The Grief Journey in Literature and in Life

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Rebecca L. Poindexter

Thesis Advisor
Dr. JoAnne Edmonds

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

April 1996

Expected date of graduation: May 4, 1996
Purpose of Thesis

This essay on grief combines literature with life. It originated out of my desire to sort through memories and feelings and to emerge a stronger individual. It starts by looking at the process of grief in *The Optimist’s Daughter*, by Eudora Welty, where the character of Laurel is observed as she proceeds through her father’s illness, funeral, and the few days following the funeral. The second section deals with the book *A Grief Observed*, by C.S. Lewis. Noted here are several profound statements by Lewis about grief as he is suffering from the loss of his wife. The final section of this essay contains my own grief journey.
For my loving family.

This thesis marks a very important step in my grief journey, which started when I was eleven years old. You, my family, have been such a great support throughout the years.

Thank you. I love you.
The Grief Journey in Literature and in Life

Life is eternal, Love is immortal
and Death is only an horizon,
and an horizon is only the limit of our sight.
(Apples of Gold, 65)

The loss of a loved one and the pain that follows can sometimes seem unbearable. But as impossible as it may feel at times to even make it through the next hour, surviving loss can and must be done.

This pain is called grief. The Accord pamphlet on grief says this: "Grief is the many different reactions to loss. Grief is physical and emotional. Grief is normal." Most people throughout the course of their lifetimes will experience grief. It is virtually unavoidable.

The words found above from the book Apples of Gold, hold abundant truth and great comfort in these times of grief. Our loved ones continue to live, for life is everlasting. Even though they are gone from our sight, we will continue to love them. In body they are no longer with us, but their spirit remains in our hearts, and we will someday be with them again.

The grief that we endure when we lose someone close to us, however, can make these words seem empty. Even though we know in our hearts that the words are true, sometimes it is very hard to see or feel the peace that they carry.

I continually have to remind myself about that peace. Grief has entered my life more times than I would like to remember. But remember, I must. For even though the pain fades over time, if I forget why I hurt, then I will forget the love and the life that I grieve for. Yes, I must remember them.

This essay stems from my desire to remember. I am hopeful that by sorting through these memories and taking a look at others who suffer from grief, both in fiction and non-
fiction, I will be able to remember without so much pain. And maybe then I can remind myself once more of the peace that roots itself in faith.

Laurel's Journey

In the novel *The Optimist's Daughter*, by Eudora Welty, Laurel Mc Kelva-Hand, who is only in her mid 40's, faces grief once again. When we meet Laurel she has, years earlier, lost her husband and her mother and is about to be confronted with the loss of her father. To complicate matters more, she has to contend with her stepmother Fay, who is extremely egotistic and unbelievably rude. One example of Fay's self-centeredness comes after Judge Mc Kelva's diagnosis when she says, "I don't see why this had to happen to me" (15).

At the onset of the novel, Laurel's father has been afflicted by a slipped retina and is promptly admitted to the hospital where he undergoes surgery. The surgery requires him to lie motionless for weeks, and during this time, he requires 24 hours of care. This care is provided by Laurel in the daytime, Fay in the evening, and a hired nurse for the 3rd shift.

After several weeks of being in the hospital, Laurel observes about her father: "He, who had been the declared optimist, had not once expressed hope. Now it was she who was offering it to him. And it might be false hope" (39).

Not long after this, after returning to her room to sleep, Laurel felt a panicked urge to go back to the hospital. This report is what she heard: "'She [Fay] laid hands on him! She said if he didn't snap out of it, she'd -' The veneer of nurse slipped from Mrs. Martello - she pushed up at Laurel the red, shocked face of a Mississippi countrywoman as her voice rose to a clear sing-song. 'She taken ahold of him. She was abusing him.' The word went echoing. 'I think she was fixing to pull him out of that bed'" (43-44). Within a short time after this incident, Laurel's father died.
Now not only did Laurel have her father's death to deal with, she also had to deal with Fay, who was clueless, as usual, to what she had done. She proceeded to blame Dr. Courtland for the event. She said, "'Are you trying to tell me you let my husband die?'... 'You picked my birthday to do it on!'" (52). She continued to berate Dr. Courtland by saying, "'All I hope is you lay awake tonight and remember how little you were good for... Thank you for nothing!'" (54).

