

The Reason




HELP AND HOPE
FOR
THOSE WHO GRIEVE

SALLY GRABLICK

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T O M Y F A M I L Y

Joe, Katie, Ryan (and Maxx)



You gave me a reason
to live, love and learn.

Thank you for believing in me,
and my ability to tell our story.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Preface	ix
Introduction	xi
PART ONE IN THE BEGINNING	
1 It's Called Grief	3
2 Bits and Pieces	11
3 Talking to Ryan	17
4 The Blanket	23
5 Cliff Notes for the Beginner	25
6 Reprieve	33
7 The Three Month Marker	39
8 Ryan's Helping Hand	43
9 Company in Hell	47
10 Hope You Can Hold	53
PART TWO A NEW FOUNDATION	
11 Relationships	59
12 The Stork Delivers	63
13 Barrie and Judie	67
14 Birds of a Feather	71
15 Classic Symptoms List	75
16 Build a Toolbox	79
17 Miss Lori	85
18 Music and Miracle Basics	91
19 Diamond Rio	95

CONTENTS

20	The Pictures	99
21	I Get My Hug	109
22	Learning Curve	113
23	The Ring	117
24	The Channeler	121
PART THREE RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS		
25	Loves Me Like a Rock	127
26	Helping Katie	131
27	The Chaise	135
28	Feather's Day	139
29	Send in the Courier	145
30	Dreams and Rainbows	151
31	Frogs and Herons	155
32	A Butterfly for Joe	165
33	It's All About Katie	169
34	Pushing Forward	175
35	Something Old Something New	179
36	Mizpah	183
37	I've Got Your Number	189
PART FOUR MOVING TOWARD ACCEPTANCE		
38	Sedona	195
39	Mind Over Matter	203
40	Believe	209
41	A Few Words On Faith	215
42	Mirror, Mirror On the Wall	219
43	JRW4EVR	223
44	Wrapping It Up	229
	Epilogue	235
	Bibliography	239
	About the Author	241

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PREFACE

At 19 years of age, my son Ryan committed suicide — in our home, in his room, with a rifle. That is all I'm going to say about that. This isn't a story about how or why he took his life. It's a story of how his spirit returned to save mine.

In my desperation to endure this incomprehensible tragedy, I tried everything I could think of to release myself from the “black hole” of grief. But no drug, therapist, or book, was solely capable of giving me the peace or direction that Ryan ultimately did.

Before I go any further, let me make something perfectly clear. I do not claim to be an expert on anything beyond my own personal experience. I am not psychic, nor do I possess any extraordinary skills. I'm a mother who lost her son and wanted to know: “*Where did he go, and is he alright?*” It's that simple. I knew the mission, but didn't have a clue as to where it would lead me. This is the story of my journey...

INTRODUCTION

I went from walking five miles, five days a week, to sitting on my deck smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. Losing my son Ryan paralyzed me, both physically and emotionally. During the transition of life with him to life without him, I found it was easiest just to stay immobilized and concentrate on my breathing. In the earliest days of my grief it was really all I was capable of doing. If it had been easy to shut off my mind, I would have done that too.

My mind however had a life of its own, and it was running at warp speed. All the “could haves, should haves, and would haves” were spinning in my brain like a revolving door. Nothing I did had the ability to shut it down, believe me — I tried. In retrospect, I suppose that was a good thing, because it was the only part of me that seemed to be working, and it reminded me that I was still alive.

That was painful, because I didn’t want to be alive. I didn’t want to be in a world where Ryan wasn’t. My whirling mind went into overdrive as I attempted to figure out a way to live without my son; but in my current state, I lacked the tools and direction required to accomplish this ominous task. A week after the suicide, my fate was drastically altered by a random encounter at a local department store...

I was forced to leave the deck that fateful day to shop for a container for Ryan’s ashes. Back then, every single step was an obstacle to overcome — so making a trip to the store seemed like climbing Mt. Everest. I enlisted the assistance of my loving daughter, Katie, to get the job done.

INTRODUCTION

Time spent with Katie forced me into “Mommy mode” and somehow it gave me the energy to get a few things done.

I ran into an old acquaintance while we were browsing the aisles of TJ Maxx. I hadn’t seen this woman in several years and it surprised me that I recognized her at all. In fact, I had to re-introduce myself to her. We exchanged the usual “how are you” pleasantries and then I just blurted out “We’re here to pick out a chest to put my son’s ashes in.”

That type of comment would scare the hell out of most people, but Margo just embraced me warmly and said, “I have lost both of my sons. You need to read *Life after Life* by Raymond Moody.” I don’t believe in coincidence; I believe everything happens for a reason. I wrote the title of the book down, selected the chest for Ryan’s ashes, and headed straight for the book store.

