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Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could discover what causes us to have these wonderful flashbacks to the happier times in our lives? Perhaps for each person there is a different trigger. Meditation perhaps? If so, I plan to do a whole lot more meditating! For a long time after the loss of my father and brother, all my dreams were painful. They were sick, injured, hospitalized, or at the funeral home or cemetery. I lost my father 14 years ago and my brother 12 years ago. If you are a more recent survivor and are having mostly painful dreams and memories, please know that at some point you may wake up and think, "Wow! That was wonderful!" Hopefully I will have another one soon.

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We want to hear from you...



Vacations. Whatever that word brings to mind for you—the best vacation you took with your loved one, the first vacation you took afterwards, a funny travel story to make people laugh, the vacation you wish you could take from grief that never seems to come.

You don't have to be a "writer" to write for *The Journey*. Everyone has a story to tell, and we want to help you tell it. Even if your spelling is lousy or you failed English or you have a difficult time figuring out where to start,

just write from the heart and we will happily help you get the words right so your unique story shines through.

If you'd like to share your thoughts on this topic or other aspects of your personal journey, please e-mail a Word document (and a picture) to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org by July 15, 2014. If you don't do computers, please 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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The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird,
That cannot fly.

~Langston Hughes

A death is never just a death; a loss is always more than one loss. In the grief field we talk about “secondary losses,” which are all those things we lose when a significant person dies. When a husband dies, he might also have been the person who handled the family finances, the one who hung the Christmas lights, the first really decent guy you dated, the social one of the couple who helped you feel comfortable at parties. When it’s your son who dies, maybe that means there won’t be grandchildren in your future, or someone to take over the family business, or maybe you miss hearing people say, “He looks just like you.” All those things add up to one huge loss, the loss of the future as you envisioned it, the loss of a dream.

It is profound and painful to begin to re-envision your life based on these new circumstances. You might find someone to handle the finances, come up with a new plan for the business. But the new reality will not look like the one before your loved one died. It takes a lot of courage and grace to build new dreams. Having new dreams doesn’t mean leaving everything behind. Hopefully you carry forward the love and strength and energy that your loved one brought to your life. Some people may fade from your lives, but often others will appear at just the right time.

If your loss was recent, you might not be able to see the path yet. It may be slow going. It will take some hard work. But some day you will look back and realize how far you have come.

Shattered Dreams

By Renee Elkins, wife of Daniel Elkins (2004-CA)

We all have dreams. Some call them goals; some call them expectations; some thoughts. Really those are all just synonyms for the word dream. When I was a little girl, I dreamed about living in a home with a dad. Not just any dad, but a dad like the dad on Leave it to Beaver or Father Knows Best or—for the younger people reading this—like the Bravermans on Parenthood. I didn’t know my biological father. He walked out on my mom when I was three, my sister was one, and my mom (bless her heart) was pregnant with my brother. Mom eventually remarried when I was 10, and I had a dad who loved us in his own way and even adopted us to prove that love. Their marriage

didn’t last, however, and by the time I graduated from high school, after years of arguing, they divorced.

I didn’t know how a father was supposed to treat his children until I was married and had children of my own and had the blessing of being able to witness my husband father our children. It was with a sense of wonder and awe that I saw this role unfold as our kids were born and then grew older. I didn’t understand when he would say, “I’ve got this. Let me handle it.” I had watched my mom do it all my whole life. It was actually hard for me to let him make decisions and to discipline our kids without

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my involvement, because I simply had never seen this modeled. But once I got it, I loved it.

I was married at 20. Such a baby, and yet mature because of the responsibility I had being the oldest of three kids to a single mom. When I got married, it was hard for me to completely trust my husband to take care of me, to nurture me, to trust that he would always love me. Once again, I had not seen this modeled in my life as a child, so part of me thought it wouldn't last. I deeply desired it to last and promised God that I would do whatever it took to make it last.

My dream of remaining married and having the father to my children live in our home was coming true. At the 10-year mark, I knew we were going to be OK. I began to relax, to let go and to truly trust him. By the 20-year mark we had gone through some losses in our family; children were in college and pretty much independent. I began to feel confident and knew this was for life. I knew that, no matter what, this man loved me, and even though we both made mistakes and hurt each other at times, we had the depth of a relationship that had weathered the storms of life. At our 26th anniversary we went to dinner and had a talk about what we would do if one of us died. I jokingly told him that he could remarry, but that she couldn't be a blonde and couldn't be more than 10 years younger than him. He rolled his eyes and, joking, said, "OK, if you remarry, he can't be tall!" (Dan was only 5'7" on a good day!) Never, ever did I think that six months later those words would haunt me, and that I wouldn't be laughing at them.

