

# *Ideas from the Valley*

*Understanding, encouragement, comfort, and hope!*



*Todd Nigro*

Introduction

# Ideas from the Valley

Understanding, encouragement, comfort, and hope!

I am so sorry for your loss. Sorrow comes into this broken world and we are not prepared for such overwhelming feelings. Your pain cannot be eased with words or actions, for your pain and tears are signs of an enduring love and a yearning shattered heart. Something within you dies when you bear the unbearable. In the depths of your darkness and despair, look closely for the light of God shining His love into the core of your soul. Our minds struggle with many issues, but with God's help, our hearts will find their way. The love you shared is forever etched into your heart and an eternal truth.

Ellie's Way, a nonprofit ministry, was founded to provide comfort to the grieving. This booklet was created to provide understanding, encouragement, comfort, and hope for the days ahead.

I've learned that no one can understand your situation, but I've walked a similar path. On January 20, 2012, we lost our daughter Ellie in a tragic accident in our home. She was six years old, a sweet little daddy's girl, and our only daughter.

As I have worked through the past few years, I have learned many things. Other bereaved parents reached out to us, providing comfort through their words and support. It was important to know that Ellie was not forgotten, nor were we. As I have traveled further through the valley of grief, I have discovered that our experience can be used for good.

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

– 2 Corinthians 1:4

I sincerely hope that the information provided in this booklet is helpful. Know that you are not alone on what might be the most difficult journey of your life.

With Deepest Sympathy and Love,

Todd Nigro

Founder and Director, Ellie’s Way, Inc.



Ellie and Dad

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# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone that has helped my family through such a difficult time in our lives. Family, friends, church, neighbors, fellow bereaved parents, and compassionate strangers have all supported us in many ways over the years.

I thank God for the wonderful gift of life.

Todd Nigro

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Ideas from the Valley

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# Living Ellie's Way

Everything in my life seems insignificant when compared to one tragic day. My childhood was spent striving and achieving. We didn't have much and it seemed it was up to me to find my way. I was in control and making things happen. I had achieved my dream of being a fighter pilot, and was blessed with a beautiful wife, Kristen, and two adorable sons.

After leaving the Air Force, we were visiting my wife Kristen's family at Thanksgiving. Many of her friends were pregnant and we had been talking about having another child for months. The subject came up with Kristen's mother and she gave us this advice: "You might always regret not having another child, but you will never regret having another child." We thought about that and it seemed so true. Our decision was made! Our family was incomplete and Kristen especially wanted a daughter.

By the summer, Kristen was pregnant and it was so exciting. Our boys, Tyler and Jake, were also interested in their new sibling and asked lots of questions. We picked the name Ellie for our precious daughter. She couldn't wait to join us and was born about seven weeks early. Ellie's birth was uneventful until she was supposed to cry. I remember seeing the nurses take Ellie to the warmer and the tension rose as she didn't seem responsive. I quickly became so scared. Ellie was purple and didn't look very healthy and she wasn't crying. All of a sudden, she sprang to life. Within a few minutes, everything appeared to be normal. She was breathing on her own and her color improved rapidly. Our little Ellie had arrived!

She weighed only 4 ½ pounds and was so small. She needed to stay in the neonatal intensive care unit for one week. We drove up to see her every day and spent the entire day with her. They didn't allow us to stay overnight. Ellie was growing and doing much better each day. One day we brought Tyler and Jake up to see her. The boys weren't allowed in the neonatal intensive care unit, so I brought Ellie over to the window where the boys smiled and made faces at Ellie. They were so excited to have a baby sister.

I will never forget the day Ellie came home. We couldn't wait to bring her home to join the family. She was so full of life and brought us so much joy from the very beginning.

Our oldest son Tyler is a sweet, sensitive, and compassionate soul. He is an accomplished musician and athlete, but more than anything, he was an incredible big brother to his little sister Ellie. When Ellie was little, he looked after her, played with her, and loved her with all of his heart. I've never seen a young boy as patient and loving to a baby.

Our middle child is Jake. He has a charming personality and will make friends with anyone. He has a heart of gold and is so much fun to be around. His optimism and love of life is contagious. He also loved to play with Ellie.

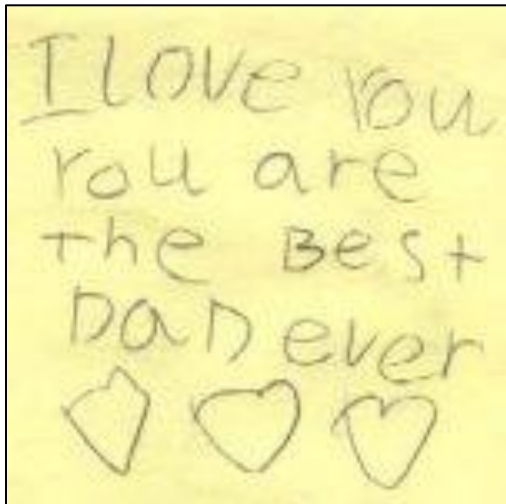
Finally, Ellie (forever 6) was my sweet little daddy's girl. She and I just "got" each other. She thought I was funny and wanted to be like me. I'll never forget our talks in bed about her dreams and her struggles. She gave the warmest welcome home every time I came through the door. We shared a love for encouraging others.

