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By Sarah Kilch Gaffney



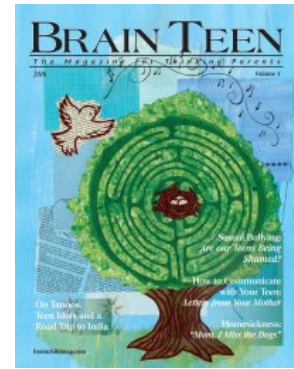
I knew it would come back to haunt me. I knew that I would wish I had come up with a better, more personally truthful explanation to give my daughter, but at that point it was the best I could do, so when prompted to talk about where Daddy had gone a few days after he died, I took the easy route and answered: heaven.

It felt like such a moment of weakness. Even in the thick of the worst days of my life, I had always told her the truth.

I am a spiritual person, but I do not believe in God. I do not believe in heaven or hell, angels or demons. While my spiritual beliefs are still evolving, I do know that I believe in love, and positive energy (whatever form that may take, be it prayer, meditation, or simply good juju). I believe there is another aspect of our beings that is beyond the body, but I do not place my belief in God.

My daughter was barely three when her father died, however, and I was at a loss for what to say to her. Death and permanence are difficult concepts to comprehend at that age. After having the "Daddy is dying" talk, I wasn't sure how much more I was capable of. A tiny part of me still didn't believe that it

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was actually happening, that there was going to come a day very soon when my husband's body would finally fail.

Almost all of the kids' books that we had read together about death and grief talked about heaven, so she was at least vaguely familiar with the concept, and "heaven" seemed like an easy answer during an extremely difficult time.

Most people would probably struggle with the idea of wanting the love of their life to die, but I have been there and come through the other side. The day before he died, I told my husband he could go, that I loved him and that he could go. He seemed to know we were there briefly that morning and then he was gone again. He was no longer aware of the world, was in constant pain, and had not been able to speak, eat, or move in days.

I laid down with him in his hospital bed, my head on his shoulder and my hand on his chest, the way we used to lay together in the old days, and I gave him my blessing to die. I wanted him to die. The state he was in was not life. He was ready and I was as ready as I was going to be, and it seemed that all that was left in the meantime were varying degrees of suffering.

I called time of death the following night at 9:40 pm.

Fourteen months later at the dinner table, my four-year-old daughter asked me where Daddy went.

"I know it was the cancer that made him die," she said, while spooning macaroni into her mouth, "but where did he go?"

I started explaining again how when some people die they get cremated and their bodies become ashes. I talked about how we had spread Daddy's ashes in the places he loved most. This was a conversation we'd had many times before. She knew what had happened to his body, and it became clear that wasn't what she was asking.

"But where did *he* go? Did he go to heaven?"

"Some people believe that when we die, we go to a place called heaven," I said. "And Mama doesn't believe in heaven, but she believes that Daddy isn't hurting anymore, and that all he feels now is love." She nodded.

"We're always connected to Daddy through our hearts," I continued, "because we will always love him and he will always love us."

"We feel him right here," she said, placing her small hand on her chest.

She was content with my answer and we finished our dinner talking about school, friends, and princess books, but I kept replaying the conversation in my head. Was I saying the right things? Was I giving the right answers? Did right answers even exist?

I don't know how to explain suffering of that extent to my child, and I don't know how to explain a religious place where the dead go that I don't believe in. There will always be difficult questions, and I know that I often won't have the answers, but I do know that I am doing the best I can.

I have seen and felt my husband since his death: in a sole firefly floating through our bedroom on a dark summer night; in a beautiful Luna moth clinging to a tree when I suddenly felt compelled to turn around mid-step on a trail; in a bottle of bourbon opened the night he died that inexplicably exploded while every other bottle in the cabinet remained intact.

Our daughter will grow up to develop her own beliefs about spirituality, religion, and death, and I hope she does plenty of exploring and inquiring in the process. It's okay if she doesn't end up on the same page as me, as long as she finds her own truth in the end.

In the meantime, I teach her about the good in people and about being kind to others. I talk to her about the wonder of life and about the beauty we can find in the world. I give her all of the love and energy I have to give, and then some more I didn't even know was there.

Sarah Kilch Gaffney is a writer, brain injury outreach coordinator, and homemade-caramel aficionado living in central Maine. You can read more of her work at www.sarahkilchgaffney.com.

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