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Living life through the grief

SARAH HAMPSON - June 4, 2007

'Good, bad, joy, sorrow, they are all inextricably intertwined and linked," Lesley Parrott explains. "That's life. And if you think you can get by with only one ... then, in a way, you're not allowing life to come at you. You can't appreciate joy without sorrow, and if you only have sorrow, you are shutting out the possibility of joy."

Ms. Parrott is now 61. It was 21 years ago next month that her eldest child and only daughter, Alison, died at the hands of her murderer after being raped. She was a few months shy of her 12th birthday at the time.

That death stunned Toronto, and if in the ensuing years we have become inured to the violence that lurks in a city, the palpable distress of a mother who has lost a child is always painful to observe. Witness Lauren Small, mother of Jordan Manners, shot recently in his high school, C. W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute in northwestern Toronto's Jane Street-Finch Avenue area.

Ms. Small's anguish is excruciating, and yet we watch, perhaps because all parents fear the unimaginable grief themselves. It's what you accept when you become a parent: your vulnerability to a loss that you feel could kill you, too.



(Jim Ross for The Globe and Mail)

Lesley Parrott, readily talks about coping with the murder of her daughter, Alison. The grief never ends, but she wants others to know it is survivable.

Ms. Parrott speaks with great candour about how she coped with her daughter's murder. But she does so not to suggest that grief ends or even abates. She simply wants to help others know that it is survivable.

"Once you've lived with it for a while and you kind of figure you're going to survive and not do yourself in, there's a great comfort. I feel strength in my ability to suffer," she says.

There is a calm certainty about Ms. Parrott, whose pellucid blue eyes hold a direct gaze with anyone who engages her in conversation. She articulates the nuances of grief like a clinical psychologist.

The emotion is there, behind her words, knocking up against them, like fists at a door. It's clear talking helps prevent the terror from escaping.

"The initial stages and years are just abject total pain. Relentless. You have your heart ripped out the whole time," she says. "It's like a shroud. It's all that's in your frontal consciousness."

She felt that a mother's urge to protect her child was denied her. "There is a sense that you should have been there," she explains calmly. "That somehow she had to go through this horror alone. When she had her asthma attacks, I'd be there. When she was sick or troubled, I'd be there. Everybody has to deal with how their child dies.... You kind of have to find a way of working through that. But there is no way of working through the rape and murder of your daughter."

Even the conviction in 1999 of Francis Carl Roy, after years of pressure on the police to find her daughter's murderer, didn't help.

"No, it doesn't matter," Ms. Parrott says with a deep sigh. "All you can do, ultimately, is say that this [the manner of her death] is a black hole, and I'm not going there. And if you have to go there, you get out of it as quickly as possible. It's going to debilitate me to be a mother to my son, to be a friend, to be a partner, so I just slammed it shut. I wasn't capable of processing it. The only way to process it is to say you can't, and that it's dangerous to do it."

She and her husband of 39 years, Peter, attended parts of the trial but avoided the days when the pathology and forensic reports were discussed. "Sometimes, people feel they have to know everything. I didn't. If it had done anything to help Alison, I'd have done it. There's a sense of bearing witness, and there's a sense of supporting the team that is doing it. But there's no closure."

In the immediate aftermath of Alison's death, Ms. Parrott's work as head of production at J. Walter Thompson, an advertising agency in Toronto, was one of her salvations. "I kept working by rote. I went back two weeks later. People were fabulous. I never took time off when I was pregnant. Taking time off wasn't going to take the pregnancy away, and taking time off wasn't going to take the grief away."

She works still, as an independent consultant in communication training.

The other salvation was her son, Calum, now 29. "A few months after the loss of Alison, a really lucid thing happened. I thought, 'If I can do nothing else with my life, I can parent Calum.' We as a couple realized that we could lose Calum if we went down."

Her marriage survived the loss, unlike many couples' relationships that crumble under the weight of grief. But they coped in different ways. "I don't kid you," she says. "It was tough, because I couldn't stop talking about grief and Alison, and Peter is not a talker. I have utmost respect about how he handled it. It's such an individual thing. At first he listened to me and then I realized it was burdensome to him.

"Grief is like surgery. There may be others hovering around you, but you have to go through it alone."

Her healing, which is possible, but never complete, began with forgiveness of herself, she says. On the first weekend after the memorial service for her daughter, she and her family retreated to a 40-hectare farm in Durham County, east of Toronto, where she and her husband now live permanently. After dinner, she climbed a hill behind the house. There was one star in the sky.

She sang *Star Light, Star Bright*, a favourite lullaby for her children. "I told Alison how much I loved her. And I told her how sorry I was because, of course, I felt guilty."

Ms. Parrott had been at work when her daughter called to ask if she could meet with a man who was posing as a local newspaper photographer to do a feature on her track team. A housekeeper who didn't speak English very well was home with Alison at the time. Ms. Parrott gave her daughter permission to go.

In her prayer to her daughter, she wanted to free her. "I said to her, 'I'm going to let you go.' I felt that I was going to be enduring so much pain and so much of the pain had to do with her, and I didn't want her to have any part of that. She had done her suffering. I prayed for forgiveness, not for having been part of what happened, but for a lot of the things we need forgiveness for."

When she opened her eyes, she looked up and the star had gone. "I had this deep, abiding sense of peace that I probably haven't had since."

The daughter of a Scottish Presbyterian minister, Ms. Parrott extends her extraordinary gift for thoughtfulness to her daughter's murderer.

"I wish for him healing. That does not mean I condone or accept what he did or that there's any excuse for it. But I think you can't wish for healing for yourself and not for someone else. I want there to be possibility for some transformation. Love in the end is stronger. And so to do that, you can't say I want him to hang by his fingernails. That's not about love, and forgiveness is part of love."