

TRAGEDY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM FOR SURVIVORS

T★A★P★S[®]

Comfort and Support Since 1994

MAGAZINE

FOR THE LOVED ONES OF THOSE WHO SERVED & DIED



VOLUME 20 • ISSUE 3

TAPS Magazine is dedicated to the brave men and women who died while serving in the Armed Forces, and to their survivors. The magazine is written by surviving family members, friends, and care-giving professionals. We hope you will find comfort, support, information, inspiration, and a sense of connection within its pages.

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★ **About TAPS Magazine** ★

Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) is a national nonprofit 501(c)3 Veterans Service Organization which publishes *TAPS Magazine* in furtherance of its mission to support survivors whose loved one died while serving in the armed forces.

TAPS Magazine is published quarterly and sent free of charge to survivors, their friends and family, service members, and professionals who work with U.S. military survivors.



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TAPS®

Comfort and Support Since 1994

TAPS offers immediate and long-term emotional help, hope, and healing to all those grieving the death of a loved one in military service to America, regardless of their relationship to the deceased or the circumstances of the death.

TAPS is here for you 24 hours a day 7 days a week

Call us at 800-959-TAPS
Or visit us at www.taps.org

TAPS

SUPPORTS the bereaved survivor through a network of peer mentors. Mentors are trained volunteers who have also lost a loved one in the Armed Forces and are now standing ready to reach out and support others.

PROVIDES the National Military Survivor Helpline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at 800-959-TAPS (8277). Support is available from leading experts in the field of grief and trauma.

HOSTS the TAPS Online Community of survivors, providing secure chat rooms, message boards, blogs, peer group discussion sites, and an extensive website at www.taps.org.

SPONSORS Military Survivor Seminars and Retreats for adults and Good Grief Camps for young survivors in locations across America, giving survivors the opportunity to share, grow, and help each other heal.

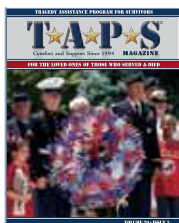
CONNECTS survivors to resources in their local communities and provides grief and trauma resources and information.

FEATURES ★

- 6 Hope in the Midst of Loss
Surviving the suicide death of a loved one
By Kim Ruocco
- 8 Healing Through Our Strength
Knowing our weakness, Part Two
By Tom Golden
- 10 A Few Good Men
Project 18
By Sarah Greene
- 12 The Capacity to Love
The reason we grieve
By Alan Wolfelt
- 13 Now I'm Older
Passing the age of a sibling who died
By Stephanie Frogge
- 14 Understanding a Widow's Heart
New directions
By Emma Wright
- 16 Welcome Home
Creating a new family refuge
By Donna Elm
- 20 Learning to Let Go
(It's not what you think)
By Amber Baum

NEWS ★

- 18 New Regional Survivor Seminars
Coming to a location near you
- 22 Hearts and Hands Across the Ocean
Minding the gap
- 24 Colorado Celebrity Classic 2014
A successful formula toward healing
- 34 Keeping in Touch
Strength through communication



COVER PHOTO BY
Angel Caracciolo

TAPS children and their mentors place the Good Grief Camp wreath at the Tomb of the Unknowns, 2014.



DEPARTMENTS ★

- 4 Letters to TAPS
Let Us Hear From You
- 5 Letters from TAPS
Community Based Care
- 26 Grief 101
The Fog of Grief
- 28 To Your Health
Self Care for Survivors *by LaRita Archibald*
- 30 Poetry Place
Coming Home to TAPS *by Ruth Wiley*
- 31 Book Shelf
The Way Men Heal
- 32 Volunteer Spotlight on Service
Shaun Smithson
- 33 Resource Center
Pro Bono Legal Assistance



Let Us Hear From You

We want to know your thoughts, perspectives, and opinions on TAPS programs and publications. Tell us what you think, send ideas for future topics, or submit an article. Submission Guidelines can be found online at www.taps.org. Your TAPS family is waiting to hear from you. ★



Finding TAPS

A couple weeks after my son died, a stranger came to my door. She said her husband had read the obituary and felt the need to send their condolences. She brought a book on grief a friend had given her when her son died a few months before and left us with information about TAPS. It took me a while to find out what TAPS was about but we soon learned what a perfect family it is for us. We will always thank our angel for leading us to our new family.

Christi Barton, Utah
Surviving mother of
SSgt Charlie Barton

Fort Hood Regional

I was absolutely amazed at all that you are able to accomplish and blessed to have been a part of this truly successful weekend. All of us were honored to have the chance to help and participate in this event. I can't thank you enough for allowing me the opportunity to meet so many of the families, talk with them about their experiences, and then witness the transformation. So many will be able to move forward because of the efforts of the TAPS team.

MG Kendall P. Cox
Fort Hood, Texas
USARMY III CORPS

Retreats

I just completed a widow's retreat last April and received so much love and support from all of you. I hope you know how much we are grateful for all that you provide. I have been unable to work since they told me in January 2012 that Ken was going to die. I spent a year in a fog. I have begun the return to functioning this past January. I have to say that the retreat in Florida brought me back. It was life changing. I now have a family I cherish and will cherish forever. I felt empowered when I left. It has been nineteen months and two days since Ken went to heaven. You guys have never forgotten me. Your patience and persistence have sustained me. I send each and every one of you a hug.

Bridgit Fennell, Florida
Surviving spouse of
MU1 Kenneth Fennell

Remembrance Cards

Thank you for the card I received today. Made me cry, it is so thoughtful of you all. What a beautiful card, worded so perfectly. I appreciate that my hero is remembered, and that we are, too. I doubt many people I know will remember this anniversary. Makes for a lonely time, but I know I can count on TAPS. I appreciate all of your efforts.

Shari Harder, California
Surviving spouse of
Craig Harder, USMC

24/7 Helpline

I had to call TAPS last night because a flash of memories of my brother from our childhood came back. I had lost and forgotten it when he died. I really love how easy it was to talk to a TAPS worker. They understood how I was feeling. TAPS has helped me and my family tremendously in dealing with my brother's suicide. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Lauren La Bella, Pennsylvania
Surviving sister of
Cpl Daniel LaBella

Family Reunion

Thank you to everyone who put together the TAPS weekend in D.C. What an amazing event that was. My first TAPS was in 1996 when I came with my five small children. This year I was able to meet up with a friend I had met many years ago at TAPS. We have communicated throughout the years. However, it had been years since we were able to share a cup of coffee and visit face to face. I was also blessed to meet one of my mentees, and I loved every moment spent with her.

Janna Schaefer, Colorado
Surviving spouse of
SSG Stephen Schaefer



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Hope in the Midst of Loss

Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One

By Kim Ruocco, MSW, LSW

I am the widow of United States Marine Major John Ruocco, who died by suicide in 2005 at the age of forty. John was an incredible son, husband, father to our two boys, and marine. He was dedicated and passionate in everything he did.

John joined the Marine Corps in 1989 and became a pilot even though he wanted to be in the infantry. He was a respected leader to his troops, providing comic relief when everyone needed a laugh, as well as a steady hand and leadership in times of combat and operational stress. He made friends wherever he went, enthusiastically meeting new people every time he changed duty stations. He loved his friends and family and was the life of any party. He even found time to coach baseball and roller hockey for his children.

He only had one fear: that he would let other people down. John felt responsible for his junior marines and their families. Over time he accumulated scars of trauma and loss. He made life and death decisions that were hard for him. He saw friends die in military training accidents and in combat. I can remember attending memorial services for a group of marines lost in a training accident at Camp Lejeune. He was back in his helicopter and flying the day after the funerals. These losses impacted him deeply and he carried these tragic scars as personal failures on his psyche.

As the senior marine on base, John taught suicide prevention and provided resources



Looking back now, I can see how John was walking around with a full cup of water waiting for that last drop to make it overflow. After flying seventy-five combat missions in Iraq, he returned a different man.

to others. But John had a secret; he suffered from untreated depression and post-traumatic stress. Over the years he was able to push himself through it with exercise, nutrition, prayer, and family support.

Looking back now, I can see how John was walking around with a full cup of water waiting for that last drop to make it overflow. After flying seventy-five combat missions in Iraq, he returned a different man. He was withdrawn, agitated, and sullen. He had nightmares and could not sleep, and he struggled to reconnect with me and our two sons, Joey and Billy, who were eight and ten years old.

John started having trouble concentrating and flying the aircraft that he knew so well. He failed a routine flight test soon after his return from combat. We talked

about getting help, but he feared that people would lose respect for him or think he was faking. But by not getting help, his worst fears were coming true. He was letting people down.

The fun-loving John whose laugh could fill a room was gone. He couldn't find joy in anything, even the things he used to love. John was stationed across the country from our home in Massachusetts, preparing for a second combat deployment to Iraq. The boys and I called him to talk about the exciting news that one of his favorite teams, the New England Patriots, had won the Super Bowl, and he didn't even watch the game. As a trained social worker, I realized John was in crisis

and asked him to get help. I also asked him if he was feeling so badly that he was thinking of killing himself. He replied that he would never do that to me and the boys.

Despite this response, I knew that asking for help was going to be the most difficult thing he had ever done in his life. I got on the first plane I could and set out across the country to support him. But I didn't get there in time. In his altered state of mind, with poor judgment and tunnel vision, John thought everyone would be better off without him and he lost hope. He died by suicide. Alone.

When my husband died, I thought I lost everything. We had been together for twenty-three years. I was overwhelmed with the path before me and was reeling in emotional pain. I had lost my life partner

and my best friend. How do you tell two little boys that their dad, their hero, made it safely back from combat in a war zone, and then he took his own life?

I questioned everything I had said and done in the days before John's death, and worried that I could have done something else to save him. I didn't trust my instincts because I felt like he had "died on my watch." The support systems that I usually depended on did not seem to understand the depth of my pain or the many questions that I was wrestling with.

I questioned everything I had said and done in the days before John's death, and worried that I could have done something else to save him. I didn't trust my instincts because I felt like he had "died on my watch." The support systems that I usually depended on did not seem to understand the depth of my pain or the many questions that I was wrestling with.

I started my grief journey by reaching out to others who had lost a loved one to suicide. I came to TAPS in 2006, looking for help. I hoped that the TAPS Good Grief Camp program could help my boys, and they made life-changing connections with service members who were volunteering at the camp to help children of fallen service members, including Matt Sterni, a marine pilot who had flown with their dad in Iraq. Matt told them how John supported and guided him through a difficult combat situation. He helped my boys remember again their dad—their real dad—before he got mentally sick and withdrew from them.

I found help at TAPS, too. The power of meeting others who had experienced a similar death was incredible. As I began to heal, I realized there were others who were suffering alone. With the help and support of Bonnie Carroll, I used my professional training to formalize a program to provide comprehensive care to all those grieving a military suicide.

Although most military deaths are traumatic and violent in nature, suicide poses special issues that survivors must face. Family members grieving a death by suicide are two to five times more likely to die by suicide themselves and are at risk for other issues, such as depression, insomnia, and anxiety. They often become recluses out of fear they'll be judged or asked questions that they themselves are not able to answer.

