

THE PARENT Journey

october - december 2011

a grief Haven newsletter for grieving parents and those who support them

my son's spirit lives on in *Piggy Nation*

by richard rosser

for adults and children of all ages!

On January 31, 2009, our son, Nick Rosser, was taken from us in a car accident. In the ensuing days I struggled to get out of bed. Grief drained me emotionally and physically. At the time of the accident, I was on hiatus from my job as First Assistant Director on the TV show *24*. It was fortunate that I did not have to immediately return to work during those initial days. However, days turned to weeks, my hiatus ended, and I returned to my job.

At work I was surrounded by loving friends and crewmembers who were compassionate and understanding. But I felt empty inside. Work ceased to hold the same excitement that it had before Nick's passing. I'd always been passionate about my job, enjoyed my time on set, and as a manager I strived to create a light-hearted environment for my co-workers. But now I questioned the arduous hours and wondered about working so hard when someone that I loved could be taken so easily.

Let me take a step back in time.... A year before Nick died, my family met my mother-in-law for dinner one evening. She circled the busy parking lot looking for a place to park. As a spot opened up, she was about to take it when a guy in a Corvette zipped in, stealing the space. My family and I were stunned! Nick urged me to beat the guy up. I've never been much of a fighter, so I declined. We joked over dinner that the Corvette driver should be



Nick and Richard

reprimanded for his "piggy" behavior, and the concept of Piggy Nation was born.

In the interim, between that evening and Nick's death, I created a novelty item called the Piggy Ticket and wrote the manuscript for a children's book about piggy behavior. I sent the manuscript to several literary agents, but had no luck getting it published. I printed several hundred pads of Piggy Tickets with the hope of selling them to gift shops, but the pads sat in our garage collecting dust.

After Nick died, I was overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness and despair. Life seemed



where hope resides

this book would make a GREAT gift!

Check Out the Last Page and Encourage Your Kids to Enter the Raffle!

This is our final Parent Journey newsletter for 2011. The official holidays between now and the end of December are upon us. It's always a challenging and difficult time for grieving families. To help with this challenge, both this Parent Journey and the current Sibling Voice share inspirational stories that also suggest unique and meaningful gifts to lift anyone's spirit, whether young, elderly, or in-between.

Just flipping through Richard and Shane's newspaper cartoons, watching a Piggy presentation to elementary school children, or reading pages from the Piggy Nation book can put a smile on anyone's face! You can order a signed version of the book at no additional charge, AND Richard and Shane will donate a portion of each order to griefHaven. Or, if you love the beautiful poem, *The Thing Is*, as much as we do, you can order Ellen's book, or perhaps the beautiful poster she offers.

John Albert Thomas' sumptuous CD, *Now I Sleep*, will transport you to another place. Read about John's inspired journey inside.

As always, we are here for you whenever and wherever you need us.

~ Susan Whitmore
founder & president

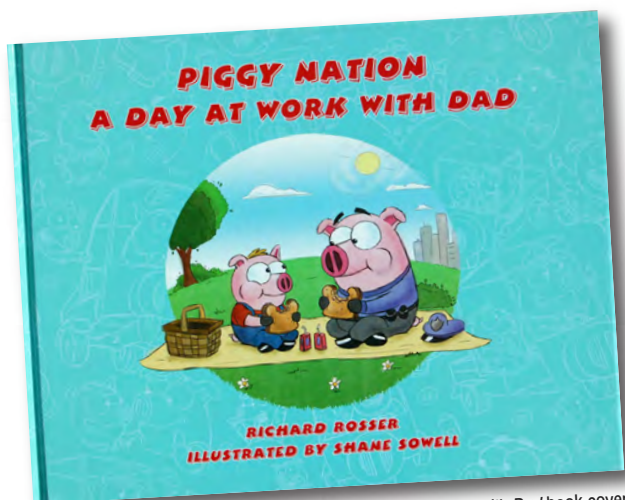


like a giant treadmill of heartache. As I searched for something meaningful to latch onto, I printed a copy of my children's book manuscript and carried it in my pocket. I pretended to edit the thing; moving sentences around, adding exclamation points, deleting commas. But I was really just spinning my wheels.

