

Chapter 1

I WON'T FORGET

It was 3:00 AM in the morning. It was a dark, ugly time when the rain was coming down in torrents beating violently against our car. Even though my husband accompanied me, I felt so vulnerable and alone. We were both silent, each in our own world of thought.

The sky was black and foreboding, not too different from my own feelings. Like a rookie baseball pitcher, earnestly trying to strike out the latest batter, the wind blew savagely against the windshield. My eyes blinked at the pelting rain as if the glass would soon give way to the viciousness of the storm.

Streetlights appeared like distorted flashlights throwing crazy beams of light in fractured, swirling reflections as we passed them. The wipers jerked back and forth throwing rivulets of water in all directions in wild abandon. My heart seemed to be pounding just as wildly in sync with the beat of the blades as we raced to the hospital.

We had just received the telephone call that every parent dreads, there had been an automobile accident and my son was

involved.

I remembered walking down the narrow passageway to the waiting room located next to the surgical suite. I had followed a trail of fresh red drops that shouted to my brain what they obviously were. They were still wet. I could imagine the drops of blood slipping over the side of the gurney as someone was recently wheeled down that hall, and I reasoned that it probably was my son's blood.

Many of us pray during such times of pain and turmoil. I was no different. I pleaded for my son's life. He was only sixteen years old and had a lot of living ahead of him. Please God; don't take him, I screamed silently. The words reverberated through my whole being and shook me until I thought there was nothing left inside of me. An answer didn't seem forthcoming, but I remembered feeling that a decision of some sort had been made, though I didn't know who made that decision, or what it was.

My husband and I did what only parents can do under the circumstances; we waited. I remember someone coming into the waiting room and having a consultation with another couple and the woman crying out loud. I was wondering when it would be my turn to be told that my son had just died.

Eventually it was my turn. My son hadn't died. My husband and I were told of the injuries, some of them to the head. We were told of the dangers such as swelling of the brain. We were told to go home and wait since there was nothing we could do; we would be called when there was news. Reluctantly we left. I remember during that drive home that I had made a decision that if it took all that we owned, I would sell everything in order to save my son, if I had to.

I don't remember the sequence of everything, only that there were several operations and my son Shawn never came out of his coma. We went to the hospital to visit him during those times, yet I couldn't go into his room. I couldn't stand to see him hooked up to all that machinery.

I had given this child life and I couldn't stand to see him dying. My husband said he would take my place and he held Shawn's arm for me and talked to him while I stood outside the room and tried to keep my heaving heart inside of my chest.

I had friends tell me I had to go into his room and give him encouragement to help him live. I believed they were right, but I couldn't force myself into his room no matter how much I tried. I wanted to remember my son with the wind blowing through his blond hair.

I time came when there was nothing more that could be done for Shawn, and the hospital wanted us to donate his organs, especially since he was young and strong. I couldn't. My decision may sound selfish to some, but to me, I felt my son had been violated enough. I couldn't sign a paper giving someone the right to take out his organs even though my husband wanted to do this. At the time, I thought of Jesus dying on the cross and the guards casting lots for his garments; which was the last of what he had to give. My son had just died, and there was nothing left inside of me to think of someone else at that moment.

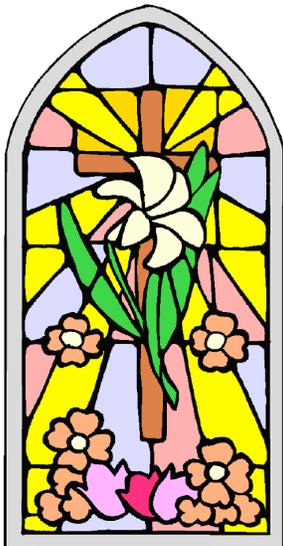
After his death in 1982, I went through a "baptism of fire." I felt as if the event shook me to the very foundation of who I was. At the time, I wasn't thinking of overcoming a challenge. I was too numb to think. Nothing had prepared me for his death.

Looking back, I realize now that I got to really know myself in the ordeal. Because I overcame the event of his dying, I now know that I can overcome any challenge in the future. I am a survivor. However, it took me a very long time to reach that frame of mind.

Losing a child is incomprehensible to me. I felt that life had made a pact with me that he would survive me. He would grow up, and I would get to know about his loves, his joys, his children. I didn't think about whether this would actually happen or not; I just looked forward to it and knew it was to be. I can tell you there is no tragedy in life as great as losing a child.