Ellie was always watching people. One day, she noticed that I was leaving encouraging sticky notes around the house for Mommy. She informed me "Daddy, where is my note?" She was irresistible! I began to write her notes and leave them where she would find them. I always

wrote her one because it made her so happy (even if Mommy didn't get one sometimes).

Ellie learned and wanted to give back. She began to write notes and cards to everyone. She took it to a whole new level! Her nice words are on all the neighbors' refrigerators and were delivered to her swim team coaches. She always had time to write a nice note.

In early January 2012, when Ellie was six, I came home for lunch. Just before I left, I was walking out of the garage to my car and I saw Ellie run across the driveway as fast as she could. She darted around the back of the house. I walked up to the car and saw a sticky note on the window. It touched my heart and I put it over the tachometer where it remained for the next few days.





Our lives changed on a normal Friday. I woke up and got ready for work. Ellie inspired me to write her a note of love. The night before she said, “Dad, I wish you would write me a note, I haven’t seen one in awhile.” I left the note in the usual place on the wall where I knew she would find it and left for work.

I came home for lunch. I walked in the door and greeted Ellie sitting at the table. She smiled at me as she always did and I looked over her shoulder at the work she was doing. My wife left for the store to shop for some groceries.

I grabbed a snack from the refrigerator and asked Ellie, “So how is your day going?” She beamed, “Thanks for the note!” She jumped up and showed me where she had been hiding the notes she received under the kitchen bar counter. She liked having secret hiding places for important things and it seemed she treasured these notes. I came up with an idea at work that I wanted to start, so I went up into the office and began to work at the computer. I was sitting there for about five minutes. I had no idea my world was about to change.

Then it happened. I heard a gun shot. I jumped up and ran right into Ellie standing at the top of the stairs. She said “I’ve been shot.” I picked her up and carried her downstairs. I called 9-1-1. I held Ellie in my lap on the kitchen floor while waiting for help. The next twenty minutes was a blur of chaos as our house was filled with emergency medical personnel. We had to remain outside and that’s when my wife returned.

Someone came out and said they were getting ready to move her to the hospital and that we should make our way there. As we drove, I was afraid, but I convinced myself that modern medicine could surely fix our sweet little Ellie.

We arrived and were ushered into a private waiting room. There was a knock at the door, and a doctor walked in. The doctor sat down in front of us and with compassionate eyes and voice said, “I’m sorry, Ellie is dead.” I was dazed and felt so helpless. How could this have happened? It had been less than an hour and my life was completely out of control.

Time stood still. After ten minutes or so, a nurse knocked on the door and said they had prepared Ellie for us to see her. We wanted to see our sweetie. It was so scary. I had never been to a funeral in my life and never lost a person close to me. I was a 42-year-old man facing death for the first time in my life. I held my wife’s hand as we stumbled into the back room. The curtain was pulled and pushed aside and there she was.

After some time, my wife wanted to call her family and left the room and I found myself alone with Ellie. I moved in close and kissed her and held her sweet little hand and just lost it. This was the ultimate low point in my life.

Then, right when I needed it, I noticed a hand on my back. It felt so soothing and comforting. It wasn’t too hard or too soft. It was exactly what I needed to get through my pain in that moment. After I had regained some composure, I looked to my side and there was a gentleman with a stubbly beard next to me. He didn’t say anything, but his hand said it all. It was on my back and it meant the world to me. I said “you sure do have a tough job,” and he just replied that it was difficult at times and he let me be in the moment with my daughter. I felt the hand of God through that nurse’s hand. I was comforted and not alone in my moments of deep anguish.

After leaving the hospital in shock and arriving at home, we had a family meeting. I did my best to rally everyone. We could get through this. We had to stick together and make sure that we didn’t let this

accident destroy us. I made sure that the boys knew this was an accident and no one was blaming anyone. We all seemed to be somewhat stable for a bit when we got home. Of course, everything was about to get much worse.

I didn't sleep that night. It was the longest night of my life. I just wanted the sun to come up again. Our family, friends, neighbors, and community rallied around us with support for which we are eternally grateful. Our church went way beyond anything we ever could have expected, loving us incredibly even though we were irregular attenders. We made it through the visitation and memorial service.

So what did happen? One of my sons was shooting at some squirrels with a pellet gun out of an upstairs window. This was not an approved activity. He got distracted and put the gun down, pumped and loaded. My other son picked up the gun, not knowing it was loaded a few hours later. Ellie was accidentally shot in the chest.

A day after Ellie's memorial I woke up with a phone call from my father. He asked me not to read the paper. I agreed to honor that request, but fear struck me very hard.

Now, up until this point I had felt like I was doing a reasonable job of keeping things together and supporting my wife and kids. But, at the same time, I was dealing with that terrible voice in my head asking me how I could let this happen and blasting "You are a failure!"

Being in the military, I believe in the concept of the Pilot in Command. The ultimate responsibility for our family rests with me. I am the leader and needed to keep us safe. I had failed!

It was later in the day, and I was alone at the computer. I became curious and went to the newspaper's website. I read an article that became the turning point in my life.