This type of attitude and dramatic show is how we see Fay throughout the novel. She is a constant source of frustration for Laurel. Fay's grief is not a genuine grief. It is a show of ignorance and self-indulgence, which contrasts with the significant, genuine grief of Miss Adele, Major Bullock, and Laurel.

Miss Adele Courtland, sister of Dr. Courtland, was the long-time neighbor of Clint and Becky McKelva. She had been good friends with Becky. Her grief stems from a sense of guilt at what had happened to Becky and now to the Judge, for her brother had been the doctor to them both.

After all the callers had left the house the evening before Judge McKelva's funeral, Laurel heard, "The sound of plates being laid carefully one on top of the other... Laurel knew that would be Miss Adele Courtland... 'Here in the kitchen it will all start over so soon,' Miss Adele said, as if asking forgiveness" (68-69).

Then reassuringly Laurel said,

"You can't help being good. That's what Father said about you in New Orleans, ... He was the best thing in the world too - Dr. Courtland." Miss Adele nodded her head. "What happened was not to Father's eye at all. Father was going to see," Laurel told her. "Dr. Courtland was right about the eye. He did everything right." (69)

This scene reminded me of something we talked about in my Grief Recovery Workshop.
The Grief Counselor, Connie Owens, told us that sometimes those who come to comfort the grieving often need comforting themselves and end up being comforted by those whom they aimed to comfort.

Another old friend of the family is Major Bullock. He was a lifelong friend of Judge McKelva. His grief is an outward denial of his loss. When Laurel comes back to Judge McKelva’s home after the death occurs, the house is full of callers:

Here at his own home, inside his own front door, there was nobody who seemed to be taken by surprise at what had happened to Judge McKelva. Laurel seemed to remember that Presbyterians were good at this. But there was a man’s deep groan from the dining room, and Major Bullock came swinging on into the hall, cutting through the wellcomers, protesting. "I’m not even going to have it, I say. He was never sick a day in his life!" Laurel went to meet him and kissed his flushed cheek. (64)

A little later, after Major Bullock hears that Judge McKelva’s body is now at Mr. Pitts’ funeral home, this is what happens: "He stood there in the middle of the women and cried. He said, 'I just can’t believe it yet! Can’t believe Clint’s gone for good and Pitts has got him down there -" (67).

After the funeral was over, Major Bullock, feeling helpless says this, "I still can’t believe it! . . . Can’t believe we’ve all come off and left him in the ground!" (122). These scenes show an angry, hurting man who is still in the stage of denial. He cannot believe this horrible thing has happened to someone he loves. Someone he has known for many, many years is suddenly gone and Major Bullock is at his wits-end to try and accept it.

Laurel McKelva-Hand has endured great loss in her life. She has lost her mother, husband, and father. Laurel has many issues to deal with in this novel.

One of these issues is guilt. Laurel seems to have guilt heaped upon her throughout
this story. One example of this occurs when Laurel is coming down the stairs of her father’s house the day of the funeral: "So this time it’s Clint’s turn to bring you home," said an old lady’s voice to her . . . 'Yes, daughters need to stay put, where they can keep a better eye on us old folks,' said Miss Tennyson Bullock" (76).

It was the opinion of Becky McKelva’s old friends that Laurel should have stayed in Mount Salus with her father after Becky died. This opinion is shown clearly in the following quote: "'Laurel is who should have saved him from that nonsense [Fay]. Laurel shouldn’t have married a naval officer in wartime. Laurel should have stayed home after Becky died. He needed him somebody in that house, girl,' said old Mrs. Pease" (136).

In other words, Laurel should not have a life of her own! These ladies, still grieving for their friend Becky, are grasping at what could have been. If Laurel had stayed home, maybe Clint never would have married Fay. If Laurel had stayed home, maybe Clint would not have gotten sick. But what it really comes down to is, if Laurel had stayed home, it still would not have brought back their friend, Becky. And they are hurting and at loose ends about what they are supposed to do now.

