

# Sometimes the Rock Must Crumble

*A father's journey from  
heartbreak to purpose*

by Jess A. Kuhl



Sometimes the Rock Must Crumble  
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*To Mary, my bride*



# Foreword

How are you?

Yes, you, the guy reading this. As men, we're often inclined to give a pat, simple answer like, "Doing great, thanks."

How many of us have ever paused and allowed ourselves the chance to ask, "How am I *really* doing?"

For the past twenty years I've made it my mission to help men answer that question. As head of the ministry, Character That Counts, I routinely speak to men nationwide about the importance of finding a place where they can speak openly and honestly about their struggles, whatever they may be. That opportunity comes through something called an "accountability group." Just as the name implies, this is a place where a trusted group of men—a band of brothers, if you will—can discuss whatever they're facing without fear of judgment.

Sounds simple enough, right? Not really. Invariably, when I wrap up a talk on accountability at a men's group or workshop, someone will come up to me and say, "Accountability sounds like a great idea." I reply, "So, what does accountability look like to *you*?" The person generally fumbles for an answer. Accountability sounds great in the abstract, but taking it to the next level—and actually forming a group—is often intimidating for many of us guys.

It's a sad truth: It's been reported that the average man has just one good friend, if that — and by "good" I mean someone he feels comfortable enough opening up to. The consequences can be devastating. The book of Ecclesiastes says, "If an enemy finds a man alone, he is likely to prevail against him." How many corporate scandals, pastor downfalls, and failed marriages now serve as ample proof of that? The enemy wants us to believe we're alone, and more often than not, we oblige. We tell ourselves, "I'm the only one who has issues, everyone else is doing fine . . ."

My friend, Jess Kuhl, knows all about that struggle. Jess lost his infant daughter, Maura, at three days of age, and suddenly found himself thrust among the minority of men who face the heartache of seeing a child predecease them. Whether or not you've faced a similar loss, you can probably relate, in one form or another, to the questions Jess wrestled with in the years to come.

How could God let this happen? Where do I fit in the grand scheme of things? What's my role as a man, particularly in a country where the very idea of masculine virtues — things like being the protector and provider — are increasingly under assault by mainstream culture? How can I stand strong as a husband and father, and still admit how I'm really doing when times get tough?

Those questions can be triggered by a whole host of critical life events. Maybe your family is broken. Or you're fed up with a double life. Maybe you've just lost the one job that's defined you all these years. Or you've seen your investments take a hit, and, like so many others in this economy, you now wonder how you'll provide for your family. Maybe you're still wrestling with memories of the father who failed to provide the

validation you secretly hoped for as a kid. Whatever the case, you may be feeling, as Jess certainly did early in his grieving process, that you should just tough it out – not show any weakness or vulnerability – because, if you do, others may think less of you as a man.

For a time, Jess was ruled by that fear. Until one day he realized, as the title of this book suggests, that sometimes the rock must indeed crumble. This book is a testament to the long and often painful road Jess traveled on his way back to healing and spiritual renewal for himself and his family.

A big part of that renewal came through Jess's embrace of the role accountability could play in his life. Accountability isn't just about having others hold your feet to the fire; it's about finding a safe place to verbalize your hurts and pains. In Jess's efforts to answer what accountability could – and should – mean to him, he has emerged with greater peace and resolve as a Christian man.

So can you. It is my hope that this book provides you a reference point to overcome whatever hurt and pain you're currently facing. If this book offers you anything, let it be this: There is hope beyond your present circumstances; there is a way forward.

*Rod Handley  
Founder & President,  
Character That Counts*



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*Preface*

## The Rock Crumbles

*Someday it's all going to hit me, someday I'm going to crumble . . .*

For four long years, I'd been trying to keep it together, trying to stand strong in the midst of a devastating loss my wife, Mary, and I had suffered. Inexplicably and without warning, we lost our infant daughter, Maura, one night back in the fall of 2003.

Like any devoted husband and father, I'd always tried to be a strong and steady presence, a rock that my family could rely upon. But Maura's death challenged the very core of my identity and sense of purpose. For the first time in my life I felt an overwhelming helplessness. I was supposed to protect my family, yet I hadn't been able to prevent our child's death. How could I guarantee my family would ever feel safe again?

Beyond my inability to offer any guarantees, I faced another agonizing question: How could I balance my need to be "the rock" with my own grief, the intensity of which I could find no adequate way to express? What made my grief even harder to endure was the overwhelming lack of inquiry from friends and family about how I was coping. Instead, I was often left to field a steady stream of questions about Mary.

"How's she doing?"

I was asked that question literally hundreds of

times in the years following Maura's death. Of course, it was heartening to know that so many people were genuinely concerned about my wife. But what about me? During that same period of time, I received only four inquiries, making me long to scream out, "But I'm going through it, too!"

That lack of inquiry, however unintentional, reinforced an almost paralyzing fear: I wasn't allowed to grieve as a man. Instead, I had to suck it up and somehow navigate my own feelings alone. But now, four long years after Maura's death, a harsh light was finally about to be cast on my grief — all because of a single phone call.

It was a Saturday morning, and I'd just walked through the front door when the phone rang. It was my mom. From the sound of her voice I could tell something was wrong. I couldn't have imagined just how much.

"It's Michael . . ." she said, referring to my first cousin, "there's been an accident."

Michael had been out on the Ohio River with his wife and two of his four young children. At some point during the night, the fog thickened and Michael decided to dock his boat for the night. At around 2:00 a.m., Michael heard a barge nearby. He tried to steer away from it, but the fog had rendered visibility near zero. He drove straight on. The impact shred his boat to pieces.

My mother continued: "Michael's OK, but . . ." After a moment's silence, she added, "His kids didn't make it." The children — a boy and a girl, ages four years old and sixteen months — had been sound asleep in the cabin below at the time of the accident.

Losing one child is painful enough, but to lose two, as Michael had, was a level of loss I couldn't even imagine. And yet, it took something as extreme as

Michael's story for my own feelings over Maura's death to rush forward. While my grief had trickled forth here and there through the years, it had never done so quite so fully until that moment. I was confronted with every last emotion that had been brewing beneath the surface all those years: shock, rage, despair, guilt — but most of all, helplessness, complete and utter helplessness at not having been able to prevent Maura's death. For the next twenty minutes, I sat on the living room couch, my feelings hovering somewhere between shock and grief. Suddenly, sobs broke through; it was as if I were losing Maura all over again.

My thoughts soon returned to Michael. It's true we hadn't seen each other in years, not because we didn't care about each other but simply because we were each busy leading our own lives. It's also true that the circumstances surrounding our children's deaths were completely different, with absolutely no point of comparison. At the same time, Michael was a father, and so was I, and I could sense this much: He must be feeling as if someone were ripping him apart from the inside out. No matter how tough he might appear — he had once served in the Marines — he was going to need the support of family and friends.

Within hours, I was sitting next to Michael in the emergency room. Naturally, he was wracked with guilt. The only reason he'd saved himself during the boating accident, he told me, was because he thought his wife had died in the boat and he didn't want to leave his remaining two children without a parent.

"If I had known she was still alive, I would have stayed under the barge . . . I would have just drowned," he said, despondent.

At that moment, I recalled my own despair in the

years following Maura's death. I used to go on long drives and think, *All I have to do is jerk the wheel one time, real hard, and go over the hillside.* But the thought of my wife and our son, Jak, always reined me back in. *Boys need their dad,* I would remind myself, *I have to be there for him.*

In the case of Michael, though, the pain proved too great. Less than two months after his own children's deaths, he was gone, too. An apparent suicide by cop. He was just 35 years old. The official police report had it that he had gone out one Saturday night past 11:00 p.m., and started shooting guns on his front lawn. A state trooper came out to the house and called out to him: "Stop! Put your hands up! Get down on the ground!"

Michael kept walking.

Days later, at the funeral, one thing really jumped out at me: The service focused on Michael the Marine, on "the boy" growing into "a man." Hardly a word was spoken about Michael, the father, and the grief he'd suffered over the loss of his children. That story had been left to die with him.



I've often wondered why so much attention is focused on the mother when a child dies, while the father and his grief remain largely invisible to even the most well-intentioned friends and family.

In traditional circles like the one I come from, men are expected to stand strong for their families, to be the rock. While I think there's a lot of wisdom in that expectation—this country would be a lot better off if more fathers did exactly that—I also see the need for balance. I'm still only human, after all; I still need to allow myself the chance to express grief every once in a while.

In my case, though, I often felt as if my only recourse

was to bury my feelings. When I was with someone whom I felt I needed to be strong for, my emotions inevitably took a backseat. Even if I wanted to talk about my pain, I would stop short, fearing any possible judgment that a show of emotion might trigger. And so, when I did feel a rush of emotion coming on, I would go for a run, or into the woods, or to the office, or simply sit in my car. Just sit there for hours, the same thoughts looping through my mind.

*What now? Where do I go from here?*

With Michael's death, I now saw one of the most extreme consequences of a man not coming to terms with his pain. I now understood that I could remain silent no longer, that I had to share my own experience for the sake of others struggling through grief. I had to share my story.



While every situation is different, one thing is universal: Few events will ever test a man's spirit like the loss of his own child or put him so squarely in touch with questions about who he is, what he can and cannot control, and whether faith can ever fit into his life again.

The answers aren't easy to come by. When I talk to other fathers who've lost a child, they agree: It's like special forces training. If you know anything about the military, you know the Green Berets are trained the hardest. Similarly, it's a small fraternity of men who can truly understand the pain and questions that accompany the death of their own flesh and blood.

I was reminded of that fact recently by another tragedy. My old high school baseball coach's youngest son was found dead in his dorm room at the age of eighteen. The authorities called it an accidental overdose.

They said his dorm room looked like a store; every possible supplement you could imagine was on display. The last thing I wanted to do on a recent Saturday morning was throw on a suit and go to the wake. But I knew I had to. As I went through the receiving line, I made my way up to the coach. Solemnly, he leaned in and said, “You’re one of the few people going through here who knows how I feel – thanks for being here.”

“Coach, I hate that you’re going through this,” I replied. “If you need anything, you know you can call.”

A few weeks later, Mary and I received a letter:

*Thank you for the card and your words. Only a couple like you that has had to deal with a tragedy could understand, and your words are as true for us at this moment: We will get through this one day at a time. Without friends like you I don't know if I could, but I'm going to try each day as best I can.*



In the end, a man who goes through loss will either be destroyed by it or emerge stronger and better able to deal with anything else life throws his way. My own journey back was long and hard, and included its share of questions about why tragedies sometimes visit good and decent people. At some point I realized I had to look beyond the lack of answers and be proactive. Just as it says in Ephesians: “Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of malicious behavior.”

Today, I can say that the death of my child does not define me, but it has shaped who I am. Maybe it’s even refined my faith and spirit. Think for a second about a great sculptor. He doesn’t look at marble and simply say, “That’s a chunk of marble.” He looks at it and thinks, “I see this side and that, and I need to chip away the ugly

parts, at what doesn't belong."

As men, we need to see something similar in our individual journeys through grief. As we face our emotions, we're not so much crumbling as chipping away at the pieces that leave us ill-equipped to understand ourselves and better connect with others. In the end, all that chipping away can leave us better able to face some important questions: What does it mean to be helpless? Do those feelings diminish my role as a man? How can I take care of everyone else and still remember to take care of myself? Can I really share my feelings with those closest to me without letting them down? How can my wife and I work through our grief and not see our marriage destroyed, as so often happens to couples who are dealt a loss?

What you're going through, there's no playbook. Nor is there any magic date by which the pain will be erased. This is an ongoing, lifelong struggle. At the very least, you can find comfort in knowing that you're not alone — I can attest to that — and that you can find a way forward and embrace life again.

This is a story, then, about hope, about getting back to living and trusting in joy again for yourself and your family. If I can help even one man reach that destination, my own journey would have been worth it.

*Jess Kuhl*



Chapter One

## Just Gone

Have you ever gone through a rough patch or two, then turned a corner and thought, *Life is finally coming together, things are finally starting to make sense?*

That's how I felt the year I turned 31. I was in a job that looked like a solid fit. I had a great marriage. Our first-born son, Jak, was doing well, despite a brief health scare when he was an infant. And, just as we'd planned and hoped for, my wife, Mary, and I were now expecting a baby girl.

I'd always wanted a daughter. There's a soft side to dads that wants to come out but doesn't as much with sons. I saw that growing up. My dad was always just a little bit harder on me and my big brother, Roy, than on our sister, Lesli. He let his guard down more around her. As a little girl, Les would do up Dad's short crop of hair and play make-up with him. As silly as it sounds, that's something I looked forward to with my own daughter. I've always worn a pretty tight flattop haircut, and in the months before our little girl's birth I wondered how long it would take for me to grow it out.

Most of all I was just plain excited about the new life that lay ahead for all of us as a family. That moment finally arrived on the first day of September. Labor Day!



The more cameras the better. That's how I felt in

the hours leading up to our baby girl's birth. I'd gone all out, with two digital cameras on-hand, plus two still cameras and two camcorders. This was our family's big moment, and I wanted to capture every last minute of it.

When she finally arrived, she was perfect: seven pounds, seven ounces, and long. We knew immediately she was a "Maura." All the nurses, for their part, were relieved; there were already so many "Emmas" in the nursery.

Pretty soon we were ready to bring our baby home. Foil and plastic pink balloons filled our living room and let everyone know, "It's a Girl." Whoever wanted to come and celebrate was more than welcome. By evening, friends and family started to pile through the front door to see our new addition: Maura Rae Kuhl, all of three days old.

With her shock of thick black hair – and sassy attitude – Maura was well on her way to becoming the most photographed baby girl in our small town of Winfield, West Virginia. My mother-in-law snapped pictures and shot video, while my sister-in-law introduced her own baby, Anna, to her new cousin. My niece, Loren, who'd been so disappointed at not having seen Maura at the hospital, showed up. So did my sister, Les.

To see so many people on hand was truly heartwarming.

But the best moment of all came earlier in the day during our car ride home – our first ride home together as a family. After parking our car, I turned around and took a picture of Maura next to her big brother Jak. He leaned back in his little car seat, so big and proud, with a look on his face that said, *I'm the man, I'm the big brother.*

He definitely was, and everything felt right.



We'd waited a long time for this moment to arrive.

For months Mary had been on complete bed rest, counting down the days until Maura was born. During those last few months, Mary had been getting frustrated doing nothing, and I'd been getting frustrated feeling as if I were doing everything. Jak meanwhile didn't understand why he couldn't just go out and play. So, we started introducing him to the baby early on, just to let him know why Mommy had to be in bed so long.

Jak would rub Mommy's belly, kiss it, and ask questions like, "When's the baby coming?" We'd answer as best we could. In our hearts, we just hoped we wouldn't face the kinds of challenges we'd encountered the first time around, when Jak was born.

The moment he was pulled from Mary's womb, he'd been rushed to the neonatal intensive care unit because he wasn't breathing right. We eventually got through that little scare. We got him home, I started a new job, and Jak was taken off his heart monitor. But the next thing we knew, Jak had to have surgery to fix what we learned were cataracts in his eyes. What a kick to the gut that was. But we got through that, too.

Then, Mary found out she was pregnant again, which was awesome. Right on time. Two years apart. Found out it was a girl, which was awesome, too. When Maura finally arrived, Mary and I couldn't believe our good fortune. The first time around, with Jak, we'd never even gotten a chance to hold him or feed him; he was just whisked away to the neonatal unit. With Maura, we got to hold her immediately and spend almost every minute with her.

