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The Grieving Mathematician and Mother

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Synopsis

Grieving while teaching and researching is a tricky task. Support from the local community and from the larger mathematical community were important after my son Drew's death. In this essay I describe my motherhood and grief journeys and how they intersected with my career, and also offer suggestions for others supporting parents in similar situations.

About ten years ago, I was 19 weeks pregnant and at the routine mid-pregnancy ultrasound, my first. The ultrasound technician put the gel on my belly, started moving around the wand and said "I see two heads in there; did you know you were carrying twins?" No, I did not. So, I went from what was assumed to be a routine first pregnancy, due around the start of the Joint Mathematics Meetings (JMM) in January, to a twin pregnancy which was more likely to involve bedrest, complications, and premature birth. However, my pregnancy went fairly smoothly, and Nora and Drew arrived the day after Christmas.

Like most twins, Nora and Drew did not sleep at the same time initially. Fortunately, I was on leave, but I was also on the job market. I interviewed and accepted my current job before the kids were six months old. It was difficult to find a daycare in our small town that had an opening for two infants the same age, but we managed.

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When the kids were finally old enough to attend the preschool on campus, Nora and Drew loved it there. Drew always arrived excited and was the smiliest kid. Nora took longer to warm up when dropped off in the morning. Nora and Drew were almost always seen in the dress-up area. Both of them liked to dress up, especially as princesses. Drew thought the princess dresses were the most fun of the dress-up clothes and loved the colors pink and purple. It was always difficult to get them to leave when I came to pick them up.

One day, I went to pick Nora and Drew up from the preschool on campus. They, as was typical, did not want to go home from the fun, and this time hid under the playground equipment. I took them and the babysitter home and then returned to work. After work, I made some of our favorite cornmeal pancakes for dinner. My husband and I measured both kids against their height marks on the doorframe from their third birthday, and we were happy to see that Drew, who was always shorter than Nora, had grown more. My husband went to play with the kids, and I went back to the office to play catch-up on work. I had a class with a new textbook that semester, and I was behind on prepping. I was also scheduled to give a talk to the high school students taking the American Mathematics Competition exam at Juniata the next day. At bedtime, I called home and asked my husband if he could cover so I could finish next week's prepping. When I got home, both kids were asleep. In the middle of the night, Nora woke up and crawled into our bed. As usual, I went to the guest bed to try to get some sleep before Drew woke up and crawled in to sleep with me. This was our routine, more or less—we took turns sleeping with each kid.

The next morning, I woke up with my head full of thoughts about the fractals talk I was supposed to give that afternoon and marveling that Drew did not end up in bed with me. That was when my husband started screaming. From that moment until after the ambulance arrived from my 911 call is a blur of panic and fear. The shock which settled me into a calmer, but not calm, state happened right after the ambulance arrived. At the hospital, we would find out that Drew had died in his sleep. The preliminary autopsy report did not indicate a cause of death other than he had stopped breathing. The final autopsy report was still inconclusive and we consider his death a case of Sudden Unexplained Death in Childhood (SUDC) [4], which is like Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) but for kids older than one.

I would have vivid flashbacks of this moment and hear phantom repeats of my husband screaming for month afterwards.

In the immediate aftermath, the shock cushioned us some from the size of the grief and trauma. We called family and friends. Our pastors arrived. The college president and provost stopped by the hospital to say they were sorry. I later learned that the provost went around and personally notified and talked to faculty who had kids around the age of mine. Our parents arrived. We went home and at the end of the day picked up our daughter from a friend's house and told her for the first time about her brother. The college had an event on campus for affected students, most of whom worked at the preschool where Drew and Nora went.

My husband and I planned the funeral with our pastors. The church choir agreed to sing some unfamiliar-to-them shape note songs at the funeral, including David's Lamentation. My dad, who owns a florist and garden center, went home and made up flower arrangements and cut lengths of purple ribbon for people to wear. Purple was Drew's favorite color. The funeral was lovely, and packed; since my kids were in the campus preschool, more students knew my kids than I had realized. There were the family flower arrangements, but also some from students and colleagues, including one from the Young Mathematicians Network. Nora did not know what a funeral was, and insisted that my husband and I dance with her when the choir sang Better Land, and we did. Nora referred to the funeral as "the concert for Drew."

When Drew died, I could not tell how much time I'd need off from work. I was given an option of as much time as I needed, which I appreciated. While the shock was still around, buffering the sadness and the full realization of the loss, I knew I would need to take off the current week to plan the funeral and fortunately it was near spring break so I had extra time. Shock meant, for me, that I couldn't figure out what I was or wasn't capable of doing, such as actually grading the stack of Calculus II exams I had sitting around. A retired colleague eventually did the exam grading, of which I really wasn't capable. I returned to work about three weeks after Drew died but picked it up slowly. First, I only met with advisees for spring registration, and then I began teaching my classes again, one course at a time.

Our community continued to care for us. There was a schedule of people who brought us dinner until the end of the semester. The number of cards from people far and wide was astounding. People did tasks for us like helping

repaint Nora and Drew's room so it could eventually become Nora's room, making and writing thank-you notes for food, making mail addressed to my son from birthday clubs and such go away, dealing with insurance which refused to pay for Nora's echocardiogram even though it was recommended by the pediatrician, and listening to whatever was on our minds. The local coffeehouse owner gave us a gift certificate after watching us have our awkward first meal out in public again. Our college student babysitters refused to let us pay them. Our pastors helped us find a therapist with experience in grief work. A friend came over most weekends to help with Nora because sad and crabby parents led to a sad and crabby three-year-old Nora who needed attention. Nora, since she was three, did not really understand fully what had happened for several years. It in fact took many weeks for her first question in the morning to not be "Where is Drew?"

