

Preview of *William & Wendell: A Family Remembered*

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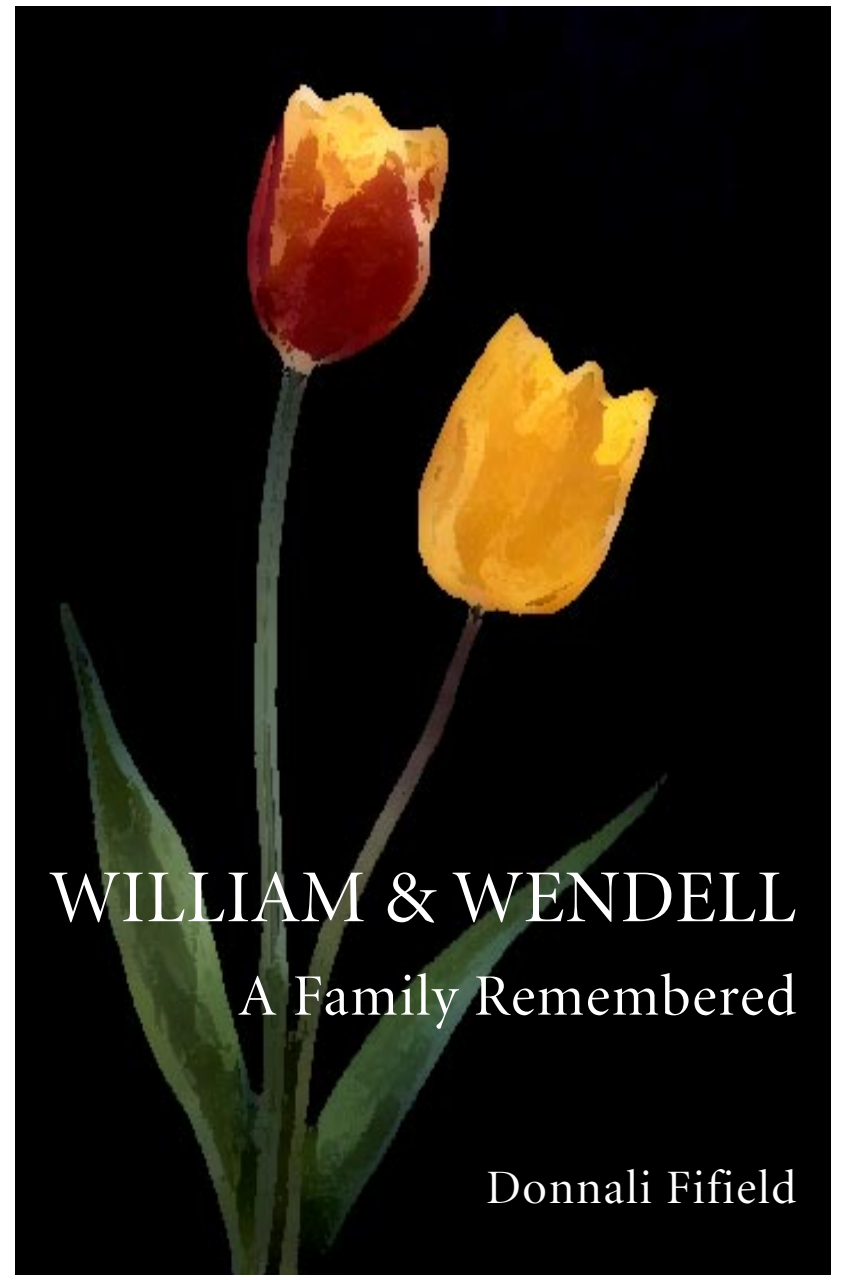
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WILLIAM & WENDELL

A Family Remembered

Donnali Fifield

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“Are you sitting down? I have some bad news.”
Cancer? Was he terminally ill? Did my mother or brother have an accident?

“Last night, John Lawrence killed his family and then himself.”

I let out a cry. “But why did he have to take the girls?”

“Because he probably didn’t want to go alone.”

That call, between my father and me, was at 11:30 a.m. on November 17, 1987. On the previous night, a thunderstorm shook Little Rock, downing trees and power lines, flooding streets, and masking the crackle of gunshots that would destroy my family.

My half brother, John Lawrence Markle, my father’s son with the actress Mercedes McCambridge, first shot his wife, Christine, then went to the room where his two young daughters, scared by the storm, had gone to sleep in the same bed. He used a handgun to kill Amy, who was thirteen, and then Suzanne, his nine-year-old. Afterwards he went downstairs to his study, wrote a two-line note saying he was responsible for the murders, called his lawyer to come over because of an emergency at the house, put a gun on each side of his head, and pulled both triggers.