I wish I had known enough about life to know that this was only a testing period. I thought it was an end, but after years had passed, I realized it was a beginning.

For the most part, I thought I had lived life with an understanding of who I was and what I was supposed to be doing. I felt I understood what was required of me as a student, wife, and mother. I tried to accomplish what I perceived was necessary to do the job right. But I was to find out that I knew nothing about life.



When my son died, it shook up my belief system completely. I had buried his body, but where was he? My faith told me he lived on, but did he? If I didn't see him or hear him, how could I know he existed somewhere?

He was only sixteen years old. How did I know he was safe? Did he need something – me?

If he existed, what confronted him? Finding out the answers to these questions became my obsession. I had to know if he still existed and if he were safe and adjusting to his new situation. I could not continue living if I didn't know these things about the friend I had just lost.

The Easter of 1982 was one that our family will never forget. Lent is forty days before Easter. According to the Church, these forty days should be a time of reflection and self-denial. During these forty days, rituals as old as Catholicism itself lead us through a period of penance. The reason for them is so that we can share in some small way in the true joy of Easter. Through our penance, we can find some joy at the end of suffering and a transmutation of these sufferings into a triumph we can share with the risen Lord.

At the beginning of Lent, my twenty-one-year-old nephew died, and at the end of Lent, my sixteen-year old son Shawn died and was buried. In retrospect, I think there was a message in all of this, since the backdrop was Christ's passion and death and the two boys shared the same name. There were so many other indications at this point in my life that I didn't feel these events were accidental. I almost had the sense that I was following a script.

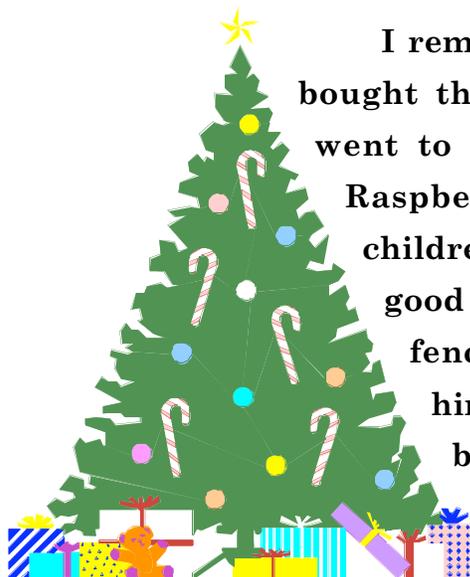
I agonized, because everyone around me needed something to help them get over the pain of separation. I didn't feel I had much left myself to help anyone else's needs. The brother who had shared Shawn's room with him couldn't sleep there anymore and I understood that. Each person experiences pain in a different way and they have to be allowed to express it in their own manner in order to heal.

When someone you love dies, you can't help but think of some unkind words or selfish act that you might have expressed

to them when they were living. Even though we may want to live perfect lives, we are not always perfect. We can't go back and make things right. Each family member could remember some incident that brought feelings of guilt. There were things said or unsaid, some imperfect behavior that was dredged up and examined after Shawn died.

I remember emptying out Shawn's clothes closet and thinking that he should have had more clothes. I remembered the boots he wanted and the fact that I didn't have the money to buy them for him. I was feeling guilty, because I felt I hadn't given him enough of the things I thought he wanted. The reality of the situation was that I couldn't have done more than I had. At the time, I was working a full time job and a part time job to make ends meet.

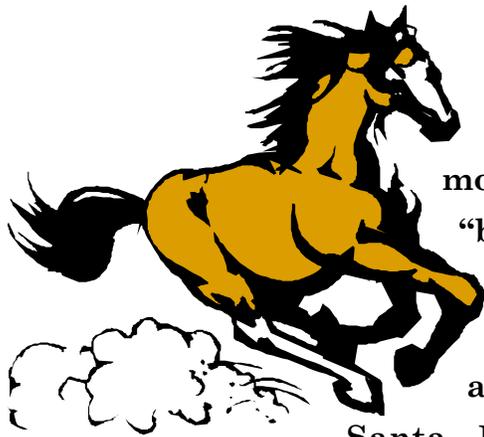
Thinking back on his life, I am not sure I remember him talking about the things he wanted. I think my children knew I was doing the best I could to provide for them. If the children didn't have a lot of material things in life, they did have some things that perhaps other children didn't have.