It didn't say it in so many words, but it was clear that all the blame was on me. It implied that I let my daughter be killed in an environment that was so dangerous. For me, knowing that I am responsible for my home, this all fell on my shoulders and drove a stake through my heart and my guilt. I was weak already, but this was a blow that my mind could not withstand. Despite the insensitive, false statements and lack of fact finding that was strewn through the article, it couldn't be fixed. I had no strength and just wanted to give up.

I usually sought comfort and support from Kristen and I was totally out of control mentally. I just wanted to be alone. I walked downstairs and closed all doors behind me. I went into the bedroom and locked the door. I went into the bathroom and closed the door. I went into the little room with the toilet and closed the door. I curled up into a ball and hid behind the door and just sobbed. I was so afraid that anyone would find me and I didn't know what I was going to say. I was thinking how to just leave this unbearable situation. I knew that Kristen would eventually come. But, how could I let her know what I knew – it would surely bring her the same pain I was experiencing. I wasn't sure she could deal with this, and I couldn't deal with it either. I had lost all hope. For the first time in my life, I could not solve my problem and had no idea what to do.

I don't even know how long I was there in the deepest low of my life. After a time, Kristen did come and helped me off the floor and just kept asking what was wrong. It was the hardest thing for me to build up the courage to tell her. She had the strength to listen and tell me that I was such a loving and caring father. She encouraged me and let me know how much she loved me. I just sat on the floor and she went to get me some water and tried to regroup herself. I knew that Kristen had tried her best but she couldn't save me from myself or from this situation. We were both just trying to survive at this point.

It had been a long search over the years. I was around so many churches and learned so much about God and Jesus. Many people seemed to have peace and live in such a loving way. Ellie used to pray the sweetest prayers for me and our family. I wanted to be a part of it, but I just didn't understand it and didn't know how to open my heart. But, I knew now that it was the only way. I needed God's love and His forgiveness. I was so tired of trying so hard to be a good person, and knowing that I could never be good enough. I didn't want to be in control anymore.

I felt God's hand reach down to me and fill my heart with His love. I told Him I was sorry, thanked Jesus for dying for me, forgiving me, and giving me the gift of eternal life. I gave my life to Jesus! I called my pastor, father, brother, and a friend and had them come to my house. I declared my faith to them and we prayed.

Things changed and I want to let you know what God has done in our lives!

Probably the most significant thing that occurred was that both of my boys accepted Christ and we were all baptized within a month. Kristen has been a Christian since childhood, but her faith has been strengthened through our tragedy as well.

God started teaching me. It had been three long weeks of very difficult days and nights since Ellie died. Somehow we found the strength to bring our sons to a swim meet in Atlanta. It was a long day. We were all tired after the hour long drive back home. Ma, Kristen's mother, had stayed behind to watch our dog Maverick, and the two new puppies, Slider and Goose.

When we arrived, Ma informed us that Maverick had bit her hand while she was trying to bring him in. He was barking at a neighbor and she tried to retrieve him. He apparently turned and took a large bite in her

hand, puncturing her skin in several places. There was a long trail of blood through the garage and down the driveway.

My initial reaction was one of anger and responsibility. I was mad and felt the responsible thing to do was to find a new home for him or take him to the pound. As I began to verbalize my plan, Kristen quickly resisted. She was upset too, but Maverick was Ellie's dog and she wasn't ready to write him off. The situation escalated rapidly and I had learned that trying to discuss anything further would likely just make things worse. So, I exited to our bathroom and decided to regroup. I called my brother and vented. I was frustrated and didn't know what to do. Kristen and I were not communicating with each other and it was getting worse. I tried to figure out what to with my brother.

After the phone call which lasted about an hour, I came out and discovered that Kristen was gone. The car was not in the garage and no one knew when she left or where she had gone. She had never done this before. She was somewhat unstable and this was very scary. I didn't know what to do. I decided to go inside and check on Ma's hand. I went to the store to pick up some medical supplies. It started raining as I arrived home and parked at the end of my driveway. Kristen still was not home. She had been gone for several hours.

While parked in the driveway, I looked in my side mirror and saw a light that was moving around and getting closer. I wasn't sure what it was. I got a bit nervous and the light came closer and closer. Then, a large man came up to my window and shined his flashlight into my window. I rolled down my window and looked up in horror at a policeman standing in the rain.

I lost it. I didn't want this man to talk, because I didn't want to hear him say, "I'm sorry, sir, your wife is dead." I began to just wail and cry, yelling "no, no!" This could not be happening. I had just lost my daughter, I didn't want to lose my wife too. This was just too much for

me and I cried and cried. I must have seemed like a madman as I just cried and carried on for what seemed like forever.

Finally, I calmed down and the policeman finally spoke. He said “Sir, I found your wife, she was parked near the lake. I approached her and she was obviously upset and crying. After identifying her, I was aware of your situation with your daughter. I told her that she needed to move on, and it was probably best if she went home. She pulled away and I decided to follow her. Unfortunately, I was called away on another problem and lost her. I came by here to see if she made it home.”

I got out of the car and we walked into the empty garage. The police officer took out his notepad and began to ask me questions. I was still a wreck but had caught my breath. I kept thinking that I was so glad that my wife was not dead, but she still could be. No one knew where she was and I was so scared. After talking with the police officer for ten minutes, he told me that they would keep an eye out for Kristen, and to call if she came home.

