

Pat & Tammy McLeod

with Cynthia Ruchti

HIT HARD

One Family's Journey

of Letting Go of What Was—

and Learning to Live Well

with What Is



This book is riveting. I could not put it down. Pat and Tammy McLeod share their story of being “hit hard” by their eldest son’s head injury in a high school football game. With twists and turns, their story moves from sadness to joy and back again, but always informs and provides hope. While this book is about a child who is brain injured, it will be helpful for anyone coping with losses of any kind. The awful challenge is to embrace change—especially a change we loathe. In *Hit Hard*, the McLeods share their journey of how, with faith and dignity, they are coping with loss. I recommend this book not only for professionals but also for those who want to learn how to live with loss of any kind, clear or ambiguous.

DR. PAULINE BOSS, Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota;
author of *Ambiguous Loss* and other books

A stirring and inspiring story about loss, grief, love, and faith. Pat and Tammy McLeod have much to teach us all about the meaning of ambiguous loss—how they let go of the son they once knew and learned to embrace the son they have today.

BEN BRADLEE JR., former Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist at the *Boston Globe*; author of *The Kid: The Immortal Life of Ted Williams* and *The Forgotten: How the People of One Pennsylvania County Elected Donald Trump and Changed America*

On the surface, *Hit Hard* tells the story of a young man’s brain trauma and its long-term impact on the McLeod family. But there is far more to this book than a story about a catastrophic injury. Parents Pat and Tammy alternate as authors, often reflecting on the same incident from two points of view. In essence, they weave two stories into one,

which underscores how each member of a family—of a community, really—is affected so differently by the same loss, especially a loss that never ends. The story itself is compelling on its own. But their honesty, their maturity of faith, their confession of hope, and their commitment to deal with the harsh reality of the experience without yielding to despair set this book apart as profound, insightful, and helpful. I was so captured that I read it in one sitting.

GERALD L. SITTSER, Professor of Theology, Whitworth University;
author of *A Grace Disguised*

Hit Hard is a gripping, brutally honest narrative of the emotional devastation of parents and siblings when the athletically gifted eldest son suffers severe brain injury in a football accident, and of the disruptive effects of the injury on family relationships. When, after several years of flailing about in their grief, the family learns to identify what they are experiencing as “ambiguous loss,” they are finally able to acknowledge and celebrate what is good and precious in the life of their son, especially his unbounded joy in family and friends, and his unwavering faith in God. Told by the parents in alternating sections, the story is both gut-wrenching and inspiring.

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF, Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology, Yale University; Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, University of Virginia

The McLeod family has been on a remarkable journey. By sharing the highs, the lows, and the unvarnished truth of their

son Zachary's serious brain injury, they invite us all to reflect on finding meaning in tragedy, coping with a new reality, and discovering the depth of a family's love.

CHRIS NOWINSKI, PHD, cofounder and CEO, Concussion Legacy Foundation; author of *Head Games: The Global Concussion Crisis*

One of the greatest destroyers of hope in our lives is a lack of honesty about pain, grief, and loss. In *Hit Hard*, Pat and Tammy McLeod share, with painful honesty, the reality of living through ambiguous loss together as a family. I wept several times reading this book and was moved by their commitment to Christ and especially their son Zach's focus on God. If you are experiencing loss, this book will bring you hope, comfort, joy, and a certainty that you are not alone.

MATT MIKALATOS, author of *Good News for a Change* and *Sky Lantern*

Spiritual, riveting, compassionate, loving, cathartic, and so much more. A must-read for every parent and parent-to-be.

DR. ROBERT C. CANTU, Clinical Professor of Neurosurgery and Neurology and Cofounder of the CTE Center, Boston University School of Medicine.

Hit Hard is a story of tragedy, grief, heartbreak, acceptance, hope, and redemption that will encourage every reader who has also been hit hard by the reality of this life in a fallen world outside the Garden of Eden. I have been privileged to know Pat and Tammy through this difficult journey. I have witnessed, through the pain and challenges, their struggle to accept the unknown and begin grieving

without closure. Their faith has inspired me, and Zach is so fortunate to have parents who are deeply committed to Christ and to him. *Hit Hard* does not answer the question of why these difficult things happen to faithful believers. It does provide an inspirational guide to what we are to do when the challenge before us is so great that, without faith in a faithful God, we would lose our way. Pat and Tammy do not lose their way. Instead they show the rest of us how to find ours.

