The gift of stories amid grief

By Linda Lawrence Hunt
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My daughter Krista died when she was 25. She was doing volunteer service in Bolivia , and a bus she was traveling on plunged over a cliff.

Moses Pulei, who is from Kenya, met Krista in college. He flew from southern California to Spokane, Washington, to attend her memorial service. At the reception, he approached my husband and me. “In the Masai tradition, when someone dies, our gift is to go to their home and share a story,” he said. “May I come over?”

Researchers have found that when a loved one dies, the most common early reactions are an intense yearning, a sense that part of you is missing, and a hunger to have the person back. Sharing stories often provides solace and helps ease the heartbreak. But to the dismay of many bereaved parents, after a brief time many people rarely want to talk about the child who died. These silences add another layer of pain.

“Ours was a family bound by an unacknowledged credo,” says Solveig Torvik, who wrote a family memoir to unearth four generations of Norwegian silences. “They tend to believe that if a thing remains unspoken, it does not exist; if pain is given no voice, it lacks power to harm.” In the writing classes I teach, many war veterans tell a similar story. They carry their pain in silence, in vain hope that it might go away. Unfortunately, buried grief seldom dies.

The Masai know better. When Pulei visited my husband and me, he gave us our first inkling of the healing power of stories.

He told us about a disturbing encounter with overt racism when he first arrived in our city to attend college. While he was walking downtown with another African student, a group of men in a pickup truck threatened them, hurling racial slurs and yelling at them to go back to Africa.

Pulei is the grandson of a respected village elder known as one of the “holy people.” He’d never encountered such abuse in his life. He seriously considered returning

home. But his college sponsor knew Krista and for some reason said, “You have to meet her first.”

“What she said changed my life,” Pulei recalled. After he told her what happened, Krista responded, “Moses, when this happens again, you have to remember that the problem is not in you, but in the persons treating you this way.” She added, “If you let these men deter you from your goals, you’ll never achieve what you came to America to do. You want to be in control of your life decisions, not let them determine your future.”

He took her words to heart. Rather than shut down in fear, he chose to stay in America and be his warm, sociable self. He became so beloved among students they elected him as their first international student-body president. His brilliance and commitment as a scholar led to doctoral scholarships. He now speaks several languages, connects Americans and Kenyans in common projects such as drought relief and education for girls, and leads a program for World Vision in Tanzania.

“Without her encouragement," he told us, "I often wonder how different my life would be now.” What a gift this story was for us to hear.

Parents tell of a variety of ways others can give them more memories of their child. Friends, family, or work colleagues of older children share e-mails, letters, or music recordings they’ve received, or they drop by to visit and reminisce. Sometimes teachers, babysitters, or neighbors of younger children give another glimpse into a parent’s child.

Along with hearing stories, parents often long to share their own stories of the son or daughter they miss so profoundly. The Compassionate Friends, a bereavement organization, recognizes this need and offers more than 660 meeting locations throughout the U.S. A pastor founded the organization in England in 1969 after observing that parents found their greatest comfort when talking with other grieving mothers and fathers. The group's credo, “We need not walk alone,” finds expression through the parents, siblings, and grandparents who gather and share support, insight, and stories.