

**A Journey Through Unexpected Sibling Bereavement:  
An Adolescent's Grief And  
Struggle To Find Meaning In Adulthood**

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## Abstract

*Although extensive research relating to adolescent bereavement exists, studies relating specifically to adolescent sibling bereavement are limited in scope and rarely provide a longitudinal perspective. This study implements autoethnography to reveal a retrospective of the author's personal experience with grief after the unexpected death of her only sister during adolescence. The case study provides a longitudinal perspective of adolescent sibling bereavement as the author examines her grief from the moment that she found out her sister was killed, through to the present day, 22 years later. The author reveals many short-term and long-term effects of grief while examining her own experiences from both adolescent and adult perspectives. Also provided is an introduction to other literature on the topic. The study will present families, teachers, counselors, and other community members, with a more in-depth look at adolescent sibling bereavement, its long-term impacts, and suggestions for supporting an adolescent experiencing grief after the death of a sibling.*



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Dedication

*For my sister, Leslie Dawn Norbeck . . .*

*Although my journey through life continues to be lonely without you by my side,*

*I know that our relationship will continue to transcend time and distance,*

*because it is I who chooses to bring you with me.*

*Beneath the sun, the moon, and the stars, my life must go on without you . . .*

*Nevertheless, I am still missing you every step of the way.*

*I hope you understand that I have shared your tragedy not as means to say goodbye,*

*or to bring closure to my past,*

*but as a means to revisit how important you will always be to me.*

*Maybe our story will help someone else find their way.*

*I love you and I miss you.*

*Our journey together is not over . . .*

*Keeping your shadow beside me . . . your little sister forever.*

### Acknowledgements

Mentioning my gratitude and thanks, to both of my parents, for not dissuading me from doing this project, does not in any way seem sufficient in relation to the personal and private experiences revealed, and despite without choice, having to revisit their own sorrows as I presented my own. Mom, I can only let you know how much I appreciate your stepping back when necessary, and your unobtrusive assistance during those times when I needed it. Thank you for hearing my words and wiping my tears. Dad, I know and understand that your silent voice was not a reflection of a silent heart. The patience and acceptance you both provided with this personal journey of mine have taught me more about the importance of family and forgiveness than you could ever imagine. I hope you understand.

I also recognize that in no way would I have been able to get through the emotional lows and personal expectations of this project unscathed, if it were not for the support, flexibility, patience, and encouragement of my husband. I understand that it was difficult to sit by and watch me emotionally unravel at times without being able to protect me or mend my heart. Thank you for nurturance, and at times, tolerance of my stories, tears, and unpredictable emotions as I struggled with the experiences of my past, bringing them unleashed into our present day life.

To those of my friends, especially Rochelle, who along the way, always checked in and listened as I shared, vented, and cried...Thank you. Knowing that I could count on you provided much relief, peace, and strength to my heart.

Thank you to my project supervisor, Trudy Mothus, for supporting me as I struggled with the decision as to whether I should even go ahead with this emotionally challenging project. Furthermore, your open-minded, parallel, and flexible style of communication supported my need to feel secure and uninhibited when discussing not only emotional topics, but also the requirements of this project. To both Trudy, and additional committee supervisor, Judith Lapadat, I appreciate your on-going genuine care and concern for my emotional well-being. As much as it was difficult at times to keep your efforts at providing emotional support at an arms distance, I will remember your personal reflections and insights into my story. On a more academic note, I would like to thank you for your guidance, recommendations, and as much freedom as possible, in creating this retrospective on my long-term journey with grief.

Additional thanks to Dr. Han Li, my external committee member, for her participation with my proposal approval, and taking the time to provide professional feedback on the final stages of my project.

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## CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

*Background*

I often wonder what my life would be like if I still had a sister--or I suppose more realistically if I had some form of counseling to help me work through the pain that has followed me all of these years. Twenty-two years have passed since my older sister, Leslie, died in a drinking and driving after-grad related car accident. At the time, she was just completing Grade 11 and seventeen years old, while I was just finishing my Grade 9 year at the age of fourteen. Although it has been so many years since that life-altering moment, I still think of her every day, and I still miss her so much that it emotionally overwhelms me at times. For years, I convinced myself that I had managed this loss fairly well. I still had days that were difficult and horrible memories that haunted me, but overall I thought I was discovering how to move forward and remember her as best as I knew how. Yet, in all honesty, I never felt as if my life was ever going to be okay again without her. I should have had more time with her. She should still be here with me. Even today, I still feel as though I need her in my life. I can think about those statements from a logical and conscious perspective, and knowing that according to some individuals, are in many ways dysfunctional, am able to stop and reframe them. However, my emotional and spiritual sides seem incapable of breaking free and adjusting adequately enough to eliminate these persistent and pervasive thoughts more permanently.

I believe that much of what I was told and read about grief over the past few years was helpful for me cognitively, but nothing prepared me for the unbelievably intense emptiness that seems to have permanently situated itself in my life. I continue to ask myself, why does it still hurt so much? What is wrong with me? Why do the wonderful people and things I still and now

have in my life not lessen the agony? If I tuck the thoughts and memories away, regretfully choosing not to think about her, then I get a chance to breathe freely again--even if just for a moment. Maybe that is what I have done for years in order to survive. Is that what people who have lost a loved one do? Is this how I wound up here, feeling as though my sadness is no better than it was the day that my sister died? All of the stages of grief that western society says I was supposed to work through still seep into my thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and relationships. What I do know, is that I feel lonelier than ever since several major events in my life have occurred. Am I unrealistic in my understanding of what grief really is?

### *Rationale and Aims*

The traumatic death of a sibling during adolescence signifies an unanticipated and unwanted termination of what one anticipates, believes, hopes, understands, and expects to, possibly be the longest and perhaps the most intimate relationship of our lifetime (Robinson & Mahon, 1997). Much of the research that I have examined so far indicates that there has been relatively extensive study of adult and parental bereavement, as well as, adolescent grief in general. However, the research also states that adolescent bereavement specifically relating to sibling loss often goes overlooked, underplayed, and underestimated in our society (Balk, 1990a, 1991b; Davies, 1988a, 1991b; Hogan & DeSantis, 1992a, 1994b; Hogan & Greenfield, 1991; Forward & Garlie, 2003; Packman, Horsley, Davies, & Kramer, 2006). Furthermore, limited longitudinal research exists regarding the complexity and intensity of unexpected adolescent sibling bereavement from its traumatic beginnings to its effects on the future development of the person (Balk, 1990a, 1991b; Davies, 1988a, 1991b; Hogan & DeSantis, 1992a, 1994b, Hogan & Greenfield, 1991; Forward & Garlie, 2003; Packman et al., 2006). Consequently, western society

in general is poorly prepared to intervene therapeutically with surviving siblings, who may benefit from grief counseling during adolescence and later in life.

The purpose of this project is to provide an in-depth description of my own life-long journey following the unexpected death of my older sister, in the hope that this account will resonate with others in a similar circumstance, as well as increase the understanding of helping professionals working with bereaved teens. I believe a personal exploration of my own grief following the death of my sister during adolescence will provide insight and knowledge to a broad range of community members about how to offer support and understanding to people who experience this significant loss. Furthermore, I believe that my personal story may provide solace and insight to some adolescents and families who, unfortunately, are dealing with a similar type of loss. From a personal perspective, I hope that implementing an autoethnographic approach will help me construct meaning, and provide healing and resolution to the pieces of grief that may have gone unresolved for me all these years.



## CHAPTER 2

## INTRODUCTION TO ADOLESCENT SIBLING BEREAVEMENT

The sibling bond can be an influential and powerful relationship that often goes unnoticed and unacknowledged by society and other family members. Companionship, rivalry, loyalty, jealousy, support, envy, love, and even hatred are all descriptors that encompass the unique and intense world of siblings--a dynamic bond that is often distinct, immeasurable, and incomparable to any other. Forward and Garlie (2003) and Bank and Kahn (1982) have described how siblings typically spend at least 80 – 100% of their lifetimes together and may eventually be the only immediate family relationship remaining later in life. Siblings develop unrivaled connections from their initial beginnings, not only through shared biology and familial characteristics, but also through common households, belief systems, experiences, and histories (Robinson & Mahon, 1997). As well, siblings often develop their personal identities based upon each other's influence and shared perspectives. Furthermore, the death of a sibling does not only signify the loss of a soul mate and essentially a piece of ourselves, but also presents the elimination of a probable lifelong companion who can offer a unique connection, history, and perspective that no one else can (Rosen, 1986; Davies, 2003; and Devita-Raeburn, 2004).

*Adolescent Development*

It would be difficult to understand the multitude of emotions, behaviors, and thoughts that an adolescent experiences after the death of a sibling without knowing more about adolescence in general. Background knowledge about the varying aspects of adolescent development, along with perspectives on death and grief reactions becomes imperative when considering the challenges and multi-faceted problems associated with adolescent bereavement after the death of sibling. Within the stage of adolescence are distinguishable characteristics that

prominently feature three different areas of progression. Noted as a time of transition, distinguished by rapid physical growth, sexual maturation, and specific cognitive and emotional needs, Morgan (1990) and Emswiler & Emswiler (2000) compiled a summary of stages associated with adolescence, to better illustrate the unique phases of development with which adolescents encounter.

Early adolescence (11 to 14 years) - logical thought, dependence on and valued time with parents, compliance to demands/rules/structures, testing of limits influenced by peers, anxiety related to peer relationships, physical/sexual changes, more interest in the opposite sex.

Middle Adolescence (14 to 17 years) - rebellion, emotional upheaval, intense reactions, fight-or-flight responses, judgmental attitudes, bargaining with adults, “know it all” stance, peer group priority, pushing limits, breaking rules, search of own beliefs/values/independence/identity, sexuality and sex-related issues, struggle with self-image, reaction to parents as “worst enemies”, rejection of parents, and confusion about dependency to parents.

Late Adolescence (17 to 21 years) – greater rationality and maturity enable less resistance and emotional turmoil, physical/sexual maturation, security with ethics/values, develop adult social skills, further independence, search for mate, develop intimate/mature relationships, career decisions, live independently, make long-term commitments, more stability/security with self, and parents more accepted again.

Although these descriptions provide some insight into the adolescent experience, they do not consider or incorporate the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive reactions to grief that an adolescent may exhibit in response to a tragedy or crisis.

### *Factors Contributing to Adolescent Sibling Grief*

The unexpected death of a sibling during adolescence presents emotional, familial, and social challenges, which will transcend time. This multitude of complex emotions, depending partially upon personal characteristics, family dynamics, and influence from others, will contribute to the surviving sibling experiencing a more positive or negative personal journey with grief. Gapes (1999, p.9) states that “. . . the intensity, duration and expression of an

individual's grief will be proportionate to the individual's psychological make-up, the nature of their relationship with the deceased, social factors, cultural factors and the nature of the death.” Davies (1999) encapsulated the mediating variables, which significantly influence the grief-related responses of surviving siblings, as a combination of individual characteristics, situational characteristics, and environmental characteristics. More specifically, Davies identified the following descriptors to provide a clearer understanding of the multitude of factors that have an impact upon sibling bereavement.

Individual Characteristics – gender, age, dependence, health, coping skills, temperament, self-concept, and previous experience with death + loss.

Situational Characteristics – cause of death, duration of illness, place of death, time elapsed since death, involvement.

Environmental Characteristics – shared life space, centrality, family environment, parent/child communication, parental grief, and family functioning. (p. 293)

It becomes clear that an adolescent's personal journey with grief encompasses many factors that may bring about some common reactions and responses to their loss, but could also present unpredictable emotions, cognitions, and behaviors that are unfamiliar to families, friends, and even counselors. The identification of potential factors that may affect an adolescent in a positive or negative manner during their struggle with grief is essential in order to prepare for and understand adequately how complex and diverse each individual's grief may be.

### *Adolescent Sibling Bereavement*

Although there are several different theories about the stages of grief that one experiences after the death of a loved one, it is difficult to find research that specifically addresses the grief reactions that an adolescent experiences after the death of a sibling. Balk (1990) stated that a life crisis affects many fundamental changes relating to the cognitive, moral, physical, emotional,

and psychosocial development of an adolescent after the death of a sibling. For some, “. . . the dead sibling’s legacy can be a force for sickness and stagnation or, under beneficent circumstances, can serve as an inspiration for maturation and creativity” (Bank & Kahn, 1982, p. 287).

Several researchers have pointed out that the grief reactions of adolescents may be significantly different from those of adults, as they have limited experience coping with intense emotions such as, anger, fear, shock, guilt, depression, and loneliness (Balk, 1990; Kandt, 1994). More specifically, Hogan and Greenfield (1991) reviewed several studies investigating the grief reactions of bereaved adolescents from community-based samples. (Balk, 1981, 1983b; Hogan, 1987, 1988; Hogan & Balk, 1990; Martinson, Davies, & McClowry, 1987; Michael & Lansdown, 1986). The following descriptions of grief-related reactions in response to the death of a sibling became apparent in Hogan and Greenfield’s examination of these studies:

sleep disturbance, poor concentration, doing things alone, feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, restlessness, not being liked by peers, fear of dying, being sick more often, increased fears, depression, phobias, anger, nightmares, decreased sense of self-worth and suicidal thoughts, feeling uncomfortable when happy, . . . feeling responsible for death, feeling overprotected by parents, anger at God, increased grief symptoms during family holidays, and believing that their parents will never get over the death.(p. 99)

Having knowledge of these bereavement responses may prepare and enlighten those who interact with a surviving sibling, but it is only one aspect towards being able to institute effective support measures and access the grieving world of a sibling. As mentioned earlier, despite many of the internal and observable reactions identified with adolescent sibling bereavement, there is limited insight into the specific processes or stages of grief that an adolescent may experience, which differ from those of an adult. Nevertheless, Forward and Garlie (2003) utilized a grounded theory approach to examine the sibling bereavement process during adolescence. Their findings

suggested that, more specifically, that the adolescent sibling bereavement process contains five stages.

1. Finding Out
2. Avoiding Reality (numbness, keeping busy)
3. Facing Reality (working through the pain, loneliness, being different)
4. Turning the Corner
5. Ending the Search *or* Finding New Meaning (accepting the pain, continuing the bond, redefining self)

According to Forward and Garlie, regardless of ending the search or finding new meaning, the grief-related process for some adolescents led them to re-experience the third phase of facing reality and continue cycling through the process over again. The core variable is the surviving sibling's search for new meaning, from the moment he or she learns of the loss, which then continues for many years. For some of their participants, the search for meaning remained ongoing throughout their life.

Although I only briefly introduce the literature relating to adolescent development and grief here, further discussion of literature pertaining specifically to adolescent sibling bereavement will be included in my concluding chapters. Nevertheless, this introduction will provide the reader with some general knowledge about grief prior to reading my personal story. Additional research findings integrated later will provide deeper insight and a broader perspective about sibling bereavement with details from my experiences to draw upon.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

My implementation of autoethnography is, in effect, a case study based on my personal experience with grief. The central focus of this project is to examine my personal experiences, reflections, and thoughts relating to the unexpected loss of my older sister during adolescence. A longitudinal perspective on grief will emerge as this retrospective of my own process with grief progresses to my present day life. I believe that this autoethnographic approach is appropriate for further developing the reader's perspective about adolescent sibling grief, as I will present a unique and often unfamiliar perspective relating to unexpected sibling loss during adolescence through to adulthood. It is a story that I believe will resonate with others who have encountered sibling loss personally or for those who work in counseling contexts. Furthermore, this qualitative approach will provide a link between what readers might consciously recognize about sibling loss, and how much they are able to emotionally understand, and empathize. Evidence provided through this first-hand account, and the understanding and meanings that I have derived from my experience with adolescent sibling grief will complement, expand upon, and at times challenge the current research by filling in and presenting new details left unsaid in previous research about an adolescent's journey with grief.

#### *Autoethnographic Approach*

Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that developed out of traditional ethnography as practiced by anthropologists, informed by the narrative turn and the social constructionist paradigm. Social constructionists believe that the constructions of past or recent experiences are not necessarily an absolute truth, but more specifically well informed and/or sophisticated knowledge based upon the individual perceptions presented (Lincoln & Guba,

1985, Berger & Luckman, 1967). Essentially, the central points that characterize a social constructionist perspective are that there is no one single truth but rather that people have differing perspectives that arise from their different history of experiences, and that social practices have great influence on what individuals believe, know, and do.

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) define ethnography as using writing to focus on the culture within groups of people. They go on to more specifically describe culture as a pattern represented by the beliefs, behaviors, norms, attitudes, social arrangements, and forms of expression that exist in the lives of people. Nastasi & Dewolt (1995) assert that all personal constructs, although potentially altered over time, lead to new perspectives of reality, and are equally valid and important. They proceed to conclude that well-developed perceptions of shared insight relating to a specific social problem leads to direct implications for community action. Furthermore, LeCompte and Schensul (1999) state that an autoethnographic approach lays the groundwork to produce theories about culture and society, thus providing validity to personal stories and an inclination to corroborate an individual's thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors which are revealed in the details of their experience.

LeCompte and Schensul (1999) also identify two fundamental goals and several key principles of the ethnographic research approach. The two goals of ethnography are to bring about an understanding of sociocultural problems in groups or communities, and to identify potential solutions based upon the research that will contribute to positive changes. The principles or important characteristics of ethnography are: constructing the stories from a natural setting; generating theories or explanations about the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors of people at a given time and place using inductive, interactive, and recursive data collection; and accurately representing the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of the participants.

### *Participants*

I am the sole participant in this study, an autoethnographic longitudinal account of my personal memories, thoughts, and feelings. This study focuses on a personal grief-related retrospective of a single event that I experienced during early adolescence and have struggled with until the present day. This exploration of grief is a retrospective as there is no precise way to recall what my exact feelings and thoughts were from 22 years ago. This is simply my best effort to reconstruct what I most clearly remember. However, the inclusion of original poetry, selected course assignments, and music (Appendix A) from my past will help ground some of my earlier thoughts and emotions. In contrast, the present day perspective provided will represent a current account of my emotions and thoughts experienced in adulthood.

### *Procedures*

My primary methods of ethnographic data collection were a recollection and in-depth exploration of personal memories, a review of my poems written over a 17-year period, and an examination of various print materials such as newspaper articles, obituaries, a funeral leaflet, a death certificate, memorials, sympathy cards, and music relating to my sister's death. I also have included photographs as a visual representation of my sibling relationship prior to Leslie's death to provide an emotional and human connection for the reader. In addition, I drew upon resources and previous course assignments that I completed during the past several years directly relating to my journey with grief. More specifically, I retrieved portfolio submissions from an art therapy course, along with a research paper and two book reviews from a grief therapy course. The direction in which my story unfolds explores many topics and experiences that describe the following: the days following my sister's death, relationships, rituals, holidays, resurfacing emotions, unexpected reminders, significant life events, symbolic meaning, emotions, and my



search for answers. The development of my story, through the exploration of various events and times in my life since my sister's death, also leads to the identification of a number of recurring themes.

In addition to my personal story, I have included a brief introduction to adolescent grief and incorporated a brief review of literature within my discussion. I originally had intended to integrate a literature review throughout my story, as I felt uncertain as to whether I would be able to produce my story with sufficient scope to be meaningful. This uncertainty arose from my own personal insecurities about story or non-fictional writing, as well as, a sense of fear in not knowing if I could emotionally handle the task of re-telling my experiences related to my sister's death. I had not anticipated that the process of writing about my personal experiences after the death of my sister would become so extensive and, although emotionally challenging, considerably therapeutic. Thus, I made the decision to separate the literature review from my personal story. I believe that this decision does not compromise the integrity or validity of my research, but rather highlights the purpose, value, and meaning of my personal story more directly.

### *Ethical Considerations*

During the initial planning and writing stages of this project it was clear to me that I would need to use caution in documenting my grief experience for several reasons. First, I faced the dilemma of having to rely on my memories and recollections from 22 years prior. Second, it was clear in my mind that I did not want to reveal the identities of individuals other than myself. Finally, I was aware that some members of the community may remember my sister's name, and did not want to compromise the anonymity of anyone based upon details that related to certain circumstances, events, or interactions.

The purpose of implementing ethnography was to support an honest account of my recollections and experiences. In using this approach, I also recognize that my story can only provide reconstructed memories, from a perspective that can no longer represent an exact replication of my thoughts, feelings, or observed events as they occurred during those years as a teenager and young adult. In light of this, I decided to include poems, pictures, songs, and assignment content collected over the years to provide additional context and support for some of my stories. In addition, I acknowledge that the quotes, which reflect statements and comments made to me over the years, are at best, a recollection of words spoken, but I cannot guarantee the accuracy of those quotes. Lastly, I realize that my grief-related responses did not only occur due to the death of my sister, but also because of individual personalities, past experiences, family dynamics, and the developmental stages I passed through during adolescence.

As I wrote down my memories, I eliminated individual's names and identifying information about those people with whom I interacted. Before I began writing my story, I knew that I must only represent my own personal perspectives and interpretations. I recognize that I cannot speak for any of the other people involved in my journey, and that their perspectives may not coincide with my own. In addition, this project was not about placing blame or identifying those who, from my perspective, may have caused more harm, so I saw no purpose in including their names or identities. I also recognize that any reference made to my parents does not reflect their personal thoughts, feelings, or interpretations about the situations, but more specifically and exclusively, my own personal interpretation of what was happening in my world at the time.

I am aware that citizens from the community where I grew up may remember my sister's tragedy. There is the possibility that someone may encounter this project and draw mistaken conclusions about the situations I describe. Therefore, I have taken every measure to ensure that

the details I have chosen to include, in no way, reveal any specific people, schools, or institutions involved. This is my story about grief and the anonymity of community members remained paramount throughout this journey. I would also like to conclude that my parents and husband were fully aware of my reference to them in my writing, but have not included their names as it did not seem relevant, nor did it add any additional meaning to the stories. Moreover, my parents have signed a written consent form (Appendix B) for me to write and publish this account, and it includes a statement of their right to preview my completed project and request omission of any information that they find especially sensitive, offensive, or too personal. Lastly, despite my efforts to ensure anonymity as described above, I sought and obtained approval by the university Research Ethics Board to proceed with my project as intended.

### *Limitations of Autoethnography*

Ethnographic research is not different from other approaches in that it also faces restrictions and limitations. Although I have attempted to present the most accurate and honest account of my grief-related experiences and perspectives, I have encountered some challenges presenting the information due to the limitations of the approach selected.

First, I have found it challenging at times to accurately recall some of the situations and emotions from the past. In those cases, I chose to eliminate the inclusion of those memories at the expense of losing some valuable material relating to my grief experience. Although the loss of those significant incidences may be unfortunate, I do not believe that their exclusion has compromised the significance of my story, but rather supported the ethical and professional presentation of my project. Furthermore, I have carefully selected and worded the recreated accounts of my past so that they reflect the most genuine portrayal of my experiences from then and now.

Second, I acknowledge that my research is limited by only including my personal journey with grief. I recognize that my experience with grief may be different from that of other people who may not describe similar experiences or perspectives relating to grief. In addition, more than just grief shaped my journey; it also encompassed individual characteristics, age, gender, family-based values and beliefs, culture, religious beliefs, community influence, and previous and present life experiences. I struggled at times distinguishing whether an emotional experience directly related to my grief, or to the other factors mentioned above. In those cases, I chose to remove those stories, as I did not want to confuse my grief experience with some other facet of my life. Furthermore, it is impossible to generalize my experience with grief, as my personal background is unique. However, I do believe that my experience will enhance understanding of some immediate and long-term adolescent grief reactions.

Last, I have chosen to exclude some specific events and stories from my project in order to protect the identities of some individuals who negatively influenced my emotional stability as I dealt with grief. The exclusion of these stories may leave some of my emotional challenges after the death of my sister unexplained, but that is simply for me to come to terms with. I do believe that I have included enough in-depth discussion that the complexity and magnitude of my grief-related story will uphold its significance, value, and legitimacy.

## CHAPTER 4

## MY STORY

*Sisters*

Always in my shadow, the red-haired child . . .

Little sister.

Sharing in my visions.

Accepting all the pieces as I found them,  
but making of them something woven . . .

Something of her own.

I keep the things I love in disarray around me  
Intermingling with the dust and shadows of my life

She places hers in crystal boxes

To catch the light and splinter it like prisms

I am oils,

gouging textured meaning from the canvas.

She is dappled watercolors,  
suggestions of a moment felt, but undefined.

She the mime, and I the jangling harlequin  
on either side of beveled glass,  
watching one another.

And if sometimes I draw too many black lines,

I am comforted to know . . .

that she will follow close behind me still.

Coloring the spaces with her crayons  
and laughing when she goes out of the lines.