I went inside and realized that I had survived something incredible. I gave Ma the medicine and our doctor friend came over to look at her hand. While we were doing that Kristen arrived and she slipped into the bedroom and went to sleep. I didn’t know what to do, so I just got the boys to bed. I crawled into bed and made it through most of the night.

In the morning, I was a mess. What do I do now? I had experienced an incredible emotional trial. I just prayed to God to help me find a way to deal with this. As Kristen awoke, I asked her if she wanted to go to church. It was Sunday, and she agreed. We didn’t say a word to each other as we got ready to go. We drove to church in silence and walked into church.

The music was playing but I was not listening. The tears just streamed down my cheeks and I prayed. I missed the first half of the sermon as I kept in my prayer. Then, I felt several ideas enter my mind and I wrote them on the offering card.

The first idea involves unconditional love. This is a bit complicated. God convicted me in that moment. I hadn't loved Kristen unconditionally. I didn't know how and I didn't understand it in the context of my relationships with anyone, perhaps with the exception of my children.

I believe we get to see unconditional love in its purest form at one particular instant in time. When my children were born and I looked into those beautiful eyes, my heart overflowed with love. These babies could not take care of themselves. They did not ask for anything or give anything. Yet, my love poured out into them, expecting absolutely nothing in return. The love was a true unconditional gift. That's the kind of love that God, our Father, has for all of us, His children. I am to love God the same way. I am to love people the same way. In marriage, I am to love my wife the same way.

The other idea that I learned was to live without fear. In my mind, my wife had died. I felt the pain and the anguish of that reality for five minutes. I had processed it and I knew that I could survive it. God showed me that there is nothing to be afraid of. I would have gladly sacrificed myself for Ellie and for my wife. God was right there with me providing comfort in the midst of great trials. When keeping an eternal perspective, life is so short, and there is nothing to be afraid of.

We still have Maverick. It turns out he has some lower back issues that cause him pain when you try to pick him up. We didn't know that then and he has been a great dog since.



I'd like to let you know how God has worked in Kristen's life. Everyone grieves differently due to different relationships and circumstances. How can a dad understand the grief of a mother? Mother's carry, deliver, and nurse their babies. Dad's support the mom through all of that, but there is a world of difference! In my case, I was at work for most of the day, while my wife took care of Ellie and the boys. I lost my sweet little daddy's girl, and she lost her daughter whom she spent all day, every day with. She lost a life that grew inside of her, something a dad just can't understand. She lost her identity as a homeschool mom. I can't even imagine her pain.

About 18 months after Ellie passed, Kristen decided to get a job and worked at a cafe. Soon after, she decided to reactivate her nursing license and enrolled in a Nurse Refresher Course.

Kristen now works as a research nurse at a large cancer center. She helps others with grief and sadness in ways that were different than hers, but with the same empathy that comes with pain.

For me, life has become exciting again. I wake up wondering what God has planned for me. I know that life is not easy, but I don't expect it to be. I am motivated and energized to share my heart and love to the world. I try to love God and love people in all that I do.

I'm not even recognizable from the previous me, but that's not all bad. The old me was ruined and broken faster than I thought possible. My world had shattered. Little did I know, but Ellie had planted a seed in me that would save my life and birth a new me. Ellie loved Jesus, prayed with me and for me, and shined God's love into my life. Her joy for life and faith is a constant inspiration and will never be forgotten.

I miss Ellie. I wish she was here and we could enjoy each other. I remember her every day. But, I would not want to be the old me. I've

found a richer life that I had never known. I've found a profound sense of purpose and compassion. I know that I'll see her again in Heaven because that is promised to all who give their lives to Christ. I live in the moment of every day, enjoying the people and blessings in my life.

God has given me a heart for the grieving. I helped facilitate a GriefShare group for three years and sought to bring comfort to those who have lost a loved one. It was an incredible experience to watch a small group of people transform over the course of thirteen weeks. The first week is full of tears and brokenness and by the end of the course, friendships have formed through laughter and walking together, not alone, through the valley of grief.

We founded a ministry called Ellie's Way that provides comfort to thousands of people who are suffering the loss of a loved one. We do that through our website, care packages, and online groups.

My life as I knew it was destroyed by a terrible tragedy. I had built my life around idols such as money, family, marriage, security, and achievement. The storms of life happen and test our foundations. Jesus said the following:

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

– Matthew 7:24-27

What is your house built on? How will you survive the big storms of life? I have found a richer life through my personal relationship with

Jesus Christ. He has helped me rebuild on the rock with a solid foundation that will help me through any storm, even a deadly one. Our Father is always available, full of love and compassion.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

– John 3:16

If you would like to know Jesus, I'd like to share a short prayer of salvation. Will you pray this with me?

“Father, I'm so sorry for the sins of my past and I want to turn away from them and toward You. Please forgive me. I believe your son, Jesus Christ, died for my sins and was resurrected from the dead. I invite Jesus into my heart to lead me from this day forward. Thank you for the gift of life and the hope and promise of an eternal heaven with You. I pray that love, compassion, acceptance, and peace will blossom in me as your presence lights my soul. In Christ's name, I pray. Amen.”

If you prayed this prayer, you are now a follower of Jesus! I encourage you to find a local church where you can be baptized and learn more about God through the Bible.