I remember the Christmas when their father bought the children a pony. After the children went to bed on Christmas Eve, he picked up Raspberry from the previous owner, so the children would be surprised. I thought it was a good idea to leave Raspberry tied up to the fence out front, so the children could see him through the window. But no, he had to bring Raspberry into the house and put him in front of the Christmas tree, bow and all. As a child, my husband had

always wanted a pony, and he gave to his children his greatest desire.

Being a city girl myself, the only thing I knew about horses was the unpleasant trail they left behind themselves. I can still see it now, like it was yesterday. I had run behind Raspberry with a big piece of canvas, so he wouldn't christen my white rug as their father brought him in the living room. Then I went to get the children from their beds to tell them that Santa Claus had come.



They ran to the living room, shouting their glee as only children can do on Christmas morning. They abruptly put on their "brakes" when they faced Raspberry. When they had gone to bed the night before, there was no tree, just a plate of cookies they had left for Santa. Now there was an enormous tree reaching to the ceiling, brightly lit, topped with the Christmas angel smiling her approval over the scene. Standing proudly in front of the tree was Raspberry, wearing a big red bow.

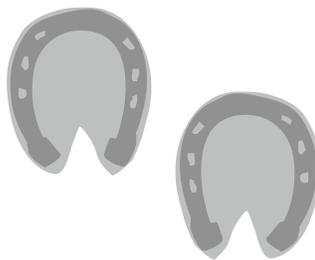
Raspberry was a dappled gray Shetland pony with a creamy white mane and tail. Shetlands are rather small ponies, but to little children they look huge, especially with their winter coats. The children shouted their approval. "Look, Dad. Santa left us a buffalo." I think Raspberry was just as amazed as the children to be standing in our living room. Fortunately for me, the rug was still white when the "buffalo" was escorted out of the living room.

Raspberry turned out to be a real adventure for the family. He was a jumper and could leap in and out of his stall, no matter what we did. So many times when I was getting the children off to

school, I could hear Raspberry's hooves pounding over the lawn. He would whinny as he ran by, as if he were letting me know that he had gotten out again.

I think everyone in a twenty-mile radius had my telephone number and would call me to get Raspberry out of their garden, or to let me know that he had come visiting again and they had put him up in one of their stalls. In the spring, Raspberry had a hard time staying away from the "ladies." I even got calls from State Troopers to report a pony sighting.

Many mornings, when I made lunches for the five children, I would cut up apples and carrots so I could entice Raspberry to come to me. He loved his freedom, but he loved apples and carrots more. He played the same game with me every time. As I approached, he watched me out of the corner of his eye. He would continue to eat some neighbor's lush grass as he would turn and give me a good view of his flank. As I came closer with the carrot in my extended hand, he would walk away and show me his tail. He would do this for a while. After some time, he couldn't stand it anymore. It was as if he would sigh and say, "Okay, if you insist." I could almost see his decision-making process: "I want the apples and carrots. I want my freedom." The apples and carrots always won. After grabbing his halter, I would lead Raspberry home to the clip-clop symphony of his hooves on the macadam road.



The children grew and Raspberry didn't. He remained the same "Peck's Bad Boy," and I continued to cut up carrots and

apples. After a while, the children were too big to ride him anymore, so we bought a cart and harness for him. Raspberry loved that cart! Shetlands were bred to pull carts of coal out of the mines. I guess this understanding and relationship between a pony and a cart was in Raspberry's genes somewhere. All Shawn would have to do was to pick up the harness and shake it at him, and Raspberry would come running.

At first, after my son died, all I could think of was the fact that I didn't have my friend with me anymore. I would cry a lot, until my eyes were puffy and red, though I am not certain that a mother ever stops crying for the child who isn't with her. They say that time heals. Perhaps it does, because after what seemed like a long time, I started thinking about things such as Raspberry.



Other pictures of past events would filter into my mind. I could "see" Shawn pick fresh vegetables from the garden, wash them off and pack them into the cart. It would be some sunny, lazy day in summer, when Shawn would want money for some good purpose. He had a customer route of neighbors who would come out to the cart pulled by the pony to pick out their fresh vegetables for dinner. There was joy in this mother's heart as I watched Shawn get in the cart, snap the reins, and Raspberry would prance down the road with the precious cargo.

