

PROLOGUE

Grown ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.

The Little Prince
Antoine De Saint-Exupery

My life took an incomprehensible turn at the age of fifty. Had someone forewarned me about it I would not have believed him or her. Sometimes, life's path can be a treacherous icy mountain road filled with obstacles and detours. How we each choose to navigate such a road is a personal decision. We can travel that road with fear and trepidation or we can view it as an adventure. When I crossed over that treacherous icy road was when my life, my heart, and my sanity disintegrated—when my twenty-one year old son Zac died. With time, and with Zac's help, I eventually came to accept what I could not change and discovered a new life and a new adventure. In spite of being tossed about in a stormy sea of emotions along the way, I have come to believe it was worth the trip.

Sometimes, we struggle to understand the lessons alone and sometimes we have help. I have been extremely fortunate to have help along the way. Even more so, I am so grateful for it, although it came through great pain.

Even before this life-changing event occurred, I had been pursuing a more abstract life-philosophy, and came to believe that there are no coincidences in life. Everything happens for a reason. There are reasons for every experience, every situation, every relationship, and every person we meet in our life journey. The negatives, crises, and events we do not want to occur in our life usually are the most difficult and traumatic, but often guide us to practical wisdom through the experience. This practical wisdom is the potential outcome we are all striving for through the lessons we programmed in our life plan to learn in this life. Recognizing that we designed our life plan and that we programmed our lessons to learn in this life for the growth and progress of our souls is important: it is this knowledge that guides us toward an acceptance of our trials and tribulations in our life.

It was September 2000. My husband Jim and I vacationed in Washington, D.C. while our boys and my parents stayed home and tended our yard, garden, and flowers. The weekend following our return we hosted a barbecue to thank them, and to visit with relatives we had not seen in a long while. I had no idea this was to be the last time I would ever see my son Zac. Nevertheless, had I known this event as part of my life's bigger plan would I have changed that day at all? It may surprise you if I said that I do not think so.

I do not believe a parent can ever prepare for their child's death. I surely did not. It is

hard to remember, let alone focus your beliefs when your entire world explodes. A friend described me by saying, “You were upside down.” I was upside down, inside out, and shattered.

However, because I do believe that there are no accidents or coincidences in life, that every life event has a purpose, and that we have many lessons to learn in this life, I take responsibility for choosing this life path. I knew Zac’s death was somehow part of my life plan. I trusted that we design our life plan with others prior to coming into this life by arranging all the situations, events, and people we proposed to meet in order to learn our lessons. I believe that patience, tolerance, and love are lessons I chose to learn in this life. Now I also know I chose to learn these lessons through the death of my son, and he chose to help me. Little did I know early in my grief that Zac would eventually confirm not only my beliefs in life plans, but also our specific afterlife agreement to experience our relationship in such an inconceivable manner.

I came to my beliefs about the spiritual afterlife, reincarnation, and eternal life innately. As a child, I was uncomfortable with and questioned the notions of heaven and hell in relation to life and death. Even then, it did not make sense to me that an all-loving God would create a negative environment in which some people would fritter away their life, while others had good fortune, abundance, and positive life experiences. It made no sense to me either that He would create a hell or negative place where some beings were doomed to spend an eternity.

When I was in high school, my grandmother died and I began seriously questioning my more conventional beliefs. I had never experienced the death of someone close to me before and a new door opened where I was forced to face unfamiliar and painful emotions. This sparked a growing interest in life after death, past lives, and other paranormal subjects. Several years later, after giving birth to my first son Tyler, my mother and I began attending séances, the Spiritualist Church activities, Dick Sutphen, and other past life regression seminars. We joined an Edgar Cayce study group and read about reincarnation and the afterlife. My interest continued to grow and I learned a great deal about death, afterlife, and psychic phenomenon, while being supported by a community of like-minded people. It would seem that my life plan was unfolding, even though I was unaware of it at the time or of what was to come.

My faith and my experience tell me that death is not the end of our existence. I believe the soul is eternal. There is life after death. We continue to live on the other side between reincarnating into other lives, which enables us to learn the spiritual lessons for the progression of our soul. The “other side” is another dimension of existence that is actually right here with us, but at a higher vibrational level, which where our spirits lived before we came into this life and where we shall reside after we die.

