

Excerpts from *Light in Blue Shadows*

Dear Reader,

I offer these excerpts from my book, *Light in Blue Shadows*, with hope for you:

May you be free from suffering.
May you know that you are not alone.
May your heart remain open.

Shortly after my 20-year old died, a sudden inexplicable death a friend, trying to comfort me said: “ One day your son will become a pearl”.

An uncontrollable rage poured out of me: “ I don’t want a pearl, I want my son back!” In that moment I can assure you, my heart was shattered and I felt that never again could I love. I felt alone, as if a great seismic chasm had swallowed me up; as if I was plunged into an underworld torture chamber. How could this happen? Why Jonathan? What did I do wrong? What’s the purpose of living? Like being deep in the hell realms, I felt stripped naked of all meaning. Nothing would ever be the same, and meanwhile in the “normal” world, everyone else’s life continued as before.

Today, fifteen years later, I can truly say that although the pain still exists, buried deep like a grain of sand, or a luminous pearl, suffering has ‘opened my heart, the door of compassion’. * Like a most precious gift, compassion has enabled my rage to subside, and my gratitude to flower. Forged by fire, my heartache for others seems stronger and gradually has become a vehicle for service as I meet with others who have lost a dearly beloved.

As I clawed my way inch by inch out of darkness I longed to meet another soul who had some inkling of my reality. Books about stages of grief didn’t help. Neither did well meaning advice. I began writing as a means of survival. Gradually I discovered that the moments I illuminated for myself were useful for others.

I know only too well that none of us can tell another how to survive and flourish after sudden loss. Nonetheless, it is my hope that these vignettes will resonate with your experience, and in some mysterious way offer you a willing hand through the valley of your own dark shadows.

*From Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Call Me By My Two Names* (2003).

Here is the moment when I received that nightmare of every parent, a sudden phone call telling me: "Jonathan is dead".

Sandwich Hug

At a great distance, as if burning through a thick gray fog, I hear a low growling moan. I cannot move. I am floating up on top of the room, looking down at a woman with her mouth open, in her bathrobe. Suddenly a shattering, high-pitched wail starts me shaking all over.

What the hell is that ghastly noise? I wonder, and then I realize. *Oh my God, it's me.* It must be me. I clamp my hand over my mouth. The children are still asleep, and I don't want to scare them.

It can't be true; it just can't be true. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to stop the shaking. He's lying—I'll call back, that's what I'll do.

"Robin, Robin!" I hear the screaming again, "Helllllllllp. Jonathan's dead. Our baby's dead..."

I grip the wooden banister tightly, one step at a time. One more step, I tell myself, then the hall, open the door...The stairwell is utterly silent. I hear a strange calm voice coming from nowhere. *It will be worse for Robin. You have to help him. All the love he gave Jonathan. They're so much alike. Robin lost his own Dad. He was only eight. And now his son...It will be worse for him.*

My throat closes and I can hardly breathe. An iron clamp around my chest squeezes all the blood out of me. I have become transparent and cannot feel my body at all. Only a huge hole and an outpouring from the center of myself, like a silver river.

I open the door to the hallway. Robin stares at me, his mouth open, his fluff of graying red hair still ruffled with sleep. His long blue and white kimono bathrobe is inside out, and his knobby knees stick out. He looks pale green. I can only squeak out a whimper: "Jonathan's dead."

"WHAT? That can't be! It's impossible!" Robin's face flushes bright red. He hunches over, sobbing. I shake uncontrollably in his arms, trying to say something coherent.

Benji, our younger son, bangs his bedroom door open, and then our daughter Joemy does the same, and they both run over to us, still in their pajamas.

“What? What is it?”

Robin and I stand on either side of them, put our arms around them both, and hug them tightly into the middle.

On Sunday mornings, already seemingly a lifetime ago, we used to scrunch them up between us in the warmth of a leisurely sun-filled moment.

Laughing together with them, we would say: “Let’s have a sandwich hug! You’re the peanut butter and jam, and we’re the bread!”

