

The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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“Words are the keys to the heart.”

~ Chinese proverb

Actions may speak louder than words, but sometimes the right words can be a powerful thing. Have you ever come across a quote or passage that really spoke to you and thought, “Yes! That’s exactly right!” Do you carry a certain poem in your wallet or post inspirational words

on your fridge to keep you focused on the right path? Maybe you have even written some inspirational words of your own. If so, you are not alone. In this issue, readers share the words that have given them inspiration along the way.

By Jeanie Cole, Aunt of Adam E. Cole (2007-PA)

To this day, I regret not speaking at my young nephew’s funeral, but I knew that I would break down. There was so much to say, and the poem that I wanted to share has hung on the side of my fridge for many years. It’s my all-time favorite, and seldom a day goes by that I don’t recite it.

I Have a Mission

God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another.

I have my mission—

I may never know it in this life; but I should be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught.

I shall do good.

I shall do his work.

I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it—if I do but keep his commandments.



Adam E. Cole

Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what he is about. He may take away my loved ones and friends; he may throw me among strangers; he may make me feel desolate, make by spirits sink, hide my future from me—still he knows what he is about. Therefore, I will trust him.

~John Henry Cardinal Newman

Never before had my Catholic faith been rattled as it was with Adam’s tragic death. He was only 24, such a genuinely good and caring person, and suddenly ripped from our lives....how do you cope with such anguish? The powerful message in this poem continues to reinforce my belief system that God has a mission for each of us. There is indeed committed work and a bigger plan, and we are “a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.” I honestly feel that, unbeknownst to any of us, in life as well as after, one’s mission can profoundly impact and alter the actions and paths that others will take, including perfect strangers.

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The heartache will always remain, but no matter how difficult, I think it's important to find a greater good over painful personal loss to channel your energy, give back and try to help others. There may be no greater honor than to help carry on a fallen loved one's mission... often without even knowing it.

By Deb Bowen, Mother of Jeremy Wach (2007-NE)

My son, Jeremy Wach, was killed while fighting a fire on November 5, 2007. The weeks that followed brought every emotion I could imagine and more. The kindness, caring, and support of friends, family, and people we didn't know was amazing. Yet the emotions were almost more than we could bear. My wonderful daughter-in-law, Melissa, was now the single parent of a 3-year-old and a 19-month-old. At times, all we could do was just put one foot in front of the other to keep going.

A few weeks after I returned to work I was having a particularly difficult day. I started thinking about Jeremy, and I remember saying over and over in my head, "Oh, honey, the man you became." At lunch that day, I closed my office door and turned to my computer and started typing. It only took me about ten minutes to say some of the things I needed to get onto paper, but I can't tell you how many times I refer to that page again and again, and the memory of that day becomes clear once again. These words are the "words of inspiration" I still turn to and which have helped me to remember that time and the man I am blessed to call my son, Jeremy Wach.



Melissa and Jeremy Wach

Without a doubt, I think Adam was given a grand mission. His family will never know it in this life; but it gives me great hope that he'll get to tell us all in the next!

The Man He Became

*The man he became would amaze us all
From his chubby baby cheeks with a heart not so small*

*His love for his family would grow each day
From the time he was little until it was time to go away*

*His friends were the best no matter what they ask
His love for them was never a task*

*The love of his life, the mother of his boys
With life's ups and downs, tears, laughter and joy*

*Her memories are forever she remembers each day
For the rest of her life nothing takes those away*

*Two little boys he loved so much now miss their Daddy
His hugs and his touch*

*A little brother now missing their own special time
Whether wrestling or laughing he waits for a sign*

*Does "Bub" see me wrestling, does he know just how much
I may not have said it but I need him to know
We were more than just brothers by the time he had to go*

*His family came together when we laid him to rest
Aunts, uncles and cousins all put to the test*

*Grandmas' hearts are broken but they're not alone
We all miss you sweetheart but we know you are home*

*He was always my hero that sweet son of mine
Did he know how much I loved him did I tell him in time*

*I can still hear your laughter I can still feel your hugs
I will see you again my hero, in time*



By Helen Tierney, Mother of John Patrick Tierney (2001-NY)

I am often comforted by the words of the English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson:

It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

I lost my probationary firefighter son, John Patrick Tierney, age 27, on September 11, 2001, in the World Trade Center attacks. He was my youngest child and the joy of my life. I was so proud of him as he achieved his goal of becoming a firefighter. He was happy, and that made me happy. Then the inevitable happened, and my family and I were devastated.

