



CHAPTER ONE

**Reframing The Experience**

"Women, I believe, search for fellow beings who have faced similar struggles, conveyed them in ways a reader can transform into her own life... Women catch courage from the women whose lives are writings they read, and women call the bearer of that courage friend."

~ Carolyn Heilbrun,
The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty

**Joyce's Story**

My family consists of a husband, a daughter, and a son. Matt, my son, was killed in a car accident when he was seventeen. My husband and I were in Florida for a short visit with his family. I had a sense of urgency to call my son back home in Indiana. When I called, Matt answered and said "I just walked in the door, Mom." We talked for a while and he told me that he was so glad I was his Mom. This seemed like an unusual thing for a teenager to say. I asked him why he would say that. He explained that I was so flexible. We said "I love you" and "good-bye." That conversation was to be our last. He died that very night.

What I needed most in those days of initial shock of Matt's death was for people to listen to me or accept my silence without trying to fix my grief. I had some people in my life who were able to be with me in my sadness. My sister, my best friend, and my daughter were good examples. I realize that the desire to fix someone's sorrow and help out is strong, but really, it's just not possible in a lot of situations. The person must be given time and space to through the loss. In my opinion, the only really appropriate thing to say is, "I'm sorry." Comments like, "Just be grateful for the time you had with him," "He's in a better place now," or "Why don't you try golf, country line dancing, etc." just don't help!

I still miss my only son deeply, but I don't cry so much after fifteen years. What helped me deal with this loss was the care and support of my minister, my sister, a best friend, and the regular meetings with others who had experienced this kind of grief at The Compassionate Friends group.

**Note from Louise**

As a minister and life coach, I have looked into the face of grief countless times over the years. The story of Joyce and her son which you just read was placed here because Matt's funeral was the first one I was called to do as a newly ordained pastor. I was totally unprepared to help this family through a most devastating kind of loss, that of a child. Yet trusting something deeper inside us, the grace of God and the humanity which linked our hearts, we somehow managed to find inner strength to walk through that shocking and profoundly sad experience together.

Herein lies the clue to surviving grief and loss – *the companionship of others*. We cannot do life alone; we are hardwired for relationships and meaningful exchanges. Our joys



and our sorrows need to be shared so that joy is expanded and sorrow is eventually absorbed and healed.

So many people have no frame of reference for handling the inevitable losses of life. Our society as a whole seems often clueless about how to help us through a time of grieving. It is as if we are supposed to hurry up and be “normal” again so other people can feel better in our presence. But losses change us, sometimes forever, and there is no way to “hurry” through bereavement. It is a process that takes time and attention. Each individual grieves differently, and everyone deserves to have their process honored.

It is our deepest wish that as you bring your own grief and loss to the pages of this book, you will feel companioned and understood, that you will find relief for yet unexpressed emotions, and many ideas for honoring yourself through the difficult passages of your life.

Grief and Bereavement

Because of the confusing or ambivalent messages we internalize around the handling of loss, we may not be aware of the difference between the experiences of grief and bereavement.

Grief is the normal immediate reaction to a death or loss. That reaction can involve physical, mental, and emotional responses.

Bereavement is the extended period of mourning following a loss in which we experience our grief and process all of our responses to it. It is only through allowing the bereavement process that we find healing.

The human experience is so deep and rich and wonderful. At the same time it is fraught with tremendous turmoil and great pain. We simply cannot avoid the grief and the losses that are part of living. We can only hope to find the courage, strength, resilience, and grace from those who have gone before us to walk through the difficult passages of life.

In this book you will find the stories of other women who have traveled their own path of grief. Their words give us a window into the unexpected depths of bereavement and all of its complicated, soul-wrenching facets. Their voices also provide encouragement as they bravely claim their own healing.

In our society, we are still often very sheltered from the temporal, ever-shifting nature of our life on Earth. So when we are faced with a great trauma or significant loss, we may stumble in the darkness of ignorance with little or no knowledge of how to proceed.

When we are going through a difficult passage in life, it can be very easy to get caught up completely in it and to wallow in our pain. There is grief in any big change, and the process of grief for many people is sticky; they may want to push it under the rug and ignore it, self-medicate so it won't feel so bad, or just fail to attend to it. Most of us are raised without a frame of reference and without role models for grieving or for handling traumatic change.

*For everything there is a season,
And a time for every purpose under heaven:
A time to be born, and a time to die;
A time to break down, and a time to build;
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;
A time to seek, and a time to lose;
A time to keep, and a time to let go.*

~ Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