We gave the children very little money. They even had to

earn their small allowance. But we would go out of our way to help them earn the money they wanted. I remember their father's one time coming home with blisters on his hands, because he had spent the afternoon helping one of the children plant twenty trees on a neighbor's lawn to earn twenty dollars.

I went through a very long time of being in a bittersweet state of mind. I couldn't stand the loss of Shawn, but the realization and joy of who and what he was would creep into my mind sometimes.

At age fourteen, Shawn was almost six feet tall. Two boys who lived next door to us were exceptionally short for their ages. At seven and eight years old, the two of them with fourteen-year-old Shawn looked like two Mutts and a Jeff. I would see them having fun riding on sleds down the hill between our properties. My experience as a mother told me that children usually liked to be involved with kids closer to their own age group. It seems this is part of some sort of pecking order in child-world. One time, Shawn came in all red-cheeked from the cold and said, almost apologetically, "Mom, I know they are little kids and I shouldn't be playing with them, but they wanted to play with me and I couldn't disappoint them."

I remember that scene, especially when I look out of that window and snow is on the ground. I can't remember if I told Shawn then how much I respected him for his attitude. I guess it doesn't matter, because Shawn knew I loved him and accepted him because of what he was.

The beginning of that Lent when my nephew died, I thought I understood his parents' pain because I was a parent. I grieved for them, commiserated with them. Then I learned that,

regardless of what you think, you know nothing about such a loss until it happens to you. No matter how much compassion I shared with my nephew's family, I didn't really understand what the loss of a child meant until I had to live every day of my life carrying that same loss.

If one believes in reincarnation or the possibility of reincarnation, then perhaps the soul needs to evolve by undergoing many diverse experiences. Perhaps that part of us that is our eternal part, wishing to learn of every human situation, needs to undergo every conceivable joy and sorrow. Perhaps the need for these experiences is related to our actions in the recent or distant past.

Perhaps it is only then, when we truly understand every event and relationship, that we are able to make the choices necessary for soul growth. It may be that we need to go through every conceivable pain before we are able to see the wisdom of positive action and the joy of what love brings.

If soul growth is a matter of choices, it appears to me that our choices need to be evaluated against a background of experience. How can we truly choose in wisdom unless we understand what our choices mean?

I don't know why the eternal part of me needed to experience the death of a child, but I do know that, on some level, there is a part of me that has overcome and in some fashion is stronger than before.

But even if the eternal part of me has examined, calculated and absorbed the experience, the human, emotional side of me has suffered a loss that cannot be extinguished. There is a flame

in the belly that burns and will not be put out until I can see my son again and we can be together once more. There is much pain in being separated from those you love.

Even today, fifteen years later, and after everything that's happened to me between Shawn's death and today, I cannot write about this time in my life without a great deal of sorrow.

Apart from being my son, Shawn was also my friend. I remember calling him that sometimes: "Hey, friend!" There is an acceptance between friends that transcends the parent-child relationship and Shawn and I had that.

Shawn was growing up during a period of time when young men liked to wear their hair long, and, at sixteen, Shawn wanted his hair long. Coming from a rather conventional family myself, it was hard for me to agree to men in the family having long hair.

I could remember my daughter as a toddler, sitting in a grocery cart seat, asking me if that was a Mommy or Daddy when she saw a man walk by sporting a ponytail. That was sort of the way I saw people, too. Long hair meant you were a woman and short meant you were a man. Anything else was confusing.

However, Shawn was rather adamant about wanting long hair. I finally told him he could have long hair if he kept it clean. He kept his end of the bargain and washed it every day. When I think of him, the first thing that comes to my mind is a picture of him with his thick wavy hair, with golden highlights, moving in the wind. He used to take long strides because, even though he was only sixteen, he was over six feet tall and rather lanky, and the sun would shine through his hair and it would move with him, as if it were dancing in the sun.

When you have lost someone you love, it seems that you remember unimportant things they did, things that the world would consider insignificant. Suddenly, these actions become important things to remember and cherish. Perhaps this is because, at sixteen, there is not a lot that someone can accomplish, according to the world's standards. At sixteen you are just starting to dream, or maybe know what dreams are. Accomplishments come later.

I think about that sometimes. Shawn had had an adolescent crush or two, but he had not yet found the love of his life. He hadn't had a chance to partake of some of the promises of life. I wondered what his family would have been like, my grandchildren, perhaps.

