

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 3 February, 2008

Outliving Guilt

What do we do with our guilt? Holly Hendricks felt so strongly about this poem, she sent it to me twice last week. What do you do with your guilt? Here is Brad Sachs' *A Boy in a Bed in the Dark*:

Born with a cleft palate,
 My two-year-old brother,
 Recovering from yet another surgery,
 Toddled into our bedroom
 Toppled a tower of blocks
 That I had patiently built
 And in a five-year-old's fury
 I grabbed a fallen block
 And winged it at him
 Ripping open his carefully reconstructed lip.
 The next hours were gruesomely compressed
 Ending with a boy in a bed in the dark
 Mute with fear
 Staring out into the hallway with horror
 As the pediatrician went in and out of the bathroom
 With one vast blood-soaked towel after another
 Shaking his head worriedly.
 My brother's howls
 And my parents' cooed comfort
 Became the soundtrack to this milky movie
 That plays
 In my darkest theatre,
 The one that I sidle past each night
 With a shudder
 And a throb in my fist¹

¹ from *In the Desperate Kingdom of Love: Poems 2001-2004*, © Chestnut Hills Press, 2004

What do we do with our guilt?

In each of three congregations I have served, there are adults who, as children, were involved in accidents that resulted in the death of a sibling. Actually, “involved” is not quite right; I should say they were “proximate to” their siblings’ deaths. They were not to blame; a child cannot be blamed. Yet each of them has borne the trauma to this very moment, each in their own way trying to live with a burden like a stone tied to their soul.

Perhaps you know this kind of haunting guilt, or something like it. I think my sister, Lisa, was six, and I was ten, when we were left alone at an amusement park. We were ecstatic. I took her into the haunted house, to see her reflection in the funny mirrors. The floor tilted wildly. We were very, very fat then very, very skinny, and laughing as she lost her balance and fell against a handrail. A huge, terrible splinter was driven deep into her tiny hand.

When we got to the clinic, they took her from me into a back room. My brave little sister was often very sick as a child, and never cried. But from the lobby, I heard her scream as the Novocain went in. Forty years later, I can still hear it. I can still feel the wave of guilt wash over me, drown me. I know it wasn’t my fault, but it was all my fault.

One of the assignments I’ve given to people who suffered this kind of trauma is to go to a playground and look for the children who are the same age they were when the accident happened. I ask them to come back and tell me if they think the five-year-olds, or the ten-year-olds, for example, should be held accountable for the crime with which they have charged themselves. The answer is always no. That is, no for every other five-year-old or every other ten-year-old, but for them, for us ... somehow ... yes. Perversely, yes.

By my lights, this kind of guilt – the guilt I share with the voice of the poet, and with my three parishioners – this guilt and lack of forgiveness and trauma is completely without value to us or to anyone else, except that it makes us compassionate towards others who feel it, too. Though I am in the business of confession, amends, reparation, forgiveness, and redemption, I’m not sure how to unravel guilt. Telling seems to help a little. Being told to let go and move on does not. And so I wonder if what’s really going on is that we

would prefer to own these accidents with guilt, instead of facing them for what they really were: they really are *accidents*.

If we could accept that accidents happen, it would mean that the world is a random, potentially life-threatening, or murderous place. It would mean that, at any given moment, our lives could be divided between “before” and “after.” It would mean we would have to accept that we are not always in charge, and that there are people, places, and things that are out of our control. Maybe we would rather be guilty than afraid.

The current issue of *Outside* magazine ran a story by Tim Zimmermann called *Hell in High Water*, trying to make sense of a wilderness accident that killed six boys and four men in Southern California’s Sespe wilderness. *Outside* periodically runs these stories, in an attempt to get its readers to learn from others’ fatal mistakes. What struck me about the Sespe tragedy, though, is that it happened thirty-nine years ago, and, for everyone interviewed, it might as well have happened last month. Zimmermann writes, “What’s the half-life of a tragedy in the wild? In the case of the Sespe [flood], I discover, the pain still runs hot through the lives of everyone involved.”² All these years later, the voices are of grief and rage, unhealed by the passage of time.

On a weekend forecast for beautiful weather, sixteen inches of rain swelled the creek by as much as fourteen feet. Mix in one spectacularly bad decision, and it was a recipe for disaster.

In fact, Robert Samples, the forty-two year old trip leader, got the kids – ages eleven to fourteen – well away from the raging stream; they made it safely to high ground. They met a man named Scott Eckersley, who helped them break into a cabin, where they holed up, “burning wooden chairs to keep cozy, eating stew made from some quail [Samples] had shot, and warming to their outdoor adventure.”³

After dark, rescuers from the sheriff’s department and the forest service showed up. Robert Samples wanted to keep the kids safe and sound in the cabin; the rescuers insisted that their parents were waiting. That was the

² *Outside*, February, 2008, p. 75

³ *op cit*, p. 76

moment it all went to death; hiking out, all but one were swept away in the raging current. Only Eckersley lived to tell the story.

Scott Eckersley was a twenty-eight year old teacher and outdoorsman. Now sixty-seven, he bears a burden of unremitting guilt. For the past fifteen years, he has been largely homebound by an auto-immune wasting disease with no known cause.⁴ When Tim Zimmermann arrived to interview him, he looked exhausted. He doesn't know how he survived, or why. He was holding two boys mid-stream; both were ripped from him. "If I'd only been stronger," he says.⁵

One mother says, "If only they had left them alone in the cabin. They killed my kids. It eats at you."⁶ One older brother "still has a very hard time talking about the accident," but "explains how it blew his tight-knit family apart. 'We all just kind of went, "This can happen at any minute.'" It was devastating, absolutely devastating." He "struggled for years with rage and alcoholism," until he finally received the grief counseling he needed.⁷

It was a mistake. It was a monstrous, tragic mistake that cannot be undone. And as unacceptable as the mistake was, it is only in accepting the finality of that mistake that will bring any peace. Steve Larson was two years old when his father, the deputy sheriff, died in the attempted rescue. Writer Tim Zimmerman brought him out to the Sespe. Steve Larson has always wondered whether his father "had been a hero, or responsible for the deaths of six ... boys. Retracing [his father's] tragic march to the final crossing, ... he knows now that [his father] was a decent man who made a terrible yet honest mistake, ... preoccupied with completing [his] mission and ... [unaware] that [he was] in the midst of the heaviest rains ever to fall in the area.... Dulled by cold and exhaustion, [he] simply failed to comprehend the brutal, unholy potential of the flash flood that would result."⁸

My spiritual companions, until we take life on life's terms, and death on death's terms, and until the past is given its rightful place in the past, it will be dragged, toxic, into every moment of the present, the crippling burden of

⁴ fibromyalgia

⁵ op cit, p. 91

⁶ Jan Cassol, mother of Bobby and Ronny, ages 14 and 12

⁷ Pat Salisbury was 17 at the time of the accident; his brothers were Danny and Eddie, ages 13 and 11.

⁸ op cit, p. 91

guilt. The only remedy is acceptance, and a heart attuned to freedom, and to love.

Perhaps, in the spirit of freedom and love, we will talk about our mistakes, and our shared stories will spare someone else the agony in their wake. Perhaps, in the spirit of freedom and love, we will create a legacy for those we have loved and lost, and, in that way, deepen the meaning of their life, even when we cannot do justice to their suffering or death.

Birth is a mystery.

Death is a mystery.

If we are very lucky, we will make something of what lies in between.

Let us help one another.