I felt as if I was going mad. I couldn’t sleep. As if possessed I wandered in a daze:

Answering Machine Madness

I’m going crazy, and I’m ashamed to tell anyone! It must be the middle of the night. Robin and the kids are sound asleep. Thank God, they can sleep. I’ve been lying awake trying not to scream since 1 A.M.

I sneak downstairs so I can call Jonathan at his work extension. I listen to his live voice again: “Hello, Jonathan Hartshorne speaking. Leave a message and I’ll call back as soon as possible. If you need immediate assistance press zero.”

Hearing him sounding so competent, I sob into the phone and talk to him. “Jonathan why did you do it? Why did you leave us? I love you. I miss you. Please call me back.”

Then I cry alone in the cold living room, and look at photos of him when he was a baby, until I can’t cry anymore. It is dark and cold, but the moon is still up. Morning will not come for a long time.

Tomorrow I will call Wes, the president of Jonathan's company, and I'll ask if he can leave Jonathan's message on the answering machine just a little longer.

I must be out of my mind. I wonder if they're listening to my messages. Maybe I should try writing letters to Jonathan instead. I can't go on like this.

Could I ever have imagined the outpouring of love and sympathy that flowed like a warm river, like a blessing into our home? My family and friends suddenly appeared as if by unfathomable grace:

Sort of Like Thanksgiving

Despite our concerns for her recent arterial by-pass, my mom—a feisty eighty-two-year-old amputee—insists on flying 3,000 miles from Boston to be with us. I hug her at the doorway without saying a word. Her crutches clatter to the ground. She seems smaller and bonier than the last time I saw her.

My voice comes out in a squeak. “Thank thee for coming, Ma.” I feel like a little girl again, and I greet her in the familiar Quaker words of my childhood. Speaking in this intimate second person to my mom gives me the feeling of being safe, of belonging. For a moment I feel held by the long ago wisdom of the white haired Elders in the Quaker Meeting House in Cambridge.

“I’m glad to see thee, dear.” She wears the same tweed skirt and old ratty red down ski parka she has had for twenty years. Her blue eyes seem grayer than I remember, and when she holds on to me and I can feel all her ribs. Yet her words are like a blessing in the midst of chaos.

My other brother, his wife, and four of my seven East Coast nieces and nephews managed to get a flight with my mom. They all arrive from the airport at once, sopping wet. Robin and I stand at the doorway together, greeting my family, taking their umbrellas and dripping overcoats.

Robin takes everyone into the kitchen, puts on the tea, and we all scrunch around the little kitchen table. For a split second, I feel safe, protected by the kindness of my family arriving so unexpectedly.

Robin asks me to come into the living room for a minute with him. He hugs me and starts crying again.

“It feels like a party. Sort of like Thanksgiving. Then I remember why everyone’s here...”

I began writing letters to my dead son in the privacy of my midnight waking hours. To my astonishment, these seemed a golden thread reconnecting me to the fabric of my son's life, guiding me out of the labyrinth of my grief:

A Dumpling Bun

Dear Jonathan,

The rain finally let up for a moment so the rest of the family all went out for a hike in Tilden Park. I'm looking at your baby pictures. So vividly, I remember that moment you transformed our lives, falling like a sapphire star into my heart. Dear Jonathan, imagine—I've been writing to you ever since you were born. I just found this song I wrote for you in my old Kyoto journal. You were four days old. Of course, I never would have shown it to you while you were alive. But now everything's different.

I call you by name—Jonathan. You are separate yet part of me. You drink my body. I paint your colors and sing with joy as I feel you kick and turn. Such a long awaiting for you my son, yet I've known you all along in your father.

We prepare for you with flowers and music. Amida Buddha with compassion guards the gateway by our bedside. Your father sings out his private soul on ancient bamboo reed, shakuhachi—song of the “Bell Ringing in the Empty Sky.” On the crest of rising pain and bliss, I tremble.