STEPHEN ARTERBURN, bestselling author and founder of NewLife Ministries and Women of Faith

Jesus told us that in this life we will have trouble (John 16:33). *Hit Hard* is a heartfelt and courageous testimony of fear, disillusionment, and hope in the midst of loss. Pat and Tammy corroborate the reality of so many Christians who walk through the shadow of death and still feel evil. In this regard, *Hit Hard* is a generous and empathetic love offering to the body of Christ.

JONATHAN L. WALTON, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals,
Harvard University

I've known Pat and Tammy McLeod since 1986. This is the story about how their family's life changed when their sixteen-year old son, Zach, suffered a traumatic brain injury after a routine hit during a high school football game. It is a story about marriage and its imperfections; about parenting and its vulnerability; about the struggle of faith in life's uncertainty. It is a story about overwhelming grief and unexpected slivers of grace; about loneliness and

friendship; about finding a marker when you are lost. It is a story about finding a name for their experience—ambiguous loss—and trying to hang on to God and each other when sometimes “hanging on” is all you can do. You will find yourself in this story somewhere. As I read it, I thought of being a parent, being a child, being a brother, being a friend, and being a person of faith. I cried and I laughed . . . it seemed like real life.

DR. RON SANDERS, author of *After the Election* and Campus Minister at Stanford University

Hit Hard hits hard. By sharing their experience through story, Pat and Tammy offer humanity a wonderful gift from their struggle, making meaning of their loss in the crucible called life. Their story resonates with issues that transcend geographic location, class, and race, not only because it interweaves their experiences in South Africa and in the US, but because ambiguous loss and its ubiquitousness is a reality for many people across the world.

EDWIN SMITH, former director of the University of Pretoria Mamelodi campus; cofounder of the Mamelodi Initiative; author of *Immortal: A Poetic Memento for Vuyisile Miles Smith*

Good stories can help us find meaning in the midst of devastating tragedy. *Hit Hard* is one of those stories. It's a hard but wonderful story that shows us how to deal with unimaginable loss.

MATT CARROLL, Pulitzer Prize-winning member of the *Boston Globe's* journalistic team whose coverage was the basis for the Oscar-winning movie *Spotlight*

This book of courage and faith in the midst of a cruel and senseless tragedy helps us make sense of what seems incomprehensible.

MICHEAL FLAHERTY, CEO of Epiphany Story Lab;
cofounder of Walden Media

Clarity. That is what this book brings to those searching for meaning in the midst of loss and suffering, or for those who feel caught up in a story that has no last chapter.

BOB SWENSON, ex All-Pro linebacker, Denver Broncos;
founder of the Freedom 58 Project

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*In times of crisis,
every relationship becomes
an at-risk relationship.*

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Prologue

Pat

My wife, Tammy, and I had fallen hard for Montana in the years we lived and worked there. Everything about it stirred our senses. The mountains, wide spaces, fresh air, piercingly blue sky, and pristine lakes stretched our legs and our souls. It added to our joy that our children—a girl and three boys—appreciated the beauty and all it offered as much as we did.

After we moved to Boston, returning to Montana for vacations felt like being back home, in a place where we could look out the window and see not a bustling city, but a bald eagle soaring over a glassy lake, or the moose our son Zach nicknamed “Old Mangey” pruning the willow trees around our cabin, or the black bear that pillaged our raspberry bushes and once climbed onto our porch swing to peek in at my mom while she was in the bathroom.

Montana—even for short visits—afforded us everything we needed to thrive as a family. Togetherness. Exploration. Time and room to wander and ponder. Physical challenges that

strengthened muscles and relationships. Serenity that seeped deep into our souls.

Until the day the storm hit.

Five-year-old Soren and his ten-year-old brother, Zach, had begged their grandpa to let them spend a little more time fishing from the dock while he went up to the cabin to clean fish. Tammy and I were attending a wedding. Chelsea and Nate were away with their cousins.

A Montana storm came out of nowhere, tossing a small aluminum fishing boat tethered to the dock and threatening our two sons standing nearby. The boys' grandparents were unaware of what was happening until they heard hail pinging against the roof. Then clunking on the roof. Then pounding on it.