During those first two days at the hospital, I was sort of scared to change Maura's diaper. She was just so . . . new. But the doctors told us she was healthy and strong.

She sure did prove it with a powerful set of lungs. She kept getting kicked out of the nursery! Soon, the doctors told us we could take her home, one day early no less.

The last night at the hospital, Mary and I finally got to sleep but not before we heard Maura coming down the hall in a nurse's arms. Her lungs worked very well, no doubt about it, and Mary and I laughed to each other that our little girl wasn't too shy to make her wishes known; she wanted to be in the best spot in the world: Mommy's arms.



Maura's homecoming had turned into such a long day, from checking out of the hospital to celebrating with family and friends later that evening. By night-time, I was beat and so was Mary. But Jak was still full of energy, bouncing up and down, eager to play. As Mary settled into bed and cradled Maura in her arms, I grabbed Jak to take him to his room.

Mary looked over at us. "Let's all just lie in here a little bit," she said. "Let Jak relax and spend a little more time with Maura." Within minutes, Jak was cradling his little sister, and kissed her.

Lying beside everyone, I looked over at Mary, Jak, and Maura, and smiled: *I've got my perfect family now . . . the perfect wife, the perfect little boy, and now the perfect little girl. This is how it's supposed to be.*

Soon, Jak started to nod off. So, I kissed Mary and Maura good night, and took him to his bed. For a few minutes, in his room, I cuddled with Jak, so proud of him for being the big protective brother. Eventually, I started to fall asleep myself and decided to stay put so Mary, who was still sore from her C-section, could get some rest and time alone with Maura.

For a while everything was quiet. But like any newborn, Maura didn't stay silent for long. From over in the next room, I could hear her getting loud and fussy. As Maura's cries rose, I started thinking, *Mary, just feed her . . . I just want to get one good night's sleep before they become few and far between.* But the crying continued. Mary called out to me.

For a moment, an annoyance rose up in me. Then, I caught myself and remembered two words: Be. Present. *Be present . . . Be present . . .*

It was Og Mandino, a sales leader, who once said, "Live in the present and make it so beautiful it will be worth remembering."

I nodded. *What an opportunity to rock Maura a little bit, and give Mary some rest.* Going over to the next room, I wrapped Maura tight in her blanket, then settled into a rocking chair and tried to calm her down.

When Jak was an infant, I'd rub from his forehead all the way down to the tip of his nose with my index finger. He would follow the trail until he fell asleep, often within minutes. Not so with Maura; she immediately batted my hands away.

I chuckled, *Gosh, Jak was such a good baby, here comes our wild child.* I kissed Maura's forehead and rubbed her thick head of hair. She soon fell asleep, and for the next hour I rocked her back and forth, just enjoying the moment, this time between Daddy and his baby girl.

Eventually, I put her in the bassinet next to Mary. Kneeling down, I rubbed Maura's head again and her button nose—just to make sure she was asleep—and smiled at this new life before me. Before returning to Jak's room, I kissed Maura one last time and took one last look at her sleeping snug and sound in her bassinet.

*Live in the present, and make it so beautiful it will be*

*worth remembering.*

With that, I turned off the light and tiptoed out of the room.



There's a story that I recall from time to time. It's of Jesus and His disciples and the time He told them, "Let us go over to the other side."\*

Leaving a crowd of people, Jesus and his disciples boarded a boat headed across the Sea of Galilee. Jesus got into the boat knowing exactly what would happen next. The disciples got into the boat knowing absolutely nothing.

During the trip, a large storm picked up so fierce and strong that waves began to break over the boat. The disciples rose to their feet. It looked as if they were going to drown. Terrified, they turned to Jesus. He was asleep in the stern, deliberately, unbeknownst to them.

As with the disciples, I guess Jesus decided Mary and I needed to get into the boat. That's another way of saying that all hell was about to break loose on our quiet little street in Winfield.

It happened around 2:00 a.m.

I was sleeping next to Jak when a terrifying sound jolted me to my feet. It was Mary. She was screaming. Over in the next room.

*Something must have gone wrong with her C-section, I thought. I rushed over and saw Mary clutching Maura. Mary was sobbing, "Maura's not breathing, Maura's not breathing . . ."*

I immediately grabbed Maura. Felt her pulse. She didn't have one. Listened for her breath. She didn't have any. Pried open her mouth, just to make sure there was

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\*Dan Gerdes speaks about this passage in his book for grieving fathers, *Through the Storm*.

nothing in there. There wasn't.

"Call 911," I said. "Call your mom . . . and call my mom . . . and call anyone else who can pray," I told Mary.

This wasn't happening. This couldn't be happening. Jak was supposed to be our high-risk baby, not Maura. She still had saliva in her mouth. Maybe there was a chance, maybe she was still alive.

I started doing CPR, carefully trying not to break her tiny little ribs. Every time I breathed into her, I could hear her lungs expand, but the air would rattle back out—a horrible rattling sound. It was as if Maura were taking her last breath over and over again.

One second . . . two seconds . . . three seconds . . . four seconds . . . five . . . ten . . . fifteen . . . twenty . . .

I continued performing CPR, more frantically as the time slipped away.

"Please Jesus," I prayed, "please bring Maura back."

But as the seconds stretched into minutes— one into two, three into four, five into ten—and that rattling sound continued, I wondered: *What happens if I bring Maura back? What happens if she starts breathing? Is she going to have a good quality of life?*

I hated myself for even thinking that and went on autopilot.

Suddenly, from outside, I heard Mary running up and down the sidewalk. She was screaming, "My baby . . . my baby . . ."

Mary's screams soon mixed with the sound of sirens.

Within seconds, the stark blinking red lights of an ambulance bled through the curtains of our upstairs bedroom.

The paramedics rushed through the front door, past the "It's a Girl" banners and balloons that filled our living room. Two paramedics came upstairs and took over.

“She’s got bruises on her chest,” I said.

For some reason, as I spoke those words, I was calm. That’s when the surreal nature of the moment hit me. Only a few hours before we’d been celebrating Maura’s homecoming; now our scene of celebration was turning into a literal nightmare.

Before I knew it, the paramedics had loaded Maura into the ambulance. I felt completely helpless. Where was I supposed to focus my attention? On Maura? Mary? Jak? Who was I supposed to help first? Who could I even help?

As the ambulance got ready to leave, Mary sat on the front porch in her robe and slippers, speechless and numb. Her eyes were red and puffy. I lifted her up and brought her into the house.

She collapsed on the front steps.

A paramedic told us, “We’re going to Putnam.”

Mary rose to her feet, screaming, “They can’t take her to Putnam . . .”

Putnam wasn’t our first choice, but it was the nearest facility. They had to get Maura to Putnam, I said.

Mary soon left for the hospital with her father, who’d just raced over to our house. Meanwhile, I went upstairs. Fortunately, Jak had slept through everything. I got him up, carried him downstairs, and buckled him into his car seat—right beside Maura’s. That’s when it hit me: Less than 24 hours before, I’d taken Jak’s picture right there, right in that exact spot next to his little sister. Jak now fell back asleep, totally oblivious to what was going on.

But I knew: Like Jesus’ disciples, we’d gotten into the boat, and a storm was now raging around us. But where was Jesus?

Chapter Two

## The Rock

*We're going to get through this, Maura's going to be OK . . .*

On the night I followed the ambulance to the hospital – and prayed every step of the way for the doctors to save our daughter's life – thought after thought kept racing through my mind. But the overriding one was this: *There's no way this is happening, no way at all.*

Nothing in my life had ever prepared me for what had transpired over the past hour. I had the perfect wife, the perfect family, the perfect career and, before then, a solid track record for reaching those goals.

All through high school, I played football, baseball, and basketball, and made the all-stars. Being the athlete, the team captain – being “Kuhl” – these were the personas that I'd carried with me throughout my life. When I played varsity football, we were state champions two out of three years, and my senior year we lost only two games. When it came time for college, I was contacted by colleges early on and received a full baseball scholarship. Whatever challenges arose along the way, I always found a way to meet them head-on: I could work harder. Or put in more hours at the gym. Or hit more balls at batting practice. Or run or lift more.

But now I was facing a cruel realization: My whole life I had practiced, practiced, practiced, never dreaming

that all the practice in the world couldn't prepare me for this moment.



In my dad role I was supposed to protect my family. But how was I supposed to respond if, in fact, the worst had happened? The only thing I knew early on was to park my emotions and just "do."

In the hospital waiting room, I went up to the registration area while friends and family looked after Mary. A deputy sheriff was standing near the registration desk.

"How are you?" he said in passing.

"Good," I said, then caught myself. *No, I'm not good, I thought. Our baby's in the ER, Mary's dying with grief. . .*

I stopped myself; this wasn't the time to lose it.

Silently, I went back to Mary, who was now in a nearby conference room, and held her. She sat on my lap, and Jak on hers. That's when the weight of the moment and my responsibilities hit me: *It's all falling on me. Every decision from this moment on is pretty much going to be mine.*

Grasping for any sign of hope, my eyes fell on a vertical magazine rack off to the side. A glowing gold cross adorned that week's issue of TIME magazine. Mary noticed the cross, too, and, as the minutes passed, we both sat in silence staring at it.

Was that gold cross a sign? Was everything going to be OK? Maybe Maura had suffered a temporary blackout, and our lives would soon get back to normal.

I glanced up at the clock and took several deep breaths.

Within seconds, Maura's pediatrician, Joan, came through the door. I met her eyes with a mixture of fear and desperate hope.

Joan shook her head. It was a solemn *no*.

"She's gone," said Joan, softly.

Gasping for breath, I grabbed Mary and held her tight. Our faces buried into each other's arms, blocking out the harsh florescent light of the room. All of a sudden, I felt a bunch of hands on my back and shoulders, gestures of support from friends and family there that night: my parents and Mary's, my friend Andy, our pastor Roger.

Right or wrong, in that moment of shock and grief, I couldn't help but think: *I hate that I'm the dad, and I hate that I'm the husband. I'm going to have to take care of Mary when all I really want to do is take care of myself.*

Did I have the strength to do both?



It seemed like an eternity before we were allowed to see Maura. But the moment eventually arrived. As Mary walked one step ahead, I paused for a moment before a doorway, trying to keep it together.

Joan came in, carrying Maura. She was wrapped in a blanket.

We held her and kissed her, but it didn't seem like our little girl. What had happened to that spunky fighting spirit I had glimpsed only hours before when she batted away my hand?

I kissed her forehead. It was cold.

There was no turning back. Maura was gone; she was with Jesus. Still, a parent's instinct is to want to hold on no matter what. Mary didn't want to be the one to give Maura back to the hospital staff. So, she handed Maura over to me, kissed her one last time, and walked out of the room.

I stood there silently holding Maura, then looked across the room at Joan. After a few minutes, I spoke up.

"Would you take her from me?" I asked, "and give

her to the people on staff?"

Joan nodded.

As I handed over Maura's lifeless little body, tears rushed to the surface of my eyes, threatening to spill over.

"Let it out," said Joan, "Let some of it go."

At that moment, a thousand little light bulbs went off in my mind. Everything I'd ever learned about being a man was being put to the test. My family's future was on the line and so was my ability to guide them through this crisis. Could I really "let some of it go," even for a moment?



Nearly everything I've ever learned about being a man comes from my dad. Early on, Dad was one of my little league coaches, and, to his credit, he was always there; he didn't miss games, he didn't miss practices. To this day, many of the lessons he taught me on the field endure. I remember playing baseball and getting hit by a pitch, and just the sting of the ball – especially when you're a little guy – was so painful. I can remember – and it's not just one time, it's every time – getting hit by a pitch and hearing Dad shout from the stands, "Don't rub it! Don't rub it!" Because if you rub it, he later explained, I'd be showing the pitcher he had hurt me. Instead, just grit your teeth and jog to first.

That story carries over into college. My dad actually coached me in college as well; he was the assistant coach at the school I attended. I remember one year – I had to be a junior or a senior – I got hit in the head by a pitch so hard that it actually cut my ear. I don't remember anything other than getting hit and standing on first base and hearing Dad say, "Are you OK? Are you OK?" The instinct and the training from all those years – of

Dad saying, “Don’t rub it!” – had led me to run to first, even though I was on the verge of losing consciousness.

Another strong influence growing up was my high school football coach, Leon McCoy. In fact, if I were to say who, other than my mom and dad, had the single greatest influence on my formative years I would have to say it was Coach McCoy. He was a hardcore disciplinarian, all right. When I was playing for him he was in his sixties, but we all still had to work hard to keep up with him. Coach McCoy helped pioneer the weight lifting movement in West Virginia – even throughout the United States – and his typical schedule was to get up at 4:30 a.m., run a few miles, then lift weights. Most of the time you ended up throwing up after a workout; that’s how hard he worked you.

When I was starting out on his team, Coach McCoy came up to me one day in the school hallway. All of a sudden, he put his hand on my back and squeezed a muscle. “You get this muscle strong and walk with your chest out and stomach sucked in – that’s how a man walks,” he said.

Today he’d probably get sued, but back in high school if you weren’t holding your abs tight while walking, and he caught sight of you, he’d hit you in the stomach and see if you’d drop to your knees; he wanted you to be prepared 24-7, no exceptions. Years later, well after I’d graduated high school and even college, I was at a state baseball tournament when a coach from a high school four hours away came up and introduced himself.

“You’re one of McCoy’s boys, aren’t you?” he said. “I knew from the moment I saw you that you were . . . all of Leon’s boys walk with their shoulders back, heads high, and shirts tucked in.”

In nearly all aspects of my life, I’d say the discipline

that Coach McCoy and my dad imparted served me well. But now, in the midst of something as unexpected as losing a child, all that past training — *Don't rub it! Tape an aspirin to it! Get back in the game!* — left me ill-equipped to know how to deal with the trauma of losing a child.

Holding my baby's lifeless little body, I couldn't "let some of it go," as Joan was now inviting me to do. I thought of what lay beyond the room. There were people on the other side, some crying, others in silent shock. I had to let everyone know, my wife especially, that we were going to get through this, that this was not going to defeat us.

And so, I pulled myself back from Joan's invitation, took a few deep breaths, and stepped out of the room.



If you've ever seen a frayed rope, you know that the only way to get it back right is to burn the ends. That night at the hospital, I saw my life and my family's in much the same way. I had to prioritize all the loose, unraveled ends, then decide which ones to take a match to first.

I knew that someone had to get back to the house and set it right for Mary. We had balloons and banners all over the place: on the front light, by the mailbox and front door, in the family and baby rooms. I didn't want Mary to see any of it. So, I asked my friend Andy, who'd been at the hospital well past four that morning, if he'd go over to the house and move everything out.

I then escorted Mary to a car headed for her parents' place. Just then a deputy sheriff and a medical examiner came up to me.

"We've got to talk to you," said the sheriff.

My mom, who'd been standing nearby, jumped in.

She didn't shy away from speaking her mind.

"Not now," she said. "Can't this wait till later?"

The police stood their ground. They had to talk to me right then, they repeated.

I wanted to get mad, but I also knew they were just doing their job. Whether tonight or later, eventually they would have to check the task off their list. So, I might as well get it over with then. Besides, I didn't want things to get ugly. Least of all with Mary nearby.

As Mary was driven away to her parents' house, I stayed behind and tried as best I could to get the sheriff's questions out of the way. Just when I thought he was finished, he said he wanted me to go back to the house and reenact what had happened a couple of hours before.