Author Unknown

(Published in unknown magazine prior to June 1986)

The poem, "Sisters" was located within Leslie's personal book of poems and drawings. She had not written this poem, but had cut it out from a magazine at some point and put it with her private book of drawings and poems. My sister had never mentioned or shown this poem to me. My mom gave it to me when she found it after Leslie died. I have always wondered what my sister thought about our relationship and having me for a sister, especially after she died. This is all I have from her that might speak to that.

How ironic that, in many ways, I found this poem to be fitting in regards to our relationship, in both life and death. I remember that when my sister was alive, I often took note of her interests, style, and personality. Although, in my efforts to be somewhat like her, I am sure that much of her uniqueness was lost in translation and consequently, my own individuality developed. Regardless, I felt alive with my aspirations to be as good as her, while at times I strived to be completely different. She was my big sister and although I often embraced living in her shadow, there were times when I wanted to step outside of it. I could appreciate our differences, take pride in our similarities, and strive to emulate those things about her that I admired. Prior to her death, I had often experienced living in my sister's shadow by her side, or at least chasing at her heels.

After her death, I grew accustomed to the notion that I would always be in her shadow. The phrase, "I am comforted to know, that she will follow close behind me still", on one hand provided reassurance that she may have appreciated me, her little sister, despite our differences, tagging along behind her. Regretfully, this comfort was also somewhat bittersweet, as I also felt despair in knowing that I would never have the chance to follow close behind her again. In addition, this sense of connectedness that I once felt when she was alive frequently became self-defeating after her death. I no longer believed that I could be as good as or as important as her,



regardless of how hard I tried, or how well I did. People have said that I shouldn't have felt that way, but I just did. Although I knew that she hadn't been perfect and as sisters we butted heads many times, it was as if she was now up on this incredible pedestal and everything she represented to me seemed so far out of reach. I now experienced feeling as though I lived in a shadow beneath her and the distance to keep up had stretched out of reach.

I do not believe that anything specific contributed to this shift, other than the fact that I grieved her death and emulated her memory. Over time, I translated this inner comparison and lessening of my sister's own faults, into thoughts of inadequacy and began to believe that I was a disappointment to my parents. Although they never compared us, I often misinterpreted their guidance, expectations, and encouragement as wanting me to be more like her or resentment that I was not. I can now acknowledge, however, that these distorted perceptions after Leslie's death polluted my sense of self. Whereas once I would have gladly followed in her shadow, upon her death, I somehow faced feeling haunted and diminished by it.



*Losing My Sister (Hearing the News)*

The night that my 17 and a half year-old sister died in a horrific, graduation-related drinking and driving accident marked a point in my life that I believe changed me forever. I was fourteen and a half years old and in a matter of minutes, the life that I knew and the person I recognized in the mirror disappeared. I do not remember all of the details exactly, but what I do remember of that night tore open my innocence, trust, and spirit like an earthquake ripping through the land and destroying what took years to create. The only way that I can explain this change resembles this--after an earthquake, all of the land and its pieces still exist, but the formation, layers, structure, stability and appearance have changed. My inner sense of self, perceptions of the world, relationships, emotional stability, and freedom to exist as I once had, drastically transformed that night. Although I can picture in my mind what existed before, no amount of time or re-building seems to repair the damage to its original state, while the formation of a new life seems meaningless, flawed, and incomplete.

I remember waking up suddenly at about 3:00 in the morning at the sound of a doorbell and my mom saying something to my dad about somebody at the door. In her voice was an unfamiliar tone that alarmed me. I lay quietly in bed listening as my mom and dad scrambled out of bed, turned on the hall light, and went to the door. I sat up in my bed, but stopped and waited with a fearful uncertainty. Why was someone ringing the doorbell so late? Based upon my age and experience, I had no inclination as to why someone would be at our door in the middle of the night. I heard the door open and for a brief moment only silence--and then the terrorizing sounds that still echo in my head today. My mom began screaming in a way that elicited feelings of terror and confusion. It wasn't a high-pitched frantic horror show scream, but rather a slow, repetitive low-pitched raspy sound that reached from the depths of her spirit. I remember the



stiffening chill that ran through my body that night as I stood in the darkness of my room. Tears started trickling down my cheeks. I did not understand what could possibly be happening. I do not remember getting up and out of bed or walking down the hallway, only standing at the end of the hall and seeing my mom in a distraught state and my dad, tearful, trying to hold her. I looked to the door and saw two police officers standing there. Their faces looked frozen. I do not remember anything being said--only the screams--those horrible, echoing screams.

Then the police left. Looking back, I wish they had not left us alone. Why would they leave us alone? I suppose they had done as much as their training provided for. Unfortunately, back in the 1980's, when my sister's accident occurred, I suppose crisis counselors had not been available or were not active resources in the community. I assume it was uncommon for professionals to arrive at a home and provide support in the aftermath of a deadly accident. I am not certain if my parents told me what was happening at this point or not. Even if they had, the scene that followed invaded my ability to process what they told me. My mom buckled on the floor at the foot of the loveseat, but my dad managed to get her up. She just kept screaming, "No, No, No." My dad was crying and trying to stop my mom as she hypnotically paced around the house sobbing. I am not sure how long I stood there fearfully watching and wondering, "Why were the police at our house, why won't my mom stop screaming--wake up, just wake up--please stop screaming, please just stop." At some point, they wound up in the kitchen, holding onto each other and sobbing. I remember during all of this asking, "What's happening? What's wrong?", but in all honesty I do not know if the words ever escaped my mouth. I was frightened and did not know what to do. My parents somehow found the strength to utter the words, "There's been an accident--Leslie's been in a bad accident," I remember a thought immediately

flashing through my head that we needed to get to the hospital, but then the rest of the sentence came, “and she didn’t make it--she died.”

Everybody’s immediate experience with grief and life-long reactions are different, especially because of the unique personalities involved, differing reactions, family dynamics and varying circumstances. I also believe that the nature of one’s death and the manner in which a family finds out can have a long-term impact on a person’s grief response. The trauma that I experienced that night left me with sounds and images that still ring in my ears and flash in front of my eyes today. I cannot seem to erase these memories. They remain forever imprinted in my mind. I have learned over time how to keep these memories of that moment somewhere separate from my day-to-day life. However, there are times when they escape from that dark place and leave me feeling nothing except misery and defeat. After all these years, I find it strange that in these private moments of remembering my chest still feels like it is going to cave in, my eyes become a river of tears, I cover my ears as if to block out the sounds, and begin to feel as though I cannot breathe. My thoughts still scream the same things, “Why, why, why! I don’t understand!” People have made statements over the years about working through my grief. This whole concept frustrates me. I wonder, as a young teenager, how was I supposed to work through something so horrifying, an experience that, even today as I write this, still consumes me with unimaginable agony? I sincerely do not believe that one can realistically work through this type of trauma for years, and for some if ever. For me, I simply acquired the skill of blocking out the thoughts of the experience until some unexpected reminder of that suffering caused the pain that I purposefully locked up inside to re-emerge. As an adult, I believe that although I will never forget these moments, I have gained a sense of maturity that enables me to comprehend this pain

with more tolerance. I now understand that I no longer need to lock it up, but still use caution in deciding with whom and where I choose to reveal it.

Nobody ever took the time to talk to me about the horror and intensity of emotions that I felt when we found out that my sister was dead. They said, “We’re so sorry,” and asked, “How are you doing?” or “What happened?” I do not recall family or friends attempting to talk with me privately or in any length about my feelings after my sister’s death. There was no rewind button to press as a means to examine our feelings or experiences, just the slow motion forward as we tried to make sense of life without Leslie. Nevertheless, this specific moment on that dreadful night created a gaping wound in my soul that I have somehow learned to live with all of these years. I have experienced many other traumatic and sad events since then, but nothing has come close to the debilitating and life-altering emotions of those few minutes when I found out my sister was killed. There was no saving her and there was no chance to say good-bye. She was just gone--just like that--in an instant.



The last picture we would ever have of Leslie.  
It was taken approximately 8 hours before the accident.

*What Followed in the Aftermath*

In the aftermath, a roller coaster of emotion, shock, and exhaustion followed. We did not have the desperately needed opportunity to hold each other, to grieve, and to talk--now the chaos of visitors, notification, and planning began. This period left me feeling very isolated and inadequate; I just sat and watched. I did not know what to do in order to help. I felt forgotten, alone, and in the way. I also came to realize in those early years as a teenager, that despite trying to process the despair of a tragedy, there always remains potential for things to get worse or more complicated.

I remember the immediate concern to inform my grandparents and other important people about my sister's death before the news channels released her name to the public. Before most people were even getting out of bed or the sun began rising, my parents were calling upon our long-time family friends in the wake of my sister's death. Within an hour, my Dad and our family friend left our home to drive to my grandparent's lakeside cabin to protect them from hearing about the accident on the radio during the early morning news. I remember feeling petrified that they may have an accident along the way and not make it back. I had never experienced these fears before when my parents traveled out of town. Astonishingly, within an hour or two of my sister's unexpected death, I began to respond to situations around me differently. Nevertheless, I said nothing and just waited fearfully.

Around this time, I remember watching my Mom make repeated phone calls to family and friends. I felt somewhat confused in having to hear her explain to people that Leslie was dead, tearfully answer questions, hanging up, drying her eyes, and then dialing again. Even in those moments, I wanted to help but didn't know how. Should I hug her? Should I leave her alone? Should I offer to make some of the calls? The words, "What do I do, what do I do?" just

kept running through my mind. I remember telling myself to close my eyes, or find a spot on the wall, and just look at it, when I could no longer face the reality unfolding in front of my eyes anymore. This is how I managed while sitting on the couch alone trying to figure out what all of this meant. It couldn't get any worse--or could it?

As family and friends came and went, there was a lot of talking, crying, and hugging. There is so much emotional chaos in the aftermath of death that I believe there are, at times, some things that just go unnoticed because there would be no reason to consider the possibility of anything to watch for. As much as the comforting embraces were a part of the process, one incident immediately added disgust to the mixture of feelings that already consumed me that day. Some adults would probably classify this single incident as a sexual assault, although the innocent teenager in me remembers it more emotionally as a grotesque and perverted groping. Up until now, I have never revealed this to my parents, as some things I just kept secret, as they would only add to the devastation that we already faced. I remember the exact moment when, in what was disguised as a hug providing support, a male hand slid down my back to my tailbone and began pressing me against his crotch. I tried pushing back but was unable to get any distance. He just kept me pressed into him while maneuvering my hips back and forth across his groin. I felt nauseous and sickened. This was not what a hug felt like. This was not comforting. This was not how anyone else hugged me. I wanted to scream, "Let me go, don't touch me," but I just stood there horrified, and unable to fathom why he would hug me in this way. I could see my parents over his shoulder as other people coming into the house were hugging them. I kept thinking, "Look over here, look over here--make him let me go." I do not know how long it took, but I was finally able to push away to the side, underneath his arm, quickly walked over, stood

by my Mom and Dad, remained silent, and preceded to receive hugs from the others coming into our home.

I said nothing and have continued to say nothing for all these years. What was done, was done. Besides, as a teenager, I did not know how to bring this up when everything that was happening was already so devastating. I convinced myself that it was no big deal--I would be fine, and I would just be careful to keep away from him. For years, I considered disclosing this incident to my parents, but I worried that they might minimize or explain his behavior as a misunderstanding or overreaction due to the emotional intensity of the situation. As well, it continued to seem insignificant in the scheme of things as we faced the emotional and familial ramifications of my sister's death. I even considered the possibility that maybe I misinterpreted the hug--but no--I honestly know that I did not. My skin still crawls with disgust whenever I think about it. I still loath the man and harbor much hatred for what he did to me that day, but believe my decision to say nothing at the time and for all these years was necessary.

Another aspect that emotionally complicated what we already faced related to the accident details. I will never forget the coroner standing in the kitchen at the back door with my mom. He had come to get a brief description of clothes and any distinguishing marks on my sister's body. I asked my mom why she was telling him those specific things. I was completely unprepared to for the situation getting worse, but it did. In this moment, I learned that there was unspeakable damage to my sister's face in the accident--"she had been pretty banged up." The coroner insisted on identifying her body for my parents. This aspect of my sister's death has been one of the most traumatizing realizations to process over the years.

I do not believe that anyone--teenager, adult, sibling or parent--is equipped to figure out what to do with this kind of information. I never imagined that my mind could create such horrid

images, constructing on its own the disfiguring damage that I never saw. My mind played tricks on me and fabricated images of what the accident scene and bodies may have looked like. I could not seem to stop some of these brutal images from filtering into my thoughts during the day and dreams, or nightmares, at night. I just wanted to remember her beautiful face and smile, but that seemed no longer possible. I thought about those images less frequently over the years, but have still not been able to eliminate those disturbing images from my mind.

The last thing I really remember, or at least for some time, other than bits and pieces in distorted fragments, is lying in my bedroom and quietly turning on the radio. I desperately needed to hear the news report. I still wanted to believe this was all a big mistake. The police were mistaken and my parents were wrong in believing them. In some ways, I was mad at them for making me go through this horrible lie. Then I heard it, "...17 year-old, Leslie Norbeck..." coming through the speaker of my radio. I did not understand how this could be happening. I just lay there and cried into my pillow, hoping that nobody would come to my room, and that my parents would not hear me. I did not want or need a hug. I did not understand the emotions that ran within me. I felt out of place and numb. I simply did not grasp what was happening. She was just here with us. I just wanted to be alone with my sadness and my tears--simply to disappear for a moment. Even today as an adult, I cry most of my tears in private where I do not feel as though I need to maintain some composure for fear of upsetting someone else.



*The Days That Followed*

In all of the comings and goings after the death of a loved one, somehow a family manages to fit in the planning for rituals that they believe will provide a funeral that encapsulates the deceased and presents the chance for a formal and final goodbye. At the same time, there may be additional unanticipated situations that arise. In the days that followed my sister's death, several events occurred that I believe magnified and complicated the pain, confusion, worry, and fear for me. Although some of these occurrences might be quite typical after a traumatic loss, I had no previous experience with death, other than that of my great-grandmother as a young child and our family pet. Even if asked what I needed, or if there was anything that I wanted to contribute or add, I just said, "It was fine. It's okay. I can't think of anything." I am not sure why I was so hesitant to share my thoughts or ideas, but in essence, I believe I struggled with many things going on, due to not only the situation, but also my age and naïveté. Unfortunately, in addition to this, an unforeseen complication made the days that followed more challenging.

As news of a tragedy filters through the community, phone calls, visitors, and flowers often become endless. In our home, it quickly resembled a skipping record of repeated efforts by family and friends to provide comfort. Someone would come over--the hugs--the tears--the tissue--the intended words offering heartfelt condolences. The doorbell kept ringing repeatedly. More flowers and more visitors arrived at the door. Although the intention was to be supportive, thoughtful and heartfelt, I soon began to feel completely irritated. This was my initial experience with anger after the death of my sister. Everything felt so overwhelming and surreal. It was like being frozen in time and watching a scene play out that I was not actually a part of, or at least I didn't want to be a part of it. Even today, I remember sitting in the living room, not knowing what to do. I just wanted everything to stop, everyone to go away. I didn't want anybody to talk



to me or hug me anymore. I was so tired. Tired of hugging people, being polite, and listening to them say, "We're so sorry." It simply did not help me feel any better. I wanted to go back to sleep, start the day over, go to baseball and wait for my sister to come and watch me play. I just wanted to scream at everyone but continued to sit in silence watching and listening, not knowing how to help, what to say, or what to do.

Around this time, I also began to conjure up make-believe stories in my mind as to where my sister might really be. Part of my thoughts told me to stop it, but it was easier to say to myself, "Well, maybe--Maybe she met some other friends at the dance and was with them. Maybe she knew something that put her safety at risk and needed secret protection. Maybe she was in trouble and actually just ran away for a little while." As I think back, I now find it astonishing how elaborate and creative my stories became in that denial and hopefulness of still wanting my sister to exist. Deep down I knew that my stories were unlikely to be true, but I was hopeful, because anything would be better than believing she was dead. At least a several months went by before I stopped telling myself that her accident was all just a great big lie.

In the midst of all of this emotional chaos, an unsettling concern arose in regards to my Dad and Grandfather's heart conditions. I believe that it was within the first 24 hours after hearing about my sister's accident that we all faced coping with my grandfather needing to go to the hospital, as he was experiencing chest pain. I do not recall if my Grandfather's heart attack was severe, but I felt an inner anxiety and fear at the thought of someone else dying. I remember going to the hospital with my parents and watching him lie helplessly, breaking down into tears, as he was grief-stricken and alone. I could barely process the reality of having lost my sister, and there I stood, terrified that my Grandpa might die as well. The doctors reluctantly discharged my grandfather within a day or two on the Intensive Care Unit, as the staff believed it was not doing

him any good to stay and that he needed to be with family. My parents and grandparent's were under pressure to keep a watchful eye on my Grandpa for distressing symptoms, while at the same time trying to prepare for my sister's funeral service. There was also concern for my Dad, as he had already experienced his second heart attack within the previous year, and the emotional trauma of losing Leslie, could be too much for his heart to bear. It was in this moment that I told myself not to upset anyone further. I did not want to risk causing any more stress in the fear that it would make things worse. I remember deciding at that point to try to go along with whatever my parents said and do my best to stay out of the way.

As time grew closer to the day of my sister's funeral, my mom also presented an idea to me that was to assist me in saying a final good-bye. If I felt up to it, I could write a letter and the funeral director would place it with my sister inside her casket. Although I did not feel forced to write the letter, I partially chose to because I did not know how to explain that I did not want to say good-bye. A letter would make this whole nightmare real and I still refused to comprehend what had happened. I went ahead with the letter, but struggled with what to say. My mom showed me a letter that my sister's best friend had written to give me an idea of where to start. I wished that I could make my thoughts and words sound like hers. I still could not figure out what to say. I felt embarrassed by my letter in comparison. I was her sister and my words were so simple and boring. I could not manage to select which memories I would treasure or what it was about her that I would miss the most. With hesitation, I gave the letter to my mom, shamefully thinking to myself that I should have had more to say. To this day, I still regret not having been able to express myself better in what was to be a final chance to say good-bye to my sister.

I also remember how disillusioned I felt in the mornings when I would wake up. For the longest time I found it strange that I could forget overnight as I slept that my sister had died. As a

teenager, I didn't think about why this was happening or understand the experience. I just hoped for one morning to finally wake up and see her in her room doing her hair and make-up. There were even days when it wasn't until I was out of my room and didn't see or hear her that I remembered she had died. I so often just wanted to go back to sleep so I wouldn't have to think about the fact that she was gone. In these moments, I just wanted to be alone. There are still some days when sleeping is a welcome escape from having to face the fact that she is no longer with us. I thought about asking my parents if they had the same thoughts, but I was already sure that they did. However, at the time, it was easier to find a distraction, be it music or getting ready for school, and surrender to the idea that I had no choice but to figure out how to get up each day living without her. This experience more realistically lasted several years than just the days that followed.

From this point on, I have a difficult time remembering what anyone was doing, who stayed, who went, or even what I was doing. In fact, even within a few months I had a difficult time remembering these few days. There are only occasional scattered pieces and fragments of time that I recall. For years, I failed to understand why I could not remember any of this better. As a teenager, I thought that if I really cared about what happened then I should be able to remember more clearly. How I could possibly forget anything associated with the loss of my sister was unexplainable to me. Feelings of guilt decreased by my early twenties, as I had learned that shock, trauma, and stress at the time might have blocked some of these memories.

*Dreams*  
(1988 Memorial)

I wish for days when dreams come true,  
That is why I'll wish for you.  
And even if you're gone forever.  
Thoughts of you, will leave me never.  
But as I cry a million tears,  
I'll remember those fourteen years.  
(our together years)

~ Never to be forgotten ~



I wrote this poem as my first memorial to Leslie on the second year anniversary of her death. I was 16 years old and finishing Grade 11. I remember feeling overwhelmed and frustrated as I struggled to capture my thoughts and feelings into a poem in the privacy of my room. I had originally ended the poem with those fourteen years, but my mom pointed out that it was actually 14 ½ years that I had spent with my sister. Writing “fourteen and a half” did not work for me in the poem, so I changed it to our together years. I remember feeling as though I disrespected Leslie’s memory and should have recognized the importance of honoring all of the time I had with my sister.

*Searching for a New Identity*

As an adult, I have come to realize that after the loss of a loved one, the remaining family members attempt to reconfigure their lives and manage new dynamics and roles within the family. Some families are aware of this process of change, while others are not. As an adolescent, I had no idea how to manage the loss of my only sibling in a healthy manner or understand the impacts the tragedy had on my parents as individuals and our family relationships. I just went with whatever came my way. More specifically, I did not consider or fully understand the impact that my sister's death would have on my own sense of identity or the structure of our family. Now, as an educated adult, I am able to comprehend more about what confused me during adolescence. Many things make better sense now and I have come to terms with many troubling situations, thoughts, and feelings that I experienced as a teenager.

The most difficult part of this transition for me was becoming an 'only' child. There were no other siblings in my family for me to grow up with, share with, play with, argue with, laugh with, scheme with, tease, or defend. I questioned everything about my remaining existence as a sibling. Who was I on my own? With whom would I do these things now? I had always identified and defined my life as one with an older sister in it. I had always existed as a younger sister. In so many ways, being a sister for my whole life up to that point had defined me. She led the way; she set the pace and held the key to what growing up was supposed to look like. I now felt lost and did not have anyone to guide me.

How does my sister's importance and influence transcend time if I now have functionally become an "only" child? I have struggled with this label for many years. For fourteen years and 6 months, I lived almost everyday with a sister by my side, participating with me in almost every aspect of life--family, playtime, school, sports, vacations, and so on--as an integral component to

my life. Many people told me that I needed learn how to, "Let go", "Move on", and "Figure out being an 'only' child." I considered that maybe they were right--I was now an 'only' child and needed to accept that. I even remember someone telling me once that becoming an only child was not so bad--that many people grow up without ever having any brothers or sisters, and they managed fine. Yet my overriding emotional response was to perceive that person as a tactless moron for thinking that my experience resembled that of someone who never had a sibling.

Although the majority of people in my life were never this insensitive, there seemed to be a lack of understanding as to how significant sisterhood still was for me. Prior to Leslie's death, I had never experienced life without a sibling and being an 'only' child did not seem to fit into the reality of my life. Back then, I didn't know how I should view my sibling relationship anymore, but I always felt uncomfortable with the notion of now being considered an 'only' child. It just wasn't right. I am glad that I was able to develop my own personal thoughts and beliefs about choosing to continue having a connection with my sister in my life.

Since June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1986, I believe that I have continued to live everyday with a sister by my side. She does not physically exist, but she is still here with me--in my thoughts, in my memories, and in my heart. I wish more people could recognize, understand, and accept that. She is still my sister and she always will be. Just because she died, does not mean that I am an 'only' child now. I see her everyday in pictures, in things around me, and within my memories. When I hear or see the name 'Leslie', I still instinctively think of my sister first before any other person comes to mind. She is still my older sister and would have been 39 years old this year. She did not do anything to warrant me not considering her a sister or not have her birthday celebrated. I have not disowned her, or by choice said that I do not want her in my life. She stills exists for me--I still think about her, remember times together, talk to her, yell at her, and feel that place in



my heart where she belongs. I think about her at every holiday, vacation, and special event. I look at my children today and think of their 'Auntie Leslie', and plan to show them pictures someday when they will understand. I am not an 'only' child; I have an older sister who still lives with me everyday.



*A Life*

A life is really made to die,  
I often ask and wonder why.  
It's like a very special rose . . .  
Has its time, then quickly goes.

But, no one can ever tell me why.  
And, if I only stop to cry,  
The life I live will quickly end,  
And my heart will never mend.

And even if a life does die,  
It's memory will soar the sky.  
But for the life that had to go,  
Why it went, I'll never know.



Our last Christmas Holiday with Leslie.

The poem above represents an early perspective of my thoughts about life ending before its time. I believe that I was approximately 16 years old when I wrote this and was questioning life, death, and how my sister's death affected my life.



*Relationship with Parents and Perspective of Family*

After my sister died, my relationship with my parents and view of our family took on a new identity. On one hand, I recognized and appreciated that my parents were all that I had left, but at the same time, I resented my unexpected and unsolicited existence, which magnified this isolating fact--my parents were all that I had left. Although I knew that other family members and friends existed, I found it frightening to think about my life, without what I considered as my only family. I knew that someday my grandparents would die, but the knowledge that my parents would also die, left me feeling petrified about my potential future without any 'real' family. As confused as I was within myself about this notion, I also realized that without my sister, my parents now only had me. I suppose this thought created challenges for me as I tried to experience independence, but at the same time felt this persistent responsibility to never venture to far, in fear of leaving my parents without any children.

