

"That August Day"

By Jeff Hallman

Summer is such a fun time of year. There is so much to do. Cookouts with family and friends, days on the lake or beach, hiking in the hills and mountains around Atlanta, or just sitting in the thick grass at Piedmont Park. Even with all those fun activities many of us still have to go to work or school most days.

Have you ever driven into work or school like you have done so many times before and thought this is going to be just another beautiful Summer day? That August morning last year was such a day for me. I stopped for gas at my usual location, the Shell at the first corner. I waited at those traffic lights that seem to catch you every time you pass them. I thought about what I needed to get accomplished when I arrived at work. I thought about an upcoming motorcycle ride to the mountains. It was so hot and humid that morning I did not think Fall would ever get here. Everyone around me seemed to be starting their day like me; headed to work or school.

That otherwise normal August afternoon would turn out to be completely different. Something I did not know about had already happened. Something that would change my world. Something that would change me. What happened shortly after lunch shattered my world, my life, my

future. Shattered is such an insignificant word to me now. We could try devastated, crushed, horrified, and wrecked. They all fall so short of the feeling I was about to experience. I am back there in that unexplainable emotion right now just telling you this story but I need to tell this story for you and for me.

That afternoon my world just stopped. Think about that for a moment. You leave that very seat you are sitting in right now and walk out of this room and you find out your life has changed forever in a way you don't have the courage to even imagine. Just you. No one else's world has change but yours.

It was as if a person had transported me to a different place. A place I was not familiar with. A place I was not familiar with. The people seemed different, the day was different, and everything just that morning was so familiar was now so strange. This was now a place I didn't know how to be me anymore or what to do next. Even more strange was that everyone else around me was not there with me. They were there. I was just not with them. I wanted to go back, right now, this second but I couldn't find a way. I just kept getting further and further away.

I had spent my whole life planning and plotting my future and life's course. There had been set backs of course but I was in control. I thought. I would never had planned

for this nor would I ever had wanted to consider it a possibility. It was so unbelievable and alien to me. I could no more have planned for this day than I could have completely understood the creation of the universe. But here I was. The clock was already counting down.

It happened so quickly. I had gone to the only empty office I could find in the building I work here on campus. There was nothing in that office. Just me, the carpet, the walls, and the phone in my hand. I went there because I received a strange and concerning call at my desk a few minutes earlier. Most of us have gotten calls like that. They make us take immediate notice. We go into a triage-like mode until we can sort it out. So that's what I did. I went somewhere to have more privacy. The next call. I still have to mentally remove myself from the story just to be able to tell it. I'm doing that right now. It happened when a voice on the phone, a voice I did not know said very emphatically, very bluntly, "Leah is deceased".

Right now think of a childhood memory. Why do you remember it? You remember it because we retain the clearest memory of the most emotional events in our lives, both happy and sad. This one for me will always be the clearest.

I still hear those three words right now exactly as I did that August afternoon with the same fidelity. Stop Jeff

don't do it. Don't think about it. Those three words are so traumatic to me that thinking about them at this moment or any moment since then makes me want to just stop. Stop being here; stop being me. But that's not an option, at least not an option I am willing to consider.

My daughter took her life at just the time I thought she had figured out her plan for the future. I had always said "everyone needs a plan". This all felt like a cruel setup. I had been concerned for the futures of all my daughters just as any parent might be. She was not different except maybe her journey to a plan had been a little less straight. Leah had a heightened sense of emotional connection with the world around her. She was a sponge for everyone's emotional pain while disregarding her own. This was a gift she had but it was also a burden. More of a burden than I could have realized. Leah was so brilliant in her analysis of the human condition we find ourselves living in today. We would talk at length about esoteric subjects that I enjoyed but knew no one else even wanted to consider. She did and I just knew that the world would be a better place with her in it.

Each one of my daughters had to navigate the life decisions of early adulthood not unlike most their age. Leah was no different and she was so much like me that I knew she would figure it out. And she did; for a moment.