I was starting to get angry. *What an idiot!* I thought. *Why can't you wait until after five or six in the morning?* Just as quickly, another thought raced through my mind, a passage from scripture: "Let the dead take care of themselves."

As is, I still couldn't believe Maura was gone, and that shock was compounded by an agonizing question: Had I really done everything I possibly could have to save her? Before I could even process those feelings, I had a deputy sheriff now treating me as if I were a suspect. But there was no room for emotion. Not now. Maybe not ever.

The police gave me an hour to go see Mary at my in-laws. When I stopped by, I walked upstairs and, in what would become a habit, paused before the doorway to compose myself before going in to see her.

Mary was curled up in bed, the covers pulled up over her head. I could still make out her face; it was swollen from crying. I could tell her body was hurting, her spirit broken. I hated seeing my wife — my bride —

that way and knowing I couldn't protect her. In that moment, one thought raced through my mind: *If hell is any worse than this, there's no way I'm not going to tell everybody about heaven.*

I spent a couple minutes with Mary, then drove back to our home to meet with the deputy sheriff. Walking through our house, I noticed that my friend Andy had moved the bassinet out of the bedroom just as I'd requested. I had to move it back in for the reenactment.

What followed would have been laughable if the circumstances hadn't been so tragic. To reenact the scene for the police, I had to wrap a Barney doll in a blanket and show them what I'd done to try to save Maura. As I held Barney, the police started snapping pictures and pulling the sheet and blanket out of the bassinet. They were starting to treat my family home as if it were a crime scene.

*What next?* I thought, trying to keep the word "idiots" from escaping my lips. *Are they going to bust open the yellow tape and tell me I can't come back into the house?*

Luckily, that didn't happen. They left soon enough and eventually apologized for their handling of the case. Even so, with all the other pressures mounting, I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep it together.



As dads, so many times we find ourselves taking care of everyone else during a crisis that we totally neglect to take care of ourselves. In my case, I found myself playing multiple roles from the moment our crisis hit. I had to give CPR to our baby and instruct my wife to call 911. I had to give our newborn to Joan, knowing it would be the last time I would ever hold her again. I had to give statements to the police and later

make funeral arrangements. I had to be strong for my wife and our son, Jak. I had to be strong in my faith, too. I also had to go back to work and provide for my family.

The Book of Matthew speaks of building your house on either rock or sand, and the consequences of choosing one over the other. That rock, of course, is Jesus, but, as I tried to navigate the events following Maura's death, so many times I felt as if I had to be the rock for everyone.

I wasn't sure if I had it in me to pull it off. The day after Maura's death, I walked into The Church of the Nazarene where my parents and siblings routinely worship. No one was there that morning except the pastor. I asked him if I could use the altar. For the next half hour I sat on the steps leading up to the stage. It was the first moment I had stolen for myself since our family crisis had hit. I buried my face in my hands and wondered, *Who do I turn to?*

Knowing how hard the situation had been up until that point—and knowing how much harder it was going to get—I cried out to God: "I've got to have Your strength because I don't know if I have any of my own . . ."

I'd always been taught that if I were obedient, Christ would take care of me through good times and bad. I needed to hold tight to that belief now more than ever. But could I?



On Monday, Maura had been born. By Saturday, we were getting ready to bury her. As our car pulled up to the front of the church for the funeral service, I was still wondering when we would wake up from this nightmare.

As I stepped into the bright light, a wave of acceptance suddenly came over me: *This is real. This really*

*is happening. We have to do something with Maura's life. Instead of just being sad or forgetting it, we have to move in a positive direction.*

Right before the funeral service was set to begin in the church auditorium, Mary and I sat in a small sanctuary. For three days, Mary had been unable to function, as she lay in bed dealing not only with the loss of our child but the aftermath of her C-section. Even now, she was in pain, and in a cruel reminder of our baby's loss, she was still producing milk. Still, her spirits suddenly lifted, too.

She looked me in the eye.

"You need to get Roger," she said, speaking of our church's pastor who would be leading the funeral service. "You need to get him to say that if Maura's death means that one person we know and love can come to know Christ, we'd be willing to go through this all over again."

Something told me that if anyone was going to say those words on Mary's behalf, it had to be me, Maura's father. And yet, I didn't know if I had it in me to get up there and deliver that message without losing it. I absolutely could not afford to break down on the day of Maura's funeral, least of all in front of everyone.

I got Roger, told him about Mary's request, then added: "I would like to do this, but I'm not sure I can." Pausing for a moment, I added, "Would you deliver Mary's words for me?"

Roger put his hand on my shoulder: "Jess, I'll do whatever you want me to do. But I think it would mean a whole lot more coming from you."

Roger and I struck a compromise: When Roger was getting ready to wrap up his sermon, he would look over at me in my seat. "If I give you a signal, pull me up," I said. Then I added, "If not, you've got to deliver

Mary's message for me."

Soon, Mary and I settled into our seats at the front of the church waiting for the service to begin. Mary leaned in, and, thinking of her request, she whispered, "I've got a real peace about this." Then, in an attempt to encourage me to deliver her words, she added, "Of all the times you've ever spoken in front of people, this would be the most important . . ."

I looked around the room. It was packed; as many as 400 people were there. Meanwhile, up ahead on the stage was Maura's little white casket, so tiny it made you think there should be a rule that caskets can't ever be made that small.

Could I really muster the words on Mary's behalf? Could I really say we would have gone through this all over again?



The funeral service began.

Our pastor, Roger, Mary's uncle, Ray, and Reverend Hayes of The Nazarene Church led everyone in a version of *Victory in Jesus*. Led it like it should be led, really upbeat.

Soon, Pastor Ray began with a call to worship, then preached on a text from Genesis: the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel of the Lord. As morning broke, the angel said, "Release me," to which Jacob replied, "Not until you bless me." Jacob received the blessing but not before realizing his hip had been dislocated from the previous night's tussle.

Pastor Ray looked out at the congregation. "It was a blessing for Jess and Mary to receive this baby . . . we shouldn't miss the blessing that she was even here to begin with. But you don't walk away from something

like this without a limp.”

Roger added to that message. “Maura’s life is not over,” he said. “We live in a sinful world, and bad things tragically happen, but God is aware of our hurt . . .”

Roger looked over at me. This was my cue, this was the moment to indicate whether I could deliver Mary’s message. I looked Roger in the eye and mouthed the words, “I can do this.” With that, I slowly rose to my feet and walked in ordered, deliberate steps toward the podium.

For a moment I stood looking out at the sea of faces, then at the casket. I could have reached out and touched it with my foot, it was that close. A fear gripped me, a fear of losing control. So, I reached in my pocket for a family heirloom, my Papaw Fisher’s old handkerchief.

*This is an opportunity for me to be as bold as I will ever be, I thought, because no one is ever going to hold it against me.*

I cleared my voice.

“Mary and I have been praying for many of you who have come here today,” I said.

“We’ve been praying for you to come to know the Lord, because . . .”

I paused. “We know there are some of you who don’t know Him . . .”

“ . . . and if this circumstance has brought you to the point where you are ready to accept the Lord as your savior – if that’s the end result – Mary and I would have gone through this all over again for you.”

Silence filled the room.

I looked over at Mary, she gave me a smile. My eyes then settled on Maura’s casket. I knew I had said what needed to be said.

As the service came to an end, and everyone headed out the door to the burial grounds, the funeral director

came up to me.

“Do you want to see Maura one last time?” he asked.

It had been a closed-casket funeral, and I wanted it kept that way. I had constantly been reminding myself that what remained was a shell – not Maura – and that she was with Jesus now. But upon catching sight of a few mourners – my cousin Charles Junior, my Aunt Deloris and Uncle Dick, Mary’s Uncle Chuck and Nancy – I realized that many people hadn’t gotten a chance to see Maura in life. So, I said yes.

Mary and I pulled up beside the casket and sat in silence. I didn’t want to let go of Mary, she seemed so frail. The situation reminded me of my grandmother; wherever she goes someone has to help her along. I felt the same way with Mary. Whenever we walked I had my arm around her, supporting not only my body weight but hers. When we sat she was usually slumped toward me.

We sat beside Maura’s casket for ten minutes or so, both wrestling with the reality that once we shut the casket all we would be left with were snapshots, memories, and tears.

After a while I leaned in closer toward Mary and whispered, “Are you ready?”

She nodded softly.

We kissed Maura on the forehead. There was such a coldness about it. We then walked out into the parking lot. That’s when one of the guys from the funeral home came up to me. My responsibilities weren’t over.

“Do you have anyone to carry the casket?” he asked.

Amid all my preparations for the funeral, this is one thing that had completely slipped my mind. I had absolutely no idea who would carry the casket. But I knew I didn’t have the strength for it to be me.

I walked over to my brother Roy's car and tapped on the driver's side window.

"Would you do this for me?" I asked him.

He gave me an instant yes.

Mary and I soon headed over to the cemetery. Along the way, the words I'd delivered before the congregation less than an hour before replayed in my mind. So did the thought of Maura with Jesus. That's when I began to wonder: I knew with certainty where Maura was. But where did that leave us? How were we supposed to navigate the days and months and years to come, the long stretch of time that would mark our lives without her?

As our car inched toward the cemetery, I could find no good answer.

*Chapter Three*

## The New “Normal”

When will things be normal again?

Just like someone who’s suffered a stroke – and now has to learn to walk again – Mary and I had to learn to live again. But how?

“Do you think it’s worse now than it was?” Mary asked me a few months after Maura’s death.

I knew exactly what she meant.

Early on, the funeral had kept us busy, deceptively so. Everything about it had been so structured, offering a good deal of order and a large show of support from community. For nearly an hour people hugged us as they came up the receiving line at the funeral. Afterward, I looked up to see the whole church – our church – standing in the back of the sanctuary. Not coming forward or talking. Just standing there, letting us know in their own silent way that they were there for us. The gravesite service also attracted a much larger crowd than we’d expected.

The burial itself came and went in a slow haze. In fact, from the moment we’d left the church everything had unfolded in slow motion. The drive to the cemetery, slow motion. Catching sight of people’s faces in accompanying cars, slow motion. Viewing a sign, “Our thoughts and prayers are with the Kuhl Family,” which my good friend Amy Gaylor had erected outside

her family restaurant, slow motion. Seeing Roy carry the casket over to the cemetery plot, slow motion.

I don't even remember what Pastor Ray said at the gravesite; I was so focused on Mary. As we sat on fold-out chairs, with the casket on straps nearby, I had my arm around her and rubbed her shoulder, ready to catch her in case she passed out. Here and there, I looked over at a mound of dirt off to the side, covered with AstroTurf. I did my best not to think about what it was there for.

Once the service concluded, I didn't want to get up; I knew we would be walking away from our baby for the last time. Once I did, everything sped up back to normal, and we soon gathered at my in-laws. Strangely, the gathering seemed almost like a birthday party, so much food and so many people chatting and reconnecting. That's when it hit me: Life was already moving on, people were already getting on with their lives.

Sure enough, once Monday rolled around, everyone was gone. Back to their busy lives. Back to normal.

It's not that they didn't care. The hard cold reality is that people go on with their lives. They have to. They go on back to work and they go on back to raising their kids, all the while trying to block out the thought that a misfortune like yours could ever happen to them. Meanwhile, you're stuck back somewhere in a no man's land of grief, and as painful as it is to accept, most people aren't going to stop their lives and try to drag you forward into the land of the living; you have to find the strength to rejoin the world yourself.

Mary and I knew as much. Still, it's one thing to know something in theory, another thing to put it into practice. Now that the funeral was over, we were at a complete loss as to how to start living normal lives again. Besides, what did "normal" now mean, anyway?

Talking one night, Mary and I both agreed: We now had to accept a new definition of normal.

From now on, we would face every day of the rest of our lives with the memory of Maura's short life. New normal. We would always feel as if someone were missing from our family. New normal. We would be known as "the family that had lost a child." New normal. Some people would always feel uncomfortable around us, unsure of what, if anything, they could ever say. New normal.

We also had to accept another challenge: Every corner of our house was now filled with memories of Maura's short life and death. How could it ever feel like home again?



We all know that life is unpredictable. But we try to treat that realization like background noise, tuning it out as best we can in order to get on with living. When something tragic occurs, though, we're suddenly put on "high alert" about just how fragile life really is.

To some degree, I'd always been tuned into the fact that life is unpredictable. When I was a teenager, someone broke into my parents' car, and my fear after that was that the perpetrator would break into our house next. For the rest of high school, I routinely slept on the couch in the living room near the front door. No one ever knew the reason why; they just assumed I wanted to stay up late watching TV.

Despite my fear of a possible intruder, I always felt I could protect my family from any worst case scenario. I was a solid athlete, after all, and a pretty big guy — a couple guys in high school used to call me "Tyson" after the heavyweight boxer because of my build and confidence on the field.

But now, after Maura's death, I felt completely

helpless. The only thing I knew in the days after Maura's funeral was that we had to get away. And so, three days later, Mary and I loaded up our van, fastened Jak into his car seat, and headed out of town. On our way out, Mary made one request: She wanted to see her little niece, Anna, who'd been born just three days before Maura. It was Mary's way of saying to her own sister, "We want to be happy for you."

As I stood nearby, Mary lightly bounced Anna up and down. It was difficult to see Mary expressing a maternal desire that would never be realized with our own daughter. For my part, I couldn't bring myself to hold Anna or any baby; the memory of performing CPR on Maura was too great. In fact, I didn't hold Anna for a good nine months, and, as painful as it is to admit, I didn't even acknowledge her existence for that entire time. Admittedly, that put Mary in a tough spot of trying to stay close to her family on the one hand and supporting me on the other. In retrospect, I realize just how difficult it was for my wife to be in the middle and the incredible strength she showed in the process.

Within hours of seeing Anna, we were off to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, in the heart of the Smoky Mountains. On our way down, Mary and I didn't talk much; we mostly listened to Christian radio. When a comforting lyric glided by – "Take heart, God knows where we are . . ." – Mary would reach for my hand. Such moments of comfort were few and far between, though. So was any diversion afforded by our getting away.

Mary and I quickly realized that as much as people build their vacations around getting away, or eating at restaurants, or sampling the local food, there are some things you just can't escape. When we did try to enjoy ourselves and eat a little, we got so sick, so fast, that our

silence only grew. It was as if we were on the outside looking in, watching the world pass by while we trailed behind in silent grief. For my part, I half-wished I could get back in the van and drive off alone. But I also realized I had to carry on for Mary's sake and Jak's.

The closest I came to escaping into another world was through visits with Jak to Ripley's Believe It-Or-Not Aquarium. There's something magical about the rhythmic flow of water and its sea life. During our stay, we actually joined the aquarium with an annual membership, mainly so I could keep going back and forth with Jak. Early each morning, while Mary stayed behind in bed recovering, Jak and I threw on our shorts and T-shirts and headed out the door. Off and on throughout the day, Jak would play in the horseshoe crab water, then tell the fish "goodnight" when night fell.

For the past week, we'd shielded him from the knowledge of Maura's death. On the day of her funeral, a family friend watched Jak and other kids whose parents were off attending the funeral. Before we said goodbye to him that day, we told him he was about to have a "play day." Days later, when he started asking, "Where's Maura? Is Maura OK?" we simply replied, "God needs Maura back in heaven." To our relief, Jak didn't follow up with any other questions. All he saw was life as usual, with Mommy and Daddy in control.

