

## Jake's Story

My oldest son, Jacob Samuel Siefert, died on October 20, 2005. While hunting with his dad and uncles in Colorado, a celebration for a safe return from an Iraqi deployment with the Texas National Guard, he hit a tree at dusk. As his dad and uncles came over the hill, just minutes behind him, they spotted the four-wheeler he was riding, mangled, up against a tree. Jake lay in a depression just off the curve in the road. He lasted, unconscious for about 12 hours. He was 27.

It's 2013 as I write this and I have witnessed the hollowed eye, broken hearted stare mirrored in five parents, all friends of mine who have also lost a child. Everything in me wishes they didn't have this in common with me. But they do. We have each handled this most horrible, perfectly devastating sorrow differently.

Some of us went back to work immediately. Some couldn't work for more than a year.

Some took the earthly belongings of a son or daughter and gave them away within a week. Some took to wearing them then and still do.

Some wanted to talk about their child; during the funeral, afterwards and always. Some kept their thoughts to themselves.

Some went to counselors and some should have.

My observations tell me there was no set response to how we each handled the grief even though it was equally and similarly profound in each of us. Our responses were as different as the individual nature of each of the children that we lost. My prayer is that if you are reading this, something that God puts into my heart and in these words, will help you down the road that you are now bound to travel. Not because I have the answers for you. This is one road that must be traveled in your own way. It cannot be any other way. Your family will adopt an identity from this point defined by your loss. There is no way to circumvent what a parent must go through to accept a loss such as this. I offer this as part of a community that hopes to surround you in love until you find your way. Actually, until you find God's way. I do have unmitigated hope for that. In that regard, I have two things of which I am confident. I am certain that God grieves with you and it is with Him and His plan only that you will heal the best possible.

**My story** - In retrospect, God orchestrated, tailored three specific activities for my healing. I didn't know enough to ask for these or even to expect them. He did them in His wisdom. He did them just for me. They are interesting in the practicality and the spiritual understanding that they provoked in me early in the days of losing Jake. I stand in amazement now at how He continues to provide through them.

**Living again - The first activity** My husband, brother, mother, and I restored an old farm house the year after Jake died. This might seem strange to you but there is a part of accommodating loss that requires you relearn to live. Restoring a 100 year old farm house that should have been bulldozed made us do that. Every weekend, we gathered at the north end of a beautiful pasture and worked until we could hardly stand. We ate when hungry. We slept exhausted. We sat back and surveyed our progress each

weekend, measuring in replacement of old windows, painted ceilings, or newly plumbed bathtubs. Sometimes we shared our thoughts about Jake through tear streaked cheeks and broken hearts. We broke bread together. We noted the resiliency of life. The old farm house situated in the country as it was provided the unavoidable reminder that life cycled. Chickens pipped from eggs, some died, and some lived. Flowers withered in the vine and renewed in the spring. We worked for nine months. The joke was that the place was cheap therapy. The truth was it was invaluable therapy for the four of us. It provided a vehicle to share our corporate, familial grief. It also made us do one of the hardest things to do when sorrow goes to the bone; that is to do the simple things of life, eat, sleep and accomplish something.

**Spending time alone – the second activity.** I grieved in solitude. A lot. I credit God for giving me the confidence to do this. There was something productive in letting the moments, the sheer waves of sorrow overwhelm me and consider how much I missed Jake. There was freedom in not trying to stop them. I indulged in whatever time I needed to remember. I now know why. A parent must give over to the knowledge that their child's death defines the end of hope and expectation, of continued relationship. That is hard to do. Over time I replaced the physical time I would have spent with Jake had he still been alive with other things. I eventually lost the automatic consideration of assuring physical time in my day for him, the thing that a mother considers for all her children no matter their age. But by allowing myself the private time to recall the part of life of him I did have, the memories, I could investigate how much I knew of his spirit. I could consider what the soul of us each really is and how that is related to the soul of Jake that God had created as my son. I could consider how Jake's spirit now rested in the bosom of the creator that Jake and I both called Father. The key was to learn the following: the loss of Jake physically never altered, replaced or diminished his reality in my heart or mind or most especially, in God's. This was a direct answer to prayer, the certainty that the corner Jake occupied in my mind and heart when he was alive had not changed in any way since his death and would be so forever. Those early days I went to this place of solitary reflection centered around Jake so often that it cemented the certainty of the everlasting life of a believer in my heart and soul. I still go there, sometimes through a song or a thought or gentle stirring of longing. I suspect I always will. God still grants me solace there.

