



*Autumn 2019*

*Girl, Know  
Your Worth!*

*Lisa Moler*

*A Dental  
Perfectionist's  
Confession*

*Kandice Swarhout*

*A Griever's Guide to  
Life After Loss*

*Kimberly Harms*

*Once an RDH,  
Always an RDH*

*Debora Carrier*



LIVING YOUR STRENGTHS

# A GRIEVER'S GUIDE TO LIFE AFTER LOSS



By  
Kimberly Harms

**T**his is a guide to the second half of a life interrupted, life part two, life after loss. I don't mean life after a reasonable loss, a loss that might be expected, one of life's normal losses. I am talking about life after a catastrophic loss, a loss that explodes your universe, a loss that splits your life in two in such a way that everything is measured in terms of "before" and "after." For many, this loss could be a divorce, death of a spouse, cancer, death of a parent or natural disaster. For me it was the suicide death of my only son, Eric.

Eric was a wonderful son. He was a kind, caring, compassionate, funny teddy bear of a young man. His hugs and dancing jigs were famous among his friends. As drum major, he made band the cool place to be in high school and drew standing ovations from the crowd who thought they were there to watch a football game. He loved and included people and stood up for those being bullied. He also happened to be brilliant. He was a National Merit Scholar, a jazz pianist, an actor and a student leader among his peers at Columbia University. His engineering professors noted his creativity and design capabilities, and he was so proud to make the dean's list his first semester. He was well on his way to his dream of becoming a patent attorney, and he couldn't be happier when he came home for Christmas in 2008.

But on January 31, 2009, just two weeks into his second semester and just 45 minutes after a breakup with his girlfriend, he was gone. Suicidal depression triggered by sadness over the loss of an important relationship, a brain 6 years short of full development in the areas of rational thinking and management of intense pain, and Eric's natural impulsivity combined together into a fatal cocktail. Our lives would never be the same.

As a typical dentist, I lived part one of my life, the first 52 years, according to the rules. I studied hard, worked hard, built a nice practice with my husband, Jim, and raised three beautiful children. I was active in the community and with organized dentistry. The previous year or so before Eric died had been difficult. In October 2007, my brother Mike died unexpectedly from a heart attack, and a month later Jim was diagnosed with liver cancer. All calculations gave Jim a 5% chance of a 5-year survival, and we prepared our lives for the possibility of losing him. Our practice was too big for me to manage alone, and we sold half to another couple. Eric graduated from high school and prepared for Columbia, our youngest daughter, Ashley, graduated from college and prepared to enter law school. Jim received a liver transplant and was successfully recovering. 2008 was a rollercoaster of emotion. A month later, Eric's loss turned our family of 5 into a family of 4. Life part one was over; and life after this unimaginable loss, life part two, began.

## LIFE PART 2:

One of the important things to remember as you begin your new life after a catastrophic loss is to recognize that it is indeed a new life. You have to begin again with an understanding and acceptance of your new circumstances. You have to work through the pain, and that is a hard task. It takes time, it takes hard work and it takes determination to get through. You have to adjust to the world as it exists now internally, externally and spiritually. The ultimate goal of the mourning process is to find a new life that allows you to live in the moment and find joy again without the interference of that suffocating shroud of grief that interrupted your expected life and marked the beginning of life part 2.



## ACCEPT THE KINDNESS OF FRIENDS AND DON'T JUDGE

It is interesting to report that many people I know describe their first year after a catastrophic loss as very clouded in their memory. Mine was the same. Memory is sometimes overrated, and a memory loss during a time of pain can be a blessing in disguise. I do, however, remember the kindnesses I received from family and friends. I was not alone. Of particular note was dental colleague Linden Dungy, brother of NFL coach Tony Dungy who lost his own son from suicide at age 19 just after a breakup. Linden's family shares our faith, and he wrote beautiful letters to us delivered exactly when needed. Linden helped Jim and me to look at the big picture, focusing on our life as it is instead of as it was. He taught us to realize that everyone grieves differently and to respect each other's differences as we navigated through the mourning process. One of Jim's cousins lost his own brother at age 19 and felt that the resulting grief also took his parents away. He taught us that we should hold the needs of our two living daughters above the grief we had for our son and never let our girls think that they were not enough.