Inside, though, I felt as if I were losing control. Driving back from Gatlinburg, I turned to Mary: "I've always been the life of the party . . . do you think I'll ever be that again? Because I don't see it happening."

Mary silently nodded, and gazed out the window at the highway lights passing us by.



That first month after Maura's death, I couldn't even bring myself to work. The only work-related thing I did was attend a company convention in Boston, which had been scheduled months in advance. Fortunately, my company let Mary and Jak attend, too.

The drive up to Boston that fall was peaceful enough; we saw leaves of red, yellow, and orange. Plus, we stayed at the Westin way up high. The setting was so different and new, nothing reminded us of Maura. That was good in one sense. But we didn't want to forget about Maura either or to do things that would make us purposely forget her. All in all, we tried to have a good time, but when we came back home, there it was again, staring us right in the face: the memory of what had happened.

Ever since Maura's death, we had camped out at my in-laws. But we knew we had to return home eventually. When we did, it occurred in baby steps. For a time, Mary and I slept downstairs, taking turns sleeping on the couch while the other slept on the floor next to Jak. That arrangement continued for two weeks, then we moved back upstairs. I never could bring myself to set foot in Maura's room across the hall, though. In the months leading up to Maura's birth, my mother-in-law had fixed the room up, selecting a dark pink for the wallpaper and a colorful array of bears for the border. Just thinking about that room now was too painful; it had no place in our new normal. What did was fear.

One night, Mary and I found ourselves talking about our greatest fears. Even before Maura's death, Mary's greatest fear, she now told me, was that one of her children would become seriously injured or die. I never had fears like that. Even if I'd known that life was unpredictable, I'd still internalized an idea I'd learned on the field: You don't think about

your fears, you think about your successes. Now that idea seemed like a cruel joke. All I could think now was, *It happened once. It could easily happen again.*

With Maura's death, I now found myself becoming overly protective of our son, Jak. In the days, weeks, and even years to come, he often slept in our bed, with my hand on his stomach so I could feel him breathe. It was the closest I could come to a feeling of safety.

Sleep, meanwhile, became increasingly hard for me to come by. In the weeks following the funeral, Mary came to rely on Ambien to overcome sleepless nights but eventually managed to sleep on her own, probably a little too well at times. For my part, I was scared of taking sleeping pills. When I did doze off, all I could visualize was my performing CPR on Maura. So, instead of taking a pill, I would toss and turn, picking up the sound of Jak either in bed next to me or over in the next room, breathing through a runny nose and sounding eerily as if he were struggling to breathe. Other times I'd walk around the house, checking doors to make sure everything was OK.

Here and there, when sleep did overcome me, a terrifying question would jolt me back to consciousness: *If there's a crisis, who's going to take charge? Who's going to be there for my family?*

Once morning broke, I would stumble to my feet and groggily head out the door to work. By evening, I always resolved to get a good night's sleep. But the next thing you know I'd tell myself I had work to do on the computer downstairs in the den. Then, once I'd settle in my chair and turn on the computer, I'd realize that I had no intention of working at all. As 10 p.m. turned into 11, then midnight, I'd flip on the TV, but soon find myself staring at the wall ahead, wondering how our lives had managed to take this course and how we could ever get back on track.



A big part of our lives before Maura's death had been the strong and steady presence of friends and family. In our new normal, elements of that dynamic shifted.

In my family's case, it wasn't so much a physical absence as an emotional one. My family was in a fix-it mode more than anything else; they would say what I needed to do rather than allowing me the space to get back into routines at my own pace. An elder relative, for example, told me many times, "Jak notices you're not holding Anna." That was his way of trying to get me to hold my niece. Or my Dad would say this about my sister Les's baby, Malorie: "You've gotten over everything else — you've got to hold that baby for your sister."

Every now and then I would tell Mary, "Can you believe what so-and-so said?" Which was stupid because it only served to put Mary in the middle. More often than not I'd just stew about whatever was bothering me. The alternative would have been to talk about it with the person in question, which was a terrifying prospect. It just seemed easier to get over my feelings alone.

As for friends, many of the people I thought I could count on were nowhere in sight.

*Where were you?* This is a question that occupied many of my thoughts. One day, probably eight months after Maura passed away, I went through my day planner and eliminated phone numbers of people I'd once considered friends. I eliminated quite a few, actually, thinking: *It's been almost a year, I haven't heard from so-and-so, so forget them . . .*

And yet, not everyone bailed, which brings up an interesting point: Why did I choose to focus on those who weren't there for me? The answer comes down to

human nature. We often focus more on the bad than on the good. For instance, I've found that I cannot list every person who was there for Mary and me after Maura's death. Sure, I remember my good friend, Andy, who showed up at the hospital in the wee hours of the morning. And my other good friends, Keith, who was the first non-family member to arrive at my in-laws, and Steve, who managed to get Mary and me to laugh in some of our darkest hours. I also remember people from my church who mowed our lawn in the first month after Maura's death and those who brought us food.

Unfortunately – and this goes back to human nature – I have on many more occasions remembered those individuals who weren't there. I have thought about friends from childhood – like one, we grew up in the same neighborhood, double dated to prom, and later attended each other's weddings – who never offered so much as a word or a card. I see people even now, more than five years on, who I think should have been there and whose absence during that time led me to permanently question our friendship.

With time, I've come to realize how self-defeating it is to focus on those who weren't there. Somewhere along the way, the question for me became: How do I let their absence affect me? I can either let it eat me up or I can try to put it in some kind of perspective. Slowly, I began to realize that I didn't have control over others' actions, but I did have control over mine.

Part of regaining control came from putting myself in other people's shoes. In terms of family, I came to realize their intentions were good, they just didn't know what to do or say. As for friends, I've found that some people who weren't there initially came back around later on. I also discovered that some people had legiti-

mate reasons for staying away. Some friends had gone through a similar experience and simply didn't want to be reminded of their own personal loss. Still, there were other friends who didn't show up and never will show up, and somewhere along the way I had to learn to move on and not take their silence personally. It's almost like Jesus hanging on the cross saying, "Forgive them Father for they know not what they do." I had to get to a point where I either forgave or let my bitterness continue to eat me up.

Reaching that point wasn't easy. A little over a year after Maura's death, around Thanksgiving, I was making the rounds at a local hospital where I was selling medical equipment when I bumped into a doctor. He was a family friend and knew about Maura.

"How are you all doing?" he asked.

Normally, I would have just said, "We're managing." But this time I let my guard down.

"We're hanging in there," I said, then added, "but Thanksgiving is a little tough . . ."

He nodded. Then, as he walked away, he called out over his shoulder: "You know, you're not the only people who've ever lost a child."

I was shocked. I didn't know if his response had more to do with the fact that he was a doctor – and therefore more immune to death – or if he'd just found the nerve to say what I feared everyone else had been thinking: "Get over it."

Over the coming months and years, as a range of responses continued to pour in, I started asking myself: *Being only human, people will disappoint from time to time. So, who – or what – could I really put my faith in?*

*Chapter Four*

## Questions Without Answers

Years ago, when Mary and I lived in Wyoming, one of the most impressive places we visited was Jackson Hole. There's a huge field out there, fenced-in, with thousands upon thousands of elk. It's a major elk refuge, the main feeder for Yellowstone National Park. So long as elk stay within the gate, they're safe from hunters. Trucks come around daily, throwing feed out. The elk aren't going to be shot, and if they get a disease they'll be taken care of.

Growing up, I viewed faith in much the same way. So long as I stayed within the parameters of a good Christian life, I assumed everything would pretty much turn out OK. Sure, life was unpredictable, but I still counted on God to take care of me and my family. And whatever He didn't take care of I could.

Church, meanwhile, was something I did out of obligation more than anything else. Dad would drive us to church Sunday morning, then later that evening for 6 o'clock service. Once Wednesday rolled around, we were back again, this time for the weeknight 7 o'clock function. All in all I'd say we were at church a minimum of five hours a week, and that's not counting youth functions, typically held on Saturdays.

One time I asked Dad, "Why do I have to go to night church when all I do is fall asleep?" His answer was

simple, “We go to night church as a family, that’s why we go.” That answer didn’t do much to motivate me. Many nights, as we pulled into the church parking lot, I would close my eyes, pretending to be asleep. I always hoped my parents would just leave me there until service was over, but they never did.

To my parents’ credit, all that churchgoing did keep me in line through my teenage years. But it wasn’t because I wanted to please God, or to have a relationship with Him, but simply because I didn’t want to get into trouble. Faith, in other words, was about saying the right things and looking the right way. Any larger questions didn’t really come into play.

All that changed with Maura’s death. For the first time in my life, all my previously unexamined ideas about faith were thrown into question. Indeed, nothing stirs up emotions in us quite like our own children. We instinctively think, “This is my greatest gift, and to lose that gift would be unimaginable.” But once the unimaginable does happen, what then? The most difficult part, after the initial shock wears away, is the questions you’re left with, questions, you come to realize, that have no real answers.



Early on, I kept thinking, *I did everything right, so why would God allow this to happen? Hadn't we done our best to lead what we thought were decent lives?* I kept revisiting my life with Mary and recalled how we had tried to do everything right from the moment we met. On our very first date, we went to a service at my Mamaw Fisher’s church. We went on to date for the next six years and throughout that entire time we were respectful in our dating relationship.

Later, when we got married, we both felt as if we could provide a solid foundation for a child. So, why us? Why not someone who hurts kids or wouldn't take care of them?

No matter how much I went over those questions in my mind, I couldn't reach any satisfying answer. In the end, I didn't know which was more scary: spending my life searching in vain for answers or giving into the idea that what had happened was totally meaningless and that something just as random could easily happen again.



As Christian men, we have two natures battling for control of us. The Christian side is taught to say, "God, I'm giving it to you . . . I'm giving you my relationship, my finances, my job situation . . . everything." Meanwhile, the human side of us wants to be proactive, to get at answers.

After Maura's death I faced this conflict. On the one hand, I wanted to give up control and to accept, as many people were telling me, that "everything happens for a reason." On the other hand, I wanted answers to Maura's death.

If you've ever experienced a tragedy, you know how it is: You want answers, and you want them now. Yet the most frustrating thing is when there are none to be found. The doctors never could find a reason for Maura's death, even after they'd conducted an autopsy. (That word, so cold and clinical, is still hard for me to write.) Maura's heart had simply stopped beating, they told us, possibly because of something called long QT syndrome or LQTS, a rare but deadly disorder that disrupts the heart's electrical rhythm.

As the months passed, I couldn't see any possible

good that had come out of Maura's death; I couldn't see any reason. I kept thinking back to the day of her funeral, when I spoke in front of my church and said, "If this circumstance has brought you to the point where you are ready to accept the Lord as your savior we would have gone through this all over again . . ."

As difficult as it was for me to deliver those words, no one ever came up to me afterward and said their lives had been changed. So, I kept circling back to the same thing: wrestling with whether Maura's death was a fluke or part of a larger purpose.



Proverbs says: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, do not rely on your own understanding." But from the start I kept trying to rely on my own understanding for answers. One instance really sticks out. In the days following the funeral, when we got away to Gatlinburg, Mary and I were walking down a street with Jak. At one point, we stopped off at a taffy shop. As I lifted Jak up to the window, I momentarily turned and saw a child of eight or nine years old, severely handicapped, in a reclining wheelchair a few feet away. Later, I asked Mary, "Did you see that kid?" We both thought, *Maybe we'd been spared that same fate; maybe that's why Maura was taken from us.*

We also started comparing our story to that of others. At least we hadn't had time to bond with Maura like some other parents who lose a child after many years. But comparisons are a funny thing. In times of personal suffering, while we're encouraged to consider those who are worse off than ourselves, the exercise rarely, if ever, makes us feel better for long. If anything, drawing comparisons simply makes us feel guilty that

we were so miserable in the first place when so many others have suffered even more.

On the flip side, I tried thinking of parents who never even had a second with their children. One day, I found myself uttering a half-hearted prayer of gratitude for the time we did have with Maura. I thought of another couple we knew, Jeremy and Kara, whose baby had been delivered stillborn. *At least, I thought, we'd had a perfect little girl, even if it was only for three days.* But as I started to pray, any gratitude soon caved to anger and confusion: *God, what were you thinking? Why did you set us up to fall like this?*

Without any clear answers, how could I ever come to trust in God again?



On the few occasions I shared my grief with others, they met my feelings head-on with passages from scripture. I know many of those passages just as well: In Matthew, Christ says that He sends rain on the just and unjust alike. In Peter, one of the apostles says, "Don't be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed."

Today, I read these and other passages and find comfort in them. But shortly after Maura's death, my feelings were still too raw to embrace the heart of their words. Nor did I like hearing statements like, "Everything happens for a reason."

Even today, when someone says those words to me, bitterness does well up. Don't get me wrong; there's a lot of truth to those words. If we believe in God and trust in His sovereignty, we must understand that He

is in control. However, in the midst of a tragedy no one wants to hear platitudes. I certainly didn't. C.S. Lewis says it best: "Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly . . . But don't come talking to me about the consolation of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand."

As a husband and a father, I was trying to guide my family through an absolute hell, and almost everyone was telling me that everything happens for a reason. Other times, people would say, "Maura's with Jesus now." Yes, I had to believe Maura was with Jesus, but hearing as much didn't ease the pain. I missed my daughter — it was that simple — and so did Mary. And we needed time to come to terms with our grief rather than feeling as if we were being silenced by convenient catch phrases.

Granted, it's never easy to know what to say to someone who has lost a child, and I probably wouldn't have known either if we hadn't lost Maura. For those of you who know a father facing the loss of a child — and don't know how to respond — the following story may prove helpful. Recently, one of my coworkers lost her 28-year-old son, Aaron. In the days to come, I found myself fielding one call after another from coworkers who wanted to know how to respond. My advice was simple: Just listen.

The sad truth is that we're wired to talk more than to listen. We're always at the ready with the next thing we're going to say. We're so concerned about getting our point across — and saying things like, "I can't imagine what you're going through" — that we fail to take the opportunity to listen. Most of the time, though, that's all a grieving person wants is for someone to listen. We need to train ourselves, then, to simply hold our tongue.

With my coworker — and this approach is equally valid for grieving fathers — my approach was simple. “My words aren’t going to ease your pain,” I told her in a voice message, “but if you need anything, you know you can call me.” Later, every few weeks, I sent her a text message: “If you’re ready to talk, I’m ready to listen.”

Beyond simple inquiries, actions really do speak louder than words. I can’t tell you how much it meant to Mary and me in the weeks after Maura’s death when guys from church mowed our lawn. It would have driven me so much deeper into a hole if I’d had to spend two hours each week pushing a lawnmower around, listening to its grating sound.

If you can, think of something that will help lighten the load. Show you’re concerned, not by telling a grieving father what to think, but by doing. Then, when he does want to talk about it, don’t change the subject. In Nancy’s case, I make it a point to say the name of her son, “Aaron,” on those rare occasions when she does find the strength to bring him up conversation. I want Nancy to know that I am genuinely interested in hearing how she’s doing. On the other hand, if a grieving parent doesn’t want to talk about it, don’t try to force an emotional connection before they’re ready. Be in tune with what’s going on.

Regardless of where a man is at in the grieving process, realize that it’s best to skip the pronouncements, comparative stories, or words from scripture. Just pick a simple action that will uplift his life in some small way. And listen.



Of course, acts of kindness may help ease the pain, but the questions may always linger. We often view God as a

bellhop, expecting Him to provide answers on the spot.

