

# *First Year, Worst Year*

Coping with the unexpected death of our grown-up daughter

BARBARA A. WILSON AND MICHAEL WILSON



John Wiley & Sons, Ltd



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THIS IS A DIARY OF BEREAVEMENT  
FOLLOWING THE DEATH IN PERU  
ON MAY 12<sup>TH</sup>, 2000, OF  
SARAH, A BELOVED DAUGHTER

*A nobleman once asked a Chinese philosopher to grant his family a blessing. The famous scholar thought for a moment, then said "Grandfather dies, father dies, son dies". The nobleman was horrified, but the philosopher shrugged his shoulders. "What other way would you have it?" he said.*

*None.*

(Reproduced from McCracken & Semel (eds), *A Broken Heart Still Beats*.)





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## *Foreword*

This remarkable diary is of the ‘Worst Year’ of their lives endured by Barbara and Mick Wilson after their adult daughter, Sarah, was drowned in Peru. It records the daily lives of two parents and their surviving children, struggling to make the terrible and exhausting journey from devastating, overwhelming grief, when the small light at the end of the dark tunnel can barely be glimpsed at all, through a more calm acceptance of the inevitable, to the stage of being able to resume their normal lives without it being a constant emotional struggle.

This does not mean, as my husband and I well know from the death of our 14-year-old twin son, Nicky, that the child you have lost has been forgotten and pushed to the back of your mind. Rather, it means that he or she has a constant place in the hearts and minds of the family circle and is able to be remembered and talked about frequently with pleasure as well as sadness.

Barbara and Mick rightly feel that other bereaved parents reading this diary may be helped to realise how much their early emotional turmoil is an unavoidable result of the tragedy they have suffered, but that there is (maybe unbelievably at first) light at the end of the long, dark tunnel, and they will be able to resume their more or less normal lives, slowly, with time.

The book will also appeal to the general reader with its examination of bereavement in general and its description of family life, work and travel that has to go on despite the loss of a loved child. There is also an account of Mick and Barbara’s extraordinary expedition in the Peruvian mountains, led by the same guide who had tried to rescue their daughter. They climbed sometimes at 14,000 feet above sea level to the deepest canyon in the world, where they conducted their own ceremony in honour of Sarah who was last seen a year earlier at that point in the rapids of the River Cotahuasi.

There is an ancient Chinese poem that beautifully expresses the feelings of bereaved parents:

He took his big candle  
And went into another room  
I cannot find:  
But I know he was here  
Because of all the happiness  
He left behind

Countess Mountbatten of Burma  
*March 2004*



## *Acknowledgements*

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## *Introduction*

### **2003**

The core of this book, the heart of it, is Barbara's journal, written in the year 2000, the year in which we lost our daughter in a white-water rafting accident. Sarah has never been found. Barbara has kept a daily diary for the past forty years and she kept it going, even during the very darkest of our days in that awful first and worst year. As a result of our experiences during the first year of bereavement, and our subsequent progress through grief in the next two years, we decided we would try to communicate our thoughts and feelings to others. While most people thankfully will never have to go through the mental and emotional agony of losing a child, they are nevertheless bombarded by images of grief through the popular press and television. As experienced griever, we are of the opinion that this second-hand view is frequently superficial and can lead to equally superficial and automatic responses. So one of the driving forces behind this book is a desire to tell it as it is, to go beyond the nightmare imaginings of those whose only experience of the loss of a loved child is perhaps fuelled by media images.

We realised that the journal would make an impact on readers, but we also thought that the pain expressed in the journal throughout that first year needed building on so that some light through the darkness could be seen. People do not stay locked in grief unless they are made too ill by their losses. Most of us will pull through because there is no other alternative: life has to go on. We wanted to show that grieving people do change as time passes. So we have added additional material from our experiences during the third year after Sarah's death. The structure of the book is therefore as follows: each chapter starts with some reflections that both of us have put together during the year 2003, then proceeds to the 2000 journal, as we said, the 'heart' of the book. The final chapter breaks from this structure as it describes our 2001 journey to the Cotahuasi Valley in Peru, in mountains that at times reach 14,000 feet, and into the deepest canyon on earth, where our lovely Sarah is now laid to rest. We were taken there by the guide Pepe Lopez, who was on the original rafting expedition, and who was the last person on earth to see our Sarah as she drifted beyond his reach. We had to get there to say our final goodbyes.