

The
Hand
on the
Mirror



The
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Mirror

A TRUE STORY OF
LIFE BEYOND DEATH

JANIS HEAPHY DURHAM



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Excerpt from *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1943.

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For Max



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To love another person is to see the face of God.

Victor Hugo

Les Misérables, 1862



Introduction

This is a story of an unusual personal journey. It's not what you would expect from someone with my traditional upbringing and experience in the hard-edged world of newspapers. It begins with the untimely death of my beloved husband Max Besler in 2004 and follows with a series of extraordinary events that startled me at first, and then intrigued me. Unfolding over eight years, this is a story of my spiritual growth and how my mind gradually opened to realities that I previously would have considered unimaginable. It's a story about love and how love ties us all together in a far more fascinating universe than I ever imagined. In the end, I hope my story will be a source of strength to all who are touched by death, which, of course, is everyone.

The question of what happens after we die has always challenged us. The topic makes us uneasy. Here we are, living active and full lives. Why do we even want to think about death? Then it strikes. We lose someone we love and we are faced with contemplating death and the afterlife. Scientists, theologians, writers, musicians, poets, and artists have all addressed the question directly or indirectly. It is at the core of organized religion's

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belief system, one that I grew up with as a Presbyterian. We believe that when you die you go to heaven. But what exactly is heaven?

If we knew, not just from the faith of our religions, but from modern science, that our consciousness survives after death, it would profoundly affect how we behave. I think it's arguable that this question of whether or not there is an afterlife is the most important question in life. What could be more important? *The Hand on the Mirror* suggests that we continue on in another form after we die. Simply put, life does not end with our physical death. My hope is to open readers' thinking to this possibility.

The most compelling motivation for writing *The Hand on the Mirror* was the potential to encourage people to talk openly about their experiences of communicating with a loved one after the loved one has passed. I also hope this book will provide readers with not only an emotional framework but also an intellectual foundation of legitimacy for those conversations. These discussions should be out in the open, free of constraint. As a society we could benefit from eliminating the stigma associated with sharing personal stories about the afterlife, including those that involve the supernatural, as mine do.

Fear of embarrassment was a significant part of my reluctance over the years to write this book. I knew that what I revealed would be provocative, and I obsessed over what my family and friends would think. Of course, I knew they loved me, but I was worried that wouldn't stop them from thinking that my profound grief had affected my judgment. And I was also concerned about my wider circle of friends and associates, particularly those I worked with. I was convinced that the bizarre nature of the events I experienced would be impossible

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for many of these fact-based personalities to accept. Who could blame them? The story is incredible, out of bounds of the normal. And even though there are documenting photographs, people often believe only what they choose to believe, not what may be unbelievable but true.

I know I'm not alone in this fear of being judged. As part of my research, I shared my story and the accompanying photographs with a number of people, and many related to me their experiences with otherworldly events. In fact, they were eager to tell me their stories and sometimes added that they had never shared them with anyone else, in certain cases even their spouses, for fear of how they would be viewed. Learning about their reluctance fueled my courage to come forward.

Most stories have characters, and this one is no exception. You will meet my family, my friends, professors, researchers, psychologists, physicists, spiritual practitioners, and mediums, and a host of other individuals who were part of the journey and pivotal in my investigation. You may be surprised at their similarities of thought, although they are not always expressed with the same language. You will meet a number of key scientific leaders in this field and hear their frustrations in trying to further their exploration. I hope you will come to know them as I have—as fascinating people.

Some technical issues go well beyond my expertise, but I've tried to describe scientific principles and progress in a way that the average reader can understand. My goal in this is to help the scientists and their work get the widespread attention they deserve.

Lasting change is not driven from the top down but from a bottom-up approach. People get behind an idea, and unbelievable things can happen. Abraham Lincoln said it well: "With

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public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed.” If readers can feel safe to share their stories about the survival of consciousness and an afterlife, momentum will build. That will help drive the topic further into the mainstream, perhaps leading to more extensive, accurate, and serious media coverage. With momentum, scientists can explore this field in a properly funded, more open environment. Any contribution this book can make to that momentum will be immensely gratifying to me.

An expanding acceptance of the survival of consciousness and, therefore, life after death has the potential to bring about change in all of us. We’ll live our lives with more emphasis on love and less on fear of loss. And maybe, just maybe, we’ll begin to understand our purpose.

