

The unexpected gifts of loss

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When Scout, the eight-year-old daughter of Abby Fuller and her husband Neil, died of cancer in July 2007, Abby thought her own life was over. In this article, she describes the unexpected gifts that Scout bequeathed to her – all she has learned about life, love and loss in the months that followed.

I lost my eight-year-old daughter Scout to cancer on 7 July 2007. The months that followed have been by far the most painful of my entire life.

I don't know that there is anything worse than losing a child. At first, I didn't want to live – and this is typical of parents who lose a child. In fact, many plan their suicides. For months I woke up every day wishing that the world would disappear. I tell you this not to elicit your sympathy, but so you will know that it was from the depths of this kind of pain that came the unexpected gifts I will be describing here.

I had thought that, if Scout died, I would not be able to go on. And yet here I am. And not only am I here, but I have learned more in these past nine months than I ever thought possible. I feel as if I have undergone the most astonishingly rapid spiritual growth spurt of my life – a sort of spiritual boot camp, if you will. It's tough going, but it makes for fast changes.

What have I learned?

Our culture deals badly with death

We ignore death, deny it, and avoid it as much as possible. This is manifested in so many ways: our culture's idealisation of youth and looking young and feeling young (instead of valuing the wisdom that comes with age); the measures to which we go to keep people alive at the very end of their lives; the way we consign dying and death to hospitals and funeral parlours, instead of allowing these very natural and inevitable things to happen at home.

Why does this matter, our culture's denial of death? Because when death comes – and it always does – we are shocked, frightened, unprepared. We do not know how to sit with someone as they die, comforting them and supporting them as they make the sacred

journey to the other side. A dead body seems creepy to us because we have never touched one before. We push aside grief and try to 'move on' because our sadness is uncomfortable to those around us, and to ourselves. We do not know what to say when someone loses a friend or family member, and so too often we say nothing and stay away.

Compare our culture with this example.

'Sobanfu Some is an African healer and lecturer. She describes the way grief is regarded in her culture. In her village, at any given time there is a grief ritual taking place. Anyone who is grieving is welcome to come, to cry, and to feel together in a community of others as a simple matter of course. The notion of avoiding this process and these feelings is as illogical to them as avoiding a meal when feeling hungry. Holding on to grief is likened to holding on to a toxic substance. It is only through the acknowledgment and expression of the grief that the health of the organism is restored.' (Brams-Prudeaux, 2005)

And our fear of death is really an aspect of a larger concern: our fear of loss. Think about this: all relationships end. *All relationships end*. I read those words recently and was struck by the paradox that, while this is so obviously true, we almost never pay attention to it. It is too frightening, I think, to live daily with this realisation.

In a strange way, embracing the inevitability of loss has given me comfort: what happened to Scout and to me is not out of the order of things; it is part of the order of things. As my husband said: 'Eventually, if she grew up she'd have to say goodbye to us when we died. She just happened to go first.'

I have been reading a lot of Buddhist philosophy these past months. A central precept of Buddhism is that the source of human suffering is an unwillingness to accept loss. But loss is a part of life, because change is a part of life.

So, if I face my mortality head-on, the next question becomes: what am I going to do with this life that I do have? The moment we fully acknowledge the inevitability of death is the moment we fully feel

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the preciousness of life, because it doesn't last. So life and death are parts of a whole – the one cannot exist without the other. Which brings me to the next lesson I've learned.

Happiness is over-rated

I do not think the point of life is to be happy. I think the point of being here on earth is to grow as human beings – to gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for all that is. And guess what: we don't grow when we are comfortable. It is when we are challenged, when we suffer, when we are uncomfortable, that we grow the most.

Now, you might argue that, as we grow as human beings, we in fact become happier – yes, but this is happiness in the truest sense of the word: not fun, ha-ha, laughing at jokes happiness, but a kind of hard-earned happiness that comes from experiencing both pain and joy, both life and death. In my senior year in college I took a course on Literature of the Holocaust and, toward the end of the semester, the professor invited this woman to speak to the class. She had lived through unimaginable horror, and in spite of that – no, because of that – she had the most serene, genuine, warm presence I have ever witnessed in a person.

