

# Keep Going

Category: Persevering

written by Alison Hartman | November 9, 2018

Since my son died last year of a heroin overdose, the most common response from others has been “I can’t imagine!” Losing your child is unimaginable. A parent is not supposed to outlive their child. It’s contrary to the natural order. He was only twenty-five and never became the beautiful person he was meant to be.

When the call came that he had died (“This is Officer A from Precinct B. Sorry to tell you that your son is dead. If you want to see him before the medical examiners take his body, he’s at this address...”), I faced the choice to either allow it to do me in or pick myself up and move forward.

Existential questions have flooded me: Where is there meaning now that my child is gone? Who am I now? What is the purpose of my life? Not only the loss of my beloved son, but other losses in my life—relationships, hopes, dreams—became attached to my grief, as if it were one huge tidal wave.

How do I swim in this vast and turbulent sea, out of sight of the shore or a single buoy? I’ve learned to just keep swimming. I keep my legs and arms continually moving to keep from drowning. I’d promised my son I would go on and live a full life. I uncovered strength I never knew I had. Every day I practice the art of perseverance.

Watching my son’s illness was preparation for confronting his death. Over the eight years of his disease, I’d received numerous calls from the police, heard shocking medical news (including after a suicide attempt), came to terms with his homelessness during a cold, snowy winter. I learned how to survive the ups and downs, the uncertainty, my inability to fix his problems. I developed an inner resilience, an ability to tolerate and even embrace the seemingly impossible. I didn’t know then that those skills would serve me now; it was a training ground for endurance, for which I am grateful.

Persevering actually offers gifts. I see more accurately the proper proportion of things. What really matters rises to the surface, and circumstances that might previously have unglued me fade from significance. Unexpected support has been showered upon me from some special people, including my son’s compassionate doctor, who continues to mentor me through my grief. As I persevere, still unsure where I’m headed and what it all means, my heart has grown and my compassion has deepened. My enduring love for my son helps me keep going.

*Alison Hartman  
Baltimore, Maryland*