

A M O T H E R ' S S T O R Y

Cathy Harrington

*"I cannot wipe away your tears...I can only teach you how to make them holy",
From Affirmation by Anthony De Mello.*

My life changed forever the night I received the call that my beautiful daughter and her roommate had been brutally murdered on November 1 2004. A shroud of darkness fell over me in heavy layers suffocating me with fear and despair. It was inconceivable that the vibrant, shining essence that for twenty-six years had been Leslie Ann Mazzara, the light of my life, my flesh, my blood, my youngest child, could be gone, extinguished forever. Her beautiful and promising life was stolen in the night in an act of terror, in a gruesome act of selfish anger and rage. I was thrust on a journey through hell seemingly without end, and began a mother's mission to make meaning out of the meaningless.

The next eleven months were an unspeakable nightmare as the police investigation following false assumptions that Leslie was the murderer's target failed to find the killer. I fumbled through each day in a broken-hearted daze, confused and unconvinced that anyone would want to hurt Leslie. When Eric Copple, a friend of her roommate, Adrienne, turned himself in after the police revealed that the killer smoked a rare blend of Camel cigarettes, we were all stunned. I hadn't realized that I had been holding my breath all that time and that every muscle in my body had been braced for that moment until I received that long-awaited call in the middle of the night. I gasped for air like a victim of a near-drowning accident. We had been held in trauma space for almost a year, while this man, this murderer, married Adrienne's best friend, and had gone about his life as if nothing had happened. Stunned by the news, I braced myself for the next steps of the journey.

The many months that followed were filled with speculation about Eric Copple and about whether the prosecution would seek the death penalty. The District Attorney assured us that it would be his decision ultimately and after they did a full review of the case and a psychological profile on Eric, they would ask the families for their views before making that decision. We were told to be patient, to wait.

Meanwhile the media rushed in to exploit and sensationalize our tragedy. The American entertainment industry has developed an unsavory taste for violence and vulgarity. When murder is turned into entertainment, the sacred gift of life is diminished and our minds and hearts become calcified, our humanity suffers.

I sought counsel with anyone who might help me preserve Leslie's dignity and save us from the potential pain and suffering of a lengthy and very public trial. Sister Helen Prejean generously offered to speak with me and her words of wisdom nourished me with hope. Sister Helen told me heart-wrenching stories about mothers of murderers that opened my mind and my heart to

compassion. She pierced my darkness when she said, “Jesus asks us to stretch, Cathy. There are two arms of the cross; one side is for the victims and their loved ones and the other side of the cross holds in the same light of love and hope, the murderer and his family.” For the first time I felt a measure of compassion for Eric’s mother, and I could feel my heart open, suddenly aware that it had been clenched tightly like a fist. Looking back I must have been thinking that a broken heart had to be bound tightly like a tourniquet.

There has been a gradual adjustment since then as my eyes have slowly adapted to the dark. My Universalist faith teaches that ultimately all will be reconciled with God and that everyone is saved, even murderers. When I think of Eric as a child wounded by abuse, I feel sadness, a too common history shared by those who grow up to commit violent acts against each others. Remarkably, Jesus was capable of forgiving his murderers as he suffered on the cross. As a Unitarian Universalist Christian minister, I seek to follow the teachings and the example of Jesus, but forgiving the murderer of my daughter and for the loss of my never-to-be-born grandchildren; babies that my arms ache to hold, still seems inconceivable to me.

But, even in the worst that life has to offer I’ve discovered that grace is present. *Grace is everywhere*, Georges Bernanos’ country priest said on his death bed, borrowing his dying words from St. Therese of Liseaux. It must be true, because I found that when I reached towards the heavens from the hollow emptiness of my sorrow, I found grace. Grace was there waiting for me, quenching my sorrow, a trusted companion on the lonely journey.

