

# Narratives on Pain and Comfort: Readings from *Endings and Beginnings*

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At age twenty-nine, while a graduate student in computer science at the University of Pennsylvania, Mark Albertson was diagnosed with lymphosarcoma. He died four months later, leaving a wife and two young daughters—Robin, three years old, and Kim, three months. Sandra Albertson, a Quaker, writes about their family's experience with death and renewal.

The following is reprinted from Sandra Albertson, *Endings and Beginnings* (New York: Random House, 1980; Ballantine, 1983): chs. 9, 10.

Robin began to ask to see where her dad was buried, so on a trip back to Philadelphia we went to the cemetery for the first time. I called the Anatomical Gifts office and was startled to learn that the burial of those remains that included Mark's had taken place only the week before, eighteen months now since his death.

We found the cemetery ... surrounded by neglected apartment buildings and an expressway.... A rough, uneven patch of freshly turned earth faced us, the square marker resting among jagged chunks of broken glass. It was bleak and desolate, and I knelt among the clods of earth and wept. Robin squatted beside me, silent and thoughtful. When I asked her some time later about that day, she remembered "Just sitting there, being quiet for a while. I knew you were crying, mommy."

... From the beginning Robin seemed to understand more about death than most theorists claimed was characteristic or possible for three-year-olds. For the most part, she understood that Mark was not coming back, and her missing him was openly expressed. She'd remark suddenly on a color that matched her dad's bathing suit, or recall a

time when we'd all gone for a walk in the woods. As I tied her sneakers one day several months after he'd died, she said, "I 'member daddy dancing with you."

That first summer she often asked to talk about Mark rather than be read a bedtime story, and we would take turns remembering different things he'd said or done. She often asked to read aloud with me a book by Rabbi Earl Grollman, *Talking About Death*, in which the name of the person who has died is inserted, and anxieties and questions are talked about.

For many months, Robin did numerous drawings of the four of us. A year later, she started to draw a picture of Mark to send to her grandmother, but became frustrated and angry, saying she couldn't remember what he looked like. The offer of a photograph only made her more irritated, and she finally drew a hippopotamus instead. Later, she brought me a drawing of a circle. "It's empty," she said. "A dead person ... my daddy."

... The desire for a father wove like a contrapuntal theme through Robin's grieving....

She would sometimes invent stories of things that she and Mark had done together. It seemed important, however, to help her keep the truth separate from her fantasies so that we could remember and celebrate those things that had actually happened.

The release of tears came for Robin during the night. She would often wake sobbing, "I want my daddy..."

Although at first Robin asked questions like "Will daddy come up again out of the ground the way chipmunks do?," her later attempts to explain death to other children indicated an understanding of its permanence. Two months after he died, Robin said, "When Kimmie is growing up and asking where her daddy is, we'll tell her daddy is dead and we won't ever see him again."

... Once at the supper table, she suddenly asked, "Mom,

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do you think daddy remembers us?” How to comfort her, how to hear what she was really asking, without offering a theological treatise?! I answered with what was real for me at least: that I believed that even though her father’s body was dead and buried, his spirit was with God and his love for us continued. That seemed to be enough.

... Just when it seemed that I’d finished working through all these issues with Robin, I was caught off-guard by Kim.... One evening when she was two-and-a-half, she suddenly asked, “Where did my daddy go?” and it hit me that I had to go through it all again with her—the explaining, the comforting. I told her that her dad had died of an illness called cancer. “Oh.”... “But he loved you very much.”... “No ... died. He died. I didn’t hardly even have a dad.”

Kim was only three months old when Mark died, so she has no memories of him to respond to or grieve over—only an awareness that she does not have in her life a father such as she sees in other homes....

Her play activity often included a dad. She would “make cakes” for him in the sandbox; “I’m making believe that I have a daddy and he stays here.”... At nursery school, when the paint ran down a picture she was doing of me, she labeled it: “Mommy crying when daddy died.”

... We’ve done a lot of remembering together as a family, part of the time-binding storytelling process. I’ve asked Mark’s mother if she would put down her memories of her own childhood and Mark’s, and she’s been recording stories from her past for us. The children and I have talked about the things we used to do as a family—the hide-and-seek game where we finally found Mark under the covers inside Robin’s crib; the time he let Robin play hairdresser, and discovered the barrettes were still in place only after he’d been out walking the dog; his presence at Kim’s birth; the “mountain slides” on his knees; Robin’s trips with him to his office at the university....

The summer after Mark died, Robin found me crying upstairs. Though she was only three, she sat quietly with her arms around me. “Do you want daddy? I want him, too.” At last she went and got all her blankets and a favorite book, *The Best Nest*, one she’d memorized from the retelling, about two birds who get separated, lose their home, and are at last reunited. She “read” it aloud to me for comfort. When I thanked her, she said, “I can always do that for you when you get sad.”

She feared *my* dying now as well. “What if you die while Kim and I are still little?” I can’t deny that I will die some time; I can’t promise that I’ll always be here. Yet I have told them that I have every intention of living to be an old lady, of being a grandmother to their children, and we have talked about the people who love and would care for them if anything did happen to me.

Part of our bedtime ritual includes talking about the day ahead—making plans, explaining where we’ll each be. It is, for us, not so much a claiming of control over the events of another day, but a reassuring sense of our place in it, and a trusting in the strength and wisdom and care that will see us through it, whatever happens.

The journey out of grief is not a linear, lock-step process where sorrow can be crossed off like tasks completed. For a while, it seems as if the same ground is being traveled over and over, the wound is raw, exposed, the loneliness and anguish as real as ever. Then the pattern becomes more like that of a spiral, where birthdays and holidays and anniversaries bring pain and sadness, but experienced at a less intense level. There are longer periods of quiet between. The days become not just a matter of coping, but filled with more and more pockets of gladness, self-confidence, and hope. The past finally stops overwhelming the present, and one can begin not only to hope for the future, but also to be present in the moment, where one is.