

A special reprint
of Chapter 4



MY LIVING WILL

A Father's Story of Loss & Hope

An Excerpt From:

My Living Will

A Father's Story of Loss & Hope

Chapter 4 Reprint

John Trautwein

Foreword by Joe Girardi

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Chapter 4

Heaven's "Catch"

It was still quite early in the morning, and I was not sure what to do next. I needed to call the office. I needed to call Mark Oldfield, my good friend and the CEO of the company I work for, Source Support Services, a global IT services company. I'm the president, and together, Mark and I make up the executive team of this small business we've run together since I joined up with Mark in 2003, in the company's third year. Source Support is a successful small company with a family-oriented approach, and Mark and I have been like brothers for years. I called him on his cell, but it immediately went to voice mail. So I called his home and his wife, Tricia, answered.

"Hi Tricia, it's John. Can I speak with Mark, please?" I'm sure Trisha must have thought that was weird. Normally I would have spoken with her, asked her how she was, how the kids were, but today I couldn't. She sweetly and happily said, "Sure, John, just a sec," and handed Mark the phone. "Hey, Johnny, what's up?" Mark had a bounce in his step. Later that day, the four of us were going to head down to Piedmont Park in Atlanta to watch the Eagles in concert. We both were talking excitedly about it just twenty-four hours before. I'm sure Mark thought I was calling about that. He had absolutely no idea his world would soon be turned upside down.

"Mark," I said, "I have some awful terrible news. Will killed himself last night." Once again that morning I heard the shock. Mark yelled, "No, John, no," into the phone. Mark's known Will for years. He saw me pitch whiffle ball to Will in our front yard when we were neighbors all those years ago. He told me he loved me and was on his way.

Within fifteen minutes, he was pulling in my driveway. He sprinted into our house, found me, and just bear-hugged me. Mark was fighting the tears, and I could feel him begin that hyperventilating cry as well. He had such pain in his eyes as he told me he loved me and how much Will loved me. Mark was clearly worried about both Susie and me. His "big brother" instinct had taken over, and although he was crushed about Will, it was *me* he was focusing on—and Susie, too. He was amazing that day. In fact, he was one of those core people who carried me through that day and that weekend. I remember later that weekend telling him, "You're my Clarence,

Mark,” in reference to *It’s a Wonderful Life*, not knowing my Clarence reference would later blossom into so much more.

My sister, Grace, called soon after I’d talked to Mark to tell me she was coming right over. She had heard the news from my dad and immediately gone into “action mode.” She and Mark pulled up in our driveway about the same time, and between the two of them, they basically kept me standing throughout the rest of the day.

I remember when Grace hugged me, her little brother, whom she took care of her whole life, she, too, was hyperventilating and shaking. There was also this incredible strength about her, especially since she saw that Susie and I were staggering. I believe this caused Grace to kick into an instinctive, motherly, big sister role, where she’s always been at her best. Her body language said, “I’m going to get Johnny through this.” She simply took over and led Susie and I back to Karen’s house.

Growing up in Barrington, Illinois, my sister and brother (Dave) and I were extremely close, just as we are today, best of friends. Big sister Grace loved to take care of her two younger brothers. She was at her best when she was taking care of me, caring for me, protecting me, making sure everyone knew her brother was the best. When I was with the Red Sox, she and my mom were tired of hearing about Roger Clemens. To them, *I* was the ace pitcher on that staff, and the other people just hadn’t realized it yet. Thus on the worst day of her brother’s life, she was determined to make sure I was protected. She was there for me, she was tough on me, she was caring for me, she was, well, she was Grace—and I loved her more than ever.

Grace guided us back over to the Macrinas’ home to see the kids. When we arrived, the scene was incredible. There were people everywhere, as the news had spread throughout the neighborhood and the town. Our friends had poured in to comfort us. Old friends, new friends, friends I see every day, and friends I hadn’t seen in years. They were there for us, and they were devastated. I sought out our kids and found them on the couch, crying very hard. Everyone was crying and hugging, and asking, “Why?” No one had a clue, and I mean no one. Tommy was white, and he was sobbing. I hugged him hard, told him it would be okay, that *he* would be okay. Tommy looked into my eyes and said, “Dad, I can’t feel my hands.” I told him to breathe and held him while he was shaking. I was terrified, and once again, I had

absolutely no idea what to do. I asked God to show me what to do. I cried in Tommy's arms with him.

While I was holding Tommy, I noticed our assistant pastor from Johns Creek Presbyterian Church had arrived. We refer to him now as Pastor Neal, but despite the fact we had been members of that church for thirteen years, we didn't know him very well at all. What would transpire in the next five minutes, however, would set the tone and the beginning of our recovery. It would send us on a new beginning, as it paved the way for us to allow true love to take over our lives. The start of a new life, one that would be so different from what we had known. Nothing could ever be the same, but it was a new beginning that we truly needed right then and right there.

He quickly got Susie and me together with the kids. We held hands, and he asked if he could say a prayer. I answered, "Yes, please," and it was such a blessing. We held hands, and Neal began to speak. His voice was quiet but strong, and I noticed it was extremely confident, and to this day, that confidence was as effective as the words themselves. He prayed,

"Dear Lord, we know You are heartbroken with the passing of our brother Will, but we also know You have 'caught' him, and right now he is in Your arms in heaven, and he is okay. Please hold him and love him, and let him know his family is praying for him. We know that Will is safe, and we know that he is without pain, because we know he is with You. Please, Lord, be with all of us today."