We choose our life lessons and chart our experiences before coming into this life. Consequently, everything happens for a reason, as everything in life is a part of this larger pre-conceived plan. Therefore, there cannot be coincidences in life since we are responsible for the choices in our life chart that were developed before incarnating. This does not negate

the opportunity for free will since we have infinite life situation choices available to us in order to learn our charted lessons. In particular, it is how we deal with our life situations that determine the learning from the spiritual lessons we charted. I believed this before that fateful day when my life skidded out of control, but Zac's death tested those beliefs.

For five months I suffered through the death of my youngest son alone. I clearly remember confusion, intensity, depression, and undefined feelings about my life. I thought I was alone...but due to Zac's insistence and incredible assistance from the other side, my resultant growth due to our present conversations, and our redefined, present relationship, I want to share my grief process in order to "normalize" what is commonly approached as a highly denied, if not taboo subject in our society: death.

Death is a natural part of life and even more so, a part of modern society. Not only are guns, gangs, drugs, and violence escalating the number of deaths of our children, but also terrorists and catastrophes are increasingly making us aware of the preciousness of life. Society can no longer deny that the dangers and yet naturalness of death exists. We cannot allow another generation to grow in the shadow of our fears. We need to be aware of our own ideas, beliefs, and fears surrounding the subject of death in order to talk openly and honestly with our children about death. They in turn need to hear their parents, caregivers, relatives, and friends talk about death in order to grow in a safe and secure world. They do not need shielding from the reality of their world. By doing so, we will perpetuate another generation of unaware, unprepared casualties of our ignorance. Although we all react in different ways to death, all individuals need emotional and spiritual healing in response to death and loss.

Let us not only give our children our love but also our truth, as we know it. We will all die physically, but we do not have to die emotionally with our loved one's death. We can choose a different life—we can choose to live again. If we are open enough, we will receive messages from our loved ones. The signs are there. Be aware, notice, and watch for personal signs from our loved ones. They want us to know they still exist. They continue to be with us and we will reunite on the other side.

INTRODUCTION

*If you want to get a clear picture of any condition in life,
Don't try to see things with your nose on them!
See them from the highest point, from the plane of spirit,
and you will be surprised at how different your problem looks.*

*White Eagle
The Quiet Mind*

Every mother carries a gnawing fear in the back of her mind about the safety of her children all the years they are growing up. The thought of receiving a telephone call in the middle of the night from a police officer is every mother's worst nightmare. However, without experiencing a trauma of this magnitude, most mothers have no idea how they might respond. When I received the call Sunday morning, October 1, 2000, I immediately went into the familiar textbook steps of grief that were unknown territory to me until that day. After confirming my identity as Zachary's mother, the police officer at the other end of the line told me to get to the hospital as soon as I could—because there had been an “accident.”

I wanted more information.

“I am his mother. You are speaking of my son. What kind of accident was it? Where did it happen? What happened? How is he?” I received no answers except, “I'd get down to the hospital as soon as you can.”

Within five minutes of that ominous message, my husband Jim and I were in the car headed to Salem Memorial Hospital. For the forty-five minute drive I was beside myself, vacillating between panic, anger, prayer, disbelief, calm denial, and bargaining.

Reaching the hospital's emergency room and identifying myself to the intake nurse, they whisked us away from the admitting desk into an adjoining waiting room. The room's décor included a chair, a dark Naugahyde loveseat, and a box of Kleenex. Its depressingly bland design aptly represented a lonely cell where one could easily descend into a void of nothingness.

For a short time I circled the room until the chaplain entered and introduced himself. Almost immediately after the introductions, a police officer came into the room and initiated a barrage of questions. The inquiring officer had not been at the accident site, but happened to be at the hospital on other business and had been recruited to gather information for his sergeant. Jim stepped in and shielded me from what felt like yet another assault.

