



The Heart of a Survivor

By Jonathan Godfrey

On January 10, 2005 near 11:00 pm I was walking out to my medical helicopter with my paramedic partner Nikki. It was a crisp night with clear skies and tail winds. I never imagined that I would be starting a life of choices between being a victim or a survivor that night. The mere fact that 15 minutes later, even though I would be dealt a near fatal blow as a victim of a helicopter crash, I decidedly started on the road as a survivor.

Looking back to the moment that I awoke under the frigid dark water, a rebirth took place. Making life and death decisions was nothing new to me. Trauma was my job. Landing safely at scenes of destruction and lives being torn apart and then turning the tide gave me satisfaction. However, I rarely identified with my patients or their families. I was compassionate and tried to comfort people as best as I could, but I didn't take it home with me or let it seep into my dreams.

Anyone who survives an air crash is for a moment a victim. I wanted more control. I wanted to find purpose in this new chance at life. I was desperate to shake off the feelings of survivor's guilt. I was exhausted from apologizing for being the only survivor. I was lost in my own misery of physical pain, emotional hell, and dreams that made sleep worse than being awake.

After the crash, there was some element of celebrity during my recuperation. It felt good to be the center of attention for a while. With this rapid climb to some strange stardom, I also felt that I had the call to be responsible with it. Maybe I could actually do something good with it.

I spoke with my senior boss who called me regularly and had true compassion for my family and talked about this random need to talk about my experience. His reply was that he would take me on a short drive to Delaware to have me speak to a fellow flight program. My initial presentation was a terrible Power Point with me trying to keep from going off on tangents to an audience of about 20 people in a cramped room. I spoke for about 45 minutes and answered questions for another hour.



Jonathan with his children, Logan, 5 years old, and Noah, 8 years old.

Word quickly spread that I was willing to speak about my experience throughout the flight community. I quickly began to get requests to speak at local flight programs, but I did not see how I was making a difference or improving the industry. I left several presentations just feeling that all I had done was give a "gee whiz" story.

I took a small step back and did not accept invitations for about a month. I spent most of my time doing some special projects at work while I was on light duty and having a couple of operations. My close friend and mentor at work asked if I would be interested in speaking beside him at the annual Air Medical Convention in the fall. I started to share with him how I needed to make sure that I could make a difference and that it was not just entertainment for the attendees. Over the next two months we developed a presentation that gave the entertainment but also talked about safety and survivability. There were actions and habits in my daily work that gave me a chance to survive and I wanted people to know what they were. There were also some lessons learned, procedures which we changed to make our program safer.

We arrived at the conference with an assigned room that would hold about 200 attendees. The hosting organization reconsidered the room size when people began talking about which classes or topics that they planned on attending. A larger room was reluctantly assigned just hours before we were to speak. That fall day in Austin, Texas, we crammed over 500 people into one of the auditoriums and the fire marshal turned more than 200 away from the doors. It was not seamless, but it was incredible. Nobody dozed off. Nobody got up to use the restroom. They were all glued to the message.

Requests to travel and speak about safety and survivability were overwhelming. I spent hundreds of days over the next three years on the road. Requests came from every area of helicopter transport, civilian, police, and military, as well as local civic groups. I continued to work full time and sacrifice time from my family for the sake of the industry. I believed that I was making a difference as air medical crashes decreased for a time. Then I awoke one morning to hear that a helicopter had crashed in

(continued on page 4)

When Grief Derails a Marriage

By Joni Woelfel

(Editors Note: Although the circumstances of death are quite different, there are ideas shared in this article that we felt may be helpful to parents who have lost a child in an aviation accident.)

Most people are reluctant to discuss the sheer magnitude of challenges grief presents to a marriage. Because the intimacy between a husband and wife is so private, not many of us want to face the reality if grief is crushing the life out of our marital relationship.

The exhaustion of grief and the roller coaster of being in different stages at different times can play havoc on a marriage. Stressed out, used up, trying to cope with a hundred feelings while being there for others can chip away at marital communication and usher in the inability to meet one another's needs. Sometimes, without even being aware of it, emotional and spiritual distance can lead to flatness between spouses and – as the alarming divorce statistics prove – the bottom can and often does fall out.

