

Learning the Lessons of Love, Gratitude and Service

By Marlene Lange

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Sometimes it is our worst tragedies – with their sheer force and weight – that teach us the most profound lessons.

And so it was for me – when, after a decade of my son's distress which included depression, drug and alcohol use, group homes, treatment centers, incarcerations, and both attempts at life and attempts at death – my son, Billy, not quite 23 years old – handsome, gentle, artistic, and fun-loving but with – as one of my daughter's called it – a broken brain, completed suicide.

How does the unspeakable become the speakable?

For me, it becomes speakable because I chose to heal by learning the particular lessons given to me, lessons about love, gratitude and service.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his classic expose on suffering entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, says we really cannot answer the question of why bad things happen to good people, but – he encourages us – we can answer this question:

“What are we going to DO about the bad things that happen to us?”

I began my healing process by letting myself feel. I learned that to heal, I must feel.

There's a quote I found early on in my bereavement that starkly suggested the formidable task of healing from my son's suicide:

It goes like this:

A wife who loses a husband is called a widow.

A husband who loses a wife is called a widower.

A child who loses his parent is called an orphan.

But in Yiddish they say there is no word for a parent who has lost a child. That's how awful the loss is.

And so I began to experience my journey of awe-full-ness.

My favorite verse became John 11: 35 – **“Jesus wept.”**

I learned that my tears and rage would not bring Billy back, but what happened over time –as I kept myself open to that mysterious energy we sometimes call “grace” – was that I learned I had done the only thing that was in my power to do – namely, to love him. And he wrote me from prison and told me that he knew we all loved him. As the quote goes:

“If love could have saved him, he never would have died.”

I learned that the rest of it was up to Billy and his higher power.

I learned that the Serenity Prayer really is true:

We **can** be granted the serenity to accept the things we cannot change,
We **can** be granted the courage to change the things we can,
And we **can** be granted the wisdom to know the difference.

I also learned that we don’t know how much we love them until they are gone.

From Billy’s life and death, I learned about unconditional love. How we can set boundaries and still love. How we can be disappointed and still love. How we can be frightened and still love. How the most important thing is not what happens to us but what it teaches us about love.

I learned that forgiveness is a part of love.

At a personal retreat in the hermitage at HSRC, I experienced an emotional catharsis as I “forgave Billy” for taking his life, perhaps forgiving myself as well for holding so much fear.

Immediately after this powerful experience, I felt compelled to go for a walk in the woods, which seemed odd because I was emotionally and physically exhausted. But I went, taking a worn path through the woods, which I knew led to the lake.

I had just entered a clearing. I was walking on a path of beaten down grass – no stones or gravel – just worn grass.

Suddenly there in front of me – alone on the entire path – was a small, heart-shaped stone! Instantaneously, my consciousness seemed changed as I looked up, truly expecting to see Billy. Inside this altered state of consciousness, I heard him say, “**Mom, I love you and I’m ok.**”

Then, in a flash, my consciousness reverted to normal and I was left holding this concrete gift from Billy in my hand.

That’s love. Given by grace. When we decide to heal.

What I also learned about love is that it can be carried forward. We can continue to feel love for that someone who is no longer with us, and at the same time give love to others as opportunities arise.

For me, Billy’s legacy became one of love, not anger or fear,
One of joy, not despair.
Not a legacy of death, but one of life.

We meet on Billy’s birthday every year for birthday cake, to celebrate his life and what we cherish about him. Sometimes we allow sadness, but mostly we relish the memories of his lovability. That works for us.

GRATITUDE

And then there were the lessons I learned about gratitude.

HOW does that fit in here you may well wonder!

What I learned about gratitude started before Bill’s completed suicide.

He had already attempted suicide in prison. As I left work one day some time after that attempt, a thought dashed through my mind unbidden:

“If Billy succeeds in taking his life, how will you survive?”

Following as quickly and just as unbidden, was this answer:

“I will be grateful for having had him.”

Was this an answer given by grace? an answer in preparation for when I would deeply need it less than two years later?

I have not been able to answer these questions. If I could, there would be no Mystery.

So I just look back at all I am grateful for...

...like the time when Billy was, maybe 4 or 5. We were resting on the couch and he had been looking at me in the most serious way. Finally I could see that he was about to say something, something I anticipated would be very profound, judging from the look on his face.

