Letter to a Grieving Heart

Billy Sprague
This book is dedicated
to the memory of my grandmother,
Myrtle Payne
July 31, 1895–March 31, 1997
The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalm 34:18
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This is a song for the day that breaks your heart
A gentle warning of unexpected scars
Wishing it won't come, won't keep it away
This is a song for that day

Someone you love runs out of days
Suddenly they’re gone or gently slip away
More than ever you’ll be carried by
Amazing Grace
This is a song for that day*

* From the song “The Day That Breaks Your Heart” by Billy Sprague. Written to prepare and pre-care my children for heartache.
We have something in common. This book is probably in your hands because you are suffering a great loss. And I wrote it out of great loss. It helped me very much to write. To remember. To pass along the kindness and care of friends and strangers. To recall the wisdom, truth, and love that led me back to life.

I hope my story helps you.

In this new edition are blank pages for you to write your own letter, in your own words—to the one you miss so much, to God, or simply to cry out to the whole wide world. Spilling ink might be as good for you as shedding tears. It was for me.
Since the book’s first release, joys and sorrows continue. My wife, Kellie, and I celebrated the birth of our third shiny child, Sawyer. We faced the home-goings of her Great-Aunt Annie and Uncle Rudy, my older sister Marsha, and my dad, who nodded off in his chair old and confused after lunch with Mom—and woke up new and whole in heaven. We delivered our firstborn, Willow, to college and watched our second son, Wyatt, run like the wind down countless soccer fields and into manhood.

Like you, I walk this long and winding road knowing none of us is here forever. But I also—and this is my hope for you—move forward in the heart-restarting truth that life, death, and forever are in bigger hands.

I pray for you now as I write. As you begin to read, I can picture you pouring out your own heart. Your lament. And I can picture great love and comfort pouring little by little into that hollow place inside you. I can picture it because that’s what happened to me.

May the God of heaven, his Spirit, and our Hope who walked, cried, and bled on solid ground carry you, heal you, and revive you for the rest of your journey, and keep pointing you toward home.
If I get to heaven ahead of you
When it’s your time, here’s what you do
Let go of this life
Hang on to the love, head for the light
Let go, spread your wings
Let the Spirit lead, proceed without caution
And meet me at the corner of Beauty and Awesome

When life is heavy and hard to take, go off by yourself. Enter the silence. Bow in prayer. Don’t ask questions: Wait for hope to appear.

LAMENTATIONS 3:28-29 (MSG)
I am so sorry you have to face life with this kind of wound. I don't have any answers. Or magic words.

In fact, I would rather sit or walk with you for a silent hour than fill your ears with words that ring hollow and fall so short of real comfort. I would rather do your dishes. Or restock your refrigerator. Or write out the checks to pay your bills, answer your phone, or take care of other mundane details. I would rather listen to you tell me all the things you love about the person you are missing so much. Or light a fire in your fireplace and make you something warm to drink. Or read the Psalms to you. Or bring you a pot of homemade soup. I would rather sleep on the floor by your bed so when you wake up in agony, someone is there. Because these are the things that people did for me when grief broke down my door some years ago.

I cannot explain much about anything. I can only compare notes with you about the road we are on. And begin to tell you a few of the hundreds of little things that eased me forward. At times I didn’t want to go forward at
all. I even wanted to die and go on to heaven, mostly to stop the pain, which I thought would never cease. (I still do long for heaven in many ways, but no longer out of desperation.) That crossing-over will, of course, come in time. As King David said when his infant son died, “I will go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Samuel 12:23).

No one can talk away the pain. Grief drains most words of their power anyway. But a few words carried great strength for me. Jesus spoke about and promised to prepare a great reunion (John 14:1-4). His words always held such power and gave me hope for an eternal gathering with those I love. Those words have become even more powerful each time someone I love leaves this life—a favorite college professor whose heart stopped while sitting at his typewriter...my fiancée in a car wreck...my wife’s aunt in a battle with cancer at the age of forty-two...my Grandmother Myrtle, who slipped away peacefully in her sleep a few months before her one hundred and second birthday. Naturally, the thought of seeing all of them again after this life became an even stronger hope.

Farewell, adios, and all the goodbye words that hurt us the most
They will be obsolete, no more bon voyage, no arrivederci
There’s no need for auf Wiedersehen
When there’s nowhere to go to get back from again
And I’ll look at you for an eon or two... or three or four or more... and say
Hello. Hello, I missed you so, but then we’ll know forever
And have ourselves a long hello

But what about until heaven? How do you drag a heavy, frozen heart around every day and night? It’s exhausting. Like a fever. But cold. And you think you will never feel very much again. Except the pain.

For two years after my fiancée’s death, the thawing of my heart was agonizingly slow. This sort of awakening is, for most, subtle in coming, and for good reason. (In fact, I suspect those who seem to bounce back too quickly are trying to put a better face on the pain in their hearts.) “Little by little we come alive,” Frederick Buechner wrote. This especially applies to grief. The heavy, invisible cloak is a fog that gives way so stubbornly, we are convinced it will never lift.

In my experience, the landscape ahead was shrouded in uncertainty. I couldn’t see one day ahead of me. I became a foot watcher, walking through airports or the grocery store staring at my feet, methodically moving through a misty world. One foot, then the other. Even before that I came to associate faith with simply tying my shoes. Some days, especially early on, it was the only act of faith I could muster.
For we live by faith, not by sight.

2 Corinthians 5:7
Maybe you are stronger than I was. Maybe you are already tying your shoes and running again. Or maybe you can’t even concentrate long enough to finish this page and are not ready for much of what I have to say here. Even so, I find myself pouring all this out for what it’s worth. Don’t rush it. The Spirit of God must know what we can handle and is, whether we sense it or not, accompanying (sometimes carrying) each of us along this lovely, dangerous journey. And in some sense, I don’t doubt that those who are with him are pulling for us too.

More than a year after RosaLynn’s death, I took a walk in the woods with a friend. There is something about the muted light filtered through the leaves of a forest canopy and the muffled sound of footsteps on the cushioned ground that softens the world. A forest seems reverent, as if it knows your sorrow.

As we walked, this happily married father of two told me, “I want to tell you something you might not want to hear right now and may not believe.”

“What’s that?” I said, ready to discard almost any “advice.”

“The heart is larger than you think.”

What he meant was that a lot of people can live in one heart. All those we love occupy a unique place inside us. Forever. His obvious implication for my situation was that someday I could love again. Love can make more room.

My friend was right. I didn’t want to hear it. Not at the time. But he had the credibility of someone who
knew personal grief. He had lost the woman he intended to marry fifteen years earlier to leukemia.

Certainly, the challenge for some is to love again, especially those who lose a spouse or a lover, but for all of us who must send someone we love on ahead, the struggle is more about coming fully alive again. So I heard the words my friend kindly offered and tucked them away for another time.

You may need to do that with this book—tuck it away for another time. Save it for another day. And when you pick it up again, I pray that my journey sheds a little light on your own. And gentles you forward.

I was down in the valley
   of the shadow of death
Where the passion for life
   drained like blood from my chest
And it took more than my will just to take a step
When the compass of hope was gone

In a darkness so black that I wished for the blues
Every desperate prayer seemed like heaven refused
And some days I found faith meant just tying my shoes
And it was all I could do to press on
Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens.

**PSALM 68:19**

List some simple acts of kindness that have touched you. What small, daily steps of faith, like tying your shoes, encourage and strengthen you?