The physician who treated Zac in the Emergency Room entered the waiting room and interrupted the questioning. He had the overwhelming responsibility of describing the details of Zac's trauma and of delivering the news: Zac was going to die. Unfamiliar feelings of anguish, torture, desolation, and inordinate sorrow engulfed and overpowered me when he told me that Zac's skull fracture was too extensive, and that they had placed him on life support only until our arrival so that we be the ones to decide when to remove it.

For the next half hour I entered a world I hope never to have to re-enter or experience again. I wish no other parent ever had to encounter and suffer this torturous realm. The shock

of being told that your child is dying (or will die) is inconceivable. One's reaction is just as unfamiliar. After about thirty minutes of agonized crying, floor crawling, fetal positioning, and anguished bottom of the belly sorrow, I suddenly realized I needed to be with my son. He was in a room by himself and I had to suspend my grief to be supportive of him and his letting go of this life so he could peacefully go to the other side.

That day, time stood still and time flew by. The chaplain and Jim were perfect supporters. There were no comments about what I needed to do or should do. There were no directives about what or when or how I should be doing anything. The chaplain led us to room 3141 in the ICU while he provided us with information about the hospital protocol and procedure the staff would follow, and that the staff would respect our wishes in the process. He offered his assistance, was empathetic, but allowed us to make our own decisions. He watched us for clues to detect how he should proceed in comforting and supporting us, and let us know that he was available when and if we needed him. Jim called family members and arranged for my brother, Scott to drive Zac's brother, Tyler, to the hospital from Portland. Under normal circumstances, I would have valued my family support, but much of that day I was unaware of their presence.

I was hyper-vigilant and strong while in Zac's room and then I would break down and fall apart in the family waiting room. I was unaware of my physical body and all functioning was on autopilot. I knew this would be the last time I would ever spend with my son. In trauma and confusion, I wanted to say all the things to him that I thought I had not said, but I could not think of anything that I was not saying. I stroked his head for hours. I kissed his cheeks. My words told him to go to our relatives who were there on the other side waiting to greet him, but in my heart, I was scared and did not want him to go. I tried to be the strong mother for both of my boys, but the pain and chaos inside was tearing me apart.

The physicians and hospital staff were honest and clear about Zac's condition and told us what to expect during his death process. They told us he felt no pain and could not respond to us due to a lack of brain activity, but we knew Zac better. He squeezed my hand and Tyler's hand to reassure us that he was still there. Tears fell from Zac's eyes when Tyler told him he loved him and that he would miss him. Because of the skull fracture and the swelling, they told us, he would not live without the respirator. However, Zac fought hard for forty-six minutes after its removal so that he would leave at 3:33 a.m., a number Zac knew had strong meaning in Tyler's life. I was able to say, "Take care a you," one last time. Many events took place during those twelve hours, but it all blended into the day that changed not only my life, but also my whole being.

At 8:30 a.m. the following morning my chiropractor/family friend, Dr. Russ Colgan called me to express his condolences. He also verified that I had just experienced the worst day of my entire life and that now starts the worst week of my life. He was right. He would know: he too experienced the death of his child eight years earlier.

I believe there is no pain more excruciating, no event more emotionally intense, and no life situation more indescribable than the death of one's child. There are no words to define what happens to your body, mind, and soul. I knew I would never be the same again, for I had never felt intense pain and stress like this in my life. I needed hope. I needed peace. I needed comfort. I did not know how to identify these feelings, let alone search for them. With time and help, I did find them, I learned how to live with a scarred heart, and chose a new life. Perhaps others have discovered a different method of surviving this trauma. The following is mine.

THE KID

*Just a good ol' boy,
never meanin' no wrong,
Makin' their way
The only way they know how...*

*Waylon Jennings
Theme song from "The Dukes of Hazzard"*

On January 22, 1979, Zachary Jay was born after more than two years of my trying to have a second child. What a birthday present he was! In the hospital, the day following his birth, a nurse placed a red birthday rose on my lunch tray. Although a thoughtful gesture, I felt I had already received my present the day before when I gave birth to Zac, one day prior to my birthday. I was fortunate to share my birthdays with him for the next twenty-one years.