Over time, I was able to reflect on John's life and what led to his death. I began to assemble a timeline and narrative, so I could share John's story and educate others about mental health and save lives. A few months ago, I testified before Congress on ways to improve mental health care for our veterans, sharing information gleaned from families coming to TAPS for help and support.

By engaging in suicide postvention to assist grieving military families, I have found new meaning and purpose in

I found help at TAPS. The power of meeting others who had experienced a similar death was incredible. As I began to heal, I realized there were others who were suffering alone.

my life. This helped me realize that I could and would survive the trauma of John's death, and that my children and I were going to be okay.

Today we have more than 4,000 people grieving a death by suicide who are part of the TAPS community. We are holding our sixth annual National Military Seminar for Suicide Survivors in St. Pete Beach, Florida, bringing together the best experts in suicide support and bereavement care to help hurting TAPS families find healing and hope amid the devastation that suicide brings. If you have experienced the death of your loved one by suicide, welcome to the TAPS family. We look forward to seeing you in October. We can get through this together. *

About the Author



Kim Ruocco has been a social worker for more than twenty years, providing mental health services in various settings both in the military and civilian communities. She came to TAPS following the suicide of her husband in 2005 and is now the director of Suicide Postvention Programs and Special Programs for the organization. In this capacity, with professional skill and personal dedication, Kim provides suicide prevention and postvention programs to military families and personnel throughout the country.



Healing Through Our Strength

Knowing Our Weakness, Part Two

By Tom Golden, LCSW

I was walking through the woods the other day, completely merged with the sound of the wood thrush, when suddenly my left foot twisted under me as I stepped on a root jutting out in the path. I felt it starting to twist and relieved it by taking all of my weight off that foot, thereby tumbling unceremoniously to the ground. After a slightly bruised pride and a few choice words, I was once again enjoying my walk.

Ever since I broke that left ankle years ago, I have had to be especially careful and gentle with it. I am aware that it is one of my weak spots and demands my special attention.

Most of us are aware of the weak spots in our bodies. Maybe it's an ankle or wrist or some other part, possibly sensitivity to the sun or cold weather or maybe to a certain food. We all have weak spots in our bodies, but did you know that we also have weak spots in our psyches?

Imagine the psyche as a rope hammock. The grid of rope varies in different places. In some spots it is a tight mesh and in others there may be larger holes. Our weak spots are where the large holes are, where things flow in and out with ease. This is not such a bad thing. If we had no weak spots we would be too defended, too tight. You might think of an infant who has very few defenses. Their hammock is pretty loose. As we grow, our grid gets tighter, but hopefully maintains some of its original flexibility. Maturity requires we use both tight and loose in the right places.

When a strong bout of grief strikes us, there are times and places where we have very little control over the outflow of our grief. It comes spontaneously—of its own accord, without any invitation. When we experience a strong grief such as this, our hammock grid

of loose and tight becomes clear to us. We can begin to see where things will pour through. The spots where things pour through are what I call weak spots.

Unlike other paths we use in healing ourselves, these weak spots require no safe place for expression. They could care less where you are or what you are doing. The grief will spill forth wherever and whenever it wishes. There are no ropes in the grid to hold it back.

Weak spots can be many and varied. For some folks they may be associated with a sense like hearing, taste, or smell. Often, people in grief will find that one particular sense will be a channel for floods of grief. For some, hearing certain songs or the sound of the person's voice on a tape or video will have this power. For others the sense of smell may be the source of the grief pouring through. For some people, a weak spot may be seeing a certain item in the grocery store.

A friend of mine whose daughter died found that the song "Amazing Grace" was a weak spot. Every time he hears this song, the tears flow and flow. A couple whose young child died unexpectedly have this same type of reaction to the smell of roses. When they smell roses, they are transported to a place where the intensity of the loss pours through.



Imagine the psyche as a rope hammock. The grid of rope varies in different places. Our weak spots are where the large holes are, where things flow in and out with ease.

Knowing our paths where grief flows easily can be used to our advantage. We can make conscious use of our "weaknesses" in order to release the emotions that otherwise seem quite stuck.

For some people it may occur when they are involved in activities that they don't like, tend to avoid, or feel inadequate while doing. For others it can occur when they are doing something practical like vacuuming or cooking. Still others might find it related to their thinking activities, planning their future, or day-dreaming about possibilities. For many people the weak spots are associated with the areas in their life where they tend to play and have fun.

Everyone has a different vulnerable place, and most of us are not limited to one. If you think back to the early stages of your loss when the pain was fresh and highly unpredictable, you may remember the places your pain flowed through without any warning or intention. It may have had to do with being around people or possibly with being alone. Think of your own experience and remember the places for you that brought floods of grief. Knowing these places is not simply an academic exercise. By knowing these spots, we can help protect ourselves when we are most vulnerable. We can have at least a small degree of foresight that we may be bombarded through this particular place. Knowing these areas can also hopefully give us a deeper understanding of ourselves and a more forgiving response to these floods. By knowing our nature and the paths where floods of feelings may flow, we can prepare ourselves.

It is obvious that when we are acutely surrounded with grief it can be of help to know these pathways of grief. At these times we need ways to keep our heads above water and find anything stable to hold on to. Knowing these paths may give us a little more stability.

There are other reasons to know these weak spots. It is not uncommon for people later in grief to experience periods when there is a need to emote, but the emotions simply will not come. People feel the pressure of the grief, the dark moods that hover when we are burdened with a great deal of unexpressed grief, but cannot find a way to funnel the emotion out of the body. It is at this time that knowing these weak spots can be of extreme help. This is the time for my friend to play "Amazing Grace." He can now choose to play this song, consciously and intentionally entering into his weak spot. By doing this, he will allow the emotion to be released and therefore bring him toward transformation and healing.

Knowing our paths where grief flows easily can be used to our advantage. We can make conscious use of our "weaknesses" in order to release the emotions that otherwise seem quite stuck. Our previously mentioned friends might want to go and buy some roses. The smell, which formerly may have brought an unwanted wave of emotion for my friends, may at this time help them in connecting to emotions that are stagnantly waiting to be released. Others might want to vacuum.

What would be helpful to you? *



About the Author



Tom Golden is a professional speaker, author, and psychotherapist whose area of specialization is healing from loss and trauma. Tom gives workshops across the country on many aspects of this topic, especially about men and their unique paths in healing. His workshops are known to be both entertaining and informative. Tom's book *The Way Men Heal*, reviewed in this issue, focuses on a wide variety of paths (for both men and women) that can be used to connect with grief. For more information, visit www.webhealing.com.

A Few Good Men

Support for Project Eighteen

By Sarah Greene ☆ Surviving spouse of LtCol David Greene

Since the death of my husband, one of my son's most difficult challenges, aside from dearly missing his dad's daily physical presence, has been the desire for guidance from this most important man in his life. I have struggled with providing those daily "man" lessons and teaching him how to grow into a good man. I've tried my best to convey what is important, explaining what Dad would say in any given situation and filling in what I thought he would do to guide our son Wes.

But Wes readily reminds me that I am not a man, nor am I his dad. And he underscores, with an inflection of great injustice, just how cheated he feels by saying he wishes his dad were here to tell him how to conduct himself, "like all the other boys my age." It is very important for him to express that I can never know what he is dealing with, and he is right. I don't.

I have struggled with providing those daily "man" lessons and teaching him how to grow into a good man.



Wes's last living memory of his dad was at the age of seven, in the midst of the dad hero worship phase. Understandably, he became frozen with the notion of his dad's greatness. Since his dad died in combat, many well-intentioned people verbally canonized his dad with words like heroic, honorable, and noble, creating some incredible pressure for Wes to achieve a similar highly regarded status. Additionally, because of the empty space at the dinner table, my son was also statistically considered to be at risk. These factors cast a huge shadow of greatness to grow in. And yet, Wes learned some real lessons on becoming a man, because he grew up without the "master of the house" in his life.

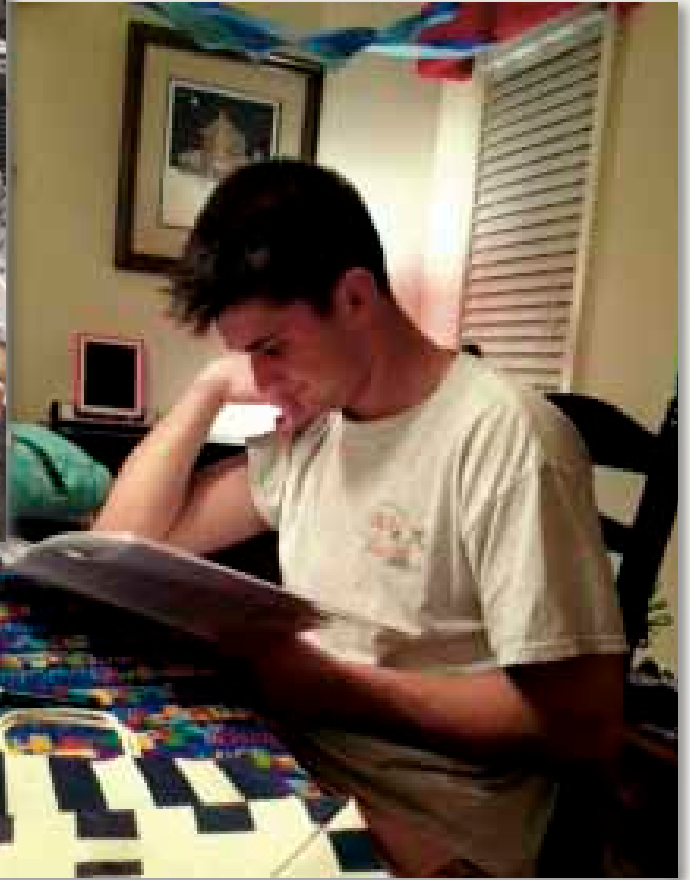
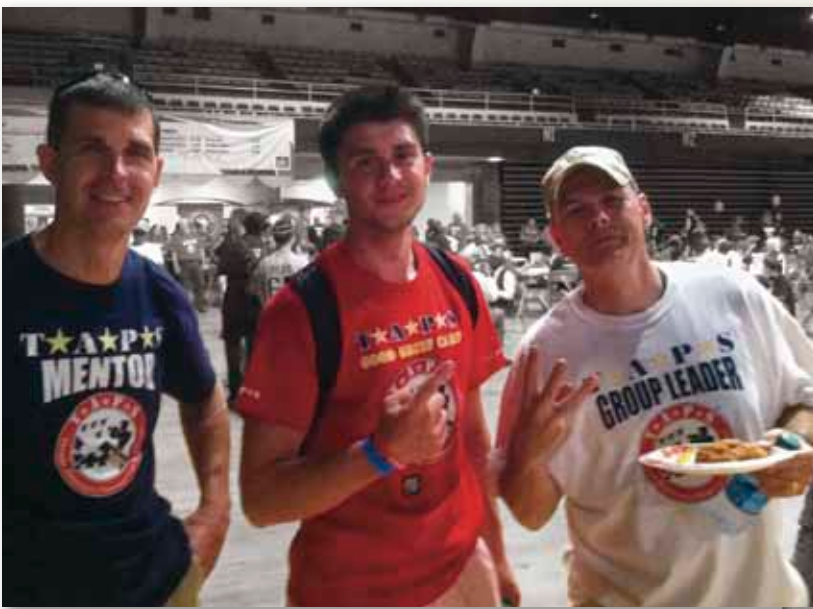
Despite this lack of essential male influence, Wes has grown into an amazing young

man. How did this happen? I look at his strapping six-foot-two-inch manly form, noting his remarkable similarity to my handsome husband. I listen to his deep voice, enjoy his keen observations, appreciate his sense of humor, feel confidence in his smarts, and love his stories. He inspires me. He is a young man of his own accomplishments and character.