There are times however, when people say very insensitive things to Laurel. Often in times of grief, people just do not know what to say. At those times it is best to just give a hug or grasp a hand. But sometimes people feel they just have to say something. And often these words turn out to be hurtful. This type of situation happens with Laurel. One example occurs when Fay’s mother, Mrs. Chisom, is talking to Laurel. She says, "So you ain’t got father, mother, brother, sister, husband, chick nor child. Not a soul to call on, that’s you" (86). Well, if Laurel was not down before that statement, she certainly should have been after.

A similar, but shorter and possibly more sincere statement was made by Miss Tennyson when she and Major Bullock told Laurel goodbye. She said, "I’m glad there’s nobody else for you to lose, dear" (151).
Another one of these ghastly statements was also made to Laurel by Miss Tennyson. When Laurel is working in her mother's flower bed Miss Tennyson makes this observation, "Do you know, Laurel, who was coming to mind the whole blessed way through? Becky! . . . And all I did was thank my stars she wasn't here. Child, I'm glad your mother didn't have to live through that. I'm glad it was you" (121). This was probably a very well meaning statement, just very terribly said.

Besides the guilt and the insensitive statements Laurel endured, there were yet two other aspects of this entire ordeal that she had to cope with. These aspects were the memories and the grief of so much loss.

After Laurel's father dies we see glimpses of quiet memories that come with everyday life. One of these memories occurs when Laurel is lying in her childhood bed the night before the funeral:

When Laurel was a child, in this room and in this bed where she lay now, she closed her eyes like this and the rhythmic, nighttime sound of the two beloved reading voices came rising in turn up the stairs every night to reach her. She could hardly fall asleep, she tried to keep awake, for pleasure. She cared for her own books, but she cared more for theirs, which meant their voices. In the lateness of the night, their two voices reading to each other where she could hear them, never letting a silence divide or interrupt them, combined into one unceasing voice and wrapped her around as she listened, as still as if she were asleep. She was sent to sleep under a velvety cloak of words, richly patterned and stitched with gold, straight out of a fairy tale, while they went reading on into her dreams . . . What Laurel listened for tonight was the striking of the mantel clock downstairs in the parlor. It never came. (70-71)

This vivid memory of her mother and father and her childhood is disturbed by the fact that moments like this will never be again.
The next day, after all of the commotion of getting ready for the funeral, and after a disturbing display by Fay, Laurel is finally alone in the parlor with her father’s body. "In the moment of silence that came after that, Laurel looked at her father for the last time, when there was only herself to see him like this . . . 'He loved my mother.' Laurel spoke into the quiet" (105-106). This was an important time for Laurel. When loss occurs we need to find a moment to be alone with our thoughts and remember what is most important, the love that was shared.

There was one scene in this novel that I really connected with. It was at the grave-side after the funeral. "Dr. Bolt assumed position and pronounced the words. Again Laurel failed to hear what came from his lips. She might not even have heard the high school band. Sounds from the highway rolled in upon her with the rise and fall of eternal ocean waves. They were as deafening as grief" (110). I believe that the time at the grave before your loved one’s body is lowered into the ground, can be one of the hardest moments of loss. This is the end of having any connection with the physical body, which can be very traumatic.

After the funeral, Fay decides to go back home with her family for a few days. This gives Laurel a chance to be alone in the house she grew up in. When she is asked how long she is going to stay, she says, "I’m giving myself three days" (119). This is so typical. When someone you love dies, generally you are given three days off of work, as if this is enough time to grieve and get back to normal. Sometimes when we grieve openly beyond these three days, it starts to make others uncomfortable. Therefore, we keep our grief pinned up inside of us and become physically sick or emotionally strained. When we grieve we need to talk about our feelings, we need to remember, openly, the memories we have of our loved one. Everyone needs to find this type of an outlet; otherwise, life can become even more complicated and stressful than usual.
An important outlet for Laurel was working in her mother’s flower garden. She pulled weeds and remembered things her mother used to say about the plants and the weeds. She remembered her mother’s voice and the way she used to look. In her memories she contemplated the implications of spring on memory: "Memory returned like spring, Laurel thought. Memory had the character of spring. In some cases, it was the old wood that did the blooming" (136). In the spring, sometimes flowers or plants sprout out of old wood. In this way too beautiful moments sprout out of old memories.

In the few days that Laurel had in her childhood home, she went through her father’s desk and books and through her mother’s old desk and letters. During this time she had some very vivid and healing memories about those whom she had lost. There were memories that made her angry, such as this one when she was going through her father’s things.