I burst aflame, no boundaries to my passion now. And cry with joy for this exquisite moment of communion with you, new moist and dappled love; with your father, guardian of my raw awakening. Eyes damp as forest moss he smiles, flaming above me his crown of red-gold hair. Can I ever love and be as consumed as at this very moment?

My milk white floodgates open, tingling with delight at your nuzzling insistence. So warm and succulent a peach boy! Oh, how could any mother resist so ripe and plump a dumpling bun to kiss and nibble as you squeak with joy! I shall eat you up as I love you so, my damask oyster! I am ablaze with love.

These memories fill me with your smells, the silkiness of your skin. As if it were only an instant ago I can feel you lying upon my breast, a sapphire soul looking right into my eyes, falling like a star into my heart.

Now this broken heart can barely go on beating. I can't look at these photos anymore. I'll write tomorrow.

--Your sad and tender Mom

After many months of feeling my life was ebbing away, being consumed by grief, I decided that I might feel a ray of hope again if only I could return to my former work, if only I could be of some use to others. A good friend suggested that I come with her to offer respite from the then ongoing war in Bosnia to refugee children. The children were in summer camp, so I decided to go:

In My Heart Forever Lovely

I must be nuts to imagine I can help kids in the middle of a war. The overnight train clickety-clacks through the French vineyards on its way to Italy, where I will catch a boat and go on to Croatia. Even with Tây's teachings to strengthen me, will I have anything to offer the Bosnian and Croatian children from refugee camps? Can I forget about Jonathan for just a while?

The moment I step off the boat onto the island of Badija, on the Adriatic, my fears begin to vanish.

By the third day on the island, war seems far away. Each day I swim, play my flute to wake the refugee children, and sing and paint with them on the patio. There are seven ten-year-old girls in my group. Some do not know how to swim, so I rock them in my arms and swish them through the balmy Adriatic waters.

Today Anna stops clutching onto me like a drowning kitten. I gently turn her on her stomach, hold her under her ribs, and guide her arms to dog paddle. She finally relaxes and even laughs: "Look! I'm swimming, I'm swimming!"

I have become close friends with Amra, Mirsada, and Amira, three young Muslim women who were able to sneak out from Sarajevo through the tunnel under the airport to join us. Mirsada cannot believe she can take a warm shower: “This is the first time in three years I have had the use of a shower. It’s so wonderful!”

She tells me of dodging sniper fire to get water every morning, and how she and her friends are determined to continue studying by candlelight, huddled in small groups in the basement. My own sorrows are put in perspective as I listen to these stories and work with the children.

These silky days of summer unfold like fragrant roses. Maybe I can bring comfort to some other mother, who knows her child is safe here on this island at least for a while.

During the morning, I teach the youngest children how to swim. I can imagine the healing warm waters of the clear Adriatic washing away some of their grief, as it does mine. In the afternoons, Mirsada and I set up an outdoor painting table where the children can paint their feelings and impressions of war. We help them write small poems to go with their paintings, which we display in the dining room each evening.

We have just received news that the children’s paintings and poems will be featured in an exhibit in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia. Alongside pictures of guns, and planes dropping bombs, are poems, and paintings full of flowers, rainbows and the ocean, which show hope and their longing for peace.

Each morning before the children wake, my three new friends and I walk around the island to a protected cove, just as the crickets start singing. There, by the rocky shore, we put out a rainbow cloth and four rainbow candles. My friends teach me how to wash and prepare to offer Muslim prayers. I share teachings I have learned from Tây and tell them stories of my Quaker ancestors. We share our hopes and sorrows, then swim in the warm soothing ocean—so clear we can see the round white stones eight feet below, so buoyant we float as if dreaming on clouds. The war is far away.