Peering through the storm, they could barely see the dock, and no one hustling up the incline toward the cabin. All they could see and hear were a machine-gun barrage of hailstones and a sudden jarring thunderbolt.

The crisis was over by the time our family was reunited. My mom and dad, however, were still shaken. As my dad related details of the incident later, I felt every emotion, every surge of adrenaline that I would have felt if racing through the storm myself to reach my sons.

Tammy wrapped her arms around five-year-old Soren as if he were still shivering. I fist-bumped his protector, Zach, who acted as if heroism was no big deal.

"Way to go, buddy. Way to look out for your little brother."

The calm I hoped I projected didn't match my pounding heartbeat. Neither boy was seriously injured. But I knew from my own childhood that a Montana hailstorm can kill livestock.

It could have ended differently.

The boys had scrambled off the exposed dock into the boat. Soren had curled into a ball at the bottom as Zach threw life jackets over him, then hunched over his brother, shielding Soren from the pelting hail. Zach hadn't even considered his own needs in light of his brother's.

It didn't surprise any of us. It was so like Zach.

As the storm clouds on all fronts cleared, Tammy and I leaned into each other and she sighed against my chest.

"I think we should probably forgive Zach for that stunt he pulled last week with the four-wheeler," I whispered.

"Already did," Tammy said.

Holding her in that moment reminded me how blessed we were to have each other, these four unique children, and the adventure of watching them discover their place in the world.

Six years later, we were hit hard by a different storm. We weren't there to see that one strike either.

C H A P T E R

1

Tammy

“Pat, can’t you drive any faster?”

“You want me to get us all killed?” Pat glanced my way.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“I know.”

I gripped the seat belt that lay across my chest and lifted it away from my body so I could breathe easier. The crushing pressure remained. The pain’s genesis must have been internal.

Pat checked his rearview mirror and pressed down on the accelerator. Boston traffic. He hit the blinker and steered our car into the other lane, swerving in front of a slow-moving delivery truck.

From the backseat, I heard eleven-year-old Soren draw a

sharp breath, reminding me we weren't alone in this race to the hospital. I glanced over my shoulder. Soren sat, wide-eyed, tugging at his own chest strap.

I turned to watch Boston fly past my passenger window, but Pat's profile reflected back to me in the glass. Even without a clear image, I could see the distress written all over his posture.

"Tell me again exactly what Nate said to you on the phone, Pat." As if recounting it one more time would uncover a new detail—a missing fact that would make sense of the message our fourteen-year-old son had screeched over the phone, jerking our hearts out of rhythm. I listened again as Pat repeated the scant information he had received from Nate.

I'm the no-nonsense one between us. I'm the give-it-to-me-straight person. But I'm also a ponderer. Nothing about the minutes between us and the hospital gave me anything to slide into orderly notches. Logic? Absent. Thoughts worth hovering over? Gone.

Pat's focus was still trained on the traffic in front of us, and behind us, and on either side.

Before. Behind. Beside. Familiar words in unfamiliar territory.

"We have to be prepared, Tammy," Pat whispered.

"Is Zach going to be okay?" Soren's vocal cords registered enough tension for all of us.

Sure he is lay on the tip of my tongue. *Why wouldn't Zach be okay?* I couldn't nudge the words any farther.

No matter how fast we drove or how much traffic we negotiated, the distance between us and the hospital seemed to widen rather than shrink.

We should have been at the scrimmage.

“Regret travels at the speed of light,” Pat spoke into our silence.

How had he known what I was thinking? We *would* have been there. But we’d been responsible for organizing the meeting that evening where hundreds of Boston students would take their first steps toward integrating faith and college life.

Zach’s scrimmage. There’d be others we could attend. Now that idea seemed absurd. We’d been laughing with, hugging, and counseling other parents’ kids in our role as campus chaplains at the defining moment when, twenty miles outside of Boston, our sixteen-year-old Zach took a hard hit on a high school football field.

Now stoplights and speed limits, like referees on a field, had become impediments in the way of getting to our son.

Pat

A gut-bruising unlike any other. An excruciating pain in my chest. Though I’d played a lifetime of sports, I don’t remember a hit like the one I felt when Tammy and I were finally allowed into Zach’s cubicle in the Boston Medical Center trauma unit.

