

Cutting Words

by Tracy Youngblom

You know, he begins, an older person or someone in worse physical condition wouldn't have survived.

Yes? I say, hesitant to pursue this line of thinking.

It's better that it happened to me. I was strong and in good shape, so I didn't die. Someone else would have died.

We are seated in the waiting area of his therapist in vinyl armchairs, hemmed in by a door on one side and a small water cooler and white-noise machine on the other. We have barely made it up the stairs.

You sound like you're saying you're glad it happened to you? This is supposed to sound neutral, but it comes out as a question.

As soon as we'd entered the building, I'd remembered clearly: no elevator. I ought to have remembered, since Dan had been my sons' therapist for years; he'd saved at least one of their lives. Defeated, I pushed Elias in his wheelchair to the foot of the stairs.

Can we do this? I asked. *Do you want to reschedule?*

I felt worse than stupid: barely two months post-accident, and it was my idea to start therapy. Now I'd done it. He'd been ready to talk, but now we had no way to get to the second floor. He'd been taking a few steps at a time from his bed to a chair in his hospital room, but after months in bed, he had little strength to spare. I had introduced an impossibility.

No, I'll just use the stairs.

I helped him stand and pivot, then lower his body backward onto the lowest step. He hoisted himself upward with his arms, pushing off his stronger right leg, one painful step at a time. I climbed behind, carrying the collapsed chair.

We made it—he made it. Now we sit chatting, waiting for the appointment. We have no life outside recovery, so we discuss the accident and its aftermath.

He is upbeat today; maybe the triumph of the stairs. We are recalling the details of his salvation at the hands of the many, the impeccable timing of it all. The first bystanders on the scene (one of them an EMT) removed the windshield so his bleeding would slow down in the brisk March air; the First Responders extracted him from the car in less than 20 minutes; the helicopter transport the State Trooper had called was waiting. Everything lined up perfectly. Maybe the miracle was simple: his life was saved by the timing.

Besides miracles, I am always aware of a severe irony: the drunk driver who ran into my son head-on escaped unscathed. She was on a joy-ride, going the wrong direction on the freeway, at 2:00 in the afternoon. Her injuries were minor: a broken ankle (a lifetime of addiction?).

It's true he survived when he shouldn't have, but recently we learned he was not so lucky; because of the force of the impact and the consequent swelling, he has been struck blind.

I am grateful for his life, but when he suggests it was better for him to have been hit than someone else, the conversation turns serious.

That's hard for me to hear.

I know.

This honesty and get-to-the-truth-fearlessly tone is one gift in the midst of much challenge. We have thrillingly deep, intimate conversations almost every day—every parent's dream. But I am not thrilled to hear this.

Then the door opens, and I wheel him in and wait in the white noise until the session is over and he can sit facing forward this time and bump down the stairs to my waiting car (down is much easier, we discover).

Later I tell myself, forcefully, that I cannot be expected to be glad my son was in this accident. I cannot be expected to accept his conclusion, on top of everything else I'm expected to accept. I tell it to myself so vehemently, it almost sounds like I'm telling someone else, like God.

More than two years post-accident, Elias is himself full-force: tough, funny, uncompromising. He lives alone, brooks no objection. We don't have daily

interactions—more like weekly. I have had to abandon the worries that used to keep me up at night, have had to ward off vivid fears: of fire, of burglars, of knives and guns, of hit-and-runs, of evil-intentioned strangers. Of another unexpected call, this time the death of me (him).

I think I have done well and deserve some recognition. My son thinks otherwise. Or, he doesn't think of me that way—as a stand-up, an example. Someone to praise, protect.

Maybe that's why today, as we are driving, talking as we often do about the arc of this strange experience, he does it again: stops my heart with his casual observations.

I think I'm a different person since the accident.

I cringe; I think I know where this is going. Sensing my doubt, he gives a few general examples: less arrogant, more grateful.

Well, you don't know what would have happened without the accident, I offer. *Probably you would have turned out the same.*

No, he says, certain. *No, I'm better. I've turned out better.*

Do you mean you needed to change? And there wasn't any other way?

Now it's his turn to hesitate.

I've grown up, he says. *I'm less self-involved. Less. . .* his voice trails off.

I don't push it, though I want to stamp out this line of thinking, stop this smoldering mess before it spreads, engulfs both of us. I am not as shocked as I was two years ago, however, hearing him suggest it was better that this accident happened to him. Now he's just pondering unforeseen benefits. I don't like the implications, though I understand his eagerness to express gratitude for this life he's been given.

But I am still surprised at the suggestion that this was our Fate. I don't accept it with the brightest face possible. He can't see my face, so he doesn't know that I grimace often, my eyes cloud with mist, that I shake my head sadly, almost unbidden.

It's the damn accompanying emotions that always stymy me. They lurk under my sunny surface, threaten to erupt in bouts of cursing: *Jesus. Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ Almighty.*

Recently, I confessed to Elias that I swear more—too much—these days.

What do you say? he asked.

I told him, and he laughed.

Mom, that's not swearing. If you're going to swear, make it count.

I stay quiet in the car, listening. I can see he's also grappling with emotions, half-surprised at these insights that are just words—but words, words: all we have to invoke peace, to ward off fury and fear.

To pray, if we choose.



Tracy Youngblom earned an MA in English and an MFA in Poetry from Warren Wilson College. She has published three books of poems, most recently *One Bird a Day* (2018), along with essays and fiction. Her individual poems, stories, and essays have been published in journals including *Shenandoah*, *Wallace Stevens Journal*, *Big Muddy*, *Briar Cliff Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Cumberland River Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Ruminate*, *Foliate Oak*, *St. Katherine's Review*, *Westview*, and many other places. Her work has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She lives and works near Minneapolis, teaching English at a community college and working with adult writers in the community.