

Letting Death Be

When I first heard that my soon-to-be-born son had died I was standing beside my wife in a crappy room at a crappy hospital, details that seemed to underline, more than cause, the shittiness of the situation. Our midwife had just performed a careful sonogram of our 37 week old baby (this following a couple of other ones done by others that were uncertain because of equipment problems, uncertainty that amplified both anxiety and hope) and then she softly but clearly said to us: “there has been a fetal death.”

Why is it that death is so strange to us? So shocking, so surprising? There is nothing more natural than death. Our lives depend on death, the death of plants and animals, even the death of our forebears, who by dying bequeath us their space, land, and resources. Ecclesiastes tells us what we already know, “There is a time to live and a time to die.” Until very recently it was not uncommon to lose many children in pregnancy, birth and early childhood. Should we not be genetically accustomed to all this by now? Shouldn’t we be less surprised, less disturbed?

When I was a kid, probably about seven or eight, I went to the first funeral that I can recall going to. It was for a boy from my church. The deceased and his family were well known and liked, and the funeral was well-attended. The church I grew up in sat on 18 acres of grass and trees in the country outside a smallish city in Ontario. It was built by Dutch farmers and tradesmen, well intentioned and good hearted folk who are more inclined to sweat than to swear.

It is hard now for me to accurately recall how many people were at the funeral. The church building felt full, and I remember it being a big building, but memory is proportional to perspective, and I was young. Looking back it was also probably more than just the volume of bodies that made it feel full. I now know something about emotional affect and the way that our emotional states affect how we experience things. A room full of people mourning, feeling sad, angry, confused, and afraid feels very different from a room full of people following along to a sermon with the family bible.

The boy who died shares the same first name with me, and his funeral was held on his fifth birthday. Both of these facts are quite memorable to me, and for reasons that are obvious to a kid. When you are a kid things like sharing a name are a big deal, as are birthdays. The boy had drowned within a few feet of help. The beach was not too empty and not too full, his babysitter momentarily distracted. His parents, and everyone else, too far away to help in time.

It could be that we are so affected by death not because it is strange, but because it is too familiar. Death is like our sibling who is able to get under our skin better than anyone else because they know us so intimately. This does not seem too implausible. I am willing to admit that I am not sure how real I want my reality to be. Death, like lots of other things, is too able to get past my emotional defenses for me to be comfortable around it. When we get close to death we are reminded of true things we mostly work hard to ignore. But, “you can’t not know what you know” and death presses its big fat thumb directly on the sore spot of our vulnerability and fragility. Death knows our secret fears.

Jack is the name we gave to our son. When Jack died, I collapsed into a weeping, snotty heap onto the floor outside the door of the ultrasound room. We had gone to have an ultrasound

performed in the hopes that our midwife was wrong or the machine not working correctly. The ultrasound was definitive. He was dead.

I have thought a lot about my son and his death in the years following that day, his last. The pain created by his absence, after so much anticipation, was keenly felt in the first few days and months. I felt a lot of emotions those days, and I was surprised by many of them. I think this happens to a lot of people. What are you supposed to feel around death? We don't quite know, but at the same time we clearly have expectations about what the 'right' emotions are because we are surprised when we feel certain ones, like shame and guilt.

I felt guilt. I felt guilty because I thought that I didn't feel his loss as deeply as my wife did. She experienced the highs of having a deep physical bond with him while in utero, but she also felt that bond end in the middle of the night when he stopped moving and she awoke in fear. I felt bad because I didn't feel bad enough. Or I didn't know how bad I was supposed to feel. I was also angry - very angry. Despite knowing that the mathematics of biological survival means that I am not exempt from tragedy and loss, Jack's death felt personal. How dare this happen to me!

I don't know if it would have been better or worse to be the parents of the boy who drowned. To have had five years with him also means that you have five more years of attachment and love to burn away inside you. I know that tragedy is not comparable, but I also know that we do it anyways. Our pain is felt more acutely because we are so good at imagining alternative scenarios, which may be at times a useful form of coping and a mechanism for change, but it is certainly a two-edged sword. I think I would have liked to have five years.

In the sort of work that I have been doing lately I encounter death and people who work near death a lot more frequently. And again I am surprised at how I am still being caught off guard by things that shouldn't. Recently I was at a monthly meeting of clinical practitioners, doctors and nurses who gather to talk about the ethics of their work, and I heard a pediatric palliative care physician describe some of the issues he sees around medical aid in dying. When he was introduced I was surprised by his title, and then kicked myself for not realizing sooner that this is, of course, a line of work. Of course there are children dying in hospitals all the time, and of course there is a need for medical care providers to try and help kids die well.

The doctor brought with him to the talk something that he brings with him everywhere he goes in his medical practice: a golden lab. The dog is a therapy dog, but it is not primarily therapeutic for the doctor. The dog is meant to help the people who meet with him. Imagine you are with your young child and you hear that you are now meeting with a palliative care physician. This is a situation that benefits from a dog, a creature able to take on all the excess emotional affect generated by this trauma. No one wants to meet with a doctor who will journey with your child to death.

One of the strongest things I felt after Jack died was a feeling that to honour his death I had to feel his loss forever, that I would somehow be wasting his life or his death if I did not maintain a deep sadness and anger. It was a strange thing to feel, and it is something that I still feel somewhat today. Part of me feels guilty that I do not feel his loss as strongly as I used to. Part of me also knows that this is an easy, but dangerous pit to fall into: the expectation that certain

experiences should feel a certain way, that when we love someone or lose someone in order for it to be a genuine love or loss or spiritual experience it has to be felt in one particular way. I know this is not true, but it is still hard to not believe it. I want to be open to letting Jack's death be what it is: a not-one-thing, a many-thing, a changing-thing.

I guess this is what makes a therapy dog so effective. A therapy dog has no expectations or demands on our emotions and we know this. With a dog, there is a freedom to express first and reflect later. It would be nice if I felt that way with God.