



# Drinking the Dragon: Stories of The Dark Nights of Soul

by

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## Excerpt from Chapter Two: INTO THE DEPTHS:

### Experiencing the Dark Night of Soul

#### SHERRI'S STORY

*The heart must break to become large. When the heart is broken open, then God can put the whole universe in it.*

*Andrew Harvey, Hidden Journey*

*...when you touch broken hearts together, a new heart emerges, one that is more open and compassionate, able to touch others, a heart that seeks God. That is the blessing of a broken heart.*

*Sherri Mandell, The Blessing of A Broken Heart*

#### Death in the Desert

Sherri Mandell's thirteen-year-old son, Koby, was stoned to death in a cave carved into the starkly beautiful canyons of the Judean desert. He was hiking with Yosef Ish-Ran, his closest friend, when both boys were bludgeoned with rocks and left in a blood-splattered cave. Their murderers have never been caught. The boys were only a half a mile away from their home in Tekoa, a settlement 17 miles from Jerusalem.

An American-born writer and teacher, Sherri and her husband Seth, a rabbi, moved with their four children from the Maryland in the U.S. to Tekoa, Israel, in 1996, five years before Toby's murder. Many years before, Sherri and Seth had met and married in Israel and their first child, Koby, was born there. They later returned to America, living in the States for seven years before *making aliyah*, or immigrating, to Israel to share in its historical, religious and cultural life.

Sherri is petite and blonde, her eyes light blue, her hands small and child-like. On the day of our interview, she wore a beret over her pinned up hair and a long skirt. Her gaze was calmly direct. I intuited that there is a lot of fire in her, but on this day she was wan and tired and not feeling well. She was staying with friends in La Jolla for the run of the play based on her book, *The Blessing of a Broken Heart*<sup>1</sup>, by the San Diego Repertory Theatre at the Lyceum.<sup>2</sup> A number of play-related events, including lectures and musical performances, were planned while she was in town, and the pace, as well as the emotionality of the play's theme, was wearing on her.

Sherri was asked to retell her painful story several times during her visit. The shock and horror of Sherri's loss—and her deeply profound transformation as a result--lends integrity and authority to her essential message that it is possible for hope and healing to emerge out of suffering and grief. She

expressed this beautifully in her book, writing, “There is something in us that clings to life and refuses to be diminished or broken. We ourselves are vessels, filled with Godliness. And though we may chip and crack, our souls are whole even when we aren’t.”<sup>3 4</sup>

*I see that life is leaning how to see in the darkness.*  
*Sherri Mandell, The Blessing of A Broken Heart*

### **The Dark Night**

Sherri characterized Koby’s death as an “amputation,” a “rape,” lamenting: “I stand naked, battered.”<sup>5</sup> She felt the pain and loss in her belly, declaring her womb a “grave.” In losing Koby, she had “lost a whole world.” She wondered how to cope with the overwhelming pain and evil of a murderous act.

During the Jewish traditional seven-day period of mourning, or *shiva*, Sherri “lives in the land of pain.” She shared that she could only manage to breathe. Sherri was so distraught that, for three days, she could not eat: “...food is for people who are alive, and I am not.”<sup>6</sup> For several days, the mirrors were covered; she did not bathe; she wore the same clothes, a rip in her blouse to express her loss. She asked that a sign be put on the door of her home that only talk of Koby could take place inside. Sherri wrote, “I could have stayed in bed the rest of my life, mourning him.”<sup>7</sup> She woke up crying, and she fell asleep the same way, flooded with anguished tears that left her “stone-tired” and desolate. Six months after Kobe’s death, she remarked to a CNN reporter that the pain of mourning was so intense that one could wish to die.

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<sup>1</sup> Sherri Mandell. *The Blessing of a Broken Heart*. New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2003. [www.tobypress.com](http://www.tobypress.com). The book won the 2004 National Jewish Book Award in the Contemporary Jewish Life category.

<sup>2</sup> The play was adapted and directed from Sherri’s book by Todd Salovey, Associate Director at the SD Repertory Theatre. In the San Diego production, Lisa Robins portrayed Sherri and Daniel Louis Myers, her son, Koby.

<sup>3</sup> *The Blessing of a Broken Heart*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 165-166.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p.5