

A Tragic Loss: A Son's Eulogy

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Last month my wife Marilyn and I visited my brother Michael and his family in Arizona. We had a wonderful time, especially since Michael looked and was feeling the best he had in five years since first being diagnosed with a rare, life-threatening illness. He was treated for an entire summer at the world renowned Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Michael confronted his illness with courage and determination. I believe that the support and presence of his wife, children, grandchildren, other family members, and friends contributed to the success of the treatment. I have frequently written about the importance of our personal connections as sources of emotional and physical nourishment and healing. The positive power of connectedness was and continues to be very apparent in Michael's treatment progress.

When someone very close to you faces a life-threatening illness, it personalizes and heightens an awareness of both the fragility and preciousness of life. I experienced such emotions intensely many years ago when my brother Irwin, whom I have written about in previous articles, was killed; a terrorist planted a bomb on the plane that he and other Air Force members were flying. In a split second not only were lives lost, but the lives of family and friends of the victims were altered forever. Sudden losses are not unusual. They occur with regularity whether taking place in war zones or in car accidents or in natural disasters. An attendee at a recent workshop said to me that we all use a certain amount of "healthy denial" or we would become paralyzed thinking about all of the possible misfortune that might befall us or loved ones at any particular moment.

An Unexpected Message

While we know that capricious and unpredictable deaths occur with regularity, they still evoke shock and disbelief, especially when someone you know very well is involved. On our last morning in Arizona, just as we were getting ready to go to the airport, Marilyn received an e-mail from a close friend back in Massachusetts. It simply said to call when we returned home. There was an ominous quality to the message since it seemed to convey a sense of urgency without any explanation.

Marilyn decided to call while we were at the airport waiting for our flight back to Boston. As we had feared, the news was very upsetting. A dear friend, Ellie Jacobs,

whom we have known for more than 40 years and lives in the same town in which we do, was struck and seriously injured by a hit-and-run driver. Ellie was in a coma with multiple injuries including two broken legs. Her only son Jonathan, his wife Maedhbh, and their infant son Donovan immediately came up from New York City to be with her. Jonathan and Maedhbh e-mailed Ellie's many friends and family with up-dates about her condition.

About two weeks after her accident, Jonathan reported some improvement with Ellie although she remained in critical condition and had not yet regained consciousness. This was the first indication of any progress, however small, since the accident. Later that evening while I was involved in doing some writing, the phone rang. A few minutes later Marilyn tearfully came in to say that although the last report we received about Ellie appeared more hopeful, she had passed away a short while ago. We knew she was critically injured, but we were still shocked by her death, perhaps more so given the optimistic up-date that had been sent a little earlier that day.

In reflecting about Ellie's death, I thought of our friendship over the years. I first met Ellie when I was a psychology intern at the Worcester Youth Guidance Center in Massachusetts and Ellie was just beginning her career as a social worker. After I was awarded my doctorate, Marilyn and I and our 15-month-old son Richard moved to Denver where I completed a postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Colorado Medical School. We moved back to the Boston area in 1970 and rented a townhouse in Needham. A couple on the street invited us to a party at their house and said that they learned that I knew the wife of one of the couples who would be at the party. It was Ellie. She came with her husband Don and we were to become close friends. We bought a house in Needham as did Ellie and Don. We had a second son, Doug, in 1971, and their son Jonathan was born in 1973.

A Son's Eulogies in 2004 and 2011

As we were waiting in the sanctuary for Ellie's funeral service to begin at Temple Beth Shalom in Needham, where we had all been members of the congregation for many years, my mind wandered back to 2004 when Don's funeral service was held in the same setting. Don, a professor at Northeastern University in Boston, had battled Parkinson's Disease for many years, and it was very sad to witness how the disease ravaged his body

during the last few years of his life. Two very different things about Don's funeral remained vivid for me. Don was a passionate Red Sox fan and on the casket in a very tasteful way was a Red Sox balloon. The Red Sox memorabilia served to elicit smiles from those at Don's service. One person said to me, "Don would certainly want his love of the Sox displayed at his funeral." Just a few months after Don's passing, the Red Sox won their first World Series in 86 years and both Marilyn and I talked about the joy Don would have felt when the final out was made and the Sox finally won the Series. Thinking about Don I also appreciated stories that were reported of people bringing copies of the sports pages of *The Boston Globe* to place on the gravesites of departed family members who had never experienced their beloved home team winning the Series. As I described in my website article of November, 2004, a love of the Sox was a link that connected the different generations to each other.