I attended two support groups and read many books on grieving the loss of a

loved one. The support groups were especially helpful as we shared our losses together. But what stands out most of all throughout my years of grieving is the quote by Tennyson. As I think of my son and look at his picture, I am often reminded of the poet's words. I think to myself, *I am grieving his loss so much, and I'm feeling miserable.* Then another thought goes through my head— *If John wasn't born, I wouldn't be going through these terribly sad times.* I suddenly snap out of my sadness and try to think positive about the wonderful times I had with my son. I am so very happy to have known him and loved him and lost him than never to have known him and loved him.



Helen Tierney with granddaughter Elena

By Candy Johnson, Mother of Cohnway Johnson (2009-TX)

These words help me a lot, and I read them quite often. They are on a framed plaque I purchased from a Christian store located close to where I work. You may be familiar with this already.

Remembrance

You can shed tears that he is gone, or you can smile because he has lived.

You can close your eyes and pray that he'll come back, or you can open your eyes and see all he has left.

Your heart can be empty because you can't see him, or you can be full of the love you shared.

You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday, or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday.

You can remember him and only that he's gone, or you can cherish his memory and let it live on.

You can cry and close your mind, be empty and turn your back,

or you can do what he'd want:

Smile, Open Your Eyes, Love and Go on.

~Author Unknown



Cohnway Johnson

I cry as I type these words, as every time I read them, to keep reminding myself and keep myself focused on what I know Cohnway wants for me.

 By Dolores Bopp, Mother of Christopher Bopp (1998-NY)

Our son, Firefighter Christopher Bopp, was killed on December 18, 1998, with two other firefighters, James Bohan and Joe Cavalieri. Besides leaving behind Mom, Dad, and his brother, John, he left his wife of three years, Cori, who was pregnant with their first child, his daughter Carli. Talking to him and telling him how much we missed



Christopher Bopp

him never seemed enough. His wife had this inscribed on his headstone:

*If tears could build a stairway and memories a lane,
I would walk right up to heaven and bring you home
again.*

That's what I say every day.

 By Marie Mitchell, Sister of Paul Mitchell (2001-NY)

This quote came my way not long after 9/11/01 when my brother, a lieutenant with the FDNY, died in the line of duty when the WTC Towers collapsed. I carried it everywhere and read it often, sometimes over and over, as each line became a sort of meditation. I offered it more than once at various memorials over the years, including at Stanford University, where I gave a talk at a student-inspired event meant to "always remember" those lost on that fateful day. Alice Walker is no stranger to tragedy and trauma, and her words are both a poignant observation and a reminder to me that there is a "daring compassion," and it is deeper and wider than I could have ever guessed before 9/11.



Paul Mitchell

I offer these words here, once more, with gratitude to those who have not been afraid to "witness" and whose

courageous compassion in the face of the unimaginable continues to point to the Divine as our healing journey continues.

There is always a moment in any kind of struggle when one feels in full bloom. Vivid. Alive. One might be blown to bits in such a moment and still be at peace...To be such a person or to witness anyone at this moment of transcendent presence is to know that what is human is linked, by a daring compassion, to what is divine.

~Alice Walker

From Anything We Love Can Be Saved

 By Kathy Brennan, Sister-in-law of Peter Brennan (2001-NY)

My mom passed away last year, and on the one-year anniversary of her death, I received a letter and poem from Compassionate Care, a hospice that we used for Mom's last days. I was truly inspired by the poem and wanted to pass this along. I think many survivors will be able to connect with it. I only wish that I had received it years ago when my dear firefighter brother-in-law, Peter, was lost at the World Trade Center.