You never think it can happen to you. I certainly thought our marriage was unshakable, even during the worst of times. It was unthinkable to me that my husband and I would grow so far apart that we hardly recognized each other. Would this have happened if we had not lost our beloved seventeen-year-old son to suicide? We will never know the answer to that, but the fact is, our son's death shattered us and eventually our marriage unraveled and came apart at the seams. Just a week before we were going to sign divorce papers, we reconciled after being separated for over a year.

How did we survive the near destruction of our marriage? My husband and I came up with a list of ten key elements that we feel made all the difference for us. They are as follows:

1. Relax: By the time we reconciled, we had been through such emotional turmoil, that we could hardly see straight. We craved peace, needed psychological rest, and had to drop all preconceptions and assumptions. When some friends wanted to offer support and to celebrate our reunion, I remember thinking “*There’s nothing to celebrate.*” It was too soon, our relationship was fragile and we did not know how things were going to go. The first helpful key element for us that marked our new beginnings was individually looking to God to soothe our distraught emotions and ‘just being’ with God and each other.

2. Renew Commitment: We did not talk a lot at first. We were both changed people who had to become reacquainted. The tension was very hard to deal with during these walking on eggshell days. I longed for us to be the old

familiar ‘us’ that I knew and loved before all the grief and strife. We had to let go of the sense of urgency to ‘fix’ us because rather than trying to salvage the old us, we were beginning the process of starting over from scratch. While we did not have a clue as to whom we would become as a couple, we were committed to the process and each other.

3. Find the Bridge: Trust was understandably an issue and we had to accept each other's reservations without becoming defensive. Learning to love one another with so much past pain between us was like a gulf that needed a bridge. Believing in spiritual *perseverance* became the bridge that helped us span this tenuous time. We agreed that we were not going to give up.

4. Listen with Respect: As we began recovering and becoming emotionally stronger and healthier, we began to talk more. This ongoing step cannot be skipped, as communication is the vital foundation to recovery. Once we began earnestly communicating as a couple, the wounds that had not been addressed began surfacing in a way that was often overwhelming. There was anger, disappointment, disillusionments, and unmet needs that needed to be expressed – that is just the short list. Listening with respect became the fourth key that helped us open our hearts to each other again.

5. Take the Risk: As we tentatively began opening up to one another, we had to recognize the fact that we were both vulnerable. It is always a risk to reach out and reveal intimate longings, hopes, and dreams again because there is a fear of being misunderstood or feeling rejected. This winding road was a struggle because the natural flow that true connecting brings had been lost through our grief and marital fall out. The fifth key to our recovery was two-fold: being willing to risk sharing how we felt and becoming a soft place to fall for each other.

6. Grow up Spiritually: *No perfection.* Those two little words reminded us that while we could expect genuine effort from each other in our recovery, it would be detrimental to set unrealistic expectations of each other. Rather than perfection, we sought wholeness that evolves through healthy give and take. For us, the sixth key was the pursuit of emotional, psychological, and spiritual maturity as individuals and as a couple that comes from *not taking each other for granted.*

7. Increase Flexibility: We found that even after thirty-some years of marriage, we could learn new skills in how to generate warmth between us. For example, one of us is by nature

(continued on page 4)

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The Heart of a Survivor

(continued from page 1)

California killing all three onboard. The three onboard had attended one of my presentations just a few months earlier. I was devastated. All my efforts, were they for nothing? I knew that it was unrealistic to think that I could somehow protect every crew in America, but it was still my desire.

The balance of family, work, and travel began to take its toll specifically on my wife and our relationship. Fulfilling my destiny had become a drug and I had become addicted. It was my escape and my pain killer for the daily turmoil of how to justify why I had survived.

The travel and presentations were put on the back burner and a rededication to my family took priority. It was during that time that I began to more clearly see in the smiling faces of my wife and children, the reason I had survived.