There was a bursting folder of papers having to do with the Big Flood, the one that had ruined the McKelva place on the river; it was jammed with the work he had done on floods and the flood control. And everybody had already forgotten all about that part of his life, his work, his drudgery. This town deserved him no more that Fay deserved him, she thought, her finger in the dust on what he’d written. (141-142)

Laurel also had comforting memories. As she sat in the cold sewing room going through her mother’s things, she remembered when that room was once her own.

But it had been warm here, warm then. Laurel remembered her father’s lean back as he . . . spread a newspaper over the mouth of the chimney after he’d built the fire, . . . Firelight and warmth - that was what her memory gave her. Where the secretary was now there had been her small bed, . . . The sewing machine was still in place under the single window. When her mother . . . sat here in her chair pedalling and whirring, Laurel sat on this floor and put
together the fallen scraps of cloth . . . making them into patterns, families, on
the sweet-smelling matting, with the shine of firelight, or the summer light,
moving over mother and child and what they both were making. (158-159)

These types of memories, both disturbing and tender, help in the grieving process.

For Laurel, burning the letters that her mother had kept was a way of dealing with
her grief. This type of action is one's own personal choice. Laurel may have chosen to do
this because she had read the letters and there was no one left to read them. Laurel did not
have any children and she certainly did not want Fay to get ahold of them. Therefore, her
actions were understandable. I reacted the opposite way to my loss; I kept many tokens of
remembrance of my loved ones. We all grieve in different ways.

At the end of the novel we see one more interaction between Laurel and Fay. This
situation brings Laurel to the point where she can let her feelings about Fay be known.
Laurel finds her mother's old breadboard that Laurel's husband had made at the same
moment that Fay returns to the house and enters the kitchen.

Laurel and Fay get into a heated argument about Fay's abuse and neglect of the
breadboard that her mother had kept so nice. This argument turns to Fay's treatment of
Judge McKelva at the hospital. Laurel says, "'Scaring people into things. Scaring people
out of things. You haven't learned any better yet, Fay?' Trembling, Laurel kept on. 'What
were you trying to scare Father into - when you struck him?' 'I was trying to scare him into
living!' Fay cried . . . I tried to make him quit his old-man foolishness. I was going to make
him live if I had to drag him!' . . . 'You hurt him.'" (202-203) Laurel said.

The argument then went back to who was going to get the breadboard and Laurel
surmised that, "Memory lived not in initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and
freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams"
(201-208). And so Laurel left that place, with her memories, in search of her dreams.
Jack's Journey

Unlike Eudora Welty's *The Optimist's Daughter*, *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis is a work of non-fiction, a journal of emotions written down after the death of his wife, Joy. Lewis' grief is brought to the reader in a most straightforward and personal way. He takes the reader on a journey through the many facets of grief that he encounters along the way.

As I read the first words of this book, it was like stumbling over a boulder. I have felt that way, only I was unable to describe the feeling I was having. Here Lewis describes that feeling: "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing" (1). That is it! That is the feeling, fear. Only I would have to say that there is, not only a feeling that resembles fear, but an actual element of fear involved in grief. This is the fear of not knowing what lies ahead of you without your loved one.

Lewis goes on to talk about the laziness of grief, how you no longer are concerned with your appearance and that you do not really feel like doing anything. Maybe, even more than laziness, this feeling is pure exhaustion. Grieving is hard work, both physically and emotionally. It takes its toll on the body.

Another thing that often happens when we grieve is a questioning of our faith in God. Lewis puts it quite frankly, "Meanwhile, where is God? . . . go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face" (4). These feelings of doubt are common in grief. We do not understand how God could let such horrible things happen. We grieve, not only for the loss of our loved one, but also for the loss of our perception of God. When a loved one dies, there always seems to be someone who says to the bereaved, "Well, it must have been God's will." Personally, I do not believe that. God's will is never for his children to suffer. When we hurt, God hurts; when we cry, God cries with us.
As I continued on in this book, I felt wonder at what I read. Lewis has such a special way of capturing in words the feelings that accompany grief. One of these ever-so-true feelings is this:

Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery's shadow or reflection: the fact that you don't merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief. (9)

It is kind of odd when you think about it. This cycle seems to be an endless circle, especially in the first moments and days of grief. As hard as you try, you can not get away from the suffering. If you run away, it just follows you. If you try and hide, it finds you. In times of loss we have to grieve; we have to suffer in order to heal.

