

Her Sweetest Gift

We have a quiet room, one with a door that closes out the hushed murmurings of others who also want to quietly talk, study something, or maybe, like me, discover what's in the heart and mind of the person I'm with. This area I've staked out for us has a table, four chairs and two windows - enough space for us to spread out comfortably if we wanted. But we don't . . . spread out. Instead we stay relatively close to face each other across the table. I wonder what he's thinking about his decision to meet me here today. I take a second to speculate how I can make him comfortable. How do I help him know my heart is open to his? We are friends, Greg and I. But there is a kind of cautious air between us because this time we're together so he can share a story that is deeply personal – one I've never heard because he's held it very close to his heart. I decide to turn toward one of the general questions he's agreed to answer but before I can pose one to break the ice, he stops me with a comment that lets me know he has thought about what he wants to say today, and he expects to deliver it his way. So we begin.

Greg's story starts in September of 1986. He is in his second marriage; he has fathered one daughter who is presently living with her mom. Greg is building his life with another and they are happily pregnant with their first child together. He recounts that the pregnancy had some difficulties early on, but those health issues seemed to have smoothed out over time and he was excitedly awaiting the birth of his child. But trouble resurfaced during his wait, and Marie, the new love of Greg's life, was born prematurely. She weighed in at only 3 ½ pounds and was immediately put in the hospital's Intensive Care Unit. Happily the baby's situation improved both rapidly, and seemingly, easily. Marie rallied; she grew stronger and developed well and, after only three weeks in the hospital, was released to go home with her new parents. She was a beloved miracle.

It is a joy to watch Greg's face light up as he describes Marie. She was "pretty incredible," he declares with wide eyes and a happy grin. She smiled early, even rolled over on her own before her amazed parents knew what was happening. Here she was, a premature baby, already mastering so many milestones. Greg's face is full of wonder as he recalls how his tiny baby girl worked so hard to communicate back to him, how earnestly she tried to mimic and answer him with her own special language. It's easy to hear the special, loving bond this dad feels for his child as he speaks softly of her sweet personality: "She wasn't fussy at all; she was very content, very quiet." It is clear he believes his Marie was someone remarkable.

And then, with a subtle shake of his head, Greg shares the beginning of the darkness to follow. He noticed Marie began having difficulties holding down her feedings. Something was not quite right. Not long after the parents had identified this concern, their worst nightmare began to unfold. Greg was heading home early from work and as he drove closer to home, he noticed an emergency vehicle parked close to his house. An earlier 911 call had summoned help; Marie had stopped breathing. At home, Greg found emergency personnel working to save his daughter's life. One of his last memories of Marie is seeing her intubated and placed in an ambulance that would race her to the hospital. Within the hour a doctor joined the anxious parents to tell them Marie was dead. An autopsy followed quickly and the devastated parents, who knew only a little baby who "externally . . . was perfect," were given SIDS as the cause of death. An additional report of chromosome irregularities left bewildered parents to walk away from their daughter holding only the many questions and the chaotic confusion unexpected death leaves in its wake -- their dream of a life raising and loving their little girl, lost. How could this be? In September, the gift of a sweet life was given and only 7 ½ weeks later that gift was gone. Profound grief with its companions, guilt, anger and fear, settled deeply in and around Greg.

Greg talks about the following year with a kind of frustrated wonderment. He and his wife heard all the messages of the "right things to do" when one suffers deeply-felt, unexpected loss and they tried things they thought might help. They attended a support group for bereaved parents for a short time and found some comfort. Talking about your story and hearing theirs is helpful, he shares; "You figure out 'I'm not alone.'" As I listen, I also hear a bitterness that bites through Greg's voice each time he remembers how friends and religious acquaintances tried to comfort him during this time. He recalls the phrases as if they were given yesterday and his anger is palpable. "God needed her," and other such platitudes meant to make him feel better by assuring him his beloved daughter was now in "a better place," only made things worse.

But there is no time to sort out and deal with all of grief's colliding emotions because Greg discovers even more strength will be required of him very quickly. Only months after Marie's death the couple discovers they are pregnant again. It is during this usually happy and expectant period in a couple's life that Greg finds himself living in the unbelievably vulnerable and confusing time of deep grief. My baby is dead! Now I'm supposed to make room for another? The medical professionals tell the couple that all the tests and signs are positive for a healthy baby boy; "This will be so much better," they smile. Greg only hears his baby girl being disrespected; it sounds to him as if others are saying his remarkable daughter was

somehow not good enough. And it is in this busy, planning time, with no space for mourning or healing, he awaits the birth of his son.

