

## THE LETTER SEASON 1, EPISODE 5: Putting Down the Rocks

**Amy Donaldson:** A warning to listeners - this podcast includes descriptions of gun violence and associated trauma. Please take care when listening.

**Sy Snarr:** I was sitting in my living room and everywhere I looked, I would see Zach.

[MUSIC]

**Sy Snarr:** Sitting on the couch playing his guitar, walking through the door, saying 'Mama, I'm home!' You know, and I was sobbing. I was just sitting there sobbing and this was quite a while just missing him.

**Amy Donaldson:** In the months after Sy Snarr's son was murdered, grief saturated every moment.

**Sy Snarr:** and I remember looking up. My oldest son was standing there and he just looked so sad. And when, when I looked at him, he just walked out the room. That was the kick in my gut I think that I needed. When he saw me so upset, and he looks so sad and just turned around and left the room, I realized I had let the death of one child become more important than the lives of three more than I loved every bit as much as Zach. And it just brought me up short, like, what am I doing? What am I doing to my family? I just knew that I had to change, but I didn't think I could, towards my feelings for Jorge Benvenuto.

[MUSIC]

From KSL Podcasts, I'm Amy Donaldson, and this is The Letter. Episode 5 - Putting Down the Rocks.

**Amy Donaldson:** The Snarrs hoped that the sentencing of Jorge Benvenuto would bring closure, that he would be locked away for the rest of his life, and that they could somehow forget about him. But Jorge's legal team threw a wrench in that plan. They wanted to withdraw his guilty plea. That meant the families involved would be left in legal limbo for years.

The idea that the Snarrs could put this behind them turned out to be a mirage.

In the meantime, Sy had to go on living. But how do you sit through a parent-teacher conference or consider what to make for dinner when everything reminds you of what you've lost.

**Sy Snarr:** I didn't want to leave the house. I didn't. I just would curl up in the fetal position. Honestly, it was just so painful. And that pain and then the anger. Anger at everything and everybody; I was angry at him, obviously, I was angry at God for allowing this to happen to my son, if that makes sense. I I would see other 18-year olds out there. And I think why are you

here and my son not. I know that's totally irrational. But, that's where I was at that time. I'd see people out running and laughing. And I think how can they do that? Was I ever that way? And I thought I'll never be, I'll never be happy again. I really, truly believed I will never be happy again. I can't smile. I can't laugh. It was just so devastating.

**Dru Weggland Clark:** I personally have never seen anyone with such a physical manifestation of grief.

**Amy Donaldson:** Sy's neighbor and close friend Dru Weggland Clark witnessed the worst of it.

**Dru Weggland Clark:** Just when you hugged her you could just, broken. And Ron was maintaining and greeting people but sigh I mean just distraught.

**Amy Donaldson (interviewing Dru):** Yeah, but you could see that she was in pain.

**Dru Weggland Clark:** Oh, absolutely. Feel it. See it.

**Amy Donaldson:** Dru moved into the neighborhood back in 1978, the year Zach was born.

**Dru Weggland Clark:** I remember him, especially as this little boy in overalls, just a darling, darling little child.

**Amy Donaldson:** She admired how the Snarrs raised their children. Dru was there when Sy gave birth to their youngest son Levi.

**Dru Weggland Clark:** I remember that well, cuz I was pregnant with my first child and I was watching her intensely. And they were a great role model about how to raise a family. All the kids knew how to work, how to get things done, but they also knew how to have great family times and fun.

**Amy Donaldson:** Zach's older sister Sydney says it WAS fun growing up a Snarr.

**Sydney Snarr:** I grew up in a really happy home. My childhood was ideal. I loved my brothers. They loved me. My parents were excellent. We just had so much laughter and joy in our home and really, we were a family that truly loved and enjoyed each other. So after Zach died, my parents just, we were changed. No more family pictures, no more family vacations, no more family dinners because how could it be called that, when we were missing, you know, our heart?

**Amy Donaldson:** Sydney didn't just lose her brother. She lost the larger-than-life woman who raised her. She lost her prank-pulling, joke-telling dad.

