



## **Some thoughts about poetry and the caring for the loss of a pregnancy or newborn**

When the outcomes of our patient's pregnancies end in miscarriage, stillbirth or infant death, we struggle to find the right approach to break the news to them, treat them medically and/or surgically, help them recover physically and emotionally, and console them in their grief. Most of us have not been taught to provide this bereavement care. We learn fast that there are hospital nurses and social workers, bereavement counselors and therapists, support groups and religious ministries to whom we can refer our patients for immediate bereavement care and subsequent follow-up. We can do the D and C and we can attend and assist in the birth of the baby who has experienced an intrauterine death. But then, for many Obstetricians, we refer our patients for bereavement care. When we hold in the palm of our hand an 18 week fetus immediately after our patient miscarried or attend the stillbirth of a term pregnancy, our intellectual knowledge and rational thought fade as we struggle to find the right words to say. Unlike the repetition of performing a surgical procedure, no matter how many times we have experienced a loss with our patients, it does not become easier. Although the stillborn baby which might have been born viable represents the greatest emotional and management challenges, we must recognize any loss in pregnancy as a life-altering event for our patients.

The care of the patient experiencing a Pregnancy Loss is a paradigm for what we do as physicians. It tests not only our clinical skills and judgments but stretches the fibers of the human aspect of caring very thin.

Although we might ask, “how can we heal when our patients’ children are incurable, when they are suffering or when they die or what do we do when the advanced technology that has become a part of our black bag fails”, we must understand that we can heal by providing comfort, empathy and hope. As bad as this experience is for our patients, we can make it better. If we remain aware that we are the link between the stillborn baby and the bereaved family, that we were the first to touch and hold their child, albeit their stillborn child, then we can share this with them, remember this with them, and from this point forward, heal with them. The bond we form becomes the unbreakable fiber, which strengthens and indeed cements our role in the doctor-patient relationship.

There is Art as well as Science to caring for the parents of a child who has died, either before birth or afterwards. Countless mothers and fathers and those close to them silently grieve with little resolution over the loss of their pregnancies, newborns and children. Seeking reprieve from their sorrow, they cry and yearn for solace and hope, many times for years following their loss; cries that are but a muted weeping of despair as a child so longed for is not born, or is not born alive, or dies during childhood. Pained by these losses, their lives seem devoid of hope. The joys expected

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from normal childbirth and child-rearing turn to sorrow. We as physicians share with them in this tragedy as now the balance between caring for the well being of the child shifts to caring for the tolling physical well being of the mother and father, the agony of their emotional well being and that of their immediate family. The shadow of their grief will be indelibly imprinted in their minds and souls. Death may strengthen or threaten to tear apart the bonds of their relationships with friends, family and themselves. We, their physicians must recognize the impact of these losses, be the first responder in this time of need, and abet the healing process, no matter how long and difficult. The loss of a child brings to us pain that is primal and endures forever. Poetry enables us to ask why even when we already understand how. It permits us as healthcare providers, witness to the frailties of our humanity, to abet healing through the very core of what makes us human, our language and our personal emotions.

Poetry is my venue for “self-reflection”. A synergy exists between poetry and medicine for each share from their origins themes of life and death, sorrow and despair, love and futility, promise and hope. A simple poem can transfer frosts of despair and gleams of elation inwards when written on the occasion of a birth or a death, a tribute or a memorial, a secret feeling or a revealing epiphany.

The impact of words and thoughts at these difficult times are universal. Sometime ago, I

received a note from a father who just had lost his prematurely born daughter to the condition called twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome. One twin died in utero and the remaining twin was born at 25 weeks, gravely ill and on life support systems in the Newborn Intensive Care Unit. After a brave but futile struggle, she, too, died. Her father contacted me from England, asking if I could suggest some words to read at the memorial service for his children. I sent a few lines to him and his bereaved wife. In their reply I learned that they placed these words upon the headstone of their twins' grave:

“Let us not succumb to this portent,  
The solstice of our darkest hour.  
For it is but a finite point  
Upon an infinite journey  
Which began with all creation and  
Upon whose path walk  
The souls of our children;  
Pure as the silence of the virgin winter,  
Alive with winds of indomitable hope”

Michael R. Berman, MD, MBI, FACOG  
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## Cameron

I no longer see the stars; I am the stars.  
I no longer breathe the wind; I am the wind.  
I am the sweet smell of honeysuckle after an  
Evening rain.  
I am the dew on the rose petals in early  
Morning.  
I am harmony and I am peace.  
I am love.  
In sorrow, my mother and father cry,  
But they need not fear. For I am strong.  
My heart is whole and in union with my soul.  
I understand my fate and I smile.  
For nature's will is my destiny  
And my guide through eternity.

1990

*After years of infertility, Cameron was born  
only to die soon after birth of congenital  
heart disease. Unlike most forms of congenital  
heart disease, Cameron's was inoperable and fatal.  
His courageous parents were with him every moment  
of his short but love-filled life.*

## Netzah [Eternity]

"Only those within whose own  
consciousness the suns rise and set,  
the leaves burgeon and wither,  
can be said to be aware of what living is."  
Joseph Wood Krutch

Could I have died so soon,  
So soon that my cries  
Were silenced in your womb?  
So soon that I'll never touch  
Your breast nor feel  
Your hands caress  
My brow?  
So soon that you never got  
To sigh and cry  
Sweet tears of joy,  
For your first child,  
Your first born boy?  
Could I have died so soon?  
I suspect not,  
For I felt the passion  
Of your love around me  
As my heartbeats slowed,  
Then stopped.  
As I lay motionless,  
I heard the misery  
In your cries that  
I would not be born alive  
And wondered, why?  
Yesterday father, you fathered me.  
Today dear mother, you birthed me.  
I was there,  
You were there.  
We all stood witness.  
I heard your whispers,

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*Hygeia®*

That you love me.  
I heard you tell each other  
How beautiful I was viewed  
In my eternal quietude.  
I even felt your soft caress  
As you held me to your breast.  
On this morn, mourn not for me.  
With ethereal grace I have a name.  
I have a home, I have a life...  
To live through all eternity.