I still travel on rare occasion to speak to flight programs. This fall I will be receiving the Jim Charlson Award from the Association of Air Medical Services and honored as the "Safety Person of the Year." This will probably be the biggest award of my career. The best part will be that I will have my wife sitting next to me. Knowing full well that I am a survivor, I have purpose, but best of all, I have my family. This is the heart of a survivor. 🌟



Jonathan Godfrey at work as a Flight Nurse for Children's Hospital

When Grief Derails a Marriage

(continued from page 2)

a neater, organized person than the other, who is more spontaneous. We learned to give each other space and breathing room by respecting each other's natural characteristics through not imposing our own inclinations upon each other.

8. Forgive and Remember: An innocence that cannot be recaptured is lost when a marriage falls apart. We grieved not only the loss of our son, but our partnership, as we knew it. However, in its stead, wisdom and the ability to forgive took root as generosity helped us work through the process of resentment. We do not forgive and forget – so much as forgive and remember more fully how short, fragile, and precious our earthly, temporary lives are. We realize how lucky we are to have each other.

9. Examine Priorities: As we recovered from the numbness of grief and the fog of all we had been through, it was like coming alive again. It was like seeing with new eyes and becoming filled with compassion for one another, as we comprehended the vast extent of all we had endured and survived. Within this clarity, we were able to live out the beauty of our marriage vows, our scars now reminders of the miracle of healing as we experienced the joy of living for each other.

10. Believe in Joy: Together, we are growing older, our hair becoming gray as our physical bodies age while our hearts deepen. This is the way of love that transforms and teaches us new things every day. While the complications of grief once nearly derailed our marriage, grief also taught us the true meaning of joy. Joy in simple pleasures, joy in our family and two young adult sons and daughter-in-law, joy in going to movies, eating ice cream, driving around a lake, leaving funny notes for each other, planning adventures, helping others and most of all, the joy of believing in God as a friend who watches over us and guides us.

For all these reasons and more, through these ten keys, **we extend encouragement to any couple who feels their marriage is hopeless and too far gone to save. We are here to say, "Give it a little more time, a little more love, patience and care – see what happens."** 🌟

Joni Woelfel is the author of numerous articles and five books including *Meditations for Survivors of Suicide*, Resurrection Press. jwoelfel@tds.net

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Extraordinary Experiences; Extraordinary Comfort

Love Lives On: Learning from the Extraordinary Encounters of the Bereaved

Millions of people who are grieving the death of a loved one often encounter a phenomena [Extraordinary Experience, or EE] which helps them deal with change and reinvest in life. However, it's commonly dismissed by family, friends, and some counselors as an artifact of grief or a product of the disorganization and anxiety of the grief process. Yet they contain much insight and wisdom for all ... Much can be learned. These powerful events benefit the bereaved and their caregivers by restoring hope, giving comfort, and opening up a whole new way of looking at life and death. The issue is not where do these experiences originate. The significant fact is that they do happen for a purpose, and the focus should be on how should we put them to work.

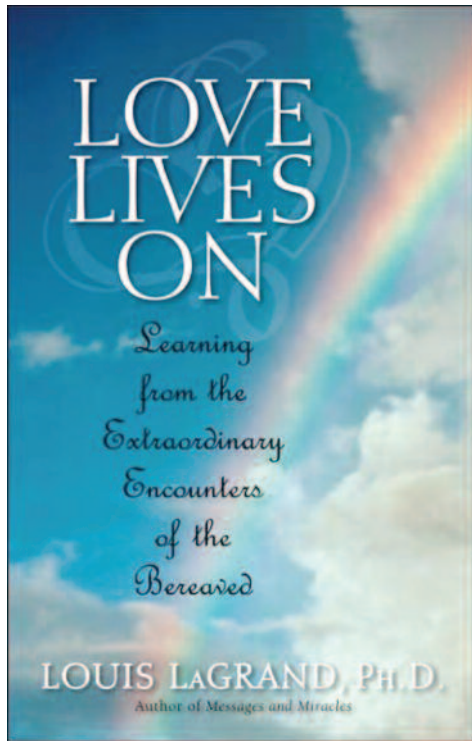
As a certified grief counselor, Dr. Louis LaGrand has interviewed scores of people who are convinced they have had a sign or message from a deceased loved one, viewed it as a most positive occurrence, and accepted it as a gift for healing. In the twenty-five years he has studied the phenomena, what is clear is that those who have had an EE know they have connected with another reality every bit as meaningful as the physical reality they live and grieve in each day. It is important to honor such a profound personal experience, examine the mystery that surrounds it, and use it in adapting to loss and change.