The sounds of sleep breathe through the darkened monastery, our home for these two weeks. I look out my balcony window at the clear, star-filled sky, smell the fresh salty breeze, and walk down the corridor to Mirsada's room. We are just finishing the translation of thirteen-year-old Jelika's poem, so we can put it up on the dining room wall in the morning. She writes:

*Maybe some people destroyed this world
But in my heart it is forever lovely
As a spring flower.
Maybe they burned all,
But our memories do not burn.
They are radiant and eternal.
Memories stay hidden in our hearts
Like the biggest secret.
Maybe they destroyed our reality.
They can change our future but not our past.
Because the past is our treasure
And we keep the past and our memories
Because they are beyond any price.*

Returning to our home in Berkeley I thought perhaps things would be easier, perhaps I could begin to function again like a normal human being:

Maybe The Worst Is Over

As I settle into life at home, I feel surprisingly refreshed and rested by my trip. Robin and Joemy have flowers in the living room to welcome Benji and me, and this morning we're celebrating being together with a leisurely Sunday brunch.

The sun streams into the kitchen, and our front garden blooms with dahlias, orange nasturtiums creeping over the stones, and Jonathan's yellow rose bush. We open the French doors and set the table with a yellow and orange flowered tablecloth. No rush today, so we can enjoy being together. We imagine we're in a café with French omelets, fresh scones, home-squeezed orange juice and English breakfast tea. This *is* our Berkeley café, chez Hartshorne.

Robin has begun work on a new book on Euclid, and we sense his excitement. A brown package arrived in the mail yesterday from England. After breakfast, we all go into the living room, so the package will not get food on it, and Robin carefully cuts the brown paper while we watch. Under layers of wrapping paper and old newspapers nestles a fat book in its original tan vellum binding. As Robin carefully opens to the frontispiece, I see traces of hungry worms having munched deep trails in the pages.

"It must be a delicious book," I kid Robin. "What's it about?"

He opens the book, carefully inspects the elaborate frontispiece, and reads aloud: "Euclidis Elementorum, Libri XV, 1574."

He grins, and pats the book affectionately. "I got it from my antique book dealer in England."

Though I cannot understand a word of the books and research papers Robin writes on algebraic geometry, I love looking at the drawings in this beautiful ancient text.

He opens to page seventy-two. “See, here’s the Pythagorean theorem, Book I, Proposition 47.”

I marvel at the symmetry and detail of the hand-drawn geometric triangle with squares on each side. Though I never liked math in school, I can feel the beauty and simplicity of this book, and Robin’s excitement is infectious. I’m happy to see him return to his passion for mathematics.

Joemy teases Robin about his latest collecting hobby. “Robin, don’t you think a new dress and matching necklace for me would be a bargain compared to that little book?”

I catch myself wondering if it is okay to laugh. *Jonathan, I wish you were here too.*

It is good to be home. I hope that coming back renewed from travels will make life a little easier here in Berkeley. Maybe the worst is over.

I had no idea how wrong I was. I had no inkling of the amount of time, patience, kindness from many many friends, moments of falling on my face and slowly starting over again, no idea at all that the process of weaving together the fragments of my life into a new fabric would take a long time:

Nothing Is the Same

My heart aches as we drop Benji off at the San Francisco airport. He has gone off to Vermont for a semester at the Mountain School. Our home will seem empty without him, our family smaller. But I am glad he will have a respite from the grief that Robin and I still have trouble hiding.

After saying goodbye, I close my eyes and imagine him driving up to the Mountain School, past the old red barn with cows and chickens, past the duck pond and fruit trees. Like a delicious summer fruit, Benji is tan and golden and seems filled with sunshine when he waves to us.

Fall always used to feel like a fresh start, but now nothing is the same. The excitement of beginning anew, while basking in the fullness of harvest and

crisp evenings, is gone. My old patterns do not work anymore. It is a struggle to know who I am.

While Joemy goes out shopping for school clothes, and Robin prepares for classes, I walk down to Solano Avenue to get a cup of chai at Peet's. It's a wonderful Indian summer morning, warm enough still to wear my yellow sunflower dress. At Peet's, I bump into my poet activist friend Judith.

"Edie, I'm so glad you're back!" She hugs me warmly. "Guess what? I have the most exciting news! Andrea's engaged and she'll be getting married next spring. We just went out shopping for her wedding dress, and she looks adorable! Can you imagine—my baby is all grown up?"