**Sydney Snarr:** My mom was, she always such a fun, energetic, just passionate person who just loved to grab life by the horns. (laughter) You know, everything was 'Ah!' oh, you know, everything (laughing) nothing. It was never like... if, if a taco was good, it wasn't like 'This is a

good taco.' She was just like, 'Oh, it's to die for it. Oh, this is the best taco!' And you know, everything was in caps and exclamation points and emojis. My mom before and suddenly she just, she lost that sparkle for a long time. She was so, she was just, she just became quiet. And she just was so into her grief that I think for a while she just had to withdraw from all of us. Which, which I get. And then my dad, he was beforehand he was just this, fun loving big laughter You know, were he laughs with his whole body and just this fun magnet for people right, and afterwards he was so sad. We had a dog that we had had for about a year before Zach died and my dad wanted nothing to do with it, and then Zach died. And after that I'd look outside and see my dad sitting on the porch, with the dog just sitting next to him, and my dad would just have his arm around our golden retriever and would just be crying into his neck. He just, he was so alone.

**Amy Donaldson:** Their individual heartbreak somehow isolated them from each other in ways they'd never experienced.

**Sydney Snarr:** I knew I needed help; we all did. But I would go home and I'd see how traumatized and depressed and anguished my parents were. And I was like, I can't, I can't add to that. I don't want to add to that. And Trent did the same. And Levi did the same. And we all just suffered on our own. I knew my family was there for me. And they knew I was there for them. But it's like you just how can I add to your burden?

**Amy Donaldson:** Sy desperately wanted to change for the sake of her living children, but she didn't know how to live and love with such sadness and rage. She sought help from a counselor.

**Sy Snarr:** What I liked about it was that she let me yell and scream and say how I was feeling and didn't tell me, "You can't feel that way." You know, so many people, right from the get go, 'You have to forgive him'. And it made me so angry. Like, I don't have to forgive him. I will never forgive him. I don't want to ever forgive him. You know, and even my own sister, 'You have to forgive him.'

**Amy Donaldson:** Were you even able to discuss forgiving him?

**Sy Snarr:** No.

**Amy Donaldson (talking over Sy):** I mean, I'm sure they had good reasons why.

**Sy Snarr:** Yeah. And I said, it's not gonna happen. I don't want to, you know, I hate him. I said that so many times, "I hate him."

**Sy Snarr:** Never had I felt that amount of hatred towards another human being where I was literally, literally obsessed with it. And it overtook who I was.

**Amy Donaldson:** And Sy wasn't alone in her hatred. It consumed the entire family.

**Sy Snarr:** My youngest son, Levi, who was only 15 at the time. I think I saw the biggest change in him. He just plummeted. And he was so angry. And he would pick... he was a big kid. He was 6-4. I always called him my gentle giant because he was so sweet to me. But he would pick fights. And that was his outlet, unfortunately, and he'd come home, sometimes with big bruises. And I worried because he said so many times, "I want to kill him. I want to kill him." And I kind of got it because for a long time I did too. But it scared me to hear my youngest son say that.

**Amy Donaldson:** But over time, Sy says, something shifted for Levi.

**Sy Snarr:** He just went out of the blue one night, said you know, "I wouldn't kill him. I wouldn't kill him anymore. I might still hurt him bad. But I wouldn't kill him." And that was huge. He did a total turnaround. He started exercising and he was happy again. And that made me so happy to have him back... because he was so sweet. My protector I always called him my protector because he had always put his arm around me, 'I'll protect you, Mama.' (laughs)

**Amy Donaldson:** Gradually, Dru says she started to see glimpses of the friends that she knew and loved. She tried to plan outings with Sy and Ron to pull them back into some semblance of normal life. One of those was taking Sy to a movie.

**Dru Weggland Clark:** I can't remember the movie, it was kind of a comedy. And she laughed hysterically. I was like - this is great. She's laughing! I didn't watch the movie, I was more watching her reaction.

**Amy Donaldson:** While the heaviness of grief was always there, Sydney said there were moments of joy. Just over a year after Zach's death, Sydney got married.

**Sydney Snarr:** I remember when I got married, my mom was like, "We need to have, make this a party. Because we need something to celebrate. We have to have something to look forward to."

**Amy Donaldson:** And then came the first grandchild, Zachary Taylor Davis, born in October of 2000. They called him Taylor, but he would carry Zach's name.

**Sy Snarr:** And, my life changed, like so in love with this boy. And I remember, they lived in New Hampshire at the time, and I was up in his nursery rocking him. It was just him and me. And I started just talking to him. And he was an infant, a newborn. And I just started talking to him about Zach. And I'm not making this up and I'm not kidding. His eyes, he looked right at me. And he just started just like, trying to say something I know he was. It's like he knew what I was saying. And I thought, "You know him. You know, Zach." And I know he did. And it's like he couldn't communicate that. But that's always been special to me. I don't think I've ever, ever even told Taylor about that. But it was really special to me.