Three weeks later my father died of a heart attack, brought on by grief and stress.

Their deaths were the first in a series of tragedies. In 1990, I lost both of my twin boys, William and Wendell, born prematurely. As I mourned each loss in turn, I was introduced to grief and to the uneasiness with which people react to it. Often, their words made me feel worse. I especially resented the battalion of recovery language—*heal, let go, move on, move forward*—that pushed me into the future without giving me a tie to the past.

Friends and relatives expected me to recover within days, then go on as if the deaths hadn’t changed me. But as hard as I tried, I found I could not be happy and move on. Grief had become part of the landscape. I was more used up than before, more aware of limits since I had not been able to save my family.

When I read the literature on grief, I discovered nothing on multiple bereavement or on the effect of twin loss on a twin. I am a twin myself, and my boys’ deaths had changed my own identity as a twin. I’d noted specific ramifications for the other deaths as well, but I kept reading loss treated as a discrete episode with a generic resolution. The books left out crucial variables. The extent of grief depends on the cause of death, the kinship, and the desire for continued attachment. Personality type helps determine how someone reacts to loss. The level of identification also plays a role, as does the resurgence of prior traumas. The grief counseling texts, based on therapy, delved only into a fraction of the experience but nevertheless asserted a wholesome recovery. Therapeutic concepts, which have largely replaced religious doctrines as the way to handle grief, have substituted one restrictive convention for another. In this book, I mixed autobiography and analytical reflection with two aims: to record the impact of consecutive losses and to challenge the theory of resolution—and what it has saddled on the bereaved: the duty to attain healing.

I wrote, in part, to give solace to anyone who feels inadequate because of the current expectation of recovery. The problem is with the theory, not with you.

Book after book recommended catharsis as the method to achieve closure. The literature, most of it by therapists, used terms such as working through, resolving, and overcoming grief. The books spoke of grief as a healing, purposeful, cathartic process ending with resolution if a person grieved fully. At first, I didn’t understand why these books bothered me. Gradually I saw that their assumption of healing had turned into an expectation. Because of it, I think, many people feel even worse after a loss. At a time when they least need stress,

others pressure them to recover and they hold themselves to the same criterion. The spread of psychological ideas, via television and other cultural outlets, means that they often become simplified and accepted as true. In my opinion, venting emotions doesn't resolve grief; it eases it. The narrow framework of a healthy resolution implicitly sets up a right way to grieve, and its premise contradicts many people's experience. Yet the guides to grief reiterate it. Frustrated, I wrote this book to suggest a different perspective.

Although the focus is on loss, I include memories of wonderful times, too. I write about my childhood in St. Rémy-de-Provence in southern France. One of the book's themes is the importance of valuing the past and each person's individual life history in all of its aspects.

The themes, carried forward and expanded throughout the book, are linked together by a narrative voice. I used this approach to develop the book's central ideas. With each loss, the tenets of religion and of therapy grew less valid, and I wanted to convey a sense of process until I reached my own conclusions on how to live after the traditional solutions broke down. I also chose to write in the first person to duplicate the telling of a story. A personal account parallels the companionship of peer counseling and support groups. Both provide a reprieve from the isolation of grief without imposing expectations. Loss is a common struggle in which no one has the right answer. Too often, well-meaning friends, clergy, and therapists—who have not had the same loss themselves—give advice, attempting to guide when the best response is to respect loss by simply acknowledging it.

Grief books only touch on these comments. Few discuss the social dimension of loss, even though platitudes and condolences that muzzle grief heighten the distress. I describe why they alienate. Readers can consider the thoughts and emotions I put forward and contrast them with their own experience. As in peer support, I don't try to give answers but relief. In my darkest years, I would have relished a book that had skewered religious and therapeutic homilies. Subversive humor unites people who have suffered a loss. By it, I hoped to let readers share a knowing laugh—and more: a moment of understanding. Poking fun

at the pressure to recover, love God, and be good—a pitch to get on with life is really a pitch to get grief out of sight—encourages them to feel less alone and confused by dismissive advice. This recognition allows them to trust their own experience, namely, that a loss has permanent and profound consequences and that there is not one right way to grieve but many individual, highly complex responses possible.

In the final chapters, I sum up the ideas in the book, and I advance my own response to loss. One was to integrate grief. Its legacy influences the present and connects me to my father and children. I see the past as creating a mosaic with every experience reverberating with every other. The variety of grief reactions reflects different personal and cultural backgrounds. Rather than urging people to recover, an attitude that often seems to disavow the past, a less stressful approach is to appreciate how their experiences contribute to the wealth of personalities and outlooks.

