



Miracles

IN THE DARKNESS

BUILDING A LIFE
AFTER LOSS

— JULIE CLUFF —

On Mother's Day 2007, Julie and her three youngest children set out on a road trip to visit family, but their journey did not end where she expected. Instead, a tragic rollover accident claimed the lives of her two youngest children, 10-year-old Carrie and 8-year-old David. Devastated, Julie found herself on an unexpected quest for hope and healing. Through her desperate search for healing she found self-compassion, meaning and a healing greater than she could have imagined.

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Introduction

WE ALL HAVE A STORY

We all have a story. Every single person has an extraordinary and important story. Our distinctive experiences make us who we are.

Absolutely no two people on the planet share the same story even within the same family which I think is so remarkable. The uniqueness in each of our lives is amazing. And to consider that our Heavenly Father knows and loves each of us in our individuality is even more astounding.

When we tell our story, we are telling how we perceived the events that shaped our life. Our perceptions are everything. We can choose to write our character in the story as the villain, the victim or the hero, even if it's the same story.

With the perspective of time and healing, I choose to see the love and light in my story despite the moments of victimhood and villainy. But it wasn't always that way.

In the dark, desperate days and weeks following the death of my children, I saw myself only as the victim. The incessant questions in my head, included "Why did this happen?" "Will my life always be this painful?" "How will I ever survive?" "How can I go on living in this overwhelming anguish?"

Author Walter Anderson said, "bad things do happen. How I respond to them defines my character and the quality of my life. But I can choose to sit in perpetual sadness immobilized by the gravity of my loss or I can choose to rise from the pain and treasure the most precious gift I have, life itself."

I understood from the beginning the importance of “sitting in sadness”, of being “immobilized by the gravity of my loss.” What I couldn’t comprehend was how to “rise from the pain” and treasure my life again.

My story is intertwined with my faith in God and in His Son Jesus Christ and in His words. I personally use the King James version of the Bible and those are the verses I’ll share with you. If your faith or spiritual practices look different than mine, when I share my story, please reflect on your own spirituality and how it has impacted your life.

Throughout all my trials, God has supported me before, during and after in His most glorious ways. During the most painful days, I couldn’t always feel His support even when it was there, but I could remember. I could remember the times in the past when I had felt His support and I clung to those memories.

Over and over and in different ways, God has whispered to me, “I helped you before, I’ll help you again.” Reminding me to trust in his goodwill and love.

As I share my story, my overarching desire is for you to feel and hear that there is always hope. Always.

Disclaimer: I share my experiences from my point of view and as truthfully as possible, but I recognize that it may be different from someone else’s memories of the same events. Also, some of the names have been changed, either because I can’t remember the person’s name or to protect their identity.

Mother's Day

*I found my fortress, in You
And my soul is anchored, with You
My resting place, is in Your name
Forever safe*

-Lee Brown

My birthday landed on the day before Mother's Day in 2007. I decided we would celebrate in a couple of weeks when I returned from a planned trip. Every day with our six children was filled with activity and there was no time for a celebration that busy Saturday.

Our oldest daughter twenty-year-old Stephanie was away from home, a college sophomore in Idaho, but everyone else's activities kept us hopping all day.

Our 10-year-old daughter Carrie spent the day performing in a homeschool Shakespeare play with her older brothers while I attended a mandatory Cub Scout leader meeting for an upcoming day camp for 8-year-old David.

I went to my meeting reluctantly, resenting having to miss the final play performance. I had seen it earlier in the week, so I was grateful for that.

That same Saturday our eighteen-year-old daughter Kristin frantically prepared to go to her senior prom that night. She had designed and sewn her own dress, but the fabric turned out to be faulty and was literally coming apart at the seams.

No dress, no prom. Preparing for the prom became an unexpectedly huge ordeal. In between other demands, I hurriedly helped Kristin with a solution to the dress fiasco. We made frantic phone calls to friends in hopes of finding an alternative gown for her to wear. Just in time she found something suitable.

