

Joshua's Ring

As told by
His Parents
to
Marie P. Duess

Introduction

He didn't want to die. He didn't want to be known for miracles. He didn't want to do anything more remarkable than any other boy would do. He just wanted to live an ordinary life, with the normal dreams of every boy—the typical desires, concerns, and hopes of every boy.

His parents didn't want him to die. The only miracle they looked for was one that would save his life and make him well so that he could live and grow to manhood.

This is a story that is told too often by too many parents of children who are diagnosed with life-threatening disease and lose their battle against death. Yet this story, perhaps like others, has a rather remarkable—*what?*—not an ending, but a continuation. In the end it is a testament that these children didn't loose to death, but triumphed over it.

I knew Joshua Wilker, but I didn't know him well. I remember him mostly as an adorable preschooler with thick curly golden brown hair, big expressive eyes, and a personality that made you smile just looking at him. I remember him performing with his Kindergarten classmates at the annual Christmas show at Grey Nun Academy, where my own children who were a little older than Josh went to school. I remember they were singing Jingle Bells, and Josh was a little more enthusiastic about “jingling” than the rest, and the reason became obvious when his little hand moved over the part of his body that he was having a little trouble with. I remember his father, the gym teacher and athletic coach at the school, grimacing and running his hand over his face as the audience convulsed in laughter while his little guy was escorted quickly to the boys' room immediately after the performance.

And I remember hearing seven years later that this sweet, funny, charming kid was being treated for leukemia. I remember choking back tears, my heart breaking for his father, Joe, who I knew well from my own affiliation with the school, and for his mother, Rosemary, who I worked with on numerous fundraising committees when my own children attended Grey Nun Academy.

There are always “signs” when someone dies. It's so very common to hear of synchronicities that happen after the passing of a human being. It's happened to me with several of my own loved ones. I will admit that I wanted to see these signs. I looked for them; I longed for them because they were a comfort for me. So as much as I “believe” in them, I have always wondered if these “signs” are real or imagined—perhaps just our way of surviving heartbreak.

When Josh died in March of 2003, I decided my family would purchase a special gift rather than send flowers to commemorate his life. My husband and I discussed buying altar vestments that could be used by the chaplain or visiting priests in the chapel of Grey Nun Academy in remembrance of Josh. He was in the 8th Grade at the private Catholic school when he died, and we knew that this gift would bring Josh to mind for everyone who knew and loved him when worn at special liturgies, like First Eucharist Celebrations and Graduations.

The evening before I went to the religious article store, I had a dream that I was in the chapel at Grey Nun Academy, but all I could see was the altar. On the altar were a chalice and paten and what I believed to be priest's hands cupped around them but not touching them. There was a defect on the chalice—a little scratch. I mentioned the dream to my husband when I awakened the next morning. “You must have dreamed that because we were talking about the vestments,” my husband said and I agreed.

I went to the store to pick out the vestments, and as I passed a case that housed brand new chalices and other altar vessels, I saw the chalice that was in my dream—defect and all. I was stunned...absolutely blown away. *A sign? For me?* I barely knew the boy. I certainly wasn't looking for a sign from Joshua—not that I didn't care about him and his parents, but because I just wouldn't expect a sign from him since I was a stranger to him.

Needless to say, I purchased the chalice, as well as the paten that sat beside it on the shelf with numerous other more perfect vessels. What would his parents think about me giving them something less than perfect to commemorate their son's life? How could I do that? I could do it because I knew without any doubt that Josh had picked it out himself and just used me to get it. I did purchase the vestments, also, and sent all to Joe and Rosemary with a note trying to explain why I would have the audacity to give them a chalice and paten that was slightly damaged.

"They're going to think I'm nuts," I told my husband.

"Yes, they are," he agreed, "or they're going to think we're too cheap to buy a perfect chalice."

"I'm giving it to them anyway," I told him, "because it wasn't my decision, it was Josh's."

His parents were very gracious—didn't let on that they thought we were nuts *or* cheap—and in fact had expressed that they had had some very exceptional "signs" of their own.

Although I thought of Joe and Rosemary and their other children from time to time after Josh's funeral and prayed for them whenever I did, I really didn't have any correspondence with them after Josh's death. My children, Mai-Ann and Buddy, had already graduated from the elementary school before Josh died, and we were not socially linked with the Wilkers. The school was our only connection.

Then, in early 2006, there was a phone message on our answering machine from Rosemary asking me to return her call. There was something she wanted to talk to me about. I didn't return her call right away. I listened to the message, wondered about it, then moved on to my next chore, my next project, and the next day. A few days later I was straightening up my home office, moved some books from one side of a shelf to the other, and a piece of paper fluttered from one of them down onto my foot.

It was the prayer card from Josh's funeral. I called Rosemary right then.

"I want you to help me write about Josh and some things that have happened since he died," she told me.

The prayer card was still in my hand and I looked down at it.

No. The word formed in my mind before she finished her sentence, and was followed by a rush of more negative thoughts. *No. I don't write that well really. I'm not talented enough. I'll mess this up royally. I'm too busy working full time in a very demanding job and I just won't do it right. I just lost my own sister-in-law and I'm up to my ears helping to take care of her two little boys. I just don't think this is a good idea right now.* I never said these things to Rosemary; just to myself.

I turned the prayer card over in one hand while holding the phone in my other hand: ***In Loving Memory of Joshua J. Wilker, September 12, 1988 – March 4, 2003 ... What kind of place would Heaven be with all its streets of gold, if all the souls that dwell up there like yours and mine were old?***

"Sure, Rosemary, of course I will," I told her.

I'm not talented enough, not skilled enough, and the truth is, I *could* mess this story up royally. It doesn't matter because I believe that Joshua Joseph Wilker wants me to tell his story from his parents' perspective—from his parents' hearts. And that's what I'm doing.

Josh Wilker didn't want to die. He didn't want to be known for signs or miracles. I didn't want to ever have to write a story about a boy who died too young and the miraculous events that have occurred since his death.

We take different journeys than we want to sometimes, don't we?