That's understandable, especially when a child dies. Just imagine someone telling you, "You have no choice, you must accept this reality for the rest of your life." Just imagine how difficult that would be, especially if that reality meant never speaking or interacting with your child again. What person could easily accept that? What person wouldn't struggle to find answers?

In my case, I'll never know why Maura passed away. Basically, it goes both ways. I'll never know what greatness could have been achieved, or, on the other hand, what kind of misfortune might have lain ahead. But eventually I reached a conclusion: I had to accept that we work in God's time, which means the answers may not come as quickly as we want them to come. Or they may never come at all.

Reaching that point of acceptance didn't happen overnight, of course. In the months following Maura's death I struggled so hard to find answers that I wrestled with my share of destructive thoughts, a whole slew of them.

*Maybe we should sell the house . . . Maybe I should leave everything behind altogether, Mary included . . . Maybe I should take up drugs or alcohol, maybe I can escape the memories that way . . . This situation is nuts, I either need to get control of it or get out . . . But how can I get out? . . . If I drive off this mountainside on the way home from work today, how much money would Mary recoup through insurance? Would her life be better or worse off without me? If something happened to me would Jak still have enough male influence in his life to be a good man one day?*

When my thoughts briefly turned to ending my life, I knew I had crossed a line. When you're depressed, as I was, crazy thoughts are going to run through your head. You've got to be aware enough to know they're

fleeting thoughts and to let them go out of your head as quickly as they came in. In my case, I also realized that I had to develop a deeper reliance on God or else I'd drive myself crazy.

People sometimes told me, "I can't imagine what you're going through." And that's true; you can't imagine the magnitude of the hurt unless you've gone through something similar. But God can understand. It's hard to imagine that the God of the universe feels our pain, but He absolutely does. I think a lot about the parallels between God and any parent who loses a child; God lost His son, and it gives me comfort to know that He can identify with my experience.

I also think a lot about a picture I've seen of Jesus in the garden knocking on a door. That scene illustrates a line from Revelation: "I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door I will come to him and will dine with him, and he with Me." In the picture, you'll notice that there's no handle on the outside of the door; it's on the inside, the symbolism being that God's waiting for you to invite Him in.

Occasionally, God may take the lead Himself. About a year after Maura's death I had an unexpected glimpse of God's grace. One night, Jak and I were kneeling at the edge of his bed for his evening prayers. At one point, Jak started asking me about Maura.

"Can we say a prayer for her?" he asked.

As I'd done many times before, I simply asked Jesus to give her an extra kiss and a tighter squeeze for us that night. After concluding our prayers, I held Jak in bed and looked up at the ceiling. As the minutes passed, I let out a deep sigh.

Even though Jak was barely three years old, he was already proving himself to be a very intuitive little boy.

He turned to me and started rubbing my face.

“Daddy,” he said, “it’s going to be OK.”

I looked over at him, surprised. “What’s going to be OK?” I asked.

“It’s going to be OK with Maura,” Jak replied, “She’s running and playing with Jesus.”

Those words startled me; no one had said anything quite so heartfelt to me since Maura’s death. If anything, I’d grown so tired of hearing people say things like, “You’ve got to look to God.” But Jak’s words at this moment were different; he didn’t know any clichés or scripture. And he certainly didn’t know that Jesus says, “Let all the children come to me.” He was speaking simply and purely from the heart.

In that moment of unexpected grace, I felt something that had been absent from my life ever since Maura’s death: a sense of hope and gratitude for what remained. For the first time, I sensed that I could weather a lifetime of questions that would surely lay ahead, that I could find the strength to face into the storm.

*Chapter Five*

## The Blame Game

You may make your peace with God. You may even come to accept, somewhere along the way, that you'll never find answers to your questions, the "why" of your child's death. But reaching that point doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's a journey you have to share with your spouse.

That may be the hardest part of all. No matter how strong the love and attraction, marriage is tough. From raising kids to navigating family dynamics, a couple's steady stream of pressures often leads one or the other to walk away. Add to the mix something as devastating as the loss of a child, and it's no wonder an even greater number of couples—something on the order of 75 percent—see their marriages fall apart.

The "what-ifs" that typically accompany the grieving process are a big reason why. The barrage of questions that a parent faces are often filtered through a lot of emotion, and that emotion can easily turn irrational. Fault or no fault, someone is going to start pointing fingers, anything to ease what is the greatest pain of all: Your child hasn't just "passed away." Or "gone to sleep." They're dead. Gone. And there's no easy answer why.

It's a hard reality, and being only human when something as precious as your own child is taken from you, blame is going to surface.

Sometimes we focus the blame on ourselves, even when there's none to be had. I know of a man who blamed himself when his nine-year-old son was diagnosed with brain cancer and was given only six months to live. The father kept thinking he'd unwittingly brought asbestos home from work. (He installed insulation around hot water pipes in old buildings.) Maybe, the father thought, his son had somehow breathed in the fatal mineral. Even though doctors offered the father a blunt reality check—"That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard, your son may have had this his entire life," is how one doctor put it—the father still continued to blame himself.

Other times we blame our spouse, which is the surest way to destroy your marriage. So, how do you get beyond the blame? My good friend and former college teammate Dr. Brian Monteleone, is a therapist in Charlotte, North Carolina who routinely counsels grieving couples. He offers this advice. "One of the first things you want to do is work toward accepting the reality of the situation," says Monteleone. "Accepting does not mean that you like it," he stresses. "Accepting means, 'These are the facts of what I'm dealing with now—I'm going to try to work with them as best I can.'" Otherwise, says Monteleone, blame will continue to fester, and merely serve as a defense mechanism from facing painful emotions.

My friends Mike and Cindy know all about that scenario. When Mike was forty, and Cindy thirty-nine, they were overjoyed to learn they were expecting their third child. During the delivery, though, the baby's heartbeat dropped dangerously low. The doctors soon delivered the devastating news: A heart valve that controlled blood flow to the baby's lungs had never fully

formed. The baby had just hours to live.

As their infant girl, whom they'd named "Brooke," clung to life, Mike stood by the window of the neonatal intensive care unit in shock. That's when a doctor came by.

"I know what you're thinking," said the doctor, "you look at that beautifully formed little girl and wonder how things could go so wrong . . .

"Let me tell you something," the doctor continued, "within eight weeks of conception everything you've got on you comes together, and the body's temperature has to be just right for that to happen."

Instantly, Mike recalled that his wife had briefly battled a viral infection during her first trimester. *If only she'd taken better care of herself*, he thought, *maybe our baby girl would have a fighting chance now.*

Today, Mike will tell you his initial thought is a "pile of it," and that he wisely never shared it with his wife. She was so busy blaming herself just as my wife, Mary, did herself. Besides, the rational part of Mike knew that no one was to blame, especially his wife.

Mike credits his faith with helping him reach that point of acceptance. "If you don't have a strong commitment to faith and to each other, I can see how people divorce," says Mike, who's been married 26 years now.

Faith also helped my marriage survive the blame game. The day after Maura died all sorts of questions began racing through my mind: *Who was at fault? How did Maura die? Was Mary holding her at the time of her death? Had I really done everything I possibly could have to save her? After she was born, what more could I have done to make sure we'd left the hospital with correct information, if there was correct information? What more could I have done to perform CPR effectively?*

Fortunately, the autopsy showed no one was to blame.

But even before Maura's autopsy results came back, I reached a pretty swift conclusion, thanks in large part to prayer: No matter what the findings, I told myself, nothing good could come from the blame game. The only thing it could do is destroy what life Mary and I had left.



There's another element to confront if your marriage is to survive: being tolerant of each other's different ways of grieving. "Men will tend to be in the role of the problem solver," says Monteleone. "It's kind of like the old adage of a wife who complains that her husband listens to her for two minutes, then spouts off an answer and walks away, when all she really wanted was for him to listen."

Women, by contrast, are often more inclined to talk about their grief. "Generally, women are more willing and capable of plowing through their emotions. That makes men extremely uncomfortably; it puts them in a role that not too many of them have been trained to do, which is to process their emotions at that level," says Monteleone.

I can speak to that difference firsthand. When I look back on my years with Mary, we were always on the same page in our dating life, and we were always on the same page in our faith, but we couldn't quite get on the same page about how to grieve. Where Mary was open about her feelings and got into therapy almost immediately, I largely kept to myself.

It wasn't always easy to hide my feelings, though. Every time Mary got that sixth sense of hers that I'd had a particularly rough day, she'd try to get me to talk. Those moments often occurred at night, in bed. I'd generally pretend that I didn't hear her or say, "I'm

fine," then roll over and quietly cry to myself. Other times, when Mary saw my appetite slip and my sleep diminish, she would plead, "Would you please open up to me?" She even phoned my friends to intervene. But hearing her pleas made me retreat even more.

I justified my silence by thinking, *If Mary knows the literal hell I'm going through she'll sink even further into a depression and any progress she's made will unravel.* And so, I made every effort to be her rock. The downside of my determination to be Mary's rock was that resentment did start to well up in me. *Why*, I began to wonder, *do I always have to be strong for you?* In retrospect, my question was a little misguided. Truth is, my wife is plenty strong; just because she was open about her grief doesn't mean she wasn't. If anything, closing myself off merely served as justification for not coming to terms with my own pain.

On the other hand, when I was more upbeat, and Mary more down, I felt as if it were my duty to talk her out of her mood. I never really could, and that, of course, would fill me with even greater helplessness at not being able to fix the situation. Dr. Monteleone sees that kind of scenario time and again in his work with grieving parents. He routinely offers husbands this advice: "Men do not have to be active problem solvers in this situation . . . oftentimes they can be more effective in the relationship by being a passive problem solver, an example of that is to just listen — that's one of my best suggestions," he says.

As for wives, Monteleone says, "Remind your husband that you're ready, willing, and able to talk about it whenever he's ready." But offer that reminder, he stresses, judiciously. "Sometimes a touch, a look of kindness, or a good meal is more powerful than words

and can bring down the defenses that couples tend to build up in this situation," he says.

Accepting different approaches to grief takes its share of compromise. It definitely did for Mary and me. It still does, in fact.

My own feelings of grief still kick into high gear anytime I see Maura's first cousin, Anna, reach a milestone like a birthday or preschool graduation. The inevitable comparisons arise in my mind: *Would Maura look like Anna? Would Mary dress Maura up in dressy little dresses the way her sister, Sara, does with her daughter?*

Another tough day for me is September fourth, the day Maura passed away. The first couple of years I would completely shut down. I'd go off for long periods of time and be by myself. Mary always wanted to be with me at those moments. I think she thought she could help lessen the pain if she were by my side. But the last thing I wanted was anybody to see that side of me. So, these days, around the anniversary of Maura's death, Mary knows to just let me be. She knows it will take me a day or two to snap out of it and then I'll be fine.

That's been a huge milestone for us, actually. It used to really frustrate me when I felt as if Mary expected me to grieve the way she did; it was as if I wasn't allowed to deal with my pain the way I wanted or needed to. Granted, it's a tricky balance. On the one hand, I wanted my wife to express her concern for me; on the other hand, I didn't want her to push too hard. All I can say is it's a play-it-by-ear situation of knowing when to inquire and when to back off.

I've also learned how to help my wife through her grief. Rather than trying to talk her out of her feelings, I've come to realize the importance of just listening and offering a hug or shoulder to cry on. Even if you don't

always have the strength to be verbal with them, wives still need a simple human touch, a sign that you care. I've learned that approach works best with Mary.

There are other ways I've learned to compromise. If I had my way, I'd just as soon not visit Maura's grave. I still vividly remember the day of the funeral and the convoy of cars pulling up. I'll also never forget my brother carrying Maura's casket down the walkway and my thinking, *I can't believe I did this to my brother, I can't believe I made him carry the casket.* To this day those memories make my stomach churn.

But every year, on the anniversary of Maura's birth, I accompany Mary to Maura's grave. Because of my vivid memories of Roy coming down the walkway, I walk across the grass instead and stand to the side, allowing Mary her time to grieve. During those moments, Mary cries to herself quite a bit. I don't ask, "What's wrong?" or "What are you thinking?" Not because I don't want to talk about it anymore; I just know she needs the freedom to let the tears out.



Sometimes the memories are so painfully intense, a grieving father may find himself wrestling with the ultimate struggle: fight or flight syndrome. In my case, there were memories of Maura everywhere, especially when I looked at my wife. I have no doubt Maura would have looked just like her mother; Maura had jet black hair just like Mary. Those reminders were so painful at times the absolute easiest thing would have been to walk away from the marriage. I was still doing very well professionally. The year Maura died I'd finished number one in sales — number four the year before — and could easily have made a phone call to company headquarters

requesting a transfer to a big city, leaving Mary behind.

Fortunately, I never took such a drastic step. Going back to my faith was a key reason. The scriptures speak of the marriage of a man and a woman as a mystical union; Paul speaks of the church as the “bride of Christ.” Something similar holds true between a husband and a wife. At the highest level, the two complete each other. And yet, a lot of people wrap up the entirety of their marriage in their children, and in their children’s absence they find they have nothing left. Yes, our kids are precious gifts — no doubt about it — but as my pastor has told me so often, if you place your children above your marriage, your marriage will fail.

In our darkest hours, when I feared our marriage was going down a path of failure, I realized I had to reconnect with my vows — and with the memories of the woman I’d married all those years ago. I made a real effort to revisit the good times I’d shared with Mary before we ever became parents. I also thought back to my early twenties, when I was still single and unsure of my next steps in life. One day I pulled up a chair and started compiling a list of qualities I was looking for in a woman. The list came to something like thirty points. That’s when I realized that the girl I’d been seeing off and on for several years met each and every one of those qualities, a growing relationship with Christ being at the top of the list.

I soon proposed to Mary, but not before giving her one final out.

“Say the word ‘divorce,’” I told her, two days before our wedding as we sat in her parents’ living room.

She looked at me as if I were a little nuts, but played along. Through a chuckle she repeated the word: “Divorce.”

“OK,” I said, doing my best to make light of a serious subject, “now that you’ve said the word, it’ll never be part of our vocabulary again.”

Soon, we exchanged vows before 350 friends and family on a summer’s day in 1996. After Maura’s death I reflected on that memory quite a bit. My friend Mike did something similar following his own baby’s death. That agonizing first year, Mike would wake in the middle of the night to find his wife over in the nursery, sobbing on the floor as she clutched their baby’s blanket. During those long tortuous nights Mike clung to the vows he’d made years ago. “I made a commitment in front of 600 people and the Lord Almighty,” says Mike. “I knew I had to be there through better or worse.”

One other thing that helped me after Maura’s death was to carry a high school picture of my wife in my wallet. I also thought of those first few months after our marriage when Mary had just turned twenty, and I was almost twenty-five, and I’d just been offered a job with Fellowship of Christian Athletes in Wyoming. That was a pretty scary time for us. It was a starting salary, plus neither one of us had ever been away from home for any length of time. Nor did we know anyone out west. But as we loaded up our Ryder truck, and spent the next twenty-four hours driving from one state into the next, our motto every step of the way was, “Whatever we do from now on, we’re making memories together.”

In no time at all, Mary and I made friends in Wyoming and sort of melded into one, so much so that our friends often called us “Mess and Jary.”

After Maura’s death, I kept coming back to that memory. And I kept thinking: *Is it really worth throwing away precious moments like that, no matter how rough the situation now?*

The answer, I realized, was an absolute *no*.

