



Facts & Arguments Essay

Losing my granddaughter

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“Granny!” she squeals as she leaps with abandon into what she trustingly assumes will be my waiting embrace. Her eyes shine with joy as she anticipates play time, Granny-style.

We collapse on the floor, surrounded by dolls and other such girlish accoutrements. Sometimes I get to be the mommy and she the daddy; other times she tires of parenthood, dumps her “children” in a box and we dance to the rhythm of *Old MacDonald*, joined by her two brothers (one of whom is her twin, the other older). Sibling rivalry abounds, quickly forgotten as story time begins.

Is there any greater joy?

My granddaughter, Tal Doron (affectionately called Tali), was just 4 when she died on Aug. 26, 2007. A stunningly beautiful child, she exuded both childlike joy and astounding maturity throughout the 10 months of her suffering. Diagnosed at the age of 3 with a rare form of brain cancer, her chances of survival were slim. Nevertheless, as she endured the unspeakable horrors of chemotherapy and stem-cell transplantation, we convinced ourselves that she would beat the odds.

There was simply no other way to think.

Dazed and terrified, we sprang into action, aided by our wonderful community of friends. The family needed to eat. Her parents needed clean clothes. And there were two bewildered little boys whose world had turned upside down and inside out. My heart broke as I dropped my three-year-old grandson off at playschool (without his twin for the first time in his life) and left him screaming because I was needed at the hospital.

How could this possibly be happening in my family?

With heartwarming compassion, the oncologists devised an aggressive treatment regimen that would require Tali to be hospitalized for the better part of six months. Each day after work, I would alternate between helping out at the hospital and spending time with the two little boys at home, until my body demanded an end to this frenetic pace. I found myself crying non-stop and realized it was time to take a leave of absence from work.

Tali’s hospital room was a veritable Dora the Explorer exhibit, Dora being her all-time favourite character.

She had Dora books, videos, posters, stuffed animals, stickers and more. She even played Dora games on the computer, which inspired her parents to set up Skype for her so she could interact with her brothers and other family members when they were unable to visit. For me it meant extra time with her reading stories or singing together, activities she loved.

The second phase of treatment – stem-cell transplantation – carried with it a significant risk of infection. Only Tali's parents were allowed into her hospital room, one at a time. But if one parent wasn't well, I became the overnight alternate.

After sanitizing everything and anything in my possession, I would peek in and be greeted with an excited "Granny's here!" sending my heart soaring to the moon. When she was ready for sleep my heart would melt as she lay quietly, her huge dark eyes locked with mine as I sang to her.

From this child – not yet 4 – I learned about the capacity of the human psyche to experience joy and to laugh, even amid unimaginable circumstances.

Sent home after the last cycle of treatment, she flourished, quickly gaining weight and looking healthy and robust. We dared to be cautiously optimistic, but soon after her fourth birthday came the catastrophic news of a relapse from which she would not recover.

It was unfathomable to imagine a world without this remarkable child. Words couldn't possibly capture the depth and breadth of our grief.

Her devastated and devoted parents cared for her at home, where I too stayed day and night, terrified to leave. I remember singing *You Are My Sunshine* to her, until I reached the line, "Please don't take my sunshine away." I could not go on.

She died two days later.

As I tried to articulate my sorrow, I found myself trying to brush aside my grief, since it was a mere drop in the vast ocean of agony into which her parents had been plunged. Of what importance could my grief be when her parents were facing a future forever darkened by this inconceivable loss?

Yet I could not ignore the voice inside me, and I had to keep reminding myself that loss cannot be measured. That my pain, although different than that of Tali's parents, was real.

Hoping to somehow quiet my sorrow, I began creating a collection of tangible and touchable remembrances. I put together photo albums and videos, surrounded myself with framed photographs, wrote in my journal and listened to "our" songs.

Gradually I began to notice that time was softening the edges of my grief, allowing me to remember moments my granddaughter and I had shared – how she would give me Dora stickers for "good behaviour," make up nonsense syllables or declare her love for me, arms outstretched to show me just how much. She loved "chicken nuggets" and "pupcakes" and needed "mapkins" to clean her face. She offered adult-like encouragement when I exaggerated my struggle to master a task ("Good job, Granny!" or "I know you can do it Granny!"). And she was so proud of her long string of bravery beads, one for each painful procedure she endured.

I am thankful for each precious moment I had with this remarkable little girl, whose courage, wisdom and capacity for joy touched the very deepest part of my soul, where it will remain always.

Adele Gould lives in Richmond Hill, Ont.

For more on Tali see www.taldoron.com.

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