One day on set, my coworker, Jill Cosh, asked what I was reading. I explained that it was a children's book I'd written that was going nowhere fast. After reading my manuscript, Jill's face brightened and she exclaimed, "This is great. You should perform school assemblies. Kids will love it." Jill's plan sounded perfect, because Nick had always enjoyed working with kids. He was a camp counselor, a lifeguard, and created a camp video game when he was only 14. Jill's idea was the first spark of hope I'd had since Nick died. Looking back, there's no doubt in my mind that Nick's spirit brought Jill and me together. Her enthusiasm (and her threat to "kick my butt" if I didn't follow through) nudged me forward.

Piggy Nation A Day At Work With Dad

I began to search for an artist to draw some illustrations for my school assembly presentation. A friend of Nick's sent me a message through Facebook that her father, Dave Warren, worked on *The Simpsons*. How cool! It was through Dave that I was then introduced to an incredibly gifted



Piggy Nation A Day At Work with Dad book cover

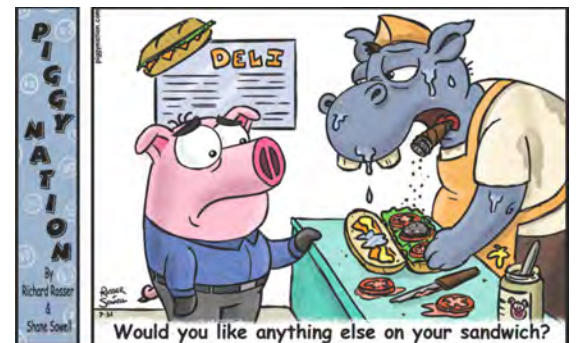
and talented artist, Shane Sowell. Shane and I hit it off, and we began designing the illustrations for what would become *Piggy Nation A Day At Work With Dad*—a children's book that focuses on piggy behavior in amusing ways that is a modern version of the Golden Rule. Again, I felt Nick's spirit guiding me.

During the design process, I began reading our book to elementary school classes. The students were a perfect focus group and helped me hone the story. In the depth of my grief over Nick's death, I suddenly felt energized. I had a new mission! However, the task at hand was not without unexpected difficulties. For example, one day as I entered a school, I noticed a boy that reminded me of Nick. An overwhelming wave of anguish filled me, and I nearly bolted from the room. But then I realized that Nick would have wanted me to continue. So I stayed and read my book to a class of first graders. The children smiled as I read my story. Deep down, I knew that Nick was smiling too.

As Shane completed the illustrations, I worked on the book cover which resulted in my favorite illustration of all: Sammy and Hank picnicking in the park. Each has his legs crossed and a bite out of his sandwich. They are surrounded by a circle that reminds me of a snow globe; an idyllic snapshot in time for father and son. After the book was published, a member of our grief group commented how appropriate it was that I had chosen a drawing that showed father and son together. She loved the symbolism that the cover conveyed—that Sammy and Hank represented Nick and me. I have to admit, this had not occurred to me while I was designing the cover. Again, Nick had wielded his influence.

I began performing school assemblies. I created a comic routine in which I pretended to be a piggy myself, rushing late into the front of the assembly room with all of the children patiently waiting for me, talking on my cell phone while in front of the room, and sloppily eating chips while talking to the kids about the "inconsiderate behavior" by those piggies in the book. Of course the kids immediately "got it" and called ME on MY piggy behavior.

Clips of *Piggy Nation the Comic Strip*, which debuted in the Sunday *Oklahoman* in July of 2011



"I... wondered about working so hard when someone that I loved could be taken so easily."



Piggy Nation A Day At Work with Dad book inside

Thrilled by the kids' responses, I decided to adapt my book into a full-blown children's musical.

