

Week 34: Let's Hold Each Other Like We're Dying

About a week before Robin Williams committed suicide, my friend was in a car accident. The car was totaled. He texted me a picture of it and let me know everyone was okay. Reassured of his safety, the next question on my mind was this:

“Whose fault was it?”

Then Robin Williams committed suicide. A shocking, tragic loss. And instantly, Twitter and Facebook lit up with debates about depression and suicide and illness versus choice and who was at fault. Mental health debates. Theological debates. Existential debates. Apparently, we *all* like to look for fault and to assign blame. Of course, we *need* to talk about such things. Dialogue is essential. But the debate happened so fast there was little real dialogue. Why is conflict so often our first response to tragedy?

Sometimes, we fight so we don't have to feel.

Sometimes, we trade jeers so we don't have to trade tears.

Robin Williams and depression. Police shootings and racism. ISIS and war. Gaza and religion. School shootings and guns. Ebola and safety and social privilege. Tragedy strikes and we instantly light up cyberspace with arguments about what is to blame and who is at fault and how to fix the problem. It helps us to feel in control—if someone is to blame then there is a cause and an effect, and the universe isn't random or capricious. It helps us to feel blameless—if the other guy is at fault then we don't have to bear the burden of guilt. And, most commonly and honorably, finding fault and assigning blame can help us solve the problem. When things go wrong, we want to fix them for the future.

But when we try to fix things fast, we never get to feel them fully. And that's a *real* problem. Because the solutions to our most pressing concerns don't lie within the heated exchange of our ideas; they lie at the bottom of our grief. If we don't get better at grieving, we can't get better at loving and living.

For instance, when Quinn was only a few months old, we took him to the pediatrician for a routine wellness exam. It didn't end in a routine way. She was concerned about a condition called cranial stenosis, in which the plates in the skull fuse prematurely. She told us the condition could result in physical disfigurement, neurological complications, even death. And then she told us we'd have to wait *months* for a definitive diagnosis—surgery could not be performed until he was much older, so it was prudent to delay x-rays until they would be safer for his developing body. Months of waiting on our son's fate. Months of WebMD searches. Months in which I could barely look at the little guy—every time I saw his head, my insides lit up with panic.

Then one day, as I was driving and praying, I became aware I was stuck in the bargaining stage of grief, and I began to wonder what kind of sadness lay just beneath my anxiety. So I pulled over, took a deep breath, found a place of stillness within me, and I waited for the sadness to come.

And come it did.

Deep waves of grief about the future of my little boy. The depth of it surprised me. Because it wasn't limited to grief about his potential diagnosis. Up welled grief about the fact that, even if his life goes perfectly, he will one day be gone. And, even if everything goes perfectly, I'll be gone *before* him. Grief that life is fragile and uncertain and limited and that's just way it is.

As the waves of sadness ebbed, I drove home, entered the house, saw my little boy, and for the first time in weeks, the sight of him didn't trigger anxiety. It triggered *tenderness*. I reached out and I held him tight, not to protect him, but to love him more deeply because I knew I *couldn't* protect him.

At the bottom of our grief lies the solution to our problems, because at the bottom of our grief always lies the inexorable desire to hold each other like we're dying. Can you imagine a world in which everyone is holding each other like they're dying?

What if when Robin Williams died, we all just paused our debates for a day to feel the grief of it? What if the sorrow sent us into an embrace of the depressed and despairing people we love? What if when we saw the image of the Australian-school-kid-turned-ISIS-soldier holding the decapitated head of a Syrian militant, we paused for an hour to feel the grief of it? What if we experienced that horrendous violence as a natural extension of the subtle violence we commit every day in our families and our friendships and in every brush with a stranger on the road? How might our anger dissolve into tenderness? What if when our fear rises up about Ebola patients being transported to our country, we dwelled just a little while on their humanity? What if we closed our eyes and imagined our closest loved one half a world away, bleeding from the inside out? I wonder if our anxiety would give way to compassion. I wonder if we'd want to bring them back ourselves.

We need to become a world that gets good at grieving.

We have to surrender to it. We have to feel our way to the bottom of our sorrow so we can get to the bottom of this mystery we call love and life. Because at the bottom of the mystery is a singular reality: we were, all of us, made for each other, and we are here to hold each other like we're dying.