I remembered the long rope he'd used to do some mountain climbing when we were camping in New England. Thank heavens I didn't know about this while it was happening! I found out about it later when some pictures turned up of him dangling over a cliff, clutching that rope. I guess, with five children, one cannot always stay on top of everything.

Another thing I didn't find out about until years later was the mashed potato fight. When it happened, everything was cleaned up before I got home. I was working at the time and everyone took turns with jobs. My daughter Ginny cooked that day and Shawn peeled an enormous pot of potatoes for mashed potatoes. He could never get enough. No one wanted to peel all those potatoes and mash them, so Shawn would do that job.

There was some bickering going on between some of the children and the fight started with one little fork of mashed

potatoes being flung across the kitchen and hitting Shawn in the face. From what I gathered, after that, there was a free-for-all. There were mashed potatoes everywhere. Shawn liked plenty of milk and butter in his potatoes, so they were rather splatable. Luckily, the kitchen cabinets and floor were scrubbed before I saw them.

These are the sort of events families reminisce about when they gather at Christmas dinners, graduations, marriages, births, etc. When these memories involve a son who has died, a mother has to muse over them privately, because, for the most part, others feel uncomfortable talking about them and won't join in.

Most people do not know how to treat death because it is so final, and there is nothing that you can do about it. As a general rule, we really don't know what happens to the person after the event we call death. As children, we were given, perhaps through our religious affiliation, the "official interpretation" of what happens after death, but we don't have any firsthand information until our lives are directly touched. Death is something that we seem to want to forget, because we are afraid of the unknown. If we do not talk about it, maybe it will go away. But sometimes it doesn't go away.

After Shawn died, there were so many, probably insignificant moments that I lovingly relived and cherished, knowing there would be no future history for him and me. In addition to the loss of companionship, there is great pain in knowing that other events like those you cherished will never happen again in this lifetime.

I remembered the flowers Shawn had given me, and the Christmas presents he selected and purchased with his own

money. I recalled his visits to his grandparents' and how he had delighted them by negotiating a purchase for a toy when he was three years old. His purchase was made in a toy shop in Philadelphia, the "City of Brotherly Love." The shopkeeper sold him a toy for less than its cost, because Shawn didn't have much money in his pocket.

Shawn had a very winsome way about him, and I guess the shopkeeper must have loved children, too. Shawn had that mischievous look about him, but with a twinkle in his eye. God, I loved that child!

I remember how he would tell his grandfather that he wanted to drive the car. His grandfather would put Shawn on his lap and Shawn would put his hands on the steering wheel, thinking he was driving. Grandfather said he would work the pedals. Of course, Grandma didn't think that was such a great idea. But there were some things grandchildren were allowed to do, no matter what.

When someone you love has left you, you think of them in little vignettes, not big stories. Events jump around in your mind; there is no continuity. Maybe you find a paper that reminds you of their school, or an old picture that brings memories streaming back. This, what I call musing, never goes away. The mind can be triggered by the most insignificant stimulus—a big bowl of mashed potatoes, a long rope, pieces of straw. However, as time passes and the pain of loss is tempered, you can start remembering the fun times again.

One time, we went skiing in New England. Shawn loved jumping over moguls on the ski run. Moguls are irregular bumps or small hills that need negotiating skills to ski around or jump

over. Shawn was not one to let the good times end, and, when we returned home, he tried building moguls in the snow on a hill in back of our house. He was such a fun-loving guy. Whatever he was doing, he really got into it with his whole self.

Halloween can't pass without me reminiscing about the haunted house he put together in our barn. The plan was that the neighborhood children were to go through a dark maze. Dim lights illuminated scary masks—ghouls with the gloopy glop of blood rolling down their faces. These were the fearful, unmentionable things that would jump out from behind bales of hay. The unmentionable things were usually Shawn and a friend of his dressed in scary, realistic-looking masks. I don't know where he got his hands on the disreputable-looking clothing they wore as costumes. At the end of the tour, to get out, one had to be blindfolded and push aside a big piece of raw liver hanging on a string. The girls must have loved that one. Shawn charged five cents for a trip through the production and crowds came from long distances to see it.

It took weeks of preparation before Halloween, but it kept them busy. The project fulfilled a mother's dream—something wholesome to keep the little buggers busy and out of trouble.