While I can't know your own situation, having seen my own marriage survive the storm, I can advise this much: Work on your feelings together instead of wondering what the other person did or didn't do. Never close the lines of communication. Never stop listening. Continue being there for each other, never giving up, never giving in, and knowing – believing – that whatever you do from now on, you're making memories. Together.

## Chapter Six

# Accountability

As much as I love my wife, she can't always be there for me, no matter how strong our marriage. I realized that early on after Maura's death. I was away at a company meeting in upstate New York. The pain over Maura's death was still so raw no one at the meeting really knew how to talk to me; they'd come up to me, give me a hug, then walk away. Later that evening, I went back to my hotel room and sat on the edge of the bed with nothing but my thoughts to keep me company. I could have picked up the phone and called Mary. But even though my wife had been encouraging me to open up, I didn't have the strength in me just yet.

Sitting there, with no one else I felt comfortable enough to call up and confide in, I started thinking of anything that might ease the pain: *I'm alone . . . nobody really knows me up here . . . and it's New York, I can probably get anything I want . . . let's just go out, grab a couple of bottles of wine, and forget about everything for a day or two . . .*

Nothing like that happened, but I can see how it could have. When a crisis hits, a lot of us guys feel like we've got to be the constant, steady presence in the midst of the storm. Sooner or later that pressure gets so overwhelming we start looking for the nearest exit. In my case, I never bolted but the pressure did start to take its toll on me, not only emotionally but physically. I soon

topped 260 pounds – this on a 5-foot 11-inch frame. I’ve always been a big guy but that’s just ridiculous.

The more I shut down emotionally, and let myself go physically, the more I realized I needed an accountability group of some kind to help get me back on track.



An accountability group is just that: a group of spiritually motivated guys who hold each other accountable through open, honest communication delivered in an atmosphere of total trust. The idea of joining such a group wasn’t new to me. Back in the day, when Mary and I lived in Wyoming, I’d meet up once a week, early in the morning, with four other guys. Young and newly married, I saw the group’s small, close-knit setting as a place to talk about anything I’d been facing over the previous week.

Even before then, I saw the power that a group of guys can have in each other’s lives. My high school football team was a prime example. We didn’t have any superstars on our team; it really was a case of the sum being greater than the parts. For an hour and a half every day after school – and two to three hours every Friday night – we played and practiced with the idea that the guy in the green jersey next to us was the most important person in our life. If I missed my block as a lineman my quarterback would get crushed, and I didn’t want to be the one to let that happen. Or if I was on defense and somebody cheap shotted one of my guys, it was my job to take up for him no matter what.

Ideally, an accountability group offers that kind of synergy. I liken the group’s intent to the movie *Braveheart*: a group of guys who stand beside you, swords drawn, in battle and ready to say, “I’ve got your

back – I’ll be there for you.”

That type of camaraderie is pretty rare, not only in our daily nine-to-five lives but in Christian circles. While the whole idea of a church is meant to foster accountability, it has its limits. Even if the congregation is small, opportunities for meaningful fellowship can be few and far between. Maybe that’s because, as Christian men, we internalize the idea that we should lean on God, so we miss the opportunity to lean on each other also.

That’s a shame, because few things can help a man deal with life’s ups and downs like a group of guys meeting regularly in fellowship. Take the case of my friend Mike – I mentioned earlier that he’d lost his own baby girl at two days of age. Mike credits a weekly men’s group with helping him endure that first tough year after his daughter’s death.

“Would I have weathered the loss?” asks Mike. “Sure, but not as well and not as quickly . . . having people who are praying for you, who are there to listen, just to have that lets you know it’s going to be OK.”



Few have articulated the value of an accountability group like Rod Handley, who heads a ministry in Missouri called Character That Counts. For nearly a decade, Rod’s ministry has offered men advice on how to start a group. He presents a pretty persuasive argument for having one: “We violate one of God’s basic principles when we try to exist without brotherly relationships. True brothers not only stand with us and sharpen us, they are also willing to confront us.”

Confront is the operative word. No one sets out to fail or stumble. But how often does that happen? Even at our best, we all need others to hold a mirror up to us

every once in a while. The idea is as old as the Bible. The Book of Proverbs famously tells us, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." The Bible goes on to offer one example after another of individuals who helped hold each other accountable.

Take the story of David and Bathsheba. David had seized her, got her pregnant, then got scared and dispatched her husband, Uriah, who was off at the time with the Israelite army. David was betting that Uriah would eagerly take a break with Bathsheba, thereby helping David conceal the identity of her unborn child's father. But Uriah refused to return home at a time when his fellow men were suffering in combat, so David sent orders to have Uriah abandoned on the battlefield, where he subsequently got killed.

Later, the prophet Nathan held a mirror up to David. Without naming names, Nathan told David about a rich man and a poor man, and an injustice waged by the rich one against the latter. Outraged by the crime, David told the priest to bring the guilty party in, that the man deserved to die. To which the priest replied, "You are that man."

Jesus articulated the importance of accountability as well. "Where two or three come together in my name," Jesus tells us in the Gospel of Matthew, "there am I with them."

There's a lesson in those words for each of us. If we truly say we're going to follow a Christ-like model, then we have to understand that faith is not a solitary journey. It must be shared with people we trust, who are sincere in their faith, and who can help sharpen us as we move toward greater spiritual discipline and meaning.

Today's world also shows us the importance of accountability. Michael Zigarelli, dean of the Regent University School of Business, has written how account-

ability applies across all walks of life. Elders oversee a pastor's performance, accrediting bodies hold universities to a particular set of standards, and CEOs have to answer to boards, Zigarelli tells us in the article, "The Power of an Accountability Group." In the case of organizational leaders, adds Zigarelli, when they answer to no one their organization runs the risk of becoming "insular and stagnant," at best.

That's definitely how I felt in the years after Maura's death: insular and stagnant. Not only was I tipping the scales physically, I also found myself retreating into work rather than spending time with my family — anything to avoid facing the pain of Maura's loss. And while I knew that an accountability group might help, I was reluctant to take the next step. I had just gone through one of the worst things a parent could ever experience. People, in turn, kept telling me I was one of the strongest people they knew. I didn't want to let anyone down. Or to be judged as weak.

Another thing that held me back was the knowledge that trust takes time. I saw that with my previous group in Wyoming. It took almost three years before a sufficient level of trust had been built up to where I felt comfortable opening up. After Maura's death the stakes were so much higher. Not only did I wonder if I could recreate the kind of trust I'd found in Wyoming; I also asked myself: Who in Winfield could I even approach to get a group up and running? Could they even relate to my grief if they'd never experienced anything similar?



We all know that certain events in life can be pretty nerve-wracking. Asking a girl out for the first time is

one. Getting married is another. I'd add this to the list: asking another guy to be your accountability partner.

Think about it: You are essentially asking if you can share some of the most intimate details of your life with them, and vice versa. Reaching that level of simpatico also depends on other factors. As you get to know each other, you may start having joint family get-togethers. That was the case for me in Wyoming. It may sound trite, but in narrowing the field of potential accountability partners this time around I asked myself questions like, "Is this someone I would want to go to a baseball game with? Do our kids get along? Our wives?"

After a good deal of prayerful consideration — over two years, in fact — one person stood out whom I believed I needed to approach. His name was Jeff.

Jeff and I were fairly close friends, close in the sense we were both around the same age. We played softball and jogged together. Our sons were both in kindergarten. And we both grew up in the same county. Only later did I discover our points of commonality ran deeper. Both of us had dads who'd stressed the importance of athletics early on. (These days our dads are even on the same senior softball league.) Jeff also likes to joke that we both had a drug problem growing up; both our dads constantly "drug" us to church.

In retrospect, approaching Jeff was a little comical; the fear of rejection was overwhelming! The moment reminds me of an old episode of *Seinfeld*, when Keith Hernandez asks Jerry to help him move. The rest of the show has Jerry deliberating on the question: Are he and Keith really at the point in their relationship where one of them can ask the other for help moving? As Jerry quips, "That's a big step in a relationship . . ."

My big step with Jeff occurred on a Sunday morning

following church. After a few words of hello, I cut to the chase.

“I’ve been dealing with some stuff for a while now that I can’t really talk to anyone else about,” I said, then took a deep breath. “I’m thinking of starting a group . . .”

Jeff was open to the idea but carving out a regular time to meet wasn’t easy. Life’s steady demands and obligations always seemed to get in the way. But after a few fits and starts, we began meeting on a regular basis. A month into our meetings, we realized the group could gain greater momentum if we expanded to three or five guys — but no more. Any more and it would become harder to maintain a tight, close-knit environment in which everyone felt comfortable opening up.

For the next year, Jeff and I announced the group at church. But only two or three other guys ever showed up, then quit. One of them was a guy whose wife thought it would be a good idea for him to join. His heart wasn’t in it, though, and he soon bailed on the group and his marriage. (Not that he would have necessarily stayed in his marriage if he’d stayed in the group, but I do think he would probably have tried a little harder.)

For my part, I’d found a great accountability partner in Jeff. Could I ever find others as committed as he?



These days, I’m happy to report the answer is yes.

It happens every Saturday morning at 7:30 a.m. Five cars pull up in front of a Bob Evans restaurant along a stretch of highway in Winfield. I’m one of the drivers. Jeff’s another, and in the past year or so, our friends Andy, Marc, and Joey have started joining us.

We’re all roughly the same age, except for Joey who’s still in his twenties. Most of us have young

families, and all of us are definitely busy. Jeff's a state trooper, Andy a medical sales rep like me, Marc an assembly line worker at Toyota, and Joey's just finished his master's degree in educational counseling. Still, all of us have committed ourselves to this early morning hour every week.

After a few words of hello, the four of us take a seat by the window, a little groggily at times. By now, Connie, our waitress, knows the routine. She comes by, pours each of us a cup of coffee, then gets us our usual order. After grace and a quick bite, we get down to work.

You've heard the saying, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." Well, the same should hold true for an accountability group. As our meeting winds down, we ask each other questions that put the "A" in accountability. They're actually ten questions\* developed by Rod Handley. A few include: Have you been completely above reproach in your financial dealings? Have you spent quality relationship time with your family and friends? Have you had any lustful thoughts or exposed yourself to explicit materials that would not glorify God?

The last thing you want is to bare your soul too soon, too fast, especially with the wrong people. So, how can you find the right people? The best advice I can give is to keep an eye out for potential accountability partners at church, like I did. Look at their lifestyle, as well as the commitments that occupy their time, and ask yourself: Is theirs a life you can admire? Would you trust them to offer advice on ways to build a better life for yourself and your family?

Another good measure is attendance at your accountability meetings. Do they show up faithfully

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\*Visit [www.characterthatcounts.org](http://www.characterthatcounts.org) for the full list of questions

and consistently? Selecting an early morning hour, especially on a Saturday morning when everyone would sooner sleep in, is a great filter. That dedication reminds me of my old high school football team. At the start of the school season we'd have as many as fifty or sixty guys, but very few of them would ever go on to be a Winfield General. By my senior year we were down to twenty-three guys, which was fine by us. If you weren't completely sold on being part of the team, if you weren't dedicated to working hard, we couldn't use you.

Demonstrating a receptivity to being challenged is another good measure. We guys can sometimes say all the right things but when the rubber meets the road, a prideful "I was right" mentality can kick in and the excuses start flying. Granted, it's not easy to have a mirror held up to you. That's why it's important to be open to personal change.

I've definitely been challenged a time or two. In the years after Maura's death, when I escaped into work, my accountability partners gently, yet firmly asked about the situation. In other cases, when I shared a particular situation that was weighing on my mind, they'd follow up with, "Have you spoken to Mary about that? Does she know that?"

Other times, I'm the one holding up the mirror. Recently, one of my accountability partners was thinking of cutting short a weekend camping trip with his wife and son so he could honor a last-minute request from his parents. That left his wife frustrated, given that the request wasn't urgent. When my accountability partner called me up that Saturday to share the situation, I advised him to stick with his original plan and reschedule with his parents. He followed my advice.

Salvaging the weekend wasn't the key thing at

stake. You've probably heard the passage from Genesis: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife." The purpose of that leaving and cleaving is for a man to establish a path for himself and his young family. It's a daily challenge, played out in daily decisions, which is why having perspective from other guys is so important.

It's that kind of perspective that helps keep each of us on track and motivated. A frequent word uttered in the group is "integrity." We actually use that word quite a bit. It comes from the word "integer," which, of course, means a whole number. Similarly, integrity is about being a whole person in all aspects of your life. It's about trying to be the same person on Sunday morning as you are at the office or at home. It's about trying to be accountable.

I'm reminded of an image that Rod Handley uses to describe an accountability group: geese in V formation. Flying in V formation affords the whole flock far greater flying range than if each goose flew by itself. Also, when the lead bird tires, another bird takes over. By the same token, no one in our group ever takes the lead for too long. We all answer to each other, just as we uplift one another along the way.



Beyond my accountability group, another option I considered after Maura's death was therapy. My wife had been encouraging me to go for years, and I eventually relented, more out of desperation than anything else. I had begun suffering from almost debilitating back pain, and after a conversation with a therapist friend I began to question if the physical pain stemmed from my unresolved emotional issues. The back pain had

gotten so bad that I couldn't even throw a ball at one of my son's little league games. Nor could I drive for long stretches of time, which is a must in my profession selling medical equipment.

So, one day I went down the phone book and literally started dialing therapists. Finding someone wasn't easy. I either didn't get the answers I wanted — my main questions focused on whether they dealt with grieving fathers and if the therapist saw a link between physical and emotional pain — or I didn't get a call back.

Out of something like twenty messages, I got one return call, from a male therapist. His whole presentation sounded great; grief recovery was a focus of his, he said. When I arrived at his office a small cross on a nearby calendar clued me in that he was a Christian counselor. I started thinking that maybe this was the person I was meant to be paired with.

As well-intentioned as he was, though, I could tell he was internalizing everything I said. He would respond, "Wow, I just can't imagine that . . . I don't know how I could deal with that as a dad." I understand that he was trying to put himself in my shoes, but his comments made me feel as if I had to reassure him. I felt as if I were back to square one.

Ultimately, my accountability group has done more to help with the grief than anything else. I say this cautiously; the last thing I want to do is to discourage someone from seeking therapy as an option. If the pain is that debilitating, I strongly suggest seeing someone.

In your search for a therapist, it's important to know the right questions to ask. Do they deal with men, for instance? Some therapists are good at dealing with women but have less success with men. Is their client makeup evenly split? Do they have children of

their own, therefore making them better able to relate to your experience? Is this someone you feel comfortable opening up to? If it's a female therapist you might want to make sure she's not within your age range. I was leery about going to a female therapist for precisely that reason. I didn't want to get into a situation where I found myself opening up to another woman more than my wife.



Regardless of which road you take, it's important to keep in mind: Unless someone has lost a child themselves, there's a limit to how much they can really relate to your pain.

I was reminded of that fact recently in a somewhat comical exchange between myself and Jeff, my accountability partner. He had taken his new puppy in to get spayed. Sadly, before surgery could be performed, the puppy died suddenly from the anesthesia. When I heard the news from a mutual friend, I left Jeff a voice message to offer my sympathies. It took Jeff a week to return my call, he was that shaken up.

"I'm mad," said Jeff, when he finally called back. "I took over a healthy puppy and the doctor gave me no reason why this would happen . . . I'm so mad! . . . I'm questioning God . . . I'm questioning everything . . . why would He do this to my family?!" Someone even told Jeff that he knew exactly what he was going through. "They don't know what I'm feeling!" said Jeff, "their dog was old!"

