

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Simple Moments in Time

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הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

רגעים פשוטים בזמן

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

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Aims and Description

When my son, Ozi, was in ninth grade, he began complaining about sporadic leg pains. We went to visit two different orthopedists during the year and had x-rays taken, but it was only during the summer between the ninth and tenth grades that the third x-ray showed evidence of a tumor. He was eventually diagnosed with Ewing's Sarcoma, a cancerous tumor that forms in bone or soft tissue, most common in adolescents and young adults. It is most probably the result of a postnatal shift in the DNA. Further scans indicated that his cancer had metastasized and had spread from the femur bone where it had originated to other parts of the body. Like other Ewing Sarcoma patients, he suffered from pain and swelling in the arms, legs, chest, back, and pelvis and fevers. Less than a year after his diagnosis, he passed away.

The purpose of my thesis is to tell our shared story, a mother and her 15 year old son with an aggressive, fatal cancer, through an essay collection detailing the experiences we shared before and during his illness, and continuing with my personal encounter with grief and mourning. The essays will explore our relationship, our coping with the prospect of imminent loss, dealing with the situations that arose during the year before and after diagnosis, in and out of the hospital, and the bonds that we forged with the people we met along the way. They will also focus on how the illness reshaped my life and identity.

During the year that he was ill, I composed several essays in my mind, not daring to write them down, but also knowing that the stories needed to be told. I found myself reflecting back on both my childhood years and my earlier life as a younger mother, periods in life that had formed and cultivated my personality. While in the past I may have described myself as a mother of four, observant Jew, therapist,

feminist, I now had to integrate a new variable into my self –definition, that of cancer mother, which in turn dominated all the other factors in redefining my persona. The extensive impact of Oz's death on my narrated self emerges as the memoir progresses through a year in which I was faced with imminent tragedy, and afterwards, when struggling with loss and mourning,

After Ozi died, I began to write those essays that had been dwelling in my head for months. My thesis will be a compilation of the stories, experiences and reflections that comprised the year of illness and the aftermath. This memoir will not focus only on illness and death but will also tell the narrator's story by providing a personal account of my own perspective – as mother, therapist, religious Jew – of her son's cancer. Equally important to me, as Ozi's mother, I aim to acquaint the readers with Ozi and let them know who he was.

Conceptual Background

The literary sources that have influenced me in conceiving of this collection are memoirs that allow the reader to grasp the devastation involved in loss while at the same time avoiding the overly sentimental writing that sometimes characterizes the genre.

During the year of my son's illness, I returned to a book that I had read in college for a psychology course: Victor Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning, a memoir that attempts to make sense and provide significance to the most horrifying of life experiences. Frankl chronicles his experiences in the Nazi death camps while suggesting that even within the most terrible suffering, man can find meaning. This philosophy has proved a challenge for me in my writing – when confronting the narration of my own tragedy – but I have tried to keep it in mind.

While Frankl had a theoretical purpose for his book and provided example of his coping strategies to create a new school of psychotherapy, other memoirs on loss are less focused on creating new schools of thought and rather provide the reader with the struggles faced by those who are in mourning. Two memoirs from this genre that have had a profound influence on my writing are Joan Didion's The Year of Magical Thinking and Sonali Deraniyagala's Wave. They are both examples of mourning memoirs that deal with the terrible loss of close family members, yet the authors are able to maintain a degree of detachment that allows the reader to enter the author's mind and identify with the tragedy without becoming overpowered with emotional description. Neither Didion nor Deraniyagala tell the reader what to think or feel – that is, how to respond to tragedy, but rather this happens naturally. Didion is able to

hold back her emotions when describing her husband's sudden death while her daughter was lying in an intensive care unit with pneumonia. Deraniyagala lost her parents, husband and two children in the Tsunami in 2004 while her family was vacationing on the Sri Lankan coast. Yet, her text is restrained, written in simple prose. Their writing style has been a major guideline for my work.

Robin Hemley, in his book Turning Life into Fiction, emphasizes the importance of dealing with the aftermath of trauma, rather than focusing the book on unfolding it. He advises to "get trauma out of the way" and to allow the emotional punch of the story to sneak up on the reader instead of aiming for an 'ersatz' catharsis on every page. For Hemley, paradoxically, the more that is left out, the more the reader is allowed to experience the tension of the narrative, and in the end to think instead of being told what to feel.

Both Didion and Deraniyagala's memoirs enact their stories through Hemley's principle. The authors get the tragedy out of the way quickly: Didion's first chapter describes her husband's collapse, the trip to the hospital and meeting with the hospital staff who inform her of his death, while in *Wave*, the first chapter brings the reader to the scene of the tsunami, the family's flight and the moment of impact. However, neither author focuses solely on the aftermath; their writing is both expository and reflective and throughout their memoirs, they return to the trauma scene and their pre-trauma lives. In my memoir, I hope to follow their precedents, by cultivating both experiential and reflective modes.

