It’s Not Your Fault

My throat still raw from the punishing nasal swab, I sit alone at home awaiting the result. After awakening with a sore throat and muscle aches, I am quarantined from work at the hospital where I am an infectious diseases physician. I try to reassure myself that I have been careful—all the diligent handwashing and mask wearing. But still my mind is racing through every person I have been in contact with over the last 48 hours—coworkers, patients, my husband, and kids who, if this COVID-19 test result comes back positive, may all become potential contacts. The fear of getting sick is bad enough, but wrap it up in the guilt of hurting those you care for and love and you have a uniquely horrific gift of the pandemic.

I feel sick to find myself on this familiar ground again after so many years. This isn’t the first time I’ve carried this kind of guilt, and the memories come back quickly; a series of vivid pictures, like images from an old slide carousel.

Click: I’m pulling ahead as we race our bikes down the hill. We are 12 years old and on my morning paper route together. I turn the sharp right-hand corner onto the next street and stop about a hundred feet up the road. Click: I turn my head back to watch for him just as his bike sails into the street and he is struck by the car.

Click: He is thrown into the air as his bike continues its forward trajectory. Click: He lands on his back in the middle of the road as I hear myself scream his name. Click: The driver gets out of the car and runs to the house on the corner. He is probably 30 years old with curly black hair and a pale, scared face. Click: I run home, only a few houses away, screaming for help. My father comes. Our neighbor who is also the minister’s wife, comes. The driver comes and offered him her feet. I watched—feeling scared, sad, confused, but most of all guilty. Those horrible questions all churning inside my head: Why did I ask him to go with me? Why didn’t I let him sleep in when he wanted to? Why didn’t I slow down at the turn? Why didn’t we leave the house earlier, so we would not have been at that intersection at that time.

I had talked to my father that morning and confessed how responsible I felt. He had reassured me that it was a terrible accident, but I didn’t believe him and the seeds of guilt and shame were taking root in my brain.

As I sat there watching my uncle’s face fight to control itself while he helped my cousin get into her shoes, I had no words to explain how deeply sorry I was. My dad came into the room and stood across from his brother. “Peter” he said, “She’s feeling guilty, responsible for what happened to Jeff. She’s so sorry. She wants you to know.”

That was the first time I ever saw my uncle cry—a single deep sob. I waited and held my breath. I was ready to take responsibility. With my child’s simple sense of justice, it seemed this was my fault. And who would have blamed my uncle if he had been angry or inconsolable or if words had failed him or even if he had simply hesitated?

But I remember him as strong, unflinching, and clear. I remember he had the vision to see through blinding grief and to reach out and rescue me.

I remembered sitting in my grandmother’s living room later that morning, my 12-year-old mind whirling, reliving that morning’s terrible events. I had asked Jeff, who was visiting with his family, to come with me because it was lonely to do it by myself. I wanted him to help me deliver the mail and see the funny side of things. I had agreed because he had a way of doing that. He had agreed to come when I asked him the night before, but when I woke up that morning to go, he wanted to stay in bed—it was so warm and comfortable. But I would not take no for an answer. I pleaded with him to get up, so I wouldn’t have to do it alone and he agreed because that’s the kind of kid he was—the kind that wouldn’t let down his cousin, the kind that was always up for a new early summer adventure. And it started out fine, the usual bicycling from house to house, dropping newspapers in mailboxes and behind screen doors. We had delivered about 10 papers and were racing down the hill before it all came apart. Before he was hit by a car and died.

As I sat there in that living room only a few hours had passed, but also years. My toddler twin cousins, Jeff’s sisters, were running around the room, picking up toys, stumbling into furniture. My Uncle Peter came in, carrying a pair of small shoes and sat down in a chair. He called to one of the girls who came over, sat down, and offered him her feet. I watched—feeling scared, sad, confused, but most of all guilty. Those horrible questions all churning inside my head: Why did I allow him to go with me? Why didn’t I let him sleep in when he wanted to? Why didn’t I slow down at the turn? Why didn’t we leave the house earlier, so we would not have been at that intersection at that time.

There are moments in life that change us. We move forward from them different, our course altered in some way.
way. What happened to Jeff was unfathomable and traumatizing. What I felt then, and still do, was deep sadness for the loss of my cousin, but also for my role in it. Thirty-five years later, I still feel a moment of panic whenever my kids get on their bicycles. When my own son turns 12, I worry for an entire year that he is in danger of some kind of crazy curse or reckoning. I flash back to the accident when I see a movie where a person on a bike is hurt. I cry secretly in the bathroom at happy family events because I see my cousin’s empty chair. I am not as sure of the safety of any of us to move from one day to the next.

But what I am not, is filled with guilt and shame. And I know I could have been. The person who saved me from that was my uncle. That day my uncle changed the story I would tell myself; from one of guilt about my role to one of tragic chance and accident. A lightning bolt, rather than a mistake. The comfort of powerlessness—a feeling often so uncomfortable—but in that moment a salve.

The phone rings; it is the employee health nurse who tells me my test result is negative. I am filled with relief to have won this horrific lottery for now. I am released from illness and guilt this time, but I know it may still come for me. COVID-19 has made this toxic combination commonplace. When we are not in the midst of a pandemic, most of us don’t experience the intimacy with mortality looming over us now. Most of us, during times of peace and health, do not find ourselves in the position of wondering if we have contributed directly to the illness or death of another person. These feelings are relegated to the unlucky among us—the driver of the deadly car, the babysitter of the unwatched child who fell down stairs, the father who forgot to lock his gun safe. But COVID-19 is a lightning bolt that has come for all of us. Any of us might wake up one day and realize we shared this virus with someone else and, with it, gave sickness and death.

I have seen physicians infect patients who, due to their underlying medical problems, die from the infection. I have seen children infect their grandparents. I have seen essential workers bring illness home to their families. I have seen a parent infect their child who unexpectedly died of COVID-19-related complications.

For every person sick and dying with COVID-19, there is someone who transmitted that virus—and sometimes that person knows who she is. Maybe she wore a mask and washed her hands like crazy. Maybe she didn’t wear a mask because she listened to misleading messages from people in power and believed the wrong “expert.” Maybe she watched the president of the United States and followed his lead. Maybe she thought COVID-19 “wasn’t really that serious,” until she found out that it was.

Whatever the reason, as we all continue to navigate the pandemic as safely as possible, we must find our way quickly to forgiveness, for each other and for ourselves. This story cannot be about shame and guilt.

Please believe me. It wasn’t your fault.

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: None reported.

Acknowledgements: I thank my aunt and cousins for allowing me to share Jeff and Peter’s story.