Hearing all this I thought, *You have got to be kidding me . . .*

What I really wanted to say was, "Imagine if that were your own kid . . . put this in some kind of per-

spective.” But I let it go.

Even if my accountability partners can’t understand the extent of my pain — and I hope they never have to — what I can draw strength and comfort from is their unwavering support. Just the fact that I have a group of guys I can turn to, who accept me as I am, and who don’t view me as weak for struggling through my grief, has been a huge part of the healing process for me.

That’s especially true on anniversaries. Every year, Maura’s birthday is a horrible day for us, Mary especially. So, in the weeks leading up to it, a big topic of discussion in our accountability group is how I can help Mary navigate Maura’s birthday. My accountability partners know to hold Mary and me up in prayer that day. They also call throughout the day and ask if they can do anything to help. The anniversary of Maura’s passing is also tough. And so, in the hours leading up to it, my accountability partners come over and spend time with me into the early morning hours. We’ll typically pop in a movie and pass the time that way. Throughout, we rarely talk and that’s OK. We’re close enough friends by now that we can literally sit for hours in silence and that would be fine.



*It can't be my strength alone, God, I need yours too.*

From time to time, I think about that prayer I offered up in the sanctuary of The Nazarene Church. I’ve since come to believe that my prayers have been answered. I truly believe my accountability partners were hand-picked by God. In many ways, we are each other’s surrogate strength.

I liken the experience to a group of rock climbers. You climb up a certain level, hitch a rope to a rock, then

help the other guy up. Some days I'm the first one up the mountain, other times one of my accountability friends is. But regardless of who's first that day, each of us takes heart in knowing, "I've got your back — I'll be there for you."

Chapter Seven

## Trusting Joy

No matter how much I've learned to live with Maura's loss – thanks, in large part, to my accountability group – a thought always lingers in the back of my mind: *It happened once, it could easily happen again. Happiness could be taken away from me and my family in an instant.*

I was reminded of that fact one recent Saturday while driving to a family reunion with Mary and our sons Jak and Caleb, who was born a few years after Maura's death. Heading south on a busy stretch of road, I approached an intersection with a solid green light. Ever cautious, I scanned and saw that I had an escape route to my right – an open lane and a Taco Bell parking lot – just in case. As I lifted my foot off the brake a brown streak shot through the turn lane on my left. Before I could put my foot back down I was engaged in a head-on collision.

Air bags deployed, seatbelts grabbed, kids screamed, and metal crunched. The impact was so great it actually lifted our Chevy Tahoe off the ground. The casserole dish on Mary's lap completely shattered, piercing her with shards of glass and puncturing both our airbags. Soon, the sound of sirens ripped through the air and the next thing you know Mary is being loaded into an ambulance on a backboard. I should've been, too, but I could not let our boys see both Mommy and Daddy that way.

The one thought I had, even before the impact, was, *I can't lose another one, nobody can be hurt*. Fortunately, no one was, but an old fear rushed to the surface: Just when you think the coast is clear, something broadsides you.

It's that lingering fear that Maura's death has left me with, the sense that another calamity is always around the corner and that happiness, a part of my life I once took for granted, can never fully be trusted in again.



We've all heard about the various stages of mourning: First comes shock, then grief, then anger, then guilt, then slowly but surely, acceptance. The hardest part of the journey is the belief that good things can happen again – and that they can be counted on to endure.

That uncertainty plays out in daily little rituals that Mary and I still find hard to let go of. Sometimes, when our boys are sound asleep, either Mary or I will go in and check on them at some point during the night. We'll put a hand by their mouth and wait for the steady, reassuring sensation of a breath inhaled and exhaled. (I don't even want to think what will happen if and when my boys decide to play a contact sport – ironic coming from a former football and rugby player.)

Along with the fear of "what if," I've faced my share of guilt through years, the guilt that comes from wanting to embrace happiness again but fearing that doing so would betray Maura's memory.

It's kind of like *Saturday Night Live* after the terrorist attacks of September 11; no one knew if it was OK to laugh or not. If you've experienced the loss of a child, you know firsthand just how painful that first Christmas and New Year's are. In our case, they were horrible,

absolutely horrible. So was the second year. By the third and fourth years, I started to ease up a little but a mixture of fear and guilt always pulled me back in.

So did the memories of the night Maura died. Flashbacks would occur at unexpected moments. One time I was sitting in church with Mary when a sound shook me to the core. My mother-in-law was sitting next to us with her granddaughter, Anna, sound asleep in her arms. The noise Anna was making, the breathing, sounded eerily like the rattling that had accompanied Maura when I tried to resuscitate her. Hearing that noise, I wanted so badly to bolt out of church. But even if I had, where could I have run, anyway?



Painful memories do eventually recede; I've learned that firsthand. Reaching that point takes time and effort. My friend, Dr. Monteleone, offers this advice: "My suggestion would be to force yourself to focus on the positive moments and events you had with that child, and when I say 'force,' you must 'force,'" he says, "because the tendency would be to focus on what you have lost instead of remembering the joy you had prior to this event."

Another good friend of mine, Tim Stevens, knows all about the time and effort it takes for good memories to return. Tim's youngest son, TJ, was born with a genetic defect of the liver, which prevented waste nitrogen from metabolizing and expressed itself as ammonia in the blood. By the time he was two, TJ was delayed mentally and physically between six to eight months and wasn't walking or talking. The closest thing to a cure was a liver transplant.

TJ soon underwent a transplant, and the results

were “miraculous,” says Tim. “TJ started eating protein at a level you or I would eat, he started walking and talking.” No one knew, however, that TJ’s donor, a nine-year-old boy who’d been hit by a car, had been exposed to the Epstein-Barr virus, which causes mono. TJ’s immune system had already been suppressed to prevent rejection of the transplant and was no match for even the slightest infection. The virus quickly became active and morphed into lymphoma.

TJ underwent seven surgeries to address the complications that ensued. At one point, the doctors wanted to do an X-ray. Tim remembers that moment all too well. “The way TJ looked up at me,” says Tim, “He had a look of, ‘I’m so tired of this . . .’

“Knowing that that would have been the last time I would have been able to hold him,” says Tim, choking up, “I would have handled that moment differently . . . instead of dealing with the task of giving him the X-ray I would have taken more time to just give him love.”

In the years since TJ’s death, Tim was plagued by that memory. “I remember thinking, ‘Will there ever be a day when I don’t think about this horrible event?’” That question took a long time to answer. The first few months after TJ’s death, Tim went to the cemetery every day, just sat there talking to anything he hoped endured. As more time passed, people would tell him, “I know how you feel . . . you’ll get over it.”

Tim didn’t believe them; he still doesn’t. “You don’t ever get over it,” says Tim, whose son died in 1996, “you just don’t think about it as often.”

Through the years, the memory of TJ’s death has given way to memories of him before he got fatally sick. “I remember thinking at one point, ‘Oh my God, I didn’t think about it . . . it’s been three or four days,’” says

Tim. "Then I'd get to a week, then it would be a couple of weeks, then it gets to the point where you think about things that remind you of him – the sight of other children – and you reminisce about him. But you don't think about the tragedy of him . . ."



In Maura's case, we don't have a whole lot to remember; we only had three days with her, and the last day was brutal. But the handful of memories we do have, we treasure: The day she was born, of course. The joy of being able to hold her almost immediately. Our relatives taking turns holding her, too. Her getting kicked out of the nursery that first night and us hearing her come down the hall in a nurse's arms. Jak holding her. Our bringing her home. The last time I got to rock her and kiss her.

That's pretty much it, that's the extent of the memories I have of Maura, but they're pretty good ones, and they're the ones I choose to remember the most.

What also brings me comfort is knowing that Maura is in a better place. There's a group, MercyMe, and one of their songs, "Homesick," reminds me of Maura. A few lines go, "You're in a better place, I've heard a thousand times, and at least a thousand times I've rejoiced for you . . ." Even though I miss my girl, and I'm homesick for the day I can be reunited with her, I've found the strength to rejoice, quietly, in the knowledge of Maura at home in a better place.

At certain moments, though, like her birthday, it still feels appropriate to feel the loss of what will never be. The problem becomes when that's all you feel. That was the case for me those first few years after Maura's death. All I could do was focus on the loss. With time,

I'm now better able to uplift the present while still honoring the past. This past year, for instance, Mary and I bought balloons in honor of Maura's birthday, then stopped by the cemetery with our boys. The boys call it "Maura's special place" and tied several balloons to the pink granite headstone. Before we left, Jak and Caleb launched two of them into the air. We all later went for a bike ride, and Jak helped decorate a birthday cake in honor of his sister that evening.

Jak understands that Maura is no longer with us, but he talks about her as if she has gone off to college. Caleb, meanwhile, is still too young to understand that she's not coming back.

In the case of Mary and me, we still wrestle with a question we occasionally get: "How many children do you have?" If I think my answer will lead to further discussion and I have the energy for it, I say, "Three, but one passed away." If I don't feel like talking about it, I just say two.



Much of the grieving process really is a play-it-by-ear situation. At the same time, I've found a few tips and pointers universal for navigating the grief.

As hokey as it sounds, I try to count my blessings — every day. Even on the toughest days, a few bright spots shine through. Take our recent car accident. Somebody should have been seriously hurt but, thankfully, no one was. When I do find myself giving into defeat — like when I'm at a park with Mary and the boys and glance over to see another family with a little girl — I pull myself back with this thought: *Just be grateful. Just because.*

With that gratitude comes a greater appreciation of the loved ones I do have. I spend a lot of time with my

two sons, and make a point of being affectionate toward them. The way I was raised was a bit of the opposite. I remember the day my dad said we probably shouldn't kiss on the cheek anymore. That was his way of saying, "We're guys, we don't do that." I'm very touchy-feely with my kids, though. Even when they're in college I want them to feel comfortable coming up and giving me a kiss on the cheek.

I also try to be positive, even when it hurts. When I'm feeling down, I look at my two boys and ask myself, "What's more important – my feelings at this moment or my two boys' well-being?" I'm reminded again of that Og Mandino line: "Be present and make it so beautiful it will be worth remembering." Indeed, we're only promised today, and how we choose to spend today is our choice.

Above all else, I've come to accept how little in control I am, and how much in control God is. So many times Christians claim Christ as their savior but not as their lord. But if I truly believe that God is my savior as well as my lord, I have to accept that it is He who lords over me and that I can only control but so much. That realization helps me go about each day with a growing peace.

So does the realization that God's intentions are good. I don't think God made Maura die; I don't think He's sitting on a mystical throne somewhere with a lightning bolt in hand. God wants the best for us, and a lot of my own peace of mind has come from a willingness to believe in that goodness.



The ability to trust in God – and allow joy back into your life – occurs in everyone's own time. In the case of my friend, Mike, the process was slow and painful. It

took a pivotal event to help him turn the tide for himself and his family.

After enduring the first year after his daughter Brooke's death, Mike's wife, Cindy, began talking about adoption. Mike struggled with the idea at first. Leaving aside the paperwork and financial commitment, Mike was terrified about the lack of guarantees that a child who wasn't even his own flesh and blood would present.

Mike's friends and family encouraged him to take a leap of faith, though. "You really need to think about doing this; your wife's heart needs to heal," they said. Mike had already weathered a year of raw emotions, which included seeing his wife walk out of church every time a song reminded her of Brooke.

Mike began looking into domestic adoption, but no leads panned out. That's when he and Cindy put international adoption on the table. They began the process one January day. By the following October they received the news: A four-month-old baby girl was on her way from Korea. Within days, Mike and Cindy drove from their home in West Virginia to Dulles airport. "The closest thing to a delivery room," says Mike.

A few months later Mike was standing in church, getting ready to baptize his new baby girl. That's when it hit him. More than a year before, Mike had been standing in nearly that exact same spot, struggling to deliver Brooke's eulogy. Now new hope and possibility lay ahead.

"We have this child today, Taylor, who is eight years old," says Mike, adding, "I did not honestly know that I could love a child through adoption like I love my two biological children."

"She has been such an important individual in my life in teaching me that God has a plan for you – that

you have to be faithful through the good times and the bad," he says.

Mike recalls the day a local paper decided to do a story on international adoption. The reporter came by, asked a few questions, then left, leaving Mike to think the story would be buried in a future paper. Thanksgiving morning Mike awoke to see the story on the front page. An accompanying picture showed a smiling Taylor being swung through the air. Over the coming weeks, Mike and Cindy received half a dozen phone calls from people who'd been on the fence about adopting but now decided to move ahead.

"Our daughter has so much love in her heart, it's amazing to think of this little person from all the way across the world coming into our lives," says Mike. "It makes you realize that things happen for a reason."



My own renewed faith returned two years after Maura's death. That's when Mary and I decided to have Caleb. Naturally, we were excited but also scared. We kept thinking, *What if the worst thing that can happen, happens twice?* Mary and I agreed that if her obstetrician voiced even the slightest concern, we'd shelve the idea.

"Lightning won't strike twice," he assured us, "it's like a piano falling on your head a second time . . . it happened once, it's unlikely to happen again."

"Unlikely" isn't a full-proof guarantee, though, and for the next nine months we were on pins and needles. At first we didn't tell anyone about Mary's pregnancy. Eventually, we couldn't hide the news any longer. With each passing month, Mary and I still found it hard not to ask ourselves, "When will something go wrong?"

We tried to leave as little as possible to chance. We'd

even purposely spaced out the pregnancy so our baby wouldn't be born anywhere near Maura's birthday; we didn't want any future child to feel like a replacement. Our baby was also a scheduled C-section, at 39 weeks, a day short of June. (Mary was born in June and wanted the baby to have his own birthstone.)

The delivery itself went well, and he looked beautiful—he had the same dark hair as Maura and similar features—but not so similar that you dwelled on the resemblance. He seemed perfectly healthy, too.

The doctors ran an EKG just to be sure. That's when my heart sank; the EKG showed something borderline. Mary looked up. "Is he going to be OK?"

"Probably," said the doctor.

Probably?!

Our newborn son had to undergo a round of tests, and was poked and prodded as the nurses drew blood.

As we waited for the results, I spoke into a tape recorder one day, my personal form of therapy at the time: "This is getting ridiculous," I said, on the verge of losing it. "Here we are trying to do everything right but having all these problems . . . why did the doctor tell us it was OK to have another baby when the EKG is now showing signs of trouble?"

"Caleb's reading has to come back good," I said, through tears I could no longer contain, "everything has to be good."

But what if it wasn't? "I'm at the point of giving up," I said, then added, "I can't be strong for one of us again, let alone all of us . . . so where do we turn from here? I hate to say we've already tried turning to God . . . we've already tried that . . . life is not fair . . . I'm done."

Mercifully, the tests proved normal. To be safe, the doctors put Caleb on a heart monitor and beta blockers.

Jak sensed the ordeal we'd all just gone through, and came up to me one day. He said he wanted to write Jesus a letter — he wanted Jesus to know He couldn't have this new baby. Hearing a three-year-old say that tore me up. The old feelings of helplessness returned.

But as one year passed into two, then three, we slowly started counting our blessings again. Despite that early health scare, Caleb is today a happy, healthy kid. If ever a kid was full of life, in fact, it's Caleb. When he walks into a room everyone knows it. Most of the time he doesn't just walk in; he's either pretending to fly like a superhero or jumping over somebody.

