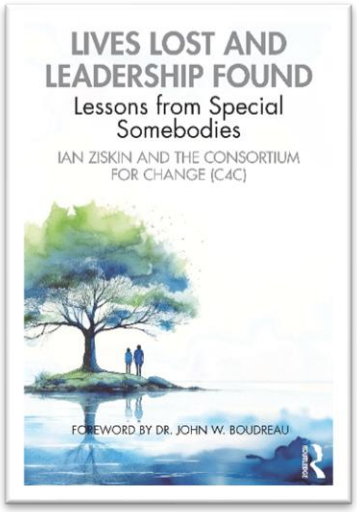
Lives Lost and Leadership Found: Lessons from Special Somebodies



Chapter Abstracts

Introduction – Friends for Life

In *Lives Lost and Leadership Found: Lessons from Special Somebodies*, lead author Ian Ziskin gathers personal stories from dozens of contributors about losing their "special somebodies." These departed individuals, though unknown to readers, profoundly impacted the contributors' lives. Their essays offer lessons on life and leadership from diverse perspectives and real-life experiences, supplemented by insights gleaned from survey responses from more than 150 leaders and thinkers. Core contributors include members of the Consortium for Change (C4C), a community network of independent coaches, consultants, and transformational change experts, plus other colleagues of Ziskin, including current and former clients, board members, former MBA students, academics, senior leaders, and others who became “friends for life” through the project. C4C’s approach is based on a “spirit of abundance” mindset, encouraging the generous sharing of experiences and insights, coupled with a “friends for life” philosophy that emphasizes deep, enduring connections.

Chapter 1 – The Presence of Absence

Lead author Ian Ziskin lost his brother and mother six months apart in June and December 2023, respectively. Their deaths, along with his father's passing at the age of 46 more than five decades earlier, inspired him to write *Lives Lost and Leadership Found: Lessons from Special Somebodies*. Every day, in every way, he feels the positive impact they had on his life as well as the emptiness and silence they left behind. Their presence and their absence will always be with him. The same is true for the dozens of contributing authors to the book who share their stories and leadership lessons learned from losing their special somebodies. As a book about leadership, informed and inspired by personal loss, the authors do not focus on grief or death but rather on the exploration of four critical questions: What did we learn from people important to us during their lives and deaths? Can anything positive be gleaned from their passing? How have these experiences of loss changed us as leaders and as people? What can we do with what we have learned?

Chapter 2 – Neuroscience, Loss, and Leadership

There are thousands of books, articles, research papers, podcasts, blogs, YouTube videos, and other resources on grieving the death of a loved one and the psychological, emotional, spiritual, and/or physiological effects of the experience. This chapter cites a handful of science-based resources to help readers understand the neuroscience of grieving and the impact that losing someone special can have on our perspective as individuals and leaders. Research tells us that loss and grief have profound and lasting effects on the brain and body. Change causes real pain and discomfort, and losing someone is one of the most transformational—and painful—changes people and leaders can experience. It seems we never truly get over such loss; we only learn to live with it. On one hand, our brains recognize that something is wrong—that our special somebody is gone. On the other, built on a lifetime of shared experiences, our brains continue to expect them to be part of our everyday lives.

Chapter 3 – Fame Ain't Fair Sometimes

Despite the apparent glitz and glamour associated with fame and celebrity, people are people—famous or not. We all share the experiences of losing, grieving, and learning from special somebodies. Yet famous people have a much broader and more public platform from which life and leadership lessons can be shared. This chapter explores lessons of life and leadership through the eyes and experiences of famous people who lost special somebodies. Is there a direct correlation between loss of a loved one early in life and success? Many people of achievement share a common bond—that of losing a loved one and turning their negative experience into something positive. It seems that famous people grieve, love, learn, and lead—just like the rest of us.

Chapter 4 – Notable Quotables

This chapter presents feedback from 150 survey respondents who we asked two questions in preparation for writing *Lives Lost and Leadership Found: Lessons from Special Somebodies*: "If a person important to you passed away recently or a long time ago, what is the one most significant thing you learned from that person about life and leadership?" and "What was this person's relationship to you (parent, grandparent, spouse, life partner, child, grandchild, sibling, friend, colleague, boss, mentor, etc.)?" Respondents included colleagues, fellow leaders, and complete strangers. They shared detailed stories, emotions, and memories with us. While their responses covered a broad range of perspectives, three common and consistent themes emerged: "Cherish Relationships," "Advocate for Yourself and Others," and "Dream Big and Go Bigger." A fourth category, "Seek Wisdom," featured responses that did not fall neatly into the other main themes but offered powerful messages and significant lessons.