**Sydney Snarr:** I think with my parents, the burden really started to lighten with the birth of their grandkids. Being a grandparent for my parents brings them, like so much joy. My parents took

on that role with just gusto. Like they, they ate it up. And so that that was when things started to kind of lift.

**Amy Donaldson:** Sydney had four children, Trent got married and had three. His firstborn son was also named Zachary, Zachary Snarr. Sy and Ron refer to them as the seven wonders of the world.

**Sydney Snarr:** However, I will say that, my marriage, the birth of all four kids, all of their little milestones that they've hit, all of their accomplishments, all of the joy that we've had. There has always been that dark shadow there with us. I've carried this rage on my shoulders, and my parents have and my brothers have for a long time. And every, every good thing that happened, that ugly sludge of hatred and anger and rage and sadness, was there with us. You know, I, the birth of my child, I was 99% happy. And then there was that, you know, it was there. It was always there.

**Amy Donaldson:** Motherhood gave Sydney unique insight into her own mother's pain.

**Sydney Snarr:** I remember the very first time my oldest son Taylor, when he was born, the doctors put him in my arms, and I looked down at him. And I just started crying. And I looked at my mom, who was in the room. And I just said, "How, how did you do it?" Like I... I can't imagine. It was so hard to lose a brother. And I look at my children and I can't, I can't even... I won't allow myself to imagine because it's, it's too painful. It's too overwhelming.

**Amy Donaldson:** After the break, Sy is offered the chance to meet with her son's killer.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

**Amy Donaldson:** As the years went by, Sy couldn't help wondering if Jorge Benvenuto ever thought about Zach. Jorge had never spoken in court, and she wanted to know if he was sorry. In 2003, 7 years after her son's murder, she met someone who worked for a restorative justice program. She was offered the chance to meet with Jorge.

**Sy Snarr:** And I said yeah, I'd like to do that because I thought surely he's sorry. (laughing)

**Amy Donaldson:** Sy attended training to prepare for the experience.

**Sy Snarr:** And so I went through all the training, and I didn't tell my family because I thought they would not agree with me that I should do this, but I just did it.

**Amy Donaldson:** She didn't want to go alone, so she asked a friend to accompany her. They both had to undergo background checks, and they did everything they were asked to do. What Sy didn't know, however, was that no one had talked to Jorge about the program. No one had

asked him if he wanted to meet with the mother of the man that he'd killed. So Sy and her friend were all ready to go to the prison.

**Sy Snarr:** Then they went and approached him after I was ready to go and they said they were talking to him and he just sit there kind of nodding. And then afterwards he said no, "I'm not really interested." And (he) got up and left.

**Amy Donaldson:** After all that, they told her Jorge did not want to speak to her.

**Sy Snarr:** And it's like, what? I was so angry, I thought How dare he deny me this?

**Amy Donaldson:** The failed meeting sent her into a tailspin. She went through all of this expecting to learn something that might help her understand why her son was murdered. She hoped for an apology. Instead, Sy felt her suspicions that Jorge had no regard for Zach or his family were confirmed.

**Sy Snarr:** So it kind of set me back, you know, it set me back and I was really angry.

**Amy Donaldson:** A decade after Zach's murder, in 2006, there was a court hearing where Jorge Benvenuto attempted to withdraw his guilty plea. Sy was allowed to speak, and at one point, she addressed him directly, asking the questions that had tortured her for years.

**Sy Snarr:** What did I say?

**Amy Donaldson:** Yeah.

**Sy Snarr:** I probably wasn't very nice. I'm sure I wasn't. I talked a lot about Zach and how amazing he was and what this had done to my family. I had always just wanted to know why. And I said, I guess the only person who can answer that is Jorge, and I looked right at him. I said, "So it was it worth it to watch someone die?" And I just stood there. And he looked at me for one brief, split second. Then he looked back down and never said anything. He never said anything in court. They gave him the chance. And he never did.

**Amy Donaldson:** The district judge turned down Jorge's request to withdraw his guilty plea, saying his claim lacked merit and it came too late. But his legal team appealed once again, and it went all the way to the Utah Supreme Court. In July of 2007, the Court ruled the plea could not be withdrawn because it was made due to "overwhelming evidence" of guilt. Jorge Benvenuto's life sentence without the possibility of parole would stand.

**Sy Snarr:** Then I thought it's really over. And it was but it took 11 years.

**Amy Donaldson:** Waiting so long for justice felt unfair to Ron.

**Ron Snarr:** It took 11 years. And it's a done deal. You know, there was an eyewitness, an eye witness to the crime and 11 years in court. You know, there's something wrong with the justice system.

