

Interview with Cheron Joy Mayhall

Author of *The Bridge is Love: A Journey Through Grief to Joy After the Death of a Child*

Today, we are talking with Dr. Cheron Joy Mayhall, author of the inspirational memoir/novel, *The Bridge Is Love: A Journey Through Grief to Joy After the Death of a Child*. Cheron is being interviewed by Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views.

Juanita: Thank you for sharing your heartbreaking, yet inspiring story, *The Bridge Is Love*. Please tell your readers about the personal and unique story of your book.

Cheron: Our second son, Scotty, was killed in a highway accident at age 4 1/2, in 1977. Overwhelmed with loneliness and sorrow, we nonetheless felt compelled to confront the situation actively, seeking a return to equilibrium in our own lives and the life of our surviving son, age 6. That is the core story of *The Bridge Is Love* – an honest memoir chronicling the events and emotions we experienced during the first year of recovery from our tragic, inexplicable loss. Two additional story lines are interwoven to flesh out the events and characters, and to infuse hope, humor and joy throughout this book.

Juanita: What inspired you to write your book at this time?

Cheron: In the fall of 2003 I very intentionally reorganized my life so that I could focus energy on creative writing. I had retired six years earlier from a very demanding job, but soon found myself overextended with a wide variety of volunteer activities that kept me hopping. So, freeing myself of several commitments, I joined a local writers group and began penning my stories. At first they were short stories about things like travel or running away from home at age five. But, after only three months, I found myself writing about Scotty and our loss. Whether one believes our creativity is inspired by God, the muses or is self-generated, I truly felt that this was a story I was supposed to write.

I mention in the forward that I felt “guided and goaded by God.” This is not to say that writing is easy and words flow effortlessly, but there was a compulsion that kept me going. Also, there seemed to be some magical force operating through me as the multi-faceted story line and format took shape. Sometimes I marveled at how a chapter or a character developed!

In addition to these internal forces, I sensed a social responsibility I needed to accept: to write the sort of book I had searched for as a newly bereaved parent but was unable to find in 1977. I had felt desperate for a parent’s detailed account of grief and recovery after a similar loss. I found nothing in the literature to inform, guide and inspire my healing process. Then, as now, we live in a death-denying society, especially when the deceased is a child. A strong sense of purpose to create a useful resource, coupled with inspiration and encouragement from several directions, kept me

writing. Scotty's spirit pervaded my thoughts so that the book became a memorial tribute to him as well.

Juanita: What were your thoughts behind expressing your story from the unique point of view of Scotty?

Cheron: It was one of those writing conventions that evolved through the struggle to find an interesting "voice" for the story. I started out in the first person, telling our family's story as seen through my own eyes. Frankly, it was a bit boring. But my imagination took hold and my pen followed my heart's desire to believe that Scotty's life had not disintegrated into nothingness when we buried him. About then I chanced to read *The Lovely Bones*, a murder mystery wherein the teen victim relates the story from her vantage point in the afterlife. Though I could not imagine my son in that youngster's rather scary heaven, I did experience incredible joy and comfort as my concept of Scotty's heaven emerged. Many of my book's vignettes that are set in Scotty's heaven are funny, poignant and whimsical. They provide generous doses of comic relief as the reader engages in a story born out of deep sadness. Scotty telling the story from a different realm is obviously novel, departing from the factual memoir of happenings on earth.

It was a challenge to guide the reader in an understanding of how a four-year-old could narrate the story. I was careful to explain in the first paragraph that the story is being told nearly thirty years after the death event, and that the angel-child has grown greatly in wisdom and knowledge over those decades. Still, Scotty's childlike speech and personality shines through as he recounts the experiences that happened during 1977-78, when he was four, both on earth and in heaven.

Juanita: You express this time moving through the emotions through grief to joy as a journey. Can you explain the process of this journey?

Cheron: Overcoming grief is work. Successful resolution requires effort, diligence, hope and action. It needs to be interwoven with aspects of the mourner's ongoing life, one day – sometimes one *hour* – at a time. All of life is a journey full of challenges and promises. Life goes on even when the crush of grief seems formidable. Along the way, I found strength and courage as I embraced the possibility for joy at every turn. I acknowledged and fed into my yearning for equilibrium – a return to the positive affirmation of life that is central to my being.

My husband, Bill, and I took control of activities where that was possible, knowing full well we were powerless to effect the change we most desired, i.e. having our child alive again. So we journeyed in pursuit of other satisfactions, large and small. For example, we worked to establish a memorial playground and a memorial children's corner in the waiting room of my husband's office. I re-focused my doctoral research to be congruent with my grief work and healing. We sought successfully to reconstitute our family by adding two daughters.