He's also a prankster. One Sunday I was lying on the couch, half asleep, when he came up and stood over me. I thought he was going to give me a kiss or a hug. But as I looked up, he said, "This is going to be vewy, vewy cold," then he pulled a water bottle out from behind him and hit me in the chest with freezing cold water.

You can't get mad at Caleb, though, he's just funny.

He asked me one night, "Daddy, do you love me because I make you laugh?"

"That's one of the reasons I love you," I answered.

The reasons run so much deeper, of course. Caleb's entry into our lives has strengthened my belief that even the toughest times can be endured, and that something greater than happiness is possible — something on the order of joy. The Christian writer C.S. Lewis once said that happiness is fickle; it depends too much on circumstances and events beyond our control. Joy, on the other hand, comes from a knowledge deep within that God is present through the good times and the bad. Looking into Caleb's eyes, I can certainly attest to that.



*Chapter Eight*

## Three Days

Three days. That's all the time we had with Maura. Yet in that short amount of time, our little girl made a bigger impact on our lives than anyone else had up until that point. It's because of that impact I can now say: God didn't quit working the night Maura passed away. In many ways His work just ramped up.

I couldn't have realized that the night Maura passed away. To this day the memories are still vivid. Mary running up and down the sidewalk screaming for help. My performing CPR on Maura as the minutes slipped by. The paramedics rushing through the front door, whisking Maura away. My praying on that long, awful drive to the hospital for God to spare our daughter.

Without a doubt, that was the darkest hour of my family's life. Little could any of us have known that five years later, tragedy would visit again, this time a few houses down from ours.

It was a Thursday night, a little after nine, when we got the call. Our neighbor Angie was on the line. It had something to do with her husband, Stan, she told Mary.

"Stan's dead," said Angie, through tears, "he's been in an accident."

Mary dropped the phone and raced over to the house, only to see a state trooper sitting in a police car in the driveway. It had been a freak accident, the trooper

explained.

Earlier that night Stan had been driving home from work when a deer jumped out from the edge of the highway. Stan's car swerved across the center line and hit a semitrailer head-on, then spun back around and collided with another vehicle. Stan was killed instantly.

Over at our house I stood in the living room, taking in what bit of news I'd already heard while Mary was on the phone. With Maura's death, my response had been to just "do," while completely shutting down emotionally. Five years later, after all my questions about grief and what it means to be a man, something had changed in me: I now understood that a big part of being "the rock" means accepting my own vulnerability. Through that acceptance, I could now better understand others' pain and be a greater source of strength for them. I now hoped to be just that for Angie and her two kids.



That alone is the greatest insight — you might even call it a "gift" — that Maura's death has left me with: I now try to be a part of people's lives, more fully and openly, than I might otherwise have been.

This isn't easy to admit, but in the past when I took any personality assessment test at work, I would measure off the charts, on the negative side, in my capacity to feel compassion for others. The bottom-line is I wasn't a very compassionate person. Part of that emotional disconnect stemmed, as I've mentioned, from the arrogance that can come with being an athlete.

One story comes to mind. Way back in high school I was at a rival school's basketball game with my sister, Les. Les was two years younger than I, a sophomore at the time, and was trying to date a friend of mine from

the rival school. When the game wrapped up, we were all getting ready to leave the bleachers. As I walked on ahead, Les tried to jump over some chairs; she was trying to be cool. Her foot got caught on one of them, though, and a big crashing sound ensued. I was halfway across the auditorium when I looked back to see what all the noise was about. And there was my sister. Flat on the floor. In front of everyone.

Les wasn't hurt, just embarrassed. She got up quickly, and the guys and I had a good laugh about it. I kept on walking.

It's only since Maura's death that I've thought about that moment, it's only now that I've realized: I should have walked over to Les; I should have picked her up and brushed her off instead of walking on ahead.

Little moments like that, where I should have shown the people in my life that I cared about them but didn't take the time, have revisited me in the years since Maura's death. Through the prism of my loss, I can no longer keep on walking.



That was the case with Angie and her kids. I'd known Stan through college; he was always so quiet he blended in with the fabric of everyday life, not something as horrible as what was now unfolding.

After Mary rushed over to Stan's house, she called to brief me on the situation. As she spoke, I could hear Stan's nine-year-old daughter, Brittany, screaming in the background out of shock and grief. Holding the phone, I caught sight of my son Jak a few feet away from me. I sat him down on the couch and held him tight.

"What happened?" he asked.

I looked at him. "Stan's been in a real bad accident . . ."

"Is he hurt?"

Silence.

What do you tell a seven-year-old boy?

"Well," I said, finally, "it looks like Stan may have died . . ."

Jak fell silent. We sat there for over an hour, my holding him the entire time. Looking for any confirmation that he was OK, I finally asked, "What are you thinking?"

No answer.

"Are you OK? . . . Are you concerned for Brittany? Do you want to go down there?"

Jak shook his head no.

Finally, he spoke up: "Is Mommy down there? When is she coming home?"

"Soon," I said, understanding it would be a while.

Like me, Mary has grown in the years since Maura's death. Whereas in the past Mary would have been the first one to drop a card in the mail, today she's the first one at the door.

When she raced over to Angie's house, Mary picked up Brittany, and held her and Brian tight on the sofa as they sobbed. By Friday morning, Mary was clearing out Angie's fridge and organizing the food coming in from friends and family — anything to help Angie and the kids get through the next few days.

For the first time in five years, Mary and I felt as if our own loss was taking a backseat. It's as if Maura's death had equipped us for this very moment. Interestingly, while Mary became an action responder — taking care of the kids and helping Angie keep her household afloat — I became something of an emotional responder. I soon found myself anticipating the emotional fallout of Stan's death.

I had the sense that all eyes would fall on Angie's 11-year-old son, Brian, and that people would start telling him he had to be the man of the house now. I had a conversation with his mother early on, letting her know it might be good to tell Brian he didn't have to be anything more than what he was: a boy mourning the loss of his dad.

I tried to be there for Brittany as well. As night fell, I stopped by their house. Over the past day, Brittany would be her usual upbeat self one minute, then start crying the next.

"What do you need right now?" I asked her, sensing she was about to break down again.

"I just can't stand being around people crying right now," she replied, "I've cried enough . . . I just don't have any more tears . . ."

"I'll tell you what," I said, "let's make our house the 'no crying' house, and your house will be for when you want to spend time with everyone."

Over the next couple days, Mary and I tried to restore as much normalcy as possible to their lives. I also told my son Jak, "Try to be a good friend to Brittany and Brian . . . don't try to get them to talk about it . . . and if they do talk about it, don't tell them you don't want to talk about it."

Sunday morning was the wake. By then, Mary and I had taken Brittany and Brian to a local shop to buy little trinkets to place in the casket with their dad. That was hard enough, but nothing compared to the moment they walked into the funeral home and saw their father in the casket up ahead. Brian's legs went limp; someone had to grab him. Brittany burst into tears, looking as if she wanted to bolt for the door.

By evening, everyone was exhausted. I said to Mary,

"I just hurt so bad for the kids . . ."

It's not that I hurt for Stan. If we believe the Bible, we know Stan's in a better place. I simply hurt for the hurt, the pain that comes from knowing Angie is now without a husband and her kids now without a dad.

To help get their minds off the pain, Mary and I took the kids to a Japanese steakhouse later that night. Our son Jak and his friend, Peanut, were also with us. Mercifully, a few light-hearted moments emerged. At one point, Peanut said something funny, and Jak started laughing with a mouth full of Sprite, so hard he actually spit the drink out across the grill and steam shot up. Normally, I would have run him out of there, but Brian and Brittany had a good laugh about it. It was worth it just to see them laugh.

The day of the funeral would bring the finality of their loss into full view. The night before, I grabbed Brittany and Brian. They were upstairs in one of their bedrooms.

"Listen, guys," I said, "Today is horrible, tomorrow is going to be a bad day, too, but after that it will get better . . ."

With that future, though, would come their own adjustment to a "new normal." I knew Angie and the kids would start asking themselves, just as Mary and I once did, questions like, "Where did everyone go? Where did the dinners go? The flowers that all our well-wishers sent are starting to die . . ." They'd also have to adjust to how they referred to Stan; they still found themselves speaking of him in the present tense.

A week after the funeral, I stopped by Angie's house. A few hours before, I'd brought over food for Brian. Returning now, I asked if anyone wanted anything else. Brittany said she hadn't eaten yet, so we headed down

to the local Subway. On the way back, I looked over at my dashboard; I keep a small angel trinket there in honor of Maura.

"Do you think your daddy has met Maura yet?" I asked, after a moment's silence.

"I think he has," said Brittany. There was an upbeat confidence in her voice, something that had been largely missing over the past week.

Stan was a quiet guy, real quiet. Most of the time, when kids would greet him on their way through the neighborhood, he would simply throw a hand up, say "Hey," then go back to whatever he was doing. Brittany now imagined something similar going on in heaven.

"It's funny," said Brittany, "I imagine Maura sitting on a tree stump, Dad passing by, and Maura saying, 'Hey Stan,' and him throwing up a hand . . ."

Brittany and I had a good laugh.

Soon, we both trailed off into silence, thinking of the loved ones we'd lost.

"You know, it stinks your Dad isn't with you," I said, finally. After a moment, I added, "I just have to think that your daddy is taking care of my girl in heaven, and so . . ."

I cleared my throat. "Maybe I need to take care of his little girl here on earth, is that OK?"

Looking over at Brittany, I could tell she was tearing up. After a moment, she shook her head yes. "I'd really like that," she said softly, and we drove on back home.



No one said our walk with God would be easy. To be a Christian means accepting that sometimes pain is part and parcel of our journey. Mary and I discovered that one night in September when the life we'd envi-

sioned for ourselves collapsed all around us. Sometimes we wondered if we'd ever make it through the storm. Somehow we did.

Of course, once the storm calms, the grief may always endure. That's because grief, in many ways, is like a moving river; every day you find yourself in a slightly different place. For my part, I still struggle. I still have flashbacks. I still find it hard to hold little babies because they remind me of Maura. I still get a little sad around holidays and anniversaries. When Maura's birthday rolls around, I still can't help but wonder, *What would she look like? What would she be like?*

On those occasions when I do find myself slipping into the "why" of Maura's death, I go back to my foundation. I go back to trust. God is in control.

It's an ongoing process, but that doesn't mean it hasn't come without its rewards, as I discovered with Angie and her kids. Even though our stories are different, a shared sense of loss has opened the door to greater connection. It's in allowing myself the chance to feel and to express those feelings with my wife, my accountability partners, with my friends and extended family that I've come to experience a renewed sense of hope and joy.

You can, too. As you journey through the loss of your own child, or whatever other hardship you're currently facing, you might ask yourself: Are you surrounding yourself with love? Are you allowing yourself to be loved to even crumble every once in a while? Do you take time to laugh? Are you present with your spouse? Your kids? God? Are you getting what you need out of your church? Are you putting what you need into your church? How is your relationship with Christ? Do you have one? Do you know Jesus can calm your storms?

Every year, as I get older, life somehow gets better. I

become more secure in my job, in who I am. This is now the longest Mary and I have lived in any one home. As for Mary and me, I see us being together forever, yes, making memories. I look forward to our boys growing up and becoming whatever they want to be, whether that's a football player or an artist or something else entirely different. It's not that I've stopped thinking about Maura, I just see our three days with her in a larger light.

So, does everything happen for a reason? Five years after Maura's death, I still don't know the answer to that question. Somehow, with time, the search for answers has become less relevant. What's come to matter more is my involvement in others' lives.

*Be present.*

All those years ago, when I tucked Maura in for the night, those words went through my mind. At the time I didn't fully grasp their meaning. Today I do. I now have a better lens through which to view myself and the world around me. I now understand that the more I invest in others, the more I get back. I now understand, more fully, that good can indeed flourish, despite—maybe because of—the pain.

Those are the lessons I carry with me from Maura's short life: all of three days, but with enough lessons to last a lifetime.



# Acknowledgments

When I first sat down to begin this project, I thought the task would be simple enough: Just offer up one dad's take on the grieving process. What I learned along the way is that no story is complete without the perspective and insights of others who've shared in the journey. It is to them — my family and friends — that I now extend my deepest thanks.

Putting pen to paper was indeed a long and winding road. At Maura's funeral, I knew I had to do something with her short life, but what? Was it through speaking? Or scouring the obit pages and offering a note of condolence to others who'd lost a child? Writing a book seemed like the last option. My thanks go to Dan Gerdes both for encouraging me to write this story and for helping me see that it could serve as a source of healing for others.

My own healing came not only through the writing of this book, but through the role that accountability has played in my life. Years ago, I had the opportunity to read Rod Handley's book, *Character Counts: A Guide for Accountability Groups*. If not for Rod's book, I probably wouldn't have been as diligent about forming a group of my own following Maura's passing. Rod, thank you for articulating the value of accountability and for your own contribution to these pages.

Any discipline on my part in forming a group — and writing this book — was also shaped by other key influences, many of them going back to my youth. From middle school all the way up to college, I was fortunate to be mentored by many fine athletic leaders: Jon Sumner, Gary Eggleton, Don Garrison, Jimmy Tribble and his brother Charlie, David Bailey, Leon McCoy, Bill Hughes, Danny Mullins, Tom Nozica, as well as Doug Escue and his brother “Red.” Of all my coaches, one stands in a league all his own: My father, Roy Kuhl. Dad, thank you for a lifetime of valuable lessons taught on and off the field and for never missing a single one of my games.

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Of course, no book would be complete without an unforgettable cast of characters. Thanks go to my sons, Jak and Caleb, for providing plenty of material to enliven these pages. Your presence is a continual source of joy and blessing to your mother and me. Always remember that God has something special planned for you. Keep focused on Him.

To Maura, my baby girl, may your short life continue to guide me in all that I do. Thank you for the opportunity to be your daddy, and for giving me the chance to find out more about myself and what it means to be more present in the lives of other people.

That journey forward could not have been possible without the most important person in my life: my wife

and bride, Mary. I sometimes joke that I got the better end of the deal in our marriage. I'm so glad that when I made a list of qualities that I was seeking in a wife that God brought us together. Thank you for continuing to live out those qualities daily and for encouraging me to do the same as a husband and father.

Finally, my ultimate thanks go to my Creator. Thank You for showing Mary and me that Your love is more than a concept. It's a relationship to be lived out daily.

## About the Author

**B**orn and raised in Winfield, West Virginia, Jess Kuhl is a committed advocate for helping men find meaning and purpose in all aspects of their lives. For nearly 15 years, Jess has bridged two great passions – athletics and faith – in the service of others. From 1996 to 2001, Jess served as an area representative for Fellowship of Christian Athletes in Casper, Wyoming, and later as FCA state director in West Virginia. Jess continues to maintain close ties to the organization through participation on its state board of directors and through the establishment of the Maura Rae Kuhl scholarship, which helps students across West Virginia attend FCA camp.

Jess holds a bachelor's degree in business from University of Charleston, and currently serves as an account executive with Johnson & Johnson. Consistently ranked by his company as a top performing medical sales representative, Jess routinely coaches industry colleagues on achieving sales goals. A frequent speaker at Rotary clubs, community organizations, and weekend retreats, Jess also speaks on a variety of topics, including the role of discipline in athletics and faith, men and grieving, and the importance of accountability groups and church participation in men's lives.

A committed Christian, Jess attends Crossroads Community Chapel, where he teaches Sunday school.

Jess is also chairman of his church board and leads a weekly adult bible study. Jess resides in West Virginia with his wife, Mary, and their two sons, Jak and Caleb. This is his first book.