**Amy Donaldson:** Just a few months before the Supreme Court put an end to the legal battles, life dealt the Snarrs another devastating blow. Their youngest son, Levi, Sy's 'gentle giant,' her protector, was diagnosed with cancer.

**Sy Snarr:** He had a very rare cancer. It's epithelioid sarcoma, which is they told us from the get-go there's no cure. I said you just treat him because there's some more power than you because I truly believed I would not lose another son.

**Amy Donaldson:** Caring for Levi became Sy's purpose. In the wake of Zach's death, both Ron and Sy showered their youngest son with more attention and affection.

**Ron Snarr:** Levi is the baby boy and after Zach died, he was never told no. You know you have brand new truck every year,

**Amy Donaldson:** Ron said he'd go on trips to the Snake River in Wyoming with Levi and a group of his friends, and Levi would drive the packed truck with a kind of recklessness that sometimes scared Ron.

**Ron Snarr:** You know he'd be going up the canyon 90 miles an hour, we'd go river running and 6 guys, 6-8 guys in the truck and it's raining and he's going 80 miles an hour up the canyon. You know and I'm saying, "Levi, please slow down", and he says "Dad, this my truck and I'll drive it the way I want."

**Amy Donaldson:** Then when Levi got sick, he had to go to chemotherapy twice a day, and Ron took the wheel.

**Ron Snarr:** and now the shoes on the other foot and I'm bringing him home from the hospital and he's dying. He's just deteriorating in front of me. And he said, "Dad, you're even with me he says your driving is scaring the hell out of me." I would laugh and say, "Well you deserve it Levi, he says your driving is killing me."

**Amy Donaldson:** The teasing was their way of beating back more heartbreak.

**Ron Snarr:** I was in his truck, and everything. And he said, Dad, when I pass, he says, "Sell my truck." I said, "OK, Levi."

**Amy Donaldson (talking with Ron):** Why did he want to sell it?

**Ron Snarr:** He didn't want me to have it because he knew it would be too hard on me. (voice breaks)

**Amy Donaldson:** Eventually, the treatments became too much for Levi. Before the cancer, Levi had a goal to visit all of the seven continents with his mother. They had been to six when he began his treatments. Only Africa remained on the bucket list.

**Sy Snarr:** And he just said, you know, I'm, I'm going to quit my treatments. He says I want to, I'm gonna quit my treatments. And I want to go to Africa and then I'm going to go live with my brother. And that's what he did.

**Amy Donaldson:** Six weeks after they got home from Africa, Levi died. He was buried next to his brother. The two sons occupy the plots that were originally intended for Sy and Ron. The cruelty of losing both of their boys was debilitating.

**Sy Snarr:** Yeah, I wanted to die for a long time. I used to think why would anybody want to die? Just like, how could anybody be that depressed? You know, I never understood it. I get it. I get what it's like to be that depressed, where you literally do not want to get out of bed. I did not want to get out of bed. I did not want to go on with my life. I wanted to die.

**Amy Donaldson:** While Sy was drowning in despair, Ron was consumed with rage. This time, there was no one to blame.

**Sy Snarr:** When Levi died, it was I say like the straw that broke the camel's back with him to lose two sons. He just was angry. And I know one time there was a bad lightning storm. And he was up at the University of Utah, out on the baseball field, I believe, and he just put his arms up and said, "Come and take me God, take me, you know, strike me down." I mean, he was like me, it's like, what, you know what is going on here? We've lost. You know, these two amazing sons, different, totally different ways. But both were so painful. And you're just trying to get over, you know, get on with losing one and kind of getting to where you think, okay, I'm surviving this day by day, you know, and then we lose another one. And it was just too much.

**Amy Donaldson:** After the break, Sy decides - it's time for a change.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

**Amy Donaldson:** Sy says the five years after Levi's death were hell. She was tired of grief. She was tired of being angry. Her rage turned her into a person she didn't recognize. She knew she wanted to change, but she did not know how.

**Sy Snarr:** When you have that much hatred and anger in you, you become that; you are angry and hateful. I didn't like it. I didn't like what I had become.



**Amy Donaldson:** Then Sy got a call from a woman at her church, who wanted to give a talk about forgiveness. The story she wanted to tell was about a victim of a murder. And the woman was worried that if she spoke at church, it might upset Sy.

