



# **Making Things of Broken Things**

*Re-Creating My Self After the Death of My Son*

by  
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*dedicated to my beloved son, Patrick Burkett*

*'there is still a light that shines from you'*

I want to thank you all for coming today and I also want to thank the Laska family for including my son in the dedication of this workshop. That was an act of generosity for which I am deeply grateful.

I'm here to share how arts and creative acts have helped me to navigate a treacherous terrain - a journey through excruciating losses. This has been a very difficult talk to prepare. It is not like me to be unable to compose a coherent and meaningful presentation. It is not like me to be trying to do so at the last minute. Yet, I found myself unable to find my way with this one and what I'm going to say, I wrote last night, at the very last minute.

I need you to know these things. Please listen to my litany of loss:

In 2003, my first husband, the father of my two oldest sons, killed himself.

That same year, my mother sold her house in Miami and her summer place in North Carolina and moved here. My sister stopped speaking to me.

In 2004, my brother-in-law, Patrick, my husband's identical twin, was killed by a drunk driver.

That same year, our son Patrick, named after his uncle, just 18, began his struggle with alcohol and drugs. In a terrible irony, he was critically injured, driving drunk, less than 6 months after his uncle died.

In 2005, we rode an awful roller coaster with Patrick: addiction, legal and medical problems from the accident.

And the 2nd-degree murder trial of the drunk driver who killed my brother-in-law.

My mother began a steep decline into Lewy Body dementia, a particularly awful dementia.

My sister and I started speaking again.

In early 2006, we saw Patrick's light beginning to return, but his struggle was far from over. And on March 18, our beloved, brilliant, zany, creative boy died from an accidental overdose. He was 20 years and 46 days old.

And with his death, I absolutely felt a severing of ties to my old life, a final shattering of my own self.

Karen Blixen said, "All sorrows can be born if you can tell a story about them."

My life since Patrick's death has been a search for the stories. I am finding them and telling them in words, in fiber, in ink, in paint, in gesture and sometimes in silence. I am searching for the stories because I need them to reconstruct my self.

And each time I tell the stories, each time I engage in an act of expressive art, I feel like I am answering destruction and loss with creation and love. And I am rewarded with being able to continue to live on, I am rewarded with a flicker of hope, and with occasional moments of peace and sometimes I get a glimpse of an old joy I used to have. And sometimes I get a glimpse of who I might be now.

I'd like to share with you the story of the first months of my great grief, as expressed through a few of the poems I wrote during that time.

When Patrick died, I wrote three things in three days - his obituary, his eulogy and this poem, about the last time I saw him, the day before he died.

### **If I Had Known**

if i had known  
that bright sunny Friday afternoon  
standing in the street by your new car  
hugging you  
would be the last moment i would see you alive,

i would have framed it.  
i would have folded it carefully  
and put it in my pocket.  
i would have rolled it up  
and tied it with red ribbon.  
i would have stapled it  
to my heart.  
i would have wrapped it  
like a baby  
and put it in a cradle  
and sung it a lullaby  
i would have sewn it  
into a quilt  
and slept under it every night.  
i would have bronzed it.  
i would have glued it  
to a window in my soul.  
i would have dried it  
like an apple slice and eaten it.  
i would have salted it.  
i would have gilded it  
and worn it around my neck.  
i would have decorated it  
like a christmas tree.  
i would have lit it  
like a candle and prayed and prayed.

i would have never  
let you go

A week after he died, I went to the yarn shop and got a pattern for a shawl to knit. I wanted something simple yet with enough difficulty that it would be a meditation to knit the pattern. I wound up making seven of these shawls over the year. I began to call it the Isis shawl because when it was stretched out, it reminded me of depictions of the winged goddess Isis. Months later, I found out that the myth of Isis is considered to be an archetype myth of grief and mourning. Reading the myth, I was struck with how it resonated with this poem I'd written earlier:

### **Crazy Woman**

inside me there is a crazy woman  
grieving for her son.

she is beating her fists on everything  
she is pummeling the air  
she is howling like wind  
she is tearing her hair  
and banging her head  
and running  
and running  
into darkest nowhere.

sometimes her tears pour from my eyes  
and her screams cascade from my mouth  
and her anger  
and her sorrow  
and her terrible pain  
shatter my bones  
into sharp little bits  
that pierce my skin  
in a thousand bleeding  
wounds.

inside me there is a crazy woman  
grieving for her son.

By writing that poem, I found I'd let that poor crazed woman out, had told her story and released her. I draw her even now, when I draw a self-portrait with electric hair.

And the days went on. In the next poem, I gave voice to how exhausting grief can be.

### Creating the World

i am so tired.