On any journey, there are forks in the road, or choice points, where you can decide to change direction and move ahead, or get stuck at the crossroads. That's a good analogy for the course of grief work.

Juanita: What is the strongest emotion felt by parents that is the hardest to move past?

Cheron: For us, it was clearly the loss of control. Because my husband and I are both very goal-driven and motivated people, Scotty's death reminded us ruthlessly of our impotence and fallibility. I've already alluded to this. The finality of death is the harsh reality that plagues efforts to recover. In all the years since the accident, while our lives have been blessed with plenty of happiness and good fortune, we have not been able to conclude that Scotty's death was reasonable or fair. Blaming and anger did nothing to assuage our pain. We were forced to accept this loss as a mystery, and then

move on with faith and gratitude to live full lives without our precious child. We realize we have the power to make the best of our altered family and circumstances.

In my research and counseling with bereaved families over the years, another strong emotion is expressed again and again. Many, perhaps most, families experience a sense of abandonment. This can be devastating and greatly impede the healing process. Sometimes they feel abandoned by friends and relatives, and often by society in general. Those who should be closest and most comforting seem to flee, either to avoid their own pain or in fear of hurting the parents by saying or doing the wrong things. This hands-off attitude collides with the stark reality of the mourner's every moment being clouded by grief. While many parents need to talk about the deceased child for a very long time, people whose own comfort demands that the subject be avoided shut off those avenues of discourse. I have already mentioned my observation that we are a death-denying society with regards to children. Parents are urged to "get over it," "have another child," "get a dog," "move to a different community"... It can feel as if child loss is considered contagious. Abandonment of this sort is serious and widespread.

Juanita: Cheron, it seems unimaginable, but how can a time of such great sadness also hold the seeds of faith, hope, joy, and love?

Cheron: Perhaps because those are the positive forces and emotions one can cling to despite terrible trauma and loss. We are lucky if we have those threads as an integral part of our upbringing. Rather than staying incessantly mired in my grief, I grasped my faith in a good God. I consciously fought to remember all the wonderful things in our lives: the joy and love we had experienced and the hopes and dreams that had always inspired us. The memories were still sweet. The expectations for returning to stable, fruitful lives were still reasonable, though sadly altered by our loss.

There's a Bible verse that became my mantra as a teenager: "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self-control." Belief in this statement orients me toward action and healing. It was a powerful motivator after Scotty's death.

Juanita: Your book has a deep spiritual aspect as Scotty speaks from heaven. Please elaborate on this part of Scotty's afterlife.

Cheron: Creating an ongoing "life" for Scotty provided a delightful respite while writing my memoir. I know there are people whose vision of heaven is entirely different, and people who cannot conceive of any sort of heaven. This story line in *The Bridge* is not meant to impose my beliefs and imagination on the reader. As the heavenly story took shape I found that my demeanor became whimsical. I felt joy, happiness and humor. The book needs these interludes to lift readers from any despair they might vicariously experience in reading the memoir.

The Bible and other faith literature did not give me sufficient guidance with regard to heaven. Streets of gold and angels with harps weren't the key features necessary in a heaven where Scotty would find eternal happiness. I felt he needed interesting people and challenges to his creativity. Our best frame of reference for heaven, it seems to me, is a continuation of what makes us feel healthy and whole on earth. My heaven is "open and affirming," reflecting my religious upbringing. It includes an everlasting spiritual connection to all of life, from the beginning of time. If the reader finds meaning and inspiration in how I've fashioned a plausible afterlife, that pleases me. Many of my readers have recommended the book for families and staff of hospice or for pediatric oncology support groups, etc. I tried to consistently refine and expand the multi-faceted story so it would be relevant for ALL readers. The exploration of heaven makes *The Bridge* more readable, even entertaining.

Juanita: How important do you feel religion and spirituality are to the healing process?

Cheron: I don't believe that Christianity, or any one religion, has all the answers to the questions of life and death. However, being part of a faith community and a religious tradition definitely facilitated our healing. Sensing the ongoing, spiritual connection between the living and deceased loved ones is powerful in maintaining continuity as life goes on. Death doesn't have to rupture our relationships into oblivion, although it redefines them. I postulate and demonstrate "love links" as an ongoing communion between heaven and earth. I have experienced these with Scotty and other people I love (including Albert Schweitzer, who I never met!). They truly bless my life and lift my spirits. I like the idea of our memories becoming viable and dynamic connectors that sustain us through the pain of loss and separation.

Juanita: What advice or words would you have to someone that is in the clutches of grief over the loss of a loved one?