I purchased that book and read it in two days. It opened up a new world of possibilities to me, and provided something I felt I could grab onto. Books became my salvation; before I knew it, I had become a Borders ‘junkie’. There I could cruise the aisles and focus my attention on getting better, rather than constantly wallowing in my grief.

I found books that opened my mind and heart to things I’d never imagined could truly exist. Through them, I grew to find understanding in a world, that once familiar, had become so foreign to me. I discovered my spiritual side and began creating a whole new life for myself. It was what I needed to do. My life was forever changed, so I had to change with it. This book is to give hope to those who are browsing those same aisles right now — looking for answers. I hope my story will help you find some.

PART ONE



IN THE BEGINNING



IT'S CALLED GRIEF

I GUESS YOU COULD call me a “seeker.” I’ve never been the type of person to accept something without trying to understand it first. I didn’t understand death. My son Ryan’s suicide shattered the ability to comprehend anything. I had been caught unaware and unprepared for the chaos his death created in our lives. It left me fumbling in a world I no longer recognized, numb with pain and struggling to survive. In the wake of his funeral, this state of confusion held me captive, and left me wondering, “Now what?”

Up to this point, I had followed the steps that were clearly outlined for me: sign the death certificate, select a funeral home, decide on the type of burial, pick out the coffin, chose an outfit for him, set the funeral arrangements, order flowers, etc. People walked me through these tasks because they had to be done. But, after the funeral, I found myself sitting at home in a space filled with condolence floral arrangements and plants wondering, “What the hell do I do now?” Nobody tells you that. There is no direction for the days following the funeral formalities, except “give it time.”

How much time? That’s what I wanted to know. I needed someone to tell me how long I was going to feel like someone had ripped my guts out and ran over the rest of me with a Mack truck. So I asked. I had to ask several people before I got my answer. It came from a family friend who had lost her son some 20 years before. She told me it took her five

The Reason

years. Her response was, “It took five years before I could open my eyes in the morning and not feel that heavy weight on my chest.”

I was grateful to hear that for two reasons. First, now I could focus on being “better” in five years and this gave me a goal. Secondly, every day since it had happened, I had experienced that same feeling upon awakening. I would open my eyes, and think — my son is dead — which was followed by that same crushing weight she’d mentioned. It was paralyzing. Hearing her describe this had made me feel “normal”.

I looked and saw that she was there, standing in front of me — alive. I needed to know that Ryan’s death was something I could actually live through. I found myself looking at her from a completely different perspective. She wasn’t just Betty; she was a SURVIVOR. A mother who had lost her child and had successfully found a way to live her life again. I made up my mind then and there to be a survivor too. I just needed the map out of hell to accomplish this.

I felt sick all over, so I started with my doctor. He prescribed antidepressants, which I took religiously, praying for some kind of relief. They didn’t touch the pain, but they did keep me going. I also was having a lot of trouble sleeping, so he gave me something for that too. I knew that these would not cure my grief, but I felt like I was at least making an effort to do something. No one I knew was really offering me any advice on what I should do. Even now, I marvel at the thought that there was no direction — no “to do’s” for the grieving process that anyone seemed able to guide me to.

I stuck with the doctor theme and started seeing a counselor. I picked someone who was familiar with my family and our situation, hoping it would help. It was a godsend. There, I was free to talk about Ryan and this brought me great comfort. I couldn’t do that anywhere else, or so it seemed. There was too much pain in my house to discuss him there. My parents and other family members were all working

through their anguish too. We all seemed to be dealing with the pain alone, in little silos, away from each other. At my grief counseling sessions it was comforting to have another live body in the room as I wept and recalled memories of my son. I went there looking for a lifeline to grab onto, one that would lead me out of the maze of my pain.

My counselor was able to suggest the use of what was referred to as “EMDR” (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing). It is often used to treat post-traumatic stress. It has proven to be an effective way to decrease/eliminate the symptoms people exhibit after witnessing tragic events. Suicide qualified as a tragic event. It helped me. I was also able to convince my husband Joe, my daughter Katie and my father to use EMDR too. They needed it more than I did.

Joe and Katie had found Ryan after the suicide, so they were working with a different deck of cards than I was. My father, who lives right down the road from us, had been called after the discovery of Ryan’s body. He had rushed down to our house and been exposed to the same horrific sight as Joe and Katie. That was why they all needed EMDR more than me. I had been at work that morning and therefore was spared that scene. I have always felt that Ryan made a conscious choice to do it after I’d already left for the day. Somewhere inside the fog of his pain — he had thought of me, and I loved him more because of it.

So, in the earliest days following the suicide, the counseling sessions became a part of our routine. Outside of that, our schedules had little in common. My husband Joe spent most of his time away from the house. If he wasn’t working, he was at the golf course. My daughter Katie went into perpetual motion. She worked all the hours she could get and then would make plans with her friends after work. When she chose to spend time at home, she spent it sleeping or working on jigsaw puzzles. I couldn’t seem to leave the house, except for the counseling appointments

The Reason

or to replenish my cigarette supply. It wasn't much, but at least we were all still breathing.

