

Where love never dies

No, you're not hallucinating, crazy or in denial; you're just creating a new relationship with your deceased loved one.

by Leah Dobkins

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My 19-year-old daughter Hannah Rose suddenly died on March 6, 2012. After about a week, the wilted flowers that were scattered throughout my home bent their heads, mimicking my sorrow.

I had trouble throwing them away, letting go of what they were. I triaged the flowers every day. For some, I cut the bottom of their stems under warm water to try to revive them. The rest I reluctantly tossed in the kitchen garbage.

Eventually, there were no more flowers in my home. There was no more Hannah Rose.

As a gerontologist, I was well aware of the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Still, I knew in my heart that I would never let go of my daughter. I did not progress neatly through those five sequential stages of grief. In fact, there were times when I felt all these stages at the same time, quite a common experience when we lose a loved one.

After a year of bereavement, I felt subtle pressure from well-meaning family and friends to “get on” with my life. I started to judge myself and question my sorrow. Do I have overly-complicated grief? Why do I continue to have no energy, no concentration, no sex drive? My husband never cried in my presence, and I saw my son cry only once, but I still wept, often.

My husband told me it was okay to cry, but could I please do it more quietly. I felt like my tears annoyed the men in my household, and I realized just how alone one can feel when your loved ones stop grieving with you.

In reality, grief is like a fingerprint; it’s unique to each person. But people don’t always understand this. So like a snake growing new skin, I grew the necessary armor to show what a highly functioning person I was. I was moving on. The façade was exhausting.

It was at a Compassionate Friends conference (an organization that supports parents and families who have lost children) that I began to

understand that there are millions of bereaved people lugging around this heavy armor to better fit into our culture — all feeling pressure to move on. Some cultures, such as the Aborigines and Japanese, nurture communication with the deceased. They have rituals that facilitate this relationship. Our society does not.

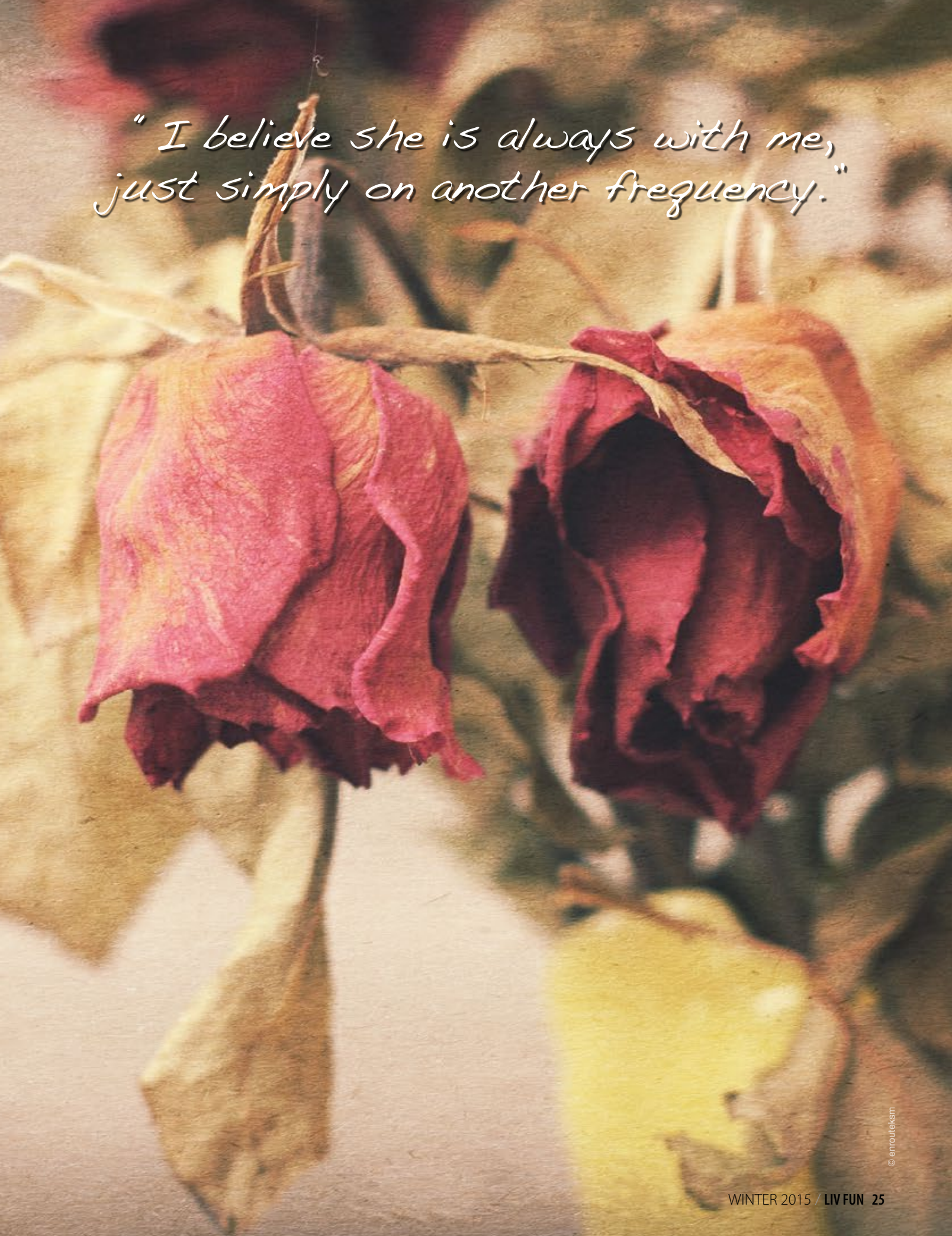
Freud said that the function of mourning is to detach the survivor’s hopes and memories from the dead. There are psychologists today who believe that the bereaved cannot complete the mourning process unless they were willing to relinquish their emotional connection to the deceased.

