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After Life Loss

Kelly Schiro

Iowa State University

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November 29, 2005, is a date that will be forever ingrained in Claire Kruesel’s head—her soulmate, Rob, was taken from her. Claire had been taking a biochemistry lab final, where they had been tasked with identifying a compound when she last saw Rob. “I remember we were supposed to be silent and I was in my lab coat, but he came in and the last thing I said to him was something like ‘I think it’s a lipid,’ and we chatted covertly on what we thought our compounds were.”

During her lab final she was only a few hundred feet from where it happened but didn’t think much of it as she crossed the street on the way to dinner. It was then that she learned that Rob had been hit by a bus in front of Molecular Biology and was in the emergency room. Claire hurried over to the hospital as quick as she could. It was determined that Rob needed to be airlifted to a hospital in St. Paul, and Claire was following below on I-35. It was 9:30 at night, dark and millions of situations were racing through her head. “When I left Ames, I was under the impression that he was in a serious accident, he was unconscious—but he would be all right ultimately,” Claire says. “The whole drive up I was on the phone with my mom; I was crying. I drove by myself—which was crazy.”

All the while, she estimates she was driving 95 miles per hour, thinking about theoretical situations with police officers—nothing would stop her from getting there.
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All the while, she estimates she was driving 95 miles per hour, thinking about theoretical situations with police officers—nothing would stop her from getting there.
On the phone with her mom, she talked about what would happen next—Claire would have to take a semester off, he’d be in a wheelchair and she would have to help him with school.

“I felt completely prepared to undertake [the responsibilities of taking care of him], but when I got to the hospital, that wasn’t even an option.”

When she arrived at the hospital, she was told that the pressure in Rob’s brain was too severe and he would likely never wake up—her mind raced with thoughts of denial, anger and bargaining.

“I felt betrayal, by the universe and by medicine,” Claire says. The nurses told her that the surgery would be too dangerous to relieve the pressure in his brain.

“I just remember thinking, ‘He’s dying, so how is this dangerous—why don’t you do it anyway?’”

The morning of November 30, Rob died. Claire was tasked with calling his professors and advisors at Iowa State. It was the beginning of a long process of grieving.

It is popularly believed that there are five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. This model was proposed by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss psychiatrist, and is outlined in her book On Death and Dying. The model tries to give people a better understanding of the emotions of people who are dying and those who are affected by people dying.

The model isn’t perfect and doesn’t apply to everybody, but it can give people a place to start understanding their emotions. Dr. Joyce Davidson, Interim Director of the Counseling Center here at Iowa State, says that grief is highly individualized.

“Some people go through very short periods of time with some of them or they don’t experience some of them at all,” Davidson says.

In shock, the few days after Rob’s death, Claire felt inanimate, just going through the motions. On her birthday, December 1, she went back to Rob’s place to find personal items for the wake. She found the two birthday presents he should have given to her that day—the practical gift of a USB hub and a specimen of Ocean Jasper—one of her favorite stones—that was to be on a necklace.

Davidson thinks that it is most important for people going through the grieving process to be patient with themselves and not to move away from things that are familiar to them. People can experience physical pain from grief, disrupting one’s everyday life.

Claire didn’t have a lot of time to grieve—after Rob’s funeral she had to jump back into finals and finished all but one on time. She threw herself into academics and returned to her normal schedule after winter break.

“I really wanted to get back into academics, push forward and tether my mind to concrete things,” Claire says “It would have been impossible for me to function not going to school the next semester.”

Looking back on it, Claire admits she may have rushed through external manifestations of grieving.

“This is a process of healing that takes much longer than we think it should or expect it to because there are no physical signs that it has healed—it’s going to take patience and understanding that you may not be able to function in the way you expect to,” Davidson said.

Davidson says people should do whatever feels comfortable for them. It’s very individual to what a person might benefit from. Sometimes it might be with making something and other times it can be from increasing physical activity.

“Usually it can be be helpful to give oneself permission to express feelings of grief in comfortable spaces,” Davidson says.

In the last decade, since Rob’s death, Claire has expressed herself through music, poetry and yoga. While her life will never be the same, it helps her live it.
In the 11 months after Rob’s death, Claire filled five notebooks with daily thoughts, collected poems and impressions.