Piggy Nation The Musical

I'm a musician, and although I play keyboards in a local dad's band, I had never actually written a song, so creating a children's musical could have been a daunting task. Yet, I approached this with the same passion I had everything else, believing that this, too, would somehow fall into place. And it did. By networking, I found a gifted composer Alec Wells. Together, Alec and I embarked on the next wave of my creative journey. Looking back, it is incredible to me how I managed to write the libretto for the musical and the lyrics for 13 songs while working full time on a new TV series, *The Defenders*. I'm positive that Nick's spirit filled me with ideas and inspiration and that I could not have done it without him. Before we knew it, *Piggy Nation The Musical* was born and ready for its premiere showing. So in February 2011, at the Pierson Playhouse in Pacific Palisades, California, before a packed house, *Piggy Nation The Musical* came to life! I was beaming from ear to ear as I heard the laughter, the "call-outs" from the audience, and the clapping. When Nick first died, I



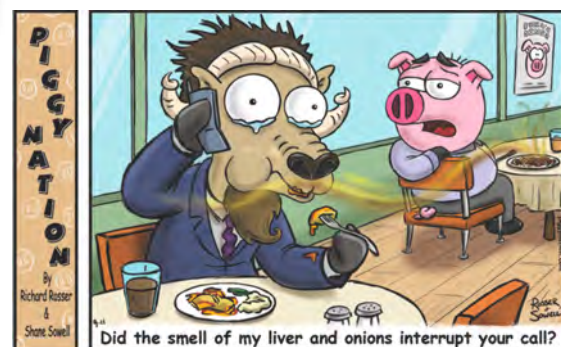
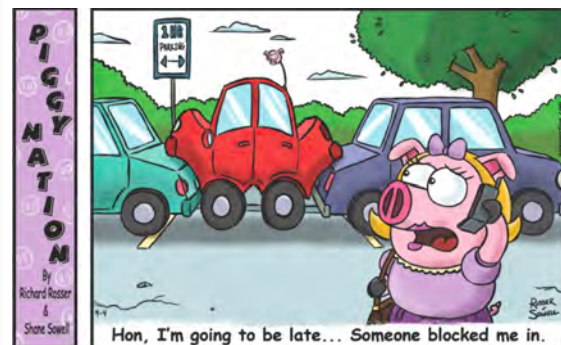
Shane Sowell and Richard Rosser at book signing.

never believed that I would experience such a moment again, but I was wrong.

When I first considered writing *Piggy Nation The Musical*, it occurred to me that some schools might not be able to afford to stage a production. In fact, some schools might not have a drama department at all. So I have established The Piggy Nation Foundation in order to teach thoughtfulness and consideration through the creative arts. I'm developing programs that utilize my children's book and musical to teach underprivileged children about creative writing, theater craft, songwriting, and cartooning. What a wonderful way to honor Nick's love of children!

Piggy Nation The Comic and Piggy Nation Let's Go Camping

I continue to expand *Piggy Nation* into additional creative outlets. Shane and I created *Piggy Nation the Comic Strip*, which debuted in the Sunday *Oklahoman* on July 24, 2011. In addition, we recently



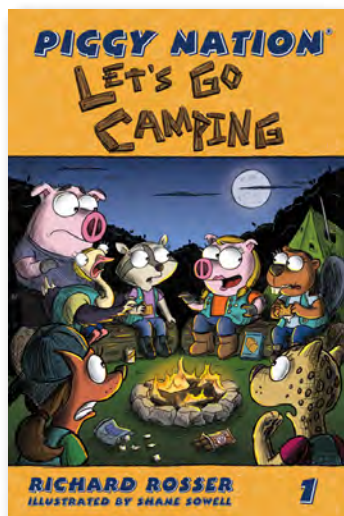
The Rosser Family: Nick, Ali, Stacey and Richard

finished our first children's chapter book entitled *Piggy Nation Let's Go Camping*.

Along the way, I've partnered with a handful of creative folks who have helped me implement my vision of Piggy Nation. Jill jump-started the whole thing. Illustrator Shane has become my creative partner.