She came to me in early June with a plan. It was a good plan. Enroll in school, move closer to me, and set herself up for several years of college. Part of her plan I thought was not the best decision. I gave her an alternative. She had been living on her own for a few years, but now she wanted to move back home while she went to school. I thought it would be better for her to maintain her independence so I offered to pay most of her living expenses while she was in school. That is a decision I will forever second guess.

I was so excited and comforted by her renewed enthusiasm. I could now sleep easier knowing that all my daughters were "on their way" to being happy and productive adults especially my youngest. Unfortunately, I did not know the whole story. Her whole story. Remember she could not help but feel the pain of others and carry it like it was her own. I knew the part of the story that I could see from my perspective, through the lens of my life experiences, but not through her lens. That is hard! That takes a level of empathy and compassion I didn't have. These details of her story were extremely important to her and ultimately her life.

Leah started school in early August with renewed enthusiasm. I went with her to pick out a new desk and chair. She took a friend to Target to buy supplies for her classes. I later found that there was even enthusiasm

in the supplies she purchased. Not only items she really needed, but also classic 'school supplies'; pencils, paper, a stapler; those meant to her she was serious about her education. Those simple supplies were a symbol of success to her. She also joined a local gym as an outlet from school.

We met for coffee the Sunday before this August afternoon as we had done repeatedly in the weeks before. I ask her about school and work. She told me about a personal reflection she was working on to present to the class. She mentioned that maybe she could practice on me. She wouldn't let herself believe what she did was good. I gave her good advice; I thought. It was advice from my perspective again not from hers. I was not psychologically advanced enough to place myself in her situation fully and be empathic and compassionate enough to understand her needs.

She had texted me two days before that August afternoon to ask if she could come over. I said "yes". She had texted back an hour later and said "Never mind. I love you so much". I said "I love you too". In retrospect, that "so much" added to her I love you had meaning I could never have suspected. I recall thinking that there might be more to those words rather than a simple text.

The clock had finally counted down. After that August afternoon, I spent many of the next days, weeks, and months in complete disengagement. I did not want to come back without her. I did not know how to come back without her. I was desperate for answers to questions I had trouble even knowing how to ask. The pain was emotional and even physical. I would hear people talking but it was as if they were isolated from me and the sounds were muffled. Like in a dream when you want to say something but you cannot make yourself form the words. I tried to find answers. Why did this have to happen? How could I go on without her? What was the world going to be like without her?

The night after her death I stayed at her apartment if only because I was not there at the moment she needed me most the night before. I spent most of the night looking at how she left her mail on the table. It was just scattered about. How she placed her school books on her desk. Very neatly on the desk and the bookshelf. What food she had left in her refrigerator. Healthy foods; strawberries, Boca burgers. Why her sunglasses were in her bathroom sink? This went on and on and on all night. No answers to those questions. At least no immediate answers. I went to a religious sponsored support group for people and families like me. No answers. I went to grief counseling. No answers.

There are no answers. No answers like I would have expected in my previous world. This new world is full of self-reflection and second guessing. The introspection and self-analysis is about how I interact with people in my new world. This is a way I can take a little of Leah's compassion and let it live in me. The self-reflection is the only way to possibly survive this new world because without it the second guessing would create a very dark place. A place you cannot see from and no one can see in. The pain, both emotional and physical, will never diminish, but through this new found self-reflection you can connect with people, family and friends, in a way that would not be possible without it. It can open you up to a language and understanding not available to you before. If you have experienced a similar tragedy you have found yourself in a new and different world like me. Find your way to convert it to better understanding.

If you are feeling something similar to what we can imagine Leah was feeling, find someone you trust and make them understand something you probably don't even understand. We do want to help you.

If someone reaches out to you and you get even a little hidden message about their pain; listen; have empathy for them; be the person they need.

If you have not experience this indescribable pain, I beg you, to seek this self-reflection in your life while it is still just a choice. Connect in a more meaningful and understanding way with people you love and care about. Understand their perspective and not just your own. A life could depend on it.