Zac was a different little boy. Although an active, inquisitive little guy, he was sensitive beyond his years, a special child from the very beginning. I used to describe him as "perceptive." However, his death gave us new eyes to recognize the many ways of his special-ness. While we who were his immediate family knew of his positive qualities, we learned much about how many other people experienced him before and after his funeral.

He demonstrated a sensitive, caring disposition at an early age. Often, he observed when something was awry in his home. Being a mother to two active little boys and frequently providing childcare for other youngsters their age, I had little time for sitting down. However, occasionally when I would stop for a moment, he sensed that something was amiss and he would hug my knees and put his head on them. His eyes said it all! Child or adult, he had a "knowing" look about him.

When he was little, Zac used to pretend he was the Incredible Hulk ("Creda Houk" he called him) and Superman, wearing his Underoos with a hand towel safety pinned around his neck. He wanted to be Superman like his big brother, Tyler. Since his death, we found out that he accomplished that goal in the eyes of many of his friends.

He lived the role of the quiet observer, being three and a half years younger than his brother Tyler is. He seemed to discern what was going on in his environment without saying a word. (Or, giving the impression that he did.) People trusted this sense. We all loved his unassuming sense of self. He had many skills but he was not boastful. He gave his best to everything he attempted, but also had a strong awareness of his capabilities. He was a self-assured individual in a quiet, unpretentious way. Zac was wise beyond his years. These traits followed him throughout his life.

The obituary described Zac as loving his family, friends, and cars. (His brother said, "He was all about cars!") It was a single-dimensional description of an exceptional human

being.

Research states that there is no greater confidence than that shared by siblings. Tyler and Zac had a reciprocal and protective relationship based on a great love between them. Their fantasy play about the “Duke boys” from *The Dukes of Hazzard* was not far from their truth. Regardless of the differences in their personalities, Tyler being artistically talented while Zac had an innate ability for mechanical and hands-on learning, they were playmates, companions and protectors for one another. The closeness in their relationship did not change as they matured regardless of the distance between residences. They depended and relied upon each other as they matured. Therefore, it was no coincidence that at the ages of six and ten the two of them made a pact that if one of them should die young, the other one would come back to the other in dreams and help them.

Zac’s compassion was evident to us, but we discovered the extent of his compassion after his death. People, including many who were strangers to us, talked about their relationships with him. His friends came from all occupations and many sections of his town. Zac was an ethical, conscientious employee and worked hard for all his employers. Often working two physically demanding jobs, he would help friends or coworkers at the end of his paid workday building fences, landscaping, hauling dirt, or whatever needed a second set of hands. A young pregnant neighbor spoke of him checking on her nightly at the end of his workday because her husband worked out of town and arrived home in the late evening. He just wanted to make sure she was okay. She also said that he accompanied them to the hospital when she went into labor and held the baby at two hours old. We thought how wonderful he was! Then we heard from many other friends who told stories of him arriving at the hospital when they had their children, and holding their babies soon after their births. It was incredible to learn of the compassion he had for so many people and the memories he created for so many friends. Although he had mentioned these pregnancies, births, and family situations to us, we never envisioned his involvement from his account of the events.

Not only did Zac enjoy children, but also children obviously loved Zac. Many of his friends have children and Zac was their friend, their playmate, and their role model. He was a natural with them. He wanted children of his own someday and genuinely loved being with them, playing with them, and teaching them. His friends wanted their children to learn from him because he displayed such positive, high standards of values and morals, and a strong sense of justice. He was a model and a teacher in his own special, quiet way.

Everyone loved Zac. He had a great sense of humor, a range of laughs and giggles, a huge smile, and an unmistakable “Zac” grin. He possessed a strong work ethic. He loved hard work, cars, working with his weights, his friends, and family. He was independent and confident in what he knew and what he liked. Perhaps this was the reason for telling family members that he wanted to have Lynyrd Skynyrd, his favorite rock band’s signature song, *Free Bird* played at his funeral when the time came.

“The Kid” was a nickname that stuck with Zac after starting as a joke between us because he was the youngest grandchild in the family. We continued the humor by addressing each other as “Kid,” and perpetuated the bantering in our telephone messages or conversations by always including a one-liner to or from “The Kid.”

