

# A MOTHER'S DANCE

ONE STEP BACK, TWO STEPS FORWARD, FULL CIRCLE

PATTIE WELEK HALL



Georgia

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OTHER BOOKS BY PATTIE WELEK HALL

*Believe*

Released: January 15, 2010



## Praise for *A Mother's Dance*

I have read Pattie Welek Hall's book, *A Mother's Dance*, through the lens of a practicing neurointensivist (a physician specializing in the critical care of patients with acute neurological illness) and have learned valuable lessons that years of rigorous academic training cannot provide. Ms. Welek Hall eloquently illustrates in her book our limited ability at determining prognosis after traumatic brain injury and our inability to accurately predict functional outcome. The book allows physicians to see a facet of medical care that is often unrevealed (perhaps ignored?) by busy practicing clinicians who tend to pay little attention to the oppressiveness of being a patient or family member in intensive care or the value of spiritual healing that the family is attempting to deliver.

Mainly the book is a story about hope, resilience, fortitude, faith, and about the value of family and friends—the most important elements in the recovery of any patient. It reminds practicing physicians and nurses that “the little things” matter the most to patients and families, that we often overlook them, that patients and families may have creative ways to improve therapy and should be encouraged to do so, and that the fortitude of our patients can be limitless. Our encounters with patients are brief but Pattie takes us beyond that brief period to see the past and the aftermath of the ICU stay, full of obstacles but also graced with wonderful accomplishments and joys.

Spirituality, an often neglected aspect of patient care, comes about frequently in the book and, without a doubt, will make clinicians (believers or agnostics) stop and reflect about its impact on patient healing. The book is a lesson in acceptance and open-mindedness for physicians who may not embrace mustard seeds, holy water, or flying angels as part of their daily medical armamentarium! **It's a must read for those involved in the care of patients with acute brain injuries.**

~ Julio A. Chalela MD

Associate Professor of Neurology and Neurosurgery

Medical University of South Carolina

Medical Director NSICU

From the moment I began reading Pattie's story, I knew that I was about to embark on a heartfelt journey. Her beautifully written words transported me both into her life and allowed me to step into her shoes, as a mother. My heart was full, not only with sadness as I travelled through the depths of her pain, but with overwhelming joy as I celebrated the miracles and wonderment of her life. Pattie Welek Hall is a beautiful gift and is the perfect person to share hope and joy with the world.

~ Bonnie Compton APRN, BC, CPNP,  
Child & Adolescent Therapist  
Host of *Wholehearted Parenting Radio*

A beautiful story of a mother's unwavering love for her child and her deep-rooted faith which was tested beyond measure on a daily basis that sustained her during the most tumultuous time of her life. It inspired me to forever hold on to HOPE and to believe that miracles really do happen. I cried and I laughed. A real page turner.

~ Mary Welek McBride

Pattie Welek Hall has turned a mother's worst nightmare into a dance so full of love, your heart will ache. Oh, the lengths she's willing to go to to save her son. Read it, and celebrate love at its most scary—and most beautiful.

~ Bren McClain  
Author of *One Good Mama Bone*

Pattie Welek Hall's heart-rending and electrifying memoir sweeps readers into every mother's worst nightmare. Pattie is the rare debut author who tackles big subjects—rock-solid beliefs shaken to the core, bouts of hopelessness, the search for fortitude amid adversity, rejection, redemption, and the boundless love of friends and family—and makes every word ring true.

~ Catherine Underhill Fitzpatrick  
Author of *Going on Nine*

Pattie has written a courageous book, one that is both heartbreaking and heartwarming. She tells her story with exceptional grace. Pattie emerges as a strong and admirable heroine who will encourage readers through difficult times.

~ Mary Welek Atwell

Author of *Equal Protection of the Law?* and *Wretched Sisters*

Pattie Welek Hall's book touched my heart. There is something in this book for everybody, no matter your religion. People from all religions can benefit from the healing that is found in Pattie's story. She finds comfort in her religion of origin, Catholicism, and comfort in new thought/age philosophies, which she accurately points out are really old age. If you want to learn to use spiritual principles to turn tragedy into growth, this book is for you!

~ Reverend Ed Kosak MSW

Minister, Unity Church of Charleston, SC

If Pattie Welek Hall's wonderful and moving book, *A Mother's Dance*, proves one thing it is this: when tragedy strikes, a mother's love is surpassed only by God's, the combined power of which can bring about miracles of healing.

