

## Bereaved Families Of Cape Breton

### Bridge Over Troubled Water

By Mary Wharram

When the call came that August day, we rushed to the hospital to find our son in a coma after a freak football accident. A blood clot was pressing on his brain. Jeff was the second of our five children, the middle brother of our three teenage boys.

I was overwhelmed by the conflicting demands of our crisis. I couldn't eat or sleep, even after the doctor prescribed medication for me. I remember how torn I felt when I said to our two little girls, "I have to be at the hospital; Jeff needs me."

They answered, "Well, we need you too!"

One morning as I lay in bed only half awake, about a week after Jeff was injured, I heard his voice saying, "Mom, quit your bawling. I'm going to be okay!"

Even though I saw no physical change—Jeff was still unconscious—that message convinced my heart that he would recover. Though I shared my experience only with my husband, Bruce, we were all affected by it. As I became more positive, I was suddenly able to pull the family together. Less depressed, I was able to handle situations better both at home and in the hospital.

Though the doctors didn't expect our son to live, we said, "We're not going to give up. We have faith!" But after a four-week struggle, Jeff died, and I felt that God had betrayed me. "Why-why-why, God?" I asked. At first I heard no answers. Then, about a week after his funeral, suddenly I saw him standing in our room, clad only in his underwear (the way he had always slept.) In my vision, Bryan, his brother, came in teasingly and said, "Jeff, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be dead!"

A few weeks after that, I reshuffled the children's bedrooms. I couldn't stand to pass by Jeff's empty bed every day, so I decided to move our two daughters into the large bedroom he had shared with Bryan. As I sorted through Jeff's things, I found a speech he had written for school. "Last year," it began, "if a half-decent chess player got a little bit ahead of me I would give up—just quit right on the spot. But my football coach taught me to fight back, to give 'em a heck of a time even if I'm gonna lose."

Jeff also wrote, "To win you must push yourself until the pain is splitting your sides in two and you think you're gonna die. To win at life you must defy Satan himself. To win at life you must not quit, even on your deathbed. I expect to die with a grimace on my face and my teeth clenched. I'll make sure I give life a farewell punch right in the teeth. I hope you do also."

At once I remembered that through the whole four weeks Jeff lay in the hospital, he repeatedly clenched his teeth, and indeed his face was often set in a grimace. Though he could not speak, he squeezed our fingers in response to questions. How hard my son had fought to live! Yet a loving God had allowed him to leave behind a message showing us that at least a year earlier Jeff's soul was preparing for a death that would come much sooner than any of us expected. Of course I could not overlook his last sentence, clearly advice to us. I knew that the best memorial I could give our son was to grow beyond my depression and help my family recover from his loss. I turned a corner that day as I began to see that our son was a continuing part of our lives. His participation with us was not a passing thing.

More than three years after Jeff's death, Bruce and I attended a Christian retreat. At one point I looked up from a prayer circle and saw Jeff in a very specific outdoor setting. He crossed a chasm, walked straight toward us and embraced Bruce and me. Though I heard no words, I received our son's message. He said, "Mom and Dad, I love you, and God loves you too. Be at peace."

Afterward I kept wondering about the chasm I had seen Jeff cross, so I asked God about it. Once more, at first it seemed I got no answer, Months later however, Bruce and I celebrated our twenty fifth anniversary by traveling alone to our family's favorite camping place where we stayed in a lodge instead of pitching a tent. As I walked into our room, I discovered that the window faced the river. I knew at once that this was the spot where I had seen Jeff when he greeted us at the retreat. Later, my Bible fell open to Psalm 46:4 where I read, "There is a river whose streams shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles, of the Most High."

Soon I was reminiscing about the last vacation we all shared on the same river just a month before Jeff died. The first night around the campfire, we drew names of secret pals to do a special kindness for during our stay. On the last night of vacation, each of us would present to our secret pal some small gift we had created from our surroundings, to serve as a memento of our time together.

Our oldest son, Howard, had drawn Jeff's name. The two boys were at a quarrelsome stage in their relationship, but during that vacation, they drew close and shared many hours of deep mutual pleasure. Howard's gift to his brother was a tiny bridge he constructed from wood shavings on tree bark he had found on the forest floor. On top of the bridge, Howard had glued a knight from a miniature chess set, acknowledging his brother's passion for the game. And in the wood-shaving water beneath the bridge, he had carefully inscribed the title of a song the boys cherished, Bridge Over Troubled Water, by Paul Simon.

Repeatedly through the past twenty-one years, I have felt Jeff's presence. Once when I was meditating, a question occurred to me and I asked God, "How will I know Jeff when I get to heaven?" The following morning I saw my son's face—

his smile, the dimple in his left cheek—and I remembered an old gospel song by Albert Brumley, *I'll meet you in the morning by the city foursquare, I'll know you in the morning by the smile you wear. I'll meet you by the fountain in the city foursquare.*

I have discovered that I'm not the only one Jeff touches. There was the dreadful day when one of Bryan's friends was killed in an accident when his car plunged into a quarry. Soon after that, in a dream, I saw Jeff pull Mike from the car and lead him into his new life.

Another time, our son, Howard, and his wife were trying to build a home. As they tried to complete their plans, everything kept going wrong and they began to lose hope for their dream. One day when Howard was lying in his bed, he heard Jeff say to him, "Don't worry, you will have your new home." Soon after that, Howard was led to the people who made it possible for him to start building.

Some people believe it is unhealthy to cling to the idea that loved ones who have died continue to be a part of our everyday lives, but when I examine the results of my son's continuing involvement with us, I see the ways in which we feel his touch, his love, his tenderness. These gifts have not caused us to turn inward and away from our present lives. Instead, Jeff has helped us open ourselves more with the passing years. Our relationships with God, with one another, with friends and acquaintances are so much more vivid today than before Jeff died. I can only conclude that he is a force for good in all our lives.

I know that I am not alone in believing that people we love remain close to us after death. In Catherine Marshall's book, *To Live Again*, she quotes the words of one of the ministers who conducted her husband's funeral service. "We have known Peter Marshall in the flesh," he began. "From now on we are to endeavor to know him in the spirit just as really as we have known him in the flesh...The fellowship we have with him will remain and may God give us wisdom, grace, and strength to join hands with him."

Not long ago, early in the morning as I lay between waking and sleeping, Jeff walked with me along seashore, his hand on my shoulder. It was as if dawn and sunset were together as we walked. He was so happy and perfectly at one with everything around him. He belonged and was at home there, and I was allowed to share a few moments with him.

I know now when I remember the first message my son gave to me when he was no longer able to engage in physical speech, "I'm going to be okay," he said.

Okay?! I don't suppose it would occur to a sixteen-year-old boy to choose a bigger word—splendid perhaps, or fantastic. Or he might have reminded us, "I'm going to BE...forever."