

NOT WASTED



LYNN AND DAN WAGNER

It was a day much like any other day—or so we thought—as my husband Dan and I and our two teenaged daughters, Mandie and Carrie, enjoyed a family outing. But on the way home it became a day like no other—ever.

Our girls died instantly in a drunk driving accident, and we were left stunned and badly injured.

This book is our story—Dan’s and mine—told in a series of non-linear “word snapshots,” reflecting our feelings, thoughts, and experiences as we moved from shock to grief to anger to forgiveness, acceptance, peace, and finally joy.

Our goal and purpose for sharing our story is to encourage you to look at your life and to realize how quickly all you’ve known and counted on can change in an instant. Do you know the God of mercy and grace and comfort? The God of forgiveness and love? The only one who can hold you and heal you and love you unconditionally forever? The one who empowers us to forgive others just as He has forgiven us? This same God has a plan for your life, and He will reveal it if you draw near to Him.

Lynn Wagner
Santa Cruz, CA

NOT WASTED

BY LYNN AND DAN WAGNER

WITH KAREN O'CONNOR AND HEIDI HEATH GARWOOD

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PHOTO BY DAN WAGNER

Less than two weeks after the tragic 9/11 events that rocked our nation, Lynn and I and our teenaged daughters, Mandie and Carrie, spent the day at Luis Palau's evangelical festival, *Beachfest Santa Cruz* in California, along with about 20,000 other people. After the festival, we jumped into our minivan and headed home.

We never made it.

Lisa was driving home from a wedding with her two small children in back, with alcohol, coke, and meth in her system. Blindly running a stop sign at fifty miles per hour, she crashed her SUV into the side of our minivan, wrapping us around a power pole and dumping us onto someone's front yard.

Badly injured, we had no memories of the accident, and very few memories of that day. Many friends and family members came by the hospital to visit and to express their condolences. Lynn remembers hearing God's voice at the festival telling her it was not the worst thing for a Christian to die. What was God saying?

Shock, the injuries, and the morphine made the news slow to sink in:

Mandie and Carrie were dead.

Six months later, Lisa was sentenced to state prison for more than seven years. Meanwhile, Lynn and I began the painful process of grieving the loss of our precious daughters. But we were comforted with the knowledge that though they were gone from us, they were at home with Jesus.

"The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."

Psalm 34:18 ESV



PHOTO BY HEIDI HEATH GARWOOD

ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE

DAN

As soon as we got home from the hospital and Lynn walked past our girls' rooms, her grief started with a vengeance. At Holy Cross Cemetery, our Pastor Barney could not contain his emotions as he poured out his grief during the interment service. *So what was wrong with me? Why wasn't I grieving like they were?*

I was taking strong pain meds while still suffering with injuries. The injuries healed, the meds were trimmed back, and the novelty of staying home from work every day wore off. It took about a year; then all hell broke loose inside of me. While Lynn was processing and healing, I was heading off in the opposite direction.

My anger and resentment toward God began slowly as I read scripture after scripture of God's promises—promises that apparently didn't apply to us. Why bother asking God for protection or for anything else since He hadn't protected my precious girls. Did I want to continue trusting Him in my life?

“Why me? Why did You take my girls?”

Poring over the scriptures, I came to realize that I had a choice of what to believe about God, whether to believe my own angry and fearful thoughts or to believe the revelation God Himself gave us in His Word. The Bible tells us that God is Love, and that He loves me enough to die for me, which Jesus did on the cross 2,000 years ago.

God's love for me brings me hope that I will again have joy in life, and someday I'll go home to Him and be reunited with my girls.

“The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”

Deuteronomy 33:27 ESV



PAINTING BY LOUANNE KORVER

THAT WOMAN!

LYNN

Lisa's parole officer led Dan and me into the meeting room. For the first time, we were about to lay eyes on **that** woman—the one who took the lives of our daughters Mandie and Carrie. I didn't know what to expect in this meeting. My heart raced. My hands shook.

But for some reason it felt natural for each of us to greet her with a hug. I'll never forget my husband putting his arms around her and breaking down crying. Dan told me later that it may have seemed awkward or unseemly to hold and weep over this woman, but he felt such a sense of relief that after seven years, he was finally meeting the woman who had killed our daughters. He felt no anger, no hatred, just relief. So he cried.

Lisa talked of her new relationship with Jesus and her 12-step recovery process. "I will be making a 'living' amends (Step 9) for the rest of my life," she said, invested in sharing her experience of taking the lives of our two beautiful daughters so "others will not do what I've done."

Soon we were ready to say good-bye. As we walked out of the room, the parole officer spoke up. "I've never seen anything like this, and it happened only because of our faith. We serve a God of reconciliation," he added, including himself in that statement.

