

Ten Years After the Unthinkable

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I still cry. Not as often as I did 10 years ago, but the tenderness persists.

For no special reason, images of Erik will work into my consciousness -- how he felt when I held him, his laugh, his tears, his little-boy worries and grown-up vocabulary, his straw-hair and his blue eyes. Born March 20, 1969. Died July 2, 1976.

If I wanted to, I could recreate the enormously painful details of that terror-filled summer night. ..the phone call from Coldwater, Ohio; news of serious injuries to Erik and his grandfather; the stone-cold, silent, hour-long ride to that rural hospital where Erik lay...in what condition, we didn't know.

"We're here to see our son -he's been in an accident. His name is Erik." The receptionist quietly said one moment, left her station and then said to someone a short distance away, "The parents are here."

From another room there appeared a woman with a giant swollen bruise on her face. She was clutching a white tissue. "Are you Mr. and Mrs. Roof?" There seemed to be no feeling in her voice. "Your mother is fine, a little shaken up. Your father has been hurt more. Broken ribs, collapsed lung..."

"What about my son?" asked Erik's mother, Bobbi. There was silence. The woman with the bruise looked down. She sobbed, "I'm so sorry...so sorry."

Erik was dead.

Recalling that warm summer night brings tears. I resist the intermittent impulse to go back because it is still painful. I hope for the pleasant memories, but sometimes his absence is too great, and I give in, mostly to sorrow, sometimes anger. Will the mourning ever stop?

It has slowed down, certainly. Reality demands it, otherwise I'd be trapped in grief. Locked in 1976.

If nothing else, we have learned Erik is dead and we are not. That may sound callous, but for us the tragedy is no more complex. We donated Erik's body to a medical school and established an educational fund in his memory at the school where he would have been a second grader. We wanted him to live on.

But life continues only for the living. We made a conscious decision to live -- to survive and most importantly, to prevail.

Erik's brother, Jamey, was 15 months old when the accident happened that July night. Much of the success of our early recovery was due to his infant demands, which forced life through those long endless days and nights of grief.

That process of grieving nearly cost us our marriage. Our decision to permit the intervention of a family counselor at Geisinger helped us see that while we shared the experience of his death, we could not share the healing process. Healing happens individually and at different rates for each.

The counselor helped us gain perspective for dealing with the challenges of who was more grief-stricken and who bore the greatest guilt.

The pain and sorrow, suffering and anger didn't vanish then. But we were able to cope with a demystified mourning. Perhaps more than anything, counselling helped us to move forward as a couple, rather than as two individuals.

On November 11, 1978, Ian was born - a third son and an emphatic statement that we aimed to survive. Apart from the wonder of a newborn, Ian was also a symbol of rebirth for us all. On July 19, 1980, Zack was born - a fourth son. We have prevailed.

Grief can become a spiritual quagmire. It has immense power. Only the most determined efforts to escape will permit you to break free, to go on with life. We have done that. We are doing that.

Yes, Erik is gone, and yes, we miss him greatly. That we go on with life has not diminished our deeply painful sense of absence.

To deny the pain would be to deny Erik.

For us, that would be thinking the unthinkable.