Let go of what I cannot control (and cherish what I have)

This lesson was a gift that first came when Scout was diagnosed with cancer in January 2007. During those first days, as I sat crying in her hospital room, I realised: 'I cannot control the outcome of this. But what I can do is love her with every ounce of my being for as long as she is here.' And I did that. I was also determined not to allow the terror of losing her to distract me from the enormous gift of having her there right then. In fact, the possibility that I could lose her gave me the gift of a deep, attentive love with her. I remember her asking me last spring: 'Mom, why are you kissing me so much?'

Letting go what we cannot control means also letting go of the fantasy that somehow, if we are good, if we are kind, if we believe in God, if we make the

right choices, then nothing bad will happen to us. When Scout died, I wondered: 'Why her? Why not some kid who was a bully, who didn't have a happy life, who was dumb, whose parents didn't care about them?' I realised after a time that the answer to 'Why me?' is 'Why not me?' Nothing makes me or my family immune from death or illness or injury. (And, of course, the life of a kid who is a bully or not so smart or whose parents don't care about him is just as precious as my daughter's life.) But I suffered a loss of innocence: I realised I am not immune from tragedy.

No, we cannot control what happens to us but we can make the best of what we have been given. What really matters in life is not what happens to you, it is what you do with it.

When your heart breaks, it breaks open

I think of it this way: each of us builds a hard shell around our heart to protect ourselves from deep pain. We can't help it, because we are human. But this same shell also keeps us away from feelings of deep joy and deep love and of peace, of oneness with the universe. So, since my heart was broken from losing Scout, I have experienced not only the greatest pain of my life but also the greatest love and gratitude I have ever known.

I find I am less interested in judging people, less willing to get in the middle of conflicts, I spend less time speculating about people's motives, and am more aware of and appreciative of the good qualities in people. I spend more time amazed at and grateful for what life has brought me – especially Scout. What a miracle that she was here, that for eight perfect years I got to be her mom.

In my extended family there has been an astonishing change since Scoutie died. I have four sisters, and my mother and father are still around. We have always been close, but with conflict. But since July, each and every one of my sisters and both my parents have shown an enormous generosity of spirit, not only toward me, but toward each other. Scout's death changed my parents' relationship, my relationship with my husband, and all our lives.

Love is the strongest force in the universe

A month or so after Scout died, my friend Marcie asked: 'You are going through such an extraordinary time. What are you learning?' I told her that I did not know: I was too deep in grief to see that yet. Later that night I was lying in bed and suddenly the answer to her question came to me – and it was so simple that I had almost missed it. The big lesson in all this, in Scout's illness and our struggle to get her cured and our deep sadness on losing her – the overarching theme in all of this is not loss, or cancer, or how unfair the world is, but love. As I lay there, I found myself actually grinning. Our love for Scout, Scout's love for us, the outpouring of love that my family received from friends and colleagues and neighbors – everything else pales in comparison with that love.

Most importantly, I realised when I lost Scout that nothing, but nothing could take away my love for her, and so we would always be connected. Cancer could take away her body, but it could not touch my love. Love can outlast time, distance, and even death. It is, indeed, the strongest force in the universe.

A few months ago, while I was swimming laps, I thought to myself: 'My life is over.' Then the universe spoke to me – or maybe it was God, depending on your beliefs – and said gently but firmly: 'No, it's not over; it's just different.' I can't have Scout back – and so the important question is: 'What do I do now with what I have? Where do I go from here?' I have these unexpected gifts to help me along the way, and they are gifts from Scout. ■

Brams-Prudeaux J (2005). The gift of loss. *The weSPARK Beam* 3(6) 5–6. Available from: www.wespark.org/newsletters/Jan_05.pdf [accessed February 2008]



Abby (centre) with Scout (left) and her younger sister Leonore