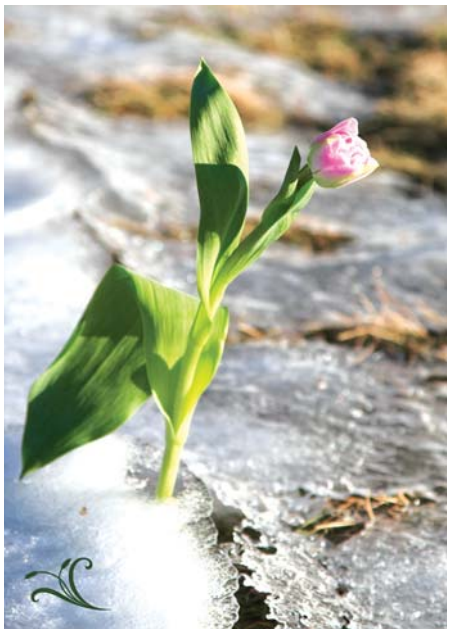
A NEW YEAR

BY MIV LONDON



The holiday season has passed, and we have entered a new year. For those of us who are grieving, the meaning of this season has changed. It is no longer a season of carefree celebration, but instead a period of reflection, remembering, profound sadness if our loss has been recent, or a bittersweet combination of joyful memories and tearful missing if enough time has passed.

I hope that all who read this have found some moments of peace, love, and joy in this holiday time. For me, it has been a mixture of sweetness and pain. This is my second holiday season without my daughter Sara, who died 17 months ago at age 19. The loss of a loved one is always followed by a period of shock, which gives way gradually and unevenly to the painful work of grieving the loss. The larger the loss, the greater and longer lasting the shock. I am finding that midway through my second year of loss, the shock is still wearing off. Although I feel that I'm beginning to get my balance back, the underlying grief continues to surface strongly and suddenly and then to recede slowly into a foggy place in my awareness.

Lately I've noticed that there are periods of time when I feel better. I have more energy, I am increasingly more invested in my work, and enjoying the company of friends without feeling so easily exhausted. I still have teary times each day, but it feels softer than it used to. But then, seemingly

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out of nowhere, another huge wave of grief surfaces, catches me off balance, and sends me back to square one. It's as if I just heard the news of Sara's death for the first time. The pain in my heart is intense and overwhelming, and the tears won't stop. But then it's over, and I'm left a little bit shaky, but able to go on, to be present with my loved ones, to focus on taking care of myself and doing what needs to be done.

The holiday season brings with it more times like this. For me, having a couple weeks off work means more time for self-reflection and fewer opportunities to distract myself from my grief. Add to that the pressures of family interactions at the holidays, the short, dark days, the gray skies, the sluggishness of having gotten slightly off track with healthy eating and exercise...it's no wonder that this is a harder time. Winter is here, and its slow dark days are a time for mourning. If only we can give ourselves the time and the space to go inward with gentleness toward ourselves. It is a time to feel our feelings, to long for those we have lost, to weep, to feel with tenderness the desolation in our hearts. It is also a time to have faith that this is just a season, and that as sure as spring will follow winter, our tears will in time heal and open our hearts to wisdom, compassion, and joy we can't imagine in these difficult days.

I wish peace and healing to each of you, and to your families and loved ones.

Blessings,

Miv

Miv London writes an online blog for the Grief and Loss Corner of the UVM Counseling Center. Her thoughtful insights and reflections on loss can be found at http://mlondon.blog.uvm.edu. If you have any questions or comments, please email mivlondon@uvm.edu.