There are many ingredients that go into raising a decent young man and we have had help along the way. Much of our success is due to incredible support we have had from various men in Wes's life. Although the one man who is most important isn't here, we are lucky to have several others to stand in.

I realized, when my son was about to turn eighteen, just how important these men had been. And thus was born "Project Eighteen." I had a great desire to give Wes a collection of sage advice as he prepared to go off to college and out into the world. This collection would affirm his status as a "good" man—a man his father would be proud of. This would be a birthday gift that Wes could refer to while in college, something to fill some of the big space where his dad would have guided him.

I set about contacting a few good men, eighteen to be precise, one for each year of Wes's life. These were men who had played an important role in our lives. I was intimidated when I thought about reaching out to eighteen men with such an assignment, yet when I compiled my list of target men, I realized they would understand why I was doing this. I asked each of them to write their thoughts on, "What would you tell your son defines a good man?" I consulted these men because of their remarkable character, their loyalty to us, and ultimately their love. Then I



Although Wes understands the hardship of not having his dad here to guide him, he could see the blessing in having these men who have stood by him all these years.

recognized an interesting fact: of the eighteen men, seven of them were in our lives solely because of TAPS—they were in our lives because I picked up the phone one dark day and reached a friendly voice at TAPS.

Over the course of the next few months, each one responded. Some said it was difficult; some said it was cathartic. All said they were glad to do it. Their words were well thought out and respectful. Some were funny. Some were exactly what my husband would say. All spoke to the same message, although in many different ways. When all the essays were in, I printed them and put them in a binder titled, "What is a Good Man." This title was not a question but a statement of opinion. I listed the authors below the title.

I carefully wrapped the book and presented it after all the other gifts had been opened. Wes unwrapped it and flipped it over to read the cover. He examined the names listed below the title. He read them slowly, recognizing each one, and asked incredulously, "Did they all really write in this?" I assured him they did.

My eighteen-year-old is wise and very observant. I can't very often surprise him,

but he could not get over that fact that all of these men took the time to write something intended for him. He lingered as he read through the names, increasingly more surprised and remarking with delight. Then he opened the book and read; birthday cake could wait.

I welled up and could feel the love of his dad surrounding us at the dining room table in that moment. Although Wes understands the hardship of not having his dad here to guide him, he could see the blessing in having these men who have stood by him all these years.

Wes read through much of the book right then while his sister and I waited, and it was not one bit awkward. We didn't have the heart to rush him, because he was so immersed. He was finding sustenance in words instead of confection. My boy was becoming a man before my eyes.

I am grateful to the eighteen men who took the time to address things like integrity, honor, humility, listening, obedience, humor, willingness, patience, respect, judgment, and so much more. Their words spoke volumes, and their action of taking time to write the words spoke the language of standing in.

In those painful and hollow moments during the last nine years, when Wes had to learn to tie a tie, shake a man's hand and look him in the eye, ask a girl on a date, drive a car, or take a stand for something, when he most wanted his dad's advice and presence, these men were present in his life. Although he didn't seek them out in these specific moments, they were available and they continued the groundwork my husband laid many years ago. They were there countless times: on hikes in the Rockies, on sailboats, in text messages, at ballgames, in voicemail, at TAPS events, at ceremonies honoring his dad, and more importantly, in the times in between.

I know this project won't replace my son's dad, nor will it answer all of his questions. But having a book authored by some very respectable men will help affirm to Wes that he is on the right course. He will someday be prepared to stand in for others. He already is a good man. *

Photos courtesy of Sarah Greene

The Capacity to Love The Reason We Grieve

By Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD

“Every time we make the decision to love someone, we open ourselves to great suffering, because those we most love cause us not only great joy, but also great pain. The greatest pain comes from leaving... the pain of the leaving can tear us apart. Still, if we want to avoid the suffering of leaving, we will never experience the joy of loving. And love is stronger than fear, life stronger than death, hope stronger than despair. We have to trust that the risk of loving is always worth taking.”—Henri Nouwen

“All you need is love,” famously sang the Beatles. I couldn’t agree more. We come into the world yearning to give and receive love. Authentic love is God’s greatest gift to us as human beings. Love is the one human experience that invites us to feel beautifully connected and forces us to acknowledge that meaning and purpose are anchored not in isolation and aloneness, but in union and togetherness.

What higher purpose is there in life but to give and receive love? Love is the essence of a life of abundance and joy. No matter what life brings our way, love is our highest goal, our most passionate quest. Yes, we have a tremendous need for love—love that captures our hearts and nourishes our spirits.

In fact, our capacity to give and receive love is what ultimately defines us. Nothing we have “accomplished” in our lifetime matters as much as the way we have loved one another.

Yet love inevitably leads to grief. You see, love and grief are two sides of the same precious coin. One does not—and cannot—exist without the other. People sometimes say that grief is the price we pay for the joy of having loved. This also means that grief is not a universal experience. Grief is predicated on our capacity to give and receive love. Some people choose not to love and so never grieve. If we allow ourselves the grace that comes with love, however, we must allow ourselves the grace that is required to mourn.

The experience of grief is only felt when someone of great value, purpose, and meaning has been a part of your life. To mourn your loss is required if you are to befriend the love you have been granted. To honor your grief is not self-destructive or harmful, it is life-sustaining and life-giving, and it ultimately leads you back to love again. In this way, love is both the cause and the antidote. Just as our greatest gift from God is our capacity to give and receive love, it is a great gift that we can openly mourn our life losses.

It is important to understand that grief and mourning are not the same thing, however. Grief is the constellation of thoughts and feelings we have when

someone we love dies. We can think of it as the container. It holds our thoughts, feelings, and images of our experience when someone we love dies. In other words, grief is the internal meaning given to the experience of loss. Mourning is taking the grief we have on the inside and expressing it outside of ourselves.

Making the choice not just to grieve, but to authentically mourn, provides us the courage to live through the pain of loss and be transformed by it. How ironic that to ultimately go on to live well and love well we must allow ourselves to mourn well. You have loved from the outside in, and now you must learn to mourn from the inside out. *

About the Author



Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado’s School of Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Loving from the Outside In*, *Mourning from the Inside Out*, from which this article is excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.

Now I'm Older

Passing the Age of a Sibling Who Died

By Stephanie Frogge, MTS

When Robert's older brother was killed in Iraq, his family described him as "stoic." Having served a tour of duty himself, Robert knew the risks but also knew his older brother was doing work he loved. Over the next two years Robert seemed to be coping well, seeking counseling for a few months and going back to school to finish his degree. Shortly after graduation, even after landing a lucrative position in his field, things began to fall apart.

For Brandi, the irony of her big brother surviving combat only to be killed in a motorcycle accident just a few weeks before his wedding was an additional challenge. His future had looked so promising, only to lose it all in the moment it took a car to run a stop sign. Three years later, as Brandi's own wedding came closer, she became depressed and thought seriously about breaking off her engagement. "I knew a big part of it was that Dylan wasn't going to be there," said Brandi, "but I also knew that he would have liked my fiancé and wanted me to marry. I just couldn't balance my joy and sorrow."

Both of these siblings began experiencing problems when they reached the age their sibling had been when he died. As their stories illustrate, reaching this milestone can trigger a variety of emotional responses. Since the milestone may take place years after the actual death, even the bereaved themselves may not make the connection.

Another young woman said, "I didn't say anything to my parents, but I figured out that my brother was twenty-one years, eight months, and two days old when he was killed by a sniper. The day I turned twenty-one years, eight month, and three days old was really weird. The first day that I lived longer than he had was a hard one for me. And I really couldn't tell anyone about it."

Other age-related events can be triggers, too. Getting a driver's license, graduating from high school or college, getting married, and having children can be milestones that turn bittersweet after the death of an older sibling. In the normal course of events, older siblings nearly always get to do things first. It can be disconcerting for younger siblings to realize that they are enjoying a privilege or activity that their formerly older sibling did not live long enough to enjoy.

"It was my therapist who made the connection about me becoming older than Dylan," said Brandi, "but we were also aware that by getting married, I was going to be doing something that Dylan had wanted to do but never got to. And the fact that he was killed right before his own wedding was somewhere in the back of my mind, too. I know my mom was thinking about it, too, although she never said anything."

Coping can be challenging because it's impossible to stop the clock. Younger

siblings will eventually become older than their deceased brother or sister. Families should talk about the significance of this and other milestones because it's likely that other family members are aware of the event, even if they have not expressed it verbally.

One thing seems to be true among younger siblings. Regardless of their age at any given time, and the age their older sibling was at the time of the death, older brothers and sisters maintain their unique birth order status in the hearts of their younger siblings. "No matter what," said Brandi, "Dylan will always be my big brother, looking out for me." *

About the Author



Stephanie Frogge holds a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from Texas Christian University and a master's in Theological Studies from Brite Divinity School. She is the assistant director of the Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue at The University of Texas at Austin. With more than thirty years of experience in the area of trauma response, Stephanie is the former National Director of Victim Services at Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and served two years as the Director of Peer Support Services for TAPS.

In the normal course of events, older siblings nearly always get to do things first. It can be disconcerting for younger siblings to realize that they are enjoying a privilege or activity that their formerly older sibling did not live long enough to enjoy.

Some names were changed by request.

Understanding a Widow's Heart

New Directions

By Emma Wright ☆ Surviving spouse of 1LT Todd Weaver

MARCH 9, 2013

Two and a half years ago today marks the darkest day I've ever known. The day when I was awakened by two dark silhouettes that I could see through the decorative glass panel of my front door. I could have been dreaming. Given the fact that the sun had not risen, that was my immediate assumption. But the silhouettes became much more real as I opened the door, confused and very much afraid for them to speak. Trembling, I had to get our daughter Kiley. She was crying in her crib.

Every single day since September 9, 2010 has been a battle. A battle against grief, a battle against coping, a battle against fear, a battle against trust, a battle against rejection, a battle against falling apart. Sometimes the soundtrack in my mind of "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can" quiets down just enough to remind me that my shield of "strength" isn't always as it appears.

Quite often I'll hear people compliment me on this so-called strength, my ability to inspire others, or my outlook on life after losing Todd. And immediately following such a compliment or kind word, the reaction in my head is always "Why? I'm not doing anything. I'm not trying to be anybody special. I'm not trying to change the world or prove anything to anybody. I'm just sitting here going 'I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.'" The mantra doesn't always work. I was reminded of that today.