~ Edward Grinnan

Editor-in-Chief and Vice President of Guideposts Publications

Author of *The Promise of Hope*

*A Mother's Dance* is a love story between a mother and her children. Written in exquisite detail with sensitivity, grace, and deep spiritual insights, Pattie's memoir is a must read for everyone who wants to walk the path God sent them long before they were born.

~ Trudy Harris

New York Times bestselling Author of *Glimpses of Heaven*

Nurturing is a lifelong process and Pattie gathered every available resource to guide her family through the most challenging times imaginable. *A Mother's Dance: One Step Back, Two Steps Forward, Full Circle* is a wonderful testament to the power of a mother's love and openness to the healing spirit.

~ Mark Dickson

Vice President Mission

Roper St. Francis Healthcare

A moving and poignant book about a mother's struggle through brain injury and loss. This book provides hope, strength, and faith to those who face the true challenges of life. Thank you to a brave and loving mother.

~ Judy Heath

Author of *No Time for Tears: Coping with Grief in a Busy World*





God first . . .

My children:

Robert B. Hall, Jr., Casey B. Hall, and Annie Hall Vincent

My siblings:

Charlie, Mary, Rita, Geri, John, and Margie

My parents:

Charles F. Welek III and Rita Johans Barry,  
who I hope received advance copies in heaven . . .

You are my *everything!*

*Faith dares the soul  
to go farther than it can see.*

~William Clarke

## FOREWORD

There is this erroneous belief going around that we end up where we are by chance, or that we end up in our particular families because we had really great luck or really horrible luck—it depends on your story. I think where we end up, and who we end up with, goes a lot deeper than that. I believe that things just don't happen by chance in an orderly Universe.

Is it possible that our soul, in its infinite wisdom, knows exactly what family to land in for its higher evolution and the evolution of those around us? I believe so with all my heart.

And so it is from this place that I am moved by the perfection of Pattie's role as a mother to her children and the role they have chosen to play in her life.

In this book Pattie exposes her soul, her vulnerability, and her strengths in a way that any mother, any parent can relate to—the deep and unconditional love for her child. The willingness to go to the gates of hell to pull her child out; to trust when there's no reason to trust; and to keep getting up when she's knocked down by the pain, the fear, the dismantled hopes and the broken dreams where her child is concerned. And yet, she gets up again and again, unwilling to negotiate when it comes to the wellbeing and ultimate triumph for her child.

That is a mother's love.

Allow the words in this book to touch the core of your being, as it  
has touched mine.

From one mother to another—well done Pattie.

Ester Nicholson, Author of *Soul Recovery*



PART ONE

# ONE STEP BACK





## CHAPTER ONE

*October 6, 2002*

*The only way to make sense out of change is to plunge into it,  
move with it, and join the dance.*

*~ Alan Watts*

Shafts of sunlight seep through the shutters and angle down, casting striated patterns of shadow and light across the family room as I'm leaving for work. I can't wait to tell my coworkers at Barnes & Noble that I landed the job as community relations manager in Huntersville. But ten minutes after I arrive and share the news, the high I was riding comes crashing to the ground with one phone call.

"Mom!" Annie's voice is choked with tears. "Dad just called. Casey was in a motorcycle accident at four o'clock this morning."

"What? Is he okay?" I cup my mouth, trying to muffle the animal cries rising from deep inside of me.

"He's . . . he's in intensive care at the Medical University of South Carolina. The doctor had to cut away part of his skull. He was afraid Casey's brain was bleeding." Annie's cries muffle her words. "He was admitted as 'John Doe.' My friends are driving me to the hospital to identify him. Mom, I'm so afraid."

"Oh, sweetie. I'm on my way."

"Hurry, Mom. Hurry. They don't know if he's going to—"

The phone goes dead. I feel like a lightning bolt has pierced my heart. Shock waves are shooting through my body, causing my fears to

clap like thunder. My knees buckle. I reach out to grasp hold of the counter when my coworker catches my fall. "You okay? What's wrong?" I recap the worst news of my life.

"Grab your purse. I'll fill everyone in. You need to get on the road. NOW."

I sprint through racks of fiction, mystery, and biography at Barnes & Noble and snatch my purse from the locker. Racing to the front door, I storm past my coworker. "You okay to drive?" she shouts. I don't answer. I keep moving.

At home, I pack a bag, call the dog sitter, and jump back in the car.

Charlotte to Charleston takes three hours. Normally, I press my foot on the accelerator and watch the needle glide past 70, 80, then 85. No sirens blare. No flashing lights blink in the rearview mirror. My foot turns to lead and the needle swings forward. Blinded by my tears, I flick the waterworks from the left eye, then from the right eye, and weave between the traffic until I find an opening.