Janis Heaphy Durham

*It is much easier to recognize error than to find truth;
for error lies on the surface and may be overcome; but
truth lies in the depths, and to search for it is not given
to every one.*

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe
1749–1832



*The
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CHAPTER 1

The Hand on the Mirror

On Sunday, May 8, 2005, my reality changed. That was the day I discovered a large handprint on the mirror of a bathroom in my home in Sacramento, California. It was not an ordinary handprint. Seemingly made of a soft, white, powdery substance, it showed all the facets of the bone structure, as if it were an X-ray. Looking closer, I could see it was the hand of a man because of the masculine shape of the fingers and the wide base of the palm. The handprint stood alone, the image affixed to the mirror and perfectly formed. It had appeared out of nowhere. Literally, nowhere.

The day the hand appeared was the first anniversary of the death of my husband, Max Besler. Max had died in the living room of our home surrounded by family and friends. We had been married for four years when he was diagnosed at the age of fifty-six with esophageal cancer. Six months later, he was gone, devastating my fourteen-year-old son, Tanner, and me. We both loved Max very much, and the three of us had blossomed

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as a family. On this Mother's Day Sunday a year later, I was still working through my grief and was concerned about how Tanner was coping with his own sorrow. He was so young and impressionable, and like most young men at that age, he wasn't a big talker. I felt pensive and alert on this one-year anniversary, vigilant in my role as mother and protector.

Tanner and I were sitting together at a small table in our backyard in the early afternoon sun. Tanner split his time between our home in Sacramento and his dad's home in El Dorado Hills, about thirty minutes away. Divorce is never easy, but his dad, Bob Heaphy, and I were committed to keeping Tanner's interests first and foremost in our lives. We had worked hard to provide a steady, dependable schedule for him and assurance in deeds and words that even though he lived in two homes, he was loved and supported fully in both. Max had added to that love. On this significant day, I was comforted to have Tanner, with his short-cropped blond hair and athletic physique, next to me. I loved watching him concentrate on his homework, and I smiled a mother's smile as I noticed his habit of moving his lips while he silently read. I was catching up on my own self-imposed homework—the backlog of reading I faced each weekend in my job. After a while, we decided we were hungry, and I got up from the table to go inside and bring us a snack. Tanner was eating like any healthy teenage boy, meaning nonstop. Besides, the food offered a distraction from the sadness in our hearts on this anniversary.

Our home was designed in a U shape, with the master bedroom suite, Tanner's bedroom, and a den on the left side of the U, and the living room, dining room, and library at the center. On the right side of the U were our kitchen, a guest bedroom suite, a laundry room, and the exit to the garage. Max had spent

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the last month of his life in the guest bedroom instead of our master bedroom because he was more comfortable in a bed by himself, as he was in grave pain. And he insisted I get my sleep since I was working.

Before entering the kitchen to make our snack, I stopped in the bathroom in the guest bedroom suite. That was when I saw the handprint. I knew it was fresh because it hadn't been there when I had combed my hair in front of that mirror an hour earlier. Stunned by the sight, I stood frozen for at least a full minute. I could make no sense of what I saw. At fifty-three years old, I had never experienced anything so completely out of the human realm as this handprint. My eyes were fixed on something unexplainable. My brain was working to catch up with my eyes. Was I losing my mind? Maybe. Had someone snuck into the house to play a trick? Doubtful.

Tanner and I would have seen or heard anyone through the open patio doors. How could a human hand show the transparency of an X-ray? Slowly, my voice started to function, and I managed to shout out the words, "Tanner, come here. Quickly! Hurry!"

"Mom, what's wrong? Are you okay?" he asked.

"Look," I cried out. "You didn't do this, did you?" I was sounding somewhat hysterical to myself at this point.

I knew as soon as the words left my lips that he hadn't made the handprint because he'd been sitting next to me throughout the time we worked together and during the hour since I'd visited the bathroom. Just to double-check, I asked Tanner to hold his right hand up next to the powdery right hand print to see how it compared. I realized how ludicrous it was to think he had made the print. The image was much larger than his hand and shaped differently.

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We both stared at the handprint, speechless and awestruck. Slowly we turned from the image to face each other. Our eyes locked. We knew we were witnessing something astounding, and we were a bit frightened. It was just so strange; we had no idea what it was. Our minds could not comprehend what our eyes were telling us.

“Mom, I don’t get it. What is that?” Tanner asked, turning his eyes back to the mirror.

I thought as carefully as I could before answering him. Reacting dramatically wouldn’t serve either one of us. My maternal instincts kicked in, and I resolved to calm down. I wanted to sound stable and set a good example for him. Children read us more clearly than we often realize, I had learned, and overreacting wasn’t helpful to him—or me, for that matter. But I also knew I had to be honest, and pretending it wasn’t extraordinary was disingenuous.