Composer Alec helped me craft songs richly layered with Blues, Rock, Rap and Gospel influences. Theater director Dorothy Dillingham Blue decided to stage my musical after reading only four scenes. Joe Hight at The Sunday *Oklahoman* took a chance on an unknown comic strip. In addition, I have the support of my wife Stacey and daughter Ali who have served as creative consultants every step of the way. I'm also indebted to Susan Whitmore, Wendell Whitmore, and Anne Roberts at griefHaven, as well as our griefHaven grief group for their love and support. I'm convinced that each of these wonderful collaborators has become involved with Piggy Nation through Nick—some of them directly; others indirectly.

I had no idea where I was headed when I first conceptualized Piggy Nation, but I've remained open to opportunities and followed my heart.



Piggy Nation Let's Go Camping book cover

As I continue forward and friends ask how I plan to accomplish the next step, my stock answer has been, "I don't know. I'm making this up as I go." I have to admit, this may not be entirely true. I'm following Nick's lead.

On a recent vacation, someone asked what I do for a living. A year ago I would have replied that I work on a TV series

as an assistant director. But this time was different; something urged me to answer, "I'm a children's author, playwright, and cartoonist." And you know something? It felt right.

Since Nick died, I often feel that I'm living for two people. I daydream about what Nick would have accomplished in life, what kind of man he would have become, and how he might have made a difference. When I step back for an objective view, I realize that I already have the answer: Nick's spirit permeates Piggy Nation. His spirit infuses me with the desire to teach children and adults about thoughtfulness and consideration—to energize kids about creative writing and excite them about the performing arts. Nick may no longer be here, but his spirit lives on in every word I write.

Richard Rosser is a children's author/playwright/cartoonist who lives with his wife, Stacey, daughter, Ali, and dogs, Rosco and Winnie, in Pacific Palisades, California.



Nick and Richard

Piggy Behavior Ticket

PIGGY TICKET

You are hereby cited for the following Piggy Behavior

VEHICULAR VIOLATIONS		
You were driving while	Reading	Texting
On the phone	Eating	Painting your nails
Watching TV		
FAMILY FOULS		
Step fighting with your	Siblings(s)	In-laws(s)
Spouse	Landlord	Conscience
Ex-Spouse		
You missed your child's	Birthday	Performance
First words	Graduation	Tantrum
Game		
Why can't you share the	Phone	Bathroom
Computer	Remote	Wealth
TV		
You forgot	My birthday	Our anniversary
	For my maintenance	My mother's birthday

Click on the links below for more information:

To order *Piggy Nation A Day At Work With Dad*, or any of the Piggy Nation items, go to www.piggynation.com.

See sample pages from *Piggy Nation A Day At Work With Dad* at http://piggynation.com/?page_id=198

Watch a montage from *Piggy Nation The Musical* at http://piggynation.com/?page_id=218

Watch a short video of Richard's school assembly at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JP4kKvpPPDM>

now i sleep

CD music and piano by john albert thomas

wonderful
holiday gift
idea!

In the summer of 2009, John Albert Thomas was trying to make ends meet as a full-time piano composer, husband, and father of four. His business coach encouraged him to find a way to use his musical gifts to serve others. With that in mind, he created a new product called *Piano Tributes*, a series of piano compositions, inspired by courageous individuals and given as a gift.

John, researching ways to let artists know about his music for slideshows and videos, stumbled upon the Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep (NILMDTS) organization—an organization whose photographers create remembrance portraits for families suffering the loss of a baby. John was moved to tears and felt deeply compelled to create some *Piano Tributes* for families. They invited him to post the idea on their family forum. Ten families quickly signed up, and John began interviewing them.

After each interview, John went to the piano with his notes and focused on what really stood out for him. He worked to capture the emotion of key words from the interview, words such as “peace,” “adventure,” “balloons,” “angels,” “heartbeat,” and “heaven.” Each baby had their own story, and each story took on a life of its own in his mind and through his fingers.