That woman is now like a daughter to me, and I know that she will be here for Dan and me no matter what.

"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

Ephesians 4:32 ESV



PHOTO BY HEIDI HEATH GARWOOD

A PICTURE OF FORGIVENESS

LYNN

Jesus Christ is called the cornerstone. This concept is derived from the first stone set in the construction of a building. All other stones will be set in reference to the original, thus determining the position of the entire structure.

You may find it difficult to believe that Lisa and I have a wonderful relationship today. The only reason this could happen is because we have Jesus as the cornerstone of our mutual faith and love for each other. Having received God's love and forgiveness for my own sins enabled me to forgive Lisa.

We've all fallen short of God's design for our lives. Though Lisa's addictions and bad choices killed my daughters, my sins were still grievous in God's eyes. But on the cross, Jesus died to pay for our sins. We wrote to her in prison to share God's love and His offer of forgiveness. We knew she needed a fresh start. Behind those prison walls Lisa did grow in faith and trust in what Jesus did for her on Calvary.

Dan and I grew towards forgiving Lisa, though it took time. First we had to grieve all our losses—not having our girls around, not watching them grow up and marry and have children of their own. Lisa and Dan and I have each had to rebuild our lives. It was amazing and wonderful to receive so much love from family and friends. We often didn't even know the people who offered their friendship and affection. The Scriptures showed Dan and me that God would never leave us or forsake us, and He knows our pain and grief.

“This Jesus is the stone rejected by you builders, which has become the cornerstone.”

Acts 4:11 ESV



CARRIE AND MANDIE. PHOTO BY LYNN WAGNER

BITTERSWEET REMEMBRANCE LYNN

When I look at photos of my sweet girls, I often feel a stab of pain. I miss them so much and wonder what they would be like now. Tears come next and regret that I can't have them in my life. There are many other parents who are outliving their dear children and also people who are grieving lost relationships. One of their needs is to be loved and valued. My motivation to reach others with God's love and forgiveness is to help the hurting see how valuable and loveable they are to their Creator.

I can tell you this life without my daughters is bittersweet. One day I fully enjoy each moment and the next I miss them terribly. Those are the times when I look deep into their eyes in a photo and try to soak up their very essences.

Mandie was quiet and sometimes shy, yet so creative. She decorated her room with all the milk mustache ads. They lined the walls! She was very particular about how she looked each day, sometimes making her friends wait for her to walk to school.

Carrie was expressive, wearing her feelings out in the open and had pictures of kittens decorating her bedroom wall. She so wanted a boyfriend, she said, "just to hold hands with and go to the Boardwalk together."

Yes my girls were unique and precious to God. They will never be duplicated and neither will any of us. This life still holds many blessings for me—and for you, as well.

"...But collect for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don't break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Matthew 6:19 ESV



This mother's
heart

GRIEF DEMANDS AN ANSWER

LYNN

And sometimes there isn't one.

It still hurts just like it was yesterday. Grief does not know time. It is not linear. Pain sometimes feels endless. Special days like Mother's Day trigger waves of sadness that still wash over me and surprise me.

Acceptance pulls the cover off the hurt and helps me to see there is still life and love beyond loss.

Bittersweet.

I know the love of Mandie's and Carrie's friends who wrote to me after the girls died. I hear the sound of my daughters' voices in those letters of love. They are now women with children of their own. I feel sad when I realize my girls will never grow up and have children—my grandchildren. But God is good. He's given me a sweet little girl to baby sit, and she calls me Gramma Lynn!

Joy. Sadness. Joy. Sadness.

They can exist together in my heart because of Jesus.

I know the only answer for grief is to press through it. Feel it all. Eventually, the joy sneaks back, one tear at a time.

"But the people who trust the Lord will become strong again. They will rise up as an eagle in the sky; they will run and not need rest; they will walk and not become tired."

Isaiah 40: 31 ESV



FORGIVENESS IS DAUNTING

LYNN

“Forgiveness is daunting,” said Brennan Manning, American author, priest, and public speaker who died in 2013. “The ungraced human will does not have the capacity for it. Only reckless confidence in a Source greater than ourselves can empower us to forgive the wounds inflicted by others.”

So true! God measured out and gifted a ton of grace to us, thanks to the prayers of many throughout our years of grief and pain. In fact, only the Lord knew our extreme need. He made it possible for us never to have to appear in court.

Lisa pleaded guilty—“because I am,” she said.

Dan and I forgave because God wanted us to. After all, He forgave us our sins. We can’t have our girls but we have found joy again through relationships with many wonderful people.

I became open to God’s perfect plan for me—to a new and full life, and I am living it now. I am happy, and Dan and I are closer than ever. We did not want to suffer for the rest of our lives with Post-Traumatic Embitterment Disorder.

Mark Twain once said, “Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.”

