

grieving and also my work with the dying in palliative care and hospice. Wherever you find it, meaning matters, and meaning heals.

Early Losses

When people ask me what I do, I pause. Do I tell them that I write books about death and grief and lecture around the world? Or that I have worked in palliative care and hospice for decades? That I have a master's degree in bioethics and help people decide when enough is enough in medical care? When it is time to consider hospice or palliative care? Do I explain that I'm a specialist police reserve officer on a trauma team, as well as serving as a member of a Red Cross disaster team? Or that I trained for a pilot's license and have taken part in helping those whose loved ones died in two aviation disasters? Unlike my mentor, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, who mostly worked with death in a hospital setting, I'm trained as a modern-day thanatologist. In other words, I don't deal with death only in the hospital or hospice, but also at crime scenes and plane crashes. I follow grief wherever it takes me, which usually brings me

to scenes of death and dying, but it can also lead me to divorce and other kinds of losses.

The list of my activities and affiliations may sound like a strange, incoherent mishmash. But the truth is that although I am a hybrid of all those things, there is an underlying theme uniting them all. When I look back on my reasons for following this unusual path, I see that my career choices weren't random. It was my destiny to become who I am because of what happened to me during the course of a few days when I was thirteen years old.

My mother battled health problems throughout much of my childhood. On New Year's Eve 1972, I walked into her bedroom, gave her a kiss, and said, "Mom, 1973 will be the year you get better." Within days, she underwent severe kidney failure and was transferred from our local hospital to one in New Orleans that was larger and better equipped.

Mom was put in an intensive care unit that allowed visitors to see their family members for only ten minutes every two hours. My father and I spent most of our time sitting in the hospital lobby waiting for those brief, precious

visits, hoping for a sign that she was getting better and could go home. Since my father had no money for a hotel, we also had to sleep in that waiting room.

There was not much close to the hospital, no mall or stores, nothing else to see. In fact, the only thing around was the hotel across the street where we could not afford to stay. But boredom is boredom. Since we had to be close to the hospital and that hotel at least offered us the possibility of a change of scene, we spent many hours sitting in that lobby, too. That was life: Mom was in the hospital and we were hanging out in hospital and hotel lobbies.

One day when we were at the hotel, there was a sudden eruption of activity, and someone yelled, “Fire!” Everyone began running outside because there was a fire on the eighteenth floor. Flames appeared on the balcony and the fire department and police arrived quickly. Then the unthinkable happened. As the firefighters climbed the ladder to fight the fire, shooting began. This was not just a fire—it was a massacre. The man who had set the fire was now on top of the building, taking aim at people with a gun.

Within seconds, police were everywhere while people rushed into the adjoining buildings for cover. It was scary stuff for a child who had been sitting in the hospital for days on end facing another terrifying thing—the serious illness of his mother. The siege went on for thirteen hours and resulted in seven deaths, including three police officers. It is now considered one of the first mass shootings in the United States. Today you can see it on YouTube if you search for New Orleans Sniper 1973.

During the two days that followed, my mother stopped talking and I knew she was getting sicker. But seeing her was a challenge since there was a rule that you had to be fourteen years old to visit a patient and I was only thirteen. Although most of the nurses were lenient and allowed me to go into her room, some wouldn't. One nurse even told me to come back when I was fourteen!

Three days after the shooting, Dad and I were told that my mom didn't have long to live, and unfortunately the next day it was the "Rule Nurse" who was on duty. She refused to let me see my mother, or to ease up on the ten-

minutes-every-two-hours regulation. Therefore, my mother died alone that day. That's the way things happened back then. Families, especially children, were often not allowed to be present during a patient's final moments. When they were, it was only at the mercy of the caregivers.

At the end of that painful day, I went on my first plane ride. My father and I were flying to Boston to arrange for my mother's funeral. Since they knew I had just lost my mother, the pilots wanted to give a sad kid a little fun. As a well-meaning gesture they invited me into the cockpit to "help" them fly the plane. Although the captain told me I was flying it, I of course never really had control of the plane, but as a child I believed that I did—and I was terrified. I remember looking out from the cockpit, feeling lost and overwhelmed, and thinking I was going to make a mistake and crash the plane. Luckily, all 148 passengers made it through my first "solo."

Now I see how all the things I do in my professional life—dealing with death in the medical world, working in end-of-life ethics, becoming a specialist reserve police officer,

learning to fly a plane, and working with the Red Cross on aviation disasters—are attempts to regain some of the control I felt I lost when my mother died. And through these choices I found a healing process that gave meaning to my own life and offered me an opportunity to use what I learned to help others. I've become someone who could have helped that young boy who was in so much distress. My career is living proof that we teach what we need to learn.

But that is not the end of this story.

To this day, New Orleans will always be a city with lots of meaning for me because it's where my mother died. I've been back many times, and during some of those visits, I've stood outside the hospital where she died and looked across the street at the Howard Johnson's hotel where my father and I had whiled away so many hours between visits to my mother. In 2005, the hospital was devastated by Hurricane Katrina and it was deemed too damaged and old to rebuild. There was a plan to tear it down and build a new modern hospital not far from there.