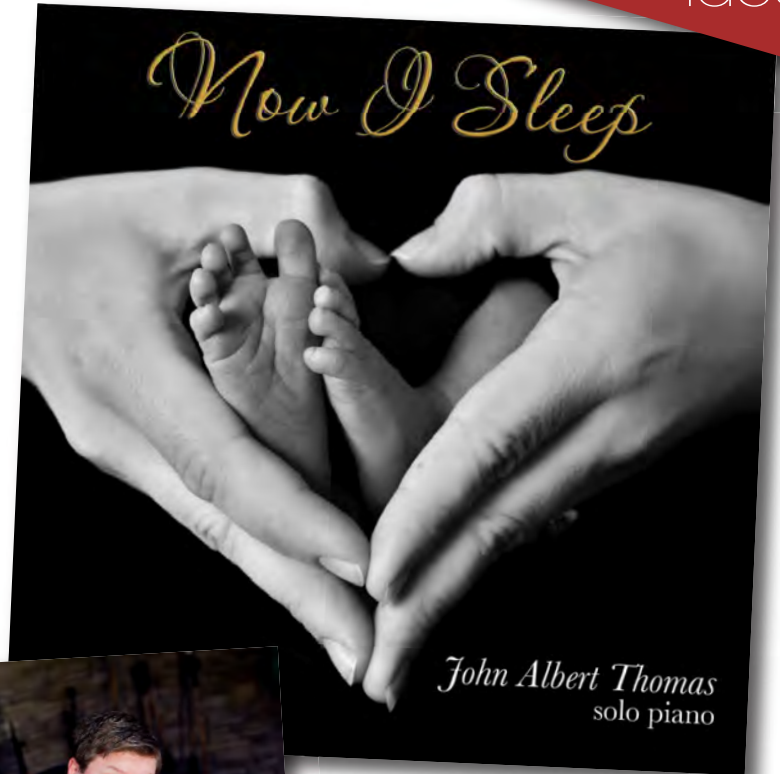
John said, “Sometimes I had to work hard at coming up with the right melody, while other times it came in one sitting. Often the music came through tears, and sometimes it poured out of my hands as if I were

watching myself play—as if God were granting me a gift to pass along. I was humbled and speechless during those times. There is no other way to describe it.” His wife Becky said, “As John would play in the evenings after we got our children to bed, I would sometimes cry when hearing the beautiful melodies being played in honor of those sweet little lives. One composition in particular that moves me to tears every time I hear it is *Fly Away*. It is an amazing, uplifting melody that is inspired by a little baby named Gracelynn. To

honor her life, the family releases balloons every year on her ‘angelversary.’ I feel so glad that the family now has a musical composition for her that will last a lifetime.”

By the end of 2010, John had composed ten piano works. He began to see the power of this musical gift when he sent to each family a rough recording of their baby’s song. Many commented on how it really captured the memory of their baby and how profoundly it touched them.

One of the moms, Darby, wrote: “When I was first sent the preview of Shaunna’s song,



John Thomas

my heart melted. Hearing the preview sent me back to the hospital room where I held my daughter on my chest for those last few minutes of her life. How amazing that a piece of music could do this. What this CD means to me and my husband is something that words cannot describe.

There aren’t enough thank-yous that would even come close to the gratitude we have for you recording this CD to remember the children that have gone too soon.”

With the parents’ agreement, John compiled the ten songs into an amazing CD. On April 22, 2011, John released the CD *Now I Sleep*, and it has been acclaimed by bereavement groups around the world.

John states, “This album is about giving. Ten families gave me their tragic stories. God gave me the gift of music. Today I give them to you, hoping that they will provide comfort for the grieving, especially when words aren’t enough.”