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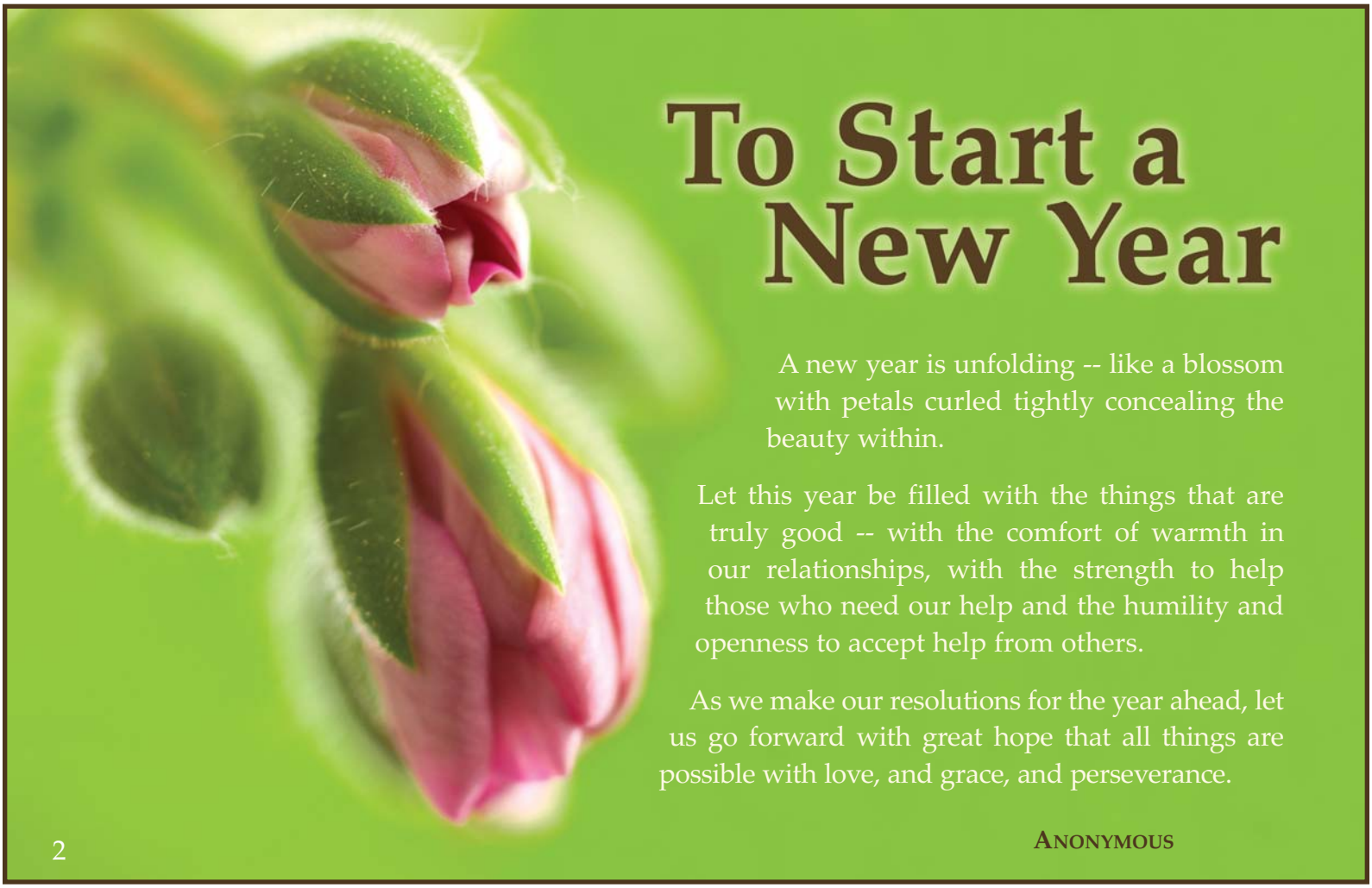


To Start a New Year

A new year is unfolding -- like a blossom with petals curled tightly concealing the beauty within.

Let this year be filled with the things that are truly good -- with the comfort of warmth in our relationships, with the strength to help those who need our help and the humility and openness to accept help from others.

As we make our resolutions for the year ahead, let us go forward with great hope that all things are possible with love, and grace, and perseverance.

ANONYMOUS

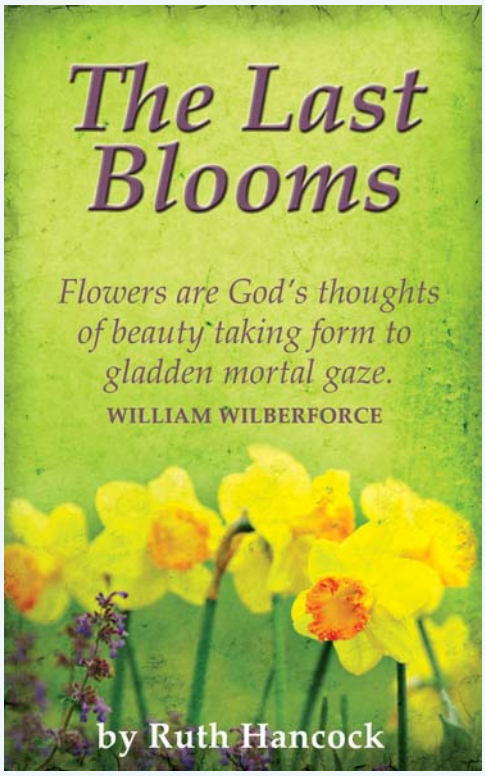
A family emergency precipitated my move back to my hometown. I hadn't even had time to renew my high school friendships when I received a call from my hospice-volunteer coordinator. "I hope you've had time to get settled. I have a lady who desperately needs your help."