My sister's tragic death had left my parents and me picking up the pieces, trying to be a family again. It sure wasn't like anyone else was helping us along the way. I suppose I reached a point where I did not believe that anything would salvage what was left of our family. As much as I desperately wanted to feel like and believe we were a family again, something was missing. A part of our family had died. My sister had died. How could we be a happy, normal family again when everything had changed? Even though many teenagers don't spend as much time with their parents, I found simply being together a tension filled experience because for me, it seemed to highlight the fact that Leslie was missing. Instead of talking about it, I chose to avoid the issue and faced many familial interactions with disinterest, boredom, and irritability. It is difficult to know if these reactions would have occurred simply by adolescent standards;

however, I am left evaluating it partially as unnecessary strife generated and magnified by the death of my sister and the impact it had on our family.

I remember one specific incident when my mom made a comment the summer that my sister died when we went to Expo '86. She was standing along a railing next to the water's edge and was scattering some dried flowers for my sister--she began doing this when we went places without any prior discussion. As she wiped away her tears she stated, "I can't believe that the last time we were here was as a family." In that moment as a teenager, I took this personally and felt as though I, as their other daughter, was not good enough to keep us a family. To me, the statement meant that without my sister, our family was now lost forever. I remember this moment so vividly. I felt so broken inside. On one hand, I knew that this had not been my mom's intentions with her words, but on the other hand, in that instance, and for the years that followed I was unable to convince myself of the potential for our family to be meaningful.

This dysfunctional realization of how incapable and insignificant I was in the task of filling in the void to make our family whole again weighed heavily on my heart and my thoughts. In some ways, I guess I gave up. Nothing mattered anymore. I would just do whatever I needed to do each day and that would be good enough. Who cared in the end anyways? Nothing I could do would ever relieve my parents' discontented hearts. Joy, pride, and laughter would never exist or be embraced whole-heartedly again. I felt as though I was not good enough for my parents to find happiness and excitement again. I believed that if it had been me, my parents would not have been so devastated. I thought that Leslie had so much more to offer them and they would have been able to move on with life with less heartache if I had been the one who died. As an adult, I can now see how all of these misconceptions about what my parents were thinking and feeling contributed to my animosity towards them at times. I also believe that because they never

knew the magnitude or intensity of my innermost thoughts, they were unable to understand why I was, at times, so indifferent towards them.

Much like many teenagers who struggle to see eye to eye with their parents, I also struggled to keep the peace. Nevertheless, there were also many multi-faceted emotions in response to my grief that I was experiencing, with little understanding or healthy knowledge as to how to manage them. Although I cannot speak for my parents, I do believe that their own struggle with grief over my sister's death contributed to some of the tension between us. Yet, I also feel that many of my parents' interpretations and perceptions unfairly scrutinized my relationship and interactions with them. We argued frequently, often about trivial matters rather than what was lying underneath the surface. Despite my belief that some of these arguments intensified due to the spilling over of unresolved emotion, I also acknowledge that me simply being an adolescent, conflicting personalities, and typical family conflict became additional components to our struggles. As an adult, I have reached the conclusion that, it is possible that because my mom, my dad, and I were so incapable of understanding my sister's death and how grief affected each of us, that we soon became incapable of dealing with each other.

Thankfully, not all of my interactions with my parents became negative or damaging. After my sister's death, I suddenly felt a more intense sense of loyalty and bond to my parents. I wanted to protect them and keep them safe. These thoughts and feelings, although existing prior to my sister's death, were not as prevalent as they soon became. I also learned that during times of stress or life challenges that my parents would always be there regardless of our feelings towards each other at the time. It was reassuring to know an unconditional bond existed which held our family close. However, I often felt torn between wanting to be an independent individual and wanting to be forever bound to them.

Even as an adult, I feel this sense of personal obligation and responsibility to remain close to my parents. In terms of my immediate biological family, they are all I have. The only explanation is that I know deep down if anything happened to them, I would regret not having spent more time together. I suppose this is because life taught me very early that you never know when someone might be taken away--life is short, and once it is gone, there is nothing that will make up for lost time. Of course, during my university years, I moved away from home, but when I attempted to stay in another community, I ultimately was not prepared to take that chance of missing time with my only family. More recently, with a family of my own, I have found that this inner struggle has amplified with a pull to remain, not only emotionally, but also physically close to my parents as the only grandchildren they will now ever experience life with are through me. For now, I am content with this choice as I watch in wonderment as my children play with their nana and papa. I have not seen that excitement, joy, or freedom in laughter since before my sister's death. In many ways, I believe that this new relationship has brought about many positive emotional changes. There is a light within their eyes now that I have waited for a long time to see again, and I am not willing to miss that now.

In terms of relationships within our home, it was not only our parent-child relationship that seemed strained, but also my parent's marriage. After my sister's death, I observed my parents as they struggled with their own conflicts. Although they most often kept any tension or arguments private from me, there were occasions when I witnessed the breaking down of a marriage that I had never considered had any problems or challenges. Before my sister died, I honestly cannot recall any incidences of my parents not getting along. However, the loss of my sister took its toll.

There reached a point when my mom had her suitcases upstairs and when I asked about them, she stated, “I might be looking for a different place for you and I to live right now.” I remember thinking, “What do you mean, you and I--what if I don’t want to go.” “Why am I not enough to make our family worth staying together?” On one hand, I was terrified of my parents splitting up, as I didn’t know how I would be able to hold it together through a divorce as well. On the other hand, I was tired of listening to them fight, or sit and say nothing to each other at all. I used to think, “Just go ahead--leave each other--leave me to figure it out. Who cares . . . there’s nothing left to care about anyways.” The potential reality that another devastating change to my family loomed on the horizon left me feeling furious, scared, unstable, and emotionally crushed. “How could this be happening?” “What did I do to deserve such a horrible twist to my life?” Miraculously, my parents managed to overcome or possibly even surrender to the problems they faced and stayed together. I remember my mom telling me at one point that they chose to work it out because I had been through enough already and they didn’t want to put me through anything more. Although I do not know how they managed to work it out, as an adult, I believe that their choice in so many ways was a testament to the importance of our family surviving. It is not to say that our relationships are now ideal, as they most definitely are not; however, for me, this pervasive struggle has illuminated the definition of strength, resiliency, commitment, unconditional love, and forgiveness within our family.



*Free*

Over the years, I've watched you change  
From laughs, to cries, to empty eyes.  
But now I face reality...  
That I am me, and she is she.  
So, now the pieces come together,  
Your pain is me, with her gone forever.

If going away could stop your pain,  
Then my tears would only be rain.  
Each day I think that I should die  
To bring her back, so you didn't cry.  
I know deep down, if it had been me  
Your hearts and eyes would still be free.  
Love always, Dana Norbeck



Probably the last picture of Leslie and me together.

I was 17 or 18 years old and attending my first year of college, when I wrote this poem. I remember signing the poem as if it was a letter, with the intention of it being a final message in case I finally decided to end my life. During those years as a teenager, it was difficult for me to understand that I could not, and was not responsible for eradicating my parent's grief. I believed that if I had died instead, my parents would not have been so devastated. Although I knew why their expressions had changed, I was not prepared to understand rationally. It was as though the drastic nature of this shift disabled my ability to realize that my presence alone did not contribute to their grief or make it more intense.

*Silence Prevails*

After Leslie died, conversation about my sister, the accident, and our feelings were limited in frequency and divulged only surface level emotions. Some people have told me that my family did not handle her death very well if we could not even talk about it. As much as I agreed with this comment, I also knew that they were not capable of understanding. It was not as though we did not want to talk about her at times. It truly felt as if we could not talk about it. Our pain, grief, sadness, and anger over the loss of Leslie stood in the way of what others believed should be healing and healthy conversation.

In the days that followed Leslie's death, several comments and situations resonated with me and contributed to my belief that it would only be better if I just kept my mouth shut. My parents did not need the added burden of me asking questions, causing problems, or making the situation more upsetting. I remember being told, "Be strong for your parents" and "Make sure you behave yourself. Don't cause your parents any more stress or upset. They've been through enough. The last thing they need right now is you getting into trouble." I also developed the understanding that their loss was greater than mine and needed me to be extra vigilant around them when I was told, "This is so sad for your parents. You will never understand how difficult it is for them to lose their daughter. You need to be strong for them." Within a few days of my sister's death, I came to believe that talking about my sister or asking questions would only serve to upset my parents further. With this belief in mind, I decided to keep everything to myself and convinced myself that I would just pretend to be fine. Unfortunately, I was not fine and there were so many things that I wanted and needed to say.

I also believe my parents deciding that I did not need to be a part of some things contributed to my refusal to talk over the years. When the police came back to our home with my



sister's belongings from that night, my parents told me to stay in the living room and spoke to the police in their bedroom. I also remained at home while my parents secretly went to the accident site. Additionally, my parents chose to leave me at home when they privately went to the funeral home to say their final goodbyes to my sister. Some of these things I was not aware of for several years, but when I did find out, it only added to my unwillingness to talk. I failed to understand at that time as a teenager that my parents faced making decisions under immense stress and uncertainty. I simply felt betrayed and that I could not trust my parents to be honest with me when it came to my sister. Through all of this, I felt excluded and as though my feelings didn't matter.

Despite many of these comments and situations, another part of me was completely unwilling to participate in any conversation. Sometimes I just said that I was 'okay' or 'fine,' so that in not revealing anymore could avoid the reality of my sister's death. I remember telling myself not to believe it, not to think about it, and not to talk about it. I do not recall a moment in time when I ever attempted to try to talk about my sister with my parents. I told myself, "What good would talking do . . . it's not like it would bring my sister back and that's all I really want." As a teenager, I saw talking as a painful waste of time that served no purpose other than to make a person feel horrible. It was easier to hold back the tears and find something to distract my thoughts--a phone call, a television show, finding something to organize in my bedroom, or even going to the bathroom without any reason other than to take a moment and recompose myself. However, over time, many occasions arose when I contemplated opening up, but was unable to do so. When faced with the decision to talk about something painful or not, avoidance and self-preservation stepped in and at the time that seemed easier for me to cope with.

I also struggled with knowing that bringing up anything about my sister or her death would only upset my parents further. I so desperately did not want to see them cry anymore. I did not want to start crying myself because then they would cry too. Many times I came home thinking that today would be the day that I would be strong enough to get the words out, but then I would see their hollow and saddened eyes, clam up, and retreat to my room. I was scared of saying something wrong or asking something that would make them tearful or mad. Although my mom had told me that if I needed to talk with her and Dad that I could, I did not know how to find the words. Furthermore, my parents never willingly opened up the topic of my sister themselves, and as an inexperienced and unknowing teenager, I just followed their lead. Besides, I desperately longed for the sense of happiness and conversation that existed once, and feared that bringing up what seemed to be the obvious, would only prevent that moment from someday occurring. I learned later in life that my parents had chosen not to bring up things and talk to me about my sister because they did not want me to feel more upset. In me trying to protect them and them trying to protect me, years went by without any in-depth or lengthy conversations shared between us about my sister or the accident. To this day, very little discussion about Leslie has occurred between my parents and me.

More specifically, I remember the first Christmas after my sister died. My Mom, Dad and I, along with extended family, had just finished our Christmas Eve dinner. What previously would have been a relatively happy time, filled with laughter and games, understandably did not occur. In our sadness of this first Christmas without my sister, it became quickly evident to me that talking about her and showing emotion was not going to be acceptable. In the silence of everyone sitting around after dinner, one family member began to cry. I remember wanting to get up and give him a hug but felt unsure about what to do because nobody had even acknowledged

the difficulty that we were certain to all be experiencing. Then, rather abruptly, another family member quickly blurted out, "Stop your blubbing. Leslie is gone. Those tears aren't going to change that, so just stop it right now." I wanted to scream at this person but knew it would be disrespectful. Everyone just remained silent. Nobody came to his defense. Nobody said that it was okay to cry openly. As a teenager, I just sat in disbelief at the words spoken and the silence by everyone else that followed. I understand now about different cultural and generational perspectives about grief, but at the time, I simply did not know anything different and did not have the wherewithal to speak up.

Feelings of anger and confusion also interfered with the healthy conversation about death that so many people recommend or believe is ideal. I remember, approximately two years after my sister's death, my mom presented me with some leaflets and brochures about grief. I felt furious and disgusted that she had the nerve to give these to me. I thought to myself, "Why did I need to understand grief better? Why wasn't it okay that I also experienced days when I just felt miserable?" As I look back, I understand that this was her way of trying to support me and open conversation, but at the time, I interpreted her gesture as an insinuation that it I needed to deal with my grief differently. She had been attending a support group for bereaved parents at the time and may have gotten these pamphlets from them. I remember thinking, "It's fine that you go to your group to talk, but it's not like you ever talk about Leslie in front of me. Her name isn't even mentioned in our house." Although there were plenty of times when I wanted to speak, I did not know how to bring it up. I could not find the words and nobody led the way to show me that it truly was okay to talk about Leslie. I reasoned, that if talking was so important, why then, wouldn't anybody talk more freely in front of me--not my parents, relatives, friends, coaches, teachers. I was fourteen years old when she died and as an adult now question why none of the

adults realized that maybe I needed some guidance and role modeling on more than the odd occasion to break through the wall that I had built up around me.

Silence can also be a much-needed emotional and mental break. There were times when I just needed space or time alone. No questions, no teasing, no cheering up--just silence. I didn't know how to communicate this need and I definitely couldn't explain why I needed it. Sometimes I just wanted to be alone with my own private thoughts and memories of my sister, while other times I savored the mental break when absolutely nothing related was going on in my mind. Consequently, I never responded kindly when interruptions of these rare moments occurred. It felt like sandpaper scraping off my skin and an instantaneous feeling of complete irritation would consume me because the moment was gone and they were so difficult to maintain. As a teenager, I did not comprehend the reason for my agitation, but rather just lashed out with an angry and resentful attitude. Even as an adult, as I write about my grief, I find that in these moments of personal and emotional thinking, interruptions can be bothersome, and at times infuriating.

Making the decision to tackle my journey with grief as a graduate project has forcefully opened some long needed conversation and understanding with my Mom and hopefully in time with my Dad. After 22 long years, I still find the task of bringing up my sister's death with my parents painstaking. When I first told my Mom about the project's topic, I could only manage to say that it was about my grief experience and added no further details or explanations. However, I needed my parents to understand the depth of emotions and the challenges I faced in working on this topic. In some ways I felt emotionally forced to tell my mom some 'real' examples of things I experienced and thoughts I had back then. For me, the conversation felt awkward and complicated. We both cried and hurt, but we finally talked. In the end, I felt an incredible sense

of relief that I finally found the courage to talk about some of the things that I kept bottled up inside all of these years. I had started talking more with friends by my mid-20's and my husband somewhat, but never to my mom or dad. Perhaps these new people in my adult life seemed more comfortable listening and showing support, understanding, and empathy towards the situation. Perhaps, in adulthood, I had reached a level of maturity to reach out. Maybe, now at the present stage of my life, maturity has influenced and allowed this challenging conversation to occur, rather than the silence reared by the inexperience, stubbornness, insecurities, and boundaries of my adolescence. There, of course, are going to be recollections and perspectives on which my family and I do not see eye to eye, but at least it is a beginning.

In this new beginning to conversation, past thoughts, questions, and words unspoken re-entered my mind. Feeling fraught with uncertainty and apprehension, it took me several weeks to muster the courage to ask my mom for newspaper articles that she had clipped out and saved relating to my sister's accident. I have not had copies of the news reports, obituaries, cards of thanks, or memorials for all these years. I used to snoop through drawers and closets to find the things that I wanted to look at when my parents were not home. Choosing not to ask my parents for these items simply related to my fear, concern and even love for them, as I knew this request would undoubtedly re-open their sadness and pain. It is unbelievably difficult to ask for things, when you know that ultimately it will cause someone you love to feel pain. Although I knew the pain already existed, I was not prepared to expose it or intensify it. A person's grief may not always be worn on their sleeve, but rather hidden beneath the surface, underneath a brave exterior. For me, the thought of seeing my parents emotional pain brought to the surface in plain view was ultimately too overwhelming and agonizing.

As a teenager and young adult, I did not realize that an alternative could be going to the newspaper company and asking them to pull the articles that I was seeking. In addition, at the time, it was an also era when the internet did not exist and I was unable to locate the articles on my own. I suppose more recently I could have located the articles and memorials I wanted, but always figured that this many years later that it would not make a difference anyways. Maybe at some level I hoped that eventually I would find the courage to ask my parents if I could borrow the articles and make copies, which would also open conversation. Unfortunately, I also believe that sometimes the effects of time passing serve as a lock to a door that becomes more difficult to open. In many ways, I probably just resigned myself to the idea of going without these effects. However, the experience of writing my story has led me to a place where I cannot hide entirely any longer. I have finally realized how important some things were to my own ability to process and heal. I have now found the courage in recognizing that I desperately would love to have a special place of my own for these items, so that I can look at them from time to time when my own need arises.

How relieved I felt that my mom was receptive and more than willing to lend me the information to copy that she had kept all of these years. I had actually been worried that she may not let me bring them home in fear that I might lose or wreck something. Even as I look at the news articles today, there is this incredible sense of disbelief that continues to manifest itself in my thoughts and heart. It still does not feel quite real. It is still so difficult to grasp this understanding and acceptance of her death. I am looking at these pieces of paper that show her picture, state her name, and confirm her death, but even today in so many ways I believe that this is just a story and it doesn't apply to my real life. Then it hits me. She's gone! She's dead! She's never coming back! I don't understand!!! Then I travel back to that crazy state of emotion filled

with agony, tears streaming down my face, feeling so defeated. It has been 22 years and my reaction to these articles remains the same. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and talk myself back into that place where the emotion is mine to control.

So far, I have not found the strength to share as openly with my Dad. The words are still too difficult to find and the topic is still too difficult to broach. I tell myself the old rationalization that it is still easier and safer to say nothing. I experience a different reaction in seeing his emotional pain and tears, than those of my mom's. It has been very distressing to see the defeat on my father's face all these years. As a child growing up, I do not have any recollections of ever seeing my father sad, tearful, or in pain. I grew up believing that my Dad was a strong, tough, and unbreakable man with whom I would always be safe. The night that my sister died, I learned about the other side of my dad's spirit, in a way that is particularly hard for me to experience. Although I believe that it is acceptable and healthy for children to witness their parent's varying emotions, I grew up in a family where potentially upsetting thoughts and emotions were simply not articulated or exposed. However, regardless of this family dynamic, I believe that even if I had observed more profound emotion growing up, nothing could have prepared me for the intensity of emotion that I unexpectedly witnessed after my sister's death. To this day, I remain scared at the thought of upsetting him, seeing him cry, or hurting him by bringing up what shattered his tough exterior and revealed an unfamiliar pain that night when my sister was killed. I wish this barrier between us did not exist, but I have been unable to build my own strength to withstand seeing my father's emotional torment.



*Feelings*

My feelings are here  
But aren't expressed  
They are confused  
Of things that hurt  
They are scared  
Of facing reality  
They remain inside  
So I won't forget.



The following poem was written within the first two years following my sister's death. I would have been 14-16 years old. I suppose in some ways at the time I thought that if I talked about my feelings, it meant that I had accepted Leslie's death. Many of the things that I felt, thought, and wanted to do confused me. I did not know how or want to face what life had unexpectedly dumped in front of me. Silence—keeping it bottled up inside—made it a little less real.

*Attempts at Support*

In the immediate wake of a tragedy, many people come to show their support. For our family, much of the same occurred in the days following Leslie's death. However, it did not take long before that changed.

I am not certain whether the absence of people was due to the summer break, uncertainty about visiting, or some other reason that I have not considered. Nevertheless, the reality is that nobody came--nobody that I remember in the months and years that followed. What I do remember is feeling as though everyone else had moved on. It was just my parents and me. As a teenager, I noticed that there wasn't anybody regularly checking in, but at the time, did not realize that it may have assisted us with our grief in those early times after Leslie died. Nobody stepped forward to ask me about Leslie or our family's grief. Doctors, teachers, coaches, counselors, aunties, uncles, and cousins, would of course acknowledge Leslie's death, but they did not approach us with available time, supportive conversation, or unconditional invitations to communicate or reminisce with them. I will not deny that there were a few occasions of very brief condolences, comments, and questions; however, there wasn't anybody that I recall who attempted to make an extended effort to talk with me or for that matter my parents about my sister or our loss. I believe that some of my struggles with grief are partially due to the futile efforts from and significant lack of support from family and community.

Although efforts of support were scarce, I do acknowledge that the following year when I was in Grade 10, school staff approached me twice in regards to Leslie's death. The first time was shortly after school started again in the fall. One of my teachers stopped me in the hall during lunch and asked to speak with me privately in her classroom. She wanted to let me know that on behalf of the staff, they wanted me to know that they had been thinking of our family

over the summer and were so sorry about my sister's accident. She told me that if I needed anything I should feel free to come and see her. I said thanks and then went back out to face the other students and get through the rest of the day. I could not believe it. I remember wondering what the teachers could possibly be thinking to unexpectedly bring up something so painful in the middle of the school day, especially since none of them even bothered to phone or come around during the summer. Why did they think that their words of support mattered now? How could she not realize how difficult it was for me to hold it together in that awkward moment and then have to redirect thoughts of my sister's death back to classes and activities? As well, pulling me aside in front of the other students made me feel singled out and as though the teacher shone a bright, invasive spotlight on my personal situation. As a teenager, I was unable to recognize what probably was a well-intentioned outstretched hand of support. I suppose that I may have been able to identify and accept this support if it had been presented more frequently and less abruptly. Despite this possibility, a teacher never approached me again to see how I was doing, except on one occasion. I remember feeling frustrated that anytime I acted up, staff and schoolmates would interpret or blame my behavior or attitude on my sister's death. Although I was struggling with my sister's death, I felt it was unfair that people usually interpreted the situation that way. Sometimes I was just being a teenager and my actions did not always relate to losing my sister. Regardless, at the time, I was not equipped to comprehend, identify, or interpret my thoughts and feelings as being healthy or unhealthy, common or uncommon.

The second incident occurred when a teacher referred me to one of the school counselors as she felt my bad attitude was indicative of some emotional baggage that I was still dealing with. I remember telling the counselor that he had no right to bring me into his office and suggest that my attitude towards this teacher had anything to do with my sister. I told him that he had no

business contacting my parents about this problem because he and the other teacher were completely out of line. I stated that my parents and I were fine and that I did not like the teacher, did not agree with how she handled a situation in the class, and that he was never again to call me down to his office and bring up my sister. Nobody at the school ever brought up my sister or the accident again. In all honesty, that one teacher was correct in her assumption that I was struggling. In my opinion, they just went about it all wrong. As an adult, I look back on this situation and question why nobody pressed further with me. What were they so scared of? How could they not approach me with support when I wasn't in trouble? Maybe they just thought it would be best for me to seek the support when I was ready. I suppose because I continued to maintain good grades, participate in school activities, play sports, and have fun with friends, nobody considered that I was just good at keeping my dysfunctional thoughts and emotional turmoil locked up inside, hidden away from everyone. In many ways, as a teenager it became somewhat of a lose - lose situation, as if approached about my sister, I would have responded with anger, reluctance, and a refusal to talk; but when left alone with no contact, I felt unsupported and as though nobody cared.

It was not until my first year of college when I was 17 years old, that my parents insisted on professional counseling support for me. I had gotten into an intense argument with my parents after arriving late from a community function, where I had been drinking a little and had been in a fight with a friend. Things escalated and I broke down emotionally, screaming that I just wanted to die. I exclaimed, "I wished I was dead" and "You would have rather it been me that died." Although I followed through with my parents' suggestion of counseling, I felt as though I became the scapegoat for our family problems. Even though I had witnessed my parents display some extreme emotions, reactions, arguments, and challenges, there was never an indication or

discussion of counseling for them or our family in those moments. In my mind, I questioned why their expressions of sadness, grief, and anger were acceptable while mine were not. I never discussed this frustration with my parents, but I believe my perspective of the differing treatment led to some of my stubbornness and reluctance to cooperate, which soon followed.

The counseling lasted one session. My parents came to the session and briefly explained why we were there, but I refused to talk about anything. I remember thinking the counselor was an absolute idiot. She actually asked me to use one word to describe what things were like in our home after my sister's death. I said, "quiet" and proceeded to say nothing more. My parents talked with her after the session and then my mom told me out at my car that they felt only I should come to the next session. I immediately became belligerent as I interpreted this as my parents concluding that I was the only one with problems that needed addressing. I took direct offence to this idea and refused to attend any more sessions. Why should I have to get counseling when from my perspective they were not managing well themselves?

Many years later, when I was about 28 years old, my family explored family counseling briefly to address the cycle of volatility in our relationship. I had an enormous argument with my parents at the cabin the previous summer and had refused to talk with them since. It had been about a month or two, and then the 9/11 tragedy happened. My mom called me that morning upset, because while the world faced this international crisis, she realized that life was too short for us to stay mad at each other. I agreed and we started speaking to each other again. We also decided to go to counseling as a family.