Becky and John Thomas

To purchase *Now I Sleep* <http://nowisleepproject.org>

the thing is

by ellen bass

from *Mules of Love* (BOA Editions, 2002)

We regularly receive poems from people and are truly amazed by their creativity (keep them coming!). *The Thing Is* is one of those poems that simply showed up one day in my email in-box. Reading it, I was utterly astounded and sat at my desk for several minutes just taking it all in. Ellen Bass managed to poetically capture our pinnacle goal after our child dies: to love life again.

I emailed Ellen, and she wrote right back, giving us permission to include her poem in this Parent Journey. I share this glorious poem of the heart with you and hope you will order her book, *Mules of Love*, which won the prestigious Lambda Literary Award.

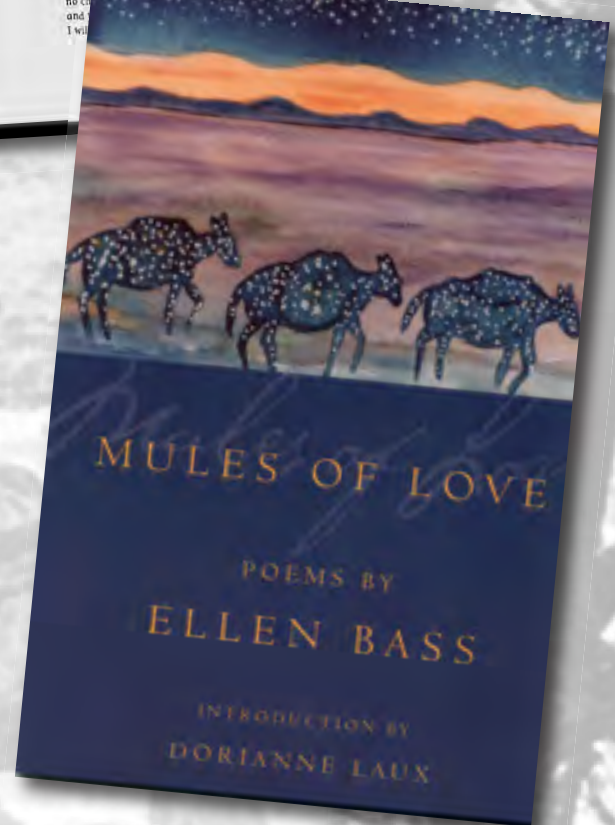
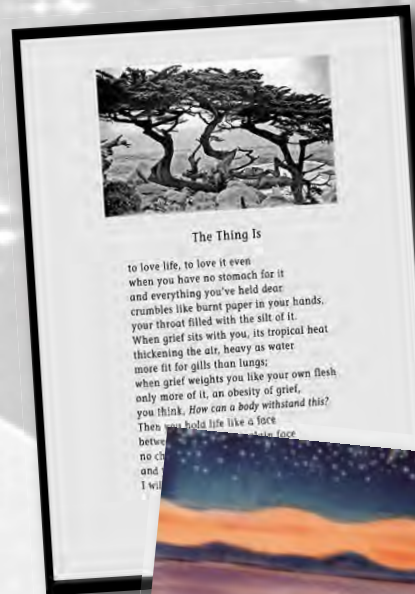
special gift
for anyone!



Ellen Bass

The Thing Is

to love life, to love it even
when you have no stomach for it
and everything you've held dear
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,
your throat filled with the silt of it.
When grief sits with you, its tropical heat
thickening the air, heavy as water
more fit for gills than lungs;
when grief weights you like your own flesh
only more of it, an obesity of grief,
you think, How can a body withstand this?
Then you hold life like a face
between your palms, a plain face,
no charming smile, no violet eyes,
and you say, yes, I will take you
I will love you, again.



Ellen Bass' books of poetry include *The Human Line* (Copper Canyon Press, 2007), named a Notable Book of 2007 by the San Francisco Chronicle and *Mules of Love* (BOA, 2002), winner of the Lambda Literary Award. She co-edited, with Florence Howe, the groundbreaking *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women* (Doubleday, 1973).

» To contact Ellen or to order *Mules of Love*:
www.ellenbass.com

The Thing Is is also available as a small poster
and note cards from Syracuse Cultural Workers
(<http://syracuseculturalworkers.com/poster-thing>).