Many stories could exemplify who he was, but how his death touched so many people’s lives is more of a testimony than any specific story could tell. At least eight young men told us that Zac was their best friend. As a twenty-one year-old, I do not know anyone who had accumulated that many best friends, nor do I feel that I can say that in my entire life

I was the best friend to that many people. Many young men cried with us as they told us stories of their friendships and memories. Neighbors expressed their overwhelming grief. The devastation of human spirit was inconsolable. One friend described him as a gift to her and stated that he had a purpose for every life he touched. In their thirteen-year friendship, she said they shared a close bond, never fought or argued, and that Zac was the most positive, well-rounded person she knew.

When Zac was seventeen, his sixteen year-old girlfriend bought *his* dream car: a 1971 Midnight blue Chevy Nova. It was in great condition and Zac was so happy for her to have his dream car. He took good care of it, worked on it, babied it, and did everything he could—he was doing this for his girlfriend, not because he thought or wanted it to be his. That was Zac—concern and compassion, not resentment.

Zac had rented a little house in the country one day before his automobile accident. He had given notice to his landlord and planned to move within a couple of weeks. This move was not only relocation but also a healing step toward a new chapter in his life after the ending of a long-term relationship. His new landlords, who shared several telephone conversations and only met him once, attended his funeral. They were impressed by him and devastated by his death, saying, “He was such a nice young man...we were looking forward to renting to him and the neighbors were looking forward to his moving in.” I am sorry they did not have that opportunity. They would have loved him too.

That was everyone else’s Zac. My Zac possessed all those qualities and more. I knew a slightly different Zac. My Zac had a caring that was deeper than lending a needed hand, positive advice or compassion. We shared not only a close mother/son relationship, but also a bond that connected our hearts with love, humor, and understanding. Although only five when his father and I divorced, he seemed to be wise beyond his years about the situation or at least trusting enough to believe that maturity would help him understand better. The times we shared and our strong attachment, whether it was throwing sock balls at each other or tucking him in bed by telephone on Sunday nights, connected us regardless of the obstacles we arranged in our life plans.

Humor and a mutual understanding seemed to be the strength between us. We maintained a variety of personal jokes that few people other than us understood. Cows, cars, coats, caretaking, and pictures of “the boys” were some of our favorite topics. Several jokes continued over the years. Because we once lived on a street named Cowles Court, one-liners about cow possession or a lack thereof pervaded telephone messages, as well as resulting in a house decorated with a large collection of cow paraphernalia. Zac was quite accepting of the multitude of jokes about his painting every automobile or truck he owned the color orange (his Dodge sedan “General Lee,” and his Datsun pick-up “General Lee”). My being “such a mother” triggered a rash of jokes about my warm-blooded son being dressed like little Randy in the *The Christmas Story* movie with his yearly Christmas coat. In this same spirit also developed a mutual goodbye comment “Take care a you” as well as the dreaded routine of the “unposed” picture taking of Tyler and Zac whenever we were all together.

Zac’s hair also took on a very important role in our relationship. Depending upon its

length or lack thereof, it created mutually satisfying situations. During high school, Zac grew his very blonde hair until it reached almost mid-back length. It was beautiful and I loved it! Running my fingers through his soft, baby fine hair was not only one of my favorite memories, but it almost seemed as if we knew we were creating memories when we shared these moments. He would fall asleep but I never tired of it. I took him to have this beautiful hair cut when he decided that this length was not appropriate for working at his first lumber yard job. When he first started growing his hair, he would tuck it into his baseball cap, but after this first haircut, his long ponytail was gone and with a quick swish behind the ears, most of his short blonde locks were hidden. I must admit I was shocked the first time I saw him after he shaved his head, but it too was a catalyst for mutually tender moments. Equally wonderful were those times I rubbed his smooth head until he would fall asleep.

Probably the most descriptive of all was Zac's laid-back acceptance of whatever he experienced in life, which led to his often-used phrase of, "It don't matter." Although he seemed to have learned what was important early in his life, it took some of us more time to learn our lessons.

The twenty-one years with him was worth the two years of waiting and trying to get pregnant, but not long enough to create all the desired memories...