Zach had four faces—relentless joy, I’m-plotting-a-joke-you-don’t-know-about-yet, intimate worship, and irrepressible compassion. But now it reflected no reaction. His face was expressionless. Blank. Empty of everything that defined our son.

Temporary. This is only a temporary condition. When the shock wears off. . .

I’d seen hard hits before. Came with the territory of being a football family. My grandfather played football. My dad played and coached football. Both of my brothers played

football—one professionally for the Green Bay Packers. I'd played college football and coached high school football before my current job in Boston with Harvard students. We McLeods knew about hard hits.

We knew risks exist with any sport. They'd all seemed worth it. But at that moment, as I held Zach's limp hand and searched his face for the slightest flicker of life, I realized I didn't know anything at all.

I should have been there on the sidelines. Guilt came as an unbidden distraction.

While Zach was lying on the football field, Tammy and I stood with our youngest—Soren—at the back of an auditorium filled with college students. None of the hundreds of smiling, laughing, chatty students seemed in a hurry to leave when the first citywide meeting of the year ended. The walls vibrated like a stadium after a victorious homecoming football game, as if Harvard had just beaten Yale. Close friends who had spent the summer on different coasts spotted each other across the room and screamed like revelers in a mosh pit at a rock concert.

I had been caught up in the celebration and reunions until I felt a tug on my sleeve in the middle of a conversation. A Harvard student—Julia—handed me her phone. I might have been irritated by her impatience if it hadn't been for the look of anguish on her face.

I held her phone to my ear and heard panic in Nate's voice, our middle son. He was supposed to be at the meeting with us, but he'd begged to stay home that night.

"Dad, why aren't you answering your phone?" Nate's words tumbled out as if pouring through a fissure in a dam. "I've been trying to reach you. Zach's hurt." His voice hitched. "Coaches

have been calling. Parents of other players are calling. Now the hospital is calling!”

Drama came second nature to Nate. I hesitated to indulge him without knowing the details.

It wasn't the first time we'd received a phone call that one of our four children had been injured. Nate had broken his arm five times. We'd deal with it. Inconvenient, but parenting is rarely convenient. In the moment, I briefly hoped whatever had happened wouldn't be serious enough to make Zach miss that week's game. He was tough. He'd played hurt before.

But I'd pressed the borrowed phone to one ear and covered the other with my hand while I made my way out of the noisy auditorium.

“He collapsed during the scrimmage,” Nate said.

“Collapsed?”

“They're taking him to the hospital. In a helicopter!” His voice wavered again. “Dad, they said they need your permission to perform emergency brain surgery.”

What? No. Kids get broken bones and twisted ankles. Not emergency brain surgery.

Minutes later, after I'd rounded up Tammy and Soren, we were in the car darting in and out of traffic on Massachusetts Avenue. The three of us arrived, breathless, at the door of the emergency room. We left Soren with a band of five speechless, stoic, obviously troubled football coaches so Tammy and I could get to Zach.

Now she and I stood on opposite sides of the gurney. I couldn't read what was going on in her mind. And I couldn't process what was going on in mine, much less Zach's. *Come on, buddy. Open your eyes. Say something. Say anything.*

I struggled to square the energetic young man I knew with the unmoving, unresponsive son lying in front of me.

“We’re here, Zach.”

Tammy’s head was bowed. She rocked side to side as she had when she’d held Zach and our other children as newborns. Same Zach. *That* one.

The boy whose love for the outdoors and passion for adventure emerged during his early life in rugged Montana. The son who, nine years before, had wholeheartedly embraced urban life when we moved to Boston. The boy who’d exchanged being pulled on a horse-drawn sled for hopping on the back of a UPS truck while it raced around the streets of our Boston-Cambridge neighborhood. The one who’d replaced deer hunting with tackling our temporary rodent problem using his pellet gun, on the lookout for the rat he spotted in the basement every morning when he retrieved his bike.

That same boy now lay before us, still clad in the bottom half of his football uniform, including his football cleats. Zach’s eerily unmoving body mocked the boy he’d been, the one who traded riding his bike along logging trails of a national forest for weaving in, out, and over the potholes and granite curbs of Boston. *That’s my Zach*. Tough and resilient.

