

THE CALCULUS OF GRIEF

*Lee Burdette Williams shares her firsthand experience
of her students' resilience in the face of loss.*

By Lee Burdette Williams

O **N A COLLEGE CAMPUS**, we live on the edge of tragedy. We walk that edge every day, aware that the possibility of death is always one misstep away. One careless move by any of the hundreds or thousands of us walking that edge, and our whole community falls into a canyon of grief from which we will climb only after weeks, maybe months, of pain.

If you have worked for twenty years on college campuses, as I have, you have probably taken this plunge a number of times. Our campuses are populated with young people who are incautious, eager to fit in, inexperienced in ways that we who are in charge (as much as anyone can be in charge of college students) have long left behind. We also have the added benefit (or burden, perhaps) of knowing the pain that comes from that awful fall, and that perspective keeps us wary, attentive, looking down at our feet to take the most assured steps possible and, in the process, missing out on the spectacular view.

Not our students. Not my students. They run along the edge, heads up and eyes forward. They are easily distracted from the precipice, unaware of its danger. A student misstep is the beginning of our communal crisis. It is, even after all these years, my anguish. And it is potentially the impetus for learning that is somehow both profound and ephemeral.

T **HAT VERY CONTRADICTION** was visible to me one afternoon on a chartered bus, driving north on I-95 in New Jersey. I was with a group of sorority members who had just left a funeral home where their much-loved sister's body lay in a flower-covered casket. They had stood in a long line that snaked through the anteroom and out onto the sidewalk, joining Carlee's many high school friends and teachers, who waited over an hour to walk past her casket and greet her parents and stepparents. I was

in that line as well and so had ample time to observe them. They were members of a sorority that seems to attract some of their institution's loveliest young women—long hair, thin, impeccably dressed. They whispered to one another, hugged, held hands, wept quietly and remained appropriately somber, heart-broken at the loss of this equally lovely freshman, the victim of a midnight hit-and-run on campus. Each woman greeted and hugged Carlee's mother and father, who, in gestures of grace and generosity that left me breathless, smiled and hugged back and comforted each of them. I remember especially a moment when Carlee's mother reached out and tucked a strand of long hair behind the ear of one of my students and I thought how automatic that gesture must have become over the years of raising her only child.

By the time we returned to the bus, one of two we had filled with students for the four-hour drive, I was bereft, emotionally wrung out, overwhelmed by the pain and loss in that room. I wondered what the long drive would be like for these young women, many of whom were so clearly and luckily inexperienced with such wrenching grief. The short answer is, they were fine. Maybe not fine the way they are when they are shopping together, laughing together, procrastinating together. But as their chapter president stepped up to the front of the bus, across from where I was sitting, and asked the driver to turn on the VCR so they could watch a movie, I found myself both puzzled and relieved. A few of them watched *Legally Blonde*; others pulled out their textbooks; a few fell asleep; and I stared out the window, amazed, as I often am, at these complicated creatures who are the focus of my professional life.

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IN *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES*, Nathaniel Hawthorne writes, "Of all the events which constitute a person's biography, there is scarcely one . . . to which the world so easily reconciles itself as to his death" (p. 261). It is exactly that reconciliation, I believe, that is both the marvel and the frustration I feel in the weeks following a death on my campus.

I have never doubted that what Carlee's friends felt about her loss was genuine and deeply affecting. But they were able to make the transition back to their lives in a way that was equal parts alarming and reassuring. I would never be so callous as to imagine that they brushed their loss aside, just that it was quickly folded into the fabric of their lives. And then they moved on. They have not forgotten her, as evidenced by the carefully tended garden near the accident site that they built and maintain without any approval or reproach from the university. It's also evidenced by the more official

tree and plaque placed by the university at their urging and by the invitation that went to her family in New Jersey to attend a dedication ceremony.

They have moved on in ways that are analogous to their physical resilience. They can stay up all night and still somehow manage to get through an 8 A.M. exam and go to their job in the library. Without a night's sleep, I, on the other hand, would be non-functional by 10 A.M. They can ski all day Sunday and be at their aerobics class Monday morning. I can barely get out of my car in the parking lot. At times like those, I resent them. But I have mixed feelings about their ability to bounce back quickly from the loss of one of their friends. I am grateful for their strength and grace and support of one another in those painful moments and for their ability to put it behind them and get back to the important business of living and learning. But their resilience is both their salvation and their undoing. I also want them to learn something, damn it. Just like any instructor who is frustrated when a student who earned an *A* in a prerequisite class last semester admits, "I can't really remember that" when challenged with an important concept, I want my students to absorb and retain the most painful lessons that life has to teach.