Writing has been very helpful to me as I've worked through my valley of grief. Thank you for taking the time to read my story. I hope that your journey is full of peace, comfort, and love.

God Bless,

Todd Nigro  
(Ellie's Dad)

# Thoughts on Grief and Loss

## The Gift of Life

Life is a gift from God. Our children, family, friends, neighbors, and strangers are all gifts to be savored. Although some days may be full of hardship and sadness, each breath, heartbeat, and thought illustrates the beautiful gift of life. Keep the positive memories alive and thank God for the blessings in your past, present, and future.

“Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!”

– 2 Corinthians 9:15

“Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.”

– Revelation 22:17

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

– Romans 6:23

“There’s promise and beauty in so many things if we are open to it. Even through the darkest moments, if we try and see the light, there is promise in this as well.”

– Natalie Bacho

“The cross reminds us that there is no true love without suffering, there is no gift of life without pain.”

– Pope Benedict XVI

## Feelings Extravaganza

You will experience many feelings in new ways. Sadness, guilt, despair, anxiety, fear, hopelessness, longing, anger, and frustration will likely run through your mind. Your feelings need to be expressed, but always remember that they are “at this moment.” This gives you hope and permission to have different feelings at a later time. Write a letter to your loved one or keep a journal of your feelings. The “why” and “what-if” questions will be asked over and over in your mind. At some point, you realize that you cannot understand the divine nature of birth or death. Embrace living without an answer by trusting and embracing the mysteries of God.

“...your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”  
– Matthew 6:10

“For we live by faith, not by sight.”  
– 2 Corinthians 5:7

“The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.”  
– Helen Keller

“Writing is the only way I have to explain my own life to myself.”  
– Pat Conroy, *My Reading Life*

“The best way out is always through.”  
– Robert Frost

“One can be the master of what one does, but never of what one feels.”  
– Gustave Flaubert

# Let the Tears Flow

What is it about tears we are afraid of? It is human to cry. Crying helps you to heal. Cry with friends, family, and alone. Don't be surprised when the grief "freight train" runs over you. Just be in the moment, and it will pass. Struggle through your emotions and you will find relief as your reward.

"weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."  
– Psalm 30:5

"a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance."  
– Ecclesiastes 3:4

"Drinking from the waters of sorrow sustains a different kind of life. This river is hidden from the rest of the world. Tears drip off my chin into an endless flow of liquid love that sparkles with beauty."  
– Todd Nigro

"But there was no need to be ashamed of tears. For tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer."  
– Victor Frankl

"There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love."  
– Washington Irving

"Listen to God with a broken heart. He is not only the doctor who mends it, but also the father who wipes away the tears."  
– Criss Jami

# Communicate

Talk to people about your loss and pain. Don't hide or deny your feelings. Let people know that you need them and ask for help. Consider writing a letter to family and friends outlining your needs. Be patient with those that don't know what to say. Talk about your loved one, and share your precious memories. Be grateful for those with the courage to hear your pain and stay with you on this journey. Always remember that you can always talk to God through prayer.

“For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”

– Matthew 12:34

“The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help.”

– 1 Timothy 5:5

“For prayer is hope put to the test.

And hope is faith in what is best.

Faith is power to do great things.

Thus, prayer is faith's enabling wings.”

– Richelle E. Goodrich

“Refusing to ask for help when you need it is refusing someone the chance to be helpful.”

– Ric Ocasek

“Sometimes, reaching out and taking someone's hand is the beginning of a journey. At other times, it is allowing another to take yours.”

– Vera Nazarian

# Grow Through Your Experience

It is not in people's nature to change. Although loss is not comfortable, it can provide an amazing marker in life for incredible transformation. Look for the lessons to be learned in your situation about yourself and in life. What can you do to overcome and survive? Vow to use your loss situation to generate the energy to become more. You can be defined by your past, or refined by your past. Seek to serve others and value the gift of life in a way that you never knew before.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

– John 16:33

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

– Jeremiah 29:11

"Strength doesn't come from what you can do. It comes from overcoming the things you once thought you couldn't."

– Anonymous

"People grow through experience if they meet life honestly and courageously. This is how character is built."

– Eleanor Roosevelt

"Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but - I hope - into a better shape."

– Charles Dickens



# Grieve Your Way

You have been fundamentally changed by your loss. Others have too. It takes time to discover who you've become. Realize that each person is different and will grieve in ways you may not understand. During your time of sorrow, bring your family together. Be patient and find ways to support each other. Guilt and anger need to be expressed and released. Sadness and sorrow can be so heavy and paralyzing. You might struggle with this thought, but grief, guilt, and anguish can be a blessing.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

— Matthew 5:4

“...my eyes are dim with grief. I call to you, Lord, every day; I spread out my hands to you.”

— Psalm 88:9

“You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. And you come through. It's like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp.”

— Anne Lamott

“The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to.”

— Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

# Become More

Follow the example of Jesus Christ. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love people unconditionally. Forgive. See beauty everywhere and give thanks for all the blessings in your life. Become the person that God wants you to be.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!”

– 2 Corinthians 5:17

He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

– Luke 10:27

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

– Philippians 4:7

“It is our hope that it is that no matter what the circumstances, grieving parents can get through the storms of grief and come out on the other side, stronger, more compassionate, and more appreciative of what we all have right now.”