I had looked forward to visiting Todd's grave at Arlington National Cemetery more than usual this spring morning. I needed to see him, to talk to him, to be with him before we moved away from the area. I hadn't visited since Christmas 2012, when Kiley and I had set up his tree. I had tried to find the right words and examples for a three-year-old child to understand sacred places, all the while praying she didn't pick Todd's neighbor's flowers or move their mementos.

This visit would be harder, but I was shocked once I got there to realize how much harder it really was. We arrived during a sailor's service. It was being held within close proximity to Todd's headstone, so we decided to keep our distance until after the family had laid their loved one to rest. Watching from afar was almost

an out of body experience; it was overwhelming. I knew that the woman clutching the folded flag couldn't feel the stinging cold wind that everybody else was feeling. She couldn't see past the casket. She didn't even realize how many people were there to support her and to pay their respects to the young sailor. I knew her numbness all too well.

That's when I couldn't keep it together anymore. As I stood sobbing over the grave of the man I thought I'd grow old with, I was renewed by the embraces of my new husband Alex and my daughter Kiley. The fact that I could now collapse into the arms of the man who never lets me fall—being held up by his love and unwavering support—solidified a belief in my heart. That is my strength!

Photos courtesy of Emma Wright



AUGUST 2013

Our world adventure had started two days after Christmas 2012 at The Williamsburg Inn where Alex and I had quietly gotten married in front of our families. Alex had returned to training and I had begun to slowly pack up our house, anxiously awaiting the duty station orders to follow: Guam.

It still boggles my mind that we call Guam home now. That tiny dot in the Pacific Ocean between Japan and Australia is now our home for as long as the Navy lets us stay here. Guam is a U.S. territory fourteen hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time. A land of mountains, caves, waterfalls, jungles, and beaches of coral sands that are gently washed by clear, turquoise waters. Coconuts, plumeria, mangoes, and bananas. A place where the people are relaxed and laid back and always celebrating their culture. Stepping off that plane with my family and taking my first few steps in this paradise renewed my soul.

Guam's most attractive feature, however, has nothing to do with any of the physical beauties I've described. The opportunity for our family was what was most appealing. The chance to walk through a store and not be stopped by a stranger asking me, "How are you?" in that sad tone they save just for me. I know that coming back to Williamsburg was what I needed after losing Todd, but in doing so I was thrown back into the environment I grew up in, where everybody knew me, knew what had happened, and made it difficult to grow through my loss.

Guam has provided us the gift of a new chapter in our crazy lives. I needed to be bold enough not just to say I'm going to live my life like Todd did, but to actually do it. But strings are attached. I refuse to live without him, and I don't. Todd's urn, flag, recognitions, and awards were the first things to be unpacked and settled in the new house.

To our delight, Kiley has adapted well to island life. She turned four years old on August 17 and started the big day off by asking us if she looked any taller. It is such



a blessing to be able to provide her with this unique childhood.

Alex and I found out we were expecting, and the baby is due at the end of January 2014. The excitement of our new world and new path is only intensified as we think about what life will be like as a family of four. I'm sometimes overwhelmed by the many blessings we have been given through having to experience the tragedy of loss. I know we are in good hands and I trust our future will be proof of that.

SEPTEMBER 2013

Looking back, I realize that what can trip us up the most in navigating grief is the "Why?" That one question burrows itself into our minds, multiplying the pain our hearts are already experiencing. I've asked myself that question more times than I can count. The difference now is that I don't find myself questioning why Todd had to die, but rather what his purpose in death means to me and to others. What am I supposed to be learning, listening for, and taking away from the greatest tragedy I've faced in my life?

Three years have gone by. I've celebrated three birthdays for both Kylie and me,



found love again, married a wonderful man, moved across the world, and am welcoming a son early next year. But I can still close my eyes and see the shadows at the door, hear my mom screaming when I called home that terrible morning, and smell the dust from Todd's belongings, sent home from Afghanistan. I can feel the pain as freshly as if it were yesterday. And I can do this every single day. But instead I look at how much God has given us since then and try to be thankful for my own life and what He has done with it so far.

It is in these moments that I hope I can continue to honor and remember the hero that I love. Until we meet again in Heaven, I hope we can stop asking why and start asking, "How am I going to make the most of the gift of life I have so graciously been given?" *

Read parts one and two of *Understanding a Widow's Heart* online in the TAPS Magazine archives. Go to www.taps.org/magazine and search by author.

Welcome Home

Creating a New Family Refuge

By Donna Elm ★ Surviving mother of Spc. Michael D. Elm

We are psychologically tethered to those we love. When they die, we are cut loose from those firm moorings, so we feel adrift, disoriented. When people ask how we are doing, the answer is certain: “We are *lost*.”

We lost Mike on October 14, 2011. On a mission in Afghanistan, he never saw the IED buried in the dirt that he was crossing. We were notified the next morning. For the previous ten months, I had been on the edge of my seat every time I heard a car door close out front. I would crane my neck to see if it was two soldiers in dress uniform. But on that day, I walked in our front door laden with grocery bags, shocked to see those two dreaded officers waiting expectantly for me inside. It had happened: the worst.

Going through this is hellaciously painful. We had years of invaluable counseling from the Vet Center as well as many

caring phone calls from TAPS. In the process, we learned to create new connections through other people and things. Staying in touch with TAPS and the military support system helped us maintain a vicarious connection with our lost soldier. In fact my kids grew so close to our casualty assistance officer that we “adopted” him into our family. I also bonded quickly to the mom whose boy is buried a few spaces down from Mike in Arlington’s Section 60; we were, after all, taking the same heartbreaking journey. In grief, we go to great lengths to try to rebuild bridges to the one who left us too soon. These things

Mike was the middle child of five, and he felt keenly the importance of family. Our place was home not only to my brood, but we also helped raise a handful of other “stray” kids. The family home was a shelter for youngsters longing for a happy family life.

helped, but we still needed to feel that direct connection to our son.

It may seem morbid, but we just had to know the details about how he died. Deep down, we wanted to ensure that his sacrifice was for something worthwhile. After his unit returned, we spent a long evening with them sharing recollections about Mike. I hung on every word from a woman who had accompanied him on that last mission. Although soldiers are meant to keep a distance between them as they walk, she had joined Mike to borrow some gum, then had stayed with him to chat. Mike was nothing if not sociable, and he would have really enjoyed female company. But after a few minutes, he politely reminded her that it wasn’t safe, that she should stay fifty feet behind. She stopped while he went ahead, just moments before the IED went off. He was hit, but she was spared.



She tearfully recounted this story while holding her baby in her arms, with her toddler pulling at her leg. I knew in my heart that Mike would never have forgiven himself if it had been her, a young mother, rather than him. It gave us a small measure of peace that we desperately needed.

Mike was the middle child of five, and he felt keenly the importance of family. Our place was home not only to my brood, but we also helped raise a handful of other “stray” kids. The family home was a shelter for youngsters longing for a happy family life. It was the place of raucous laughter and pranks, of family gatherings for celebrations as well as crises. It provided ultimate security. When the kids were grown, I got a new job across the country in Florida. Leaving my husband behind to finish out his job to retirement, and leaving our house without a mother, bothered Mike. Our place was no longer the “family home” he had grown up in, and my tiny run-down rental in Tampa was no replacement. I knew that

he missed having a family home that he and his siblings could treat as our refuge.

Getting Mike’s life insurance presented new dilemmas. There was an uneasy sense that it was “blood money,” that if we spent it, we were profiting from his death. So we simply tucked it away in the bank. During the first year, it collected dust while we were too paralyzed to reach outside ourselves. Once we had survived the first agonizing year, my husband and I finally could talk about the money. We had come to realize that Mike had clearly wanted us to have it, and so would want us to spend it. But on what? Instinctively, we knew it must be used for something that would last and would remind us of him. Over the next few months, it gradually dawned on us that we could use the money to create a new “family home” in Florida. The thought of buying a house that we could make into our family home



*This was indeed “Mike’s home.”
We felt so at peace about this whole area,
and definitely about this particular spot.
Surely he was there in his family home again.*

just seemed *right*. We would once again have walls filled with photos of camping trips and proms, a yard filled with flowering plants, a stillness broken with a couple active dogs and lots of laughter, and that cozy, homey feeling we craved. “Mike would really like that,” my husband acknowledged.

We looked at houses for the next few months, but nothing gave us the sense of peace that we sought. We couldn’t find “Mike’s house.” We finally focused on Temple Terrace, a neighboring community heavily shaded with massive live oaks. As we drove through the winding streets under the canopy, we began to feel deep down comfort. It was only a couple days before we stumbled across the perfect place. There was a profound sense of peace about it, one we had not felt since before losing Mike. We spent two hours walking through and poking around, then con-

tacted the owner and offered her the asking price without quibbling.

Contract in hand, we excitedly called our kids, telling them about finding a house Mike would want, a place for them to “come home” to in Florida. I told them about the add-on closet by the front door where I would store all of their brother’s prize possessions, and the empty space next to it where we would display his flag and the cedar chest holding his medals. I told them the place was so peaceful, they would love it. We were building a connection back to Mike by using his insurance money for a family home. For the first time since the worst day of our lives, his father and I were actually happy.

Then the amazing happened.

My husband visited the house regularly while escrow was pending, puttering about, fixing a leaky faucet, or measuring for the fence. A couple weeks after signing the contract, he came home bursting with excitement.

Pulling out his camera, he sat me down.

“Let me show you what I found today at the house,” he said as he was pulling up the photo on the screen. “This is in the cement in the driveway, just as you pull in off the road.” And then the picture materialized. I gasped. Scrawled in what was once wet concrete a decade or more ago was a name: Mike. Next to it was a peace symbol.

This was indeed “Mike’s home.” We felt so at peace about this whole area, and definitely about this particular spot. Surely he was there in his family home again. We made that connection with him through this house. A few weeks later we finally moved everything in, creating the family home once more.

After putting all of his mementos away, I stood by his medals and flag and simply said, “Welcome home, Son, welcome home.” *

New Regional Survivor Seminars Coming to a Location Near You

In 2006, TAPS instituted a new program and began to conduct Regional Survivor Seminars all across the United States, offering TAPS survivors opportunities to connect with each other and build support networks closer to home. Every year since then, we have fielded our teams of event staff more than ten times each year, allowing survivors to experience TAPS' signature hope, healing, and camaraderie in their own communities.

Recognizing the incredible potential of Regional Survivor Seminars, we took a new look at programming, and are proud to be working toward a new model of grief work at each regional event. While it may seem like a lot has changed, you can still expect the same extraordinary loving care that is the hallmark of every TAPS event.

One of the guiding principles we used to re-imagine our regional seminars is the concept that we want to meet you where you are in your grief journey. Regional Survivor Seminars are especially important for this, because they give us a chance to be in the same place both geographically and emotionally. In order to access the powerful grief work that is often accomplished in smaller groups and more relaxed settings, we created the TAPS Track System.

Each breakout group, or track, is based on the understanding that regardless of our relationship to the person we are mourning, we can relate to shared experiences and general characteristics of the grief

process. These commonalities are what we use to describe our "tracks." Each track has a different focus and a different presenter who adapts presentations and discussions to the needs of the group.