*Netzah, one of ten fundamental forces or Sefirot of Jewish Mysticism, means eternity and represents the conquest or capacity for overcoming. Alexander died in utero one day before his birth. After the birth, his mother and father and family held him for hours, in love.*

## **Secret Wonders**

*For Elizabeth*

Born silent, born still,  
With the beauty of an angel,  
Elizabeth passed from my waiting hands,  
Into the hearts of her parents.  
First breath, last breath,  
Breathed within  
A body full of love;  
Youthful, hopeful, anticipating.  
Now a body full of sorrow.  
Elizabeth... a mother's child,  
Embraced by three mothers,  
Gave tiny footprints, inked mementos of  
What might have been.  
Yet as with life itself, we are  
Guided by fleeting moments of  
Sweetness remembered  
And promises dreamed.  
The veil of death's darkness  
Will disappear like melting snows  
In springtime.  
Mercifully, prayers will turn  
Cries into song,  
Loneliness will fade.  
Life will move on.  
Elizabeth has touched us all.  
But her death will not harm us,  
For she has summoned the secret wonders  
Of what means love.  
And we have now become her children.

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## **Martyr for Desire**

*for all children, lost*

You are my quiet darling.  
Your eyes, like morning burn  
The minutes of futility  
To contrite hours, turn  
Eastward where begins the dance  
Of ocean tides, and slumbers still  
The famine of our grief, to hide  
So deep within my wounded will.  
A promise, poisoned from the start  
So brief without reply or song  
Did graze your spirit in my field.  
"Return to me" I cry, I long.  
As chaos prods my anguish, yet  
Neglecting fortunes in my soul,  
Tinted hues of destiny  
Are tender thoughts which sorrow stole  
From me when first I heard your voice;  
Each murmur on your breath that sang  
Like harps converging as a choir,  
And chimes afar, with passion, rang.  
You are my quiet darling  
Within a cold and flame-less fire,  
And I, a prism in the shadows;  
A silent martyr for desire.

## **Memnon**

My tears are watermarks  
Which imprint forever  
Sentient reminders of gentle hopes  
And dreams subdued.  
Extant in painful thought they are  
And sleep afar  
In caves of ancient echoes  
Wailing for my perished child  
Who now guised in angel's silk  
Sings madrigals of sweet delight  
And turns my tears heavenward  
To drift peacefully into the  
Forgiving canyons of winter's night.

*Memnon, the son of Eos, Goddess of Dawn, who  
mourned his death by weeping every morning.*

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<http://hygeia.org> [berman@hygeia.org](mailto:berman@hygeia.org)



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## **The Mist**

*When winter's gloom succumbs,  
and grief melts in the sun,  
warm currents on my breast will stream,  
and turn frosted tears to sunbeams...*

Sadness moistens my brow like  
mist. Silent tears coalesce upon my cheeks.  
Petrieved by the cold of winter,  
Forgotten by the spring thaw,  
I shiver and feel lost  
in this the season of my sorrow.  
Loss has embraced me more than  
once, yet it has never seized me.  
Hope has been my reclamation,  
My emancipation,  
From the bondage of despair.  
Hope exists in the swelter  
Of summer and persists  
As the leaves fall in November.  
Hope thaws the snows of winter.  
Hope does not forget.

## **The Gift**

*For Teodora*

*"Out of my window the strings of the  
harp are struck, Oh, my heart! How is  
it so deeply entangled in the echoes!  
There is the limitless sound of the trees,  
there is the limitless brightness of the moon"*

Today the sun cast hues of hope.  
Open eyes and grimaces,  
Heart beat flutters,  
Angel cries.  
And then serenity.  
A life lived long enough  
To taste the sweetness of  
A mother's kiss,  
A father's kiss;  
Caresses and caresses  
And whispers,  
And kisses again and again.  
Blessings, prayers, tears;  
Moans of weeping.  
Silent moments.  
Raging thoughts.  
Peaceful thoughts  
Which memory's keeping.  
No shadows.  
Pure light.  
Eternal light.  
From sun and stars and moon glow.  
Save the night of today  
When the moon eclipsed, turns umber.  
And  
She be our gift, forever.

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## Tinos

*“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”*      Ralph Waldo Emerson

Fortunate, are those  
whose lives so fragile,  
And in just being, so struggle  
To feel a sense of freedom  
From the pain  
Of malaise and hunger,  
And the maladies  
Which from the formative years  
Steal their persona;  
Fortunate are those  
Whose lives are touched by you.

You have learned and witnessed,  
Taught and practiced  
The tenets of what it means to give,  
And live your dream.  
And now, with profound kindness  
You will overwhelm the pity of physical  
agony,  
You will plant seeds of happiness in gardens  
Disrupted by blight and sorrow.  
You will care when caring seems lost.  
You will cry when caring has lost.  
You will smile when your kindness creates  
peace.

And of tomorrow,  
You will see  
Through mists of uncertainties  
Which veil the newly born and older.  
And with passion, skills and fervor,

Pursue cure and order  
For afflictions of a blameless child.  
As no greater worth is there  
Than for you to share what  
Rests inherent in your heart:  
Your Art, Your soul, your sense  
Of right and wrong.  
And above the rest,  
A righteous ethic that strives,  
Without pretense, to heal, lifelong.

Hygeia®, symbolic of the Greek mythological goddess of health and healing for which it is named, concerns the human dimension of healthcare