**How sure are you of Heaven? - the third activity.** One of the questions people ask when a death happens is why? I am not one of those people. Perhaps it was because I didn't expect a good answer. This is not an easy world we live in. There are all kinds of loss and no one is exempt. But I did admit to myself that I needed to really know what I believed. The time for spouting rhetoric that I really had no idea how valid it was other than I had grown up with most of it, had been niggling at my conscious as insufficient for some time. With Jake's death it was catastrophically inadequate.

At the same time and with the same honesty, I will also admit to myriad doubts. I am human and I have long been comfortable in the knowledge that God doesn't hold this against me. But Jake's death made me confront some of them. It's one thing to say you believe in Heaven as an abstract place sometime down the road and another to be confronted with the reality that you will never see your child again, that piece of your heart and body, unless there is such a place.

Two months before Jake died, we were sitting talking after a lunch and he told me that he wanted me to know that if God had taken him in Iraq, he would have been ready. Obviously, heaven was less of an abstract for Jake then (and now), then it was for me. The curious part is that this was the start of God's plan.

I must stress here that it was not God I found insufficient. It was my knowledge and diligence to know Him, to increase my relationship with Him that was at fault. It's easy to be lazy in our relationship with God, to our own detriment. The curious thing is that, looking back, God made me want to get closer to Him and then gave me a way to do it.

As happens in a grieving community, I began hearing from many of Jake's friends and business associates, fellow soldiers, how often they caught Jake reading his Bible, a small, green army-issued New Testament. I didn't know this. But indeed, I found them everywhere. He stashed them in his truck, backpacks, and his room. Never one to be the best time manager, in this activity he was apparently increasingly competent, as he took them out whenever he had a moment, no matter where he was. What you might need to know here is that not a single person told me of this in a manner that indicated Jake was posturing for Christianity or a personal exhibition of piety. Jake was getting solace. And I knew God was honing in on me.

I had been a member of a large church, in an out of various protestant Sunday schools, and Bible studies for all my life. Lynn, a longtime friend told me about a rather large Sunday School class that wasn't traditional. Telling me he thought it was what I was looking for and having never articulated to Lynn what I was looking for any better than I did with God in this particular need, one would have to marvel at Lynn's argument and as it turns out God's provision. Finding out that the class was large enough that I could sit in the back and no one would ever ask me why I cried most of the time, unless I wanted them to, I finally relented. Led by a very bright, devout, and scholarly lawyer, the lessons were approached similarly to the way my career as a scientist had taught me to think. Evidence was evidence, whether it supported your opinion, or in this case rhetoric, or not.

I'll not say anything more about the class other than it's hard for me to believe that God orchestrated this Sunday School class just for me, specifically for my needs, but clearly He did. I can't explain it any other way. He loves me that much. And in a testament of how marvelous He is, because I suspect there might be a few others in the class that thing similarly, He apparently managed to make it for them too. God is good that way. God is God in the way only He can be. I am growing weekly to understand how marvelously God reveals himself to us, his imperfect creation, through ways that only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century could we understand.

**Where I Am Now** One recent weekend, I was walking with a few Biblical scholars who are friends and whom I would never have met unless God has given me the class mentioned above. (Amazing, huh? Even more so, I don't seem to be able to ask them a single stupid question.) I like to remember this particular day as if I could physically see the Holy Spirit in the same way that I could feel it, had heart knowledge of God's promise of it, moving among us as we walked. One of them, with kids of his own, asked me how in the world could I stand losing Jake? They gathered around me as I sobbed, arms

holding me, sorry to have made me sad, telling me so. I'm not sure I articulated what I was feeling. It wasn't exactly what they assumed. I had long come to the realization that I had a unique and imperfect, but human understanding of what it meant when God gave his only begotten Son. But what hit me this fine day was that I knew that I would never have known the majesty of God, His care for me, the special brand of love He had just for me, had my son not gone to live with Him. That was both glorious and devastating to admit.

I have a husband who I shared this grief with. We made it through. My middle son held me many times as I sobbed against his chest in the early nights after Jake's death. My youngest son away at college, had to grieve alone. My mother, a woman who lost a child herself, is a living witness to me of God's strength. We have never been a family to hide our feelings. It seems more and more we talk of Jake and God in His graciousness has provided the time in a way that I would never have foreseen. I see my two sons leaning evermore on the promises of our Father.

I am sorry if you are reading this from a loss. I grieve with you. I wish you all the love, grace, peace, and understanding that only a Father, who made you, who seeks to minister to you in your grief, with a love greater than you could give even to your own child, provide.

I know this because He has done so for me.