Because we also want you to have the chance to connect with others grieving the same relationship (parents, spouses, siblings, adult children, etc.), we use mealtimes and activities to encourage the magic TAPS bonding moments—the ones where you introduce each other to the person on your button and invite them into your journey.

Time together as a TAPS family is incredibly special, and one of the new aspects of each regional seminar is the



addition of activities, projects, and even adult field trips. Our goals are to explore the bigger picture, do some of our grief work in the “real world,” and create memories together. Activities vary based on location, track, and the theme of each event. There’s no telling what we’ll do next!

For example, at the recent Wisconsin Regional Survivor Seminar, we had lunch and released balloons at Lambeau Field, home of the Green Bay Packers, where we talked about teamwork, ownership, and investment, and how they relate to the grief process. At Fort Carson, we used Colorado’s mining history and geology as an inspiration to find the “precious nuggets” in each difficult experience. Using only our hands and our collective experience as tools, we built “ladders” out of the darkest places of grief.

In Philadelphia, Track I participants visited the LOVE statue and then left love notes around the city, sharing the gift of their heroes’ love with strangers. Track II survivors discussed feelings of being broken and

mutated by grief at the Liberty Bell, and Track III survivors set goals and raced up the “Rocky Steps” at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, channeling Rocky Balboa’s will to triumph. Come to a regional event to see what we come up with for you. We’ve been making quilts, taking field trips, playing TAPS Family Feud, re-envisioning our own goals and grief journeys, and creating (or deepening) our sense of belonging.

Each seminar runs from Friday through Sunday, with peer mentor training and suicide survivor orientation on Friday, track sessions and Good Grief Camp for children and teens on Saturday, and “Awesome and Profound Moments” on Sunday. You can expect to be on the road by early afternoon, armed with knowledge, resources, support, and inspiration. ✪



TRACK I

Track I is designed for survivors who may be feeling overwhelmed by pain and panic, feeling disoriented. Programming in this track is focused on supporting those who feel vulnerable or raw, numb or dazed, or who are struggling with traumatic grief. Topics explore coping skills for getting through waves of grief, long nights, and the wide array of emotions that accompany the mourning process. Participants discuss ways to handle intense emotions and self-care techniques for the darkest days of grief.

TRACK II

Survivors at home in Track II may feel trapped and directionless, as though they are going through the motions. In this track, survivors are provided a place to discuss their sense of purpose and their sense of self. Together, they explore the persistently painful question of “What now?” Programming is oriented to handling the uncertainty of the future and dealing with secondary losses, changed family dynamics, and strained relationships. Survivors learn to re-define themselves, while honoring the loss.

TRACK III

Survivors in Track III may identify as being “beyond active grieving,” or as wanting to move from surviving to thriving. They realize that they can lead happy, purposeful lives, but aren’t always sure how to do that. In this track, survivors concentrate on self-care and self-empowerment, recognizing that we are our heroes’ living legacies. Rather than focusing on identifying coping mechanisms for grief, Track III focuses on integrating each of our losses into a whole, purposeful life.

Learning to Let Go (It's Not What You Think)

By Amber Baum ☆ Surviving spouse of Sgt. Ryan Baum

When most people hear me say I'm learning to let go, they assume I'm speaking of my late husband, Sergeant Ryan John Baum, who was killed in Iraq on May 18, 2007. Some time ago, I would have drawn the same conclusion, because some time ago I was genuinely trying to let him go. Too much pain, confusion, and uncertainty punched my gut each time I heard his name or recalled our memories.

Back on that dark day in 2007, I was coming home from a morning of shopping for Ryan. He had called the night before and asked me to pick up some new pants; he was due home in forty-eight hours to witness the birth of our baby girl Leia. I was nine months pregnant. As soon as I pulled up to our house, I saw them: the chaplain, the rear detachment representative, and a paramedic team. In that split second, my life was forever changed.

For years I lived as the damaged person that moment created. I perilously thought, "If I could just let go of that moment, I could live my life like a normal person. If I could just let go of the fear, anxiety, and panic, I could accept the world as it is. If I could let go of the memories filled with love, happiness, and passion, I could open my doors and allow others to enter my soul."

I yearned for the day when I would wake up, and a switch in my body would magically flip from Damaged Amber back to Amber.

Years went by and that day never came. That switch was never activated. I accepted my fate as damaged and adjusted my life accordingly. I desperately tried to live by the phrase "fake it 'til you make it." I thought that if I fabricated my acceptance of Ryan's death, then I would be able to happily make it through my days. I wouldn't live in fear, I would raise our daughter right, I would reconstruct my life, and I would be just another human walking within the crowds of each passing day. All I needed to do was fake serenity while secretly trying to control each and every element which came into our lives. If I could do that, then I would be the perfect duck, allowing others to see the surface of the water, where I'm calm and cool, while obscuring what goes on underwater, where I'm frantically paddling to keep afloat.

This was a great "fake plan," right?

Wrong.

Author Thomas Dreier once wrote, "The world is a great mirror. It reflects back to you what you are. If you are loving, if you are friendly, if you are helpful, the

world will prove to be loving and friendly and helpful in return. The world is what you are." In return for living a "fake it 'til you make it" life, I attracted phony relationships, a bogus acceptance of Ryan's death, and a false sense of control. I was the opposite of who I longed to be.

Somewhere along my journey, I began to believe my fake life. Instead of making it, though, I was giving birth to a whole new set of issues, like the inability to distinguish reality from fake-ality. During my failed adjustment, as I forced the issue of letting Ryan go, I brought him closer. His memory became a list of obligations and expectations, all of which crippled me and kept me from accomplishing anything successful or worthy. I wasn't in control of anything. My personal and parenting skills became obsessive instead of supportive. I still suffered from substantial health issues. And my daughter still shed tears.

Each day presented a new and uncontrollable obstacle regardless of how I tried to convince myself or others differently. I wasn't attracting anyone of quality. I surrounded myself with people who didn't even like me, let alone love me. My adjustment was nothing short of failure. Things needed to change.





So when I say I'm learning to let go, I'm speaking of my faked life. I'm letting go of every fake relationship, I'm letting go of every false sense of control, and I'm letting go of incapacitating expectations.

Enter → TAPS. Every day I am beyond grateful for the positive change TAPS has brought to my life. I can't begin to thank the TAPS staff and my TAPS peers adequately. Their presence in my life is priceless. Within TAPS, I feel safe enough, sane enough, and able enough to tackle any obstacle. Without them, I would still be lost in my fake existence.

Unfortunately, in those first few years after Ryan's death, I put up a resentful guard against TAPS. Each time I received a magazine it seemed to be filled with smiles and happy people. And each time I asked myself why. After all, we are in mourning and should be sad. I was adamant that TAPS was not for me. Once again, I kept myself from something real and true: the love, support, friendships, harmony, and joy TAPS has to offer.

My first contact with TAPS survivors was in 2010 at a memorial in Colorado, and my first TAPS event was the national seminar in 2012. My life was once again forever changed, this time in a wonderful and heartwarming way. The peer support, peer bonding, and peer comfort blew away a dark ominous cloud that had been hovering over me for far too many years.

TAPS taught me I didn't have to accept Ryan's death. Instead, I could acknowledge

it. TAPS taught me I didn't have to get over Ryan's death. I just had to get through it. And most importantly (for me), TAPS taught me that I didn't have to seek closure by letting go of Ryan. I could reconnect to his love. I learned that Ryan would forever be a thread in the fabric of my life; it was up to me to decide how I wanted to weave it. Rather than dwelling on the darkness, I could now take all of the admirable and outstanding qualities Ryan had to offer the world and pay them forward through volunteer work. While he may not personally be present to spread his attributes and character, I am able to let others know how magnificent they were. This is how I reconnected and chose to re-weave my fabric. My life is now vibrant and full of color. It's decorated with real friendships, true love, and beautiful horizons.

So when I say I'm learning to let go, I'm speaking of my faked life. I'm letting go of every fake relationship, I'm letting go of every false sense of control, and I'm letting go of incapacitating expectations. Instead, I'm acknowledging my cards as they've been dealt by getting through the tough days with an immense support system and I'm reconnecting to the love Ryan and I shared, through TAPS relationships and volunteering. There is nothing like the joy I feel when I am able to give someone else

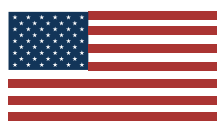


Photos courtesy of Amber Baum

the support which once held me up when I had no strength. These are the moments, along with raising our daughter, that I know I am honoring Ryan.

To those who are trying to fake it and to those who are sitting on the fence, I highly encourage you to let go of your fears and join the TAPS family, where we can learn and grow and heal together. *

Hearts and Hands Across the Ocean



Minding the Gap



“At my first TAPS grief seminar, there was always someone making sure I didn’t fall into the gap,” survivor Cait Needham said. “That is one reason why I love TAPS. They’ve done so much for me and so many others who have suffered a military loss... I was reminded of this on my first tube ride to Westminster Station.”

Making sure that people don’t “fall through the cracks” is not a new concept, either in the United States or in the United Kingdom. The phrase “Mind the Gap” defines

this concept as it pertains to the tube stations in London’s Underground, warning passengers to watch their step as they board or exit a train. When the rail cars roll to a stop in places where the tracks are curved, an unsafe gap is created. Passengers could be injured if they step into the void, so “Mind the Gap” signs can be found painted along the edges of curved platforms and heard on announcements in many Underground stations.

The phrase also held a special meaning to the group of TAPS survivors who traveled across the ocean this past June for our first TAPS United Kingdom (UK) Widow’s Retreat. This special event was filled not only with opportunities for supporting each other and minding the gaps—making sure no one fell through the emotional cracks—but also for spending time with fellow surviving widows from the UK and participating in a run/walk event for our Run and Remember Team.

Whether the group was enjoying the sights from the top of the Ferris wheel dubbed the London Eye, exploring the National Gallery, or touring Westminster Abbey, the gaps were filled with friendship, love, and support.

And despite the physical gap between America and the United Kingdom,



Oceans apart while hearts connect, creating lifelong bonds of hope.

the Royal Air Force Widows Association helped mind that gap as well. On International Widow’s Day, RAF widows hosted their TAPS counterparts for high tea at the historic Royal Air Force Club. The women felt an instant bond, one that will be cherished for years to come.

“We all really enjoyed the tea party and were only sorry it was such a short time,”

“London was the most beautiful experience I’ve had since my husband died nine years ago. Traveling from Alaska to Germany, then London, and topping it off with a trip to Paris, was the most daring adventure I’ve had on my own.”



“Living in that moment and being a shoulder for someone else, as well as having shoulders to cry on if I needed, was liberating.”

Former Chair of the Royal Air Force Widows Association Penny Long said. “There was no lull in the conversation from the moment your [TAPS] ladies walked in to the moment we all parted.”

The emotional gap was filled with self-reflection as well. Retreat participants strapped on their running shoes for a run/walk event through the beautiful rose gardens of Regent’s Park. The event recognizes Britain’s Red Nose Day, a day to put a little silliness into raising funds for charity, although the TAPS widows also ran to honor their loved ones who died while serving.

