Why We Write

GOING BACK TO WHERE IT WAS

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WHEN my son Neil was seventeen he was hit by a drunk driver while walking his girlfriend, Trista, home after a study date at our house. Trista did not survive her injuries. Neil carries his with him to this day. He spent a week in the intensive-care unit with a traumatic brain injury, then months in physical therapy followed by years in mental-health counseling for depression and post-traumatic stress. Through it all, I wrote.

In the early days I journaled about Neil's delirium. He didn't know where he was. He yelled at everyone around him, so unlike my usually soft-spoken son. He tried to climb out of his bed, tried to take off his clothes; he needed to be restrained. He would have no memory of this. As the months wore on I documented his hard work in physical therapy, his subsequent operations, and his transition back to school, all in the pages of my notebooks. I wrote about his struggles with depression, his social challenges, his treatment with various antidepressants.

One day in the early weeks of Neil's at-home convalescence, I found him sitting at the dining room table, my journal open in front of him. My heart skipped a beat, worrying about what I'd written there. Journaling is private—it's about me, and no one else. The accident was Neil's but my trauma was parallel. And it was mine to excavate and explore. Mine to hold up to the light and examine. Mine to wallow in on the page. But before I could decide whether to ask him to stop reading my private entries, he looked up at me, his face as blank as an empty plate.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you in the hospital, Mom."

My heart cracked. He didn't know he'd yelled. He didn't know anything about his hospital stay. He was totally amnesic for his entire time in intensive care. My journal, I realized, was telling him his own story. My writing was becoming his memory. That's when I decided to let him continue.

For a long time I tried to paper over the pain I felt about our changed world and everything Neil had lost. After all, my son survived an accident that his girlfriend had not. Shouldn't I just be grateful? I couldn't talk to anyone about how I felt. In my mind, if I complained about our lot in life,

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people would say, "But, Carolyn. He's alive." I had to minimize my feelings because my son didn't die. So my journal became my friend, the only place I could share my thoughts and emotions. Writing about my experience day after day sharpened my focus on what I have come to view as a kind of disenfranchised grief. Feeling guilty about mourning Neil's losses had gotten in the way of my healing. Writing had set that healing in motion.

Eventually I wanted to write for readers other than just my son and me. I wanted to share with others the lessons I had learned about pain and guilt and healing after traumatic brain injury (TBI). I decided early on that if I were going to publish stories about my son, then he would have to read them and give them his blessing. I initially wrote essays for specialized publications: medical journals for doctors like myself, literary magazines for mothers who write. Even though Neil was unlikely to stumble across my work in these places, I wanted him to know that the words would be out there—that others were reading them.

And so I sent him each piece before I submitted it to an editor. I waited for his reply, always willing to scrap anything he wasn't okay with. But he was always okay. The more personal the scene, the more important Neil's blessing was to me. In one piece, I wrote about a conversation I had had with Trista's mother, Mary, after her daughter's death. She told me she learned that our children had had sex by reading about it in her daughter's diary after she died.

"If Trista were alive, I'd kill Neil," she told me. "But since she's dead, I'm grateful to him for giving her that experience as a woman."

I asked Neil if that scene could stay. His voice caught; I thought he might cry. But he looked me straight in the eye and said, "It can stay."

Asking Neil to read my writing before publication has allowed us to talk about his brain injury in a way that would otherwise have been difficult, if not impossible. Like many writers, I sometimes find words easier to write than to say. Five years after the accident, I made the decision to write a full-length memoir about our experience. Nine years later, in 2012, *Crash: A Mother, a Son, and the Journey From Grief to Gratitude* was published by Globe Pequot Press. In it I wrote about the subtle long-term effects of TBI. How it was often difficult for Neil's father and me to discern if certain traits—a delayed response, a stony stare—were the result of the TBI or just a personality quirk, a part of who Neil would have become anyway. After reading that particular draft, Neil told me I could send it to my editor, adding, "You know, Mom, I wonder about that myself sometimes."

A few years ago, I was presenting a writing workshop at the Examined Life Conference at the University of Iowa. One of my fellow presenters was Nellie Hermann, the creative director

of the program in narrative medicine at Columbia University. Hermann had fictionalized a traumatic experience she had had in her youth by writing about it in novel form. A conference attendee asked her why she wrote the novel, or why she writes in general. Her response resonated with me.

"We write to exert power over something we can never control," she said. "The past." For me that was deeply true. I could not bring Trista back to life. I couldn't erase Neil's brain injury. But I could control the narrative. I could choose where to start my story and where to end it, which details to include and which to leave out. I made the conscious decision not to name the drunk driver in my memoir. For over two hundred pages, he is simply "the drunk driver." I felt that to name him would have given him a humanity that I didn't think he deserved. By leaving him nameless, I gained sovereignty over him in a way I wouldn't have otherwise if I weren't a writer.

One day last spring I was on my way to give a pre-prom talk to some local high school juniors and seniors. As the mother of a boy hit by another teenager in a drunk-driving accident that killed his girlfriend, I have a strong personal message for those kids about decisions made behind the wheel. As it happened, that week coincided with the seventieth anniversary of D-Day and the Battle of Normandy. Talk radio was filled with stories and interviews with aging veterans who had stormed Omaha and Utah beaches along the French coast. One ninety-year-old veteran talked about returning to the beaches of Normandy eleven times over the past seventy years. He said it was the only way he had found to mitigate the horror of that day and gain some control over his experience.

"If you want to get through it and live through it, and see it to its end," he said, "you gotta go back to where it was. You gotta put your feet in the water. You gotta crawl in the sand. And then you'll be all right."

Those words stayed with me long after that radio piece aired. For me, they limned an important reason why I write. I've never been in a war, but after Neil's accident, I had to find a way to make peace with my son's injuries and accept the death of his girlfriend. I had to sort through my complicated feelings about the drunk driver who had caused them both. Writing helped me do it. In writing, I, too, needed to relive it—to go back to where it was. With every story I wrote about each aspect of grief and loss and pain, I had to put my feet in the water and crawl through the sand.

Returning to those painful memories sometimes felt like pulling scabs off old wounds. Ultimately revisiting the pain through writing—going back to where it was—helped those wounds to heal. Going back to where it was gave me and my family an opportunity to explore in depth what happened to us. And like that wise old soldier, I think we'll finally be all right.