Kristin made temporary repairs to the dress she had created and chose to wear that for pictures but knowing it wouldn't hold up on the dance floor, she brought the borrowed dress to change into as soon as pictures were over. She dressed and finished her preparations moments before her boyfriend Joel picked her up for the evening. I followed Kristin and Joel to their friend's house to take pictures of them and their prom group, before they all left for dinner.

While Kristin was at the prom, my husband Ron and I attended a parent appreciation dinner hosted by the teens of our homeschool group. Carrie was only 10 and she wasn't officially a teen, but she was invited to attend with her older brothers James (12) and Dallin (15). She was thrilled!

Carrie served us all night long. She was constantly asking if we needed something else. She brought us water. She brought us rolls. She loved feeling so grown up and included, and it was her nature to be so service minded and loving. She was in her element.

Still too young and immature for the dinner event, our eight-year-old son David spent the evening with a friend who lived in the neighborhood just a few streets away. Even though his friend lived close by it was the first time David had been allowed to ride his bike to his house on his own.

Energetic David was very adventurous so it was all we could do to keep him contained and safe, but the day had finally come for a little more freedom. David had looked forward to this day when he could explore further from home.

After a long and demanding day, Ron kept the kids up watching the movie *Forever Strong* while I quickly packed so I could go to bed as early as possible. I wanted plenty of rest before our long road trip.

Early the next morning James, Carrie, David, and I planned to drive from our home just north of Houston to Ron's parents' home in Murphy,

North Carolina, on the western tip of the state, a couple of hours north of Atlanta, Georgia. With our large family and our extended families so far away, we were used to piling in the car and driving across country. This was a trek we had made many times before.

I went to bed irritated that Ron was keeping the little kids up late. I wanted them to get their sleep, so I wouldn't have to deal with tired, grumpy kids the next day.

Regardless they stayed up and I went to bed. David snuggled up on one side of his dad and Carrie on the other as they watched the movie. Now I know that this was just how it was meant to be, and I regret my irritation. They were meant to have that very special time with their dad before they were gone.

5 AM the next morning, on Mother's Day, we gathered on the long driveway of our Spring, Texas, home. Ron helped me pack our luggage into the back of our GMC Yukon, an SUV that was a necessity for our family. Ron had a knack for making everything fit. After he worked his magic, we were loaded to go.

Our 3 youngest children and I were squeezing in a visit to their grandparent's country home. They lived on 5 acres in the hills of south-west North Carolina and the land was a kid's paradise. Lots of room to roam among the trees, a fire pit behind the house for roasting hotdogs and marshmallows, a creek beyond the fire pit at the bottom of the property, and tractor rides provided by their grandpa. As close as you can get to camping and still sleep in a warm bed.

Our son James loaded up his heavy backpack into the front seat. He carried that heavy backpack full of books and other treasures everywhere he went. I'm not sure he ever read any of the books in his bag, but he always had it with him.

Carrie and David climbed into the backseat with a couple dozen toys and activities to keep them busy on the long day's drive. I threw in cheese crackers, raisins and other snacks in an effort to keep them entertained so I could focus on my job, which was driving.

Ron gave us each a hug and a kiss. As he hugged me goodbye, he added his usual reminder, “Be safe and remember you have precious cargo.”

As we drove, Carrie and David happily played together in the back seat, entertaining themselves with their toys as we traveled through East Texas, Louisiana and into Mississippi.

As we entered Mississippi on Interstate 10 I had to admit the trip was going great. I was surprised and thrilled that the grumpy outbursts from tired kids had not materialized.

In the early afternoon, we stopped for lunch at Taco Bell. I was feeling generous because of their good behavior, and I encouraged the kids to order whatever they wanted from the menu, an unexpected treat from a thrifty mom who was typically worried about getting every penny out of every dollar.

After our lunch break, we jumped back into the Yukon to continue our journey east. Traveling on interstate 20, I teased James, who was sitting next to me in the front seat. I pulled the SUV slowly to the right and ran over the rumble strips on the side of the highway. We giggled at the funny noises the tires made against the uneven pavement.