“London was the most beautiful experience I’ve had since my husband died nine years ago. Traveling from Alaska to Germany, then London, and topping it off with a trip to Paris, was the most daring adventure I’ve had on my own,” TAPS widow Maria Sutherland said. “All because TAPS was waiting for me on the other side.”

After attending Evensong at St. Paul’s Cathedral, the group was given a private tour of the American Memorial Chapel in the cathedral. The chapel commemorates American service members who died during World War II while based in Britain and was the setting for a touching moment

as widows searched the reference book for loved ones’ names.

“Living in that moment and being a shoulder for someone else, as well as having shoulders to cry on if I needed, was liberating,” TAPS widow Kari Upchurch said. “I am so grateful that I was able to meet the ladies and see the sites of a beautiful country in this most memorable week of my life.”

To wrap up the retreat, the widows journeyed to the ancient city of Bath, where they immersed themselves in Ancient Roman culture with a tour of the city and its famous Roman Baths.

As the event closed, the official retreat theme, “Oceans apart while hearts connect, creating lifelong bonds of hope” and the unofficial “Mind the Gap” theme rang true for TAPS survivors; many hope to stay connected and support their newfound friends regardless of where they live. ✧



Colorado Celebrity Classic 2014

A Successful Formula toward Healing

By Christine Burt

A wonderful healing occurs when people gather to celebrate life. It's a soothing balm for survivors to feel respect for their lost loved ones, and it's an opportunity for neighbors to show their gratitude for the profound sacrifices made on their behalf.

Lynne and Bo Cottrell, directors of the Colorado Celebrity Classic to benefit TAPS, have found a successful formula toward healing: music, laughter, golf, and unashamed expressions of gratitude and humility. It's a powerful combination.

Now in its ninth year, the three-day event held in June in Denver netted more than \$250,000 to support TAPS programs. The Dyk and Harris families were title sponsors. Linda Cavanagh and Kevin Kreymborg served as event chairs. The collective energy of our honorary chairs of elected officials, Patriots Committee, and corporate committee of business and community leaders, and an army of more than sixty-five volunteers made the event successful.

Three-star and Premier Sponsors included American Furniture Warehouse, MillerCoors, Greiner Electric, the Radisson Hotel Denver Southeast, WizBang! Solutions, Steve and Marla Grove and the Ranch of Cherry Creek, Dave Gill Photography, Gordon and Kaja Burr, and Taylor Oil Properties.

The fun weekend began Thursday with the Songwriters Show Kick-off, an intimate evening of storytelling and singing from Nashville superstar songwriters Danny Wells, Walt Aldridge, Eddy Raven, Frank Myers, and Jimmy Nichols. Pete Coors sat in on a few numbers playing spoons. Seasoned comedy warrior Ralph Achilles emceed the program that drew more than 240 guests.

The star-studded festivities resumed Friday evening with the Saluting Our Fallen Heroes Dinner Concert. More than 515 guests enjoyed the tasty and traditional pit-roasted prime rib barbeque prepared by the famous Coors Cowboy Club Chuckwagon Crew. A beautifully presented silent auction and fast-paced live auction, propelled by auctioneer Roger R. Seirens, offered gifts from seventy-six generous auction donors and included everything from dinner, spa, golf, and theater tickets to signed sports memorabilia to an all-expenses-paid trip to New York City with a day-long visit on the set and private catered lunch with stars of NBC's *The Blacklist*. Guests were in a giving mood; even the leftover prime rib was auctioned to lucky bidders.

Entertainers Tony David, Pam Hughes, and Kerry Edwards of *WildeFire* got the crowd rocking and ready for headliner Jimmy Fortune, Country Music Hall of Fame artist who performed with the legendary Statler Brothers for twenty-one years. Joining his standing ovation performance were vocalists Zach Runquist and Sydny Perry. Steffan Tubbs from 850 KOA radio Morning Show was masterful in introducing the TAPS community led by TAPS Founder and Chairman



EVENT CHAIRS
KEVIN KREYMBORG AND LINDA CAVANAGH



TITLE SPONSORS
TOM AND MARY DYK



CHUCKWAGON CREW



PHOTOS BY DAVE GILL PHOTOGRAPHY AND BLACK TIE COLORADO



TAPS FOUNDER BONNIE CARROLL
AND RANCH OWNER STEVE GROVE

Bonnie Carroll, as well as the many celebrities from stage, screen, sports, and television that came to Denver to show their support for military families.

The Colorado Celebrity Classic has garnered more than \$3 million for TAPS over the past nine years. For their dedication and commitment, Bo and Lynne Cottrell were honored with TAPS' highest recognition, the Soldier's Cross statue. Tom Tarver of Greiner Electric and Jewel Hargrave were awarded the Tony David



WINNING TEAM, JAY'S VALET

Volunteer of the Year Award. Both are consistent, versatile, and effective leaders for the volunteer effort.

"Families make a tremendous sacrifice and they should be honored," said Lynne. "We appreciate and honor their loved ones; they are heroes to all of us."

The weekend closed with a shotgun start golf tournament at the prestigious Eisenhower Golf Club at the U.S. Air Force Academy. There were twenty-three

teams, with a celebrity golfer on each, and special military teams of airmen, soldiers, marines, and sailors. The Jay's Valet team won first place and the Air Force team won the military competition. Winners were feted at the course following the tournament at the Burgers and Braggin' Rights Award BBQ.

Next year will mark the 10th Colorado Celebrity Classic to benefit TAPS. Join us next year: June 26-27, 2015. ★



SPONSORS, ELAINE AND DAVE GREINER



GREG LONDO AND SPONSORS
PAT AND RANDY TAYLOR



EVENT DIRECTORS LYNNE AND BO COTTRELL



SONGWRITERS DANNY WELLS, WALT ALDRIDGE, EDDY RAVEN,
FRANK MYERS, AND JIMMY NICHOLS

TAPS is grateful for the time and energy that the Cottrells and their team of volunteers put forth each year for the annual TAPS Celebrity Classic.

We are humbled by their dedication and thankful for their support.



The Fog of Grief

When Will It Lift?

Most of us functioned fairly competently in our day-to-day lives—holding jobs or attending college, raising children, reading books, taking care of our health, entertaining friends and family—right up until someone we loved stopped living. Instantly we become disorganized, distracted, distraught, distressed, and disoriented. It's no wonder everything seems foggy. The things we once did by habit even seem difficult, to say nothing of more challenging tasks like attending college, working at our jobs, or continuing to maintain family ties or raise children.

Confusion, forgetfulness, anxiety, and lack of concentration seem to be our constant companions. We put the ice cream away in the pantry and put the car keys in the freezer. We miss appointments. We forget to brush our teeth. And the only reason the children and pets are fed may be that they make enough noise to get our attention.

We fear that we are going crazy or that we have started to exhibit early signs of Alzheimer's. But the fog and the mental confusion are actually symptoms of extreme stress and grief. Physically, the stress affects

us so that we don't feel like eating, we don't sleep well, and we don't have the energy to exercise. Mentally, we are preoccupied, trying to make sense of the loss. All of these factors contribute to the fog of grief.

One recent thread on the TAPS message boards dealt with this issue. Here's what some of our TAPS respondents had to say on the subject.

Physically, the stress affects us so that we don't feel like eating, we don't sleep well, and we don't have the energy to exercise. Mentally, we are preoccupied, trying to make sense of the loss. All of these factors contribute to the fog of grief.

.....

Karen, surviving mom of Jeffrey, started the conversation with this observation: It happens daily, that brain fog—you know the one. I have trouble remembering names, appointments, special days (such as a family birthday), what I just read, or what I just heard. I am having such a hard time concentrating... I have good intentions, but find my mind wandering off to think of my son. "Why? Why? Why?" is the only thing I can concentrate on, trying to figure out things that I will never be able to untangle and solve. It's a challenge to try to work through the brain fog. Thanks for all the support from those who have messaged and sent words of encouragement. Just wanted to vent a bit.

.....

Renice Zimmerman, surviving spouse of Doug, encouraged Karen to vent away, knowing that our community of survivors would understand. She wrote: For me, the first year after I lost my husband was numb and foggy. Reality set in the second year, and the fog lifted. I also embedded in my brain the constant reminder my husband expected me to continue to live and carry on—not only for myself, but for our college-age son. Now I am almost six years being a widow. Not a day goes by that I don't miss Doug, think of him, talk to him, even yell at him, but I have adjusted to living without him. Vent away! All here understand.



*This is the beauty of the Online Community Message Boards.
Someone raises a question or starts a topic and others can contribute
with support, encouragement, compassion, suggestions, and empathy.
We no longer feel quite so isolated and crazy.*

Others added to the thread to lend support or give suggestions.

Holly Higgins, surviving mom of Dan, added: I so understand your concerns about not being able to concentrate. I lost my son in Afghanistan. I can't believe it will soon be twenty months... It can't be. But it is. Work is such a challenge. But so is every day. I ask the same questions you do, "Why? Why? Why?" My heart goes out to you. Knowing your child died just makes the whole world feel messed up. Nothing makes sense anymore. I don't suppose I am providing much encouragement, but I hope at least I can provide support so that you know you are not alone.

Ellen Andrews, surviving fiancée of David, wrote: A brain fog is exactly what I had. Concentration was difficult, at best. I think my brain was trying to process so much information and come to terms with the reality, that it would just grow tired and not function at optimum levels all the time.

Kim Suggs, surviving spouse of Milton, shared: With time some of the fog lifts. Somehow life seems to move on and you are moving along with it, just at a slower pace than you were used to. Sometimes we need to be guided along. This is not an easy path that we've been on, but there is support along the way. Just remember to reach out. There are many of us here who know what you are going through, care, and are there to guide you along the way.

Carol Lane, surviving mom of Bryon, wrote: It does lift, but even farther on you may find that every once in a while it pops up again. One thing I learned is to write lists of things that have to be done, so when they come up, I go to the lists and can function.

Allie Bemis, surviving sister of Keith, wrote: Brain fog is such an appropriate a term for those "wait, what did I miss again?" moments. My brain fog moments have been pretty numerous since my big brother died in August. My poor fiancé will tell me something, and he tells me I acknowledge it and then forget it. Finally, I had to start writing things down in multiple places. For my grandmother-in-law's birthday, I had to put a reminder in my paper calendar, one in my Google calendar, and then a reminder in my phone calendar. That way, if the bright colors in my planner didn't remind me enough, the beeping from my phone would. There are days when the fog hangs around and then days when suddenly I feel like I can remember everything without writing it down. It just changes and I make sure to have everything backed up.

John Ruiz, surviving father of Clint, expressed the thoughts of many: I had no idea that this was actually related to our losing our son. Thank you so much for posting this question—I just thought I was losing my mind. Now that I know, I can stop giving myself such a hard time about it.

This is the beauty of the Online Community Message Boards. Someone raises a question or starts a topic and others can contribute with support, encouragement, compassion, suggestions, and empathy. We no longer feel quite so isolated and crazy.

Many of the suggestions above can help you in the early months of grieving. Here are some additional thoughts.

- Remind yourself that your brain fog is normal for your situation.
- Lower your expectations of what you can accomplish these days.
- Divide tasks into smaller increments and adjust your goals.
- Give yourself extra time for getting ready for events.
- Start slowly to rebuild a daily routine that will give you new habits.
- Buy a special notebook for your lists. It's harder to lose a notebook than a scrap of paper.
- Review your lists at the beginning of the day and as often as needed.
- Above all, be patient with yourself.