Then there was the tree house. I don't know where they found all the lumber and plywood. Shawn and his friends took every one of the nails from his father's workshop for that project. Sometimes, fathers don't understand that a kid has to do what a kid has to do.

They were looking for carpeting, but before they could complete the project, the big kids tore the tree fort apart, confiscated nails and all. For a while, there was a tug of war

between the big kids and our guys, as the tree house went up and down, but the big guys eventually won. There are still some remnants in the tree and, whenever the leaves fall from the trees, I can see the surviving boards looking like some ghost ship surfacing from a forest of trees instead of a sea of waves. There is something forlorn and spooky about it, because there are no human sounds coming from the dying wreck. It appears to me to be one of the signs of passage from childhood to adulthood, except that one of the passengers did not complete the journey.

As a mother, I can't help thinking of all those unfilled promises and possibilities. He had so many good traits, so much talent. To me, he was a good person, is a good person. Why did he come, only to leave at sixteen?

At Shawn's funeral, I had so many tormenting questions and so much raw pain. So many people came and unknowingly gave me answers that it got to the point that I started looking for the answers to be presented.

I looked into the face of a woman, perhaps in her sixties or seventies, as she told me about her child. She described her infant's big dark eyes so vividly that I felt, at that moment, as if I were looking deeply into them myself. He had died of some childhood disease.

She was so distraught. She loved her child, and she'd only had him with her for three years before he died. She had tried to take her life by throwing herself in front of a trolley car. Emotionally, I could see the tracks and picture her near brush with death. I could certainly identify with this woman. And after all those years, her memories were just as sharp as they had been when the events happened. It was as if her child's death had

happened yesterday.

I was reminded at that moment that, at least, I had had Shawn with me for sixteen years. I'd had something precious and I had to be thankful for Shawn's time with me. It was a gift. Indeed, I had always looked at my children as not truly belonging to me. God had loaned them to me for a while. They were put in my care, so I could teach them what I knew and give them an assist toward living their lives as independent adults, as whole as possible. Even though I knew I had to accept Shawn's short stay with me, it didn't lessen the pain.

During his wake, music was piped in very softly. It was of his favorite noise-making groups, Rush. At home, I never appreciated that music blaring through amplifiers and rattling the windows while Shawn played "air guitar." But in the funeral home, played softly, quietly, the words and music took on new dimensions. I have to say that I liked it. Music notes expressing a phrase from the song "I will be free as the wind" are on the stone marking the place where his body rests, where, indeed, his spirit is free as the wind.

I want you to know that the pain I have been speaking of is very real to the bereaved. I am not using that word "pain" in a figurative manner. It is like a dark heavy cloud and it presses down on you, so that sometimes you feel that you aren't getting enough air. The only time this pain leaves is when you manage to fall off to sleep.

However, then the bad dreams take over, filling your nights with anxious flight. You know neither the pursuer nor the destination. Upon awakening, as I moved towards consciousness, there was a moment of orientation and then, like hot burning liquid pouring over me, came the realization that my son had just

died.

I couldn't stand for the days to pass, because each day meant that the separation between my son and myself was getting wider. He had fallen off this ship of life somewhere and I had clutched for his hand, but couldn't find it. As the seasons changed, we were getting further apart. I wanted to go back and find him, but our passage was in opposite directions, and I suffered because of this. Against my will, I was moving away from him, a prisoner in life.

I was inside the house at one of those particularly difficult moments. I couldn't breathe. I had to get outside and get some air or suffocate. I pushed out the back door and leaned against it, panting and crying. It was as if peace immediately surrounded me. It was as if Shawn were there with his arms around me, and I leaned against his chest and he told me not to cry.

If it hadn't been for the emotional charge of love and peace, I would have thought my mind was playing tricks on me. I stood there soaking in the minute, savoring what I thought was a contact with him. At that moment, I knew that some part of his personality was there in some form. I couldn't see him, but I heard distinctly, as if he whispered in my ear, "Don't cry, Mom." There was emotion without words. I gave out feelings of love and I accepted what I thought was his love. I don't know how long I stood there, but when the emotions passed, I went back into the house.

As the days passed and I examined minutely the unusual meeting, I started to wonder if my imagination had been working overtime. I wondered about his comfort. I felt he was somewhere, and that some part of his personality still existed.

