

Thoughts on a Child's Passing

Our community has just experienced the death of a twelve-year-old child to cancer. She and her family struggled for a year with it until it claimed her life. Why so young? we ask, How can it be? Her passage has touched so many in our town and left us all in wonder and awe along with our grief. What if it were my child? How could I go on?

Our Town House was filled to capacity with members of our small community who came together with their support, their quiet questions, their disbelief, their tears and sorrow, their love and concern for this family who lost their child. Children of all ages lined the railings of the balcony watching and listening and wondering. I would love to know what thoughts filled their heads? Babies were restless. Classmates sang for their friend. It seemed that the whole town came out. The loss of a child touches us all in different ways than the loss of an adult. Does her death hold a lesson for us? Did we get it?

No parent, I don't believe, can comprehend the death of a child without the experience of it. I cannot imagine being able to go on living but of course we must—they must. This young girl's parents seem to have been touched by grace. Their strength in the face of such unfathomable loss is nothing short of miraculous to me. How can they even get out of bed? How can they tolerate each day watching others going about their lives as usual? They have witnessed the passing of a life that they began. Her siblings will spend the rest of their lives without their sister. Might her death be a more powerful influence over their lives than her physical presence?

Try as we might to protect our children from harm, to save them from pain and sadness, to hold them safely against the blows of life, in the end, the lesson for us all is that we ultimately cannot. We must let them go to experience life—or death—on their own path. We cannot begin to understand the lessons they must learn, and we cannot, nor should we try to, prevent their learning process even when it brings pain and suffering—even death. Who are we to think that we can change the course of what happens or expect that our sage advice, life experience, and aged wisdom will be enough to weather their storms?

Consider the far-reaching lessons a child's death can bring to those whose lives she has personally touched. No matter what age, children are full of life and love—more than most of us—capable of teaching us the beauty of being in the moment, of slowing down to smell the roses and watch the pictures in the clouds. In the throws of cancer, this child quelled her parent's worry about her suffering by saying, "It is what it is, and that's okay." If they die as children, who can say they did not live a whole and complete life? It was just not a long one. The sadness and pain is for those who are left, those who must live life without.

Besides the grief that may diminish with time but never end, what lingers for any of us looking back at a child's life? Any regrets? Were words said in anger that weren't meant? Have we apologized for those moments of weakness—those reactions at times when they didn't do what we wanted? Did we learn what they were here to teach us or did we cover up the sore spots that they poked and prodded by their sometimes annoying presence by forcing them to stop their poking? Did they feel unconditionally loved or were they left thinking they didn't deserve it?

Unconditional love is the right of every child and the experience of too few. I believe this child who passed from our community experienced it fully. I believe she passed in grace and peace knowing she lived a full and rich life grounded in a strong sense of self. Could we all say that about our children? Too many of us live to old age and never know unconditional love. What if we don't have the blessing of time to say goodbye, to make amends, to speak of our love? What if a sudden accident ends that life? Are we ready? Can we say we have cherished and unconditionally loved? Or was that child left with the burden of not being quite good enough?

Perhaps we can learn through another child's death to cherish our own child's life—every moment of it. To take from both the good and the bad everything we can, to understand the beauty of the present moment without wishing away time, regretting the past, or fearing the future. To slow down and see what they see, smell what they smell, hear what they hear, and relish in all of it. If only....