Although you will never be the same person you were before the death of your loved one, realize that you will make progress in your grief journey. Your ability to function will not always be this challenging, and you will eventually emerge from the fog.

To be a part of the TAPS Online Community, visit www.taps.org and click on Online Community on the right at the very top of the screen. Then register to join. *

Self Care for Survivors

By LaRita Archibald

"Self-love, my liege, is not so vile a sin as self neglecting." ~ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*

Grieving is very hard work. It depletes energy and robs one of rest, of joy, and of the wish to care properly for oneself. For a time, most bereaved don't care whether they reestablish routine or restore structure in their lives. Some may not care about maintaining their health. Each is obsessed with the death and the loss that has occurred. Nothing seems more important than what has happened.

Yet maintaining good health is critical to healthy grieving, progressing on our grief journey, establishing the necessary "new normal" that eventually allows us to love life again. As a self-care reminder, I include an acronym shared with me by a friend

shortly after my son's death. My friend, a recovering alcoholic, told me this tool is used by persons with addictive disorders to help them maintain sobriety from day to day, hour to hour. With adaptation it contains some good advice for nurturing ourselves as we mourn our loss.

HALT!

Don't allow yourself to become too:

Hungry,
Angry,
Lonely,
Tired.

HUNGRY

During acute grief we may not feel like eating, but it is a time our bodies most need good nutrition to function well, to endure the stress of grief, and to sustain us without the betrayal of a health breakdown when we are least able to cope with health problems. Some bereaved will experience the opposite feeling of being deprived and empty, a gnawing in the stomach that seems to signal hunger. This false appetite encourages eating too much, too "junky," too often. The long-term risk is weight gain without benefit of good nutrition.

Eat wisely. It may help to eat several smaller meals a day of an easily digestible balance of food that will fuel your body, satisfy hunger, and keep you from feeling bloated or lethargic. Avoid heavy, spicy food that can cause indigestion, heartburn, or gas. You have no time or energy to waste on an upset digestive system. If you feel the need for a snack, nibble on fruit rather than brownies, ice cream, or chips.

Keep hydrated. Water is the best hydrant. Sodas, artificially sweetened or caffeinated drinks, coffee, or tea may not be as effective. Alcoholic drinks are depressants and should be ingested sparingly or avoided altogether during acute grief. Excessive stimulants such as chocolate and caffeinated drinks late in the day may disrupt sleep or contribute to restlessness.

See your physician for a complete physical in the early weeks of your mourning. Review with your doctor dosages of medication you are presently taking and discuss unusual or lingering physical distress you have noticed since your loss. During acute grief, when our minds are on overload, we can become confused or negligent about medication necessary to sustaining good health. You may wish to ask the physician to recommend a well-balanced diet and



supplementary multivitamins. Discuss with your physician any stress-related illnesses or conditions you have that could worsen during acute grief, such as asthma, ulcers, hypertension, heart disease, colitis, or a history of stroke.

Feed your spiritual self. Our wound reaches to the depth or our soul. Talk with your Divine Source about your loss, your fears for the future, your anger, or whatever weighs heaviest on your heart at that moment. It is not unusual for survivors to question their faith, declare they no longer believe in God, or express their anger at God for allowing the death to occur. It's okay to scream and rage at God. He understands our pain. God makes this journey with us; comforting us, loving us, healing us.

ANGRY

Not every bereaved person feels anger when a loved one dies, and that's normal. But to be angry after the death of someone we love is also normal. Anger is our protest against being deprived of the presence of our loved one. It may be directed toward ourselves for not having foreseen and prevented the death. It may be directed toward God for allowing the death to occur. There may be times that anger is displaced upon another family member. It is not uncommon for anger to be directed toward the person who died. While anger is a normal emotion following a loved one's death, it is not normal or healthy to harbor it, to use it as a shield, to cling to it, or to fuel it until it grows into bitterness. Anger becomes unhealthy when the bereaved person's thoughts are consumed by it and the words and actions of the bereaved reflect rage or thoughts of retribution.

Anger is energy. Channeled inward, anger can cause sleeplessness, irritability, depression, and irrational thoughts that have negative effects upon our physical and emotional well-being as well as upon those

close to us. Our challenge is to transform anger into reconciliation to the death and reshape our life around the void left by the death. We can transform anger by becoming informed. We can manage anger by talking with clergy or therapists, or by taking anger management classes. We can exorcise anger through exercise: walking, running, hiking, biking, aerobics, tennis, racquetball, swimming, golf, or boxing. Exercise releases endorphins that enhance one's sense of well-being.

LONELY

A loved one has died. What was once part of our own life is now part of our past, our life in memory. The tremendous void can be overwhelming, causing us to feel isolated, to believe that no one could possibly understand our loss. There are times of deep despair and hopelessness. Learning that everyone who has grieved the death of a loved one has felt desperate, hopeless, and alone means little.

During times of acute loneliness, call a friend, talk with your clergy, ask someone to be with you for awhile, visit a neighbor, or write a letter to the one who has died. In your message tell them the things you would say if you could speak face to face—your hurt, your loneliness, your fears, and your love. Many find great solace in journaling, which provides sort of a mourning calendar. In months ahead, when you feel you have made little progress, you can review the journal to recognize and appreciate the growth and healing that has taken place.

We cannot change what has happened, but we can make choices that will help us live without the one who died. We can accept the offer of friends and family to visit, take us for a drive, or invite us for a meal. We can attend grief classes or support groups. We can read to gain some understanding of the grief process and how others coped. We can reach out to others who have experienced a deep grief and use our

experience, growth, and understanding to help them and, thus, help ourselves.

TIRED

Mourning is the hardest work we are ever called upon to do. We didn't seek it. We don't want it. We rebel against it. But the death of our loved one makes it ours. Mourning is exhausting, depleting our energy. During acute mourning we focus on our pain, our loss, and the past, often oblivious to what is taking place around us in the present and distorting our vision of the future. We must learn to pace ourselves in our grief work by becoming tired enough to rest well but without becoming overly tired and unable to gain restorative rest. It is prudent to postpone major decision-making when we are tired. We may need to take short naps. Good sleep revitalizes us and is imperative to our emotional and physical well-being. *

Excerpted from *Finding Peace Without All the Pieces: After a Loved One's Suicide* (Larch Publishing, 2012)

About the Author



LaRita Archibald joined the American Association of Suicidology six months after the suicide of her twenty-four-year-old son Kent, initiating over three decades as a suicidologist. She and her husband started HEARTBEAT, one of the world's first support organizations for suicide bereaved, in 1980 and has served as AAS Survivor Division co-director, conference chair, and newsletter editor. Author of *Finding Peace Without All the Pieces: After a Loved One's Suicide*, LaRita is a long-time TAPS supporter and National Military Suicide Survivor Seminar presenter.

Yet maintaining good health is critical to healthy grieving, progressing on our grief journey, establishing the necessary "new normal" that eventually allows us to love life again.

Coming Home to TAPS

By Ruth Wiley ☆ Surviving mother of LTC James L. Wiley

*Six years have passed, a million tears,
Life was filled with a multitude of fears.
TAPS magazines came and filled my mind
With a place and time of a different kind.
I studied each page and read each word,
Things I thought I had never heard.
Then one day a desire formed.
I had to meet this group that even phoned!
There were others who shed the same tears,
Lost the same loves, had the same fears.*

*We packed our suitcases, boarded a plane,
A new fear blossomed like a sharp pain.
What if they truly did not understand?
Was it just words across the land?
Late at night we settled in our room,
Under the light of the Washington moon.
Early next morning we entered the hall
Not knowing if we should be there at all.*

*From out of nowhere, folks met our needs.
Listening carefully and planting small seeds —
Seeds of hope and lasting love,
From our loved ones now living above.
Hand in hand you have given me strength.
You have lifted my wings from beneath.
I no longer travel this path alone...
I have you to walk me home.*



The Way Men Heal

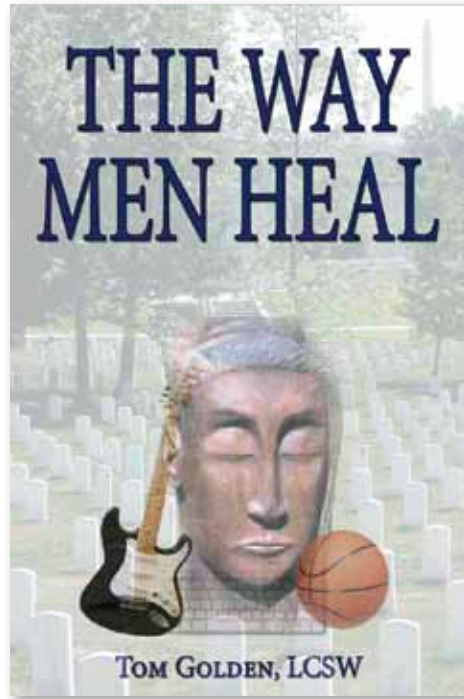
By Thomas R. Golden

Reviewed by Kyle Balduf ★ Surviving twin of Sgt. Kevin Balduf

The ways we grieve are as varied as the swirls and ridges at the tips of our fingers. This is why Tom Golden's *The Way Men Heal* (G.H. Publishing, 2013) is such a refreshing perspective of grief. In his book, Tom challenges some of the traditional judgments associated with healing. And don't let the title of the book fool you. Tom explains, "The masculine side of healing is used by both men and women. It is not simply a 'man's' way of healing."

The cultural assumption that men don't grieve or don't deal with their feelings is at the root of the way many mental health clinicians are trained. In his first job out of school, Tom struggled to help men who were grieving, leading to his research into modes of healing. He discovered that those who favor a masculine mode of healing tend to heal in an active way rather than an interactive way. In other words, they tell their story through actions, not words. This can make identifying masculine mode grief challenging, because the grief is virtually invisible. When someone isn't crying or displaying outward signs of pain, it is difficult to recognize that action can be part of the grieving process. But healing actions not only connect the grieving with their pain and loss; they also keep the memory of a loved one alive into the future.

When my twin brother died in Afghanistan, I was faced with the greatest pain of my life. I felt like I had been propelled beyond the stars and into a new universe, one with a cold, dark, bleak landscape. As friends and family poured into our house, we surveyed this new land of grief together. We sat in the living room and told stories. We talked



He discovered that those who favor a masculine mode of healing tend to heal in an active way rather than an interactive way.

about how we were doing. But after the first few days I became restless. I wanted to get out of the house and do something—anything.

I began helping with the planning of Kevin's memorial service, making a video slideshow that would encompass Kevin's life. I spent hours flipping through photo albums and listening to songs. Then I sat down with my good friend and began to create the video. As I soaked in the sea of memories, I found myself explaining the

pictures and talking about the significance of each moment. Conversation about my grief naturally took place as we worked. No one would have realized that I was actively grieving: I didn't even realize it, but this activity was a vessel for my grief and an initial path toward healing.