Each morning i must create  
the whole world.

i paint myself awake.

i draw leaves  
on all the trees  
and weave sunlight  
through  
and stitch clouds  
high in the blue.

i knit a cup of tea.

i spend the day hammering  
tears into silver coins  
that vanish  
before they can be spent,  
carve prayers  
on the walls  
of the empty space  
in which my heart levitates,  
dreaming.

i spin an unbalanced yarn  
of the grief that lies in great piles  
around the house  
and  
at night  
before any rest  
i must sigh a galaxy of stars  
and string them like beads  
and fling them across the black  
black sky.

i am so tired.

Not only was I tired, but I found it very difficult to do things I'd always done. Going to the grocery store was especially difficult - for so many reasons. Even today, a year later, I leave Baesler's and I'm crying in the car on the way home. That is an improvement....there were times when the tears did not wait until I was out of the store....

### **At the Supermarket for the Bereaved**

there is an open box of Kleenex  
at the end of every aisle.

No one questions why you weep inconsolably  
before the Cinnamon Toast Crunch,

why you stand still and silent,  
staring at the little Jell-O cups,  
remembering.

### At the Supermarket for the Bereaved

there are blank journals  
attached to each cart.

On the pages, blue-black  
with ink and tears,  
you can write

"he loved *salted* butter"

or

"I made him Ovaltine shakes when his jaw was broken"

or

"i miss i miss i miss him  
with all my heart"

just underneath where someone else wrote

"I always brought her Oreos for a treat"

and

"Every normal act is not normal  
anymore."

### In the Supermarket for the Bereaved

there are angels at the check-out.

They add everything up,  
golden light radiating  
from their brows, promising  
some kind of grace

somewhere.

'Fear Not,' they murmur.

They handle your food  
as if it is sacred.

When they give you change,  
their cool fingers brush your palm,

and for a blessed instant  
hold your grief as their own.

At the exit, there are candles to light  
and places to leave things:  
a can of mini-raviolis,  
a strawberry,  
blue corn  
chips.

As the days wore on and on, I was acutely and miserably aware of how my life was  
profoundly altered and I was far from accepting it.

### **My Missing Life**

such grayness  
my soul is thick  
with fog

someone says  
i am here  
but i am not

i have no idea  
who or where  
i am  
anymore

i hear birds  
i hear music  
i hear nothing  
i want to hear

i see sky  
and tree  
and leaf  
and bird  
i see nothing  
i want to see.

i want my son back.  
i want his wholeness.  
i want his happy heart  
beating.

(oh, here is  
the awful place  
i must not go  
bottomless pit  
of despair  
a wail....)

you may think  
i am here.  
but i am not.  
you may think  
i speak your language  
but i do not

what is this world  
that looks like mine  
that pretends  
to be mine?

what is this life  
that pretends to be mine  
but is not?

*my* life has four children  
three sons and one daughter

this is not my life  
two sons and one daughter

this missing  
this missing  
this missing  
child

this missing son

this life is missing a son  
this is not my life  
it pretends to be

but it is not.

One morning I awoke from a dream and found in that dream, a significant message, guidance.

### **Making Things of Broken Things**

This morning  
I awoke with half-remembered  
dreams and a head full  
of hypnogogic creations.

I pieced together  
broken things with thread:  
cups, teapots, vases --

bits and shards knotted around,  
linked back together  
in a form that was familiar  
to them.

Though they were never the same  
as they were but irrevocably  
altered,

they were beautiful  
in a way they had not been  
beautiful  
before.

And, too, I saw new things  
to make  
of stones and wool:  
bowls  
hanging things  
pendants

and they were heavy things  
but beautiful.

I awoke fully  
knowing  
i must make new things  
heavy things  
of stones and wool  
and also make things  
of broken things,  
(cups teapots vases)

until one day I will find myself  
stitching around  
the shards of my life  
linking them back together

until my life is a familiar shape  
though irrevocably altered

and beautiful  
in a way it was not beautiful  
before.

That dream, and the poem that interpreted it, seemed to affirm that art and creative acts could be my path to wholeness.

And it even seemed to hint there are gifts within losses.

William Blake wrote about these gifts, I think, when he wrote:

*Joy and woe are woven fine,  
A clothing for the soul divine.  
Under every grief and pine  
Runs a joy with silken twine.*

As hard as it is to believe in that joy, those gifts in loss, it is harder still to accept those gifts and use them. And hardest of all to be grateful for those gifts. I'm still working on that.

I hope that you will all find in this workshop inspiration and encouragement, the transformative power of expressive art, and that you will discover ways to tell your own stories, and create yourself a path through the losses you face. Thank you again for coming.

