

A Hierarchy of Grief

We must embrace pain and burn it as fuel for our journey.

~Kenji Miyazawa

Mary was the first one to tell me that our children were in an accident. They had been dating less than a year when a drunk driver hit them from behind as Neil walked Trista home after a study date at our house. Trista suffered a massive head injury and was taken to Boston by helicopter. Her parents took her off life support the next day. Neil's brain damage was subtler, unapparent at first.

His eyes flew open when I reached his side in the ER.

"Hi Mom," he said, filling me with relief. He knew me!

Things quickly changed. He became agitated. He thought he was in a gym. He wanted the collar off his neck. He was in pain. His broken shinbone jutted off at an unnatural angle, his only injury we were told at first. Later we learned that his brain was also bleeding. He too needed to be transported into Boston for intensive care.

Even in those panic-stricken early hours, I felt the weight of the other mother in that room, the presence of Mary. I wanted to cover Neil's cold and shivering body with my own to warm him. I thought of Mary. Wouldn't she rather feel Trista cold and shivering than just plain cold? It was so unlike Neil to yell, to demand. It was hard to listen to. I wanted to take the collar off his neck, make him comfortable. I kept thinking of Mary and how she would give anything to hear Trista's voice again, even if she were complaining. My grief felt constricted next to Mary's. How dare I grieve at all? How fraudulent it felt, like I was hijacking the very word from someone who knew true loss.

But I have losses, too. Neil recovered. He left the hospital after two surgeries. He had physical therapy. He walked with a cane for months. But he has changed. He doesn't like crowds. He has short-term memory loss. He doesn't laugh as much as before. His friends from high school sensed it right away. They didn't know how to relate to him anymore. The ones from his theater group, who once gathered around his makeshift bed in our living room entertaining him with dances and song, started coming around less often. Eventually they stopped coming by at all.

Six years after the accident Neil still suffered. He took anti-depressants and saw a therapist. He smoked cigarettes. He still saw Mary from time to time. I wondered if when she looked at him, she saw the kid who went to the prom, the high school graduate, the college student, all the things that Trista would never be. And he has had successes. He graduated from Skidmore College with degrees in mathematics and the classics. He taught math at a private high school in Vermont. But he was asked to leave before the year was out. "Too depressed," the headmaster said. Now he works at his father's restaurant supply store and is applying to graduate school. He wants to teach again.

Because our children's accident involved a drunk driver, there was a trial; there were hearings for sentencing and hearings for parole. For each one, Mary and I were asked to write victim impact statements to read before the court. We stood before judge after judge over the years, telling our respective stories. Our parallel if uneven tragedies were held up for display over and over.

Sometimes Mary spoke ahead of me. Occasionally I went first. Sometimes she read from prepared statements, but often she just spoke from her heart. She told of

memories: shopping trips and Girl Scout camps. School plays and holding hands. All the things that she would miss about her daughter.

“What yardstick do I use to measure that?” she asked.

But I need a yardstick, too. It may be different from Mary’s. With tinier notches perhaps. Or at least spaced more widely apart. But I have things to measure, too. Neil’s pain from fractured bones; hardware in and hardware out. His slow progress through physical therapy. His struggles with memory loss. His pain from the loss of his girlfriend and having his whole world turned upside down.

So I told my story to the judges, too. No embellishments. No drama. Just the facts and from the heart. I was aware that Mary was listening. I knew that her loss was greater than mine. But we were in this together and the judge needed to hear from both of us, bearing witness to our children’s separate tragedies so that justice might take place, knowing that it never could.

I have come to believe that grief has many faces. There is no one right way to behave in the face of it. No correct approach. There is no one set of circumstances that warrants it as a reaction and no specific behavior that qualifies as an appropriate response. It just is. I have come to understand that the whole gamut of human emotion is legit when it comes to coping with loss. Even how we define our loss is personal and valid, different as it may be for each of us. I’m not sure where I stand in this hierarchy of grief. I may not be on the top rung, but I’m not on the bottom either. All I know is that I belong on the ladder.

~Carolyn Roy-Bornstein