I sent my spirit 150 miles ahead, 125 miles ahead, then 50. I'm holding Casey's hand, hugging him, telling him how much I love him.

My fears burst into a crescendo of noise. What if I never see my son again? Never laugh or cry with him? Share in his joys and sorrows? Never attend his wedding? Play with his children? *No, I can't go there.* With an imaginary eraser in hand, I frantically try to wipe the thoughts from my mind, along with a haunting image of attending my son's funeral. But when that doesn't work, I bang my sweaty palms on the steering wheel and plead, "Please, Jesus, keep my son alive. PLEASE."

Finally, I spot the hospital exit ahead. I weave through the city's back streets, hardly braking at the continuous row of stop signs, barely feeling my chest rise and fall.

At the medical center, I find an elevator and push button four. When the doors open, there is my Annie, eyes swollen. We grab each other and hold on, our gut-wrenching pain interlocked like vines growing up a tree.

The nurse ushers us into ICU and speaks.

"Your son was hit by a car while driving his motorcycle without a helmet. He was thrown from his bike at a forty-five-degree angle and



landed on the right side of his head. An anonymous 911 call came in. An ambulance arrived minutes later. Casey was rushed to the ER.”

There’s cold pressing against my shoulder blades, and I realize I’ve slumped against the wall.

The nurse continues.

“The intense impact to Casey’s skull caused his brain to swell. During surgery, the neurosurgeon removed a portion of the right side of his cranium to release the pressure. He discovered a blood clot and suctioned it out.”

I can feel my body growing numb. I try to ask the nurse; *Is he in pain? Does he know we are here? What do the doctors think his chances are for recovery? Is he going to live?* But my words get lodged in my throat.

“Your son was admitted to MUSC. He didn’t have any identification on him. All he was carrying was his cell phone. He was tagged ‘John Doe.’ At two this afternoon, his cell phone rang. I answered. It was his father. I informed him of the accident.” As the nurse is catching her breath, I feel her eyes on me. “Miss Hall. You all right?”

I catch my reflection in the mirror above Casey’s sink and gasp. Lines, etched in sorrow, stretch across my cheeks, and my eyes, dark as night, sink into the void. My chin spasms. I press my lips together, but the unwanted pulse of dread persists. Willing myself back to the moment, I banish the image from my mind.

“No. But please call me Pattie.”

“I will leave you two alone with Casey. Feel free to stay until someone kicks you out,” the nurse whispers. “I have a teenage son. This is a mother’s worst nightmare. Let me know if you need anything.”

Annie’s low keening dwarfs the beeping and humming of the machines. The sound of her sorrow brings me back.

“What is it, honey?”

“Just hours ago I was standing right here, Mom. The nurse asked me, ‘Is this your brother?’ and I nodded. She left me alone, but I heard whispers from the hall. Something about Casey’s chances weren’t good. That he might not make it twenty-four hours.”

She buries her head deep into the pocket of my shoulder. Slowly,

Annie pulls her face away from my dampened shirt. She continues. "I inched closer to Casey and told him I loved him. That everything was going to be okay."

Lying on a sterile hospital bed is my nineteen-year-old boy. A bulge accentuates the swelling on the right side of his head. I can't tell if that's from the accident or the surgery. God, how did this happen? How could I not have been here, while my child was fighting for his life on the operating table? I can barely discern this face as my son's. The curve of his eyelids and brows is straightened. Nose widened. Lips puffed.

Annie's chin quivers. Her eyes are distant.

"My friends were here, Mom. We walked out to the garden. I couldn't even sit down. I hurt so bad."

I understand what she means. I feel as if I've been stabbed in the chest with a double-bladed knife. Maybe I should have taken a flight from Charlotte, rather than driving. Maybe I could have been in Charleston sooner. Holding her. Comforting her. Absorbing her pain. My God, she's only eighteen years old, a college freshman. This isn't fair, God. You hear me? Not fair.

"Oh, honey. I'm so sorry I wasn't here for you."

Her body rocks now, harder and faster, as if she's trying to shake off the pain.

"Me too, Mom."

I wrap my arms around my girl and pull her close, smelling her sweetness.

"You gonna be okay, honey?"

Annie dries her cheeks with the back of her hands. She doesn't answer. I don't push.

Carts shuffle in the hallway, breaking our silence.

"Mom, I should go." Annie says, tapping her watch. "It's six o'clock. Dad's plane from Louisville arrives in Charleston at seven. Bo's plane lands at eight. Dad is renting a car and picking me up. Visiting hours are at nine o'clock this evening, right?"