Will, a homeless friend that I met along the way gave me his grandmother’s Benedictine cross to remind me of God’s love when I told him about Leslie’s murder. Moved by his compassion and selfless generosity, the theology of the cross took on new meaning for me and at Sister Helen’s suggestion, I developed a relationship with Mary as a peer. After all, her son was murdered, and Mary spent the rest of her life making meaning. I carried that cross in my pocket for over two years and often found my fingers tracing the lines of the two arms as if praying in Braille. My life became a living prayer; *there are two arms to the cross. Jesus asks us to stretch....*

“Have you ever heard of a pinhole camera?” retired astronomer, Dr. Ed Dennison asked when I mentioned to him that Sister Helen had poked a tiny hole in my darkness. He demonstrated it to me by covering the window in his laundry room with foil and poking a tiny hole in the foil. We huddled in the darkness and waited. Impatiently, I squirmed in the dark stuffy, room as my eyes slowly adjusted. I thought five minutes was surely enough, but Dr. Dennison told us that it takes a full thirty minutes for our eyes to adjust to the dark. After ten minutes, he held up a white paper to the beam of light coming in through the tiny hole and we were astounded to see the trees from outside outlined on the paper. Gradually, we could see the details of the leaves and as we waited they became more intricate and clear. I was amazed at how I was sure that I could see clearly in a few minutes and how much more clarity there was in fifteen, and even more in twenty and twenty-five minutes. The trees were upside down, and though I haven’t found a metaphor to properly explain that phenomenon, I had no problem understanding the metaphor of the pinhole camera and my journey toward forgiveness parting my sea of despair and hopelessness one step at a time. I may never arrive, but it is the goal of forgiveness that I

have set my compass. I believe it is our true north as Jesus demonstrated on the cross, the destiny of human potential that some have called becoming fully human or perhaps this is the kingdom of God that Jesus understood so clearly. Forgiveness is not a destination, it is a journey I have come to understand.

Which brings me to my understanding of the death penalty and what I believe to be the multi-layered hidden tragedy beneath the conviction that the death penalty is “just” punishment, I don’t have time to build a case for the multitude of reasons that the death penalty is impractical economically, unjust, racist, and so on. I can best speak to my own experience and to the insights that I have gained over the past four and one half years of finding my way in the dark. I likened it to four and one half minutes in the pinhole camera experiment. I am *just beginning* to see. If we had been forced to endure a trial and remain defended and held in trauma, there would have been no beam of light to penetrate and relieve the oppressive darkness - nothing to illumine my path. The death penalty not only serves to keep us in the dark stagnating hope; it serves to compound the violence and escalates the conflict, limiting our human potential to find our true north. I don’t yet have a glimpse of what forgiving the murderer of my precious child would be like, but I know that if I don’t walk towards that hope, I will be doomed to dwell in despair and pain forever. It is about choosing life, again and again, day after day.

The German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke suggests that we think of *God as a direction*. I hold that in my heart as I put one step in front of the other and as I slowly move toward clarity, I begin to think about the possibility of meeting Eric Cople face to face; a stipulation written into the plea agreement for a facilitated victim/offender dialogue. If Sister Helen is right about the two arms of the cross, and I believe she is, then Eric can also find his way towards wholeness. But, it is Eric’s responsibility to take fully into his heart the reality of what he has done and let the guilt tear and rip apart his heart from the inside out, as his senseless and violent act resulting in the murders of Leslie and Adrienne have done to all who loved them and whose lives they touched. It is only then that healing will be possible for Eric. I pray it will be so.

I would say that what might be the most insidious tragedy of the death penalty is that if we wilfully *murder* murderers, how can we ever hope to become fully human, to complete the journey? Honestly, I’m terrified of facing the murderer of my child one day, and I don’t know if I will have the courage and the grace to ever forgive but it is my hope and prayer. All I can do is keep on walking in that direction and leave the rest up to the grace that I have come to know and trust.

Cathy Harrington is a parish minister in the Unitarian Universalist faith. Her daughter Leslie Ann Mazzara was murdered on November 1, 2004 at her home in Napa, California. Cathy negotiated a life sentence for her daughter’s murderer who had, until that point, been facing the death penalty.