My other response was to write. Mourners have always felt set apart. Still, the insistence on recovery and the taboos surrounding death, as if it were a failure, a rent in our illusion of control, have intensified the isolation. By writing, I tried to give my particular losses a tribute that would commemorate them and at the same time express ideas and feelings that would reach out to a community of readers.

The advice to get over grief hurts, I think, because it denigrates the reality of a loss. Being told how to feel silenced my emotions. Even more painful, it dismissed my losses. If I was supposed to get over the deaths quickly, then the deaths themselves must not deserve much notice. One of the yearnings after a loss, though, is to feel that a connection still exists. This wish gives rise to the hope that the person lives on in spirit, among other attempts to hold on to those who are gone. While I did not believe my family lived on in any way, I longed for a link to them, and seeing them so soon consigned to oblivion deepened their absence. What remained of them? They had disappeared, leaving a blank. Since I was being advised to move forward, as if their lives had left no trace, I had to grapple with the questions of meaning and mortality in a void.

In addition, I had to keep grief invisible. The pressure to recover coincided with the lack of mourning customs. Coming to terms with death is always difficult, but perhaps it is harder and lonelier now since there is no form to give a loss significance. Nothing to mark it and make it real. Without observances, sanctioned codes of behavior, or time allowed for grief, mourning has passed from a socially acknowledged event into a private, hidden, almost shameful matter.

The shift from the public to the emotional sphere has made grief the province of psychologists. But their influence, I believe, has added another, more subtle burden by converting grief from a fundamental human experience into a therapeutic process whose goal is to overcome the loss.

After my twins died, I read a number of grief books, searching for an answer to my losses, but none of the books explored the spiritual bewilderment after a death or dealt with repeated tragedies. Some had formulas for recovery, which reduced grief to a workable, rational program. The plans presented healing according to therapeutic principles. Not one book examined the concept of resolution itself. Allowing yourself to feel grief gives you some release; however, the waves of melancholy and anger that recur after a loss are normal. It took me a long time to realize that I would not get over the deaths in my family—and that there wasn't anything wrong with me because I didn't.

After more than four anxious years because I hadn't recovered, as everyone urged me to do and as I read in every grief manual, I understood that what I felt was natural and legitimate. On some days the sadness, depression, and anger would manifest themselves less than on other days, but they were like groundwater, always below the surface, always ready to bubble up. I would not prevail over these emotions; the best I could do was to be aware of them, control as much as possible the factors that aggravated them, and accept to live with a new, wearier reality that incorporated loss.

Unlike the theory, I am learning that a trauma has continual and unpredictable consequences. Far from being resolved, it seems to

infiltrate every facet of life. What happened to my family was extreme. But when I listen to the stories of others, I realize that my experience has differed in degree but not in kind from theirs. I haven't met anyone who has "gotten over" a tragedy. Most manage as they can and create a future despite it, but the loss gets woven through them like a vine.

Years later, they still feel pain. Reacting to the psychic damage may steer a life in new directions, inspiring beneficial changes, or it may lead to disillusioned rage, or to a combination of the two outcomes occurring simultaneously. Each response has integrity, and is as likely a result.

The image of a bright, positive resolution, therefore, produces guilt. Once, church teachings explained suffering as purification. Believers had to accept a test from God with faith and a submissive attitude. The psychological understanding of grief has supplanted this belief. A soul is no longer perfected by suffering, but through catharsis, a purging of the emotions, mourners can free themselves of anger and the other bitter feelings that surface after a death. The therapeutic ideal has instituted a different standard of behavior, with an equally abstract view of mankind: emotional health is as rare as sainthood, and just as hard to come by. Advocating a curative recovery, without taking into account complicated, long-term responses, denies the depth of a loss. When a child dies, or a parent, or anyone essential, it layers life afterward with a knowledge of vulnerability and with a consciousness of the person's absence, a longing that is repeatedly evoked and modified by new events.

Furthermore, the purpose underlying the experts' advice, to grieve in order to recover, increases the ambivalence of grief. While I did not want to suffer, I also did not want to recover from the relationships that had caused that suffering. The therapeutic model doesn't address this tension or offer a way to bridge past and present.

After I started to think of grief as part of life, rather than as something to be gotten over, I felt less pressure to put the tragedies behind me. Integrating the past, instead of purging and overcoming it, also maintained the only bond I had left with my family: memory.

I hope this book will provoke a reassessment of contemporary grief theory, including its social and philosophical implications. And I hope, as you read it, you will find reassurance in what I have written, comfort in the similarities, and—where there are differences—comparisons with your own experience. Ultimately, each interpretation of grief becomes personal, qualified by the circumstances and by the peculiarities of distinctive temperaments, beliefs, and family histories. So, this is one story, with one set of conclusions drawn from it. And one form to make loss visible.

Sample chapter from *William & Wendell: A Family Remembered*

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