Bereavement does take its toll on one's social life. In the first place, you probably will not feel much like going out. But eventually one must leave the safety of one's own home and go out into the world of the living. Lewis describes the consequences of this event with a bit of humor:

An odd byproduct of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet. At work, at the club, in the street, I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they'll "say something about it" or not. I hate it if they do, and if they don't. Some funk it altogether. R. has been avoiding me for a week. I like best the well-brought-up young men, almost boys who walk up to me as if I were a dentist, turn very red, get it over, and then edge away to the bar as quickly as they decently can. Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers. (10-11)

This is so true. As I noted from The Optimist's Daughter, most people just do not know what to say to someone who is grieving. Either it ends up that the comforter needs
comforting or they might say something that is simply hurtful. This is not to say that nobody ever says anything helpful or comforting, but it does seem when we are hurting that we are quite alone.

Part of this loneliness is realizing that you are the only one that feels exactly the way you do. Even though others grieve, maybe even over the same loss that you grieve over, the feelings in each person are unique. Lewis puts it like this: "You can't really share someone else's weakness, or fear or pain... what you feel may be bad... but it would still be quite different... we both knew this. I had my miseries, not hers; she had hers, not mine. The end of hers would be the coming-of-age of mine. We were setting out on different roads. This cold truth... is just the beginning of the separation which is death itself" (13-14).

After our loved one is gone, one of the first things we usually say or think is something like, "If only they could come back to us." When they are gone, we want them back more than anything. We think that everything would be ok is they could just come back to us. Lewis shows us a different way of looking at it:

What sort of a lover am I to think so much about my affliction and so much less about hers? Even the insane call, 'Comeback,' is all for my own sake. I never even raised the question whether such a return, if it were possible, would be good for her... could I have wished her anything worse? Having got once through death, to come back and then, at some later date, have all her dying to do over again? They call Stephen the first martyr. Hadn't Lazarus the rawer deal?" (47-48).

I certainly had never thought of it that way before. Especially for those of us who believe that our loved ones have gone on to be with God in Heaven. This plea to ask them to leave paradise for our own sakes seems rather selfish.

And so we go on with our lives without our loved one. We limp through one day and stumble through the next. Eventually, we begin walking fairly normally through the
day, but we will never walk exactly the way we did before our loss.

Toward the end of the book, Lewis talks about this type of recovery. He compares losing his wife with someone losing his leg. The stump hurts tremendously at first, then he learns to walk on crutches. In time the pain lessens, but it is always there. And everyday occurrences are changed forever.

At several points in this book, Lewis questions God’s intentions, his goodness, and even his existence. This can be a normal part of grief. But the relationship between God and human needs to be restored. As we move on through or grief we need to realize that God is with us, he loves us, and he feels our pain. This is how Lewis describes it:

And so, perhaps, with God. I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted. Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face? The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can’t give it: you are like the drowning man who can’t be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear. On the other hand, "Knock and it shall be opened." But does knocking mean hammering and kicking the door like a maniac? And there’s also "To him that hath shall be given." After all, you must have a capacity to receive, or even omnipotence can’t give. Perhaps your own passion temporarily destroys the capacity. (53-54)

In the final chapter of the book, Lewis speaks about his reasons for writing down his feelings of grief in this way. And he makes some observations about what he has done: "In so far as this record was a defense against total collapse, a safety valve, it has done some good. The other end I had in view turns out to have been based on a misunderstanding. I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process" (68). Grief is a process that we all must go through at one time or
another. We proceed through grief in different ways. And hopefully when we "get through it" we can look at the life our loved one lived and the life we lived with them, and enjoy the memories that we made together.

