



# The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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*There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter.*

~ Rachel Carson

If all goes as planned, this issue should be arriving in your mailbox in spring, a season associated with renewal, growth, hope, and light (and, for some, allergies!). This may or may not match your internal experience as you head into spring this year. As with the winter holidays, it can be distressing when the way we feel doesn't match the mood and expectations of the world around us. Despite the signs of spring in the air, it may currently feel like winter in your life or in your heart.

Still, spring can be a gentle reminder of the natural seasons and rhythms of the year and of life. However we

are feeling right now, the change of seasons reminds us that life is cyclical, and we won't always feel the way we do today. Feelings, like weather, are always changing. Even if you have to push yourself a little, try to get out in the sunshine and enjoy the longer hours of light and the fresh air. Pay attention to which flowers are blooming and which birds are singing today. And tomorrow. And next week. Notice the small changes that are happening over time, new buds on trees that were just bare. Trust that, even when it seems slow, growth and renewal are happening in you as well.

## By Claire Veseth

*Mother of Anne Veseth (2012-ID)*

My daughter Anne was struck by a falling tree while fighting a fire on a remote hillside in central Idaho. To get to the site of her death that first fall, we drove in the rain for hours, followed by a muddy slog on a newly formed logging road, a sooty, wet hike through downfall and alder bushes, before a slippery, steep climb above Steep Creek, which flowed at the base of the hillside. There was a heavy overcast, and the site was depressing—black skeletons of trees, a creek choked with debris, and the area felt gloomy and dark. It matched our mood.

The next year, the Forest Service built a trail up to the creek and put a bench



*Anne Veseth*

where you could sit and look at the hillside. For the next couple of years, every August we would make our way from the bench by the creek up the steep hill to the site of her death, where there were mementos, a rock memorial, and a dark feeling.

Four years after Anne's death, there was a landslide on the hill above the memorial site that took out everything on the entire hillside—the remaining trees, brush, soil, and the memorial. It destroyed the bench by the creek, leaving a barren, naked hillside. The slide material hit Steep Creek and scoured the creek down to bedrock as debris traveled

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**Claire Veseth** *continued from page 1*

downstream 1100 feet in elevation. Where Steep Creek flows into Beaver Creek next to the county road, some of the debris went downstream, and most of the logs were carried across Beaver Creek, leaving a massive pile of logs and debris on the county road.

The first year after the slide, when we visited the site, it was barren of anything growing, simply a brown, muddy, exposed hillside. There was no visible sign of where she had died and no life on the hillside. My first thought was the emptiness that was left after the slide swept away everything in its path; it felt like the memory of Anne had disappeared from the site. Over the next few days, as I thought about the landslide and all it took away, I changed my perspective. The landslide had swept away the skeleton trees, sooty downfall, and the blood that was in the soil where she died. It cleared the darkness and gloominess and carried it away by way of Steep Creek to Beaver Creek, to the North Fork of the Clearwater River, to the Clearwater River, down to the Snake River, and ultimately to the Columbia River and the ocean. Any physical trace of Anne and the tragedy was now out in the vastness of nature and, rather than a loss of a site, it was a stripping of the dark and time for new growth on the hillside.

The Forest Service rebuilt the bench, my son carried up and placed a metal cross that was made by the local timber protection agency, and the stream flowed free. The last five years have seen life reappearing on the hillside. The fireweed came in and bloomed, the brush

has increased, and the hillside is now covered with plant growth. Sitting on the bench this past year, I listened to the music of the creek as it flowed over the rock, watched the bees go from flower to flower, and appreciated seeing the action of the soft breeze moving over the plants. Life and light have come back to the area and are increasing their hold on the hillside again.

I have a new appreciation for the trip every August now. It is not a dreaded trip like it was those first few years. The landslide acted as a cleansing action, an opportunity for new growth and healing, on the hillside and in my heart. The Forest Service crew at Canyon Work Center clears the trail every year; to me, it is a visible sign that “we will never

forget” her. This past year, the crew—none of whom had ever met Anne—also carved an “A” on downed logs and stumps along the trail. What a sense of love and caring we felt as we hiked up and saw those A’s! I am a proponent of Leave No Trace, but in this case, each “A” is a

memory kept alive by a crew that didn’t know her but still cares, on a trail that is used only once or twice a year by family and Canyon Work Center crews.



*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes,  
but in having new eyes.*

~ Marcel Proust



## Nature and Grief

**A**s Claire Veseth so eloquently describes in the piece she wrote for this issue, nature can be one source of healing for those who are grieving the death of a loved one. Many of us are drawn to natural spaces when we are wrestling with overwhelming emotions and changes in our lives. While we have always known this instinctively, there is a new body of research that is beginning to document the positive effects of time spent in nature. Spending even a few hours in natural settings each week can reduce distressing emotions like anger and anxiety, lift our mood, instill a sense of calm, and bring about a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life. Recent studies also document the positive effects of nature on physical health, including blood pressure, immunity, muscle tension, and levels of stress hormones.

At our events for Fire Hero Families, we try to include opportunities for attendees to spend time in natural settings. Whether it's a field trip to a scenic destination, an afternoon walk, or just sitting on a bench outside chatting with someone you met at the conference, we know this has real benefits. At the 2022 Wellness Conference, coming up on May 17-20, in beautiful Upstate New York, we have incorporated nature into the schedule. There will be workshops about the benefits of nature, daily outdoor walks, and an optional extra day for local excursions to beautiful places. This summer, we will hold our Hal Bruno Camps, our Young Adults Retreat, and a brand new Men's Retreat in the beautiful mountains of Colorado. For more information about upcoming Fire Hero Family events, go to <https://www.firehero.org/events>.



## Support and Connection for Fire Hero Families

Join our private Facebook group for Fire Hero Families.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/NFFFireHeroFamilyPrograms>

Find resources that support adults and children who are grieving.

<https://www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources>

### Facilitated Support Group

*open to adult Fire Hero Family members, for those who are struggling with grief and do not have a strong support system; facilitated by psychologist Dr. Angela Moreland*

 **Weekly, Tuesdays, 8-9 PM (EST)**

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/88CKSYR>

### Fire Hero Family Peer Support Group

*open to adult Fire Hero Family members; meet in small groups to share experiences and ideas*

 **Weekly, Wednesdays, 8-9:15 PM (EST)**

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/87W8ZFY>

### Men Forging Ahead

*open to adult men from the Fire Hero Family community; informal conversation and connection*

 **Monthly, 4th Saturdays, 3-4:30 PM (EST)**

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/X31MT93>

### Monthly Remembrance Group

*during the anniversary month of your firefighter's death, join others who are also remembering their firefighters; facilitated by Vickie H. Taylor, LCSW; open to adult Fire Hero Family members*

 **Monthly, 2nd Sundays, 3-4 PM (EST)**

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/PQF7X39>

If you have questions about any of these groups, please e-mail Erin at [ebrowning@firehero.org](mailto:ebrowning@firehero.org).



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Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Programs are a unique partnership effort of the PSOB Office, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), U.S. Department of Justice and local, state, and federal public safety agencies and national organizations, such as the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, to provide death, disability, and education benefits to those eligible for the Programs.

## Write About Your Journey



One of the ways we can process our experiences, including grief and loss, is by pursuing creative activities. Art, music, writing, dance, theater, woodwork, needlework—all of these can be outlets for emotional expression, a way to work things out, and an activity to soothe a brain that is exhausted from the work of grief. Creativity is good for us! Tell us about the creative outlets that you pursue and how they have helped you.

If you want to share your thoughts on this or another topic, please send them by **June 1** to:

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