As we drove, we listened to music. It was Sunday and we would normally have been at church, so I brought some inspirational music to enjoy. I particularly remember listening to the CD Joseph by the Nashville Tribute Band, music dedicated to the life and mission of Joseph Smith, Jr.

The song that caught my interest was “Emma”. A song dedicated to Emma Smith, Joseph’s wife. I could feel Emma’s pain as I listened to the haunting verse that foreshadowed my own pain. “When you buried your children, I’m sure the angels stood in reverence as you prayed, How much can one heart take, How much can one heart take.” I reflected on the unimaginable pain of losing a child.

Eventually, the peace in the backseat deteriorated. Carrie got frustrated with David pestering her.

I looked behind me to remind David for at least the third time to put his seatbelt back on. These were the days before it was well known that

car seats were safer beyond pre-school, so everyone was just strapped into their individual seat belts.

As I looked back over my right shoulder, I watched Carrie slide from the middle seat next to David to the seat behind me next to the door. As she latched her seat belt, she said “I love you, Mom. Happy Mother’s Day.”

Everyone settled in for the last of our drive and I thought I would make it before dark.

Sometime later as we neared the Mississippi, Alabama border, I woke up to our SUV bumping along in the grassy median between the eastbound lanes and the westbound lanes of highway. I had never even felt sleepy!

In shock, I tried to bring the SUV back up onto the road. When I did, our vehicle started to roll.

It rolled and rolled and rolled and rolled. Impossible to count how many times. I remember hearing a voice as we rolled. “Bring your arm in,” the voice urged. Somehow, I had the sense to obey and I pulled my left arm closer to my body.

We rolled across the eastbound highway until we finally came to a stop, upright on our wheels, facing the highway on the grassy right shoulder of the eastbound lane.

When we landed, I couldn’t see anything. It was midday but everything was dark. I had temporarily lost my sight when I hit my head as we tumbled.

Even though I couldn’t see anything I instinctively and immediately knew that our lives had changed forever. I heard James crying in distress beside me. His cries frightened me as I couldn’t determine how injured he was. At the same time, I was grateful for those cries because at least I knew he was alive.

I frantically called out for Carrie and David but there was no response. “Carrie, David!” “Carrie, David, are you alright?” “Carrie, David!” Silence.

Slowly, my eyesight started to return. I sat in the front seat physically stunned and paralyzed with fear. As I looked at the devastation of

our vehicle -- the shattered glass, the mangled mess of the vehicle, our strewn belongings and the terrible silence from the back seat -- I started to scream in agony, "I killed my kids! I killed my kids! I killed my kids!"

The memory of those anguished screams haunt me today as I reflect on my suffering 12-year-old son crying next to me and witnessing such a horrifying scene.

I couldn't find my cell phone, but I was desperate to call Ron. I started to notice people gathering in the field, yards away from where we came to a stop. The realization punched me hard that Carrie and David were in the grass, thrown from the vehicle during the violent rolling.

A man approached the car. "I need a phone! I need to call my husband!", I cried. He handed me his cell phone and I dialed Ron with panic and dread.

"Ron, I've been in an accident and Carrie and David have been thrown from the car." I blurted out between sobs. My voice dropped as I continued, "I don't know if they're going to make it."

I could feel his anguish across the connection. I could sense his shock with his stunned response. "Ok, it will be ok. It will be ok," he said to soothe me, but I could hear the fear in his voice. "Where are you?" he asked.

I had a sense that Carrie and David were either both going to survive, or they were going to die together. As siblings, they had an unusually close bond and I couldn't imagine one without the other.

The sweet man that loaned me his phone stayed with me talking slowly and softly trying to keep me calm. He said that his wife and others were with Carrie and David, that they were ok and that his wife was singing to Carrie to comfort her. I could see people in the distance standing over my children using blankets to shield them from the intense afternoon sun.

