

Embracing grief with gratitude: A story of courage, love and baby loss

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The morning glory that blooms for an hour
Differs not at heart
From the giant pine that lives for a thousand years.
– Zen proverb

My life changed radically after the birth and death of my firstborn, Vida Tooming. She brought an immense amount of blessings, and an experience beyond words and beyond life itself. A story of healing and love that touches the depth of the heart, which I am very grateful to write it out openly for the first time. This article celebrates 5 years after Vida's passing.

As I became pregnant with Vida, my first pregnancy, I had all the joy and expectations any young couple may have. All my life I had been really becoming prepared to consciously welcome a life within me, and when it happened me and my husband we were very happy. The first four months of the pregnancy were beautiful, full of light. During the mid-term ultrasound scan, we were suggested to do further analysis as the doctors suspected some anatomical problems, mainly with the heart, saying it might be caused by chromosome anomalies and suggesting an amniocentesis. It was a wake up call and in that moment we dealt with incredible amounts of emotions, including fear, as well as enormous strength to trust. I went into a deep meditative space within and realized that we had two paths to chose from: The path of fear or the path of love and trust. If we would choose the path of fear, we would agree to do all these analyses and feed the fear and distrust more and more until the end. We chose the path of love, where in each moment of her life, however and whatever it would be, we would trust in her destiny and our destiny as a family, and trust that love will carry us further. It was not only our choice, but the choice of this soul to incarnate in this body so we would honour that and allow that to fulfill her destiny. It was of course not easy, specially when everyone around us seemed to want us to chose the other path, where everything is known and measurable. We were walking almost alone through unknown territories, without answers but also without questions. We were very clear in our decision to allow and provide the opportunity for her life to happen, however it will be. This was an attitude and a strength beyond our own personal one, as if we were being carried and sustained by a higher power. The pregnancy was easy because of that clarity of mind and decision, yet it was very challenging having to deal with doctors and all outside input since it seemed they were very uncomfortable with our decision, including some very hurtful and nasty words said to us by professionals. I felt as if I was becoming internally stronger, a strong warrior, to protect the destiny of this child throughout the whole pregnancy and birth.

We had a wonderful natural birth with Vida being born smoothly and beautifully in one cold and clear night of January. I got to hold her for what seemed for an

eternity, cord pulsating and her taking her first soft and loving breaths in my arms. Her scent was of heaven and all I could say was "mi vida" (my life in Spanish). Soon after that, she was taken for inspection and since it was clear that some things were not right with her body, she was right away sent to the Children's Hospital for operation. She had a condition called Patau Syndrome/Trisomy 13, a chromosome anomaly where every cell in the body has three copies instead of two, of the chromosome 13. This causes the body to have many abnormalities which make it difficult for life in this world. Most of the children with Patau Syndrome die within the first year of life. Without really knowing what would become of her, my husband named our daughter Vida (life) before her departure to the hospital. She died the next morning after the operation.

Grief as a blessing and a healing

"Let sorrowful longing dwell in your heart.
Never give up, never lose hope.
Allah says, "The broken ones are my beloved."
Crush your heart. Be broken.
- Shaikh Abu Saeed Abil Kheir, aka Nobody, Son of Nobody.

"Grief, in my experience, is like a new building falling. At first there is only a fall, the world falling apart and it is literally un-believable. The fall is followed by a cloud of thick unbreathable dust. The dust does not let me see nor breath. I don't know where I am, lost, where is anything? Where is the building? what happened? There is a complete emptiness and a hollow black hole in my chest. Only dust, but the inner feeling says there is light, unbelievable light and energy behind the dust. Being in this dust, for me was like being in a raging salty sea, under the breaking waves, where nothing makes sense. There is only confusion." I wrote in my blog on 13.03.2010 (1.5 months after Vida)