“I’m not sure what it is, Tanner.”

Then I ventured a question of my own: “Do you think there’s any relationship to Max since it’s the first anniversary of his death?” I knew he loved Max, so he wouldn’t be frightened by the question. I also knew it wasn’t the first time we had witnessed something strange after Max died, but nothing had been remotely close to the shocking nature of this handprint.

“Maybe, but how weird is that? And how could he make it happen if he’s gone, Mom?” Tanner asked.

Of course, I had no answer, only a sense that I needed to remain calm and inquisitive but not emotional. “I guess for now we don’t know, Tanner. Why don’t you take a break and go out to the driveway and shoot some baskets?”

“Okay, Mom, but call me if you need me,” he said, sounding very grown-up.

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I gave him a hug and told him I'd join him outside in a few minutes. I grabbed my camera and took several photographs. I didn't know what this image was, but I did know I had to document it. I should have done more, like get a sample of the powdery substance for analysis or have a forensic examination conducted of the fingerprints. But I was so stunned, it just didn't occur to me.

What did occur to me was the implication of the timing of the handprint. It showed up on the exact date of Max's death, immediately raising the question of whether Max was reaching out to me. Like most wives, I could recall precisely what my husband's hands looked like. The wide palm print on the mirror, juxtaposed with the long, narrow fingers, was reminiscent of the shape of Max's hands.

I didn't have an explanation for the phenomenon, but it certainly didn't fit neatly with the traditions I had been schooled in growing up. As a child, I had been heavily influenced by my father, a Presbyterian minister deeply devoted to God and his faith. But like many people, I had evolved in my thinking as I grew older. Now my faith was not as central to my daily life, so I didn't have a tidy solution for thinking how this handprint might relate to heaven or an afterlife. What I did know was that I was experiencing an entirely foreign dimension. I was baffled by the mystery.

I had to ask myself, could this be a paranormal event? Was this a ghost? Because Max had died in our home, had a part of him remained? Was he visiting me to let me know there was more? Had he figured out a method for contacting me that was nothing short of miraculous? I've always been open in life, and I wanted to be open now. But I was scared, too. Entering the unknown was intimidating.

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From a practical standpoint, I didn't have time to be distracted and frightened. Instead, I compartmentalized the remarkable event, setting it aside for further thought when I could attend to it. After all, I had a son to raise and a job to do. I was overwhelmed with surviving my grief. My life had been ripped apart by Max's death, and it was all I could do to function in my roles as mother and newspaper executive. I cherished those roles. They were what fulfilled me. Succeeding at them was imperative. I could not fail.

My upbringing influenced me, as well, in setting the event aside. My father's role as a minister meant he was a prominent figure in our community. We were taught as children that our personal behavior represented not just ourselves but our family and, by extension, Dad's public position. We were expected to behave accordingly and not draw outside the lines of convention. That example stuck with me as an adult.

Now as publisher and president of *The Sacramento Bee*, in the state capital of California, I was a public figure myself. Our publication was influential not only locally but also statewide and nationally as the flagship of the McClatchy Company newspaper chain. When I was being recruited, I remember a McClatchy executive asking me, "Are you comfortable with lots of public attention?" It wasn't until I was further along in the job that I came to understand the wisdom of that question. My life was naturally under the microscope, and I wasn't about to foster any criticism that could emanate from disclosing such a strange event. So I kept it private.

Not knowing what to do with the handprint after discovering it, I just left it on the mirror until Wednesday, when my housekeeper, Helen Dennis, came to clean on her regular day. Helen had been close to Max and was an enormous help when

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Max was going through his cancer treatments. He and I trusted her and viewed her as family. She was discreet with the details of Max's illness and protected both his privacy and his dignity when he was ill. I walked her into the bathroom before I left for work to show the image to her. I was curious how she'd respond. She was astounded but calm as we stared at the mirror together. We both wondered if this was a sign from Max since it was tied to the anniversary of his death. After a few minutes, I knew I had to get on with my day, so I told her it was okay to go ahead and clean the mirror. I saw no reason to keep it longer than the three days it had been there. Helen later told me that Windex removed the image, but she had to scrub.

So I marched forward in my life. But in my determination to carry on, I could not escape the thought of the curious mystery I had discovered on the bathroom mirror. It was a powerful image that left an indelible imprint on my mind.