Grief as a Superpower

I experienced my first code blue as a second-year medical student during my surgery rotation. The patient, barely older than me, was ejected from a car during a motor vehicle collision. Despite heroic attempts at resuscitation, the patient passed away. "Nothing else to see here," I was told, as I clumsily sidestepped the remaining members of the code team, mouth agape behind my N95 mask. Back in the resident lounge, I proceeded to robotically type progress notes.

That night I cried hysterically in the shower.

I was 5 years old when my father was killed while driving home from work. A spare tire flew off a horse trailer driving in front of him, smashing through his window. His truck was found on the side of Interstate 35, the same highway where the paramedics found our now deceased patient. A "fluke accident," words I parroted as a child. Piaget theorized that at age 5 years I was incapable of understanding the finality of death.1 The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders would state that at age 27 years I was experiencing prolonged bereavement disorder, pathological grief that lasts beyond a "reasonable" amount of time.2

In the shower, I wondered if my father had been taken to the same hospital where I would report early the next morning for rounds. I don’t know if he was dead when the paramedics arrived or what injuries he had sustained. My surgery review books plainly stated that a traumatic aortic dissection would result in rapid exsanguination. Maybe that was it. I briefly contemplated searching for his name in the hospital’s electronic health record. I didn’t, of course.

During medical school interviews, I wore my father’s death like a badge of honor, pinned proudly on the olive-green lapel of my mother’s pantsuit. I stoically recounted the story, citing his death as the reason I wanted to be a doctor. I conveyed my ability to understand a traumatic, unexpected death and its power to uproot the entire core of reality. I believed that this would make me a good physician. As if my father’s death was some kind of superpower that granted me the ability to be simultaneously immersed in empathy and remain impartial and action oriented. My first code blue taught me that his death was more akin to a proverbial Pandora's box, something that I was unable to open without failing apart.

In The Loss That Is Forever, Maxine Harris, PhD, explains that the way a child experiences the death of a parent is fundamentally different from that of an adult.3 According to Harris, children have neither the language nor the structural narrative within which to place such trauma. Instead, the event is something more cataclysmic, altering not only day-to-day life but entirely dismantling the tenuous early-life scaffolding, the idea that the world is safe and good. After my father died, I developed severe separation anxiety, unable to let my mother out of my sight. I remember believing that nothing bad could happen if I was at her side. I had become a protector and a peacekeeper, roles in which grief had no place.

Despite my best attempts, this past year taught me that my grief is irrepressible, unable to be perpetually buried by pride. After 22 years, this grief came up for air, forcing me to live alongside it. And while the exploration of my loss has been crushing in its ferocity, it has been simultaneously beautiful in its catharsis. For years, I scorned the idea of "working through my grief," as if this would somehow bring my father back. Yet only through this process have I learned that grief is not something to work through but rather to work with. Grief will always be part of me, not as a superpower nor a thorn in my side but as a reminder that only a love so staggering in its intensity could produce an equivalent amount of sadness.

I now know that tears are not the enemy, that crying in the shower does not mean I am weak. Instead, it is a way of honoring my father, an expression of my love. Peeling back the layers of my grief has allowed me to unlock a part of me that so desperately wants to remember him. Through this work, I have begun to assemble tools that allow me to think about my father without coming undone by the severity of my sadness.

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