

Hunting

Category: Stories

written by Scott Newport | November 23, 2018

Scott Newport ~

“Seriously?” began Amy’s text, which popped up on my iPhone one blustery November morning.

“How do you know?” she went on. “Why don’t I feel him with me?”

I had no idea how to answer.

Amy and I had met on Facebook a few months earlier, introduced by a mutual friend. Amy had recently lost her teenage son, AJ, to heart disease. “She needs to talk with someone who knows,” my friend had said—meaning “someone who knows what it is to lose a child to illness.”

My own son Evan died nine years ago, at age seven, the day after Thanksgiving. Since then, I’ve spent a lot of volunteer time mentoring parents and families of children with life-threatening illness.

Initially, Amy hadn’t wanted to talk—but she’d contacted me a few months later. She’d just returned from a conference for bereaved moms, and we talked about what she’d learned there.

The day before Amy sent me that text, I’d traveled 200 miles from my home and was sitting in my truck on the shores of Lake Michigan. I knew Amy lived nearby, and I’d decided to call. While watching seagulls and admiring the Muskegon lighthouse, I told her I was in the area to hunt. That’s when she shared how much AJ had loved hunting.

Suddenly I had an idea.

“Hey, Amy,” I said. “Would it be okay if I took AJ deer hunting with me tomorrow?”

For a moment, I wasn’t sure how she would respond—or whether she realized the implications of what I’d just said. Silence is not unusual when you’re mentoring families, but this one was short.

Then she said, “Yeah, that’s fine.”

We said goodbye. That night, I texted her: “Just wanted you to know I am leaving before sunrise and hope your boy doesn’t mind getting up early.”

She wrote back, “Lol, That’s the nature of hunting, and what he used to do. His school was even closed on opening day.”

Rain was predicted all day. Luckily, I’d brought a small blind (a camouflaged

hut). I set it up a quarter-mile from a dairy farm whose owner, Kent, also a bereaved parent, had given me permission.

I'd brought another friend's son along as well, so space was tight inside the blind. Even so, it was great to share my experiences with the boys and to enjoy their excitement whenever they thought they'd spotted a deer.

Around midmorning, I took a picture of the view from inside our blind—bare hardwood trees in the distance, a lime-green alfalfa field nearby—and sent it to Amy.

"We haven't seen any deer yet, but we've noticed a lot of signs," I wrote.

"Hang tight, one is coming to you!" she responded. "You need to be quiet."

We agreed that the boys needed to overcome their restlessness and stay focused. Mostly when they'd spot something, it was a fox squirrel climbing a tree, or a bouncing stalk of goldenrod (which resembles a deer's tail) in the distance. Once a red-tailed hawk circled overhead, looking for its next meal.

Although we didn't see any deer, we had a great time. After warming up over lunch at the local McDonald's, we returned to the hut. The afternoon went by quickly, and the day ended with a couple of tired boys falling asleep on the drive back to the rental cottage.

That night, I texted Amy to ask if she thought AJ wanted to go hunting again the next morning.

"Absolutely!"

The wind howled all night. Before daybreak, as I got ready to go, the weather report predicted cloudy skies, with gusts up to twenty-five mph.

I set off in the darkness to drive the forty miles to the blind. At dawn, it started to snow. I sent Amy a picture of the angel-like white flakes.

"A funny thing happened to me this morning," I wrote. "I thought AJ had slept in, and figured it was too cold and windy to go out, but when I got into the truck, he was right next to me."

That was when she fired off those questions:

"Seriously? How do you know? Why don't I feel him with me?"

As I struggled for a response, she finished: "Are you off your medication?"

My mind froze. *Have I taken this imagination experiment too far? I mean, I know from experience that one word or phrase can totally put me into sadness, while at other times the same word or comment may give me great joy.* I was afraid that I'd said the wrong thing.

Finally I wrote, "I guess I'm just using my imagination to bring me some peace, and maybe pass it onto you. I don't know. But I do feel a bit of joy

wondering what it would've been like if I could have taken him."

"Oh," she answered. "I don't see anything in the pic. I was looking for a sign."

"No, I'm just showing you our view," I replied. "It's starting to snow."

"It's snowing here too. Maybe that's our sign?!"

"I'll take it," I wrote, thinking about the times when I'd taken my own son to that same spot and watched the snow float by. "Like I said, it does give me pleasure to at least pretend the boys are with me."

To my great relief, Amy replied, "Actually, I too take pleasure in it! It means a lot to me that you're thinking of him. I told someone you were doing this, and they thought it was amazing!"

As the day wore on, I started to feel better about bringing the boys with me, if only in spirit. At day's end, packing up for the 200-mile trek home, I remembered Amy's description of the bereavement conference.

"Lots of the moms said that they'd received signs from their kids," she'd said.

Recalling what she'd said about my snowflake photo, I thought, *Her heart so desperately wants a sign.*

I reflected that, for my part, I don't believe my son has ever sent me a sign. Then I suddenly wondered, *Maybe our kids are waiting for a sign from us. And maybe when Amy and I spoke of our hunting experiences, that was the sign our angels were searching for.*

It's a thought that I hope I can share with Amy this Thanksgiving.

Before leaving for home, I texted her, "Yeah, we're not giving up yet. So let AJ know I'll see him on Thanksgiving morning to try one more time. Thanks also for allowing him to go, and for maybe—just maybe—learning a thing or two about grief."

Amy's response read, "I did."

Her reply was so swift and heartfelt that it warmed my own heart in return: I mean, we bereaved parents are always hunting for some kind of meaning in the loss of our children, or trying to track down someone who understands. Despite never spotting a deer, I feel this past weekend was successful. We did both find a bit of meaning and strengthen a friendship, even if only for awhile.

About the author:

Scott Newport volunteers with the Patient and Family Centered Care advisory council of C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, in Ann Arbor, and serves in his state and nationally as an advocate for families with sick children.

"Spending time between the eternities with my families brings me much joy, but also sadness. Taking time out in nature gives me a break, and journaling about my encounters gives me the hope to continue the work I do and to understand why I do it."

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