What is the cost of forgetting? That answer is clear to me every day when their high-risk behavior continues. Carlee's death had nothing to do with her actions,

but the driver of the car that hit her, and his three passengers, were coming from a party where all had been drinking. Around the corner from where Carlee was hit, there is another memorial to a student, Brett, who was a passenger in a car driven by a very intoxicated friend. But like the many crosses that mark the sites of fatal accidents on highways all over America, such a site is no guarantee that behavior will change. Each weekend, the local police stop and arrest students on that same stretch of road who have clearly been drinking.

This is the contradiction, the paradox, the dilemma I struggle with. Would I want my students to feel, both acutely and chronically, the pain that comes from such loss if it would, in turn, change their behavior? Or would I prefer to grant them freedom from such pain and the scars that accompany it? I wrestle, too, with the paradox of my own age and capacity for grief. I understand something about loss, having experienced it both firsthand and secondhand, and I know that those experiences make me grateful for the many good things I have in my life. But those experiences also make me keenly aware of my mortality in ways that are discomfiting at best, darkly disturbing at worst. I find myself envying my students but knowing, too, that they do feel deeply the losses they experience. They just seem, at times, to be able to regain their balance and keep moving forward more easily than I.

They seem, at times, almost blithe. If they are not blithe, they are, of course, inexperienced. For the most part, our lives are lived around the edges rather than at the center of death and loss, and it is our ability to keep moving forward despite these encounters that is truly our saving grace. We all require that self-protection, that ability to set aside the lessons of loss in order to just keep going.

To learn or not to learn? To have your heart and life and view of the world deranged forever? Or to right yourself as you would a capsized Sunfish sailboat, standing on the centerboard, pulling your sail up off the surface of the lake, wiping the water out of your eyes, and tacking into the wind, eager to continue sailing? What would I wish more for my students? Intimations of their own mortality or the capacity to set aside the darkest questions and turn back into the bright lights

of a college campus? I struggle regularly with my own ambivalence—my commitment to their learning on one side and, across the net, my belief in their right to enjoy these days as students, as young adults sheltered from their own vulnerabilities by the privilege of their place on my campus, for just a little while longer.

At the conclusion of Michael Cunningham's 1998 novel *The Hours*, the character Clarissa pauses at the end of a long day during which she has overseen a memorial service for her close friend.

We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep—it's as simple and ordinary as that. A few jump out of windows or drown themselves or take pills; more

die by accident; and most of us, the vast majority, are slowly devoured by some disease or, if we're very fortunate, by time itself. There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) knows these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far

darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more.
(p. 225–226)

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There is no shortage of dark and difficult hours among my students, but most of them seem to have an innate ability to pass through the most difficult moments, to step forward, and to hope for more. I am left to wonder whether they simply don't get it or whether they get it in ways I have forgotten.

AN IMAGE is burned into my memory from an earlier time in my career. I worked at a small midwestern college, where I occasionally interacted with a retired iconic football coach, who bullied his way through meetings during which we would attempt to select the winners of a scholarship endowed in his name. Coach didn't much care for my feminist sensibilities, which were brought to the fore when I had the temerity to suggest that a woman (actually, he preferred to call our students "boys and girls") might be a worthy recipient. I found him irritating and condescending and a throwback to a time I was glad to have missed out on.

Months after that contentious meeting, I saw Coach at a campus memorial service. His grandson, a handsome and charming all-American track star and recent graduate of the college, had been killed in a car accident along with his teammate, who had been behind the wheel and drunk. Steve and Kris had just stepped out into the world, degrees in hand, grand future ahead, and it all ended late one night on a country road near the college. I remember looking to my left toward the pew in our campus chapel where Coach sat alone. His wife, a lovely woman who balanced out his demeanor, might have been there, perhaps sitting nearby with her son and daughter, Steve's parents; I don't recall. I just recall the sight of Coach—the blustering, intimidating man who had once stood up and slammed his hand to the table to let me know he didn't agree with me—now sitting quietly, head bowed, eyes closed, small and sallow, as tears fell along his cheeks. I have never seen grief so palpable.

He never recovered, really. He never came to another meeting on campus, and the one time I saw him before I moved away, I barely recognized him. Grief had done what nothing else ever had—defeated

him, broken him—and, no doubt, would accompany him to his own death from cancer ten years later.

It is the recollection of that man, utterly and irreparably broken by grief, that provides for me the answer to my dilemma. I come down reluctantly on the side of the quick recovery, even if it means that my students may too quickly regain their careless gait along the edge of that canyon. I will do my best to remind them of its danger, and occasionally, they may even listen to me. Occasionally, they may pause, tilt their head; and listen for that memory of grief, like a song in the distance that sounds vaguely familiar. They will be reminded that they are not immortal, and they'll alter their path away from the edge. But then heeding once again the carefree tune that accompanies their youth, their pace will likely not slow at all.

NOTES

- Cunningham, M. (1998). *The hours*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Hawthorne, N. (1851) (1905). *The house of the seven gables*. New York: The Macmillan Company.