Being home for me was a double-edged sword. I was afraid to leave, but also afraid to be there alone, not so much during the day — but at night. This was something new to me. I had never been scared in my own home. Katie exhibited fear as well. She could not go downstairs to her bedroom alone. Because of this, we moved her things upstairs and turned my office into a temporary bedroom for her. I had my husband put a door stop on the basement door, and insisted this door stay open any time I was down there. The very thought of being shut downstairs made me hysterical. All of this was due to the fact that Ryan's room was also downstairs, and we didn't want to be alone where he had chosen to end his life.

Our laundry room is on the lower level too. This made the one thing I felt capable of doing an exercise in endurance. When I found myself home alone, I would stand at the top of the stairs and say out loud, "Ryan, I have to go downstairs now, so don't decide to show up while I'm alone or it will scare the bageeberz out of me." Ryan had been an obedient child, so giving him direction seemed like the right thing to do. Somewhere inside of me, I believed he could hear me, and saying this made it easier to descend the stairs.

Other equally bizarre behavior evolved from the suicide. I found myself moving from room to room at dusk, flipping on every light in the house. I kept most of the televisions on, regardless of day or night, to keep from feeling alone. The patio doors facing the pool suddenly required window blinds after being bare for several years. At nightfall, I would lower the new blinds and shut them tightly. We ordered French doors with blinds and had them installed to enclose the foyer, further isolating the entrance to the lower level.

It wasn't any specific thing we were afraid of in the house; we were just experiencing backlash from the shocking experience we had all just been through. A catastrophic event had taken place in our "comfort zone", and these strange behaviors were our way of coping. When we couldn't cope, we simply avoided the location of the tragedy. By "not seeing," we did not have to "believe" it had actually taken place. Sadly, these were only temporary solutions to a now permanent situation.

All of this made me realize that we were going to need more help if we were going to recover. I took my usual course of action and turned to reading to gather the information I felt we would need to accomplish this task. I didn't have to worry about what books to read, because the books found me. This was a blessing in disguise because I wasn't capable of making many decisions at this stage of the game. Even little choices tended to overwhelm me.

My friends were excellent resources when it came to reading material. Some books were given to me, others were mentioned within the text of the current books I was reading, or they would simply be recommended to me in conversation. I kept a running list and had plenty of titles to select from when I needed a new book. Reading made me feel better. It made me feel like I was doing something. I gathered valuable information from the books and the time I spent reading at home helped me to become more comfortable there.

This was not the case for my husband and daughter. They were very uncomfortable in the house, and simply didn't like to be there. I understood that. It was a no-brainer. Katie was only 17 when Ryan died. The trauma of the event itself would kill most people in their tracks, but Katie stayed strong. I said to her the day before the funeral, "Baby, it's okay to cry." She just looked at me and said, "No, Mom. Ryan is making me strong for you, and when you're better I'll take my turn." I was

The Reason

coping with it in my way and so I had to extend the same courtesy to her. All I could do was keep a watchful eye on my daughter, and pray that she would be okay.

My husband would never say he was afraid. Joe could go up and down the stairs without any fuss, but he did not go into Ryan's bedroom. For the most part, he could easily avoid being in the house most of the time without it seeming to be intentional. After all, it was summer and he had to take care of the lawn and pool. He spent a lot of time at the golf course with his friends, or tinkering in the garage. It was a somewhat normal routine for him so it did not seem like avoidance.

Joe, like Katie, appeared to be so strong. I remember thinking, "How can they be doing so well after what they had seen and been through? Why am I the one struggling so hard?" The answer was shock. We all seemed to be somewhat normal; however, in actuality, we were walking time bombs. Unknowingly, the true impact of our grief was there waiting, just below the surface.

All of this, and more, made the case for *not* selling the house. I think this surprised a lot of people. We did list the house, only to pull the listing a week or so later due to my gut instincts. It just did not feel like the right thing to do. We needed to face the truth of what had happened. We could run, but we would never be able to hide from the reality that Ryan was gone — forever. Conquering our fears in the same atmosphere that housed them would be one of our biggest challenges, but I felt it had to be done. I approached it as a conditioning exercise, thinking that the more time we spent there the easier it would get, and it did — eventually.

I saw our recovery in two phases. First, we were going to have to address the suicide itself and learn to cope with the horror of this violent act. Then, we needed to work through the grief of our loss, and the fact that Ryan had made a choice we were all going to have to live with.

PART ONE ∞ IN THE BEGINNING

I did not want us to remain the huge gaping sores we'd become — walking around without a scab for the rest of our lives. I was determined to find a way for us to heal. I became a “Grief Pioneer,” and was soon blazing unfamiliar trails for my family, looking for help, *looking for hope.*