My Journey

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, grief has entered my life many times. The first time grief invaded my heart was when I was in 5th grade. My best friend, Michele, died suddenly after a short illness. I thought she just had a cold. I had stayed at her house the weekend before she died and we had played outside in the snow. She then came down with a "cold" and she died on February 7, 1980. One of my first thoughts when I heard that she had died was that I had somehow contributed to her death by playing outside in the cold with her. That guilt stayed with me for a very long time, because as far as I knew, she did die from a "cold." The doctors never discovered exactly why she died. We know now it probably had to do with Rhea's Syndrome. But that guilt haunted me for a long, long time. Sometimes when I think of Michele, deep in my heart I still wonder if maybe I am somehow to blame. I guess guilt still haunts me. Guilt. Grief. Sometimes they go hand in hand.

In early 1989 my grandpa died. He was a wonderful old man. He had coarse white hair that sometimes formed a cupie-doll point in the mornings. He gummed his food because he only had a few teeth left in his mouth. Up until the last few years of his life he had three different gardens and some glass covered sun beds where he grew many kinds of vegetables and fruit. One of my best memories is canning tomatoes at Grandpa and Grandma's house. I never thought I would be old enough to say, "Those were the good 'ole days!"

Grandma died in mid 1994 after being in the nursing home for several years. She had been quite a spunky lady. She was the best cook in the world and she was a great
listener. She had a stroke not long before Grandpa died and her health diminished from that point.

I use to spend a few weeks each summer at their house on the hill when I was growing up. There was a room in the back of the house where Grandma had her sewing machine. There were pieces of old material all over and a mannequin that I used to "design" clothes for with those pieces of material. I made some dandy outfits in that room.

I attended my first two and a half years of college at Indiana State University in part to be close to Grandma and Grandpa. The summer after Grandpa died, I stayed with Grandma and attended summer classes and worked. It was that summer that my minister, Earl, in my home town was killed in a car/train accident. I was just exasperated when I heard the news. I felt like I had just been punched in the stomach. I was hurting.

I was twenty years old at that time and no longer had the all-accepting, childlike faith of years earlier. I had some angry, questioning words for God this time. So I questioned, and I yelled, and I cried. And God listened and he cried with me in my grief.

It was then that I met Earl’s brother, Mark who was also a minister and getting ready to go to his first church. We comforted each other, we grieved together, and our relationship grew. Through tragedy we found the strength and courage to love one another. We were married in June of 1990, and we continue our love, life, and grief journey together today. His wisdom and care have been of extreme importance in my healing process.

The most recent grief I have encountered has also been my most significant loss. It is the reason I am writing this essay. Sixteen months ago, two days before Christmas in 1994, my mom died. It all started the week my first baby was born. We had just brought Christopher home from the hospital and all was well with the world, or so I thought.

My mom was staying with me to help out with the baby and at some point during that week as she was leaving me and my baby in our own cozy little corner of the world, it
happened. As she was closing the door she grasped the far left side of her left breast and flinched in pain.

"What's the matter, mom? I asked.

"I don't know. I found a lump and it is kind of sore," she said.

So in a sincere but slightly unconcerned manner I told her she ought to get it checked out. Mom had found spots before that turned out to be nothing serious. Why should this one be any different? After all, I had just had my first baby. She was there to help me out, give me some pointers, mom stuff. I needed her... she couldn't be sick!

After the week was over and mom went home, the whole matter slipped to the back of my mind. For my mind was busy with other things like, "When will that black cord finally fall off of his stomach?" and "I didn't realize nursing was going to be such a hassle." Little did I know that while I was complaining about my breasts leaking milk, my mom was having a second mammogram done on hers.

A few weeks later we went to mom and dad's house for a visit. As we proceeded up the sidewalk to the house, mom pulled me to the side and quietly told me that she was going to have a biopsy done on the lump. Stunned, all I could do was look at her and ask when.

After the biopsy was over my dad called me - I was not able to be there because of my duties as a new mother. Between sobs dad said that the surgeon opened up the lump and declared that he was 99% certain that it was cancer. He did not want to tell my mom the news until the next day because he wanted her to get a good night's sleep. He, of course, did not sleep a wink. The next morning he crawled into bed with her and told her the news, though I believe she already knew.

