

A LIFE CHANGING DAY

Cheryl McGuinness, widow of the co-pilot of American Airlines Flight 11, which was flown into the north tower of the World Trade Centre on September 11, shares her inspired mission

CHERYL MCGUINNESS HAS FOUND HOPE AND STRENGTH IN GOD AFTER THE DEATH OF HER HUSBAND,

Tom. The last time she saw him was the morning of September 11, 2001. It started as a typical day for them in their 18-year marriage. He had an early morning flight and kissed Cheryl goodbye. Then, during her devotional time a few hours later, Cheryl kept receiving phone calls from their friends, Chris and Bob, asking how Tom was and his whereabouts.

Finally, Chris told Cheryl that a plane had been hijacked and to turn on the television.

Cheryl tried paging and calling Tom, getting no response on either one. She then tried to call a few other American Airlines pilots to see if they knew what flight Tom was on. When she did finally get through to someone, no one would tell her what was going on. Soon, people started coming to her house with looks of concern on their faces. Then, her pastor came to her house.

Shortly after this, a big, black car drove up to the house, and several men in dark suits came to the door. One of the men told Cheryl that American Airlines Flight 11 had been hijacked, crashed into the World Trade Centre in New York City, there were no survivors, and that Tom had been the co-pilot on that flight. Shock overwhelmed her, and she felt as though her heart had been ripped out. She had to hold onto her pastor's arms to keep from collapsing.

As she cried, she realised she had to tell her teenage children, Jennifer and Tommy, what had happened. Her friends, Jeff and Vickie, brought Cheryl to the school. At the principal's office, Cheryl told her children: "Jesus has called Daddy home." They then clung to each other and cried. Though it was comforting to know that Tom was with Jesus, Cheryl wondered how she would survive without him. Friends and family soon heard the news and rallied around Cheryl and the children.

Cheryl remembered one of the last things that Tom told her: "If anything ever happens to me, you have to trust God. God will get you through it. Just surround yourself with loving people, people who know Christ, people who will surround you in Christ-like love."

Even through the worst storms of life, Cheryl has learned that God is there, even orchestrating circumstances throughout our lives.

A VISIT TO GROUND ZERO

Another key lesson that Cheryl learned was about forgiveness, especially for the terrorists, which she believes is very important. The first time Cheryl had to deal with forgiveness was when she went to the World Trade Centre to participate in the Victim Compensation Fund on July 8, 2002. When she finally arrived at Ground Zero, Cheryl felt overwhelmed. Thoughts flooded her about how the events might have unfolded that day. She looked into the pit where the remains of the



building once stood. As she gazed at the ruins, her eyes fixed on the only steel structure left standing. It was in the shape of a cross. She kept looking from the pit to the cross and her eyes focused on the cross. She said, "Lord, they killed my husband." She saw herself at the foot of the Cross. She felt like God was telling her to forgive the terrorists who did this. She asked Him why. She felt like the Lord told her, "Because I forgave you." Cheryl didn't necessarily want to, but from then on she made a commitment to actively forgive the terrorists for what they did to Tom and to the nation. She felt as though she were kneeling at the base of the Cross, guilty of her own offenses against God and others, with God's forgiveness of her. At that moment she felt gratitude for what Christ did on the Cross for the sins of humanity, and she felt that she would be reunited with Tom someday. She also realized that she had a choice to forgive the evil of 9/11 and the pain it caused her or remain in hatred. She chose to forgive.

From this commitment her perspective grew. She was determined to share Christ's love and forgiveness with others. She had a new vision to lead her children and minister to others. She learned that we must apply God's forgiveness—we must do it ourselves. We must live out God's truths. After she left New York City, God granted more opportunities for her to speak publicly about forgiveness.

Today Cheryl can honestly say she has forgiven the terrorists. She still struggles, but she understands God and loves Him more. She wants to be an encourager for anyone, but she mainly has a heart for women. God's concepts of compassion, mercy, trust, obedience, love and mercy are no longer just words, but a reality to her. The tragedy of 9/11 has brought Cheryl a new revelation of who God is and His ways. What she wants people to see through her experience is that her relationship with God is different. The challenge through tough times is to ask yourself, *What does God want you to do with the difficulty?* A person has to love God more than the difficulty or human emotions.

FOCUS ON THE FEAST

Where do we go from there? It is easy to slip back and focus on what happened, but what helps Cheryl move on is to celebrate all that He has

given to us and know that He is preparing more blessings for tomorrow. "It can be easy to focus on what we don't have or what we lost. Only when we focus on the eternal perspective and try to see everything from God's eyes can we go on with life," she says. When she struggles with what she doesn't have, she focuses on and celebrates all that God has given her. This, Cheryl says, takes training and discipline, but the more she focuses on God and what she has in Him, the more that she can see that what God offers is more than what she desires.

CHERYL'S TESTIMONY

Cheryl grew up in a Catholic home. She went to a Christian camp with a girlfriend at the age of 13. A young man witnessed to Cheryl at camp and she accepted the Lord. Though she accepted the Lord, she continued to have a shallow, religious


- ◉ knowledge of God and not a more personal relationship.