The second lasting memory of Don's funeral service was the eulogy Jonathan offered about his father. All the eulogies for Don were very moving, but I was especially touched by what Jonathan had to say. At one point he observed that given the long period of time in which Don was afflicted with Parkinson's many people had never known what a vibrant person his father had been prior to the onset of the illness. Jonathan then read a piece that Don had written many years ago before he and Ellie were married. The occasion was that Ellie was returning from a vacation. Don's words captured his love of life and his love for and excitement about seeing Ellie again. It was a wonderful way to be reminded of who Don was and in actuality who he continued to be even as Parkinson's increasingly weakened his body and made it very difficult for him to speak.

Not surprisingly, given all of Ellie's many friends and family, the sanctuary was filled at her funeral service. Rabbi Jay Perlman began the service by noting, "We were not supposed to be here today," capturing the senseless nature of Ellie's death. He then offered a very meaningful eulogy that was followed by the poignant reflections of two other current rabbis as well as the rabbi emeritus of the Temple. All in attendance were aware of the vital force Ellie had been within the Temple family as well as in the larger Needham community.

Jonathan then rose to offer his thoughts about his mother. He began by saying that given how hectic the events had been since Ellie's accident, he had not had time to prepare a more formal eulogy. Even if he had little time to prepare, his eulogy was eloquent. He shared that the last time he spoke with and saw his mother prior to the accident was via skype. Ellie was ecstatic at the birth of Donovan, her first grandchild, who was now eight months old. A day or two before her death, she sang a lullaby to Donovan via skype that she had sung to Jonathan when he was an infant. Jonathan described how happy he was that his mother had the opportunity to sing that last lullaby to Donovan shortly before her tragic accident. He then sang the lullaby for all of us to hear.

Jonathan noted that what was very important was that his relationship with Ellie was in a "very good place" at the time of her death. He implied that past differences had been resolved, a situation that was comforting to him. Upon expressing this thought, Jonathan paused for a moment as if deciding what to say next. In a spontaneous way, almost as if he had not originally intended to express the following thought, he told all of us in the sanctuary that we should not let small things compromise loving relationships with family and friends. I interpreted his message to be that we should all enjoy and treasure our relationships not because we might lose someone suddenly but because seemingly small actions such as Ellie singing the lullaby to Donovan add so much joy and meaning to our lives.

After the funeral I told Jonathan how impressed I was by his eulogy and how moved I was by his words about he and his mother being in a "very good place" in their relationship. We spoke briefly of the importance of not being burdened by unresolved issues that might overshadow the more positive features of a relationship.

Not Being in "Good Places"

Reflecting on Jonathan's words I could not help but think of the many people who have spoken with me at my workshops or in therapy who were not in good places in their relationships, feeling estranged from family members or friends. I remember that three days after the horror of 9/11, I was scheduled to give a workshop about the theme of resilience. Since other events were being postponed or cancelled in the wake of the tragedy, I wasn't certain if the sponsors of the workshop would want to postpone my

workshop. Instead, they said that, if anything, what better time to think about resilience than now. They also said the workshop setting might provide participants an opportunity to share thoughts and feelings about what had transpired several days earlier.

Their decision to go ahead with the workshop was supported by the number of people who attended, the active participation of the audience, and the many individuals who spoke with me during the refreshment breaks and at lunch. One woman told me that her son worked in the World Trade Center and she found out just the day before that her son was alive. While thrilled that her son had not been killed during the terrorist attack, she explained with obvious sadness in her voice that she received the news from one of her son's friends since she had not spoken with her son in a couple of years. She didn't tell me why they were estranged, but she said that she realized that she had to do something to reconnect with him.

Just a couple of months later a man asked to speak with me at the end of a workshop, one in which I described the components of harmonious family relationships and the importance of connections with others. With tears in his eyes he recounted that he had not had contact with his son in four years even though his son lived near him. He did not reveal the source of the problem. Rather, he informed me that the ideas and strategies I presented were very meaningful to him; he especially honed in on a concept I had emphasized during the workshop, one that I have spoken and written about a great deal, namely, that of *personal control*. In highlighting this concept during my presentation I emphasized that if we are not content about a certain situation or relationship, it is incumbent upon us to ask what is it that we can do differently to improve the situation rather than wait for others to change first. He informed me that he realized that there were steps he had to initiate if he were to "repair" his relationship with his son.