“But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”

Ephesians 4:7 ESV



PHOTO BY DAN WAGNER

PLAN B

LYNN & DAN

There was no “Plan B.”

This was God’s “Plan A” all along.

How do we live without our beautiful daughters?

How do we make our lives be part of Plan A?

According To His Purpose.

*“For you were called to this, because Christ also suffered for you,
leaving you an example, so that you should follow in His steps.”*

1 Peter 2:21 ESV



PHOTO BY LYNN WAGNER

For me moving forward after losing my dear daughters took courage and God's guidance and encouragement. In the scriptures Dan and I see a lot of promises, and I see a picture of the God who created me and loves me.

We needed to know God, as he truly is, not as we had wanted Him to be. Patiently He loved us as we cried and yelled at Him, "What were you thinking?" His love came through the support we received, even from strangers. Also through stories of others who survived the loss of a child I could see how real God was to them. Others had made this difficult journey and survived! I knew then I was not alone.

One day during the first year of our grief while standing in my kitchen, I felt a wave of hope wash over me.

Dan and I were going to be okay.

This life I now have is my assignment from God. I still feel sad but I have joy as well. Dan and I realized at some point that this life is NOT all about us and our wants. But we do have a role in pointing others to the God who forgave us and forgave Lisa. No, this life is not easy nor comfortable but we have purpose and blessings too.

We encourage you to read the Book of John in the Bible and ask God to reveal himself to you.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart; lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight."



PHOTO BY HEIDI HEATH GARWOOD

LIVING AMENDS

LISA

It was a blur until the intake at the county jail when the investigator told me I had invoked my rights. He stood me up and slammed me against a wall of lockers and shouted, “You just killed two teenagers, and if I have anything to do with it, you will never breathe fresh air again!”

I was in shock. I had just killed two people? How could that be? I never thought I was hurting anyone else by my drinking and drugging. All I could think of was my kids. They had been in the car with me. I knew God was the only way out of this.

Up to that point my life had been a full-time party—to avoid feeling, to avoid having to communicate how sad I felt all the time. After the accident I couldn’t sleep or eat, still in disbelief that I had killed two young adults.

While out on bail awaiting trial, I went to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings. I could feel people pointing at me and judging me. I pled guilty because I was guilty. The judge sentenced me to seven years in prison. I worked the 12 steps with my sponsor over the phone, and then I started to help the other broken souls in prison with me. I read a book that told me to look at myself in the mirror each day and say, “I love you, Lisa.” I couldn’t do it, though I tried for months. Then one day a fellow inmate approached me. “You finally did it. You kept eye contact with yourself.”

I met Lynn and Dan for the first time face to face with the parole officer. I trusted God to help me know what to say. We felt sick to our stomachs when together. But then we talked about it, and I knew that if I stuck it out the feeling would subside.

This story is not about us, but for others to hear what God has to say to them through our experience. I am no longer focusing on myself or my comfort. My life now is a “living amends” for what I did, and I will continue to serve others and to tell my story with Lynn and Dan at my side.



WALTON
LIGHTHOUSE

WASTED

LYNN & DAN

Yes, Lisa was wasted—as she plowed into the side of our van that day and killed our daughters, Mandie and Carrie.

In the blink of an eye, everything changed forever.

Everything.

Someone early on had told us that God does not waste His children's pain. We are comforted knowing that by telling our story, God has used us to save and touch many people's lives. It may happen some day in Heaven—for all believers—that lines will form with people telling us that they are there because of our testimonies.

If our aim is to bring others to Jesus, then how we respond to suffering is so important to those around us who don't yet know Him.

NOT wasted.

"Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted."

John 6:12 ESV

"You are the light of the world," Jesus said. "But if our light is dim, how will they see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven?"

Matthew 5:14-16 ESV

*“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor.”*

Isaiah 1:1-3 ESV



PHOTO BY HEIDI HEATH GARWOOD

Lynn and Dan Wagner would like to thank their loving family and faith community who never left their side during their time of great tragedy and grief, especially their close friend and pastor, Barney Wiget.

And, of course, their Lord and Savior,
Jesus Christ who had “never left us nor forsaken us.”

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BEAUTY FROM ASHES

They were simply driving home from an event in their hometown. Dan and Lynn in the front. Their teenage daughters, Mandie and Carrie, in the back.

Suddenly a driver broadsided their car. A woman, they later learned, was high on alcohol and drugs. *In an instant Mandie and Carrie were gone—forever.*

How do parents recover from such an experience? How does life ever make sense again? How does one go on?

Dan and Lynn Wagner's story will shake you to the core but also fill you with hope as you read about their journey from rage to forgiveness, from depression and doubt to renewed faith, trust, even joy.



PHOTO BY SHIMUEL THALER