We went to several sessions together and then I understood that the counselor wanted to meet with each of us separately and then come back together again. I attended two more sessions on my own, and once more with my parents, but then refused to attend any further as my parents

had followed through with any individual sessions themselves. I felt like a target of attack in the family sessions and that all the difficulties we faced over the years were the result of my hostility, over- sensitivity, and defensiveness. Although some of this was definitely true, I did not see any accountability being taken by my parents and did not feel that the counselor was strong enough or skilled enough to take us on and create effective and lasting changes. Once again, I felt as though I was the scapegoat for the challenges our family repeatedly struggled with and it was up to me, and only me, to make changes in order for the situation to improve. From these two experiences alone, I definitely believe that every member of a family needs to participate fully with counseling when inter-relational problems exist.





*Sisters Always*

(June 1989)

Thinking back to the times we had,  
So many happy, so many sad.  
But they are my thoughts of you,  
Some are old, and some are new.  
And even though three years have passed,  
The memories will always last.  
For they are one of you and me.  
And sisters, we will always be.

~ Never to be forgotten ~

I was graduating from Grade 12 the year when I wrote this poem and was 17 years old. This was the same age that my sister was when she was killed. At this point in my life, there was much emotional turmoil. My sister did not live long enough to reach her Grade 12 graduation ceremony as I now did. Graduating just didn't feel right for me. Leslie should have graduated first. I should have watched her walk down the aisle. This year symbolized the shift from her having experienced milestones first, to me realizing that I was now living beyond what she had ever been able to experience. In some ways, this milestone said that I had moved forward with my life and beyond her existence. I hated getting to experience more than she ever did. At times, I struggled with the anticipation of participating in the celebrations. I felt guilty for wanting to enjoy and attach importance to this time of my life. Writing this poem frustrated me, as I could not seem to get the emotion out and wound up writing something that in no way reflected the complexity of emotions or thoughts that I was dealing with. I remember feeling disappointed in myself that I could not produce something that was more worthy of my sister's memory, encapsulating all of what I really wanted to say.



*Peer Support and Guidance*

In many ways, my friends seemed to fuel the conflict with my parents as their comments and responses to any situation at home after my sister's death was biased, uninformed, and judgmental. Friends would often tell me that it was unfair that my parents became so protective and controlling just because my sister died. They often concluded that my parents became overprotective and excessively worried. Most often, as a teenager and as a young adult, I felt the same way. Neither my friends nor I could begin to understand the effect my sister's death had on my mom and dad. Although I understood that they would worry, I did not want to have to answer questions or hear "No" as a response if I wanted to go out or sleepover somewhere. Just as many teenagers desire, I wanted to be able to have a good time without any emotional restrictions. It was also about escaping and getting away from the burden of my sadness. Outside of the house, I felt a little more normal, a little less sad, a little more like living. It was easier to breathe. Unfortunately, curfews, hanging out, sleepovers and parties all became very complicated. I hated my parents asking for all of the details. "Where are you going?", "Who's going to be there?", and "What are you going to be doing?" I just wanted to be trusted as most often I wasn't up to anything bad or dangerous. I began to interpret any restrictions that my parents placed on me or conflicts within our home as the result of my sister's accident. Maybe many times they were. However, as a teenager, I was unable to equate these challenges as possibly just relating to personal parental values or conflicting personalities. I believed the ground rules had changed as I didn't recall my sister being asked all of these specifics when she was going out with friends. I had not considered up until now that at the time I was quite a bit younger than she was when she died, and maybe the difference was related to our ages. Nevertheless, should it have mattered? However, I would always revert to thinking, "Why should I be punished because of the choices

that my sister and her date made that night? I haven't done anything wrong," and ultimately found myself feeling pissed off and argumentative with my parents.

My friends would say that my parents needed to let go, move on, and trust me. I believed them. I started to feel suffocated. I soon began to make up stories about what I was doing and where I was going, because I did not want my parents to tell me I had to stay home when my friends were allowed out. In some ways, this was a typical adolescent response, but I always felt guilty for making this choice, as my sister had not been honest about what she was doing the night she died. I was always worried that something would happen to me on these nights when I lied and my parents would have to face not having the answers once again. I felt so torn between what I knew was right and wanting to just feel carefree and happy. I wonder if at times I pushed some boundaries in an attempt to be able to have some unrestricted and unburdened freedom to be a typical adolescent. It was like being stuck between a rock and a hard place. Whatever I decided, I either faced feeling unfairly restricted or guilty. I just wanted to have a normal life again without these thoughts and worries.

I look back on these memories now and I am confused as to how all of these thoughts and feelings developed. Although my parents didn't give me permission to go to every party and drink alcohol, I still went to some parties. My parents even let me go to my boyfriend's graduation dinner and dance when I was in grade 11, just as my sister had done the night she died. Furthermore, my parents decided instead of keeping my home from the after-grad my graduation year, to become involved and ensure the night I had permission to be out celebrating was safe. I went out with friends frequently and on vacations. However, in my mind, restrictions would not have existed in the same way if my sister hadn't died. I didn't experience this so much in the first few years following her death, but more so between the ages of 17 and 19. I believed

that I shouldn't have to be in the position to lie to my parents if I wanted to go to a party with drinking or stay out late. As much as I always wanted to go out later or more often, I now understand that my parents must have done the best that they could during those most difficult years in the aftermath of my sister's death. However, I also believe that an element of unrealistic protectiveness and control existed, and in some ways still does, in regards to my relationship with my parents. As a teenager though, I never felt I had enough freedom and I always seemed pissed off with my parents. I believe that a combination of factors misguided me--the traumatic circumstances, my own perceptions, family dynamics, and my friends' inexperience with grief and one-sided advice. Regretfully, in my adolescent years, that was how I experienced life and what I chose to respect and embrace.



**Hopes and Dreams**

(1990 Memorial)

Hopes and dreams of yesterday,  
Forgotten when you went away.  
But never do the memories fade,  
For sister, they are ones we made.

Cherished are our times together,  
They're all I have to last forever.  
And as a year is added on,  
My thoughts of you are never gone.

Forever and always in my dreams, Your sister, Dana



I was 18 years old and my sister would have been 21 years old the year that I wrote this poem. Even though I wrote many poems about cherishing our times together, I had a difficult time remembering the things we did. Most often, I couldn't remember at all. I hated that I couldn't remember her very well. I didn't understand at the time that memories aren't like a slide show of images or videos. The harder I tried to remember the more frustrated and disappointed I felt. Details of the accident and her absence usually consumed me. Having the time with my own copies of our childhood pictures that I recently got has unlocked many memories of our life together. Although all of the pictures are priceless, the ones that catch us in the moment provide a more vivid, realistic, and emotional recollection for me.

*Day-to-Day Life*

Despite all of this upheaval in my family's life, I somehow managed to have somewhat normal experiences and opportunities as an adolescent and young adult. My parents ensured that I continued to play sports, attend sports camps, celebrate holidays, get my driver's license, go out with friends, and so on. I attended dances and prom, went on vacations, enjoyed family and friends, attended school trips, joined committees, and graduated high school and university. However, my inner most thoughts and feelings during many regular activities were often multi-faceted and burdened with dysfunction.

Firstly, although I thoroughly enjoyed playing certain sports and maintained my involvement with sports teams after my sister's death, my perceptions had changed. The reality was that my sister and I played all of the same sports. We did not have separate interests in this area of our extra-curricular activities. I believe my ability to develop my own sense of identity after my sister died in many ways became a challenge because of this. Sports were one of those situations when I felt as though I was always in her shadow and would never measure up.

I knew that Leslie had been an outstanding athlete, and I was now unable to compare myself competitively or with promise that I could work hard and become as good. I often seemed to feel disappointed with my own ability and skill in relation to hers. People made statements to me that, "It must be hard for your parents to come and watch you play." "They must feel like they are watching a ghost." "Your sister was such a great basketball player. She was one of the best." "Your parents probably envision her on the court when they come to your games." As a teenager, I took all of this to mean that I was no longer able to play on the court as freely as I once had. I noticed this transition of thoughts more so when I transferred to the school my sister had last attended before her death. If my parents came to watch, I felt as though they were

probably just remembering how good my sister was. It seemed to me as though my parents didn't see me anymore. The emptiness in their eyes just looked straight through me as though they were longing to see her playing basketball and volleyball, or waterskiing instead of me. I interpreted any comments of encouragement or constructive criticism as words of disappointment as I thought they were embarrassed because I did not play as well as my sister had.

More specifically, I remember feeling discouraged when I was unable to play in the basketball tournament that presented my sister's memorial trophy because there was an overlap with school sports and I was attending provincials for volleyball. I thought, maybe next year. However, the following year only led to further inner torment, as feelings of shame and inadequacy stirred when I did not play well enough to deserve the honor of her award. I had so desperately wanted to receive her memorial trophy, and felt as though I not only let myself down, but also my parents. I wanted to disappear when I heard someone else's name called for the award. I don't think I ever felt the same about basketball again. I just couldn't seem to move beyond what I believed to be a shameful moment. I still look at the memorial trophy today with embarrassment that I did not play well enough to earn the honor in her memory.

In addition, I was also now playing on senior teams, where some of the players had played on sports teams with my sister prior to her death. Instead of embracing this advancement to senior teams, I often felt uncomfortable around these familiar connections to my sister. I wanted to escape from this identity on sports teams as being Leslie's little sister. I did not feel as though any evaluation of my game occurred separately as frequent remarks comparing the two of us by some players and coaches affected my ambition and confidence. It's not to say that I had never experienced insecurities or self-doubt, but it now manifested itself differently. Since I



struggled with communicating thoughts and feelings that involved my sister to my parents, I never discussed this with them and, therefore, never had the opportunity to experience their support with these self-defeating challenges.

Secondly, the typical teenage experience of going to school at times became problematic. My transfer from the junior secondary to the senior secondary school just as my sister had done became challenging for reasons beyond the school's size and unfamiliarity, as well as the greater level of responsibility expected. I had anticipated that some people would remember my sister and make the connection between our names, but I had not anticipated that I would feel troubled by the association. I recall the unexpected reactions from some teachers, coaches, and students. "Oh . . . You're Leslie's sister . . ." An uncomfortable silence and uneasiness in their eyes would follow. I hated being looked at that way. I just wanted to be Dana again without the "feel-sorry-for-me" look that people seemed to get when they realized or found out who I was, or rather, who my sister was. Before my sister died, I used to experience people's faces filled with excitement or acceptance when they discovered I was Leslie's sister. It was different now--an air of awkwardness and discomfort existed in many initial meetings beyond that of typical teenage insecurity.

In addition, one particular time of the school year became extremely burdensome and stressful. Just as most teenagers feel overwhelmed during final and provincial exams, I too felt this way but for further reasons that nobody seemed to identify. Since my sister died near the end of June, my remaining three years of high school involved having to write my finals around the anniversary of her death and occasionally on the exact anniversary of her death. In hindsight, I wish that someone had considered arranging an alternative for me. Although I understand that I needed to write my exams, I have always wondered if I really needed to endure that emotional



strain. I suppose that if I had mentioned this dilemma, I may have received some additional support or options, but I could never find the words to let people know with what I was having a hard time.

I also developed a belief that certain friends and groups of people needed to be off limits. I recognized that they had been my sister's friends, and therefore, felt uncomfortable around them. It was as though I continued to feel like a fourteen-year-old little sister in the eyes of everyone around me. Being around the people who had interacted and socialized with my sister became intimidating and restricting. I would encounter her friends at school, sports, parties, college, dance clubs, and so on. It also became an unpleasant reminder that I was here enjoying myself while she was not. Besides, it was also complicated to think of telling my parents that I had plans to go out with some of Leslie's old friends. At times, I also felt as though I was an unpleasant reminder to others that Leslie, their friend, had died. I remember being at a party and one of her old friends telling me that, "It was like seeing a ghost when I came in and saw you here. It freaked the crap out of me." A couple of times, people who simply new who I was through the natural association to my sister, commented directly to me that they could not believe I was allowed out considering what happened to my sister. Despite these painful comments, ultimately, I did not want to feel as though I was taking her place or reminding others of her absence and, therefore, I did everything possible to disassociate or distance myself from anyone that I knew had a relationship with my sister. Of course, there were social situations when I could not, and ultimately I found myself struggling to stay in the moment, relax, and have a good time.

Even as an adult, when I encountered my sister's old friends, I would feel a sense of inner sadness, emptiness, and awkwardness in my interactions with them. There is an old saying, "It's

like the elephant in the room.” When I am around these people from the past, I am not able to engage with the relationships freely as my thoughts seem constantly distracted by memories of my sister. My sister’s presence and the lack of conversation about her over the years is unequivocally, the elephant in the room that I experience. Although these people are a part of my present day experiences, I often feel physically and emotionally wrapped in chains that are keeping me locked in the past when they are around. Even as an adult, I have not been able to figure out a way to move beyond this emotional constraint.



*The World to Me*

Now that you're gone  
I think to myself  
Of all the times we spent together;  
The good and bad, happy and sad  
I will cherish them forever.

I never realized before  
How much I would miss you.  
Now I do.  
You were the world to me,  
Even though I never told you.  
It is going to be so hard accepting  
life without you.  
You made my life worth living.  
Now that you are gone  
I'm not sure if I want to go  
through living my life.

I wrote this poem when I was struggling with the decision to end my own life or not. I desperately did not want to die, but I also did not know how I could continue living without my sister. I missed her and wanted to be with her. I also bargained with the notion that I could exchange my life for hers, so that my parents would feel better. I was unable to find 'true' enjoyment and felt as if I was just going through the motions of living without any sense of real attachment. Even though for many years, I thought about leaving this world, partially with the hope to reconnect with my sister, I somehow convinced myself that intentionally destroying what was left of our family would be unforgivable. It's strange that I considered this being that I did not believe in god or heaven. I suppose I didn't feel that I needed to know where my spirit would go, but simply had faith that we would somehow wind up together because we were sisters. I just kept hoping that the loneliness in my heart would subside and I would eventually find something to repair and refill my heart. I am still waiting for that to happen.

*Relationships with Friends and Boyfriends*

I believe that during adolescence, friendships and romantic relationships can be positive, fulfilling experiences, but also tumultuous. Even though I experienced friendships and dating relationships similar to other adolescents, there was a somewhat warped component to my perspectives and choices after my sister's death.

The first situation that I realized had changed after my sister's death was my struggle with the beginnings of new friendships. Ultimately, I always knew that the inevitable question would come about. "So, do you have any sisters or brothers?" I hated having to answer that question. Sometimes people would ask for more details, but most often people would avert their eyes, quickly say, "Sorry", and then change the conversation. Before my sister died, I would have just said I have an older sister Leslie and conversation would have comfortably flowed from there--but not anymore. These awkward moments were difficult to deal with because even when the conversation had changed, I still had thoughts of my sister now running through my mind. It was not so simple to just change the conversation and get back in the moment. I even considered avoiding the discomfort by just saying that I did not have any brothers or sisters, but this felt horribly wrong.

There were also incidents when people would directly state that they didn't want to talk about something so depressing because we were out to have a good time. These comments always made me feel guilty. I didn't want to ruin anybody's fun or bring the mood down. I learned over time to just answer the question and redirect the conversation myself so that others would not feel so uncomfortable. Even though I did this, there were many times when I thought to myself, "Why can't you just suck it up and stop thinking about your own good time or your own discomfort. Like I really want to be living without my sister. So sorry to have disrupted

your perfect little life.” I felt alone and isolated in these moments. Over the years, for this reason, I found it difficult to relax and just be myself around new people as I was always anticipating the inevitable.

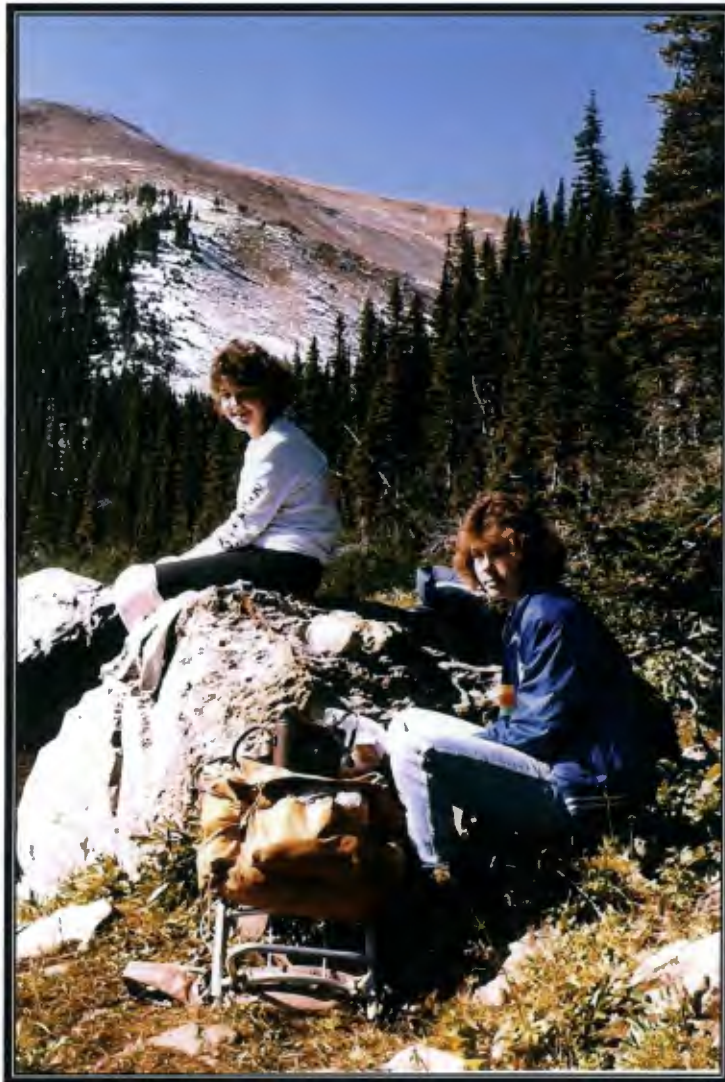
In terms of my friendships and dating relationships, I also found it difficult to let anyone get close. If I saw that caring and bonded connection developing, I would find some reason to end it or distance myself. I actually remember asking myself, “Do you want to risk losing them, and feel that pain again?” I knew that I wasn’t prepared to take the chance of letting someone get close to me and then have him or her taken away unexpectedly, as my sister had been. Although many of my relationships were positive and healthy, rarely did I allow myself to feel emotionally attached. I created somewhat of a brick wall, a tough exterior, to protect my innermost fears.

I especially felt this struggle as a teenager. Nothing would be wrong with the guy or our relationship, other than when I started feeling as though this person might be really special or important, I would just sever the connection. Some relationships I ended for legitimate reasons of disinterest; however, in others I simply did not want to be in the position to deal with another unexpected loss. I would tell him that it just wasn’t working, even though I knew that I still wanted to be with him. I made myself commit to keeping my heart protected from any more pain. I needed control. I needed to decide who would go and when. I could not wait for fate or some accident to tear up my world again.

Unfortunately, as a teenager I faced developing friendships and relationships from a different perspective. Meeting new people inevitably presented me with the difficulty of acknowledging my sister’s death. In addition, fearing the mortality of friends and boyfriends interfered with a normal connection to people. I learned very early in life that anything could happen when you least expect it, at a time when most teenagers are insisting, “That won’t happen



to me,” believing they are invincible. By my mid and late twenties, I found that I was able to break through this dysfunctional thinking and began to explore friendships and relationships differently. Although even to this day, I have only met a few people who are comfortable with me talking openly about my sister and my past.



*Memories of You*

(1991 Memorial)

To hear you laugh or see you smile  
would be a dream come true.  
And though another year is gone,  
I'm always missing you.

I know I have our memories,  
they're cherished with all my heart.  
But going on without you,  
I don't know where to start.

We shared our lives together,  
as many sisters do.  
Only now I'm left with pictures  
and just my memory of you.

Loving and missing you always,  
your sister forever, Dana



I wrote this poem five years after my sister's death. I would have been 19 years old, while she would have been 22 years old at the time. I desperately longed to be able to remember her face, voice, laughter, and so on, more readily but was unable to do so. I even continue to wish for the day when life would return to normal and Leslie would be with us again so that I could actually hear her laugh and see her smile. I simply did not want to go on without her.



*Dealing with Rumors*

As most teenagers go through high school, they are aware of, and often encounter, gossip and rumors about people, families, and situations. Some of those rumors are often complicated and embarrassing to deal with. Many teenagers are ill-equipped in knowing how to effectively handle such distorted and sometimes malicious versions of the truth. Although I experienced the personal challenge of typical rumor spreading, I also faced awkward and tormenting situations where other students asked me to clarify stories about my sister's accident.

Most of the rumors that students presented to me were not only shocking, but also tactless. Although most of these horrific questions occurred in my teen years, I also encountered several situations in my twenties and early thirties. Why people felt that it was okay to ask me about these things, I will never understand. They were oblivious as to how inappropriate and cruel their curiosity was. For example, I dealt with stories and images about my sister that specifically indicated – her body was not in one piece, she was decapitated, and the seatbelt had torn her stomach open leaving her intestines on her lap. I also heard that my sister actually drove that night and caused the accident, but because the accident tossed the bodies around so much, it only looked as if the boyfriend drove. There was also the story that my sister was several months pregnant. In addition, if that wasn't enough, someone told me that my sister initially survived the accident, was alive, and crying for help when people started to arrive at the scene. Living with the images that these statements and questions created, has wreaked havoc on my emotions and my ability to move beyond the accident and remember Leslie as she was.

Nevertheless, at the time, I did not have answers to their questions, and felt caught in the moment, compelled to ensure that people did not spread these disgusting stories around in the wake of my sister's death. What my parents told me did not resemble any of these details

whatsoever. I also worried that my parents might hear these emotionally destructive rumors and therefore wanted to put a stop to them immediately. Unfortunately, I also had to succumb to the fact that I didn't have all the information or at least didn't know if what I had been told was the whole truth. My parents had explained the casket remained closed for our private visit and Leslie's funeral due to the severe bruising on her face. How was I supposed to ask my parents about these graphic stories? I couldn't, and although my mind created images of horrific accident scenes, I decided to deal with it on my own. Although some rumors have been resolved, I still do not know the whole truth and have lived with not knowing all of these years. I believe the fact that my parents and I were never given the respect to know exactly what happened prior to the accident that night has challenged my sense of trust in others, contributed to many anger filled thoughts, and prevented some aspects of being able to move forward. I suppose I have surrendered to the notion that I will never know what truly happened that night.

Approximately three years after my sister's death, some facts did eventually present themselves and I was able to put some images to rest. Unfortunately, having the truth come out only led to deeper emotional torment and confusion. My mom and I were arguing about something and I blurted out, "How am I supposed to feel knowing that my sister wasn't even in one piece?" She insisted that all of Leslie's body was together. I responded by questioning, "How would you know? Maybe the police didn't tell you all the details. We didn't get to see her body." Everything spiraled from this point. I suppose I forced the issue, as I had nothing to believe but the rumors since any conversations with the police occurred without me and I was not included in some of the events that transpired in the days following my sister's death.

The reality was that in the days after my sister's accident my parents went to the funeral home without me. At one point in time, we went together to have flowers, my letter, and a few

other things placed in Leslie's casket, and to sit in silence beside her closed casket in an attempt to say goodbye. What I soon learned was that my parents went another time by themselves. In secrecy, the private opportunity for them to hold Leslie's hand one last time occurred. My mom explained that they thought it would be too difficult for me and did not think that I would be able to deal with this experience. She explained that a cloth covered my sister from the shoulders up, but her body was all in one piece. I was so furious. "How could they keep that from me? What else didn't I know?" I have never felt such hatred towards my parents as I did in that moment. Although I had the chance to sit beside my sister's closed casket, I would have liked to have the chance to hold her hand as well. I still wish I could have touched her one last time. I will never get that chance again--she is gone. I whole-heartedly believe my parents had no right to take that away from me. To this day, nothing can justify having my final goodbye to my sister taken away from me.

Although over the years, I gained a better understanding of the dilemma my parents faced, I do not believe that I have ever reached a point of genuine forgiveness. I recognize that it was an indescribably horrible position for my parents to be in--deciding whether to let a 14-year-old hold her dead sister's hand, while her face remained draped in a sheet to hide the horror of her injuries. I honestly believe that the best I can ever do in working through my parent's choice is to say that I can empathize with the urgency of circumstances they faced while grief-stricken and distressed. It may have been difficult and unimaginable to hold my dead sister's hand, but I believe the choice was mine to make. Regardless, I have cried thousands of tears as the hollow place in my heart grieves and thoughts scream inside my head in response to having missed this last chance to be with her.

### I'll Always Wonder

As years pass on and days go by  
There's a never-ending silent cry.  
A cry that reaches out for you,  
And to a dream that can't come true.