It was a hot July day in 2004 when my dreams were shattered. They died on a deserted road in the High Desert of California. They left as quickly as the wind that blows in that desert could carry them. They dried up like the tumbleweeds and the parched ground. OK...you get the picture, right? But what I didn't expect was that I would not only miss my husband, my love, the one man in my life that stayed and did the hard work of a relationship, the one man who loved me unconditionally. I also missed the father I never had all over again. I missed that for my children, and I missed it for myself. I felt like every man that should have been in my life had gone away. The dream of a little girl was shattered, along with the dreams of a married

woman. The many dreams that we shared were shattered, but my dream of growing old with my young love was gone in a flash. I felt cheated, angry, and disappointed. I felt sad, depressed, and lost.

Then the men that my husband knew and loved walked away. It didn't happen right away, but slowly, one by one, they left. I asked myself what I had done wrong. Why did they stop calling and coming by, and why did they ignore my adult children? I stopped receiving invitations to do things with the couples that we once were friends with. I stopped initiating the interaction, because I felt like they would participate because they felt obligated. I was sure it was something I had done or had not done. I took the blame and beat myself up for it.

Eventually I began to make new friends. These new friends were younger than me; some were my age, but like me had also lost their husbands. They felt similar things and also had people walk away from them, and they were feeling many of the same emotions and confusion that I felt. I realized that I was not completely to blame. I realized that this seemed to be a common way for people to respond to death, especially when it was the death of a spouse. I felt like screaming, "I AM STILL ALIVE!!!" I wanted these people to be a part of my life and to share time with me but, for whatever reason, it wasn't meant to be.

I have worked through much of these feelings of sadness, anger, and abandonment over the years. I have developed a level of comfort with being alone and actually get peace and restoration from that time now. I have worked hard at making my home mine. I decorated it to meet my needs and my style. I wanted it to represent me and my love of comfort, home, cooking, and life. I am realizing, after 10 years, that it is OK to enjoy being alone. I used to feel like I was a loner or a loser or both, but now I just feel mysterious. In the movies, it's cool to live alone and do whatever you want, whenever you want, with whomever you want. In real life, we know that isn't always the truth.

If you are starting down this road of "being alone," I encourage you to go slow. Don't try to fill every waking hour with busyness, and don't try to fill the void of your lost love with another warm body too quickly. I miss my husband terribly, but have found much contentment in living the life I lead, even though at times it is still very difficult.



Renee Elkins



A Piece of Me is Gone

By Jo Ann Tilton, wife of Gary Tilton (2004-TX)

It has been ten years since that fatal night. That's ten years of loneliness and quiet. Ten years of wishing I could wake up from this very bad dream. But there is no waking from the reality that a piece of me is gone.

God tells us that when two people are joined in marriage, they become one. I guess I never truly understood what that meant until my spouse died. Suddenly, I felt as if I had just lost a part of me. I somehow felt like I was missing something, but I didn't know what. Sometimes it has been hard to function because of the missing part. After ten years, I think I know what I am missing.

I am missing that partner in life, that person who was there to help with every decision. I am missing that person who enjoyed the meals I prepared. I am missing planning new menus with new recipes and watching his face light up at the tantalizing sight. I am missing planning vacations together and then enjoying the destination simply because we were together. I am missing shopping for birthday and Christmas gifts for my special someone. I am missing the delight in his eyes as he opened those gifts on Christmas morning. I am missing standing by his side as he served his



Jo Ann Tilton

community. I am missing him being there to kill the spiders and rescue me from the rest of the world's evil creatures.

And yes, I am missing our Friday night dates. How I miss him being by my side at our favorite football team's games! I am missing his head on the pillow beside me each night. I am missing his daily "I love you" as I head off for my day.

Yes, a piece of me is gone, and I miss that piece 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. God completed us both when He brought us together. One without the other is missing a vital part of life. Yes, it is hard to go on when you have lost part of yourself, but go on we must. I am so thankful that I have

the precious memories of that wonderful person I called my spouse for 37 years. And I am so thankful that God has allowed me to remember every little detail about him! Yes, some days are very difficult, but then I remember Who brought us together, and I grab hold of His hand and wait for His guidance. And as the days grow longer, my hold grows tighter on the hand of the Master.

It's true. A piece of me is now gone on to Heaven, and until that day when we meet again, I will cling to the Master's hand.

Sweet Dreams

By Pam Mansfield Burditt, sister of Mark Mansfield (2002-KS)

I recently had the most remarkable dream about my brother Mark. In my dream, he must have been about six months old. He and I were in his room, and I was trying to change him or dress him after a bath or something. It is kind of fuzzy. What was very clear, however, was how much fun we were having. I remember him not holding still, that we were tickling and laughing, hugging, and I gave him repeated little kisses to his little neck right below his ear and jawline where they truly smell like babies. I could even sense that sweet smell of him in my dream, his chunky

little thighs, even the socks and booties he was wearing. It seemed like we played like this for a long time; however, eventually it was over.



Pam and Mark as children

I don't remember waking up afterwards; I am sure I would have burst into tears. In the morning, however, I wondered if I would have awoken with a smile, thankful for the cherished moment I had just been given. Since then I keep coming back to one thought. *I can treasure these moments with him in my sleep every bit as much as the ones I treasured while he was here with us.*

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