

Leaving the Cove

Marjorie S. Rosenthal, MD, MPH

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It is time for us to leave the Cove. When my husband, Amal, died suddenly in a car crash, my daughters Elina and Maya were very young—7 weeks and 2½ years old. For 4 of the past 5 years, we have been going to the Cove, a grieving meeting two Sunday nights a month. At first I thought I didn't need it. "I can do this." I knew the stages of grief and said, "The three of us will get through this." And I shared Groucho Marx's attitude toward joining groups: I didn't want to belong to a club that accepted people like me as members. Amal and I had almost codified this thinking as a part of who we were when discussing why we would not take prenatal birthing classes. After he died, though, I found myself desperate enough to try anything I thought might stem the tide of sadness and loss for me and my girls.

We go to the Cove to grieve with other families. We run around the gym, we state out loud for whom we are grieving, and then we break into small groups to make arts and crafts or shoot pool or talk. (Maya's voice in my head makes me smile: "Mama, if you don't do art in your group, isn't it boring?") At the end of the night, we rejoin for a family activity where we might write down the names of everyone who loves us on heart-shaped pieces of paper, or draw pictures of the day Amal died, or write a eulogy for him ("There should be drumming at Daddy's funeral because he loved the drums").

At the end of the night, the children share with the circle of Cove families. At the last meeting, the theme was physical symbols. The adolescent group wrote epitaphs for their loved one's tombstone. The youngest group was given a big piece of poster board to share. Maya drew, within a tombstone-shaped outline, a picture of herself at age 2, jumping on the bed holding her father's hands. Although Elina was only a newborn when Amal died, she drew the same picture. And then, as if to demonstrate the ridiculousness of a 7-week-old jumping on the bed, Elina led me through her

other picture: "This is me and Maya and Daddy and you on a water slide. See, here's the slide and here we are. We all are smiling big smiles." And then, reading my mind, she continued. "I know we never did this, but I think Daddy would have liked to do this with us. See, look, he's smiling."

We share pizza, juice, and cookies with the other Cove families, and go home and pretend we are just like non-grieving families going home, ready to start a regular week of preschool, first grade, ballet, and soccer.

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A central achievement of early childhood is developing the capacity for the self-regulation of emotions. A parent's job is to help her child achieve this through the steps of interpreting her child's signals and responding appropriately, all the while regulating her own arousal. When the child is exposed to small amounts of tolerable stress—finishing a bottle while still hungry, losing sight of a toy, or experiencing the momentary absence of a parent, then an intuitive parent—perhaps with some pediatric anticipatory guidance—can learn to interpret and respond to the behavior while regulating her own reaction. But when there are greater amounts of stress for the child or the parent, intuition and a little anticipatory guidance may not be enough.

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The first day I woke up and I was a widow, everything was different. I could take no breath, hear no story, watch no event without seeing it through the lens of Amal's death. On the other hand, Elina was 7 weeks old and refused to take a bottle, just as she had the day before he died. Maya was 2½ years old and loved her best friend and preschool and black beans, just as she had the day before he died. It seemed like only I knew what had happened.

Normal, I was told. What they are doing is normal and you should keep their lives as normal as you can. So Maya went back to preschool the day after the funeral, and we planned play dates and trips to the zoo. I wondered how long I would feel this way. I wondered when I would be able to breathe. And I wondered when the girls would notice that Amal had died.

I felt compelled to tell stories about Amal to our girls. I told them how he loved coffee ice cream and cooking dinner for friends and playing with both of them. I showed them Amal's pictures—the ones all over the house, and the ones from an album a friend had made.

From the Department of Pediatrics, Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program, New Haven, Conn.

Marjorie Rosenthal is a general pediatrician and assistant director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Clinical Scholars Program at Yale University School of Medicine. She lives in Connecticut with her two daughters.

Address correspondence to Marjorie S. Rosenthal, MD, MPH, Department of Pediatrics, Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program, IE-61 SHM, PO Box 208088, New Haven, Connecticut 06520-8088 (e-mail: marjorie.rosenthal@yale.edu).