And though my memories are of the past,  
These memories will forever last.  
But as my life keeps moving on,  
I'll always wonder why yours is gone.



Leslie's Grade 10 year-end celebration from the previous year.  
We also chose to bury her in this dress.

*Privacy to Grieve*

As a teenager living with parents, I experienced minimal privacy in terms of my personal space and details about where I was going. I believe that I internalized much of my grief because there was rarely a moment when I felt that I could freely express my emotions. Sometimes I just wanted to break down because I had encountered an unexpected reminder, had experienced a nightmare about the accident, or had a day where I struggled emotionally with missing my sister, and so on. However, I did not want my parents to know when I was crying or upset. I did not want to talk about it. Most often, I did not want to upset them anymore than what they were, as I knew that behind all of the silence was unbearable sadness. I simply did not want to make it worse so I chose to grieve alone.

Memories of my sister would also consume me at school; before, during and after sports; at parties; at a restaurant; at the dinner table; watching TV, and so on. Since people were usually around, I somehow figured out how to put on a brave face. I didn't feel as though I had much of a choice. I did not want my parents to get a phone call from the school or a coach about me being upset or in any trouble. I had to live at home, I had to go to school, I had to play sports, I had to vacation with my parents, and so on. Furthermore, I didn't want people to ask questions or treat me differently.

I would often keep all of the pain and sadness locked inside until a safe time presented itself. Although I felt overwhelmed at times, until I could find an opportunity to escape, I learned to tell myself to breathe and find a mental distraction. One place it felt safe to cry was in the shower, because I knew the sound of water running would cover any noise that escaped as I cried. I also had the excuse to say that soap had gotten in my eyes if they looked bloodshot. I thought I had it all figured out. The only difficulty came when someone told me to hurry up in



the shower. I would be so irritated. I felt forced to pull myself together and start pretending to be okay. I would tell myself, “Okay, stop it, stop it. Just breathe. You can’t let them see you like this. Be strong. It’s okay. It’s okay. Just think about something else.” I often felt edgy and miserable for hours afterwards as I tried to block out any sadness and thoughts of my sister. I did not want to start crying again and it took all my energy to redirect my thoughts and put them away in a safe place.

There were other times, at home, at school, at parties, and in public, when I would simply find another room to go to, closet to look in, purse to search, bathroom to use, fresh air to find, and so on. Once I got my driver’s license, this privacy to grieve became more accessible. I could go for a drive, take the long way home, park somewhere remote, lay my seat back and curl up, or turn up the music to drown out my voice as I screamed and cried. I could be alone with my thoughts, sadness, anger, and tears. I also had the car mirror to fix myself up when I needed to get back to “life” and appear as though everything was fine. Although the emotional barricade that I created as a teenager and young adult most likely contributed to unnecessary stress, I also believe that I learned about inner strength and resiliency needed to prepare me for challenges I would face later in life.



*Tears Won't Die*

You have a look down in your eyes,  
That holds away those hidden lies.  
I wonder what could be so bad,  
To make you look so very sad.

I often think about your past,  
And what could make the sadness last.  
But you keep the tears away,  
Trying to live out every day.

And though you say that nothings wrong,  
I know there is, I've watched too long.  
So if you ever want to cry,  
Don't hold back, for tears won't die.



This particular poem I wrote from a different perspective. It became more like a message to myself. It was as though I was looking in the mirror, attempting to explore my own emotion. I remember many times standing in front of the mirror and thinking to myself about the sadness I held within and that it would be okay if I let it out. Unfortunately, I was not able to find the courage to do so for many years to come.



*Cemetery*

I believe that some people find comfort in visiting their lost loved ones at a cemetery and need to have somewhere special to recognize special occasions as the years pass. However, I did not have this type of experience with the cemetery. I went along with my mom and dad, but always felt somewhat detached. For some reason, I was not able to find comfort standing in this desolate place, directly facing the death of my sister.

In the early years after my sister's death, my Mom, Dad, and I would hold hands as we walked from the car to my sister's resting place. We would take flowers, stand in silence, stare down at her headstone or out into nowhere, and then my mom would tidy up the gravesite. I hated being there. I did not want to believe that Leslie was in the ground and that was all we had left of her. I was so angry that she died and I had to go there to visit her. I felt so empty and alone standing there. I did not know what to do. I just felt so completely out of place. I wanted to help my mom with the flowers, but did not want to interfere. I did not want to cry because I believed that I had to be strong for my parents. It broke my heart every time to see my parent's pain, tears, and hollowness in their eyes.

I got good at holding back the tears and keeping it together over time, but inside I was screaming; wanting to lie down on the ground, and be close to her. I used to think this would look so crazy to anyone that saw me. I would watch my mom as she continued to place flowers so carefully and brushed away any dust or grass. She would always lift the cover that sheltered the picture of my sister. There her face would be, just as it always was and always would be . . . only existing in a picture. My Dad would sometimes walk away and wait for my mom and me along the roadway. I felt torn in knowing whether I should go stand with him or wait with my mom. It seemed as though we were all together at my sister's grave, but at the same time not

together at all. I felt emotionally exhausted at this point, trying to maintain composure. I forced myself to look at the trees, away from my parents, and away from my sister's resting place.

This ritual of going to the cemetery at different times of year became disheartening for me. It also became frustrating because the fact remained that my sister was dead and that was never going to change. For me, the cemetery was not a comforting place to visit, but an irritating reminder of how much I missed my sister and hated my life. I dreaded going to the spot where I would have to stand and look at the place, which marked where my sister's dead body lie. More specifically, Christmas morning took on a completely new meaning. It was already difficult trying to feel festive during the day. Emotionally shifting gears to go to the cemetery part way through the morning didn't make sense to me. Nevertheless, this is how my parents planned it and I just went along because I did not really feel as though I had any choice. Besides, this is what people do, right? What was wrong with me? I didn't understand why I couldn't accept this time that was set aside to remember my sister. What else are we suppose to do?

Many years later, I realized that I needed to visit Leslie at a different time. Maybe we could go Christmas Eve or before opening presents on Christmas day. I so desperately wanted to feel some excitement and joy about Christmas again and find something to be happy about – maybe the reality that although Leslie was gone, we had each other and that still mattered. Maybe I just wanted to have some control of the decisions, and be able to have my parents acknowledge my needs. I simply did not feel compelled to go to the cemetery in order to show honor, respect, or grief for my sister. I felt my thoughts about this would ultimately hurt my parents and that I should just go with them because we were a family.

Approximately eight years passed and I finally found the courage and voice to ask if we could go to the cemetery some other time besides Christmas morning. I felt so uncomfortable

and anxious; maybe my words came out wrong, but I felt as though I hurt and disappointed my mom, more than I had ever anticipated, that day by suggesting this. My parents felt very strongly about the ritual and, therefore, I decided that I could no longer go with them on Christmas morning. I still feel horribly guilty about this choice and wonder what was wrong with me that I struggled so much with this little bit of time to remember my sister. There is still a part of me that feels not wanting to go to the cemetery was selfish. Maybe it was. I do not have the answer to this; I only know that I still think about her just as much at Christmas as I always have since that first Christmas without her. I just remember her in silence and alone.

For many years, I longed for my sister's memory to be with us, not over in the cold, frozen snow with the highway traffic noisily driving by. Maybe we could all buy a card for her. I had looked at them every year, but what would I do with it and where would I put it? Maybe we could light a candle together for her beside the Christmas tree. However, these things never happened and I never spoke of my wishes to my parents. Later in adulthood though, to celebrate Christmas 2000, I brought four millennium stars for my Mom and Dad to hang on their tree. There was one to symbolize each of us--my mom, my dad, my sister, and me. I am not certain if they understood the meaning for me behind the stars, I think I was only able to muster up the courage to state that there was one for each of us.

I have now chosen for years not to visit my sister's grave. In some ways, I suppose this decision was because I found it easier than facing or accepting the situation head on. Although this has been my choice, I always find that there is an unrelenting guilt in that I have let my sister down or have disappointed my parents in not taking the time to remember her by visiting the cemetery. I understand that this is my sister's resting place and it needs taking care of, but it seemed as though I just stood paralyzed, watching my mom create a beautiful and special place

to remember Leslie. Mostly though, I never experienced a sense of comfort or understanding by being there. For years, I remembered a poem from my sister's funeral program.

Do not stand by my grave and weep  
I am not there,  
I do not sleep.  
I am a thousand winds that blow.  
I am the diamond glints on snow.  
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.  
I am the gentle autumn's rain.  
When you awake in the morning  
Hush  
I am the swift uplifting rush  
Of quiet birds in circled flight.  
I am the soft stars that shine at night.  
Do not stand by my grave and cry;  
I am not there,  
I did not die.

- *Hopi Prayer*

I suppose in some ways I took this poem literally, and found myself feeling comforted by believing that her presence was all around me whenever I needed her. Someday when my mom and dad are no longer able to care for my sister's resting place, I will step up and follow suit in honoring my parent's timeless ritual, as there will simply be no one else who can.



*Broken Dreams*  
(1992 Memorial)

Ceaseless are the memories,  
Of times we spent together.  
For thoughts of you are cherished,  
Inside my heart forever.

And as another year is gone,  
I'll cry more tears for you.  
As I still am hoping for that wish,  
And the dream that can't come true.



Once again I wrote about how ceaseless the memories were. Looking back, I am not certain why I conveyed this--maybe trying to convince myself that I would remember someday. Maybe I knew that deep down they existed, but my broken heart was keeping them safe. It's possible that I just incorporated what people talk about being left with when someone dies--precious memories. Maybe I actually remembered more than what I now recall that I did.

*Pictures*

In the last few years, it has become more evident to me that the pictures of my sister have not aged as I have. I used to look at her pictures and simply appreciate that I had them, whereas, now I feel stuck looking at the same pictures of her, unchanged. I wonder what she would look like today. How would she have changed? This curiosity, and I suppose, frustration, has become quite haunting and consuming in years that are more recent.

I look at her face and wonder what she was thinking and feeling that night when the pictures were taken. I wonder what she was thinking and feeling in the moments of the accident occurring. I stare into her eyes and tell her that I miss her. I still cry in these private moments as I look at her and ask “Why, why, why?” Those last pictures of Leslie seem to bring me sadness and despair, maybe because we took them less than ½ a day before she died. As well, there are moments looking at these pictures, when I feel as though time has stood still. It is difficult to comprehend that I have looked at these same pictures of her for the past 22 years. Everything around me has changed, except her.

Additionally, I often look at our faces in pictures trying to compare our features and appearances. I look at the couple of childhood photos that I have to see how we were the same or different. In what ways do I look like her? Do my children have any of her features? I guess in some way I believe that I may find comfort in seeing one of her features in me or now in my own children. Over the years, many people have told me that I look like her, but I struggle to find the resemblance that they perceive. Regardless of being a teenager or adult, I have always wished that I knew what similarities it was that other people saw in my sister and me.

Since my sister's death, many of the pictures taken seem slightly unreal. It feels as though something is missing in these pictures; Leslie is always missing. It is a strange feeling



that I have when I look at those pictures, especially those of just my parents and me. There sits the three of us, when there used to be four. Even today as an adult, I find myself picturing what some of our family photos would look like if she had not died. The pictures still seem out of place. I remember when I was younger imagining her face in behind us. I had even considered getting extra copies of any pictures of her and pasting her into the photos with us. This idea seemed a little too tacky and disturbed though. I have also thought that maybe we could get a faded image of her imposed in behind us to represent her spirit always being by our side. I never asked if we could do this. I guess I was scared that it would upset my parents and in the end, the picture would be too difficult to look at. As well, I feared my parents rejecting my idea, as I knew this would only result in my own disappointment and anger. I realize as an adult that I could have this done myself, but I have developed the belief that this would need to be a family decision and I would need my parent's approval.

In light of this project, I finally asked my mom if I could have some pictures of Leslie from our childhood. Until now, I only had pictures of her from that night, a couple of high school photos, and a few professional pictures of us when we were younger. I have noticed an increasingly eerie feeling when I look at the pictures of my sister from that night. I just stare at her and think of that dreadful time, and the life taken from her--from us. I so desperately want to remember some happy memories, but suppose I have long needed some pictures to help remind me. After asking my mom if I could develop some negatives or have some pictures out of their albums, I just sat in the dark and sobbed. Maybe the relief of finally asking my Mom for these pictures after twenty-two years overwhelmed me. Why is this still so difficult? Even in these moments, I feel as though I am being selfish. Asking this of my Mom and Dad has felt painstaking and burdensome as this project is not their journey, but rather, it is mine.



I suppose twenty-two years of not seeing many pictures that captured our life together contributed to not being able to remember happier times more clearly. Instead, the tragic details and loneliness since her death always seemed more prevalent. I wish I had been brave enough to ask for the pictures sooner. I struggle with intense emotions that I have not experienced for a long time as I absorb all of these pictures, which lay in front of me. When I look at younger pictures of us and the life we shared together, I feel more connected and a slight sense of comfort. In contrast, I feel as though I can reach right through the ones taken that dreadful night. I suppose in some ways I had forgotten that so many of these beautiful images existed. Regretfully, there are not as many of us together in later years. I was hopeful waiting as my mom searched their whole house trying to find more pictures of Leslie and me together in our teen years. Disappointingly, the only explanation--we were both so busy with our sports, friends, and school. Being that we were both involved with sports but in different age groups and now attended different schools, we often had practices, games, tournaments, and so on, in different places and at different times. Although I am thankful to have these pictures now, I continue to feel saddened and angry that we did not get to continue sharing more of our lives together. There remains a physical sense of emptiness and loneliness that I not only feel within me, but also beside me, as that is where I had naively believed that Leslie would always be.



**Frozen in Time**  
(1993 Memorial)

There's an emptiness within my heart,  
That's forever frozen in time.  
For precious thoughts and memories,  
Are all I have left of you...

Loving you and missing you always,  
Your Sister Forever, Dana



I am not certain what happened with the poem above. I read it now and feel as though something got misprinted. I guess it's the wording that bothers me. I cannot remember if there was any significance to my ending the poem so abruptly.

*Unexpected Reminders/Resurfacing Emotions*

In the years following my sister's death, I was unprepared for the unexpected reminders of her absence. There were days when I would see, hear, or think about something and completely lose my focus as I remembered her. Certain words, people, sounds, and locations would send my thoughts into a place that I dreaded. Some people would think that remembering a lost loved one would be pleasant, but for me in these moments I was often around my parents, friends, or out in public. I was adamant that nobody was going to know what I was thinking or feeling. I felt frustrated and irritated to be in this position, distracted by reminders that took me to an emotional place where I didn't always want to be. I preferred to remember in private.

For years, I thought that something was wrong with me for not being able to stop these triggers from creeping into my thoughts. I just wanted to stop thinking about it, but it seemed to be all around me. How was I supposed to "be strong" when I could not get away from being reminded that my sister was gone and nothing would change that. Sometimes it felt like having demons stalking you. I so desperately wanted to escape the re-occurring reminders that overtook my ability to live in the moment. I did not understand that these reminders were normal. It was like living with two different dimensions to myself--times when I was able to live in the moment, and times when I was only half there. I felt overwhelmed and angry that I had to deal with this. In the struggle to keep my emotions under control and hidden, I often became edgy and irritable. I believe this lack of understanding and inability to cope adequately with these unexpected reminders presented as moodiness and disrespect to anyone on the receiving end. I wish I were prepared to understand what I now realize to be quite a typical experience.

One of the first reminders that I faced all those years ago that has never left me is the simple task of setting the table. Why did I still gather place settings for four? I remember a few

times, actually getting to the table with four forks and knives, and looking at the extra set left in my hand for my sister. I used to tell myself, "How could I be so stupid? How horrible would that have been for my parents if I did not catch myself? You've got to be more careful." A regular routine of setting the dinner table became tense and riddled with confusion. I hated feeling the need to double check that I only had plates and utensils for three. I didn't understand why this was so difficult for me to manage.

To this day, I still think of my sister whenever I help get the table ready at my parent's house. I found that this haunting experience didn't occur when I moved out on my own. It was only something that seemed impossible to overcome while at home where my parents raised my sister and me. Even now with a husband and kids, and more place settings to gather, I continue to be boldly aware that there is still one setting that I must leave in the cupboard. This process is not as difficult or emotionally consuming as before, but it remains with me after all these years.

Much related to this responsibility of setting the table was the act of sitting at the table for dinner. My sister used to sit across from me, whereas after her death I just looked at an empty space. I am certain my parents noticed this absence as well but we never talked about it. I wanted to eat and get away from the discomfort at the table as quickly as possible. I really would have preferred eating in the living room so I did not have to look at the empty place where my sister used to be. As an adult with a husband and two children, I still notice the void at the dinner table at my parent's place because my sister is not there. In my mind, the side of the table where Leslie used to sit still reminds me of her.

Additionally, celebrations such as Christmas and birthdays, which were supposed to be happy and lighthearted, became burdensome and painful after Leslie died. All of the decorations, presents, and favorite foods lost their extravagance without my sister there. It all seemed like a

phony waste of time. It did not seem to affect me as much during the first few years, as I really did not care whether these special holidays came or not. It was just another occasion that people looked forward to celebrating, whereas I just felt as though we were pretending - - going through the motions because a calendar said so. Christmas was disappointing for me every year because I felt alone. The noticeable lack of my sister's presence lingered in every room. I wanted it to be as it was before - something to look forward to and free from sadness. I wanted my sister to help me decide what to get my parents. I still feel my sister's absence at these times of celebration. I wish she were still here with us during each special occasion and milestone. Although done in silence, I will continue to wish my sister a Happy Birthday, Merry Christmas, and so on, in addition to wishing my children the same on behalf of their "Auntie Leslie". Because I am aware that this would be confusing for them, I chose to keep these heartfelt thoughts silent and unrevealed.

Related to many special occasions was the simple act of purchasing cards for family and sometimes friends. I remember the time following Leslie's death that I was buying Christmas cards for my family, and without even realizing what I was doing, I had selected one for my sister. I felt so confused inside, since in that moment, I seemed to have forgotten that Leslie had died. In that moment, I just wanted to walk away and never have to look at the cards again. I felt physically tied up inside every time I tried to get through this task in public. Every time I went to pick out cards at special occasions, I would find myself staring at the ones for sisters. I would even occasionally look through, but despite the personal intention, usually found myself holding back tears. As much as a part of me wanted to buy one, I never did. I also worried that someone, especially one of my parents, would see me looking at the cards for sisters. I don't know why I thought this would have been inappropriate and shocking, but I did. Even today, I still look at those cards for sisters and wish she were still here so I could give her one. As an educated



professional, I now realize that some grief therapy techniques encourage the on-going purchase of cards for the deceased. Unfortunately, as a teenager, I felt an overwhelming sense of sadness and loneliness whenever I encountered cards, picture frames, and books that were specifically for sisters. As an adult, I look at the cards and frames from a different and more understanding perspective, but have still been unable to bring myself to purchase any. I know that I can, maybe even I should, but I will wait until the time feels right.

As well, I struggled with times when movies and TV shows led to flashbacks and reminders of my sister. I am not certain if anyone recognized the impact that some of these images or topics had on me. However, if car accidents, funerals, coffins, or even activities that I shared with Leslie were portrayed my mind became clouded with grief for my dead sister. It was difficult to stay in the moment and just watch the show. There were often moments when I struggled, trying to hold back tears. I did not want to cry and then face answering, "What's wrong?" As a teenager, I just wanted to be able to watch the movies like everyone else without anyone treating me differently or reacting uncomfortably. I even thought at times that something was wrong with me, as I felt embarrassed that these thoughts would overcome me and cause such an emotional stirring inside. I didn't understand why I wasn't able to let go and move forward as so many people had told me I should.



*Lost Treasure*  
(1994 Memorial)

Trying to piece together  
How everything could have been  
Is like searching for a lost treasure  
That can't be found again  
So there's an emptiness  
within my heart  
That's forever frozen in time  
For precious thoughts and memories  
Are all that's left behind.

Loving and missing you always,  
Your sister Forever, Dana





*Holidays and Vacations*

Holidays and vacations filled with excitement and anticipation for many adolescents became something rather bittersweet for me. On one hand, they became a time when I looked forward to going somewhere to have fun, experience new things, suntan, sightsee, and shop. However, an incredible weight of loneliness, regret, and guilt often overshadowed this sense of wonderment and youthfulness.

One of the difficult pieces of our family vacation became the nighttime sleeping arrangements. Often on trips, I had typically shared a bed with my sister, whereas now the bed became a lonely reminder that she was gone. I remember crawling into that big double bed at night and quietly staring at the flatness of the blankets beside me, and the puffy pillow where she normally would have rested her head. Only now, I was alone. Sometimes on a trip, it would be just my mom and me, or a friend would come along, but regardless, it never seemed to make that much of a difference, as I had grown accustomed to having my sister there with me. Sleeping alone, or sharing that space with someone else, was an inescapable reminder of her absence. As I got older and began to vacation on my own, this experience no longer existed. I suppose there was something about traveling with my family, that for so long had included my sister, which triggered this reminder of her absence.

Another disappointing aspect of family traveling was that I no longer had my sister as a companion to share the experience. For fourteen and half years, I always had my sister with whom to share the back seat, listen to music, horse around, and fight. Although my parents continued to be involved in activities, sightseeing, and tours after my sister's death, it was really just not the same. A teenager does not have the same kind of playfulness and excitement with their parents as they do with someone of similar age. I shifted between two extremes of feeling: a

high of total excitement about the holiday or activity, and then a low of absolute loneliness and guilt because my sister was not there to share in our fun.

There were even times on our vacations when I would look out at the sky, ocean, mountains, or fields and wonder if she was there with us. I would talk silently in my head to her and tell her how much I wished she were still with me. Riding in a cab, sitting at a table to eat, booking seats on an excursion, or just getting a set of lounge chairs at the pool, always reminded me of that empty space where she normally would have been with us. I was so used to turning around and seeing her there, whereas now I would turn around and see nothing. I tried to tell myself that she was still with me, and would look for subtle signs that maybe she was sending a message. That is what I told myself to help get through it, but it was never convincing enough for vacations to become free from the underlying sadness.

More specifically, I struggled to enjoy what had been a lifelong weekend retreat for our family. For years, we had gone to my grandparent's cabin during the summer. A year before my sister's car crash, my parents bought a lakeside lot and began clearing the land to build a cabin of their own. We had spent every summer and some winter weekends, enjoying time together as a family at the lake, doing activities such as waterskiing, riding all-terrain vehicles, sun tanning, playing kick the can, ice fishing, skating, snowmobiling, and even driving to the garbage dump to watch for bears. I also recognize that the shift from staying at my grandparent's cabin, with people visiting and other teenagers to hang out with, to staying at our new cabin in a less developed area with no social connections, the same year of my sister's death, magnified the loneliness and isolation I felt on weekends at the lake.

After the accident, all of a sudden life at the cabin became very boring for me. I could still water-ski, swim, ride ATV's, and suntan, but it just was not the same anymore. There were

many mornings at the cabin when I did not want to get up. My parents tried their hardest to encourage me to have fun at the lake, but I just wanted to disappear. I remember feeling an incredible pressure to be enough to make up for her not being there and that thought paralyzed the motivation and enthusiasm I had once had because this was impossible for me to achieve. If I went waterskiing, I felt defeated because I had nobody to admire or feel challenged by.

Everything seemed pointless. I told myself, "Why bother? I will never be as good as she was." With whom was I to go riding ATV's? With whom did I play in the water? I hated looking down at the lake and feeling exhausted at the effort it was going to take to enjoy myself without her.

Many times also existed when I felt miserable and short-tempered with my parents for seemingly wanting me to enjoy myself. I often interpreted their encouragement to go waterskiing or swimming as demanding and overbearing. Maybe it was. Maybe they just went about it the wrong way. Regardless, I wish that they had understood that eventually I would have come around and talked myself into feeling like doing something, but then again, maybe I wouldn't have. I somewhat believe that my parents thought that keeping me active and interested in enjoying the lake, as in the past, would be best for me. I suppose I figured my parents should just back off and leave me alone, as the best I could do sometimes was just to be there. How would they have known this since I never talked about how I felt about being at the lake? We were all trying so hard to move forward with our lives, but I believe that sometimes all we really did was pretend that everything was okay and go about doing what we had to because we had no other choice.

