



Memoir Writing as My Grief Recovery

by Jeff Seitzer

Early in my tenure as a stay-at-home dad, I shared a lot of laughs with my mother-in-law Aleta about parenting. She suggested I keep a journal, so that I could publish some of the stories one day. When our son Ethan was still very young, however, I decided against it, because he did not like being the center of attention. As he put it: "Some people need to be the main character, but not me."

Then, on a beautiful summer day, Ethan drowned while swimming with me in Lake Michigan. Everything happened so fast. It was all a blur, save for one moment. Sinking with him, certain we both were going to die, my last thought before blacking out was, "I won't be able to tell his story."

Convinced I survived to write about our time together, I faced a seemingly insurmountable obstacle at the outset. I had no memories of him whatsoever other than of drowning together. Soul-crushing images of struggling in the waves played through my mind on a continuous feedback loop. Nothing else about him could force its way into my consciousness.

When Ethan was born in fragile health and needed constant care, I gave up teaching to stay home with him fulltime. A self-involved academic with neurological problems of my own, I was in way over my head. He thrived nonetheless, and we had oodles and oodles of fun along the way. The experience forged a deep bond between us and made me a different person, more empathetic and nurturing.

Yet all I could remember about him was his nightmarish death? My 4,000 pages of notes about our time together seemed written by someone else, as though I was reading through a stranger's diary. I was in my very own circle of hell.

Fortunately, the memories returned, and with them came an intuition that guided the process of writing the memoir and made it a deeply spiritual, transformative experience.

My wife Janet and I felt responsible for his death. One could say in our defense that we had unusually bad luck. Ethan and I were suddenly swept into an area of extreme turbulence. People nearby were unaffected. A few yards one direction or the other might have made all the difference.

Maybe so, but bad luck was only a contributing factor. The problem was we allowed him to swim under dangerous conditions without proper safety precautions. We, his parents, made bad decisions that day, and he paid the ultimate price for it. We only had ourselves to blame.

I was especially angry with myself. Not only was I unable to save him. I was also haunted by the thought that I might have sacrificed him to save myself. I have no recollection of that. All I remember is fighting the waves to keep him afloat and frantically trying to carry him to the surface. Nonetheless, this idea gnawed away at me. Life was a torment. My version of Poe's telltale heart was pounding ever louder.

Then, I met the brave bystander, Al Keating, a bereaved parent himself, who almost drowned trying to save Ethan. He remembered much more about the drowning than I did. He said that he took Ethan from me and tried to swim to shore. Taking on water himself, he passed Ethan back to me, and all three of us went under. He had a surge of adrenaline and reached the surface. It took him several minutes to get back to shore. After coughing up water, he questioned other bystanders about us. They said we disappeared under water and never resurfaced. Al spotted me five minutes later and pulled me to safety. My hands and feet were blue from oxygen deprivation.

Al's certitude that I did not give up on Ethan helped me begin to forgive myself for his loss. A crack appeared in the dam holding my memories at bay. It broke a few days later.

After Ethan died, I told Janet that taking care of Ethan changed my life, and that taking care of our daughter Penelope and her would save my life. So, I would do anything she asked. I was stunned when she wanted to say some prayers at the beach where Ethan drowned. I agreed, though I dreaded returning to where Ethan and I were separated from one another forever.

After a sleepless night at my little brother Chris's house in Omaha, I stared at the ceiling and listened to birds chirping away on the windowsill. Knowing we had to leave soon for the long drive to Michigan, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Suddenly, I was in our house in Chicago, where I found Ethan sleeping peacefully. Whatever it was, a dream or a vision, I believed that Ethan was telling me that he was okay and that he wasn't angry with me. Precious memories of him and of our time together flooded back into me and soothed my aching heart.

I was still devastated. Ethan was no longer with me in his magnificent physical self. I would always miss his beautiful

face, sparkling eyes, his thick mane, and throaty laugh. He would never sit with me again on the couch, his head resting on my shoulder, as we read together. His death created a hole in my life that can never be filled.

I took some solace in knowing that we shared a profound spiritual connection. I was convinced that letting go of my anger about his death enabled me to sense this connection and that carrying Ethan's loving spirit into the world would help me maintain it.

Though Ethan was forty-two years my junior, I often thought he was teaching me how to live more meaningfully by letting go of control. Time and again, I marveled at Ethan's responses to trying circumstances. Never angry, bitter, or resentful, as I often was when things didn't go my way, he lived fully in the moment, making each encounter with others a positive experience for everyone, even those who had been unkind to him.

When I pondered how to tell his story, this idea of Ethan as my life coach conjured in my mind's eye a swirl of memorable moments with him. It was kind of like in a movie, where a character witnesses a funnel cloud with faces, voices, events appearing briefly before disappearing again. I had to slow everything down, immerse myself in the details, look for connections unnoticed before, and piece it all back together into a coherent narrative about our relationship and the challenges we faced. That would crystallize in my mind what Ethan taught me about life. Moreover, understanding his distinctive way of going through life and cataloguing how it manifested itself in a wide range of everyday situations would give me concrete ideas about how I could change my posture toward the world. He always turned a loving face to the world. Writing the memoir might help me do so as well.

If I succeeded, even if only part of the time, then his death would not be meaningless. I would have a renewed sense of purpose that enables me to face life without him, because we would still be together in spirit.

Accounts of Jeff's on-the-job training as a full time parent have appeared in the Omaha World-Herald, Hippocampus, Brevity, Adoptive Families Magazine, and elsewhere. An award-winning teacher, he is also the author of a number of books and articles on law and philosophy and a regular contributor to the CMTA Report. Born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, he now lives with his family in Chicago, where he teaches at Roosevelt University. His memoir, The Fun Master was honored as a 2022 Best Book Awards Finalist in Creative Nonfiction from the American Book Fest. To learn more about Jeff's life and work, visit jeffreyseitzer.com.