**Sy Snarr:** And I said, actually, I'd kind of like to hear it, you know, I'd be interested to hear it.

[MUSIC]

**Sy Snarr:** And so she just gave the most amazing talk about that. And it just hit me, I thought, I want to be like that. I want to feel that. I want to be able to forgive him, you know. And it was a process. I've likened it to backpacks full of rocks, that you have to let go a little at a time.

**Amy Donaldson:** You may have heard of this backpack full of rocks. It's a common analogy used in the mental health field that helps people visualize how anger, stress and shame can create an emotional weight that we might not even be aware we're carrying with us. The idea is to take out a rock, acknowledge what you've been carrying, and then put it down. The goal, eventually, is to empty the backpack.

**Sy Snarr:** It doesn't happen overnight. It did not happen overnight for me.

**Amy Donaldson:** Sy says it took about 15 years, until she was finally able to finally let go. It was a slow and deliberate process.

**Sy Snarr:** I just quit thinking about it. I quit thinking about him, I quit hating him, I quit, quit dwelling on him. And I just thought, you know, I've got to go on.

**Amy Donaldson:** It was a matter of shifting her focus from the way her son was killed to the way her son lived.

**Sy Snarr:** And then every time I found myself thinking about it, which was often, cuz I thought about it every day for years; you do, you know, it's something hard to not think about that I would just make, I'd forced my mind to go somewhere else. And after a while I realized, you know, I'm not thinking about Zach's death, I thought about his life, I still do every day and celebrate it, you know, just how grateful I was to have him for 18 years and how awesome he was, you know, but I just couldn't dwell on his death.

**Amy Donaldson:** Ron followed his wife's lead, eventually realizing that the hatred he'd harbored was only hurting him and those he loved.

**Ron Snarr:** the only one I was hurting or killing was myself. And I was so sick of it, you know, I says, I'm destroyed. I've destroyed myself and everybody around me, you know, nobody likes to be around me. You know, I can see, and I can see their point.

**Amy Donaldson:** Ron says it took him about 18 years, the length of Zach's life. He remembers talking to a woman from church - a full time missionary. They were riding together in a truck for several hours to make a delivery at a girls camp for girls in Wyoming.

**Ron Snarr:** She rode with me to the girls camp and you know, I said, "you know what I'm doing I'm gonna forgive Jorge." The pain of it all is killing me, you know, it's destroyed me. And so, Jesus was right, love one another. He taught us, the whole gospel's about love. And it's just not love the people you love, it's love everybody. Even those who wrong me. Because Jesus can forgive him, we all can.

**Amy Donaldson:** Once Ron and Sy decided to let go of their anger, they found it opened up possibilities that had been closed to them for years.

**Ron Snarr:** The weight of the world lifted off my shoulder and I can, I can be nice, and I can smile and I can laugh. Everybody's got their own problems, you know, and I've got to live with mine. And I'm going to do better with it. I'm going to change me first. And then try to help everybody change themselves to you know, if I can do it, they can do it. You know, I've gone through a lot. I carried the hatred for so long.

**Sy Snarr:** I had total forgiveness for him. And it changed my life for so much better. So much better just to let go of that burden, this weight that's on you all the time. It was like this huge weight lifted from me.

**Amy Donaldson:** Sy thought she had made it to a good place, as good as it would get in her lifetime. She began to feel lighter, happier, although sometimes she still yearned for the chance to talk to her son's killer.

**Sy Snarr:** I wished I could tell him I've forgiven him. I'll never get that chance.

**Amy Donaldson:** But Sy was wrong, she would have that chance. She and Ron had no idea how things would change with the arrival of a letter.

[MUSIC]

**Amy Donaldson:** Before we tell you about that letter and the impact it had on the Snarrs, we're going to find out what happens to the survivor, Yvette Rodier. The fact that she lived and Zach didn't, haunts all of her decisions as she struggles to reclaim her life.

**Amy Donaldson:** Next time on the Letter...

**Yvette Rodier:** There must be a reason I'm here, right? I still, I need to do something. There's got to be some sort of purpose.

[CREDITS]

**Andrea Smardon:** When it comes to forgiveness, most of us think it's a concept we understand, but it might be more complicated than we think. I'm producer Andrea Smardon, and in this week's bonus episode, Amy talks with two professionals. One is a pioneer in the scientific study of forgiveness about how it can improve physical health. Another is a psychologist and professor who put his research into practice when his mother was murdered. With the help of these experts, Amy unravels the ways we misunderstand something that can offer hope and healing to victims of trauma.

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**Amy Donaldson:** The Letter is researched and reported by me, Amy Donaldson. It's written by myself and Andrea Smardon, who is also responsible for production and sound design. Mixing by Trent Sell.

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