Even through my twenties and thirties, I continued to feel a physical and emotional challenge when I spent weekends at the cabin. I knew I wanted to experience the enjoyment that the cabin could provide, but just wasn't able to see past the fact that my sister wasn't there. I

suppose a part of me realized that my parents had hoped for so much more in having gotten this property for our family, and we truly never got the chance to enjoy it as we had planned. I simply felt as though time just stood still--a sense of disbelief. How do I enjoy all of this like a carefree teenager, when I don't have anyone to share it with anymore? I felt burdened by my thoughts and emotions. I wanted to have a different experience, but didn't know how. Sometimes a friend or boyfriend would come with me to the cabin, which helped by providing some distraction, entertainment, and excitement. I did not feel so lonely or tense with someone else my age at the lake with me. Even when my parents had company, it was a pleasant distraction from the presence of only three of us when there should have been four. It's not that I didn't enjoy being with my parents; it was just very quiet compared to what it used to be. I simply missed the social and playful noisiness, with people coming and going. I felt insignificant and incapable of keeping life at the cabin as it used to be. I simply felt weighted down regardless of whether I tried or not. Despite this change of experience at the lake and inner struggle enjoy activities without my sister; I still looked forward to going to the lake because it, more importantly, was about family and continuing to appreciate what had, in many ways, become a part of us.

In recent summers, I have found that having children at the cabin to play with and watch has definitely cleared my head somewhat. However, each weekend that I spend at the cabin still brings about a persistent feeling of loneliness as I still wish she could enjoy these weekends with us. I often wonder if she would have been joining us with her own husband and kids. Would we be teaching our children to swim and ski together? Would we still compare tan lines while lying on the dock? I remember and miss her if I go waterskiing, fishing with my Dad, sitting by the campfire at night, or looking up at the stars, and on some nights, the Northern Lights. I still do

not talk about Leslie or these thoughts when I am at the lake, but I continue to remember her in silence every time I am there.





*Lost in the Midst*  
(1995 Memorial)

If only I could see your smile  
Or hear your voice again,  
My soul would be uplifted  
To live freely once again.

But all I have are memories  
And like a bird with broken wings,  
My heart is forever shattered  
And life will never be the same.

I look back to all our memories  
And for a moment...  
everything seems alright.  
But I am forever lost in the midst  
Without you in my life.

You'll always be my cherished treasure  
And you will always be in my heart.

Loving you and missing you always, your sister forever, Dana



*Shattered Dreams & Significant Life Events*

As I struggled to move on and look forward to many of life's milestones, I always remembered that things might have been different if Leslie had not died. It was like having two existences; the life I was living and the life that I wanted to have--the one with my sister still beside me. I felt confused, trapped, and frustrated by this constant need to think about: What if she was still here? What would our family be like? What would my parents be like? What would I be doing? What would be the same or different?

As I continued to live my life after the loss of my sister, accomplishments and milestones re-opened sadness, anger, and loneliness. Although many people believe that someone can work through their grief after several years have passed, these on-going significant life events can present emotions and challenges that can become overwhelming. I had not prepared for these special moments to be so difficult. I had not considered the emotional difficulty that I would face during these times.

I remember my high school and university graduations being a time filled with excitement and pride. However, there was also a sense that I was just going through the motions. I felt like I should not be experiencing this moment in my life – my sister was supposed to graduate first, but she never got that chance. Even hearing my name called at my graduations felt uncomfortable. I was getting the chance to experience all of these things, while her experiences had been stolen from her. I used to question, “Why should I get to enjoy this when she never did?” These feelings transcended many experiences that would follow in my life. I felt angry and saddened at the same time, not just for myself, but also for my parents who would never get to watch her do these things, and most of all for my sister because she never got the chance to experience so much of what life had left to bring her way.



At the time of my wedding, many years passed since I had experienced a major life event. I thought after sixteen years without my sister, that I was in control of my emotions and managing my grief. I was shockingly wrong. After I got engaged and began to plan my wedding I was overtaken by an unexpected and unresolved sadness. I felt like such a fool for struggling with my emotions during wedding preparations. I found myself suddenly facing an endless list of internal questions about how my sister's life would have turned out. I felt so lonely. How could I be feeling this way after all of these years? Why could I not control my thoughts anymore? I remember feeling an incredible longing for her to be alive still and with me during this time. I still needed her in my life. I wanted her back desperately, but knew that this could never be. I still miss her so much.

In recognizing this resurfacing emotion, I knew that I wanted to have something to symbolize my sibling relationship as it obviously was still influencing my adult life. It took several months for me to find the courage, but I finally mentioned to my mom that I wanted to have a candle lit for my sister during our wedding. I needed something there to symbolize her presence. I am so glad that I was able to have had this simple gesture in her honor, but it in no way diminished that feeling of emptiness in my stomach as I made plans, walked down the aisle, and celebrated with family and friends.

Within a couple of years, I once again faced an intensity of emotions relating to the loss of my sister. I was finally pregnant and going to have my first child. That time in my life was particularly difficult. Sadness consumed me in knowing that she was not going to be here to share the experience with me. I chose to wear Leslie's necklace and 'L' charm around my neck during this time, as I had done for years after her death. In some ways, it felt as though I believed

that she had only been away for a little while and was finally just realizing the permanence of her death.

My mind was flooded with thoughts about her death, our relationship, and everything we missed getting to share with each other. I realized that I would never get to be a 'real' auntie. My children will never have the chance to live life with their Auntie Leslie. There will never be the possibility for my children to have cousins that share a direct link through my sister and me. The manner in which my sister's death transcends time speaks volumes to me about grief and its lasting effects, regardless of "working through" your emotions. There will always be new events, new situations, and new milestones that bring about remembrance and sadness for the person who can no longer experience the dreams alongside you.



*By My Side*  
(1996 Memorial)

My life goes on without you  
But it's like stumbling in a haze,  
For I still need you by my side  
To lead me through life's maze.

I wish you'd never left me  
You never should have died,  
For as I found out the day you went,  
You made my world alive.

Just as the sun will rise and set,  
And the stars will always shine  
My heart and soul are with you,  
Forever...through all time

Holding onto you is like  
holding onto everything.

Loving and missing you always,  
Your sister forever,  
Dana



*Poetry, Tattoos, and Symbolism*

There are many different ways that a person can memorialize someone that they love. When my sister died, nobody talked to me about finding my own personal ways to remember my sister. I just went along with the rituals and choices of my parents, although I recall feeling a sense of detachment from these things. Although some of their choices were helpful and comforting, others were often not my own responses to grief and seemed to bring me little comfort. Over time, I developed my own way of thinking about and remembering my sister that provided meaning for me.

I remember occasionally writing poetry about my feelings, but I had a hard time finding the words to express what I was feeling. I believe this difficulty was because of my age and skill level; because of the stress and intensity of emotions; and because I would avoid exploring feelings because that was safer for me. The poetry evolved over time and became something that I would write frequently in the first few years as a memorial for my sister once a year on the anniversary of her death. I do not know if I would have done this if my mom did not also do this once a year in remembrance. I remember sometimes feeling that I would rather not write a poem because it opened up so much hurt and torment. Forcing myself to think about it, obsess about wording, and get it done in time to print on the anniversary of her death was sometimes more about a sense of obligation than honor.

Unfortunately, I also recall an instance when a friend took a copy of the poem, "Sisters" and had it written in calligraphy on marble print paper. I was surprised and thankful that he had done this for me, and despite being worried about what my mom would think decided to show her anyway. I did not anticipate that she would be angry that more effort did not go into presenting better quality work, especially in memory of my sister. She threw it down, and when I

quickly grabbed it, she tried to take it away. The conversation escalated until I took off from our house. I felt horrible because I, regardless of the imperfect quality, genuinely felt attached to this poem that had so much personal meaning for me.

For many reasons, beyond the incident mentioned above, I struggled every year in showing my mom the poems I wrote in memory of my sister. I never showed her my other poetry, just the yearly memorials. To this day I am not clear as to why I never directly showed my dad any of the memorials. I assume he read them in the paper, but there was never a moment of sharing when we came together as a family. My mom and I exchanged poems in the kitchen, read each other's words, hugged, reassured each other that they were okay, and then carried on with our day. I was always worried that she may not understand my words and feelings. I suppose because we did not talk about what we were thinking and feeling very often, that the yearly poems became a renewed introduction or glimpse into our private world of grief. In hindsight though, I am happy and proud that I wrote these poems. Although it would have been easier to write nothing, I believe that it helped me to work through some of my emotions from year to year.

As I read these poems, all these years after her death, I am able to remember how much I have overcome. I have found it even more significant though, that many of the words and thoughts in the poems have remained the same throughout all of these years. In some ways, it confirms for me that we may not necessarily work through grief or change our perspective about it, but really learn to live with it, only thinking about it less frequently and coping better in managing the loss. As I reflect upon my poems, it is clear that my pain is just as intense and overwhelming today as it was all those years ago. Time does not heal all wounds; it acts like a lid

on a box. When I lift the lid, I reveal the contents inside just as they were the last time I opened the box. Time has taught me how to keep the lid closed more tightly and opened less frequently.

I also made the choice when I was about 19 years old to get a tattoo in memory of my sister. I selected a rendition of a heart with a teardrop, which I had drawn since Leslie's death, to represent the sadness in my heart, as I no longer had a sister to go through life with. I may have even incorporated the idea from a glass-blown heart hanging in my window; the words, "Sisters are Forever" scrolled inside with a crystal heart hanging within, that my mom had designed for me a couple of years after Leslie died. I had always wanted to get this tattoo done but knew my parents would not support the idea, so therefore had to wait until I was a legal adult.

Unfortunately, because of the judgment and criticism that my parents immediately reacted with when they learned of my tattoos, they were never able to learn of the meaning behind them. I did not want their approval; I just wanted them to understand that I loved having this permanent image in remembrance on my body that would be with me forever. I soon realized that symbolic representations such as this helped me feel a lasting connection to my sister and that this was an easier way to remember her that did not involve having to find the words or explain to anyone what something meant or what I was thinking.

Finding symbols that represented my sister in a positive manner, rather than focusing on the emptiness has led to feelings of comfort. Years ago, I started to see the sun, moon, and stars as significant features in my life, and recognized an analogy with my feelings about my sister's presence. I had always struggled with the notion of not having anything to represent my sister in every place imaginable. I eventually realized that although we don't always see the sun, the moon, or the stars, this does not mean that they are not there. I decided that their everlasting and constant presence was similar to that of my attachment to my sister. I may not be able to see her,



touch her, or hear her, but she is always with me; just like the sun, the moon, and the stars. As an adult, I have brought these symbols, including another tattoo of a sun-moon silhouette, along with some recent new ones, into many areas of my life and home, to keep my sister's memory and presence close. I was also able to incorporate this symbolism into my birth announcements in the belief that somewhere in a galaxy of stars my sister watched over my boys until they were ready to come into this world with me. I feel comfort and peace in having found something of my own that represents my own personal meaning relating to the memory of my sister.





*Missing You*  
(1997 Memorial)

My mind wanders to sweet memories,  
My heart still aches with all the pain,  
For never will I have the chance  
To share life with you again.

I gaze up to the sky at times  
Still wondering how it could be,  
That all I have left of you  
Is your precious memory.

My love is always with you.  
My soul, right by your side.  
For never does a day go by  
When I'm not missing you inside.

Treasuring your memory and loving you always,  
Your little sister, forever Dana



*Art Therapy & Grief Counseling Course*

Although I did not receive much counseling as an adolescent and refused to explore the nature of grief with published literature, I took the opportunity as an adult to explore the process of healing through course work. Up until this point, I had never read a book about grief, learned about the benefits of specific tasks in grieving, or communicated much of my innermost thoughts with anyone.

My first experience that brought me towards some clarity was the choice to register for an Art Therapy elective through my Master's program. Although I had not considered the impact it might potentially have on me, I soon learned there was much I needed to consider, rethink, and figure out. One aspect of the course was to immerse ourselves in the process of therapeutic art. We were required to create a portfolio of artwork with commentaries about each piece to submit as a final assignment. The following quotes come directly from what I submitted the summer of 2005 when I was 33 years old and pregnant for the first time:

Portfolio Response: Always There

I produced a drawing similar to the tattoo I have which represents my sister's presence always being with me, even if I cannot see her. Two separate comments that I made in response to this drawing stated:

I was very easily able to self-reflect with this piece because the image was personal and extremely cherished. Creating something that represents my sister always initiates a lot of self-reflection. The product is something that I can be proud of and use as a visual reminder that there will never be a time when she is not with me. I may not be able to physically see her or feel her warmth, but she is always there – just like the sun.

As much as creating this image was quite positive, I continue to realize just how much my sister's death still consumes me. Along with positive emotions, came a lot of the sad and negative emotions that continue to go unresolved. I continue to realize just how much I miss my sister. I have never been able to deal with some of my feelings surrounding her death very well. In all honesty, I can't say that I learned about these feelings during this process,

but have always known where my feelings are at...this art piece just acts as a reminder that I have not been able to bring some closure or resolution to many of my emotions related to my sister. I continue to believe that many of the qualities I dislike about myself are somehow rooted in the damaged emotions from years ago that were never addressed. I did learn that although I usually feel very sad, angry, broken, lost and empty over my sister's death, this particular symbol seems to provide me with enough of a connection to her that it allows me to breathe and unclench my heart, even if just for a moment.

#### Portfolio Response: New Life

This drawing represented my unborn child during my first pregnancy, where I chose to include a tear to the side to represent the loss of my sister. I commented with the following:

The only part that I added to my drawing that maybe isn't symbolically positive was the tear. It began as the part of me that is sad that I do not have my sister here with me to share this joy with.

I also learned that including one tear did not take away from the warmth and love of my creation, but for me just added some positive comfort. I recognized that it is important to recognize the past in our current experiences and feelings. The past is a part of us. I did learn though that my past can be included in my present experiences without taking over or consuming the happiness that is occurring at the moment. I hadn't really thought of that before. My past feelings have frequently presented themselves and overwhelmed me so much that I was not able to enjoy what was happening at the moment and ultimately I missed out on many positive experiences. I have learned that my past will always be a part of me, and I need to work on not letting it diminish my present or future life.

Although this Art therapy course opened up some awareness about my emotions and grief, it was not until I chose to take a Grief Counseling course through my Master's program that I developed much more understanding and clarity about how my grief manifested itself. I am thankful that this opportunity presented itself to me and that I was able to move beyond my reservations about examining and discussing my grief, and follow through with the emotional demands of the course. In the beginning, I did not expect to reveal so much about my own personal experience with grief, but signed up simply because I believed that it would be

important for me to acquire some skills in dealing with loss that I believed the counselors I encountered had lacked.

Although I experienced emotional trials and tribulations during this course, I ended the course feeling relieved that I could finally make sense of some of the burdensome and dysfunctional thoughts that had followed me all these years. In addition to reading the textbook for the course, I selected two other grief related books to review and present to the class, and chose to research adolescent sibling grief. I learned so much from these two books and my literature review about grief that I realized how stubborn and naive I had been all those years in refusing to address what was right in front of me. I am certain that if grief-based information had been forced upon me during those years I would not have embraced or absorbed as much as I did in having made the choice myself to identify and recognize my grief-related struggles.



*Yesterday*  
(1998 Memorial)

So many years have passed,  
But it still feels like yesterday.  
No time can ease my pain,  
Of not having you by my side.

I hold onto your precious memory  
Missing you with each breath I take.  
Emptiness within my heart and soul,  
Forever...without you in my life.

Always in my thoughts, loving and missing you still,  
Your sister, forever, Dana





*Sadness*

After the death of a loved one, the remaining survivors may experience an intense and lasting burden of sadness. The home that I once knew as a busy, noisy, and involved place suddenly became quiet and meaningless without my sister. I could not escape the rawness of emotion that ran within me and around me. I believe it is important for people to understand that an unexpected death in the family can contribute to years of sadness that encompasses every holiday, every celebration, every milestone, and even every laughter-filled moment. It is difficult to explain, but it is as if the sadness has hold of a piece of you forever. Regardless of the amount of time that elapsed, a haunting sadness remained situated in my heart simply knowing that my sister would never encounter another day of her own, while I had so many still left to live through without her. Every day I miss her and that simple fact still makes me overwhelmingly sad.

More specifically, this sadness presented itself as I continued with the typical and routine tasks of everyday. Sadness existed when I looked at the empty kitchen chair, her empty room, her perfectly made and untouched bed, the clothes unworn in her closet, the newly framed pictures of her around the house, the cassette player and tapes that we so often fought over, the piano that we shared, and the phone that was more readily available. The reality was that up until the day when my sister died, I only knew life with her voice, her smell, her energy in our home. Unexpectedly, I now faced living in a home to which I felt I was unaccustomed and indifferent towards because my sister's presence was missing.

Instead of looking at these things within the house and remembering her with peace and comfort, I felt frustrated, annoyed, and depressed. I wanted my sister to tell me what to wear, not my mom. I wanted to talk to my sister about school stuff, not with my parents. I wanted to argue



with her again. I wanted to tease her again. I wanted to get advice and give advice again. I felt as though nothing mattered; she was gone and I now had to figure out the new life that was in front of me. It was a new life that I didn't want, I didn't choose, and didn't ask for. I felt that my life, regardless of how much I tried, would never be what I wanted or complete without her. Despite many incredible and memorable experiences since her death, this grey cloud of sadness continues to remain in many of my innermost feelings and thoughts. Although more prevalent in the past when I lived with my parents, I still feel an uncontrolled sadness today, especially when I think about my children and how much I would have loved for them to have an 'Auntie Leslie' in their lives. I feel sadness in my life when I think back on my life without my sister, and when I look ahead to my life without my sister.



*Wonder if...*  
(1999 Memorial)

I catch a glimpse  
of a bird in flight,  
or leaves dancing  
in the wind,  
and wonder if it's  
you that's there,  
just checking in again.

I feel the warmth  
of sunshine,  
and the softness  
in a breeze,  
and wonder if  
you're by my side  
to guide the way for me.

I listen to sounds  
of laughter,  
and music in the air,  
and wonder if it  
could be your voice,  
telling me you're right there.

I know I can  
never hold you,  
or share dreams  
with you again,  
but your memory  
still lives around me,  
For our love will never end.

Missing you still,  
Your sister forever,  
Dana

*Anger*

As a fourteen-year-old, I had never experienced intense emotions like rage, despair, emptiness, fear, disillusionment, and grief. It was like living a completely different existence. All of these emotions, “Wham”--and I was not able to make sense of any of it. In an instant, my world had become complex and foreign. Anger and rage shaped my perceptions and spilled out of me in many of my responses and interactions.

Furthermore, I had never witnessed this intensity of emotion from my parents either. There was anger, hatred, despair, and defeat written all over their faces. I often felt as though I needed to take on the same emotions as them. I should be feeling the same way. If they were angry about something or someone, then I felt foolish and selfish for not having reacted in the same way. I became compelled to be loyal and defend my sister’s memory.

I also believe that after several years of trying to pretend that my sister’s death wasn’t real, I grew more and more bitter. It became too difficult to shut out the reality that now shaped my life. One thing that I realized was being at the house where we lived or being around my parents was no longer comfortable; there was always another dimension within me, which contained anger and pain. The house where we grew up together and shared so many wonderful memories became a place, which seemed to fuel my rage. This was where my parents took the very last picture we have of Leslie. This was where she slept, did her make-up, hung her clothes, borrowed my things, practiced her basketball shot, and talked on the phone. This was where we argued, laughed, teased each other, and kept secrets. Now that my sister was gone, I felt angry at my surroundings as I faced their emptiness and my loneliness.

I also embraced this anger, because it was easier to manage than complete sorrow. I was pissed off at the world and, at the time, this anger felt better than what I believed to be my only

other two options. True happiness for me meant that I had forgotten my sister and was moving forward with my life, which produced feelings of shame and guilt. On the other hand, sorrow only led to feelings of hollowness, despair, and instability. I found it was easier to get up and do day-to-day things by avoiding the reality of grief and sadness. I thought I needed to put on a brave face. Furthermore, how do you attend classes, sports functions, and so on, in a tearful state? That type of reaction would draw attention and incapacitate you from getting on with the activity. Anger was sure easier to function and live with, than the devastation of sadness.

Much to my confusion, I also faced a mixture of emotions, thoughts, and feelings towards my sister. I felt abandoned in the mess of emotion where I now had to deal with picking up the pieces. I felt a tormenting hatred towards her for not wearing her seatbelt that night. I hated the fact that she simply got into the vehicle that night. I hated her for lying to my parents about her plans. For the past 22 years I believed that my sister did not have permission to go to any of the wet-grad parties after the dance, but I have just recently found out that my sister actually did have permission to go to the after-grad party that night. Unfortunately, some confusion about their choices that night occurred as my sister and her date had last indicated that they did not plan to attend the after-grad party, but later changed their minds. I suppose there was also much secrecy after their deaths in regards to where they had partied prior to leaving for the after-grad, because alcohol and speed contributed to the accident. Regardless, the bottom line is that they were not where they said they would be and nobody stepped up to fill in the blanks so we could have some clarification or truth. It still angers me that so much miscommunication occurred when we had only ever searched and hoped for the truth. In many ways, I now feel a sense of defeat and remorse as some of my long-standing negative thoughts and feelings about my sister's choices and the accident could have prevented if people had discussed and revealed how my

sister had spent her last hours before her tragic death that night. Despite this, most of all I hated her for leaving me all alone. I used to scream these words at her in my head, sometimes even aloud if no one was home. Then I would stop and direct the hatred at myself for having allowed these feelings. What was wrong with me? How could I possibly be mad at her? I was confused and hurt. I hated myself for years for having these thoughts and feelings. Even today, I feel guilty for not having a better grasp of my anger. Although I understand now that my anger was quite normal, it has been difficult to repair the self-hating damage. Self-forgiveness sometimes is only a word when the feelings that run too deep can't be reached.

In response to the circumstances of the accident and its preventability, I also felt hatred towards people I had never met, including the community where the accident occurred. I don't know if these feelings would have developed on their own, or if they existed because I heard comments from my mom and dad, absorbing some of their perspectives. Nevertheless, I blamed her date, their friends, his family, and the community as a whole. I took this blame and transformed it into an indescribable loathing that consumed me. If I encountered a person, name, or area connected to the accident that killed my sister, I consciously reacted with inner rage. Sometimes I would verbally express this rage, whereas in other instances I repressed it and let it consume me. Over the years, I have done a lot of thinking about this hatred, and although the intensity of anger I feel towards the community has faded, I still feel some degree of anger that continues to influence some of my decisions and feelings today.

More specifically, I have refused to even consider purchasing a home or working in the sub-community associated with my sister's death. I have struggled to maintain relationships with people who lived in the area at that time, and even those who live there now. Over the years, I have even experienced discomfort when needing to drive to the area or through it. I instantly find

myself experiencing a re-surfacing of thoughts and feelings in these moments. My feelings were so intense that as a teenager I usually had to consciously talk my emotions down, breathe deep, and blink back the tears in order to maintain composure. If nobody was with me, I most often turned up the music and just let the tears roll. Although I have not had such a strong reaction for years, I still experience sadness and an altered sense of comfort when traveling in that area. I feel as though I cannot risk accepting anything into my life with any possible connections to my sister's tragic accident that night. Although some people might believe that this reaction is extreme, I am comfortable in accepting and admitting that this is my viewpoint and do not owe anybody any explanations. Of course, as I write this I recognize that my animosity goes unresolved; it still exists, and I have accepted that this may be as good as it will get.

My parents and friends have commented in years past about my "pissed-off" attitude. According to them, I was at times short-fused, defensive, or overly sensitive. These comments from my parents and friends would only fuel my "screw off" attitude even more. How could my parents talk about my reactions this way; couldn't they see their own emotion? Why was it okay for them to be angry, frustrated, cranky, and upset, but not for me to show those feelings? Why was it okay for my friends to show their emotions when something affected them, but then judge me when I revealed my feelings? Even though my parents had managed the best that they could under the circumstances, so did I. As a teenager, I believed that I did not owe anybody any explanations for my reactions, behavior, or choices. At the time, I don't think that I realized how much putting on a brave face had smothered my ability to react without a sense of irritation. I wanted everyone to back off, give me some space, and show understanding if I appeared difficult or miserable, at times, for no apparent reason. I knew that my attitude and personality was not as it used to be, and that my bottled up emotion leaked out at the wrong times, wrong places, and



with the wrong people. Although I can now see that much of the hostility in my responses related to my unaddressed and misplaced anger over the death of my sister, I also believe that some of my anger may have derived from typical adolescent rebellion and relatively normal family conflict.

*Reflections of You*

(2000 Memorial – 14 years shared with my sister, 14 years now without)

As I treasure  
your sweet memory  
And the time  
we shared together;  
I imagine life still with you,  
In my heart  
you'll live forever.

Reflections of you  
surround me,  
In so many ways each day,  
that time has slipped by  
so quickly,  
Since the day you went away.

Endlessly my soul  
still searches,  
Forever lost and incomplete,  
Holding tightly to  
our memories,  
Hoping again  
someday we'll meet.

Forever by my side  
and in my heart,  
Your little sister, Dana



*Resentment and Envy*

Amongst my multi-faceted emotions, I also felt resentment and envy. Sometimes these feelings consumed me and I was inexperienced in knowing how to interpret them. I believe that these emotions negatively affected many relationships in my life and prevented me from interacting in a healthy and well-adjusted manner.