In October, 1987, a healthy baby boy is born into the family. It was a difficult birth and there was a time Greg feared he would also lose his wife, but she survived. And life, as it will do when left to its own, settled into a rhythm for the family. I asked Greg about his life during this time of shaping a new family while still reeling from overwhelming loss. Greg honestly professes his pain, his confusing concern over the resentment of another child brought into his life too soon, his lack of time or energy to fully grieve the daughter he lost, and his anger at religion, and for a God who failed miserably at being the “Father” to whom he once prayed. The beauty of this newest gift, another child, at this time in his life was a hidden treasure – one he couldn’t fully appreciate until later. He survives the following years, working hard to be a strong enough father, husband and bread winner to keep his newest family unit together. He admits to me that he never took more than “moments at a time” to grieve, but always remembered his Marie on her birth date with painful tears of loss. As time passed, Greg’s marriage disintegrated and, as he has always operated throughout his life, he persevered and began to build again.

My friend has now created a new life with a woman he loves; he tells me he has found peace and recounts with a big smile that he is now happier than ever. I ask him to look in retrospect and share what he has learned about grieving and healing. Greg takes a few moments to think and finally relates that what he believes about his grieving process matches his best hopes for sharing his story with others – the understanding that grief is easier when it is a shared experience. He says losing someone you love is “terrible,” and then continues, “but you’re not alone. It’s not your fault.” He adds, with a short laugh, “You’ll have bad days and that’s OK. You’ll have a lot of great days too.” Telling and hearing stories aloud makes them real and helps people know that they are not in this awful situation by themselves. Greg’s belief, “It hurts to go forward but you have to go forward” describes how he has lived his life since his Marie died over 29 years ago. His wide-eyed smile punctuates his next, loving line. “This is the first year I have not cried on her birthday.” Greg’s clear message about moving ahead gives hope that all is possible when we take the time to share both our pain and our happiness with others.

As our interview winds down, some personal anecdotes Greg shared earlier lead me to steer our conversation more deeply into situations he has used to learn and grow through his grief. Two very personal accounts indicate that he realizes he has been touched by a power beyond the world we know. “Flashes” of a spiritual presence and irrefutable happenings lead him to know “something’s out there.”

His first description is of a time when his son surprised and amazed him with a tender revelation. Greg remembers his son of four or five telling his parents that when he was up in heaven, he saw them. The boy confidently shared that he knew he was meant to come and be with them because they seemed so sad. Greg shares this simple, moving story with tears shimmering in his eyes. How wonderful that the second gift, his son, given to him at a time when grief filled his life, always knew he was meant for Greg.

His next, equally powerful story surrounds his mother's death. Loved ones had been called in anticipation of Greg's mother's passing. They gathered together, spending time with her and each other, as they waited. Hours before her death, he remembers her excitedly calling out to the family – she was seeing someone or something she wanted them to witness with her. As they surrounded her, asking what she wanted them to look at, she indicated a space where no one stood. Looking at each other, they questioned her more. What were they supposed to be seeing? Who was there? Happy and alert, she smiled and joyously declared she was looking at Marie. Greg is quick to note that his mom had no trouble knowing who was physically present in the room; she recognized all the names and faces of her loved ones. Marie, as an unseen presence, neither frightened nor confused his mother. Instead it seemed to give her both joy and peace. Again tears fill Greg's eyes as he recalls the beautiful memory of his mother finally coming face to face with the grandchild she never had the opportunity to meet. And, how amazing it is that this first meeting takes place when Marie's father is in the room with them both. It has been said that when one is in the presence of real healing, there is a grace that hangs in that moment. Greg's story holds healing grace.

As we close the interview, I ask Greg to tell about something he would like to reclaim. From that space of grief that he inhabited for so long, what would he like to take back? He waits just a moment and then leans back in his chair. Quietly he lifts his hands and places them together near his heart. "Just hold her again," he murmurs. "That's what I know of her. That she would snuggle up to sleep right here," he continues, gently moving the flat of one hand on his chest. We sit for another moment in silence, and I ask Greg what one last thing he might like to say about his daughter. He answers with loving assurance that his son would not have been born without Marie's life. It is on this lovely idea of Marie's sweetest gift that we end.

As told to Jane Nicolet, Author
Letters for Grace