What are Extraordinary Experiences?

The Extraordinary Experiences (EE's) of the bereaved comprise an exciting new field of research which focuses on a variety of events in which a bereaved person believes he or she has been spontaneously contacted by a deceased loved one. Researchers have coined the term after-death communication (Extraordinary Experience) to describe the whole range of phenomena that occurs. It is important to emphasize that the living person is not actively seeking to make contact with the deceased; the experience does not in any way involve a psychic or invoking the deceased. Instead, it is the deceased (or some believe a Supreme Being) who seems to reach out to the bereaved and in doing so provide much-needed solace and comfort. Again, the EE occurs spontaneously, without warning. It has been estimated that over 70 million people have had the experience.

When do these experiences occur?

Although a contact experience may occur at any time, it commonly takes place when one is grieving the death of a loved one and often becomes the basis for the bereaved person to accept the loss and to re-engage life.



Who has the experience?

These extraordinary encounters occur to people of all races, creeds, and social status and commonly bring comfort and healing to the mourner.

How can these experiences help?

Although the phenomenon is widespread, its potential as a resource for coping with the death of a loved one is hardly known. What has been consistently overlooked by those who have not had the experience, and are unable to grasp its impact on grief work, is the fact that it helps the bereaved accept the loss of the loved one (a major task of mourning), and reinvest in life. More specifically, the experience meets two of our most basic human needs: affection and connection with our loved ones. The EE suggests that we are always loved by and connected to the person who died. Continuing bonds are normal and healthy.

LOVE LIVES ON: Learning from the Extraordinary Encounters of the Bereaved is a book offering comfort, reassurance, and hope in the face of sorrow for anyone mourning the death of a loved one as well as those who provide support for the bereaved, whether family, volunteers, or professionals. You will learn how to use seven wisdom lessons gleaned from extraordinary encounters and integrate them with the following nine proven survival skills that have been used by millions to cope with the death of their loved ones.

1. Communicate and relate.
2. Discover and grieve your secondary losses.

3. Express emotion.
4. Do something.
5. Start new routines and traditions.
6. Go outside of yourself: Strive to be more loving.
7. Trust mystery and the unseen.
8. Replenish without feeling guilty.
9. Learn to shift your inner focus.

TO ORDER **Love Lives On**: Send a check or money order for \$17.00 (includes shipping & handling) to L. LaGrand, 450 Fairway Isles Dr., Venice, FL 34285. Indicate if you wish to purchase a signed copy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Louis LaGrand is Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the State University of New York and Adjunct Professor of Health Careers at the Eastern Campus of Suffolk Community College in Riverhead, New York. He is a certified grief counselor, the author of eight books, and gives workshops on grief support and stress reduction in schools, hospices and health agencies. Dr. LaGrand was a member of the Board of Directors and Chairperson of the Nominations Committee of the Association for Death Education & Counseling and started the first course on bereavement and death at Potsdam College. He was a member of the Debriefing Team for the TWA Flight 800 disaster and was one of the founders of Hospice of St. Lawrence Valley, Inc. He is known world-wide for his research on the Extraordinary Experiences of the bereaved (After-Death Communication phenomena).

Dr. LaGrand gives workshops, lectures, or seminars on grief, coping with the death of a loved one, and stress management as well as the Extraordinary Experiences of the bereaved. For more information on lectures, workshops, seminars or for immediate consultations on the Extraordinary Experiences of the bereaved, write to the above address or send e-mail to: bl450@msn.com



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