For example, there were days when I absolutely dreaded coming home. I wanted to just leave and have nobody know where I was, but I ultimately could not follow through with that, because I did not want to worry or scare my parents. I often found myself feeling resentment as I came through the front door of our house to see my mom lying on the loveseat with her tinted glasses on, often with tissue in her hand or tucked on the cushions. The resentment was not about my mom's sadness, as I could understand that, but rather because I had to get up, go to school, attend sports practice, face the real world each day regardless of how I was feeling, while she had the choice to avoid other settings besides home and have the privacy to grieve during the day. This offended me. However, at the same time, I felt guilty and shameful for having been insensitively cruel with my thoughts towards my parents, as they had lost their daughter. In other moments when I came home to see my mom in this manner, I felt worthless because I did not know what to say or how I could comfort her. She would ask about my day and I would usually say, "Fine" and then retreat to my room or come and watch TV.

It also seemed to make matters emotionally worse for me when my sister's friends would come by the house or cabin. I never let on how much I struggled with these visits, as I didn't want to offend anybody or disappoint my parents for not wanting to welcome their support and remembrance. A group of friends came caroling the first Christmas after my sister's death. I stood in the doorway to our house with my parents and could only think, "Just stop singing. Go

away. Just leave us alone.” On one level, I understood that this was a sincere gesture as they were missing her too and thinking of us, but I wanted to pretend that none of them existed. I hated to see them standing there while my sister was no longer with us. Some friends also came to our house the following year at their high school graduation. I remember looking at them in their beautiful dresses and feeling sadness and resentment as they were experiencing this incredible milestone and celebration while my sister could not. As a teenager, I didn’t understand why they would come as they celebrated their accomplishment. It felt somewhat insulting to me, as there were many other days to the year, not relating to special occasions, that we sat alone missing my sister. Why didn’t they visit then? In some ways, I didn’t want to remember that my sister had died and instead just pretended that she went out one night and hadn’t come home yet. The visiting from her friends was an unexpected reminder of the truth that I took exception to as I hated seeing life move forward while mine felt trapped.

Furthermore, I resented the fact that my mom had become friends with the mother of my sister’s best friend. Why didn’t I matter enough for her to want to get to know my friend’s parents? Although I knew that this family was wonderful and kind, I simply did not want to have anything to do with them. I felt especially irritated when invited to join them for lunch. I felt as though if I went I would be sitting in my sister’s place. If she hadn’t died I knew that we would not all be having lunch together. I could not be around them without struggling with those sad thoughts of my sister. These interactions felt uncomfortable and wrought with emotional strain. What I came to realize years later as an adult was that this woman had been an incredible source of support for my mom. I regret that I could not see the potential for support from this family when I was younger. I didn’t know how else to interpret their connection to us after my sister’s death other than it being a painful reminder that I wanted to avoid. I still feel some awkwardness

around these friends, but I am able to accept that within this relationship. I hope that time will allow me to enjoy this relationship with a sense of freedom in my heart rather than an uncomfortable tension and sense of defeat.



*Alone and Lost*  
(2001 Memorial)

How does one find strength to let go  
When a heart never forgets  
What is loved so much?

How do you move forward  
When all your soul searches for  
Is found in memories behind you?

How does time offer one comfort  
When the emptiness inside  
Is with you everyday?

Saying goodbye isn't right;  
You weren't supposed to go.  
Forgetting isn't possible;  
So much of our life was shared.

An emptiness still surrounds me;  
It's a feeling I can't escape  
Time has brought no real comfort,  
Life seems so out of place.

My eyes still see you beside me.  
And I hear your whispering voice.  
Forever my heart will love you . . .  
But only memories I can embrace

My soul remains alone and lost;  
Searching for what should be.  
I try to keep perspective here  
But at times I can not breathe.

In not knowing what could have been  
My life has forever changed.  
A part of me has slipped away...  
by your side it'll always stay.

Everyday I think of you – I always will.  
Etched in my heart forever – I miss you.

Your little sister always, forever . . . Dana



*Freedom and Escape*

Getting my driver's license finally gave me the opportunity to experience freedom and privacy to deal with some of my grief. I loved to just drive and drive, going nowhere by myself. I would often drive somewhere specific, park, and just sit in my car to cry. I could never do this before because I was at home with my parents, at school, or with friends.

I also could seek answers to some of the questions that I had about my sister's accident once I got my license. I tried to figure out where the actual accident had occurred. My parents had driven out to the accident site in the days following her death, but did not allow me to go with them. I needed to know where she died, but I did not have enough information or knowledge of the area to find it. I would drive out to the area, looking, bawling with tears streaming down my face. I would drive faster and faster, weaving down the road. I did not care that it was not safe. I remember even thinking to myself, "Just crash. Lose control and crash. Then you can die like she did." I would always slow down at this point because I knew that this would devastate my parents. I also did not want to crash in a different spot than where my sister had died and since I did not know where the accident took place, this choice to crash did not feel right. I remember feeling quite frantic during some of these searches because I would only have so much time before I would have to turn back to go home. I was also worried that my Mom or Dad would see me driving up there and I would have to come up with some reason to explain what I was doing in order to hide the truth from them.

To this day, I still do not know where my sister's accident happened. I have searched on Google Earth and found the approximate location, but I feel as though I have to go there. I need to see where she died even though it has been 22 years. My husband has offered to try to help me find it, but he would not know exactly where it happened. Several times, I have spoken with my

mom intending to bring this up with her, but I have not followed through. I rationalize that I do not want to upset her or dad in order to satisfy my own needs of healing. I do not want to sadden them anymore than they have already been over the years. How do you find the strength to ask someone something when you know in the end it will only cause them pain or heartache. I have chosen for all these years to accept not knowing in silence because I could not find it in myself to re-open their wounds. I believed if they wanted me to know and had the strength to face this a second time, they would have brought it up at some point. I will continue to hope for that day when I can ask my parents to show me where my sister died. However, if I am not able, I know that through my writing, there will be no more hiding behind my silence.

Moving out of my family home and eventually away from the community to attend university seemed to help me work through some of my emotions. I was able to see more clearly that life existed outside of my tormented existence. In moving out of my parent's house, I did not have to see my sister's pictures every day, set the table for three, stay in her room, or feel her ever-present absence. Furthermore, in moving away from my hometown, I did not have to drive by the cemetery every day, run into my sister's friends, see her old Bronco with someone else driving it, or look at the places filled with so many memories. For so many years, I felt relentless frustration at all of these reminders. I just wanted to escape and have a chance to figure out who I was without the influence of these things. I lived with the death of my sister every day from the time that I was fourteen and believed that I would continue to do so for the rest of my life. At that point in my life, I did not want bold reminders of this devastating loss in my face anymore, as I felt it in my heart every day, regardless of where I was.

### **2002 Memorial**

I chose not to write a poem as I was getting married that year and found it too emotional to get the words onto paper. This was my first intense resurfacing of grief. I had not anticipated that her absence at this point in my life would be so devastating. Many people did not understand as so many years had passed since her death. I included a memory candle at my wedding and reception to represent my sister's on-going presence in my life.



*Happiness and Fulfillment*

I long for a time when I can feel uninterrupted, pure happiness. At the same time, I am doubtful that I can ever feel that inner warmth of true happiness again without having to convince myself to let down my guard. Regardless, it always seems to be tainted. Even in the most joyous of moments, accomplishments and fulfillment, at some point I think of my sister and wish she were still here to share these experiences with me, and experience some of these things herself.

Fulfillment has become something that I wonder whether I will be able to find. I cannot seem to figure out why I continually have a feeling of being slightly disappointed even during the best of moments. I have only been able to conclude that it is because my sister is always missing from every experience. Is loneliness and struggle to feel fulfillment typical in the loss of an only sibling? The closest that I have ever gotten to feeling unbound is after the birth of my own children. Although the newfound joy, love, and excitement that my kids have brought me have been life changing, I still wish my sister were here with all of us. I have been feeling desperation in my search, questioning what I have been doing wrong all of these years that I have not been able to accept 'true' fulfillment in her absence. Maybe this is as good as it gets. Maybe when someone you have never experienced life without inexplicably dies, feeling completeness in their absence becomes impossible. Since my sister's death, I believe that I have continued to live every moment as it came my way, with much appreciation, happiness, and enthusiasm. Nevertheless, in missing my sister, I believe my heart will always ache for a little bit more out of life, although my mind always reminds me that this is not possible.

**Still Searching**

(2003 Memorial - 17 years into her life, 17 years of life missed)

I try to see you through searching eyes . . .  
I listen, but your voice fades to a whisper.  
I turn around, reach out and hold my breath . . .  
I can't find you . . . I am still alone.

Are you out there somewhere?  
Can you hear me when I talk to you?  
When does it stop hurting so much?

Days have passed and years slipped by,  
But not a day without your precious memory.  
My life should be full . . . but it's just not complete.  
You are not here . . . I still need you in my life.  
I have lost my best friend . . . my sister.

Can you stay in my good dreams forever?  
Is it really you I feel beside me sometimes?  
I don't understand . . . why did this happen?

My heart holds onto every moment shared together,  
And cries for all that was taken from you . . .  
So much of my life that I can't ever share with you.  
Nothing feels right, you shouldn't be gone . . .  
Oh how I only want to share life with you.

Did you know how much I loved you?  
Will I always feel lost and lonely without you?  
Do I ever really get to see you again?

Although I can imagine us still standing together,  
Every step of the way, I will always miss you.  
Wishing I could still share every moment with you  
and missing you more than ever.

Loving and Missing You Always,  
Your Little Sister Forever,  
Dana

*This is the last poem I have ever written.*

*Fearing Death*

I believe that when a person's world flips upside down from an unexpected and traumatic death, a lifelong fearfulness of death can occur. When someone that I care about is late, goes on a road trip, drives in bad road conditions, has health problems, or approaches old age I seem to have difficulty being optimistic. I imagine every death-related scenario; how I might react, what would I do, whom would I call, and what my life would be like if that person died. What would I say at their funeral? What would I do differently this time in order to manage the grief better? I suppose I believed that it was better to think the worst, than mistakenly believe things were fine, only to risk further unexpected pain. I believe this thought process partially occurred because I had been completely unprepared for the anguish that came into my life when my sister died. I had not even considered the possibility of an accident when she went out that night. At fourteen, drinking and driving was a danger that I could not begin to understand. I do not remember experiencing this type of worry or fearfulness about events prior to my sister's accident. I had lived the typical teenage experience, quite naive, believing that parents were overly concerned and enforced unreasonable restrictions on us without just cause. My perspective of the fragility of life changed that dreadful night. I seemed to acquire a perception about life, that did not develop over the span of years through a range of experiences with many of life's lessons; but rather, within an instant.

After my sister's death, one aspect of this overwhelming fear occurred whenever someone in my life was late. I became obsessed with thoughts of tragedy. Worry and concern about what may have happened to someone seemed to become an invasive and automatic response. I certainly did not enjoy this fearfulness or the response from others when I was upset that they had been late or had not called. In some ways, it seemed more logical and realistic to



anticipate the worst-case scenario just in case. I learned at a young age that bad things can happen, and not to think that it won't happen to you. I believe that this difficulty in handling my fearfulness about someone dying unexpectedly left me coping with stress and relational difficulties.

Even today, I tend to have to talk myself out of thinking the worst, especially when driving or road trips are involved. When I was younger, I always used to imagine an accident or something horrible having happened. In adulthood, much self-exploration, I have learned when these thoughts start to consume me to think of other rational possibilities first. Although I still encounter frequent, and possibly irrational, worry and fear, especially in regards to my children, I am able to talk myself through it in a healthier way than at any other time in my life.

Additionally, I worry about my parents or husband dying because they are really the only family I have left. I do not have the blessings of a close-knit, large extended family that has genuinely shared my life experiences. Perhaps my disconnected family contributes to the fearfulness I have of losing my parents and the loneliness I have felt throughout most of my life. Who will be there for me? Whom can I trust? Who will love me unconditionally? Who knows who I really am? I now have nobody who has shared all of my life with me other than my parents. With whom will I reminisce when my parents are gone? If I were to die, who would share stories with my children about my life, my sister, my parents, and my grandparents? Who would be able to describe the stories, values, goals, dreams and personalities from the past? I know that my husband and some of my friends would do their best, but they do not hold the stories or memories from my early beginnings. I realize now that I only have what lies ahead of me, and it is frightening to accept the unknown. Instead of going nowhere with this situation as I did in adolescence, I have chosen to be pro-active in my search for a sense of security relating to

my family's past. In light of this, I have asked certain family members to record their life stories in memory books I purchased for them, so that I have something to reminisce, record our family history, and share with my children someday. I also recognize that my own personal record keeping of my life can serve to alleviate my fear that my children will not have anything to ground them to their family roots.

On another note, for a long period after my sister's death, I decided that when I had children, I would want to have three. If I had one child and he or she died, then there would be no children left. If I had two children and an accident occurred, like my sister's, although one child remained, he or she would now be alone, without a sibling. I rationalized that if I had three children, and one died, then I would still have children and they would continue to experience life with a brother or sister. I always knew that this was a distorted way of thinking about my future family, but for me at the time, it seemed logical.

I am also petrified that someday I may unexpectedly lose one of my children and have to bury him like my parents did and that my sons may have to face life without each other someday. I watch them and wonder if I will be able to protect them without smothering them or emotionally exhausting myself. I even catch myself trying to force an emotional distance during certain situations with them, as I used to do in the past with other people. Depending on the situation and the risk, these private thoughts and worries can become consuming. On the other side of this fear is the desire to experience everything with them now, because you never know what tomorrow brings, and I don't want to miss out on something. Realistically though, there is not enough time in the days and this thought pattern often perpetuates a sense of never doing enough. I, fortunately, now have enough understanding and awareness of the dysfunctional nature of some of my thoughts that I consciously work through them, although I know that it

continues to create stress and frustration. I have not shared the extent of these inner thoughts with anyone, as I fear judgment or minimizing statement that I simply worry too much. As an adult, I wonder if I will ever reach a point when I no longer think in this destructive, guilt-ridden, apprehensive, and worrisome manner. As I evaluate these thoughts and feelings, I often question if I would be having this experience if my sister had not died. Is this a result of my grief or is this a result of my personality and upbringing? I know that it is impossible to have the answers to these questions, but I continue to wonder as I believe that life experiences gradually shape us as we get older. Different experiences would cause a person to become slightly different in their emotions, behaviors, and beliefs. Being that I experienced this major traumatic event at a pivotal time in my life, rather than just working through typical highs and lows, I wonder what my thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and beliefs would have developed into if not for the loss of my only sister.

Echoes of each other's being  
Whose eyes are those that look like mine?  
Whose smile reminds me of my own?  
Whose thoughts come through with just a glance?  
Who knows me as no others do?  
Who in the whole wide world is most like me  
Yet not like me at all?  
My sibling.

(Faber & Mazlish, 1989, p.114)

## CHAPTER 5

## LIVING WITH SIBLING BEREAVEMENT

Despite experiencing the traumatic death of my only sibling approximately 22 years ago, this case study has presented not only the reader, but me as well, many insights into my longitudinal grief-related experience originating in adolescence. Whether it was in the act of writing itself or forcing in-depth thought and recollection about my grief in such a short period, the emotional upheaval I have experienced resembled my grief-related response in the early years after the death of my sister. Regardless, I believe that the information revealed in this process will educate others and provide some new perspectives about grief. In the end, what I am able to present because of my personal exploration with grief are thoughts about the ethnographic writing process, my perceptions then and now, suggestions for therapeutic practice, recommendations for future research, and personal conclusions about grief.

*The Ethnographic Process*

Even though I knew this project would challenge my inner stability, the process of writing my own personal grief-related story has become an emotional and draining experience that I had not fully anticipated. Although I have lived with thoughts of my sister and her tragic death for more than half of my life, as I typed and read my own descriptions, I frequently found myself overwhelmed with emotion. Despite this emotional turmoil, enduring this writing process has developed further insight into my past and present life in relation to the loss of my only sibling. Both positive and negative outcomes have occurred because of my persistence and commitment in seeing this part of my journey finalized.

One of the most challenging aspects to this writing process related to the control that I had maintained over my thoughts and emotions in relation to my sister's death. Over the years, I

became comfortable with controlling and blocking many of my grief stricken thoughts and feelings from day-to-day life. I thought that I would be able to continue to do this during my exploration of grief. I soon discovered how mistaken this belief was. Persistent thoughts and questions from the past relating to my sister's accident began endlessly circling in my mind contributing to a cognitive nightmare, while exhausting and overwhelming my emotional sense of stability. I found myself consumed with a flood of memories and experiences that I was unable to turn off. The thoughts, memories, and emotions seemed to just 'camp out' in the forefront of my mind, even when I wasn't working on my story. I told myself repeatedly, "Stop, just stop thinking." I used to be able to take a 90-degree turn in my mind and re-route the thought process, but now it just seeps into and invades almost every moment regardless of where I am, who I am with, or what I am doing. I have been losing track of time, forgetting conversations, struggling to maintain focus, feeling irritated and defeated, fighting emotional fatigue, doubting my self-worth, and unexpectedly breaking into tears as my thoughts stay rooted in that sorrow filled space. Backing off from the writing helped me to regain my headspace, feeling cognitively and emotionally able to stay in the here and now. Unfortunately, I also now realize that in pursuing my personal story from an academic standpoint with a looming deadline and specific criteria to meet, I compromised much of the freedom with time from which I could have emotionally benefited.

Another aspect to the writing process that presented obstacles was that one thought led to another, and another. What originally was supposed to develop into approximately 50 – 75 pages has turned into something far more substantial. As I began brainstorming, writing, reading my poetry, looking at pictures and yearbooks, researching, and endlessly thinking about the past, my thoughts and feelings kept revealing new information. What should I include? What should I

leave out? Because of the extremely personal nature of this project, I found myself feeling guilty at the thought of leaving something out. In many ways, I wanted to capture all of my experiences with grief thoroughly, but then realized well into one hundred pages, that I could keep writing forever.

Over the years, I suppose I became quite comfortable with my grief and memories where I last left them--most often choosing to think only about my sister in private and when I could maintain emotional control. Unfortunately, over the years, it felt as though my grief was similar to the notion of tires spinning in the dirt. The same thoughts would run through my mind repeatedly, never going anywhere, and not making any progress. Although I was able to experience progress in life, I was not able to discover any sense of progress with my grief other than it retreating underground. In the end, I do not believe that this process has eased my sadness or loneliness, but simply brought me a sense of purpose and meaning, along with a sense of relief that I have finally done something different with these thoughts.

#### *Summary about My Journey with Grief*

As my writing began to take shape in a more organized and detailed fashion, I was able to notice some shifting perceptions relating to my grief as I went from my teenage years to adult life. I was also able to identify several themes or patterns that continued to reoccur throughout my 22-year journey with grief. These themes draw attention to specific areas of thoughts and behaviors relating to both the immediate aftermath and long-term impacts. Although many perceptions of my grief, environment, and relationships have transformed over the years, the identified themes of restricted communication, cultural/societal myths, transition, relationships, and multi-faceted emotions continue to maintain an on-going presence in my life.



Notably, one re-occurring theme related to *restricted communication*: “What good would talking do--it’s not like it would bring my sister back . . . ;” “The words are still too difficult;” “Stop your blubbering; Leslie is gone;” and “It’s not like her name is even mentioned in our house.” Another theme that became evident was relating to *cultural/societal myths*: “Be strong for your parents;” and “Time heals all wounds”. Additionally, my story reveals a significant impact to family and personal *relationships*: “Do you want to risk losing them and feel that pain again?” and “. . . sometimes all we really did, was pretend that everything was okay . . . .” In my story, I also refer to a need to recognize an *on-going attachment* with my sister: “The manner in which my sister’s death transcends time speaks volumes to me . . . ;” “...she is always with me . . . ;” and “I am not an ‘only’ child; I have an older sister who still lives with me everyday”. Other themes apparent throughout my story consisted of *limitations of memory, symbolism, ritual, avoidance of support, healing, and multi-faceted emotions*.

Of particular note and importance, is the communication that for our family remained restricted and at times non-existent over the years. Despite its recognized value in working through grief, researchers have revealed that silence is a common experience in families who are struggling with the loss of a loved one. The emotional anguish and sorrow of parents is often so unfamiliar and powerful for children and adolescents, that they fear and worry about contributing to more heartache and, therefore, often choose to remain silent about their grief, as a means to protect their parents (Balk, 1983; Forward & Garlie, 2003; Horsley & Patterson, 2006; Packman, 2006). Furthermore, research studies have revealed that, in an attempt to control the intense emotions resulting from grief, adolescents often appear unemotional and avoid discussion of the deceased (Bank & Kahn, 1982; Christ, 2000; Christ, Siegel & Christ, 2002). Forward & Garlie (2003) specifically identified that even when parents were available and encouraged their

children to share openly, most adolescents chose to keep their thoughts private because they believed that, by revealing them, it would only add to or intensify their parents' suffering. In addition, adolescents also kept many of their feelings to themselves because they felt that no one else understood the enormity of their grief. Unfortunately, the choice to conceal their grief and lack of understanding about the emotional and relational benefits to sharing openly, served to inhibit their healing, minimize their loss, and at times, isolate them from others.

Many perspectives and interactions presented to me by family, friends, and members of the community, frequently became enmeshed with cultural and societal stereotypes. Regardless of whether these people are uninformed about beneficial grief practices or they simply don't understand, as an adolescent, I took what was said at face value, and was not able to formulate my own beliefs about my sister's death for more than a decade. More specifically, the notion that "time heals all wounds" has been disputed by Forward and Garlie (2003), who explained that bereaved siblings reported that, although less frequent, their emotional pain continued to present itself unexpectedly and as intensely as the day they learned about their sibling's death. Furthermore, misguided and destructive concepts relating to "letting go" or "being strong for someone else" only serve to abandon and avoid the inevitable emotions lying within, while detracting from the magnitude and significance of the sibling relationship itself.

Similar to the prevalent theme of challenging family relationships in my story, research has also identified the enormous impact that family and personal relationships undergo in response to the loss of a sibling. Detmer and Lamberti (1991) affirmed that since grief is experienced both individually and as a family, the death of a child alters the way a family traditionally interacts, transforming the manner in which parents and surviving siblings relate to each other, and changing the expectations that each individual has for themselves and for the

family as a unit. "The individual, although experiencing grief autonomously, does in fact project and propel his or her symptoms onto the other family members of the system or family. This is likely to result in conflict and divisions within the family, as each person is perhaps seen by the others as not coping adequately, as preoccupied with irrational thoughts, wallowing in self-pity or prolonging the grieving process. The internal 'workings' of the family are subsequently placed under a terrific strain" (Handsley, 2001, p.11). Not only does the degree of communication and cohesiveness in the family significantly influence the process of adapting to life after the death of a sibling, but also the amount and quality of support provided by extended family members and friends (Christ, 2006; Davies, 1988b, 1999; Horsley & Patterson, 2006; McCown & Davies, 1995; Packman, 2006; Spinetta, 1981). As an adolescent, I was not able to understand that the challenges my family and I faced was a reflection of a typical family, naturally intertwined together, forced to live in a state of emotional chaos, trying to untangle ourselves from each other, as we grieved the loss of a daughter and sister, separately. In the shadows of grief, a family may survive because of the strength of love, commitment, loyalty, and forgiveness; however, in order to step out of the shadows, courage to communicate and the open-minded support of extended family and friends becomes essential.

In addition, I have come to terms with the understanding that maintaining a relationship with my sister, despite her death, is not only acceptable, but also comforting, I have been able to find meaning without guilt and preserve the worth and significance of my past. Research acknowledges and supports that a relationship with the deceased does not conclude after death, but that sustaining an ongoing connection and continuing relationship becomes a critical component to adjusting to the death in a healthy manner (Attig, 2001; Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Klass & Walter, 2001; Stroebe et al., 1992). More specifically, after interviewing 77 bereaved

siblings, Devita-Raeburn (2004) revealed that surviving siblings tend to incorporate their deceased sibling into their current lives, by recognizing that the sibling can journey through life within them. Furthermore, some bereaved adolescents have identified, that as they get older, their wish to stay connected or reconnect to their deceased sibling became more prevalent (Davies, 1999). Instead of avoiding thoughts and feelings relating to my sister's death, or focusing solely on her absence, through the acknowledgement of a lifelong sibling connection and relationship I have discovered an enlightening way in which I am able to have my sister journey through life beside me. This on-going connection provides me with at least something to hold onto, rather than nothing.