– Mark and Linda Triplett

“We are all butterflies. Earth is our chrysalis.”

– LeeAnn Taylor

“You cannot change your destination overnight. You can change your direction.”

– Jim Rohn

# Your Unique Path

God has planned a path for you. You will travel the path on your own, with God to help if you choose. Don't compare your path with someone else. Other people's paths may cross or run nearby, but only you can take steps on your path. Only you can choose to see the beauty around your current location and enjoy your journey. There may be amazing drops to deep valleys, but keep looking forward and take it one step at a time.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”

– Psalm 23:4

“Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.”

– Psalm 119:35

“End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path. One that we all must take.”

– J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*

“There are no wrong turnings. Only paths we had not known we were meant to walk.”

– Guy Gavriel Kay, *Tigana*

“If you find a path with no obstacles, it probably doesn't lead anywhere.”

– Frank A. Clark

“Over every mountain there is a path, although it may not be seen from the valley.”

– Theodore Roethke

# Accept God's Grace

Accept that your loss will offer you a new understanding. Trust God with all of your thoughts and feelings, even the negative ones. If you are struggling in your faith, cry out to Him. God is big enough to handle your lament. Accept God's leadership and live in the palm of His hand. Accept His peace and comfort and be an instrument of His will.

“...and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.”

– Isaiah 61:3

“Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.”

– 2 Timothy 2:21

“Nothing but this moment is guaranteed and I pray that this is a lesson that each person can learn before it has to be discovered.”

– Keri Cannella-Moye

“Without a heart transformed by the grace of Christ, we just continue to manage external and internal darkness.”

– Matt Chandler, The Explicit Gospel

“I am nothing but a ripped fabric stitched together by God's grace.”

– J.A. ANUM

# Forgive, Apologize, and Let Go

God forgives you and loves you. There are two kinds of guilt—false and real. If you have done wrong, repent and ask God to forgive you. Be wary of false guilt. We live with imperfect information and try to make good decisions. Sometimes things don't work out. Let the anger go as it only destroys you and serves no purpose. No relationship is perfect. You have made mistakes. There are things you wanted to do with your loved one, or things you wish you didn't say. Thinking about all the things that could have been different can overwhelm you. Accept God's forgiveness, forgive others, and free yourself from guilt. Apologize from your heart in prayer and let all negative thoughts go.

“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.”

– Acts 3:19

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

– Luke 6:37

“It's okay to smile through your grief. As time passes, it's okay to laugh and enjoy yourself. Don't let the devil of guilt consume you. We are still here for a reason. It's time to live life with purpose and passion.”

– Daphne Greer

“When you forgive, you in no way change the past – but you sure do change the future.”

– Bernard Meltzer

# Serve Others

Seek meaning and a positive outcome for your loss. Your loss will open your eyes to those experiencing loss, giving you the unique ability to provide support and compassion to others. Serve other people. Open your eyes to other's needs and provide comfort. Loving other people will take your mind from your pain and heals your grieving soul more than you realize. Be the rescuer, not the victim.

“Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.”

– 1 Peter 4:10

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

– Romans 8:28

“When we volunteer to help those in need, we are building rewards in heaven that will last for eternity.”

– Lourie Formby

“for there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one's own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes.”

– Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

“The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

# Never Lose Hope

Have hope for a brighter day. As painful as it seems, you can survive and thrive. There might be days when you feel that you are barely surviving. This is normal. Try to believe that the rest of your life can be the best of your life. And, our greatest hope is that of an eternal heaven with our Lord Jesus Christ.

“...but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”

– Isaiah 40:31

“...the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel.”

– Colossians 1:5

“God never promised an easy life. He said that we will have suffering and heartaches, but He also promised that He will be with us, to comfort us and reunite us on the other side.”

– Jim Sitton

“Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul  
And sings the tune without the words  
And never stops at all.”

– Emily Dickinson

“We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.”

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

## Seek Help and Connect

Grieving is a normal process, but is also unique to each individual. Seek help if you feel stuck. Locate a support group if you need to discuss and vent your feelings to people who understand in a non-judgmental environment. Reach out to your church community and compassionate people. Consider GriefShare, Stephen Ministry, individual counseling, online grief groups, or other support programs. Connect with family members and close friends. Don't go through grief alone. Seek help from the Lord.

“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”  
– Proverbs 15:22

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”  
– Romans 12:15

“Be gentle with yourself. This is a long and hard journey. Reach out for help if you need to and know that you are not alone.”  
– TB

“Never let your ego get in the way of asking for help when in desperate need. We have all been helped at a point in our lives.”  
– Edmond Mbiaka

“The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.”  
– Henri J.M. Nouwen



# You Are What You Think

Your thoughts determine who you are. Each one of us wrestles with our thoughts, and only God can really “understand” you and see into your mind. Choose your thoughts, actions, and reactions wisely. Take responsibility for your “current” reaction to whatever may have happened to you. Choose positive memories over regret, love over sorrow, forgiveness over anger, and peace over anxiety.

“Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

– Philippians 3:13-14

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

– Philippians 4:8

“When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive - to breathe, to think, to enjoy, to love.”

– Marcus Aurelius

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I — I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.”