She met Tom when she was a sophomore and he was a senior in high school. They married four years later. When they married, they had similar values and religious beliefs; they went to church on Sunday. After a few years into their marriage, they both had more of a hunger for God.

Tom didn't have a 'formal' salvation experience, but after extensive study of the Bible, he just believed that God's message was true.

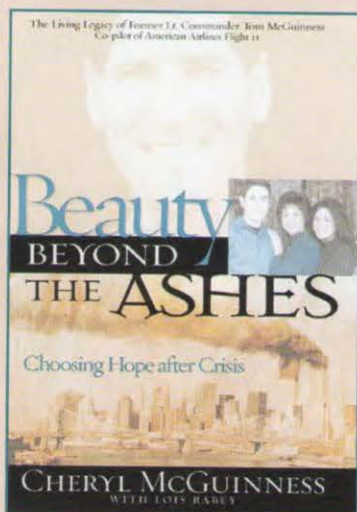
Throughout the rest of their lives together, God was the centre and priority of the McGuinness family. Tom's legacy to his children was passing on godly principles and character. Though it has been tough, Cheryl, Jennifer and Tommy have chosen hope after

crisis. Jennifer is in college and Tommy is in high school. He is taking flying lessons and hopes to go to flight school. Through the crisis of 9/11, their faith in God has strengthened them, their family relationship is even more solid and they are each growing personally.

"As Jesus rose, we can rise, too. The ashes from September 11 have been made new in the Lord," says Cheryl. 

Cheryl McGuinness will also be a speaker at the Beauty for Ashes women's conference, to be held on 19-21 May / 26-28 May 2006 at Good News Conference Centre, Honeydew, Johannesburg. For more information, please call Cathy on (011) 918 7549 or 083 656 1474, email: info@beautyforashes.co.za or visit www.beautyforashes.co.za

...helping children deal with loss



In her book *Beauty Beyond the Ashes: Choosing Hope after Crisis* (Howard Publishing), Cheryl McGuinness discusses principles of dealing with loss in the context of faith. Here's an excerpt from Chapter Seven.

MANY PEOPLE ASK ME, "What advice do you have for parents who are helping their children deal with loss?" Of course, my own experience involves the death of my children's father. But most of what I've learned can apply to

other kinds of loss, too. Here are four points:

other kinds of loss, too. Here are four points:

1. TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. I've learned that I can't give what I don't have. If I'm physically exhausted, emotionally spent and spiritually drained, I can't be of any help to my children. But where does a single mom find the time to take care of herself? That's the question I struggle with as I try to balance the speaking requests I receive with the needs of my kids. I feel called to take advantage of the opportunities that God is giving me to share my story and of course, I need to provide financially for our family. At the same time, I need to be present for my children.

I've learned to ask questions such as, "Do I really need to do this?" "Can I drop this activity?" "How can I slow down and enjoy this day?" "When can I schedule a physical with my doctor?" "When can I get some time away with the Lord?" The answers

to these questions have required some creativity on my part and a willingness to think outside the box and change the way I've been doing things. I've had to be deliberate about plugging time into my schedule just for me. I used to think that doing something meaningful and nurturing for myself required setting aside a big chunk of time. Now I know that even a little time to myself is helpful. An hour sitting in a beautiful spot with nothing to do but rest is wonderful. So is taking a walk on the beach or soaking in a bubble bath. And this may sound like an old song, but I've found it helpful to get back to the basics of eating well and exercising. I'm back to working out most mornings and I feel much better for it.

2. BALANCE YOUR OWN NEEDS WITH THE NEEDS OF YOUR CHILDREN. There's a delicate balance between caring for yourself in a healthy way and caring for yourself in a way that neglects the needs of your children. As I learned with Jennifer and Tommy, their loss was as great as mine, and its impact was multiplied by their youth. They didn't have the resources of maturity I had to deal with the pain. They relied on me to be their source of strength and support.


That's why, in the early days after 9/11, I declined invitations to be a guest on various talk shows. I felt strongly that my children needed me to be at home with them more than I needed to be on television. They needed the security of my presence to help

them adjust to a loss they could not understand.

3. TEACH YOUR CHILDREN TO HAVE AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE. For children, the loss of a parent is devastating. That's why it's vital for kids to understand the difference between physical death and eternal spiritual life. From the beginning, I tried to teach Jennifer and Tommy to have an eternal perspective—the kind that looks beyond the grave and sees heaven. The loss of a loved one who knows Jesus, is only a temporary loss! Tommy and Jennifer know they will see their dad again in heaven. Anticipating that reunion gives them great joy.

4. PROVIDE STRUCTURE. After a loss, life is chaotic. I know. Months go by with little thought of re-establishing a normal

routine. Eventually any anticipation of a return to normal is replaced by the realisation that your family will never again be normal the way it used to be. A new normal has to evolve.

As I began to heal from my grief and pain, I began to establish a new normal for Jennifer, Tommy and me. Part of that new normal involved establishing new routines and a new structure for the family. I didn't try to replicate life as it used to be, but I did fondly incorporate the past in the context of an evolving present. I realised we were still a family—a new family with new challenges and new opportunities. The new routines and structure provided security for Jennifer and Tommy as they struggled to feel safe in their new world. 

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