

Guest Speaker ~ KinderMourn Holiday Memorial Service 2007
By Janet Cooper Haas

Today I want to talk to you about the word “hope.” For many of you out there, hope is what gets you out of bed in the morning. For others, your hope died because your child died.

February 18, 2001, is the day my hope died. Cooper Jacob Haas was my first baby. He was stillborn on his due date. My maiden name is Cooper. Since I am an only child, it seemed only natural to carry on the family name through my firstborn son.

In the weeks following Cooper’s death, Peter Gabriel’s song “Digging in the Dirt” became my mantra of sorts. I threw myself into the dirt, literally. Gardening was a cathartic experience. I created “Cooper’s Corner” in our back yard, complete with a statue and a stone tablet, engraved with Cooper’s foot and hand prints and date of birth. Cooper and I communed in his small corner. For me, it legitimized his mark on my world.

About a month into my “gardening therapy,” I heard “I Hope You Dance” play on the radio. In my fog of grief, I imagined it was Cooper, not Leeann Womack, singing. And he was singing to me:

Momma,

**I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance
Never settle for the path of least resistance
Living might mean taking chances, but they're worth taking
Lovin' might be a mistake, but it's worth making
Don't let some hell-bent heart leave you bitter
When you come close to selling out, reconsider
Give the heavens above more than just a passing glance**

And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance I hope you dance

It was as if Cooper had personally signed my permission slip to begin a new life, my new normal. I no longer needed to identify myself as “the mother without a baby.” I am also Kevin's wife, the mother to two beautiful living sons and five other tiny angels. I'm a daughter, friend, writer, court reporter. My life did have purpose. My hope was renewed. As Oprah says, it was my “Ah-hah” moment. Because I was so shattered, Cooper gave me that gentle nudge I so desperately needed. Almost seven years later Cooper still nudges me from time to time. Even in death, we still have a connection.

We moved a year and a half ago into our second home just before Cole, our beautiful firecracker, came gloriously screaming into the world. Leaving “Cooper's Corner” behind was understandably difficult for me. Our new landscaping, or lack of it really, is open to many possibilities. So little by little, my green thumb has gone to work. Last year I landscaped my front yard a little too soon, and a frost wiped out all my work. On the butterfly bush at the center of it all, one tiny green leaf remained. My back yard was bare, so I dug it up and replanted it; it couldn't hurt. I placed Cooper's statue and stone tablet behind the almost-dead bush in a new corner, and now the butterfly bush spans five feet wide by three feet high and produces the most beautiful purple flowers I've ever seen. Thank you, Cooper.

Between the births of my two living children, my hope was tested repeatedly. Five more of my tiny angels were lost. Doctors performed two life-saving surgeries on me. The grief was dusted off again. It was pure hope and Cooper's little nudges that kept me going.

This candle holder, made for me three years ago by my son, Colin, represents one of our favorite family traditions. We each share what we're thankful for while holding this. Today I am very thankful for my family. I'm thankful for KinderMourn and all the friends I have made because of KinderMourn. I'm especially thankful to Chris Crawford, who does her job so well because she cares so much. And I'm thankful that my hope continues to be renewed. What are you thankful for today?

Looking out over the audience, I see myself in some of those newly-grieving eyes. I want to pass along to you the gift of hope this holiday season. Hope that tomorrow your grief isn't so all-encompassing, hope that you will laugh again without feeling guilty, and hope that life really can be joyous and fulfilling once again.