When I look back on this scene, I remember so many people in that field with Carrie and David, but I don't remember a lot of cars parked on the side of the highway. I wonder if I was witnessing heavenly angels as well as earthly angels in that grass along the interstate. Regardless of what I saw, I have no doubt that many angels were present.

Emergency vehicles started to arrive. Carrie and David seemed miles away from me and I could barely make out the scene as the paramedics loaded David onto a stretcher, his small arm slipping from under the sheet and dangling off the side as they carried him to the ambulance.

Another paramedic crew cautiously took James and then me out of the car and placed us on Stryker boards to keep us stabilized while we were transported to the hospital.

James and I were taken to Rush Hospital in Meridian, Mississippi. Someone - I don't remember who - told me that Carrie and David were rushed to a hospital in York, Alabama. We were that close to the state border.

I didn't understand why they were taken to a different hospital, but I didn't ask. To this day I assume it is because they were both small country hospitals ill-equipped for multiple emergency cases on a holiday afternoon, but I'm not sure.

In the ambulance, I asked repeatedly if Carrie and David were ok, but no one responded.

Once at the hospital and in tremendous physical and emotional pain, I laid on the Stryker board vacillating between quiet tears and an unearthly peace as I imagined the Savior there carrying my burdens.

A few weeks before the accident, a friend had walked me through a Christ-centered visualization. She guided me through while asking questions. "If you were to imagine a peaceful place where you could meet the Savior where would it be?" she asked.

I described a spring meadow filled with foot-high grass and colorful wildflowers surrounded on all sides in the distance by Rocky Mountains with delicate snow caps. I could see, smell and hear the meadow as if I was there, even though my experiences had mostly been along the white sandy beaches of Florida where I grew up.

As I stood in the meadow, Jesus Christ approached me, accepted my burdens and offered me indescribable love and compassion. In return I offered him a boxed gift. When my friend asked what was in the box, I said, "music." A very unequal exchange.

As Luke reminds us in Luke 17:10, “...when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, we are unprofitable servants.” What the Lord offers us will always outweigh what we have to offer him.

I had never experienced a meditative visualization like that before and the power of the experience surprised me. Little did I know that I would so desperately need the peace of that vision just a few short weeks later.

James was being attended to in another room nearby. Still no one would tell me anything about Carrie and David’s condition. An emergency room nurse did tell me that my aunt Ava and her husband David who lived in Richton, Mississippi, just an hour and a half from Meridian were on their way to the hospital. I gratefully anticipated friendly family faces.

In the meantime, I had a visit from a highway patrolman asking questions about where we were traveling from and to, who was in the car, what happened, etc. I answered as best I could in my distracted and pained state.

Someone had contacted a local bishop (the congregation leaders of our church) to visit me in the hospital until my family could arrive. He sat by my cot, clearly uncomfortable, as he tried to say something to reassure a stranger.

He talked about the eternal nature of life and that regardless of what happened to Carrie and David, they would always be mine. I knew all that, but I didn’t have the strength to respond. The pain was too great, and it was far too soon to talk about eternal life. I can’t imagine the courage it took for him to show up at the hospital.

My Aunt Ava and Uncle David finally arrived. Ron was at the Houston airport trying to get a flight to Mississippi as quickly as possible and my aunt put him on the phone to talk to me. I hadn’t talked to Ron since the first phone call.

“Julie,” Ron paused. “Carrie and David didn’t make it,” he whispered. The conversation ended. We were both crying, and we hung up knowing that life would never be the same.

I hope you enjoyed this first chapter of Miracles in the Darkness: Building a Life After Loss. I know this chapter ends on a tragic note, but thankfully my life has not ended on a sad note and I look forward to sharing the rest of the rebuilding journey in the remaining chapters.

God bless you and please reach out to me at julie@buildalifeafterloss.com to share your review of what you've read so far.

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Julie Cluff is the host of the popular Build a Life After Loss podcast. She's a professional grief coach, a speaker, author, and an artist. She and her husband Ron have 6 beautiful children including 2 angels and many grandchildren. They reside in Lehi, Utah. She shares her message of hope across many platforms, including podcasts, national radio, and television.