

I'm Not Contagious

By Martha Clark Scala

In the two or three weeks immediately following my brother Nick's death, I received numerous calls, cards, plants, flowers, and offers of help. My loss sat on the front burner of many wonderful people's stoves for about 21 days. I was in their thoughts, prayers, and blessings.

Unfortunately, many issues and events vie for front-burner status. Part of me understood why the love, attention, and concern started to recede. Another part of me wanted to throw a full-blown temper tantrum live at Madison Square Garden. "My brother, Nick, is dead. Gone. Finished. Have you forgotten?" I would cry, and have a grand time berating others for overlooking my plight. No wonder I resonated so deeply with Madeline Sharples' poem, "Aftermath." I could have written the same poem, simply replacing her word "son" with my word "brother."

In my fantasy, I would tattoo a large "G" for grieving on my exposed forehead so that no one could possibly forget what had recently happened. They would *have* to remember to ask me, "How are you doing?" Either that or they'd be feigning blindness!

The front-page headline of my imaginary newspaper would always have "Martha's Brother Has Died" as its leading story. Political scandals, tragedies, and stock market crashes would never get top billing. I suppose I would have some fine arguments with my imaginary editor about this! When it's our loss, it is the headliner for quite a while. When it's someone else's loss, it just isn't. In a journal entry written seven months after Nick died, I wrote:

Inside of me, there's a voice screaming to be heard: "No, you don't get it! I just lost my *brother!* Lost my *brother!* One of the most significant people in my life! Don't you dare move on to the next topic . . . I'm still on *this* topic and I am *not* ready to move on and I *won't* be ready to move on for quite some time."

My heartfelt request to the world goes something like this: "If you feel like you don't know what to say, don't say much. Just show up! I have not just come down with strep throat! I'm not contagious!"

Aftermath

By Madeline Sharples

They came in droves at first
Out of concern, out of curiosity
They sent flowers, cards
And sweet notes saying
Call anytime
Anytime at all.

Now it is quiet.
A few friends
Invite us out,
Or come by
The rest have moved on
Glad to have done their duty
They now have nothing left to say.

Don't they know I'm not contagious
My son's death will not rub off on them
I'm the same person I was before
A sadder person, perhaps
But needing my friends
Just the same.

When you have strep throat, a kiss, hug, or even a handshake is discouraged. The well-wisher will keep a distance, offer sincere apologies, and the sick person will understand. But we don't have strep throat. We have grief. It's not a sickness, but a condition with symptoms and circumstances. Sorrow. Pain. Longing. Regrets. Tears. Unanswered questions. Forms to fill out. Belongings to give away. Shock. Insomnia. Memories, good and bad. Wills. Death certificates.



Martha and her brother, Nicholas Clark, at their parents' house on Cape Cod. "This is one of my favorite pictures of the two of us," says Martha. "It was the summer of '91 or '92, a happy time between transplants.

These symptoms last much longer than two weeks or a month; perhaps some will last a lifetime. They may be acute at first, but they don't go away when the initial wave of sympathy cards, visits, and other greetings ebbs. The intensity of the symptoms may ease, but they do persist. Unfortunately, many well-wishers disappear or forget or have new things on their own front burners. Under our breath, we grievers are saying, "Please don't disappear. I need you." We don't really need that much, and yet some friends and family members seem to feel like attending to us is the equivalent of running a marathon. In fact, all that's needed is empathy ... that ability to walk a mile in our moccasins, as the old saying goes.

What do we need? The answer may be a bowl of chicken soup because we've forgotten to eat. We may need some groceries or a prescription filled at the drugstore. We may even need some solitude. However, don't confuse solitude with solitary confinement or quarantine. We are neither dangerous nor contagious. Well-wishers accrue karmic gold stars for showing up at a time when many can't.

We may need someone's presence or vitality or willingness to listen. We may need someone to hear the same story or memory or lament twice, three times, or more. We need others to let us move through our grief at whatever pace our particular journey selects. We do not need to be talked out of our feelings, unless we have asked for it. We don't need cheering up or problem-solving, unless we have asked for them. No one can hasten our return to pre-loss levels of activity or interest. The gift of attention we need is one that permits us to just be where we are in our grieving process. We *will* get better. Our condition *will* improve, but it takes time and patience: gifts we can give to ourselves and hope to receive from others.

In my teens, I took a walk on a city street in Athens, Greece. It was easy to distinguish the tourists from the natives. The tourists were in light-colored clothing while the denizens of Athens were, seemingly without exception, in black. Black skirts, dresses, pants, sweaters, shoes, socks, hats, and coats. Black. This was long before wearing all-black clothing was considered hip, vogue, or Goth. Some time later, I was told that the Greek tradition is that you wear black for a year after someone close to you dies. My lasting impression of Greece, other than its stunning beauty and ancient architecture, was that an awful lot of people had died there!

In our country, grief can be invisible. If you met someone who was unaware that you'd recently suffered a major loss, how would that person know? Perhaps you appear a bit sadder or more distracted than usual. More than likely, you look much the same on the outside as you looked the day or two before your beloved died. By comparison, if you were walking on that same sidewalk with crutches, it would be instantly obvious that something was not right. Your injury would elicit a question and open the door to further conversation about the trauma: "What happened?" "Are you okay?" In the aftermath of a death, crutches are not prescribed for treatment of our heartache. Because there is nothing visible to signal our grief to the outside world, it's easy to feel even more contagious.

We rarely get to see the pain of those still living, though perhaps *feeling* like the living dead as they suffer with the loss in their everyday, moment-to-moment existence. Much energy is directed toward containing the suffering, even in settings such as funeral homes, gravesites, or temples. Many a prescription for mild tranquilizers or sedatives is filled after the death and before the funeral in an effort to suppress any show of emotion. In my psychotherapy practice and elsewhere, I hear griever consumers with the challenge of hiding their tears, looking strong, and by all means not losing "it."

I salute those Greek women, men, and children who expose their loss in their choice of clothing day after day. If we only had some universal symbol, some universal color or badge that would announce to the world that we are grieving ... shouldering a fragile and vulnerable myriad of swarming feelings and emotions underneath our clothing and inside our skin ... perhaps then others could and would remember to attend to us. Our grief is frequently silent and out of sight—an experience not too different from that of those who have been quarantined with a virulent ailment. When we're without support, our feelings start to swarm, there is nowhere to go with them, and no one to talk to about them. It becomes difficult to temper our thoughts or feelings when we feel no link to the outside world.

I like to think I'm wearing my grief badge when I talk or write about my brother's death. By sharing my experience with others, my grief becomes more visible. I join a community. I hear and feel nods of recognition and support, and I feel a lot less contagious. This isn't a community that any of us wanted to join, as the entry requirements are very painful. It is nonetheless a loving community with empathetic arms to hold us. What a gift to receive in the aftermath of such a profound loss.

*Martha Clark Scala, MS, MFT, practices psychotherapy in Palo Alto, Calif. Her brother, Nicholas, died in 1996 at age 45, following an illness that required a heart transplant in 1985 and a kidney transplant from another sibling, Margo, in 1995. Martha edits an e-newsletter, **Out on a Limb**, which encourages readers to maximize the joy in their lives. For more information, <http://www.mcscale.com>.*

NOTE: This article, including the poem, "Aftermath," by Madeline Sharples, first appeared in the Summer 2001 issue of ***We Need Not Walk Alone***, published by The Compassionate Friends. <http://www.compassionatefriends.org>.

Martha Clark Scala, MS, MFT
721 Colorado Ave., Suite 201
Palo Alto, CA 94303
www.mcscale.com