From a long-term perspective, as an adult, I have been able to recall instances where my interpretations and perceptions of a situation, made during my adolescent years, may have been limited or misconstrued. I believe that using the term dysfunctional doesn't apply because I now recognize that my perceptions in adolescence were typical, as a result of my stage of life development, age-related experiences, and intellectual and emotional know-how. Unfortunately, as an adolescent I was not able to identify those natural limitations and evaluated my thoughts and reactions, and those of people around me, with unfair and destructive interpretations. Furthermore, as a teenager, I often looked upon relationships and situations, which were conflictual, as only being that way because of the death of my sister. I believed many of the negative aspects of my life and relationships that were challenging would have been different if my sister was still alive. Somehow, I had forgotten that my existence and that of my family had not been perfect or without conflict prior to my sister's death.

Furthermore, as an adult, I have learned to look deeper into situations and relationships. I learned about what works and what doesn't work for me along the way; whereas I used to simply

go along with what others said or expected. Additional development with emotional growth, maturity, communication skills, intellect, and insight enabled me to examine more realistically and clearly, why I felt the way I did, why my parents and friends may have responded in certain ways, and how to think and respond in a more liberating manner. I believe this is important because there were many times when family, friends, and even I, unintentionally and unknowingly, judged my thoughts and behaviors, forgetting that at that particular time of my life, I was managing my grief and my grief-related experiences from the emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social dimension of an adolescent and young adult.

My grief has not plagued me all these years as I once thought, but rather, ill-fitted cultural, familial, and societal expectations negatively influenced my personal perspectives on, and experiences with, grief. I realize now that this is my journey with grief. It always has been and I no longer feel that I need to conform to somebody else's notion of what is reasonable or acceptable. As long as I am content with my life and prefer to maintain my sister's presence in it, it is not for anyone to judge whether I have or have not worked through my grief. In my eyes, I will be okay and that is all that counts.

### *Therapeutic Suggestions for Surviving Siblings*

Although I was resistant to counseling as a teenager and young adult, I believe that many factors contributed to my unwillingness to attend. Some of those factors derived from having typical adolescent perceptions, limited abilities and opportunities to communicate, inadequate coping skills, familial conflict, emotional confusion, and negative social influences. At this point in my life, I recognize that not only I, but also my parents, could have avoided much emotional isolation and familial conflict if these factors did not exist and we were all more receptive to counseling. I also believe that in order for an adolescent to make a personal commitment to, and

follow through with therapeutic support, it is imperative for counselors to receive specialized training pertaining specifically to grief. In attempting to support and assist an adolescent who has lost a sibling, it is important to recognize that the adolescent needs to not only be supported with their initial grief, but also needs to be aware of and equipped to handle the challenges that he or she may encounter later in life relating to their sibling's death.

Based upon my own personal experience with grief and knowledge of counseling theories and techniques, I recommend incorporating any or all of the following statements and suggestions in practice when working with clients whose sibling died during their adolescence:

1. Combine individual and family counseling--Vital is the required participation of all family members, either together, on their own, or both. If there is any suggestion that one person needs support while the other(s) do not, it implies that one is alone in their grief and solely responsible for the challenges being faced within the family.  
Counselors can assist individuals and families in their search for common ground, communication, understanding, and acceptance with each other's responses to and interpretations of grief.
2. Ensure confidentiality--Reassure adolescents of the confidentiality maintained in sessions. If there may be benefit to having information shared with family, only proceed if the adolescent agrees. Prepare the adolescent by exploring potential scenarios, discussing consequences, and addressing any fears or concerns.
3. Provide time to develop comfort--An adolescent may essentially need to "feel the person out" before they feel safe to reveal thoughts and feelings. They need to see that you are also a 'real' person, rather than just an 'educated' one. It is also important



that the counselor avoid talking technical grief-related jargon and processes until rapport and openness is established.

4. Search for truth--Discuss all details about the death. Give the adolescent the choice to participate or not in situations, meetings, decisions relating to the death of the sibling. The counselor may be a resource to assist family in disclosing graphic or sensitive details.
5. Help to prepare the adolescent for lifelong triggers--Identify and discuss the potential for unexpected, intense resurfacing of emotions, thoughts, and memories about the deceased during specific times of year, special occasions, and significant milestones no longer shared together. Explore ways to prepare for and discuss comforting ideas for remembrance at these times.
6. Encourage the young person to remain active in familiar or new activities—This facilitates healthy coping skills, personal interest in life, and positive escapes from grief. Examine chosen activities for any connection to the deceased that may exist. Find positives and explore negatives about this connection. Encourage him or her to consider new activities outside of commonalities with deceased.
7. Suggest the selection of pictures and personal belongings--Allow the adolescent to select items that are personally significant to him or her without question or criticism. Provide some privacy in selecting. Reassure the sibling that they can have private time in the deceased's room and with their things without concern for boundaries.
8. Encourage the selection of his or her own rituals, memorials, or symbolic representations--Provide examples, but ensure the adolescent's choice is not

influenced by the family's wishes. It is important for family to refrain from negative feedback if the adolescent's choice does not reflect their own values.

9. Employ a genogram--Explore family backgrounds, relationships, and experiences for better understanding of each individual's perspectives and grief-related responses. It is important for adolescents to learn about other influences on personalities, behaviors, and relationships besides the death of their sibling.
10. Provide educational resources--Offer a selection that the adolescent and family can explore, or provide a list of recommendations and locations to find their own.
11. Establish contact--Make connections frequently, even if the client initially rejects the support. Avoid seeking contact only in response to negative behavior. Refrain from assuming that negative behavior is a result of the death or an indication of poor coping. Allow the adolescent time before returning to involvement in his or her peer group, activities, or classes. Attempt to remember the deceased sibling's date of birth and anniversary of death, to anticipate renewed emotional challenges. Families could contact the counselor, school, or coach to provide insights about any potential shifts in mood or the need for additional support.
12. Connect with Mentor--Have the adolescent select someone (e.g., a coach, teacher, friend, or relative) that he or she would accept as a person to establish a supportive relationship with relating to grief-related challenges. Meet with the mentor separately and together with the adolescent to establish purpose to position. Encourage phone contact, email, and regular outings as a means to provide an outlet for the adolescent.
13. Invite support person to counseling--Open dialogue with person that the adolescent connects with is important to reinforce their ability to provide support.

14. Understand that an explanation is not always needed--Allow the adolescent to have personal space without intrusive questioning. Provide an open-door for support if he or she needs it. Offer items of comfort to show genuine concern, availability, and trust (e.g., blanket, teddy bear, drink, snack, or journal).
15. Model healthy communication--Get to know the adolescent, as well as his or her sibling. Ask to see pictures or hear a story about what they are going through, what they miss, what they do not miss, what they remember, and so on. Encourage the recollection of good and bad shared times together rather than just isolating thoughts about the loss. Sometimes just talk about something else less intense, to ease in and develop sense of comfort with emotional conversation.
16. Suggest activities to explore grief and emotion--This might include memory albums, art therapy, poetry, writing, support groups, letter writing, and so forth. Resistance to these activities may occur, but it is important to provide awareness of the possibilities that may provide comfort, which they may engage in when ready. Explore that for some individuals it is a one-time activity, while others incorporate strategies for a lifetime. The adolescent also benefits by using their own discretion as to who they might let see their work, if anybody.
17. Ask for explanations--Rather than explain or judge the emotions, behaviors, conflicts, and so on of the adolescent, ask them what they believe. Adolescents appreciate having their perspectives valued and understood. Look into their understanding, interpretations, and perspectives of the situation. They often have their own answers and just need some encouragement or support in embracing those or finding an alternative response.

18. Get to know the young person and his or her experience with loss, prior to implementing strategies from specific theories--Ensure that the client's experience, belief system, and present state of mind coincide with the counseling theory selected. Each of Narrative therapy, Family systems therapy, Reality therapy, Existential therapy, Solution-focused, Client-centered, and Cognitive therapy may be effective if implemented appropriately and by "matching" clients' personally expressed needs to treatment.
19. Develop and implement a grief and loss curriculum at various stages in elementary and secondary school--Prepare children and adolescents for some realities of death, loss, and grief.
20. Never Evaluate – Listen, support, and provide suggestions. It is roadblock to evaluate a bereaved adolescent's state of grief. Do not label grief as healthy, unhealthy, progressing, trapped, and so on. Recognize that whatever he or she is experiencing at that moment is okay because that is just a response to something with which they are dealing. Explore his or her experiences so that he or she feels supported in dealing with it.

In providing avenues of support for the grieving adolescent, I believe it is important to explore a variety of activities, resources, and support networks. What is helpful for one may not be helpful for another. It is important to consider the adolescent's personality, interests, family, friend group, and environmental influences in presenting information or providing guidance. I also recommend explaining with the use of examples, situations when a chosen suggestion proved beneficial, and other situations when an attempted suggestion was not helpful. In trying to encourage adolescents to implement therapeutic activities, it is critical to allow them the

independence and maturity to decide whether to use something and evaluate its impact honestly. It is also worth acknowledging that some of the activities may even sound senseless, but there is no harm in trying; they can choose to stop the activity at any time. Regardless of any therapeutic activity, rapport, or conversational styles, an adolescent may simply benefit from the attention, nurturance, and non-judgmental outlet for emotions.

### *Future Research Directions*

In light of many research articles proclaiming that there needs to be further study examining adolescent sibling bereavement, it seems critical to mention that my personal case study is just one piece in the on-going search for more detailed and accurate reflections of the grieving process experienced during adolescence after the traumatic loss of a sibling. Based upon what I have personally experienced and researched in regards to grief that pertains to adolescence I strongly believe that further study and investigation is essential. In particular, there needs to be research that provides additional insight into the following:

1. Exploration of positive and negative outcomes of protecting children and adolescents from the realities of death.
2. How to establish healthy continuing bonds throughout a lifespan
3. Gender, birth order, and cultural differences in sibling bereavement
4. Counseling techniques which produce more positive results with adolescents
5. Longitudinal perspectives on adolescent sibling grief
6. Clarification of functional and dysfunctional grief pertaining to adolescents
7. Short and Long-term results of implementing grief-related curriculum at various stages throughout elementary and secondary school
8. Accuracy of grieving processes for adolescents

## CHAPTER 6

## CONCLUSION

## SIBLING GRIEF . . . IT IS WHAT IT IS, AND AS GOOD AS IT GETS

Despite what many cultures and western societies conclude about death and how one should appropriately work through their grief, at the vulnerable age of 14, after the unexpected death of my only sister, I was only able to grieve in silence. During the 22 years of my life that have carried on without my sister, I have felt confused about my experience with grief as I was often told that neither I, nor my family, had dealt with my sister's death very well. This project has brought me incredible clarity and insight into the present state of my grief and the challenges I overcame as I learned about my emotions, thoughts, and behaviors along the way. Was I unrealistic in my understanding of what grief really is? At this point, I can honestly say that I do not believe my experiences with grief to be abnormal, unresolved, or unhealthy as I once had. Moreover, I do not believe that grief is something you work through or bring resolution to; it is something that you learn to live with, as it continues to, expectedly and unexpectedly, shift in and out of your existence for a lifetime.

Furthermore, by stating that grief is unresolved or dysfunctional, I believe we minimize the impact of the loss, judge an individual's perceptions, and force the grieving individual to meet somebody else's expectations of healing. I do not believe that my grief goes unresolved or that I ever chose to or have continued to perpetuate my sorrow. My life has not become limited because of my grief; but rather imperfect because there is one person that I must experience new joys without. Just because I now choose to be honest about my loneliness, cry sometimes for what has been taken away, wish that Leslie was still with us, and admit that a piece of my heart remains empty, does not indicate that I have not adequately experienced or avoided the complete grieving process. I recognize that my thoughts, emotions, and behaviors have endured negative



consequences; however, my grief did not cause these challenges, it was the death of my sister. I also believe that grief is simply a word to represent each person's natural and unique response to his or her loss, rather than an anticipated process.

Although other individuals may experience grief differently, I believe it's important to consider that, for some, they may not benefit from an identified grief "process". I believe by simply identifying that there is a process, even if it is flexible, restricts a person into believing that at some point, he or she must experience these described tasks and that something is wrong with him or her, their family, or his or her grief if he or she does not. Beyond that, with the presentation of so many variations of grief processes and differing cultural perspectives, who decides what process is best or healthiest for one to work through? Realistically, who better to decide than the person who is going through it? It is also critical for bereaved individuals to explore, reject, accept, and change their own beliefs about grief as they search for personal comfort and understanding. I believe a grief process would be more effective as a reflective component, where the bereaved examines his or her present and past experience with grief, and then later identifies a progression of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that resemble how he or she evolved to his or her current state of being. I recognize that, of course, that a grieving person will experience changes, transitions, and healing; however, I believe to identify specific tasks and processes, especially during the vulnerable years of adolescence, indirectly nudges a person into a perspective on grief that may not coincide with his or her personal values, beliefs, lifestyles, or grief-related needs.

In choosing not to accept the permanence of losing my sister, but rather understanding that pain and sadness for her will continue to exist, consciously embracing the emotion as I continue to live does not make my grief unhealthy, unresolved, or lacking progress. It has taken

me 22 years, and the completion of this project, to understand and accept with eyes wide open, that my life will continue to evolve, and I refuse to simply live without, ignore, or avoid the grief that lies within me. My mind and heart embrace a sense of freedom in stating that I will continue to grieve for a lifetime, because to grieve is to remember. My enduring relationship with my sister, despite her death, is simply joining me through a new phase in life. I wish I had the maturity, insight, and courage to proclaim this many years ago, instead of living in silence and judgment, as I did not feel as many others thought I should. What is normal and healthy for me as I search for ways to step out of the shadows of grief, may not be normal or healthy for someone else. In the course of examining many of my thoughts, interactions, and experiences related to the unexpected loss of my only sister, Leslie, I have personally concluded my adolescent sibling grief and lifelong journey with it, more simply stated, is what it is, and on some days, it is as good as it gets.



APPENDIX A

LYRICS OF PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE

*Close My Eyes Forever – Lita Ford and Ozzy Osbourne*

Baby.

I get so scared inside, and I don't really understand

Is it love that's on my mind, or is it fantasy?

Heaven.

Is in the palm of my hand, and it's waiting here for you

What am I supposed to do with a childhood tragedy?

CHORUS:

If I close my eyes forever

Will it all remain unchanged?

If I close my eyes forever

Will it all remain the same?

Sometimes

It's hard to hold on

So hard to hold on to my dreams

It isn't always what it seems

When you're face to face with me

You're like a dagger

And stick me in the heart

And taste the blood from my blade

And when we sleep, would you shelter me

In your warm and darkened grave?

CHORUS

Will you ever take me?

No, I just can't take the pain

But would you ever trust me?

No, I'll never feel the same, Oh

I know I've been so hard on you

I know I've told you lies

If I could have just one more wish

I'd wipe the cobwebs from my eyes

If I close my eyes forever

Will it all remain unchanged?

If I close my eyes forever

Will it all remain the same?

*Fly to the Angels – Slaughter*

Pictures of you  
They're still on my mind  
You had the smile  
That could light up the world  
Now it rains  
It seems the sun never shines

**CHORUS:**

And I'll drive down  
This lonely lonely road  
Ooh I got this feelin'  
Girl, I gotta let you go  
'Cause now you've got to fly  
Fly to the angels  
Heavens awaits your heart  
And flowers bloom in your name  
Oh oh oh oh oh!  
You've got to fly  
Fly to the angels  
All the stars in the night  
Shine in your name

You know it hurts me  
Way deep inside  
When I turn and look  
And find that you're not there  
I try to convince myself  
That the pain, the pain  
It's still not gone.

**CHORUS x 3**

*I Will Remember You – Sarah McLachlan*

## CHORUS:

I will remember you  
Will you remember me?  
Don't let your life pass you by  
Weep not for the memories

Remember the good times that we had?  
I let them slip away from us when things got bad  
How clearly I first saw you smilin' in the sun  
Wanna feel your warmth upon me, I wanna be the one

## CHORUS

I'm so tired but I can't sleep  
Standin' on the edge of something much too deep  
It's funny how we feel so much but we cannot say a word  
We are screaming inside, but we can't be heard

## CHORUS

I'm so afraid to love you, but more afraid to lose  
Clinging to a past that doesn't let me choose  
Once there was a darkness, deep and endless night  
You gave me everything you had, oh you gave me light

## CHORUS

And I will remember you  
Will you remember me?  
Don't let your life pass you by  
Weep not for the memories  
Weep not for the memories



*Angel – Sarah McLachlan*

Spend all your time waiting  
For that second chance  
For a break that would make it okay  
There's always one reason  
To feel not good enough  
And it's hard at the end of the day  
I need some distraction  
Oh beautiful release  
Memory seeps from my veins  
Let me be empty  
And weightless and maybe  
I'll find some peace tonight

**CHORUS:**

In the arms of an angel  
Fly away from here  
From this dark cold hotel room  
And the endlessness that you fear  
You are pulled from the wreckage  
Of your silent reverie  
You're in the arms of the angel  
May you find some comfort there

So tired of the straight line  
And everywhere you turn  
There's vultures and thieves at your back  
And the storm keeps on twisting  
You keep on building the lie  
That you make up for all that you lack  
It don't make no difference  
Escaping one last time  
It's easier to believe in this sweet madness oh  
This glorious sadness that brings me to my knees

**CHORUS**

You're in the arms of the angel  
May you find some comfort here

*Without You – Mariah Carey*

No I can't forget this evening  
Or your face as you were leaving  
But I guess that's just the way  
The story goes  
You always smile but in your eyes  
Your sorrow shows  
Yes it shows  
No I can't forget tomorrow  
When I think of all my sorrow  
When I had you there  
But then I let you go  
And now it's only fair  
That I should let you know  
What you should know

## CHORUS:

I can't live  
If living is without you  
I can't live  
I can't give anymore  
I can't live  
If living is without you  
I can't give  
I can't give anymore

Well I can't forget this evening  
Or your face as you were leaving  
But I guess that's just the way  
The story goes  
You always smile but in your eyes  
Your sorrow shows  
Yes it shows

## CHORUS

(Oh, Can't Live, Can't Live) x2

## CHORUS

*Missing You – Brandy, Tamia, Gladys Knight, Chaka Khan*

CHORUS:

Though I'm missing you  
I'll find a way to get through  
Living without you  
'Cause you were my sister, my strength, and my pride  
Only God may know why, still I will get by.

VERSE:

Who would have known that you had to go  
But so suddenly, so fast  
How could it be, all the sweet memories  
Would be all, all that we'd have left.  
Now that you're gone, everyday I go on  
But life's just not the same  
I'm so empty inside, and my tears I can't hide  
But I'll try, I'll try to face the pain

CHORUS

Oh, there were so many things  
That we could have shared  
If time was on our side  
Ooh, yea  
Now that you're gone, I can still feel you near  
So I'll smile with every tear I cry

CHORUS

How sweet, were the closest of friends  
But I'll wait for the day  
When I'll see you again,  
I'll see you again

CHORUS x2

*I'll Be Missing You – Puff Daddy, Faith Evans, featuring 112*

Yeah... this right here (tell me why)  
 Goes out, to everyone, that has lost someone  
 That they truly loved (c'mon, check it out)

Seems like yesterday we used to rock the show  
 I laced the track you locked the flow  
 So far from hanging on the block of dough  
 Notorious, they got to know that!  
 Life ain't always what it seems to be  
 Words can't express what you mean to me  
 Even though you're gone, we still a team  
 Through your family I'll fulfill your dreams  
 In the future can't wait to see, if you'll open up  
 the gates for me  
 Reminisce sometime  
 The night they took my friend  
 Try to black it out but it plays again  
 When it's weird feelin' hard to conceal  
 Can't imagine all the pain I feel  
 Give anything to hear half your breath  
 I know you still livin' your life after death

**CHORUS:**

Every step I take. Every move I make  
 Every single day. Every time I pray  
 I'll be missing you.  
 Thinking of the day, when you went away  
 What a life to take. What a bond to break  
 I'll be missing you.

It's kinda hard with you not around  
 Know you're in heaven smilin' down  
 Watchin' us while we pray for you  
 Everyday we pray for you  
 Till the day we meet again  
 In my heart is where I'll keep you friend  
 Memories give me the strength I need to  
 proceed  
 Strength I need to believe  
 My thoughts, Big, I just can't define  
 Wish I could turn back the hands of time  
 Us in the 6  
 Shop for new clothes and kicks  
 You and me taking flicks  
 Making hits stages they receive you on  
 Still can't believe you're gone  
 Give anything to hear half your breath  
 I know you still livin' your life after death

**CHORUS**

Somebody tell me why  
 One black morning  
 When this life is over  
 I know  
 I'll see your face

**CHORUS x 5**

*Not Ready to Make Nice – Dixie Chicks*

Forgive, sounds good  
Forget, I'm not sure I could  
They say time heals everything  
But I'm still waiting

I'm through with doubt  
There's nothing left for me to figure out  
I've paid a price  
And I'll keep paying

**CHORUS:**

I'm not ready to make nice  
I'm not ready to back down  
I'm still mad as hell and  
I don't have time to go round and round and round  
It's too late to make it right  
I probably wouldn't if I could  
'Cause I'm mad as hell  
Can't bring myself to do what it is you think I should

I know you said  
Can't you just get over it  
It turned my whole world around . . .

(Verse omitted)

**CHORUS x 2**

Forgive, sounds good  
Forget, I'm not sure I could  
They say time heals everything  
But I'm still waiting

*My Immortal – Evanesence*

I'm so tired of being here  
Suppressed by all my childish fears  
And if you have to leave  
I wish that you would just leave  
'Cause your presence still lingers here  
And it won't leave me alone

These wounds won't seem to heal  
This pain is just too real  
There's just too much that time cannot erase

When you cried I'd wipe away all of your tears  
When you'd scream I'd fight away all of your fears  
And I held your hand through all of these years  
But you still have  
All of me

You used to captivate me  
By your resonating light  
Now I'm bound by the life you left behind  
Your face it haunts  
My once pleasant dreams  
Your voice it chased away  
All the sanity in me

These wounds won't seem to heal  
This pain is just too real  
There's just too much that time cannot erase

**CHORUS**

I've tried to tell myself that you're gone  
But though you're still with me  
I've been alone all along

**CHORUS**

*Incomplete – Backstreet Boys*

Empty spaces fill me up with holes  
Distant faces with no place left to go  
Without you within me I can't find no rest  
Where I'm going is anybody's guess

I tried to go on like I never knew you  
I'm awake but my world is half asleep  
I pray for this heart to be unbroken  
But without you all I'm going to be is incomplete

Voices tell me I should carry on  
But I am swimming in an ocean all alone  
Baby, my baby  
It's written on your face  
You still wonder if we made a big mistake

I tried to go on like I never knew you  
I'm awake but my world is half asleep  
I pray for this heart to be unbroken  
But without you all I'm going to be is incomplete

I don't mean to drag it on, but I can't seem to let you go  
I don't wanna make you face this world alone  
I wanna let you go (oh-no)

I tried to go on like I never knew you  
I'm awake but my world is half asleep  
I pray for this heart to be unbroken  
But without you all I'm going to be is incomplete

Incomplete



APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT TO PUBLISH

## Informed Consent

- Title of Study:** A Journey through Unexpected Sibling Bereavement:  
An Adolescent's Grief Experience And Struggle To Find Meaning in Adulthood.
- Purpose of Study:** The purpose of this qualitative study project is to provide an in-depth description of my own life-long journey following the unexpected death of my older sister, in hopes that this account will resonate with others in a similar circumstance, as well as, increase the understanding of helping professionals working with bereaved teens. I believe a personal exploration of my own grief following the death of my sister during adolescence will provide insight and knowledge to the broad range of community members about how to offer support and understanding to people who experience this significant loss. Furthermore, I believe that my personal story may provide solace and insight to some adolescents and families who are unfortunately dealing with a similar type of loss.

This is to certify that we, LARRY + JOAN NORBECK, are completely aware of the nature of the Graduate research project being completed by our daughter, Dana Norbeck, through the Master of Education Counselling program at the University of Northern British Columbia. We understand that this project will reveal some personal information about our immediate family that may be sensitive. We recognize that some of the perspectives described in our daughter's written story may not coincide with that of our own. We support our daughter in going ahead with the writing process, finalization, and approval of this research project.

We understand and accept that we will be provided the right to preview the finalized research project prior to publishing. We also accept the responsibility to request the exclusion of information that we are not comfortable with being made public at this time.

We understand that once we preview and provide our acceptance of this research project, that all of its information will be published and accessible to the general public.

We agree to ask all questions necessary to clarify any concerns about the details within this project prior to publishing. We will direct all questions to Dana Norbeck, Trudy Mothus at UNBC (250) 960-5639, and/or Judith Lapadat at UNBC: Terrace campus (250) 615-5578 or toll-free 1-800-697-7388.

We have read the above information and give our consent for the approval and publishing of Dana Norbeck's Graduate research project.

Date: Aug 25/08 Parent Signature: [Signature]

Date: Aug 25/08 Parent Signature: [Signature]

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