## WHILE STRUGGLING WITH EMOTIONAL HEALTH, TAKE CARE OF YOUR PHYSICAL HEALTH

One of the big mistakes both Jim and I made was to overlook and neglect the physical repercussions of emotional pain. Just about the time Jim was diagnosed with cancer, I developed a nagging pain in my neck. I was a little distracted and hoped it would go away. It didn't; it just got worse. Finally, about a year after Eric died, when my neck could no longer turn my head, I sought treatment. Too late! I had developed a chronic radiculopathy in my neck affecting the nerves in my drilling fingers. One morning I woke up thinking I had at least 15 more years of clinical dental practice to prepare for retirement; but after my diagnosis at 2:00 pm, my clinical career in dentistry was over. I spent a couple of hours crying in a bathroom stall of the Mayo Clinic (hospitals need some designated crying rooms). I then realized that losing my career wasn't the worst thing to happen to me. If I could survive Eric's death, I could survive this. Catastrophic loss brings the rest of life into perspective.

While my physical problems were career-ending, Jim's were potentially life-ending. Just 2 years after his heart checked out as healthy as before his transplant, Jim was undergoing a 9-hour open heart surgery. He needed a quadruple bypass, a new aortic valve, and hole repaired. I believe his heart was broken by grief.



## RECOGNIZE AND MANAGE DEPRESSION

Depression runs in my family. I lost my mother to suicide as well as Eric, and I have suffered depression on and off throughout my life. There is a stigma in the dental profession when it comes to the subject of depression. One advantage of being retired is that I feel free to talk about it openly. If you find yourself in that horrible pit of depression and despair, get treatment. When I was practicing, I took antihypertensives and antidepressants. The only side effect I suffered was a nagging cough from my antihypertensive medication. The antidepressants just made me feel better and therefore provide better care to my patients. I am still being treated for depression and am very grateful this treatment exists.

## FOCUS ON GRATITUDE FOR WHAT YOU HAD IN YOUR OLD LIFE AND WHAT YOU HAVE IN YOUR NEW LIFE

One of the best lessons I learned in my new life was to focus on being grateful for what I have. My husband Jim has survived at least 7 life-threatening events in the last 10 years. I am grateful he is alive! It is hard to get angry with him now, so he benefits from my gratitude as well! I am also grateful for my remaining health, my daughters,



sons-in-law and grandchildren. I have even learned to focus on gratitude for the 19 years Eric was in our lives. Developing a grateful heart after loss takes some work as our go-to brain position is to grieve for the life we expected.

### **WE ARE NOT IN CONTROL. THERE ARE NO ANSWERS AS TO WHY US. FORGIVENESS IS ESSENTIAL FOR HEALING**

As a dentist, we are used to being in control. This characteristic does not prepare us for life. We are not in control. Bad things can happen. Trying to find answers to why bad things happen only lead us back to the pit. Placing blame does not change the outcome and can destroy relationships and prevent healing. We also need to learn to forgive. Be careful of what you say to your self. Negative self talk can be devastating and delays healing. Replace that ticker tape of shame, guilt, what if and if only's with positive thoughts. In my battle with shame and guilt, I successfully pumped my favorite hymns into my head. It worked! Forgiving yourself is a big step.

### **LOOK TO THE EXPERTS**

It is also important to get a realistic view of the pain and suffering present around the world and how others have coped with catastrophic loss. During the second

year of my new life I found myself drawn to the country of Rwanda, and I developed a library project there in Eric's name. Eric loved books. Rwanda suffered a devastating genocide just 25 years ago when almost a million people were systematically murdered in 100 days but not by an invading army or professional soldiers. They were brutally tortured and killed by their neighbors and sometimes former friends. The survivors of this genocide made a remarkable decision. They realized that if they did not forgive the perpetrators, the killers of their families, in this generation, the same hatred would continue to the next generation. Through forgiveness and a legal system that focuses on appropriate punishment and then restoration, they have created an amazing place. From the ashes of genocidal devastation has arisen a beautiful, safe country just declared the happiest country in Africa through a Gallup Poll. The friends I have made in Rwanda continue to teach me more than I could ever have imagined about resilience, forgiveness, hope and joy.