I nod.

At a time like this, when our world appears to be falling apart, Annie's

warrior spirit and responsible nature—a far cry from her brothers who, more often than not, fly by the seat of their pants—is a godsend.

“Do you want me to—?”

“No. Go. I’m good, sweetie,” I lie.

As Annie leaves, I think about how stoic she is. How she has to internalize her feelings before she’ll express what’s really on her mind. I can’t help but wonder; *Will this memory scar her life forever?* Then, I turn and look at Casey and wonder, *Will there be life for Casey?*

It’s as if the wind catches my thoughts and carries them away to August, two months ago, when Casey was packing his bags for college.

Music blared from his room, and Casey’s voice drifted upstairs as he belted out each word perfectly pitched with the musician. At times, I felt like stuffing cotton in my ears but reminded myself the clock was ticking, and the end of our time together was drawing near. For the next few hours, I washed, folded, and ironed his clothes. Ran up and down the stairs more times than I could count on two hands. Handed him stacks of laundry, freshly pressed shirts, and pants; then watched as he stuffed them into the bag. The phone rang and the doorbell chimed, each time for Casey. Friends came and went. Bobby, my ex-husband, drove into the driveway in a rented truck. He honked, and I yelled downstairs, “Your dad is here.”

Casey carried boxes and bags outside to the truck. Hours later, Bobby fastened the lock on the rear roll-up door and slid into the driver’s seat. Before hoisting himself into the truck, Casey wrapped his arms around me. “Gonna miss you, Mom.” Tongue-tied, I clutched his face and stared into his mischievous, playful hazel eyes. “Gonna miss you too, Son.” He pulled me close, and I sank into his burly torso, not wanting to let go.

“Gotta run, Mom. Call you when I get to Charleston.” As the truck pulled away, Casey hung his head out the window and yelled through his frisky smile, “Love you, Mom.”

With every breath, with every sigh, his words fed my sadness as I entered a house gone empty.

Just months ago, Casey was filled with life. Now, looking at his

immobile and swollen body, I can't help but wonder how he will possibly pull through this.

"Please hear me, Son. I can't bear the thought of losing you. How will I survive? How will the family survive? You have to fight, Casey. Use your God-given gifts—determination, courage, and strong will—and FIGHT."

Feeling alone and totally helpless, I pull my rosary from my purse and start whispering in Casey's ear those age-old prayers I learned as a child, hoping they'll spark his memory. After rolling my finger over the final pearl bead, I tenderly kiss my boy on the forehead, not knowing what lies ahead, not knowing if this night will be the last time I get to feel the warmth of his skin on mine. My insides scream—*Wake up, Casey! Wake up. It's your mama. Let me know you feel my touch, feel the depth of my love.* But I sense nothing back. It's as if he's in a realm of his own, a place impossible to reach. I saunter back to the waiting room and talk to the receptionist.

"Vanessa," I say, looking at her name tag. "Quick question. I noticed a stack of pillows, blankets, and sleeping bags in the corner. Given Casey's condition, I was wondering if it's okay for me to bunk here tonight?"

"Of course, dear. When you're ready to go to bed, just locate one of the nurses to get you a pillow and blanket."

At 9 p.m., Annie, Bo, Bobby, and I gather in Casey's room. Bo stands on one side of the bed. His tall, muscular frame shrinks as he takes in the horrific sight of his brother. Just two days ago, Bo was a normal college student at North Carolina State University, and now he's watching a machine breathe life into his brother. Bobby stands at the foot of Casey's bed, his head bent in sorrow. His round-rimmed glasses slide down his nose. He nudges them back in place. Annie stands next to me, her arms pressed into her stomach, as if she's crushing her pain. I want to hit the rewind button to yesterday.

I was heading down the stairs in my condo and stopped at each step to look at the pictures that marked my history. Pop in his World War II Navy uniform, his lieutenant's hat covering all but one inch of his raven hair. Mom in her college graduation photo, looking like Rita Hayworth's

twin. Bo, my oldest, sitting inside a red wagon, his chubby legs hanging over the side and his restless toes digging into the carpet. Casey, as a toddler, napping, with his arms wrapped around his matted teddy bear. Annie, my baby girl, lying in her crib with her feet in the air, her fingers clutching her toes.

As my eyes scanned the wall of photos, I thought about all the great memories—birthday parties, graduations, vacations, reunions—celebrated over the years. I gave thanks for how far we all had come through the good and hard times: Mom and Pop each happily remarried, the kids in college and moving forward with their lives, and me, ready to start a new job in a few weeks. My last thought was; *Life is good.*

But that was yesterday.