I died in who I was. I died in my expectations, my dreams, my desires, my wishes, and yet I still remained alive. This feeling of aliveness was so strong that I could not fight against it. It was pulsating inside of me, like this heart that circulates blood and dyes it with emotions. I was empowered with this immense energy of the naked and intense emotions, from rage to deep sadness. It made me weak forever, and in that weakness I realized my infinite strength. If I could survive the unsurvivable then that means that life does heal and there is nothing in the world that happens to those who are not ready. I saw this all as a blessing and was grateful for that pain, for that loss, for that falling apart. It felt as if my physical body was changing skin, my chest with a heavy emptiness, my heart physically broken, my arms handicapped with an emptiness beyond measure. This emptiness and this void has become part of me, a scar in my inner core which makes me more open, more naked, and at the same time more kind and understanding, more compassionate, more human. My heart was shattered and that made it grow bigger. And in that void I realized God. And God chose me for this because I could allow myself to be weak and to develop the caliber to go through this for her. And I breathed that all deeply in and out, not pushing it away by breathing shallowly or refusing to breath in, but by breathing

consciously in that pain deeper and deeper and deeper, allowing myself to pause in that pain.

A pause in the storm, a lingering. A deep conscious breath was the thread through the labyrinth of emotions and out of the cloud of dust. Until the pain subsided and life went forth, at its due time. Only if I allowed myself that pause, I found the One inside. I had to give myself the love I was ready to give my child. And start building my life slowly, with new eyes, one step at the time. It was painful to turn the energy back to myself but this is what Vida wanted. To bless me and all of us with her infinite power of love. She came here to liberate us, like a little Goddess, who sacrificed her life for blessing us forever. The immense pain was at the same time an immense beauty.

As unbelievable as it may seem during the grief, life will move again around other things – meaningless as they might seem then – and joy will reign again. A bittersweet joy, with the depth of infinity and with the heart broken yet fully open. Vida's life and passing truly merged me and my husband together into one soul and one open, loving heart.

What to say to a parent who has lost her child?

Even now, after having gone through the pain myself, I find this question difficult to answer. What we say to others who have lost a loved one is very often only words of comfort for ourselves. We are saying it to make ourselves feel better, to fix the problem. I felt compassionate for all those people who were struggling with the fact and struggling with something to say. I could tune into their intention, which was very human. Yet sometimes the words we say can actually hurt the family going through grief even more. As friends and companions to bereaved parents, we must also allow ourselves to feel and experience all we are experiencing – in reality, when a child dies, we are all affected as a humanity in group consciousness.

The first advice I can give is to let it sink in for a while. Do not rush into saying something, give them peace and quietness for the first days and weeks after the death. One or two words might be enough (by email or sms). Do not storm in calling, be aware that they are very sensitive and they may not be able to cope with your shock and having to communicate with you. At the end of all these endless calls I felt as if I had to support all those people, instead of receiving support. Don't put them under pressure for having to speak. Very often, we do not need to speak and we should not speak at these subtle moments of life. They are very special and need no rational communication. When the time is ripe and they are reaching out again to others (in my experience this was about 2-3 months after Vida's death), the advice I can really give you is never say words like "you will get over this/you'll be fine/it will be alright" (I want to dwell in this feelings as a reminder of her, this emptiness is part of me for the rest of my life), "you'll have other children" (a child can never replace another), "stay neutral, don't cry, life goes on..." (I want to and need to experience all I need to go through, including very intense feelings and emotions). Never push your own values, beliefs or thoughts into the grieving couple, and never compare the

experience with losing someone/something else. You can express your own lack of words. Be conscious that anything you talk about will also affect them, though not necessarily you have to avoid the topic (e.g. speaking about your own children). Invite them to speak about their child, their memories of her, over and over again, to say her name and you also say her name with confidence, recognizing and honouring that this was a life and a courage worth praising, yet stay always sensitive and available for comforting the person. Invite them to make a little ritual and encourage them to speak (in a safe environment) freely about their feelings and about their child. Telling their story can be really empowering and healing for parents. Remind them and yourself to take one day at the time and feel that life pulsating inside of you with gratitude and intensity. One of the simplest yet most supportive words of support I got, which stayed in my memory: "I'm so sorry. It broke my heart to hear. Every visit here is short. Hers so short. My love to you and the father, and to Vida, who is love and doesn't need it. Abrazo de corazon" (A.P.)

As I am writing, my son Theo is exactly 3.5 years old. We have a very strong and special bond as mother and son, and his coming into life was one of the precious gifts I received from his sister, Vida. She sent him to us as a continuation and remembrance of infinite love and letting go.

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