I was stunned to learn that the lady was Ginny. We'd been the best of friends all through high school and college, but, except for brief notes on occasional Christmas cards, we'd lost touch over the years. We were both in tears from the moment I walked through her front door. Our first days together were flooded with the constant chatter of "remember when" flashbacks. We used to say we were closer than sisters, and we found out we still were. But she wouldn't discuss her illness. Her life had been an artistic one, boasting many talents, but gardening had been Ginny's main love. She was reputed to have the most imaginative garden in town.

"Working with plants and flowers is when I feel closest to God," she admitted. "Each bloom represents a message of love from Him. It's very powerful. I miss it so."

During my daily visits, I'd catch Ginny staring out the window. The landscape in its winter sleep looked bleak, with any hope of spring many months away. Crocus and tulips, already planted, would never bloom in time. From Ginny's faraway gaze, I knew she was mentally seeing her perfect garden as it once was: rare flowers meticulously planted in raised beds and winding brick paths edged with breathtaking colors. She confided, "Flowers feed my spirit."

According to her doctor, Ginny had less than three months to live. As her hospice volunteer and friend, I wanted so to help her deal with, yet distract her from, her impending death. So I began making phone calls, contacting old friends and becoming reacquainted with Ginny's life. On the morning my



plan went into action, our conversation had been as dull and lifeless as the dreary winter day. Then a beautiful box was delivered, wrapped in extraordinary paper that shone like a burst of sunshine. I took it on to her, feigning ignorance. "Sweetheart, this just arrived. It looks interesting and valuable. Wonder what it is?"

Ginny struggled with renewed energy to sit up. Her eyes glowed as she manipulated the gold foil seal on the front of the box. "It's from Gus, my old friend, the German-nursery man. Because of him, I won the Most Beautiful Garden award in the city contest." With a giggle, she continued. "I'll just have to force myself to open it right away. That Gus is an absolute expert, and his timing on when to plant is always perfect."

She eagerly opened the box and went completely quiet as she read the card. I could see the rough edges of bulbs inside the box.

"What are they?" I asked innocently.

With a rush of tears, she held the card out for me to read. *Ginny, plant these daffodils immediately, and I promise you they will bloom in time. In admiration, Gus*.

I remembered my initial conversation with Gus. "Bulbs will be the perfect answer. They can be forced to bloom. Nothing else can beat the clock."

"Oh, let's hurry and plant these today," she said. "I have the perfect container in the loveliest color of bluish white. It was my grandmother's."

I had just finished planting the bulbs into the antique bowl when the doorbell rang. Ginny's friends had followed Gus's instructions to the letter. As each visitor arrived bearing her gift, the bedroom slowly filled with a variety of lovely vases and urns; each one labeled, perfect for the bulbs it contained, many of them already showing fresh growth and promise. The miracle of nature would allow her to watch the bulbs sprout fragile green as they warmed to the light and then slowly reveal their individual beauty in a burst of blooms! The spring blossoms would share their charm, bringing their fragrance and color back into Ginny's darkened world. By the look on her face, I knew she felt as treasured as her gifts.

In a burst of enthusiasm, she cried, "Oh, I can't wait until they bloom!" As she settled into her pillows, gazing around the room she whispered, "These last blooms -- they will be my most beautiful garden ever -- and I'll feel closer than ever to God."