When 2½-year-old Maya asked for stories, I complied. “Tell me the story of the day Daddy died.” No matter how I was feeling, I started the story, “We had just had a great week of vacation. It was a beautiful day and Daddy was very happy...” Once I had told the story 200 or 300 times, I told it without sadness.

And Maya, in turn, would tell stories about her Dad. “I remember jumping on the bed with him.” “I remember seeing the dolphins with him.” No stories were told as sad. They were told in the matter-of-fact way in which young children report events. As one of Maya’s peers came out of the bathroom at her preschool I noted how matter-of-fact they all treated the subject of death.

“I have a penis,” the exiting preschooler said.

“My Daddy has a penis,” another one said.

And Maya, not to be outdone, said, “My Daddy has a penis but he doesn’t use it anymore because he’s dead.” The children listened to each other and then went out to the playground without questioning each other. I laughed and then wondered whether this was a good thing. Was she responding how I had hoped? What was my job here?

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I think what I’ve learned is that my job is to interpret and respond to their behaviors, while managing my own grief. It’s a delicate balance. Like most aspects of parenting, interpreting and responding to behaviors is a moving target. When I became practiced at telling the story of Amal’s death, the girls moved on to other questions: “Mama, when will you die?” and “When will I die?” and “Can this car crash?” When Maya seemed to acknowledge the finality of death, Elina presented her own interpretation of events. After a babysitter of ours moved back to Mexico to be with her family, I told the girls we might never see her again. I missed the parallel until 3-year-old Elina told me, “Daddy died. We might never see him again. He went to live with his family.” I don’t know if the visceral pain I felt at her statement was more desperation or loneliness, but I took her onto my lap and explained that *we* were Daddy’s family and that he would never have left us if he had had a choice.

Managing my grief is like managing a chronic disease. Now, 5 years out, I realize I will always grieve Amal’s death, but that grief is undulating: I have exacerbations and periods of remission. And although this chronic disease is familial, its expression in each of us is different. Every milestone is for me bittersweet—every birthday, every time one of the girls learns to swim or ride a bike. For the girls, these times are pure joy. I am proud of

them, but I weep that the most joyful adult I have ever known is not sharing these times with them. Or with me. They ask me if I am crying tears of joy. Because I think it is the right thing to say, I reply, “Yes.”

Our chronic disease has different manifestations in the girls as they grow. Maya used to tell everyone we met, “My name is Maya. This is my little sister, Elina. This is my mom, and my Daddy died.” Now it is Elina who has that role. Their happiness in finding out that Dumbo and Simba have a dead parent has given way to a game called “Heaven,” where Maya and Elina pretend to get in a magical bubble, or may even look in a mirror—Harry Potter style—talk to Daddy, and report back to me how proud he is of them. Recently, they requested to sleep in Amal’s childhood bed when we visit his parents.

I don’t know to what extent I have held it together and modeled healthy responses for my girls. Certainly not very well when I’m tired or frustrated or acutely feeling the lack of justice in the world. But perhaps, Groucho Marx, I am better since joining the Cove and a community of grievers. They have helped me interpret and respond; they have helped me forgive myself for not regulating myself the way I wish I could, and then try again next week.

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It’s time to leave the Cove. We will go tomorrow night and release butterflies, and the girls will know that it will be our last time. We are leaving the Cove, but not because we are done grieving. We will always grieve the man/husband/father/friend whose life was cut short. It’s time to leave the Cove because we can—because the three of us know the words to describe death and have learned the rituals that allow us to grieve.

This spring, when my neighbor was cutting down a small tree in her yard, I asked if she’d be willing to do the same in ours. I didn’t think about how it would affect the girls until I heard the moaning and carrying on. For an hour they wailed, “How could you kill the tree? We love that tree.” Were they grieving for the father for whom they had never shed a tear?

After an hour, they ventured to the meadow behind our house and returned with a tree stump. They placed the stump where the fallen tree had stood, and on the stump they wrote “Evergreen” and the date. Maya, with her dirty, tear-stained face, then came into the house and said, “Now is the food part of the funeral.” Happy to be feeding the mourners, I handed out ice cream sandwiches.