I would argue that the opposite is true. A healthier task for the bereaved is to discover ways to continue a relationship with loved ones who have died and incorporate that relationship into a new chapter. Thank goodness more mental health professionals also believe this to be true (Wortman, 2011).

Our culture does not fully understand that relationships with the dead can last a lifetime. When I dropped my mother at the airport after Hannah Rose’s funeral, I met an 82-year-old woman whose son had died 60 years ago. Not a day goes by that she doesn’t think of him and talk to him. No matter the age or the years since the loss, we still yearn for that continued dialog.

This relationship can manifest in many ways, including feeling or seeing a loved one; having conversations with the deceased in your dreams; feeling watched over and protected; feeling their presence; or the movement of special objects believed to be a sign from the deceased.

For me, I felt I could better recover from grief if I allowed myself to discover grief, to immerse myself in it, and come out of it with a new and even better relationship with my daughter. I frequently do and say things now to make her laugh. And I’ve discovered I’m funnier now than I was when she was alive.



*“I believe she is always with me,
just simply on another frequency.”*

One of the workshops at the Compassionate Friends conference, called “Signs from your children,” went on until 1 o’clock in the morning while each parent shared incredible stories of ways their deceased children communicate with them. Parents felt their child’s presence through messages on car license plates, specific types of butterflies or birds, through songs on the radio, and, surprisingly often, moved household items.

We chuckled in recognition when one person said, “No, I didn’t forget where I left my keys; my daughter moved them!”

Despite the comfort parents received from these communications, most shared that they would never tell these experiences to anyone other than the friends they made at the conference or other intimate confidants. They were afraid people would think they were hallucinating, crazy and desperately clinging to a relationship that is gone or even denying the reality of the loved one’s death. The truth is these types of communications are more frequent than most believe.

Researchers have found that 13 months after bereavement, 63% say loved ones were with them at all times after they died, 34% continue to converse regularly, and 33% say they have grown closer to their loved ones since their deaths. (Zisook & Shuchter, 1993).

This information provided me with comfort and validation about my own ongoing relationship with Hannah Rose. Indeed for any of us experiencing communication and signs from loved ones, it’s comforting to know we are sane, normal and going through a natural and lovely process.

It’s time for all of us who are bereaved to come out of the closet. The deceased will be with us when we do. Moving forward in our lives doesn’t mean leaving your deceased loved ones to their dust. Continuing to work on your relationship facilitates your griev-

ing process and adjustment to your new life. Your bonds of love transcend death. I’m not sure about the afterlife, but I believe she is always with me, just simply on another frequency.

My family always told me that a loved one who has passed will stay alive, as long as you remember them. I didn’t realize until recently that statement is backed by scientific evidence. As you remember and communicate with the deceased, you are actually creating new neuron connections in your brain (Colicos, 2001). In this real and tangible way, your thoughts and communication with them do help to build the physicality you sense. Your loved ones do, indeed, live on.

Sources:

For help coping with a loss in your own family, visit Compassionate Friends on the web at www.CompassionateFriend.org to find a chapter near you.

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For more reading:

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10 Ways to Stay Close

To continue your relationship with loved ones who have passed and to celebrate their lives, try any of these rituals:

1. Participate in the charities she or he cared about as a way of continuing that legacy and remembering the impact they had while they were alive.
2. Participate in activities you enjoyed together to help keep the emotional bond intact and meaningful after death.
3. Don’t be afraid to keep objects that symbolically link you to your loved one. A friend has a beautifully carved and painted wooden iguana that reminds her of her spouse prominently displayed in her apartment — she talks to it often.
4. Create simple ceremonies that help you to continue to remember your loved one.
5. Write the deceased a letter. It might include unspoken good-byes, unexpressed love and appreciation, unresolved issues, hurts, anger, regrets and forgiveness. No relationship is perfect, and expressing the good *and* bad in yours can help heal your pain and grief, and might open a channel to receive guidance from your loved one.
6. Write a legacy letter, by yourself or with other family and friends, which captures treasured stories, memories, and the unique qualities of your loved one. You can turn the letter into a book incorporating photographs, poetry, art and recipes you associate with the deceased.
7. Write a biography of your loved one’s life story.
8. Create a website or Facebook page that allows you to share memories, thoughts, photographs and comments about your loved one. My daughter’s friends continue to share dreams, music and videos they think she would like. They also take pictures of their new rose tattoos to honor Hannah Rose.
9. Ask for, nurture and pay attention to your dreams. Keep a pad and pen, tape recorder or cell phone at the side of your bed to help you record, remember and reflect on these dreams.
10. Create a sanctuary in your home where you can meditate and communicate with your loved one. I have a corner of my bedroom with my favorite photographs of my daughter and things she made or bought me. I also have a Buddhist’s brass bell and a candle I use in ceremonies to feel closer to her. ♦

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