### **PEACE, JOY AND HOPE ARE POSSIBLE IN THE LIFE YOU LIVE NOW**

I am now ten years into my new life, and it is completely different from the horrible expectations I had when I began this journey. Both of my daughters married wonderful husbands, and each has given us 3 beautiful grandchildren. We went from a family of 4 (after Eric's death) to a family of 12. I can no longer practice clinical dentistry but I have a new career as a mediator and speaker. My daughter Hillary is practicing dental contract and transition law and she is my boss. I am loving this! Ten years ago I felt as if the world had ended. But it didn't. We have no control and there is no answer as to why catastrophic loss happens, but we are in control of our recovery. It is possible to find peace and joy and hope again. The key is to focus every ounce of your energy, every day, on acceptance, forgiveness and gratitude for the life you live now.

*About the author:*

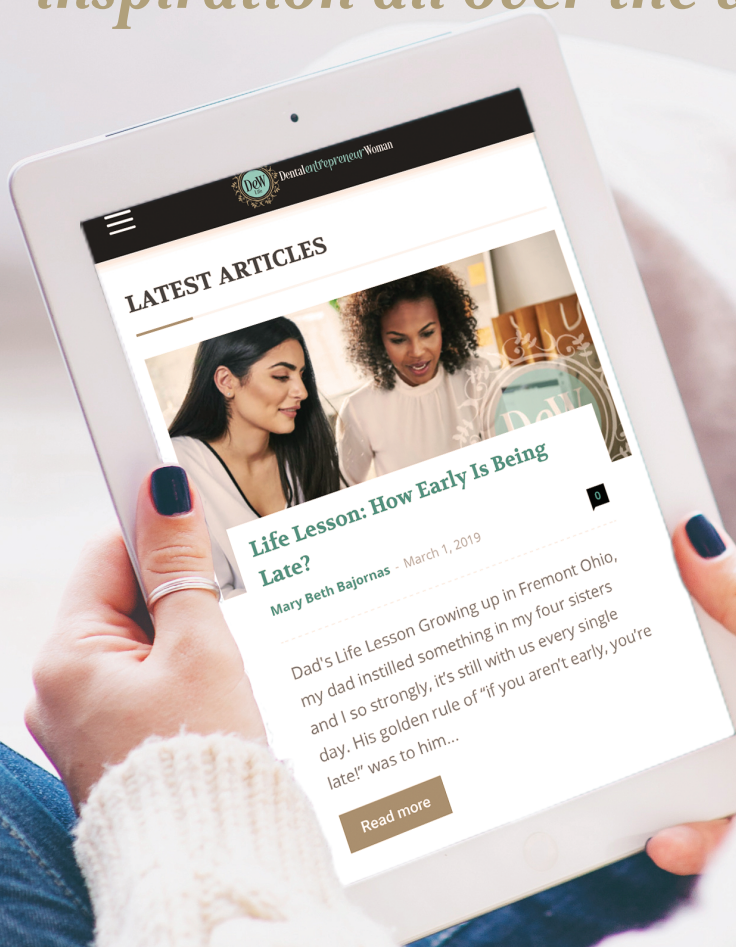
*Kimberly Harms, DDS is a retired dentist, former MN Dental Association President, ADA spokesperson and National Delegate. Dr. Harms is now a national speaker, and she performs conflict management and transition consulting around the country for her daughter's firm. Mother and daughter work together to provide legal, transition and consulting services that can help dentists from dental school graduation through retirement.*

*Pine Lake Law Firm, PLLC  
<https://pinelakelaw.com>  
 651-428-2253*



# Miss Us Between Issues?

*Don't worry. You can get a little DeW inspiration all over the web.*



All back issues are available to read on [issuu.com/dewlife](http://issuu.com/dewlife)

Weekly Blog: [dew.life/blog](http://dew.life/blog)  
Facebook @DeWlifemag  
Twitter @DeWlifemag  
Instagram @DeWlifemag  
Pinterest @DeWlife  
LinkedIn @DeWlifemag

**We'd love  
to connect.**