Returning anywhere familiar afterwards was a source of great cognitive dissonance. People go on with their lives while you grieve. I remember being in a crowd of people the first time I returned to campus and feeling very out of place. It was awkward to answer the usual "How are you?" One time, early on before the funeral when I was returning to the office to grab something, I told a student "awful," which upset both him and me. I ended up making a personal code of answers, like "okay," which meant "I am here and not currently crying and what more can you expect," and "managing," which meant "I may look fine at the moment but have just spent time crying at my desk." Then there were the silly answers I came up with when I was afraid of losing it in public again, like "I exist and am unique."

When I returned to work in mid-March, I started with just teaching my upper-level Probability and Statistics class. As I was using a significantly different book from when I first taught the class, I needed to prep. The short-term memory loss, which is a normal symptom of grief, made it difficult to prepare. At my worst, I would read a page from the book and not remember what was at the top of the page by the time I got to the bottom of the page. So, prepping took longer than usual. When I returned to the classroom, the students were kind as I was quite distracted and distressed. I made it through the first class, although I remember little of it except I had cried on the way there. I carried Kleenex with me everywhere. I picked up my Calculus II class a week later. A colleague kindly walked me to class to help the transition. So, I cried on the floor in the bathroom afterward instead.

The quantitative literacy class was the last one I resumed teaching at the beginning of April, and by then I was at least used to teaching again.

Grief affected most of my job. It was not just preparing for and teaching in the classroom; grading was particularly hard. I was already behind on grading before Drew died, but now I had difficulty concentrating, and the other parts of my teaching life were taking more time. My department provided me with a grader for homework and labs and hired a recent graduate at a nearby mathematics graduate school to help me grade my finals. I hated going to committee meetings, because it all seemed quite pointless in comparison to what I had lost; thankfully, the provost had suggested that I not go to meetings again until I felt able. I did no research that semester at all, however I was signed up for and did take a graduate course in statistics that summer, in which I also had trouble concentrating.

In the short term, we started finding support structures for our grief. My husband and I both went to therapy for grief counseling. We took our daughter to Tides, a local program for children who have lost a close family member, which she attended for many years as her knowledge of Drew's death changed as she aged. I found the group for [Sudden Unexplained Death in Childhood](#) [4] useful, as well as the website [Glow in the Woods](#) [1], which is technically for infant/pregnancy loss. Both of these groups provided contact with other grieving parents and a place to speak plainly about grief. I retaught myself how to knit. Knitting has been part of my stress relief process ever since. In the early days knitting helped me not cry during meetings; now it helps me to concentrate.

The summer following Drew's death my portfolio for tenure was due. I had been offered a year extension on my tenure clock, but I had not taken it because I was afraid my teaching evaluations would decline due to my lower functioning during grief. In fact, my teaching evaluations from the spring had been mixed, with most being kind, some complaining of changes and lack of organization (which were valid), and one truly awful one that said I had been a bad teacher before and after Drew's death. Writing a tenure portfolio in which you need to praise yourself and spin things positively would have been difficult for me under usual circumstances, and grief made it even harder. However, I managed, and did receive news of my tenure right before the first anniversary of Drew's death.

I had completed a scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) project about using clickers in Calculus I [2] in the fall before Drew died. I had not presented it at that year's JMM and so did so at MathFest, the annual summer meeting of the Mathematical Association of America (MAA). Because I had brought my kids to both a recent MAA section meeting and the JMM the January before Drew died, lots of people knew I had twins. Not as many knew that my son had died. Those who did often asked for details and one called me brave for attending at all. However, I couldn't really tell who knew and who did not, leading to many awkward conversations where someone would ask a question about my kids and then I would have to tell them that Drew died. Many handled this news with lots of grace, but it was not easy to do in a professional setting. Meeting people who knew I had twins, but did not know one had died, happened at national conferences for years. I really don't mind telling people, but do not enjoy the awkward stop in the conversation that often results. It is just in the last couple of years, nearly nine years after Drew died, that I have not had to tell anyone this news at a meeting.

What if someone you know loses a child? What can you do? While individuals vary in what they need in their grief, here are a few suggestions.

- Read the article "How not to say the wrong thing?" [3]. This article came out more recently, but it captures several issues I noticed while grieving. For example, keep in mind that as the person in the middle of the trauma, it is more useful if I receive comfort rather than witnessing people's own processing of my trauma.
- Talk about it. Do not be afraid to talk about the child and use their name. Don't worry, the grieving person is already thinking about their child.
- Offer specific help. Often, in the earlier days, I was not functioning well enough to know what I needed when asked if there was anything someone could do. I appreciated especially the people who offered specific help like laundry, food, or child care and those who offered help several weeks down the line.
- The grief will last longer than you expect. The first anniversaries both of the death and of the birth were very hard. The anniversaries are still times of grief, but with less intensity now. Remember your person on those days.

There are also some things that you should avoid saying. These are my least favorite comments from people trying to offer consolation:

- He is in a better place now.
- God never gives you more than you can handle.
- At least you still have Nora.
- I do not know how you do it.

Life happens while we work in both good and bad ways. We need to support our colleagues when these things happen. This includes parenting in general and in specific circumstances like this one. I have appreciated the support of my colleagues and friends through this journey, and I continue to appreciate the support I receive as life goes on.

And life does go on. It has been nine years, and we are a family with one living amazing twelve-year-old Nora who loves math, playing the flute, playing soccer, and playing on her iPhone. We also live with the memory of Drew and have a purple redbud tree planted in his memory at our house. We will keep making new memories while we honor the old.

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