Zach’s steady breathing slowed my pulse. Zach was *breathing*. His face was blank, but peaceful—no sign of pain.

When the surgeon burst through the doors with an entourage of doctors and nurses, he brought all the pain with him.

“We need to open his skullcap and remove a blood clot to save his life,” the surgeon said, mincing no words. “This can result in anything from death to full recovery or anything in between.” Handing us a clipboard, he added, “Sign here.”

Chilled by the cold words and emotionless delivery, we signed. We weren't invited to ask questions but probably couldn't have thought of any after a blow like that.

A nurse broke the tense residual silence left in the surgeon's wake. "You can talk to your son. He hears you."

How does she know? Tammy and I took Zach's hands, leaned over him, and breathed in the ripe-athlete smell of our first man-child. We whispered a prayer in each ear and kissed his cheeks, our faces a much-loved son apart.

Two startling clicks announced that the nurses had unlocked the wheels of his bed. They could waste no more time.

I expected Tammy would melt into my embrace when we were left alone. I hadn't expected to feel as if I wasn't strong enough to hold myself upright, much less her. Or that instead of remaining in my embrace, she'd push away too soon and head for the waiting room to console the growing crowd of the concerned.

In the moment just before we stood alone, we watched the medical staff steer Zach through the double door toward a surgery with the power to give his life back . . . or take it from him.



I watched Coach Papas—the weight on his shoulders palpable—as I headed toward him and a group of empty chairs in the corner of the waiting room. This was not a man known for his softness—at least, on the football field. He was as intense and demanding as they come. If a player arrived for practice on time, Coach Papas considered him ten minutes late. The man elicited respect bordering on fear from his football players, including Zach.

I reached to shake his hand before asking the unanswerable question. “Coach, what happened? I don’t understand.”

The coach with a reputation for toughness dissolved in tears and tried to recount what had transpired.

On the first play of the game, Zach intercepted a pass and ran it back for a touchdown. Then—an unremarkable play. Zach and four other teammates tackled a running back. Nothing out of the ordinary. Zach went down with the pile, but it wasn’t clear if his helmet hit another player’s. He stumbled on the way back to the huddle. Unusual, but not worrisome. The coach made a joke about Zach tripping over the paint on the yard line, brought him in to discuss the next play, and looked into his eyes.

That’s when Coach Papas knew something was wrong.

“I’m fine, Coach,” Zach had said with his signature enthusiasm.

And then he collapsed at the coach’s feet.

“I’ve seen lots of my players go down,” Coach Papas said. “Nothing like this.” His words trailed off, disappearing into the swirl of conversations, the endless echo—*How could this have happened?*

As Coach Papas finished sketching the details of what led to this moment, other friends and family members poured into the quickly shrinking space in the waiting room.

Tammy and I fielded a steady stream of questions. Our answers consisted largely of “We don’t know” or “We don’t know yet.” I caught glimpses of Tammy moving from one person to another, offering comfort.

Tammy’s strength didn’t surprise me. It warmed me in the air-conditioned chill of the waiting room. She saw a need and, as she usually did, stepped up to meet it. She tamed what must

have been her own raging internal upheaval to serve those locked in confusion and concern. I admired that pattern in her and had seen it often. For some reason, on this night, my admiration was tinged with—*what?*—loneliness?

We'd always worked well together—as a couple, as parents, as partners in serving the spiritual needs of college students. Still tag-teaming, we operated in our strengths—Tammy calming others, me capturing all the details I could. Only a few feet apart from each other. She turned a pained smile my way.

Suffocating numbness enshrouded me. Emotional asthma. I couldn't exhale. Couldn't inhale. Out of sight, away from our presence, doctors huddled over our son, attempting to use all of medicine's resources and their well-honed skills to preserve Zach's scrambled brain, to save his life.

How could a cohesive, rational thought push past that reality?

Tammy

So many people. Our circle of friends was large, diverse, younger, older . . . what a gift. We'd never be able to thank them all. I made my rounds, giving and receiving hugs, thanking them for coming, as if they'd taken off work to attend a funeral.

"Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for coming."

Their presence was a comfort, but it also underscored the seriousness of our unfolding family drama.