**music**

Claire had been singing in choir since she was five-years-old. Choir was a place for her to be sane after Rob died. A song that resonated with her was Brahms’ “Warum ist das licht gegeben dem mühseligen” (Why is light given to those in misery). It asks why life is given to people who don’t use it and why life is taken from people who have such potential—mirroring Claire’s situation.

“Being able to hear your own voice resonate in a large hall or hearing people around you contributing to a minor chord that captures the essence of grief makes you feel less lonely,” she explains.

Claire was also in a couple of bands and wrote lyrics that would later become poems—they were a way to express emotions and process through them.

“Everything I write is about him some way, there’s always this hollowness, this sense of bitter irony. While lyrics may not have addressed that situation, they channeled that emotion.”

**poetry**

Claire knew she always loved writing and wrote poetry as a kid. Going back through the poems, she realized some were terrible, but others were good enough.

“Writing was a way to cope with my emotions, I heavily journaled after he died and ended up taking a graduate level poetry class,” she says.

Claire doesn’t consider her poems from that period the best, but they did make her want to do more. It took several more years to get into creating works through music and writing. A Masters of Fine Arts program in creative writing and environment that offered the ability to explore the intersection of expression and environment piqued her interest.

While she faded out of science after Rob died and then faded into expression, she still keeps ties to science. To Claire, science focuses on authenticity, truth, reproducibility and transferability. She uses that mindset to approach her art.

“I don’t do science traditionally but I exert the function of science onto the substrate of art”

In the beginning, she didn’t write poetry in the formal sense but the impressions she wrote embodied her emotions for herself as a way of expression and salvaging memories.

“I was worried I would forget some of the shared experiences that we had—I was the only mind left to remember them.” They studied abroad together in Prague, and while other people they met are still around, a lot of the experiences were just between themselves.

Music and writing would give her moments of clarity—she felt catharsis from singing a song or getting it on paper. Only after looking back on it did she realize it was a healing process. During that time she didn’t feel legitimate as an artist until she was in the MFA program and felt validated.

“Once I could justify [my art] through a degree program, then I could start looking back on the art that I had been making and put it into the context of healing.”
Yoga was another way for Claire to cope. She had the stereotypical view of yoga as something you do to reach inner peace—which she found. After going to a couple classes through Recreation Services, it took her over a year to establish a regular habit.

Yoga is also where she discovered a love of teaching. After practicing both yoga and pilates three to five times a week, a friend recommended her to teach a pilates class because she had been attending his regularly.

“I just decided to go for it, I could tell it would be a healthy choice for me and a good challenge—it was terrifying,” she says.

Music, writing and yoga helped Claire create a life that is as normal as it can be. They have slowly shuffled into place in her life over the last five years. Claire’s life is inextricably tied to grief and has thus shaped it.

“He was one of the kindest people I’ve ever met. He showed me how to be genuinely kind and genuinely interested in other people in a way I hadn’t seen modeled before,” she says.

She has tried to channel Rob’s values and interests into her life because she saw how it made him the best person she has ever known. She even sometimes trying to reason that if one of them had to live it should have been him because with him not around there would be no one to appreciate the world from his view.

“Having had that thought so many times, I can’t just not do the best that I can. I have to double my efforts to make up for it.”

There are times when carrying the grief around gets easier. It doesn’t show up as much when people are really busy—namely during graduate school. It also can weigh her down when there’s a moment to think and evaluate it.

Claire’s universe was ripped apart when Rob died, but it has also made her into the teacher, the artist and the person she is today.

“I’m living a life; I feel like my life was taken and living a life became the goal. I am happy with this life. It’s a good life. It doesn’t always feel like my own though.”

Claire is a fan of making big commitments that will be ultimately good for her but maybe unpleasant along the way.

“In yoga, you focus on your breath in the present moment, practice observing and labeling thoughts and then letting them go, and that trains you to recognize that the present is what matters the most,” Claire says.

It is easy to get fixated on something that happens in the past, but Claire thinks yoga can give people perspective and focus on the present.
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