From Chicken Soup for the Caregiver's Soul

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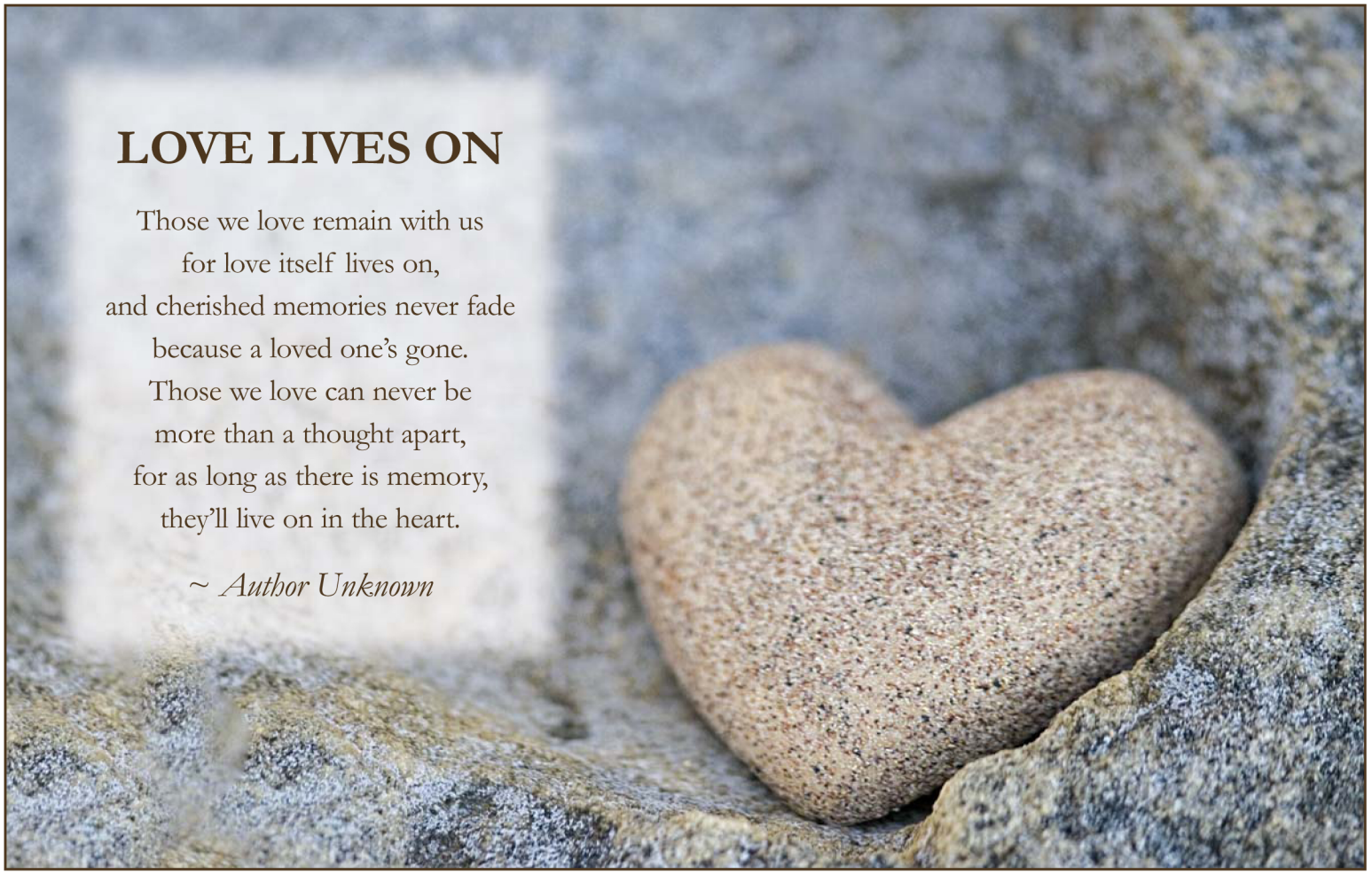

LOVE LIVES ON

Those we love remain with us
for love itself lives on,
and cherished memories never fade
because a loved one's gone.
Those we love can never be
more than a thought apart,
for as long as there is memory,
they'll live on in the heart.

~ *Author Unknown*

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If you have enjoyed this reading, please let us know! We'd love to provide you with additional grief materials and resources to help you cope during this difficult time. If you would like more information, or if you would like to speak to someone who can assist you with filing for veterans' benefits, Social Security and insurance benefits, or who can help you prepare your own or a loved one's funeral plans in advance, please reply to this email, and a funeral home representative will contact you shortly. We sincerely hope that we have been able to brighten your day with this edition of *Stepping Stones*. Please don't hesitate to let us know if there is anything we can do to assist you.

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