– Robert Frost

“Attitude is a choice. Happiness is a choice. Optimism is a choice. Kindness is a choice. Giving is a choice. Respect is a choice. Whatever choice you make makes you. Choose wisely.”

– Roy T. Bennett

# Suffering is Normal

Realize that suffering is a part of life. Learn to suffer well. You and your loved ones will experience trials many times and in many ways. People are watching you, especially as you suffer—show them how to do it with integrity, honor, love, and grace. Ask “God, what am I to learn through this?” Find moments of beauty and joy in the depths of your anguish. Seek God and open your heart to His love and peace.

“When He has tested me, I will come forth as gold.”  
– Job 23:10

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.”  
– James 1:2-3

“Comfort comes from knowing that people have made the same journey. And solace comes from understanding how others have learned to sing again.”  
– Helen Steiner Rice

“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.”  
– Viktor E. Frankl

“But pain's like water. It finds a way to push through any seal. There's no way to stop it. Sometimes you have to let yourself sink inside of it before you can learn how to swim to the surface.”  
– Katie Kacvinsky

“Turn your wounds into wisdom.”  
– Oprah Winfrey

# **This Might Take Awhile—Be Patient!**

Don't put unrealistic demands upon yourself. Let yourself heal according to your own time frame. Each path is unique and will have many ups and downs. Be patient with other grievers and with friends, family, and strangers that do not understand. Keep an eternal perspective.

“Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

— James 1:4

“...being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience.”

— Colossians 1:11

“Grief is a journey, often perilous and without clear direction, that must be taken. The experience of grieving cannot be ordered or categorized, hurried or controlled, pushed aside or ignored indefinitely. It is inevitable as breathing, as change, as love. It may be postponed, but it will not be denied.”

— Molly Fumia

“If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

— C. S. Lewis

“The strongest of all warriors are these two – Time and Patience.”

— Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace

“Trees that are slow to grow bear the best fruit.”

— Molière

# Get Busy

Find something to be passionate about. Challenge yourself and take action. Channel your energy and anxiety into a new hobby, sport, or learning something new. Exercise and eat healthy. Staying busy can be an effective way to move forward during stressful periods. Although keeping busy can be helpful, this does not heal a wounded heart. Take time to remember and to grieve as well.

“In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ”

– Acts 20:35

“All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.”

– Proverbs 14:23

“I figured I better start living because God obviously didn’t want me dead yet! That’s the real lesson with any loss. You are still alive, so live. Don’t just exist. Don’t just breathe in and out. Don’t just go through the motions. LIVE!”

– Leslie Wachter McDonald

“Trust that an ending is followed by a beginning.”

– Anonymous

“When you are not sure what to do, take action. You will quickly find out.”

– Jeffrey Fry

“Hide not your talents, they for use were made,  
What’s a sundial in the shade?”

– Benjamin Franklin

# **You've Made it Through This, Be Fearless!**

Do not be afraid. Your loving and forgiving Father is available to you. Trust in Him and His wisdom. You can find the strength to survive and thrive through any situation.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

– Joshua 1:9

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

– John 14:27

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

– Isaiah 41:10

“Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.”

– Winston S. Churchill

“Have enough courage to trust love one more time and always one more time.”

– Maya Angelou

“Confront the dark parts of yourself, and work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing.”

– August Wilson

# Love Outshines the Darkness

Remember the love that you shared. Don't forget the family and friends that are still part of your life. Stay sensitive to the needs and feelings of others. Spend quality time with those that you love and enrich their lives. God loves you unconditionally. Love all people with no expectations. Seek those that need both your love and God's love. Love involves action. What we do says more about what we believe, than anything we might say.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

– 1 Corinthians 13:4-8

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

– 1 Corinthians 13:13

“Never give up! It is not over until God says it is over! Fight the good fight and keep the faith. Love like you never have and love each other no matter what has happened in the past. Love outshines the darkness!”

– Dean Synan

“Love is like the wind, you can't see it but you can feel it.”

– Nicholas Sparks, A Walk to Remember

“To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.”

– C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves

## A Prayer for the Grieving

“Father, thank you for the beautiful gift of life. I dedicate my life to You. Thank you for forgiving me and saving me through Your Son, Jesus Christ. I’m sorry for the sins I have committed, help me to turn away from them, and be the person You want me to be. I trust that the path created for me is perfectly designed by You. Father, as I struggle through this valley, thank you for the blessings in my life. As I cry in despair, please draw near and soothe my heart. Guide me to be patient and kind, and to reach out to those that love me. Open my eyes to see the eternal souls all around me who are in need. Help me to grow and be transformed through this situation into a more compassionate and loving being. Thank you for the encouragement and support of my family, friends, and church. Father, sustain me to seek You in each moment and to choose my thoughts wisely. Help me to find the strength to do your work. Thank you for helping me to be unafraid. There is great hope in the promise of an eternal heaven with You. Please shine your beautiful light through me, despite my suffering. Your amazing unconditional love is beyond my comprehension. Father, I pray that love, compassion, acceptance, and peace will blossom in me as your presence lights my soul. In Christ’s name, I pray. Amen.”

“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”

– 1 John 5:14

“I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day.”