Essays Introduction – The Power of Yet

Readers are invited to prepare for growth and improvement by meeting dozens of remarkable individuals and one dog through touching stories of how grief can inspire deep insights and leadership lessons. With diverse backgrounds and unique passions, these special somebodies left a lasting impact on the book's contributing authors. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are the soul of the book and the heart of the leadership journey for readers. They highlight the 6Ls of **L**ife and **L**eadership **L**essons **L**earned through **L**oss and **L**ove, focusing on themes of courage, compassion, and curiosity.

Chapter 5 – Courage (and Resilience)

This chapter presents 12 essays from contributing authors that combine the powerful forces of courage and resilience. Their stories of losing special somebodies focus primarily on the determination and fearlessness needed to overcome adversity, hardships, and obstacles, as well as the strength required to challenge, push back, and bounce back from difficult circumstances.

Chapter 6 – Compassion (and Relationships)

Chapter 6 features 13 essays that blend the essential ingredients of compassion for others with the ability to cultivate and nurture relationships. Contributing authors share stories that reinforce various behaviors: assume positive intent, don't judge, be empathetic, be emotionally and physically present, recognize that everyone has a story, listen, treat others with kindness and respect, foster a sense of belonging and safety, and accept that people give and receive love the best way they can.

Chapter 7 – Curiosity (and Purpose)

The 10 essays in this chapter integrate the passions of lifelong curiosity and living with purpose. Contributing authors present stories that highlight themes such as live life to the fullest, find and pursue passions, keep learning, have a clear vision and values, be intentional about priorities and actions, be authentic, maintain a sense of humor, embrace each moment and experience, and live a life of no regrets.

Chapter 8 – Tensions of Intentionality

Chapter 8 synthesizes common themes about life and leadership from the stories shared by the book's contributing authors. Many of these stories reference various paradoxes or tensions—conflicting emotions, beliefs, and behaviors—that arise from the loss of a loved one. Despite experiencing profound grief, essay authors transformed these challenges into growth opportunities, becoming better individuals and leaders. The chapter emphasizes that intentionality is crucial in navigating complex feelings and emerging stronger. It highlights the importance of reconciling competing priorities and transitioning through contradictory tensions. By confronting and accepting tough realities, the contributors demonstrated how to turn adversity into valuable life and leadership lessons, embodying a "first A, then B" mindset.

Chapter 9 – The Smoothie Effect

What does the evolution of the smoothie have to do with losing a loved one or learning something from them about leadership? Making a smoothie involves considerable planning and preparation, which is a lot like the methodical and well-conceived way we attempt to lead our lives. We have a plan, but then life (or death) gets in the way. We expect a natural order to things, and then chaos ensues. Thus, with no intent to trivialize or make light of the pain or sense of loss associated with the passing of a loved one, the smoothie is a perfect analogy for the chaos of loss and life. Smoothies, like learning from losing a loved one, can make us healthier, better, and stronger. As a metaphor for life, they can also teach us a lot about reconciling grief, learning, leadership, and competing tensions.

Chapter 10 – From Loss to Leadership

Rather than reminding readers of what he hoped they might learn from reading *Lives Lost and Leadership Found: Lessons from Special Somebodies*, lead author Ian Ziskin instead shares what he learned about life and leadership from writing the book—and more importantly what he is going to do with those lessons: define and confront reality more transparently; persevere and recover more resiliently; listen and empathize more compassionately; learn and teach more passionately; and advocate and role model more purposefully. He then suggests that readers write their own essays as a way of exploring and discovering their own insights and feelings about a lost loved one. He also shares the lyrics to the song he wrote to honor his father, mother, and brother, “Here and Gone.”

Epilogue – Feelings about Feelings

Contributing authors share their feelings and unexpected reactions to their essay-writing experience. This includes many honest—and often surprised—expressions of catharsis, joy, sorrow, tears, pain, smiles, laughter, memories, emotional release, and other feelings. Those feelings are shared in hopes they inspire readers to write their own essays about their special somebodies.

Appendix – My Special Somebody

The appendix provides readers with detailed guidance for writing their own essays about their special somebodies. It offers suggestions on selecting the individual to write about and outlines the essay's length and structure. This includes recommendations for the first paragraph, describing the special somebody, that person’s experiences and interests, the nature of the relationship, the circumstances surrounding the special somebody’s death, how the individual handled dying and what it taught the author, and lessons learned about life and leadership. The appendix also suggests concluding the essay with a section entitled, “Three Things I Learned About Life and Leadership,” to summarize important life and leadership lessons readers learned from their special somebodies, keeping each of the three items to a word, a phrase, or a sentence.