The weeks to come brought many painstaking decisions, tears, and unwilling hope. The lymph nodes only showed small traces of cancer. Mom decided against a mastectomy and the doctors said that chemotherapy and radiation should do the trick and they felt very optimistic about the prognosis.
Mom started the chemotherapy treatments on her 55th birthday. When the treatments drew to an end she was relieved at the prospect of no more, but an uneasiness filled her heart knowing that after a small round of radiation there would be nothing left to do to prevent the cancer from returning. So she prayed as she had throughout the whole ordeal. She had a strong, unconditional faith in the Lord. She loved Jesus and she trusted him even more. Mom loved to write, it helped her to express her feelings, as it does me. After she died my dad found several sheets of paper in one of mom's dresser drawers. She relived her cancer experience on these sheets of paper and at one point she wrote this,

> When I first learned that I would have surgery I guess I knew what I was facing. I can't tell you the exact moment but I asked the Lord to take over. I have always been the type that would ask God to take my current problem and within fifteen minutes I would check in to see if he needed any help. Usually I would retrieve the problem and work on it for a while, then give it back for a while. But this time I simply said, "Lord, please take this, it is more than I can handle, and I know you can and will."

At the end of this journal of loose papers were these words, "Obviously I don't know what the future holds for me health-wise. I now we are trying to do everything we can medically to prevent a recurrence, but we simply don't know. But I can say that I know what the future holds for me spiritually - and it is as bright and shining as anyone can imagine."

Those words were comforting for her to write and they were comforting to read.

Although she never really had the strength and energy that she once had, she felt pretty good for several months following her treatments. She and dad went on a vacation that summer. They even dined at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island. Mom loved all that "fancy dancy" stuff. They were also planning a Christmas cruise to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary. They had never been on a cruise and mom especially wanted to go. This bliss of a sort was short-lived, though. At the end of the summer mom started having
some pain in her stomach. Soon we found out that the cancer had indeed recurred and it had metastasized to her liver. We all felt an awful sense of dread awaiting us.

The weekend we received this news mom and I laid down together on the bed that held my sleeping Christopher. Mom caressed his head with a gentle, loving touch and she began to cry softly. I believe that she had a feeling that her little grandson was going to grow up without his Mamaw, and it broke her heart.

A few days later we all went to the oncologist’s office with mom. He expressed hope for the situation, for there were new drugs that had proven to be somewhat successful with that kind of cancer. After the meeting, we went shopping for a "fancy dancy" dress for the cruise.

Four days after the first chemotherapy treatment, dad called me in desperation to see if I could come and stay with mom while he went to work. Mom was still very sick from the treatment and could barely even move, eat, or talk. We took her to the doctor the next day, and I noticed for the first time that mom’s skin had a yellow tint to it. She was jaundiced - her liver was shutting down. The doctor admitted her to the hospital immediately. After a few tests were done the oncologist said that there was nothing more that could be done. He predicted that she would live between two weeks and two months longer. Her condition was terminal.

The next eleven weeks were very draining, emotionally and physically, on the entire family. My brother was flying in almost every weekend from St. Louis, I was driving to Lafayette every few days. Mom’s condition did improve for a few weeks, for she was stronger and sassier. We even got to take her home overnight at the end of October, and then again for a few hours on Thanksgiving Day. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend at Thanksgiving. I had run myself down physically and emotionally and had contracted a toxic amount of strep infection in my own body. It was at that time when I let myself breakdown and cry. I am not the kind of person that cries very often. But at this time I hit
rock bottom. From the beginning of the end I had said that as long as I could be there with Mom and help Dad out with all that there was to do, that I would be okay. But now I was not able to be there. And I realized that I was not okay. And this occasion when I was not there was to be the last time Mom ever got to go to her earthly home. Guilt. Grief. Together.

I am thankful for the time that we did have with Mom after the diagnosis of terminal cancer was given. It gave us a chance to talk to Mom and tell her the things that we felt like we needed to tell her. It gave us a chance to laugh and cry. It gave us a chance to say goodbye. In A Grief Observed, C.S. Lewis says something that is quite true: "One never meets just Cancer . . . One only meets each hour or moment that comes . . . Many bad spots in our best times, many good ones in our worst" (12-13). Even at the worst time in our lives we were still able to laugh and joke and be a family. And after all of the pain, tears, and laughs, Mom went to her heavenly home to be with Jesus. Two days before Christmas. Three days before she and Dad were to leave on their cruise. She never got to take her cruise. That broke Dad's heart.