Peter Brennan

The Gift of Grief

Death takes away. That's all there is to it.

But grief gives back. By experiencing it, we are not simply eroded by pain. Rather, we become larger human beings, more compassionate, more aware, more able to help others, more able to help ourselves.

Grief is powerful. It plunges us into sorrow and forces us to face the finiteness of life, the mightiness of death and the meaning of our existence on this

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earth. It does more than enable us to change; it demands it.

The way we change is up to us. It is possible to be forever wrapped up in grief. It is possible to be so afraid that we become frozen in place, stuck in sorrow, riveted in resentment or remorse, unable to move on.

But it is also possible to be enlarged, to find new direction, and to allow the memory of the beloved person we have lost to live on within us, not only as a monument to misery, but as a source of strength, love and inspiration.

By acting on our grief, we can eventually find within ourselves a place of peace and purposefulness.

It is my belief that all grievers, no matter how intense their pain, no matter how rough the terrain across which they must travel, can eventually find that place within their hearts.

~Candy Lightner,
co-founder of Mothers Against
Drunk Driving (MADD)

By Cheryl Johnson, Wife of Mark Johnson (2010-IL)

Funny you mention posting things on the fridge... around here things are always posted everywhere.

Around my birthday and Christmas, you're sure to find my suggestions posted on the back door.

So, my quote.....I was just having a horrible day...got the mail...tons of catalogues... thinking retail therapy...which we all know doesn't work...so, first catalogue I open, I find this:

Promise me you'll always remember: you're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.

~Christopher Robin to Pooh (A.A. Milne)

I had to cut it out! I have it posted on one of my favorite pictures of Mark. He was always great for

words of encouragement to everyone, and I could just picture him saying something very similar.

So now on those really horrible days, I look over at his picture and can hear him telling me I will be OK.

Or could it be, because I found this in a catalogue, he was also probably telling me, "No more shopping," like he always did!



Mark Johnson

Need Some Words of Inspiration? Try one of these books from the NFFF Lending Library:

[A Broken Heart Still Beats: After Your Child Dies](#) (Anne McCracken and Mary Semel, Eds)

[Living with Loss: Meditations for Grieving Widows](#) (Ellen Sue Stern)

[Safe Passage: Words to Help the Grieving Hold Fast and Let Go](#) (Molly Fumia)

[A Time to Grieve: Meditations for Healing After the Death of a Loved One](#) (Carol Staudacher)

To borrow these and other books free of charge, read reviews, or buy your own copy through the Amazon.com affiliate program, visit the Family Programs section at www.firehero.org or contact Pat at pstonaker@firehero.org or (301) 447-1365.



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In Memoriam

Surreal. Sorrow. Shock. Vulnerable. Agony. Fear. Leave! Sacrifice.

How many thoughts and feelings have been captured from that day and the days leading to the Tenth Anniversary of September 11th?

Within a day of the terrorist attacks against the United States, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Office were striving to find ways to provide vital assistance to America's public safety communities reeling from the loss of hundreds and hundreds of fallen heroes. From on-site support to expedite death benefits to the loved ones of fallen firefighters, law enforcement officers, and first responders, to today's efforts that help surviving spouses and children achieve their college and university goals through federal educational assistance, BJA and PSOB remember these extraordinary public safety officers, and convey our unending gratitude to their survivors for their supreme sacrifice.

Eternal. Strength. Bravery. Thankful. Pride. Perseverance. Unity.

We want to hear from you about...



Hope. Having a sense of hope is one of the key elements in working through grief and being able to reinvest in living a happy, meaningful life. Hope doesn't lessen the pain of grief, but it can be like a lifeline to hold onto when times are the very toughest. What was the greatest source of hope for you after your firefighter's death? How do you remind yourself to stay hopeful on difficult days?

If you'd like to share your thoughts on this topic or other aspects of your journey, please send a Word document or e-mail to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org by November 22, 2011. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

The Journey
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
P.O. Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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