I want to stress a point about these two examples. As a beginning therapist I held what I now consider to be a mistaken belief, namely, that one of the main measures of therapeutic success was when family members resolved their differences and satisfying relationships were established. While in most cases this is true, I learned that there were some relationships that in actuality were beyond repair and/or destructive to at least one of the family members. I came to realize that therapeutic progress was better assessed

through the lens of *personal control*, namely, by examining whether individuals demonstrated the capacity to identify and initiate constructive action in areas over which they had control to change and/or avoid particular relationships. As I continue to emphasize, we have control over our own actions but not the actions of others.

An example of this last point was captured in my work with Mr. Larsen, a patient about whom I have reported in a previous article as well as in *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*, a book I co-authored with my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein. Mr. Larsen grew up in a home in which he was constantly berated by his father for being a weakling. Feelings of affection were strikingly absent. As a teenager Mr. Larsen turned to alcohol to dull his psychological pain. When he met his wife, a very supportive and loving woman, he stopped drinking and had little contact with his father. Mr. and Mrs. Larsen had two sons and for a number of years things went smoothly in their household. However, as his sons reached their adolescent years, the normal stresses of raising teenagers awakened much of the pain Mr. Larsen had experienced with his father. He turned to alcohol once more and as a consequence his relationship with his wife and sons was marked by increased anger and turmoil, which led him into therapy.

The therapy sessions were dominated by discussion of Mr. Larsen's unresolved feelings towards his father and his realization that he still yearned for his father's acceptance. He stopped drinking, but he felt that the only way he could truly remove the burden of these unresolved feelings was to convey to his father how he felt and to see if there was an opportunity for reconciliation. The two had rarely communicated with each other during the past 15 years.

After much consideration, Mr. Larsen decided he would express his feelings to his father by writing him a letter. In this letter he described his thoughts and emotions and voiced his desire to re-establish a relationship. He crafted his words carefully to avoid appearing accusatory or demanding. We discussed in advance the different ways in which Mr. Larsen's father might react, such as writing a hostile letter in return or not answering at all. We did not anticipate what actually happened. Mr. Larsen's father ripped his son's letter into small pieces, placed the pieces in an envelope, and mailed them back.

Interestingly, Mr. Larsen was not upset as he recounted this news. He actually displayed some relief. Although he would have preferred reconciling with his father, he said to me with impressive insight, “You’ve often said that you have to focus on what you have control over. I had control over communicating with my father but not his response. I did what I had to do, and now that I know my father’s reaction, I can get on with my life and concentrate on making certain I have the best possible relationship with my family. I can give up the fantasy of being accepted by my father and concentrate on accepting my sons.”

Mr. Larsen discovered relief in the termination of his relationship with his father, a seemingly angry, resentful man who apparently had no interest in reconciling with his son. Mr. Larsen’s relief was rooted in great part in his knowledge that he had taken steps within his control to see if he and his father could resolve issues in their relationship. He felt comfortable knowing there was nothing more he could do to improve his interactions with his father. This knowledge permitted him to move on with his life.

In contrast, my concern is that far too many people fail to initiate the kinds of actions undertaken by Mr. Larsen in seeking “a good place” for them. Instead they wait for others to change but do little to seek improvement themselves. In such a scenario persistent negative emotions such as anger and resentment dominate, leaving little room for being in a good place.

Finding Peace at a Time of Tragedy

As I listened to Jonathan’s eulogy and spoke with him afterwards, the pain of losing his mother and knowing that Donovan would forever be robbed of hearing Ellie’s lullabies and having other memorable experiences with her, was very evident. In an interview with a newspaper reporter, Jonathan also spoke of Ellie being robbed of the years of happiness she would have experienced as a grandparent. In addition, there was the distress of the police not having any leads in the identification and arrest of the hit-and-run driver, an occurrence that would at least contribute to a sense of justice for Ellie’s death.

Even with the rawness of the pain and loss so evident, I sensed a feeling of peace in Jonathan knowing that his and Maedhbh’s relationship with Ellie was filled with acceptance and love and that even for a just a few brief months she felt the joy of

interacting with her grandchild. Jonathan's sentiment about being in a good place with family and friends is one towards which we should all strive, not out of fear of these other people dying suddenly but rather because relationships housed in love and free of noticeable conflict enrich all of our lives. As we consider this thought we must remember as I have frequently posited, "We are the authors of our own lives" and that the development and maintenance of positive relationships are rooted within our power and our actions.

I hope we all find those good places for family and friends about which Jonathan spoke. His words represent, in part, the legacy left by his two caring, loving parents.

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