A few days following the funeral, Dad and I were going through Mom's things. I left the room for a few minutes and when I returned, Dad was sitting in the middle of the floor...sobbing. When I asked him what was wrong, he was only able to hand me a card. He could not speak, for the tears prevented him from explaining what he had found. The envelope had my name on it. It was Mom's handwriting, I could tell that. The date was July 30, 1993, not long after she initially had found out about the breast cancer. I had never seen the card before that moment. It said:

Dear Becky,

First let me assure you that I'm not writing this because of any fears about my recent illness. I've planned to do this for quite some time.

Your Dad and I are very proud of you. You are a lovely, caring person.
It's been wonderful watching you grow first into a responsible adult then adding to that a wife and now an excellent mother.

We (you and I) had some pretty rough times, but by the grace of God we made it through. I know you have claimed the blame for those years - but I share in it. I made some mistakes (lots) too.

It gives me great joy and peace to know that you have a deep love for Christ.

We're proud of your determination to finish school.

I can't imagine what I've done to deserve such a wonderful daughter and friend.

I'm looking forward to watching you and your family grow. (For a long-long time.)

Love Mom.

I was a bit numb after I read that note. I was unsure about how I should feel about it. So I stood in that spot for a moment, thanked Dad for finding the note, and turned and left the room in an almost trance-like manner. And that was all I could do to respond at that moment in time.

It was several weeks later before I was really able to respond to that special gift that Mom had left me. One January day, early in the morning, I awoke from a dream, got up out of bed and wrote these words:

If Only You Could See Me Now

As she struggled and grasped for just another breath, she left herself and sat by the window. Hoping all the while that the sun would come out and shine down upon her and make her warm. She noticed her daughter stroking her now bald head and whispering a soft "shh..." into her ear. There was her husband too, crying and holding her hand, and her
son holding her other hand in silence. Calmly she began to breathe, her face became peaceful. With that peace came her breathing, ever so slowly until it was gone.

That is when she noticed the light as she sat by the window. "The sun has come out," she thought, as she smiled at the warmth and great peace of it. The light became brighter and brighter, like no sunshine she had ever known. She thought it rather odd that on such a dreary, overcast day the sun shone so brightly, and as she looked into it she felt herself being pulled to it. Startled, she looked back and saw her family weeping and the nurses coming in the room, and there in the middle of it all was her self. There she was lying in that bed like she had for eleven long weeks. "Oh my," she said as she pondered the sight. "The pain must be over for me now." And sprinkling the dust of love and peace and thanks down upon her family she turned and looked back into the light and said, "My dear family, I love you. Don't cry for me now, my pain is over and my life has just begun. I will see you again someday and that day will come sooner than you think. When you think of me - think of me as I am now, for the Lord is great. If only you could see me now."

This glimpse that I encountered in my own mind into the unknown has given me great peace. I long to believe that this is how mom left us. Since the time that I wrote this, however, I have had good days and bad days. I have laughed and I have cried. I have grieved and I have felt a release from that grief. At one point, (on one of the bad days) about nine months after she died, I sat in a chair late at night and wrote as I prayed to God to give me strength. These are the words that I prayed:

I miss her. I long for her. Sometimes I get so tired of not being able to see her. I watched her die. I stroked her head and arm and soothed myself as I whispered "shh" into her ear. And then she stopped breathing. That was it! I couldn't do anything about it. She left me. She died right in front of me. How do I deal with that? I died that very second, too. I am not the same person I was a year ago. I transformed in those 3 1/2 months of waiting and
watching and screaming so loud inside sometimes I couldn't think straight. I am still screaming. When my mother, my friend, ceased to breath - a part of my heart and soul perished. I don't yet know how large that part is. How much of my very being was extinguished that day? Whatever the amount - I know I will never get it back, I will never be the same. God, guide me.

Times of guilt, times of unrest, times of anger, and times of peace - these feelings and others comprise the grief journey. And mine continues, as it will for a long time to come. My life will always be touched by the losses I have encountered. But as I said at the beginning of this essay, I can not forget my grief, for if I do I will forget the love and the life that I grieve for. So I will cry, I will laugh, I will write, I will pray, and I will remember always.
Works Cited


Petty, Jo, compiler. *Apples of Gold*. Norwalk, CT: Gibson Co.