I did feel one regret—that I never really prepared Shawn to die. But, on the other hand, how or when does a parent prepare their child to die? When I tied his shoe laces and cooked his meals, I never told him this would happen to him someday and said, “Son, prepare for this.”

Here was something I had no control over, knew nothing about. I couldn’t help him. I didn’t even know what kind of help he needed, if, indeed, he needed help. I agonized over what his status had been at the moment before death and right afterward.

When I was a child, my mother told me a story of my grandmother’s death. In her time, it was customary for the dead to be put in a casket and placed in the living room until burial, so friends could come and pay the family their respects. I don’t know when funeral homes came into vogue, but my mother told me the custom in this neighborhood was for the dead to be laid out in their homes.

The milkman would walk through the neighborhoods with a horse-drawn cart, ringing a bell to alert his customers. The homemakers would answer the summons if they needed milk that day, take their pail to the milkman and he would fill it. It would be interesting to know how much milk cost then, without modern packaging and regulations. It had to taste better without all the butterfat removed.

The story goes that, when the bell rang, my grandmother, in a stupor, got out of the casket, retrieved her pail and went out to the milkman and bought milk. As with the story of Lazarus in the Bible, there are no reports of the expressions on people’s faces or what they said when someone rose from the dead. Nor is there

any information about what my grandmother said it was like to rise from death. There were no in-depth reporters on the scene to get all the details, no television cameras, no *60 Minutes* or Dan Rather.

My grandmother had been a victim of an influenza epidemic. Physicians hadn't heard her very shallow breathing. Perhaps she was in a type of catatonic state, and, thank heavens, revived before burial. It is a good thing for me, because this happened before my mother was born.

There is a kind of humor to the story, but the thought of it caused me great anxiety. I had horrible nightmares of my son's reviving in the casket underground and that I wouldn't know to help rescue him. This fear was inside of me and I couldn't let it go. I couldn't express it to anyone, because I was afraid of being ridiculed. I finally told my husband and he explained my fear to the undertaker. Compassionately, the undertaker told me that modern embalming came about because it was society's way of dealing with this problem. He offered to loan me some of his books to help satisfy my mind. His reassurance was enough. I did not have to think of the unspeakable again.

Everyone has a distinct way of grieving, of handling the transitions of death and dying. I remember that, during Shawn's wake, I went to the basement of the funeral home to use the rest room and there was a group of people having a shot of Jack Daniels bourbon and listening to Kenny Rogers' "The Gambler." The widow told me that her husband didn't want his family or friends to grieve when he left them and this was one of his last requests. This was how he wanted to be remembered.

I started talking to this woman, because it turned out that

her son was a classmate of Shawn's. It seems that, in some ways, our lives are all intertwined. There they all were, trying to do what their husband/father wanted them to do.

I had to be as brave as this family. I reminded myself that example is a very strong teacher, and one deed is worth several thousand words. We are all very vulnerable to example and sometimes we need to evaluate what we teach through our own behavior. What seems very casual to ourselves can create a strong impression on someone else. Maybe the only way we learn true wisdom from others is through example.

The laying to rest of my loved one took a long time, because there could be no funerals from our church on the weekend before Easter. We had a wake, a Funeral Mass, back to the funeral home, a service before burial at the funeral home, and then the day that I knew I couldn't get through, the day we placed our son in the ground.

Going into the church for the funeral, I followed my daughter. As she approached the steps, her shoulders drooped and she looked as if she might crumble. It reminded me of someone taking a dead leaf and crumpling it in their hand before dropping it to the ground. I came up to her and whispered in her ear, "Michele, we will grieve tomorrow. Today, we will celebrate what Shawn was. This is in his honor." It was as if someone pulled the strings on a resting marionette. All the parts came to life in harmony, working as a unit; tall and straight, she walked into the church.

All the family had a part in the service. Each one of us had something special to read, sing or play that had great meaning to us. I read the poem about children from *The Prophet* by Kahlil

Gibran. It was one of my favorite poems and I believed the sentiment. It said something about your children being the arrows in your quiver and shooting them forth in the world.

Cousins near the same age as Shawn picked the music and played it. I can still see my niece Laurie singing "Suddenly" and "Bridge Over Troubled Waters." Whenever I hear any of the music, it reminds me that we were telling the world that Shawn was something special to all of us and that he would not be forgotten.