In 2015, I embarked on a one-year lecture

tour that took me to the US, the UK, and Australia. The lecture company that booked my US tour chose the cities and venues, and it wasn't surprising that New Orleans was one of the cities in which I would be lecturing. The bookers always make it easy for me, putting me in the same hotel where I am scheduled to speak. As I was looking over my New Orleans itinerary, I saw that I'd be speaking at the Holiday Inn Superdome Hotel. When I Googled the hotel's address, I discovered, to my shock, that it was the same hotel where the fire and the sniper attack had occurred decades earlier. It had undergone a major renovation and had a new name, but it was the same place.

When I told my lecture company the story, they said, "We'd be happy to move you to another venue. We don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"No," I said. "I think it's a full-circle moment of meaning for me." I had decided that staying there was something I should do. Healing doesn't mean the loss didn't happen. It means that it no longer controls us.

As the date got closer, my past began to demand more of my attention. I wondered

what had been built on the site of the old hospital where my mother had died. After a quick search on the Internet, I found out that although the new hospital was about to open, the old one was apparently still standing.

Wanting to see it, I called the hospital administration in New Orleans. A manager told me that the hospital was indeed still there, but it had been condemned and entry was forbidden. I told her my story and asked, “Is there any way I could get into the closed hospital?”

“No,” she said quickly. “Because of Katrina, there might be mold and it isn’t safe.”

“What about with an escort, a hard hat, and a mask?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I understand,” I told her. “But would you be willing to inquire for me? It would mean so much to me.”

An hour later, she called back. “I’m not sure what did it, your story or maybe they were familiar with your work, but they said yes. The head of security for the hospital system will meet you there Sunday, the day before your lecture, and escort you into the lobby. But you

can only see the lobby.”

I was suddenly thirteen years old again. How ironic, I thought, that all these years later I was still restricted to the lobby. At least now, as an adult, I understood why.

When I got to the hospital on Sunday afternoon, I was surprised by the kindness of the security director. “When I heard your story,” he said, “I did a little research with some of the old-timers. The ICU where your mother would have been is on the sixth floor west. Would you like to go there?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“The building has minimal electricity, so the elevators aren’t running,” he said. “But we could walk up to the tenth floor, cross buildings, and walk down to the sixth floor.”

Before I knew it, we were on the tenth floor of the old hospital. Ceiling tile lay on the floor, dislodged light fixtures swayed above us, abandoned patient rooms were empty, and everything—beds, equipment, chairs—had been removed.

As we walked down to the ninth floor, we passed abandoned nursing stations and more empty rooms, and I couldn’t help but think

about all the lives that had passed through there. Finally we arrived at the sixth-floor ICU. Whatever else may have changed, the ICU entrance double doors were the same, and decades later, I could still recognize them.

I turned to the security director and said, “These are the doors I wasn’t allowed to go past.”

“Now you can,” he said. “Go ahead.”

As I began to push the door open, I turned to him and said, “Her bed was the second on the left.” When I entered the unit, I looked at the space where my mother’s bed would have been. Just above it, there was a call light that was flashing green. I froze. We had walked through four floors of patients’ rooms and hadn’t seen one call light blinking.

My skeptical mind said it was a random light left on in an abandoned building. Or perhaps the police chief had turned it on because he knew where my mother died. But as soon as I thought this, I realized what a stretch it was. How could he possibly have known that this was the room where she died? I hadn’t told him my mother’s full name, and even if I had, he would have had to pull records from

decades ago in an abandoned hospital. Medical records are usually destroyed after seven years.

What did the green light mean? We often talk about “meaning making.” Life offers us layers of meaning. We make of them what we will. What meaning did I give to this green light? What meaning did it have on its own? A green light often means it’s okay to go. At that moment it meant I was finally able to go to the place where my mother died. But the green light they often use in doctors’ offices has another meaning. Once a patient is brought to an examination room, a green light outside the room means that there is a patient waiting to be seen. Was the green light telling me that my mother was waiting to be seen—by me? Could she somehow have known I was coming and wanted to give me a sign that she was there? If this place was such a power spot for me, would it be a power spot for her, too?

Standing in that room, I thought about my friend Louise Hay, who told me, “We arrive in the middle of the movie and we leave in the middle of the movie.” We included that in our book *You Can Heal Your Heart*. We have finite time on this earth. I had grown from a young

boy questioning why my mother had to die, into a man who was healed. That thirteen-year-old boy could never have imagined that one day he would be standing at the exact same spot where his mother had taken her last breath forty-two years earlier. Now I was about the same age as my mother when she died, and being there made me feel whole at last. I was no longer a victim, but rather a victor over my loss. I could remember my mother with more love than pain. I found great meaning in knowing that I had turned my loss into a vocation that helps thousands survive the worst moments of their lives.

Meaning Making

Gail Bowden's child Branden was born with spina bifida. He had to use a catheter to go to the bathroom, wear braces on his legs, and use a wheelchair. Yet Gail was determined to give him a great life. Thanks to Gail, Branden grew up happy. He loved the color yellow, and he took a liking to cars, especially yellow Volkswagen Beetles. Before long, he had quite an extensive toy car collection.