

Introduction

Finding Lighthouses

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During the five years I spent editing the Motherlode blog for the *New York Times*, I had a standard email response I called “sad no.” I got the idea from Dan Jones, who edits the weekly Modern Love essay, early in my career at the *Times*. I was overwhelmed, and uncertain, and craving advice about how to respond to a deluge of submissions about every aspect of family and parenting, far too many of them tragic: essays about the death of a child, a parent’s illness, a partner’s cancer treatment.

It would have been easy to fill every available inch of the column with stories of struggle. Nearly all were well-written in that bare, raw way that being stripped of our outer shells gives to us, nearly all were good enough to publish. Most were lyrical, touching reminders that life is ephemeral and unpredictable, except in one terrible respect. Finding a way to tell most of these writers that their story was worthy, and should be told—but not in this column—had become the hardest part of my job. I was beginning to question myself. How could I set aside an essay about a stillbirth for one about selling the minivan?

“You can only publish so many essays about the sad stuff,” Dan told me. “Writing them helps us get through it, and that’s why we do it, but we can’t run them all.” We needed balance. The sad reality is that some of us will always be buying coffins while others are buying car seats. Our columns, like our lives, needed both. A pre-written response, he said, allowed us as editors to acknowledge the writer’s experience while protecting our own ability to read the next essay, and the next.

But he did publish some, I pointed out. How did he know which ones? “Oh,” he said, “you’ll know.”

My prepared “sad no” response was sort of a fill-in-the-blank effort. I’d read their words, I told the writers whose work didn’t make the cut. I named their tragedy. I told them I’d heard them and been moved, but it was the nature of a column like this that we received many submissions about the kinds of things they’d written about, and we couldn’t publish them all. I wished them luck with what they were going through, or recognized how far they’d come.

Dan had been right—I did know, usually immediately, which essays we’d publish. Some were nearly perfect when they came to me; others needed substantial editing, but I realized eventually that one thing stood out, even above the voice and the writing.

The essays we published were the ones that didn’t just take the reader into a world of grief and sorrow and the pain that comes along with loving one another. They were the ones that took us in, and then brought us out again, even if it was clear that the respite was only temporary, even if, as sometimes happened, the writer—journey ended—stayed behind.

The essays that didn’t quite get there had plenty to say about appreciating our brief lives and our time together, and they said it, often directly. But too much of that comes at us like the sound of waves beating on a shore, so powerful and constant that our minds need to tune it out or we won’t hear anything else. The essays we did publish were lighthouses, guiding the reader through the hardest moments with hope and humor and grace. In them, a preschooler makes his great-grandmother laugh as hard as she’s ever laughed, even while they’re saying what she knows is good-bye. A child is named for a beloved brother who died young. A mother tells her younger children that if not for another’s death, it’s likely they would never have been born. What ends is there, but what goes on also shines through.

The essays that stood out were about facing illness and mortality and finding a way to live, not just endure. Those writers could see that grief and sorrow are built into the family package, and the ability to share that understanding was their gift to readers. They knew that life’s limits don’t lessen its joys, but instead define them.

Eventually, I realized that every essay we published, even the ones on the lightest of topics, shared those same qualities. One fall, I published an essay about coupons, written by Marcia Worth-Baker, who described trying to teach her reluctant children something about thrift even as they pretended not to know her in the checkout line. It was a joyful description of an outing to the musical *Hamilton* funded with buy-one-get-one-free offers and double-coupon days, and of her children's tentative recognition that the excursion was more fun because of the work and saving that went into it.

But when we tried to pay the author, she couldn't be reached. I emailed her several times with no response, and finally did an online search on her name to see if I could find another way to contact her. Instead, I found that she'd died, unexpectedly, just a month after her essay appeared.

Every essay about death is also about life; every essay about life is also about death. No matter what we're writing about, we're always writing about things that move us and change us, about noticing the stops on the journey that has only one destination. When I reread Worth-Baker's essay now, I can hear the reminder to treasure every moment of the trip even more clearly, but it was always there.

One of the things I learned in my years of editing *Motherlode* was that many of the clichés about life and death are true, but we can only come close to comprehending their depth when we're not hit over the head with it. Death is always there, in the background, part of the family, reminding us that life is short. But considered in retrospect, it's oh so sweet. The car seat, the minivan, our parents, our children, ourselves—all here one minute, gone the next. Watch the moments go, the writer says, mark their passage. Know that nothing lasts forever—but if you're reading this, take a moment. Pause. Breathe. You're still here. Now go do something about it. ∞