– Abraham Lincoln

# A Letter to Me

Last year, my wife came home from her work as a nurse. She was frustrated because there was a patient who had a terminal cancer that was doing very well. His quality of life was way better than anyone in a similar condition. The doctors and nurses knew this as they had seen many cases. But, this gentleman couldn't comprehend his good fortune under the circumstances and was full of anxiety and fear. He left depressed and miserable despite the gift of some good days in the midst of his suffering.

This got me thinking. Here's an exercise that has helped me keep focused on what's important no matter what life brings me.

I imagine myself in twenty years. I'm an old man who is diagnosed with cancer. I'm told that I have six months to live at most and there is nothing the doctors can do. Despite this bad news, my current health is good. I have no limitations – except the knowledge of what is growing inside of me and that I'm dying.

What would I tell myself to do with the “good” time I have left?

Fast forward six months. I'm a frail old man in bed, writhing in pain from a cancer that just won't stop. I'm not sure how many more hours or days I have left. There is not much good news regarding my health and I'm limited to a bed. Despite this situation, I have people taking care of me.

What would I tell myself to do with the “good” time I have left?

Rewind to today. I'm a middle aged man. I'm assuming that I have more than twenty years to live, but as our six-year-old daughter's death



has shown, I could die tomorrow. Who knows? Despite this bad news, my current health is good. I have no limitations – except the knowledge that I am going to die someday.

What would I tell myself to do with the “good” time I have left?

Here’s a letter to me...

Dear Me (old and now),

Life is a gift. Your children, family, friends, neighbors, and strangers are all gifts to be savored. Although some days may be full of hardship and sadness, each breath, heartbeat, and thought illustrates this beautiful gift of life.

Don’t forget the times that you felt most alive. Those were times when love was abounding – when your love was flowing to the world. In the time you have left, keep finding outlets to love and to serve.

Remember the power of right now. Each moment is a blessing to be enjoyed. Look for beauty in people and the world. Be present. Remain hopeful. Share life.

Follow the example of Jesus Christ. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Let God fill you with love, compassion, joy, and peace.

Love Always,  
Me

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What would you tell yourself to do with the "good" time you have left?  
What would your letter say?

## Before and After

Before Ellie died, I took my son to his baseball hitting lesson. We really liked the instructor. I was just being friendly and asked him “How many kids do you have?” He informed me that he had two sons, but one had committed suicide several years before. I remember being shocked and at a complete loss as to what to do or say. I think I probably looked very uncomfortable, and I was. I don’t remember exactly what happened, but I probably changed the subject, and I would bet that I didn’t offer up very much in the way of comfort.

Before Ellie died, I was afraid of death, pain, suffering. I didn’t want to experience any of those things for myself and it was scary to see in other people. I didn’t know what to say, how to feel, what to do, and the easiest thing was to avoid thinking about it. Sadly, I had never been to a funeral before Ellie’s.

Before Ellie died, I didn’t appreciate taking Ellie to the costume jewelry store or playing with her dolls. I enjoyed our bedtime routine, but I always wanted to leave before she wanted me to. I had things to do. What was so important?

Well, things change. After losing six-year-old Ellie, I have learned a few things.

I give people the benefit of the doubt and assume that they care. The fact is that unless you’ve experienced a deep loss, it is hard to empathize and understand. I try to help people with their reactions. I try to make it easy for them if I can. I know that I needed some help and guidance over all my prior years.

I saw the baseball instructor at a game a few months ago. I jumped up and walked up to him. I told him about the conversation we had many years ago and I apologized for my insensitivity and lack of understanding. Although the circumstances of our children's deaths were different, we were both fathers without our babies. We shared a hug and a few tears and it was a memorable moment.

Now I always go to the funeral. I have been to many in the past five years, and volunteered to help out as needed. It is so important to support the grieving families by just being there for them.

One day I was leaving the grocery store walking past the girl scout cookies, little girls, and a dad. I was late and did not intend to purchase any cookies, but the father said "How about some cookies?" I said, "no thank you." He said, "you must not have a little girl at home, you're lucky!" The tears quickly flowed as I continued walking. It was a difficult moment, but I soon realized that could have been me with Ellie, a father who wasn't exactly excited about selling girl scout cookies. We are all on a journey and life has a way of teaching us.

I take the time to be with my family and friends - to savor the moments. I am thankful for each day with my loved ones and try to bring a smile and some joy to the world. I've learned that kindness, compassion, and service to others brings deep meaning and purpose. Loving God and loving people through all of the circumstances of life is a good plan.

I was at golf lesson with my son the other day, and his instructor was talking to me. Then he asked the inevitable question in a friendly way, "How many kids do you have?"

And so it goes...

# About Ellie's Way



Ellie's Way's mission is to organize, maximize, and deliver assistance to people affected by tragedies.

Ellie was a precious six-year-old girl that was killed in a tragic accident in January 2012. She was full of life, loved God, and loved people. Everywhere she went she made friends and shared her sweet personality. We thank God for the gift that Ellie was in our lives, and we hope to honor her memory through Ellie's Way.

Visit our website at [www.elliesway.org](http://www.elliesway.org).

## **Ellie's Way Online Support Group**

Join over 10,000 grieving people for encouragement, support, compassion, and connection as we walk our journey of grief.

[www.facebook.com/groups/elliesway](https://www.facebook.com/groups/elliesway)

