

SUZANNE B. HANSER

## Learning How to Die

---

### Lessons from My Son

*This story is a personal account of a mother's grief over the death of her 28-year-old son. As she processes her experience over the first few months after his loss, she searches for him in everything she sees. The heart of the story is in her attempts to interpret her son's words, "Learn to die for those who know how to die shall truly know how to live." She aches to make sense of his sudden loss while coping with the shock of the finality of death. As the layers of bereavement unravel, the mother shares insights about how she finds her son's presence in her daily life as well as in her fantasies. In the signs she recognizes from his soul, she finds sustenance and comfort.*

*Learn to die for those who know how to die shall truly know how to live.*  
(Hanser 26)<sup>1</sup>

My son, Sam, wrote these words in a book for his sister when he was 20 and she was 13. From a young age, Sam demonstrated an innate ability to help others, and from the time he was an adult, he sought to learn new and ancient healing practices. His Senior Thesis at Parsons School of Design gave birth to a Healing Empowerment Center to house practitioners of Eastern and Western medicine in an attempt to "transform all of its clients into their own centers of healing and empowerment" (Hanser 49). Sam went on to study Somatic Psychotherapy at the California Institute of Integral Studies in order to fulfill his vision of seeing the Healing Empowerment Center built and becoming its director. He called me a "fellow healer," although I never saw myself as one. My technical background as a music therapist taught me to honour scientific methodology, and deny my personal powers to heal. But Sam

and I were one in our spiritual quest for understanding the human condition and for honing our intuitive skills in the service of aiding others.

Then just short of his 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, and after defending his Master's Thesis, Sam died suddenly and unexpectedly. Now, three months after his burial, the cause of his death is still unknown. But I do not believe that a description of why his body died would help me accept his death any more easily.

I acknowledge that he is dead only when I can no longer suspend the customary boundaries of reality. These days, I reside in that zone where memory and possibility live. My head fills with "remember whens" and "what ifs," but then the truth intercedes, and I am beside myself. How will he teach me how to die? How will I know how to truly live without him? Sam believed that life is limitless and never-ending, and that time as we know it really doesn't exist. It seems I have lost him to a cosmos far greater than human understanding.

In this process called grief, I live moment to moment. The recent past is horrifying; the future will always be devoid of his presence. I spend much earthly time trying to comprehend his lessons that seem so unfinished and mysterious. The passage of my time is deliberate and lethargic. I do not race towards the goal of accepting his death, contrary to my usual need-for-achievement frenzy. I want to follow his advice to learn how to die, but first I must understand it. I seek his messages everywhere.

Last week, I attended a gallery opening for the work of a gifted photographer. This artist uses sunlight's reflections and projected shadows in calm tide pools to uncover remarkable special effects and beauty. In one photograph, the shadow of a woman's head on the water's surface reveals marine life otherwise hidden by the sun's mirroring effect. The colorful complexity of the underwater world shapes her features from within, creating a silhouette that only the photographer's artistic lens can uncover. Yet we see human shadows over still water all the time. To me, when she exposes the intricacies that most eyes are incapable of seeing, the photographer's eye is like the eye of God. This is what I am seeking—the eye of God—to unearth my son and show him to me again.

My journey is a search for Sam's soul, the invisible part of him that he believed would remain alive and well beyond death. And I find it, hidden yet beautifully present beneath the algae of my intellect, and well beyond my eyesight. I know that his soul is here—I can feel it—it is just that my eye is not competent enough to view it. I miss the body that I can no longer hug or see, so I look for him in places where he might be concealed. I visit locations that he frequented and loved. A short walk around our old neighborhood elicits a sigh of despair. Then I notice a passerby who looks a little like him, and I gasp. I turn and spy a car's license plate with SAM and the numbers of my house.

Regularly, there is a coincidence that brings me face to face with symbols and reminders of Sam. Just when I feel my resolve evaporating into tears, I drive past Sam's House of Pizza. I lose faith in being able to keep my memories of him intact, distract myself by reading a novel, and find that the main character is named, "Sammy." I ask for help to establish a Memorial Trust to keep Sam's vision alive, and am referred to an attorney with the initials, S.A.M.

I look to the sky for more signs, and discover a white bird amongst the flock of black. I notice clouds that gather into a cheeky, smiling face. I see him in the moon, so full of light, yet so far away and untouchable. The moon appears to emit this light, but of course, it is the sun that brightens its surface and reflects it back to us on earth. The sun is shining on the other side of the earth, where we cannot see it. Maybe Sam is there, too. After he died, a friend wrote this haiku:

*He left in winter  
Overnight, the new moon was full.* (Hanser 40)

Quite by accident, a quilt designed by another friend shows the moon over scenes inspired by nature.

I state these facts, cognizant that I am a biased observer. My son's philosophy asks me to fan my wishes out to the universe and he promises that it will provide. Knowing no other way to receive help, I look everywhere for evidence that his soul is with me.