What he said to me very seriously was

“Mommy, your lips look like worms.”

I am also grateful for the colored pencil sketch which he sent me from prison with these words on it

“You are who you are, so be it.”

I am grateful to him for challenging me on this gratitude thing to the point that I conduct an entire workshop on the subject.

I am grateful that I have had to stretch my understanding of many things spiritual because of him.

I have had to redefine love into a useable definition. I just use the one in I Corinthians 13 because I cannot improve on it much.

Because of Billy’s life and death, I have had to stretch my understanding of the questions: Who am I? What is life? What is death?

I am grateful for having learned – though sometimes I forget it briefly – that the only reason we are here is to learn how to love and be loved. When I get too uppity about things, I remind myself that none of it is going into the casket or crematorium with me. “Oh, yes, that’s right,” I chide myself gently when I think my things, or “my way,” or my person is vastly more significant than someone else’s things, or way, or person.

Billy's life and death taught me that sometimes the questions must go unanswered, and that it possible to be at peace with unanswered questions.

The writer, Rilke, has stated it so beautifully:

“...be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

In the words of the Russian poet, Pushkin, I am reminded of how I want to think of Billy:

“Never say with grief, he is no more –
but rather say with thankfulness, he was!”

SERVICE

My final lesson was about service.

Leigh Hunt writes:

“Whenever evil befalls us, we ought to ask ourselves, after the first suffering, how we can turn it into good. So shall we take occasion, from one bitter root, to raise perhaps many flowers.”

Standing in my own numbing grief at Billy's wake, I still comprehended the grief of others as they walked up to me with tears in their eyes.

“Someday I will give something back to help them,” I found myself thinking, having no idea how, or even why I had had such a thought, especially at that moment.

Over the years, that “giving something back to help,” has taken the form of presentations such as this one,

a workshop on the 15 actions I took to survive my son's suicide,

helping facilitate suicide survivors support groups,

and mentoring 2 other young men in prison, both of whom struggled with suicidal thoughts.

We can become fit for this kind of service, but only after we have become brave once again after a tragedy. Here is a lovely prayer for bravery which may help us on our way to becoming the wounded healer we all can be:

**“Make me brave for life: oh, braver than this.
Let me straighten after pain, as a tree Straightens after the rain,
Shining and lovely again.**

**Make me brave for life: much braver than this.
As the blown grass lifts, let me rise
From sorrow with quiet eyes,
Knowing thy way is wise.**

**Make me brave, life brings
Such blinding things.
Help me to keep my sight;
Help me to see aright
That out of dark comes light.**

In the early years after Billy’s death, I was slowly walking along a country road past our house one day. I glanced up at the incredible yellow autumn trees against an incredible blue, blue sky, and I was struck by this thought:

**“The Force that made these yellow leaves against this blue sky,
has to have also made a plan and a place for my son.”**

The thought made me feel brave. I believe it still.

One of my favorite poets, Robert Frost, thinks of it in a more abrupt, prosaic way but I like it. He says:

“All I have learned about life can be summed up in three words: it goes on.”

Yes, indeed, it does. I have learned that. I said as much in a Christmas letter I wrote less than 2 years after Billy died.

I would like to conclude this talk by reading a section of that letter which shows that after tragedy, after being brave, after healing in whatever way works for us, after learning our lessons – whatever they are for each of us – we are still very much alive and life does go on.

When the garden pushes up its first shoots in Spring and I still feel awed by the mystery of how it happens, I know I am well and very much alive.

In summer when the monarchs and swallowtails waver about the zinnias, and later in summer, when the blue-jays swoop from sunflower to sunflower, picking out the seeds, and I smile for some reason, I know I am well and alive.

In the fall, when I gather red maple leaves and press them under a dictionary to save their brilliance a bit longer, I feel alive and well.

When those first, fat, dizzy snowflakes sift down in winter, and I stand quiet and still like a child, I know life is going on. I am going on.

When one of my daughters, Marta or Tasha, calls me, or we visit each other, and I enjoy their miraculous gifts of love and laughter and hope, I feel wonderful life carrying on.

And when I recall Billy’s gentle, immense hugs as he wrapped his arms around me, or his jokes told through giggles, or his easy teasing manner, or his constant affection, and his courageous efforts in this life, I miss him and sometimes still cry.

But more so, I say a Mother’s prayer of gratitude for having had a son to love and to be loved by.

Thank you.