

# Write Away

## Thoughts On the Art of Writing to Heal

By Joannetta Hendel

I'm a scribbler. I leave little notes here and there, "Don't forget...thought for the day...goals..." Jotting down my thoughts comes naturally to me. When Alexander died, it was not even a conscious decision to begin writing; it was an involuntary reflex.

The first notes were records of my five-year-old's candid comments about the realities of death. "That's not fair, babies are supposed to last!" Amanda announced indignantly. I'd find her laying a "dead" dolly to rest and fashioning a pair of angel wings from construction paper so that she could "fly up to heaven and see how Alex is doing." While Amanda worked out her feelings in play, I worked mine out on paper.

The sudden death of my youngest child left my mind full of garbled and ever-changing chaos. The shock was intertwined with denial, which eventually gave way to anger, depression, and unrelenting guilt. Those who assured me that the worst ended with the funeral were wrong. The tension, pain, and uncertainty grew with each passing day, building and feeding on itself. There is a limit to the amount of internal pandemonium that the human mind will toler-

ate. When I'd reached my limit, my mind began dumping onto paper what it couldn't process internally.

Six weeks after Alexander's death, I sat down to write to keep from going crazy. I had no preconceived direction. The words simply poured out, a blow by blow account of the disaster that had changed my life forever. I wrote about waking to find him dead, I wrote about rushing off to the hospital in search of a miracle, I wrote about walking away from the hospital empty-handed with only Alex's pajamas in a plastic bag. Playing it back scene by scene, I recounted for myself the earliest hours, the first days, the mortuary, the funeral. The writing gave order to my mental processes. I'd created a factual account of a nightmare and became obsessed with the reading and rereading, trying to convince myself that this was real. Later came poems, letters to Alex and to God, and written messages to myself. In unpredictable spurts, my mind sought healing on paper.

The human body is designed to mend itself. Given the proper attention, cuts and bruises heal, broken bones are repaired. The injured mind has the same qualities of restoration as the physical body. Emotional wounds are slowly and carefully restored to balance. However,

the resolution of emotional trauma can be facilitated through concrete expression. There is an undeniable need for a physical outlet, a method of sorting and bringing forth internal stress.

The bereaved experience an instantaneous overload in mental and emotional clutter. Stifled, left to fester and grow, emotional hurts infect the mind and soul. The need to do something with their grief, to work it through, becomes a primary focus for bereaved individuals. Grief can seek verbal expression—the overpowering need to talk about one's loss. Grief can seek visual expression through any number of artistic endeavors. Music is a catharsis for some. The paths to internal healing are varied, but the written expression of grief is unsurpassed in therapeutic potential.

Writing is a form of self-expression, self-examination, and self-therapy. It is a means of externalizing the internal, and facilitates the mind's natural tendency to seek release. Writing to heal requires no particular talent. Begin very simply with, "I feel..." Make uncomplicated statements about anger, about fear, about pain. The words will follow, thought processes will expand. As with any other endeavor, skills of written expression are gained with practice.

The lives of bereaved individuals