Today, Casey's on the brink of death.

We say goodbye at 10 p.m., and I take advantage of the quiet time to call my sister Mary.

Mary is second in line of seven. I'm third.

For the first eighteen years of our lives, we shared a room. Shared our laughter. Shared our tears. Shared our most intimate secrets. It's not that we were best friends. We were both caught up in our own worlds. She went to one all-girls Catholic high school, and I went to another. It was important for me to find my own way. But the seeds of friendship were planted back then, and, years later, they blossomed.

Today, Mary is my best friend. My rock.

"I'm so glad you called. I've been worried sick. What happened?"

I recount the horrific details, barely able to get the words out, struggling to believe they still apply to my son.

Neither of us speaks, our words substituted by whimpers.

Mary clears her throat. "How's he doing?"

"Not good. He looks like a mannequin frozen in bed. The right side of his head is swollen. Mare, I'm so scared." I try to hold it together but something snaps. My whimpers turn into moans and thunder through me, sounding like an iceberg crashing into the sea.

Mary, feeling my pain, joins in. When we have no more tears left to cry, she says, "You going to be okay?"

“Yeah. Just torn. All the kids need me now, and I’m feeling like an octopus whose arms are being stretched in different directions. I’m praying I can give them all they need, and that Casey’s tragedy doesn’t strain our relationships. Oh, Mare, that would break me into a million little pieces.”

“Annie and Bo are strong young adults, and from what you’ve told me, it sounds like they understand the severity of the situation. Rather than pulling all of you apart, maybe this tragedy will bring all of you closer together.”

“Maybe you’re right, Mare.”

“So, what did the doctor say?”

“I didn’t get a chance to talk to him. The nurse mentioned he made his final round just before I got there. And he won’t be back until morning, unless . . . I just can’t talk right now. I feel like my world is wobbling on a three-legged chair. I need sleep.”

My new home is the ICU waiting room; my bed is the floor, until the doctor assures me Casey is going to make it through the night. A nurse brings me a pillow and a couple of blankets. I crawl under the receptionist’s desk, sandwich myself between the covers, and plump up my starched pillow. My mind settles on a memory of Casey, age five.

I had just whipped up a batch of scrambled eggs for our Saturday breakfast. While squeezing catsup over his eggs, Casey said, “Dad, I want you to take my training wheels off my bike.”

“You sure, Casey?”

“Uh-huh. I’m a big boy now.” He held up his hand and stretched his fingers apart.

Once Casey shoveled the last fork of crimson mush into his mouth, we set off to the neighborhood park. Lawn mowers hummed. The sweet smell of freshly cut grass and hyacinths filled the air.

Bo, six years old, led the way on his bike. His blond locks sailed in the wind as he disappeared around the curve. Casey followed on foot, trying to keep up with his older brother. Their father ran behind, pulling the bike by its handlebars, and shouted into the wind, “Slow down, boys.

There could be cars coming.” Annie, three years old, was nestled in my arms. We were the caboose on that out-of-control train.

At the mouth of the park, a crumbling sidewalk weaved through the rolling hills and ended at the playground.

Bo stood at the top of the yellow slide and shouted, “You can do it, Casey.”

Annie clapped.

His father mumbled under his breath. He placed his hand on Casey’s padded seat and motioned for him to mount the bike.

“Don’t let go, Dad. Promise?” Casey shouted into the wind as his dad ran beside him.

Casey peddled hard, moving faster and faster.

“You’re doing great, Case,” his dad said. Then he let go.

Casey turned. And crashed under a canopy of trees.

As Casey untangled himself from the bike, his father and I rushed to his side. We brushed the dirt off his arm, pulled pebbles from his skinned knees, and encouraged him to try again.

With his feet and hands in position, Casey said, “This time, Dad, tell me when you are going to let go.”

He did, and Casey never looked back.

Hungering for what was, I whisper, “Don’t put on the brakes now, Casey. We’re still here for you. We’re going to help you get back up and dust you off again.”

I close my eyes. I try to will my mind to silence the monkey-chatter exploding in my head, but the cage has been left open, and the monkeys are running wild.

What if someone hadn’t been at the scene of the accident and called 911? What if Casey had stayed in the street for hours, crumpled, bleeding, unconscious, and alone? What would his chances of survival be? What are they now? What if something had gone awry during the operation?

I rock as if I’m holding Casey in my arms, soothing his pain, soothing my pain. Finally, I manage to fall asleep, knowing that at least if my boy calls, I’ll be here.