Lucy Grealy's memoir Autobiography of a Face deals with a different kind of loss. Grealy was diagnosed with Ewing's Sarcoma, (the same cancer that Ozi had) in her jaw, during the 1970's, when she was in elementary school and underwent surgery in

which a huge portion of jawbone was removed. While the ensuing chemotherapy and radiation treatment saved her life, she was left with a disfigured face and had to cope with isolation during her teen years due to her looks. Grealy's memoir is told from a young girl's perspective and like Didion and Deraniyagala, she avoids over sentimentality. Her book ultimately deals with the loss of her normal, pretty face, but the reader is also escorted into the world of hospitals and cancer treatment protocols and knows the chronology of Grealy's diagnosis and treatment. Grealy rarely summarizes or teaches the readers about the medical issues. By keeping the reader in scene, the medical facts and terminology are accessible to the reader. Her memoir has guided me how to include the medical aspects of my memoir without too much "telling."

These memoirs have provided me with a basis from which I will write about my own personal tragedy: getting the tragedy out of the way, writing with detachment and control of emotions, avoiding melodramatic descriptions, utilizing the aftermath of trauma as a basis to reflect backwards, and bringing the reader into the scenes, instead of just summarizing.

Shape of the Project:

The thesis will comprise essays based on my experience as a ‘cancer-mother.’ Several essays are reflections on the past but told from the perspective of the present. Other stories will focus solely on an experience that happened during diagnosis or treatment. In some stories, I will also include scenes from my past and how they tie in to the experience with my son. But the core of all the stories will deal with the diagnosis, treatment, illness and mourning, and the thesis will be divided into these three sections.

Here are a sample of several of the essays that will be included in the thesis:

In the section of Diagnosis:

It Can't Happen to me: This essay focuses on the day that it became clear that something was wrong with Ozi. The essay begins with me standing in a filthy, public bathroom holding my two and half year old granddaughter over a toilet and receiving a phone call from Ozi who was screaming in pain. This scene will stand in contrast to rest of the essay, which is written in the context of a seemingly mundane day. Even when there were hints that something was wrong, I kept making rational explanations. The essay ends with me in bed at night, feeling a false sense of security, and Ozi waking me up to tell me that the pains had returned.

This essay will provide the context of our family life before Ozi was diagnosed with cancer. It also introduces the reader to Ozi and is a starting point for the thesis, because this is the day that our lives changed.

Getting Lost: This essay describes the day that we went to Ichilov hospital and met with the Orthopedic Oncologist for the first time. This was before the biopsy and the diagnosis, but the general feeling was one of foreboding. I found myself lost in a boiling hot parking garage, walking downhill in a circular path, looking for my parking spot, eventually losing my parking ticket and realizing how I was losing myself and the life we once had.

The essay describes my mind frame and relationship with Ozi during the month of diagnosis, the time of "not knowing". It also chronicles parts of the diagnostic process, such as CT scans, and consultations in the hospital.

In the Treatment and Illness Section:

All I Ever Needed: This essay is about the Rosh Hashanah holiday, what it meant to me in the past as an orthodox girl growing up in America and later, as a working mother in Israel and eventually, how my holiday schema changed the year that Ozi was diagnosed. The essay recounts our last Rosh Hashanah together, when several hours before the holiday, Ozi ran a fever and needed to be hospitalized, and how we coped with the sudden change in plans.

This essay pairs Rosh Hashana, the new year, with our new life and focuses on how I had to learn to adjust my plans and expectations and how my role of mother changed.

Into the Frying Pan: This essay focuses on food preparation before and after Ozi was diagnosed. I discuss the apathy I once felt towards my time cooking in the kitchen and my children's finicky eating habits, as well as my vegetarianism, and my attempt at becoming a vegan. My attitudes to cooking and handling meat changed once Ozi was sick and the essay describes the new found pleasure I had in food

preparation, from buying the best cuts of meat, to trading recipes and most of all, frying up schnitzels for him.

While many of the other essays discuss the hospital experience, this one gives the reader a perspective into our home life during his illness.

The First Five Days of Tamuz: This essay focuses on the last days of Ozi's life, starting when he woke up on the morning of Rosh Chodesh Tamuz, going to the hospital for a checkup and Dr. Levin meeting with me and Eli (my husband) to let us know that Ozi had only a few days left to live. The essay focuses on the manifestations of the cancer in the last days as well as the numbness and detachment that I experienced during this time and the guilt I felt as a result of this emptiness.

This essay serves as a transition from the treatment section to the mourning section as it includes the end of treatment as well as the beginnings of mourning.

In the Reflections in the aftermath section:

Chodesh Tov: This essay will focus on our relationship with Ozi's oncologist. While Ozi developed a strong connection with him, we found ourselves staying in touch with the doctor even after Ozi's death. The essay not only describes their special friendship but also explores the reasons that bereaved parents might maintain contact with a doctor after the patient has died.

While the time period in the essay spans from the day of diagnosis until several months after Ozi's death, the essay is written from the perspective of a mourning mother.

Hello Darkness: This essay will focus on the role of music in my relationship with Ozi. The scene is set several months after his death, as I sit in my car at dusk and

reminisce when Ozi would sit next to me, listening to music. The final scene focuses on a specific song, The Sound of Silence, how it affected me when I listened to it with Ozi shortly before his death and how I learned to understand the meaning of the words. The end of the essay is written in second person, to Ozi.

This essay describes the inner emotional world of the narrator dealing with grief as well as explore behaviors that are a result of mourning.

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