My hope is that you will read *The Way Men Heal* and broaden your understanding of the unique ways we grieve. Even as a mental health practitioner, I found myself learning new things from Tom. It's an informative and eye-opening book. The section titled "Tips for Helping the Men You Love" was particularly insightful, overflowing with practical ways to walk with those who grieve in a more masculine mode. Tom also brought his observations to life by sharing the stories of Michael Jordan, Brett Favre, and Eric Clapton, explaining the unique way each of these men actively grieved his own loss.

For those who don't enjoy reading or who have little time to do so, I have good news. This book is concise at fifty-four pages. I read it in less time than it takes to watch a movie. Tom also maintains a website with many grief resources, including a video version of the book. You can access these resources by joining Tom's website at thewaymenheal.com. Membership is not free, but there are several tiers of pricing based on length of time you plan to use the website.

Remember this: the best way to promote healing in ourselves is to seek to understand. *The Way Men Heal* can help us on that journey. ★



Spotlight on Service

★ Shaun Smithson ★

Volunteers are a very important part of the TAPS family. We are grateful for the countless hours they donate and the part they play in supporting the TAPS mission. Volunteers, we salute you!

“Freedom certainly is not free,” said Shaun Smithson, a longtime TAPS volunteer. “TAPS families know this better than anyone.”

Years ago, when Shaun was serving in the U.S. Air Force, his appreciation for surviving families led him to join the team of TAPS volunteers. He joined the Air Force in 1998 after graduating early from high school and his first assignment was to the prestigious Air Force Honor Guard at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling. While stationed there, he had his first experience with TAPS as a Good Grief Camp mentor.

Survivors who have been with TAPS since the early 2000s would probably recognize Shaun, as he’s been a strong pillar of support through the years. When he first began volunteering for TAPS, the children involved in the national Good Grief Camp numbered about fifty. Over the years, Shaun has had the opportunity to watch the Good Grief Camp grow to about 500 children. The increased need for mentors and volunteers is what inspires Shaun to devote his time to TAPS.

Shaun received his honorable discharge from the Air Force in 2002, transitioning to civilian life by pursuing a career as a youth pastor. As part of his vocation he regularly led camps with more than 300 children and felt drawn to get more involved with TAPS, the group that had captured his heart during his active-duty days. So Shaun reached out to TAPS, and from there his involvement with the Good Grief Camp blossomed.

In 2008, Shaun became a key support member of the camp’s leadership team, helping to coordinate volunteers and staff at the national event. In addition to being



*Thank You,
Shaun!*

involved in all aspects of the planning and logistics, he developed a strong relationship with the companies that provide goods and services to the Good Grief Camp.

In 2009, Shaun orchestrated the first of many Good Grief Camp outdoor lunches. This year, with help from the Yellow Ribbon United group, the lunch event grew exponentially and included appearances by the Washington Redskins, American Girl, and Under Armor, among others.

In 2013, when TAPS forged a relationship with the Israeli Defense Force Widows

and Orphans Organization, Shaun was available to cultivate the relationship, volunteering for joint camps both in Washington, D.C. and Israel. He realized quickly that grief knows no cultural bounds.

“Seeing the connection, in spite of the cultural divide among those who have lost loved ones, and seeing their growth, is something that continues to be a motivation,” Shaun said. “It’s a worthy investment and an honor.”

“The stories shared between the children and their mentors become the most significant story for that moment in time,” Shaun said. One thing that has impressed Shaun was talking to a young survivor who had difficulty sharing his story with those around him. “With TAPS, I want to talk about it. It’s the rest of the world that’s hard, because they don’t understand.”

Shaun’s desire to volunteer with TAPS is also about the camaraderie among those involved in the organization, from the staff to the volunteers to the supporters. Working regularly and consistently since 2007 with the Good Grief Camp, Shaun has had the opportunity to be part of a team that, “works well together, each member bringing different gifts and abilities together for the same cause.”

As the months and years continue, Shaun sees no end to being part of TAPS, an organization where he can give something back to those who have given so much. For Shaun, his continued service is tied to the knowledge that “there’s a child who has not yet found TAPS.”

TAPS is grateful to Shaun for his compassion, his time, and his honoring of our loved ones. ★

Casework Partnership

Pro Bono Legal Assistance

The TAPS Casework Department is proud to be available for our TAPS family members, supporting them on a wide variety of topics and issues. This support ranges from assistance with DoD/VA benefit eligibility questions and requests for records, medals, and investigations, to education on survivor benefits and seeking local, regional, and national support for matters like financial assistance.

Recently TAPS partnered with the Military Spouse Juris Doctorate Network (MSJDN), an international network of legal professionals who are military spouses, to support our TAPS family members on matters like the probate of a will or other legal support needs. MSJDN launched its Justice for Military Families initiative earlier this year and chose TAPS as the first partner organization in providing free legal assistance to military families.

Prior to this TAPS had been able to provide limited low cost or pro bono legal assistance, but thanks to this new partnership, access to pro bono legal guidance and support is now more readily available.

"We have access to a group of people with very specific skills in our military spouse attorney members," said Pro Bono Director for MSJDN, Josie Beets. "We wanted to provide our members with a way of serving the military community. When we looked

for an existing national organization providing free legal help to military families, we couldn't find one. So we started our own."

The TAPS partnership with MSJDN fills an important need, as navigating the legal process can be confusing and new for surviving family members, especially in the midst of grieving the loss of their loved one. Having the ability to pair a TAPS family member with an attorney who is familiar with the military can often provide a sense of relief to those who have never previously had to seek legal counsel.

The support available from MSJDN attorneys can range from simple counseling on an issue to direct assistance with completion of legal paperwork and/or representation in legal proceedings. While the topics covered are wide-ranging, there are certain areas on which MSJDN volunteer attorneys cannot provide direct support, to include most criminal matters and situations involving multiple TAPS family members (like child custody disputes).

The process for a TAPS family member to request legal support through the Justice for Military Families program is as simple as reaching out to the TAPS casework team and explaining the need. Our casework staff will then connect with our dedicated MSJDN contact to determine if the issue can be addressed by MSJDN volunteer attorneys and if there are attorneys in the network located near the TAPS family member. Remote support via

telephone or email is also an option. This process typically takes between ten and fourteen days to initiate, but some pairings have been made in less than a week.

"We deeply appreciate the help and support that is provided to surviving military families through the Military Spouse JD Network and the Justice for Military Families initiative," said TAPS Founder and President Bonnie Carroll. "These military spouses who are attorneys understand the unique needs of the military community and we know they will be a supportive resource for many TAPS families." *



DID YOU KNOW?

TAPS Casework Department receives casework inquiries via multiple sources, to include our TAPS toll-free number (1-800-959-8277), our dedicated email address (casework@taps.org), and personal interaction with TAPS staff at regional and national seminars.

If you have a question, a problem or an issue that you don't know how to address, please reach out to us and let us know how we can help you.



Keeping in Touch

Strength Through Communication

Members of a family don't always live near each other. Miles may physically separate us, yet we carry the comforting knowledge that our loved ones are always close at heart. The same can be said of the TAPS family. Our homes are spread across the nation, and even across the globe. But when our grief weighs heavy, we know our TAPS family is there to provide an encouraging word, a lift of the spirit, and hope for the journey. We link together on the vital lifeline of care, understanding, and support.

Our family reunions at national and regional seminars provide times for fellowship, hugs, smiles, and stories. But between those in-person encounters, TAPS extends the loving atmosphere

with special messages, publications, and online forums to inform, uplift, and sustain us as the journey continues.

Special Messages

TAPS sends messages of care and remembrance to your email inbox on holidays, anniversary dates, and significant milestones to offer you the comfort in knowing you are not alone. A weekly Saturday message shares survivor stories and experiences on specific discussion topics.

TAPS Magazine

Arriving in your mailbox each quarter, TAPS Magazine shares articles from grief professionals and survivors, offering information about grief, insight into surviving, and ideas for coping. Highlights of TAPS news and events keep you connected throughout the year.

TAPS Website

The TAPS website is available 24/7, providing information and access to the event calendar, photo albums, blogs, survivor stories, chat rooms, message boards, peer group sites, TAPS Magazine archives, and more.

Peer Mentor Newsletter

TAPS peer mentors represent the foundation of TAPS: survivors helping survivors heal. Through quarterly e-newsletters, monthly chat sessions, and an ongoing discussion site, peer mentors are able to share with each other and gain new insights as they mentor. TAPS recognizes that mentors are still

traveling the grief journey, and we provide outlets for them to share experiences and perspectives as long-term survivors.

Caregiving Partners

TAPS also recognizes the need to share information across the wider community to include those who are committed to caring for grieving families and loved ones. Our care partners, volunteers, and supporters work together to provide a comprehensive network to reach a greater number of survivors.

Military Partners

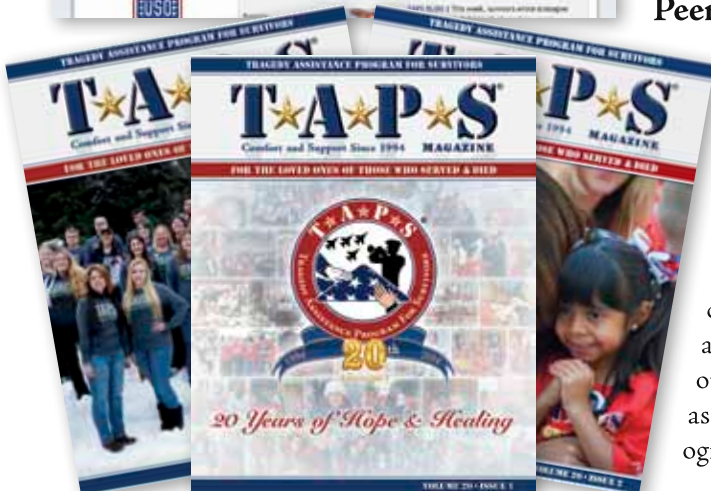
Our military partners and their casualty offices focus daily on their honorable work to assist families who are facing the heartache of loss. Because of our Memorandums of Agreement with the branches, survivors are able to connect quickly with the grief support available through TAPS.

Keeping our military and caregiving partners informed aids them in their efforts toward the families in their care. Through electronic communication, we provide regular updates and general information to share our mission and cultivate a cooperative spirit.



Our lives have been intertwined through the experience of loss. By joining together, keeping in touch—whether sharing information, sending a note of remembrance, or exchanging stories—we strengthen our connections and form a special network of compassionate care and hope.

Make sure you stay connected to your TAPS family by letting us know when you change your email or postal address. Visit our website to update your Online Community account or email us at info@taps.org. *



Thank You to Our Donors & Sponsors

We are grateful to the Friends of TAPS whose event sponsorships, grants, memorial tributes, and personal gifts allow us to fulfill our mission of comforting and supporting the loved ones of those who served and died.

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Join the team

The Run and Remember Team pays tribute to the sacrifices made by our men and women who died in service to America, while raising funds to create awareness and support for TAPS programs. Regardless of your age or your abilities, there is a place for you on the Run and Remember Team. Check out our upcoming races online and find out how you can support the team.

To sign up or get involved,
write to run@taps.org or
call 800-959-TAPS (8277).