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five regrets of the dying

by bonnie ware

For many years I worked in palliative care. My patients were those who had gone home to die. Some incredibly special times were shared. I was with them and their families for the last three to twelve weeks of their lives.

People grow a lot when they are faced with their own mortality. I learned never to underestimate someone's capacity for growth. Some changes were phenomenal. Each experienced a variety of emotions, such as denial, fear, anger, remorse, more denial and eventually acceptance.

Every single patient found their peace before they departed...every one of them.

When questioned about any regrets they had or anything they would do differently, common themes surfaced again and again. Here are the most common five:

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.

This was the most common regret of all. When people realize that their life is almost over and look back clearly on it, it is easy to see how many dreams have gone unfulfilled. Most people had not honored even half of their dreams and died knowing that it was due to choices they had or had not made.

What I learned from this: It is very important to try and honor at least some of our dreams along the way. From the moment we lose our health, it is too late. Health brings a freedom very few realize until they no longer have it.

2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.

This came from every male patient that I nursed. They missed their children's youth and their partner's companionship. Women also spoke of this regret. All of the men I nursed deeply regretted spending so much of their lives on the treadmill of a work existence.

What I learned from this: By simplifying our lifestyle and making conscious choices along the way, it is possible not to need the income that we think we do. And by creating more space in our lives, we become happier and more open to new opportunities—those more suited to our new lifestyle.

3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.

Many people suppressed their feelings in order to keep peace with others. As a result, they settled for a mediocre existence and never became who they were truly capable of becoming. Many developed illnesses relating to the bitterness and resentment they carried as a result.

What I learned from this: We cannot control the reactions of others. However, though people may initially react when we change the way we are by speaking honestly, in the end it raises the relationship to a

whole new and healthier level. Either that or it releases the unhealthy relationship from your life. Either way, you win.

4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.

Often they would not truly realize the full benefits of old friends until their dying weeks, and it was not always possible to track them down by then. Many had become so caught up in their own lives that they had let golden friendships slip by over the years. There were many deep regrets about not giving friendships the time and effort that they deserved.

Everyone misses their friends when they are dying.

What I learned from this: It is common for anyone in a busy lifestyle to let friendships slip. But when we are faced with our approaching death, the physical details of life fall away. People do want to get their financial affairs in order if possible. But it is not money or status that holds the true importance for them. They want to get things in order more for the benefit of those they love. It all comes down to love and relationships in the end, for that is all that remains in the final weeks: love and relationships.

5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

This is a surprisingly common one. Many did not realize until the end that happiness was a choice. They had stayed stuck in old patterns and habits. The so-called "comfort" of familiarity overflowed into their emotions, as well as their physical lives. Fear of change had them pretending to others, and to themselves, that they were content, when deep within they longed to laugh and have silliness in their lives again.

What I learned from this: When we are on our deathbeds, what others think of us is a long way from our minds. How wonderful to be able to let go and smile again, long before we are dying. Life is a choice.

It is YOUR life. Choose consciously, choose wisely, choose honestly. I hope you will choose happiness and find it wherever and however you can.

*"It is YOUR life. Choose consciously,
choose wisely, choose honestly."*

★ griefHaven ★

Universal Studios Tour Raffle

DEADLINE FOR ENTERING: NOVEMBER 15, 2011

TICKETS GOOD THROUGH JULY 13, 2013!

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FOUR FREE TICKETS TO UNIVERSAL STUDIOS HOLLYWOOD PLUS 10 PRIORITY PASSES!

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FREE with 10 PRIORITY PASSES*

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TO ENTER THE [RAFFLE]

FOLLOW THESE INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Send an email to: hope@griefHaven.org
2. In the Re: Line, put "Raffle"
3. In the body of your email, include your name, address, phone number, cell number, why you want to go on this amazing tour, and who you will bring!

➡ That's it! ⬅

We will let you know the winner by November 30, 2011.