"Oh, that's just fabulous!" I turn to pour milk in my tea so Judith won't see the tears in my eyes.

I am embarrassed. I love Judith and she has been such a loyal friend this year. I am happy for her—we've known Andrea since she was born. She and Jonathan attended a playgroup together. Jonathan will never marry.

Walking home I wonder, *how long will it be before I can enjoy other people's happiness?* Will I ever again celebrate the precious events of our human lifetimes without pain piercing my heart?

Only in retrospect can I observe the organic process of healing, that mysterious process of grace that sometimes comes when we least expect it. One potent source of guidance came to me in dreams. Here's one close to the end of my journey:

Jonathan Sends a Dream

A week later I have another dream, this time of Jonathan. I awaken filled with a sense of light, of warmth all over my body and of peace, as if bathed in sunlight. I exist in a completely silent place, a desert perhaps—no bird sound, no wind, only bright sunlight all over my body.

I am with Jonathan and we chat happily, relaxed, enjoying each other's company. We just celebrated my Quaker grandmother Bema's birthday—on August 7th. Jonathan expresses surprise that I know the date, and asks, "How did you know?"

"There are seven pomegranate seeds on the ground in front of us. That is how I know," I say.

We both laugh with the pleasure of the alchemical number and understand without saying more.

"I just love being with you. You are such a wonderful person. I love you," I say. We laugh and kiss each other. He kisses me gently on the lips.

"I love you, too," he says. The kiss comes as from an angelic being, an apparition, like an angel on a Renaissance chapel, surrounded by clouds, and youthful innocence—not sexual, but a light brush of the lips. Not sweet and sentimental. A child's kiss, just full of dearness. I feel a divine joy, unlike anything I have ever felt here on earth. His hug is firm and present, not hesitant or withdrawing. Just there, together with me in a matter-of-fact kind of way. Tears sting in my eyes.

"I wish you were still alive so we could enjoy each other in life this way. Do you ever wish you were back in life again?"

With tears in his eyes, he says, "No."

I understand immediately. “You’re much happier now aren’t you? The way it is here?”

“Yes,” he says, “it is much more beautiful here. I wouldn’t want to come back.”

I understand completely, feel a boundless, empty yet blessed peacefulness, a deep contentment. In this spacious realm where Jonathan is now, there is no struggle, no conflict, no yearning of the heart for anything else.

I wake with a great heat throughout my body, feeling stunned, as if finally I do understand. How beautiful. How unspeakably exquisite. What a precious visit.

It is only now, here, returning to thinking, that I begin to feel pain and sorrow again, as I wish I could change his death and bring him back or be with him as I was in the dream. It is the longing, the attachment to my wish to change things that causes me pain, not the dream, or the visitation, not even the fact of his death.

Jonathan, you are radiantly happy and peaceful. Thank you for this beautiful glimpse into our true nature, our capacity to love. Thank you for this brief moment of pure being with you, for this vision of death, this glimpse of liberation.

Along the pathways of this journey towards acceptance came many blessings. And many moments also of sorrow suddenly springing like a specter from the past into my life – at the oddest moments. Perhaps the greatest and most surprising blessing has been my ever-increasing sense of gratitude and wonder, not separate from sorrow or suffering.

I pray that however you move through the landscape of your own suffering, you also will find moments of grace. And I hope my reflections might offer you solace.

I found comfort in the words of many spiritual traditions, in particular this psalm which provided a touchstone during my healing, when I spoke silently to an abiding presence of divinity in my life, and to Jonathan:*

You have changed my grieving into dancing!
Thrown off my mourning clothes and
dressed me in joy
So that my whole being might sing to you
without ceasing
Pouring out my gratitude without end.

I am blessed and I rejoice. I know now that suffering can transform into light, shining through blue shadows at dawn, that love is more enduring than death.

*From Norman Fischer's Zen-inspired translations of the psalms *Opening to You* (2002).