Cheron: At the end of my book I list six steps, "A Path through Grief Work to Healing." I did not want *The Bridge* to be a therapeutic treatise, but rather a very readable story about one aspect of the human condition, recovery from sorrow after losing a loved one. Readers can glean therapeutic ideas for themselves. Those six pointers succinctly suggest such things as embracing the reality as quickly as possible, finding good listeners with whom to share thoughts and feelings, going with the flow of your emotions, and re-engaging in community life.

Juanita: What support is there for others going through the loss of a child?

Cheron: Because of the powerful need to talk about the child, which I believe promotes healing, I strongly recommend The Compassionate Friends. This is a national, self-help support organization with hundreds of local chapters. People who have "been there" know true empathy. They usually have the ability and desire to discuss and share feelings about losing a child. Some have already discovered how to cope. Groups usually meet monthly to create a supportive, healing environment. There was no TCF chapter in our community when Scotty died, so I helped develop one. I talk about this in my book.

Not all bereaved parents feel comfortable in a support group setting. Far more women than men participate. Fortunately, there exist many more written resources today than in 1977, and the Internet makes them accessible. If books like mine succeed in finding readers in the community at large, the pool of compassionate listeners and supporters will grow and the death of a child will not be so fearful and isolating for mourners. The very best support is having one or more friends or relatives to confide in over the course of many months. Church leaders are trained and experienced in grief counseling, and many therapists have this specialty.

There are many lonely, solitary hours in the 24-hour day of a bereaved parent, and grief work is unique and private in many respects. But healing usually occurs sooner with supportive intervention. For some, faith in God and reliance on their church community is adequate. Others may read, get counseling, join support groups, or engage in a combination of these, as I did.

Juanita: What are some of the ways that people going through this experience find meaning in their loss?

Cheron: Bereaved parents are deeply stricken by how precious and fragile life is, and we are forced to assess the quality of our relationship to our children. Usually we regret not having laughed, loved and lived with them more fully. We expected to share a lifetime with them and their progeny. Oftentimes, as healing progresses, that unspent love wells up and permeates relationships with others – surviving children, one's spouse, other friends and relatives, needy children around the world... In short, having known the depth and torment of excruciating pain and loss, survivors tend to find ways

to share compassion more deeply and broadly. Life and love is more cherished. Over time, despair morphs into an attitude of gratitude and determination to live each day more meaningfully.

I know many parents and families that have developed lasting memorials or rituals to honor the lost child, as we did. It may be something as simple as planting a tree in the park or providing altar flowers at church on the child's birthday. Some donate to the cancer society or set up a scholarship fund. In myriad ways, these parents have translated their sorrow into contributions that uplift others while memorializing the child who has died.

It seems appropriate here to advise that supporters not offer reasons or suggestions in an effort to ascribe meaning to the loss. For example, to tell a bereaved parent that God needed the child with Him in heaven, or that it's lucky the child died because she was suffering from disease or disability, more often fuels anger than providing comfort. It devalues the child's life. Parents do not expect to outlive their children. Most would give their own lives in exchange for the child. I believe the healing process, over time, allows survivors to discover some answers and meaning that make life good again. Others can't impose this return to joy, as much as they'd like to, but it is within the grasp of those who do the hard work of overcoming their grief.

Juanita: Do you see families touched by this experience as 'survivors'?

Cheron: In my professional work with families raising children with disabilities, I coined the word "thrival." It is common to talk of surviving painful and difficult challenges, but I wanted more for these families. While surviving is the baseline goal, these families should expect to thrive – to be whole and healthy again despite their loss. Marriages can become more committed and loving, parent-child bonds can grow stronger, appreciation for a rainbow or a snowflake can be richer. Arriving at joy after the journey through grief is to thrive beyond survival.

Juanita: What did you ultimately want to convey to your readers through *The Bridge Is Love*?

Cheron: *The Bridge Is Love*'s primary message is one of hope and encouragement for facing and conquering the challenges that confront us as part of the human condition. Grief over the loss of a beloved friend or family member is intense and potentially devastating, yet the power of the spirit can lift us to new heights if we confront the negatives and embrace what is positive. Be bold rather than timid, shunning the victim mentality. Activate the inherent, God-given spirit of power and love and self-control. In so doing, we honor the memory of the one who has died, returning to functioning as contributing members of the family of man. That's what gives life purpose and fullness.

Juanita: How can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Cheron: I hope readers will visit my web site, www.trafford.com/05-1239. Feel free to email me with questions and comments: cheronjoy@cablespeed.com. My alma mater has set up a weblog for virtual discussion of the book: www.pacificu.edu/alumni. I'd love to see more comments posted there. All readers are welcome to participate.