While I sit on his meditation pillow, I view a picture that he created of himself in lotus position. I ask him questions and listen attentively. I see him seated in comfort and peace. I focus on his image, and an answer sparks inside my head. It might be the response to a knotty problem I have been trying to unfold. It can be a new way of looking at an issue. Sometimes I am feeling agitated and distraught, then suddenly, calm. I cannot say that this is his intervention; nevertheless, it happens.

In these months since Sam's death, my thoughts have slowed down. I have begun to realize that this sluggish thinking is allowing me to take in and cogitate information more carefully, that is, with care and more fully. More than once, new perspectives and discoveries detonate in me when I am in this state of mind. While super-attentive and mindful of my surroundings, I have become more self-aware and insightful about others. According to the mindfulness meditation literature, this heightened consciousness is a notable, positive side effect (Kabat-Zinn). Yet never before was I able to achieve the sense of harmony that I can invoke now by envisioning Sam.

I hunt for him as I gather and sort his gifts to me. I caress the cards I saved from Mother's Day bouquets and birthday greetings. I gaze at photographs that

represent his many moods and relationships. I close my eyes and remember back to that time when I held him close, and I ache to stand next to him. I read the books he read. I reinvent his perceptions by picturing him lifting an eyebrow or nodding his head. I not only want him with me—I want him within me. Why not? I am visiting him in metaphysical time and space, so I can conjure him up inside and out, intellectually or completely spiritually. Then he will be protected as he was in my womb.

The search for my son is my search for substantiation that he exists in something beyond the memories that I cling to with a clutching grip. Friends tell me that he lives on in the good deeds of people who knew him and were inspired by him. But that is not good enough for me.

I visit Sam's grave, where he is a lot closer to my home than when he lived across the country. I leave a stone at his burial site, as is customary in the Jewish religion. His physical body won't move from here, so I have brought him rocks from places I visit, and have asked friends to collect pebbles from their travels abroad. I want to get to know Sam's new community, and look for familiar names on neighbouring headstones. I don't linger in the cemetery; this is not where his soul exists. Rather I find it in moments of meaning and objects of beauty that come to me when I least expect them.

Sometimes Sam's soul appears as an "aha" when I ask myself what Sam would say or do. I can hear him say, "You need time to think. Go outside." I consult him when I need direction, whether I am geographically or psychologically lost. He guides me to "take a deep breath." I contemplate what he would suggest when I step out at a crossroad, and a new alternative suddenly occurs to me.

His soul is also evident in the expressions of compassion from people who hardly knew him. Sam's loss has inspired poetry, art, music, tributes, and charitable contributions. These tokens of love and loveliness are the remarkable consequences of such a tragedy. Yet many find it hard to approach me or to know what to say.

I see fear on many faces that greet me—their worst fear. It happened to me; it could happen to them. Their gifts are balms to console me. Only when I smile are they able to leave in good conscience. Many people tell me that no words can express their sympathy; then they proceed loquaciously. Others inform me that they know just how I feel. Their words are unnecessary and often unhelpful. I wish they knew that their presence is the most comforting salve. Besides, when they are quiet, I sense their souls and connect with them authentically.

Many compliment me on my strength. I assume they are referring to my ability to walk behind his coffin without staggering. Indeed I am quite capable of acting. It is easy to bolster myself with defences, and move on with my responsibilities quite well, whether they are the duties of my job or burying

my son. Yes, I can distract myself with the mundane, but that does not take strength. In contrast, Sam encourages my resilience by suggesting that I feel what I feel, be who I am, and remain open and vulnerable.

It is paradoxical that my vulnerability is what girds my strength. I allow myself to experience the deepest emotions befitting the loss of my dear, loving son. I see the invisible. I feel a presence. Could this be what Sam meant by learning to die? To die, to expire, to depart—these verbs describe a process of surrendering and ending. The vulnerable are adept at these. It is when I give up control that I am enabled. It is when I let something go that I prepare for a new opportunity. It is when I accept a disappointing day with the prospect of hope for tomorrow that my soul flourishes.

To search is an active verb. It implies discovery and exploration, as with pioneers of new cultures. It implies a curiosity for the unknown or unseen. I am learning how to search.

In his book, Sam said, “In truth, there are no deaths, only transformations of consciousness.... Each death is but an opportunity to create yourself anew” (Hanser 36). Part of me died when my son died. Part of me awakened. I believe that I shall spend my lifetime searching. I think I am beginning to learn his lessons.

<sup>1</sup>Samuel’s book was published posthumously.

## References

- Hanser, Samuel B. *Many Blessings: The Remembrance of One*. Newton, MA: Samuel B. Hanser Memorial Trust, 2010. (published posthumously).  
 Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. New York: Hyperion Books, 2005.