I can't remember the rest of the prayer, but here's what I do remember. My kids were captivated by it. I was captivated by it as well. When the prayer started, I was in "concerned father" mode because I thought Tommy was in shock and would need to go to the hospital. But during that prayer, as I held his hands, I felt them stop shaking. The color returned to his face. When the prayer ended, I hugged him and told him I was there for him. He pulled back, looked me in the eyes, and said, "I'm okay now, Dad." I was stunned but so thankful. I immediately turned and looked at Mikey, Holyn, and Susie, and I noticed a small sense of peace after that prayer.

"We also know You have 'caught' him, and right now he is in Your arms."

I think it was that line of the prayer that saved us that morning. It answered the question, “Where is Will, and is he okay?” I later told Neal those words were the most important ones anyone ever spoke to me. God had caught my son. To this day, Neal Kuhlhorst probably does not realize just how important a role he played that morning. It could have been the greatest piece of ministering he ever did.

From that moment on, it was as if love was allowed back into our lives. Our friends were “God’s hands,” and they held us, comforted us, and were there for us. So many people were there, and they just kept coming in. In reality, they were staggering in, as they were in absolute shock. They had no idea what to say, and neither did I. For hours, Susie and I were comforted by so many of our closest friends. So many tears, so much pain and sorrow, coupled with such kindness and emotion. They completely surrounded us with love.

Time crept by slowly that morning, and the effects of the prayer gave way to the pain I felt with each hug and embrace of our friends. This pain in my chest was getting worse. I saw Susie across the room as she consoled a friend. Our eyes met, and we asked each other without speaking “How? Why?” I never had such a feeling of failure in my life. Susie’s tears made my chest pain even more noticeable. I needed to sit down. *How could I let this happen?* I wondered. I had promised Susie I would always make things right; I would give her a life of love and happiness, and put her and the kids first every single day of my life. Now our oldest boy had taken his own life. How could a son of mine not want to live? What had I done? What *didn’t* I do? How could I have let Will and Susie down like this? I sat down and prayed, “God, I have failed at the most important thing that I was ever tasked to do—fathering my son. Forgive me.”

I’ve witnessed so many sunrises and sunsets since I said those words to God, and although every day I remind myself that I loved Will and was a good dad to him, even today, I still ask Will and God to forgive me for failing at the most important role in my life. I know this feeling will be the chains I bear until the day I die. I hope that’s a long time from now, and I hope that because of these chains, I’m perhaps a little nicer, a little more caring, a little more appreciative—a little more like Will. If that’s the case, I can accept carrying these chains.

The morning of October fifteenth was creeping by. My God, I couldn't believe the thoughts racing through my mind. What happened? It was like the past, the present, and the future were all going through my mind at the same time. Somehow, I was processing it, but I couldn't control it. Everywhere around me was sadness, devastation, fear, confusion, and pain, and my mind was in three places at once as I tried to navigate through this fateful morning.

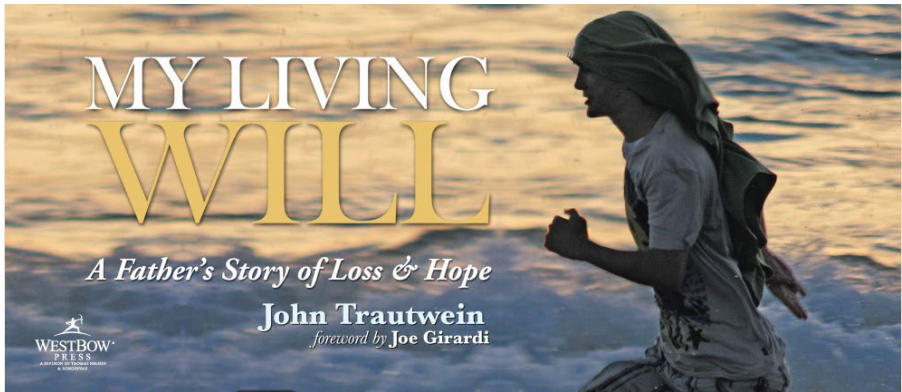
As I continued to stagger through the room, Bill Papciak—a neighbor, friend, and tennis teammate—grabbed and hugged me. But he had a different message for me. “John,” he said, “you have to be strong. We need you to be strong, and your family needs you to be strong. You need to lead them. That's what you do, John.”

Bill's face was almost angry, he was so serious. For the past three to four hours, every person I met had sympathy and pain written across their faces. They were all holding me, telling me, “It's okay, let it go. Let it out. It's okay.” But Bill had a different approach. He was stern, as if picking me up off the floor to tell me what I was doing wrong and what I needed to do. I honestly didn't expect it at all, but I'm so glad he was there that morning.

Bill continued his lecture. “Just yesterday, John, you e-mailed our tennis team and had some funny words of wisdom for us, and for the next hour, thirty e-mails came across from the other members, answering you, following your lead. You are a leader, and that's what you need to be. John, you need to be that now. We need you to be that now!”

Bill was almost coach-like, telling a player to shape up. Then he hugged me again, and we separated. I don't think I said anything. I just walked away, thinking about what he said. *How can I be a leader now?* I wondered. *I can't even stand.*

I later realized my buddy Bill's words were instrumental in getting me through those first hours and days after Will's death and in creating a blueprint for a new type of normal in the days to come.



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Love Ya Man!

John Trautwein
Author of My Living Will

Co – founder of the Will to Live Foundation
5805 State Bridge Rd. #G212
Johns Creek, GA 30097
<https://will-to-live.org/>
Email us at friends@will-to-live.org