

Name

**We Are Together in Pain and in Hope**

***Linda Probus, M.A., ATR***

The commuter plane lifted smoothly and settled into its familiar rhythm and wobbled gently side to side. I closed my eyes and leaned back into my seat overlooking the plane's right wing. My eyes saw the beautiful clouds of East Tennessee as we flew below them. Within minutes, we magically crossed over the rarely seen view of our planet from above the clouds. An endless sky of robin's egg blue capped all that was visible. My eye caught a most remarkable image glimmering in the feathery clouds bank below the plane's wing. Following me was a fuzzy but brilliant circular rainbow with the plane's darker shadow right in the center. I watched it, deciding it was a good omen for my journey. I had been asked to assist a community just struck by the sudden death of six women who were killed in a drunken driving accident. I knew we all would need the rainbow.

On a Thursday in mid-September, two women school teachers, their high school daughters and two other girls were returning home from playing volleyball when their van was rear-ended by a man whose blood alcohol level was nearly twice the legal limit. This small town was plunged into an experience for which it, or any other community, was unprepared.

The school administrators had requested assistance in lending emotional support to students as soon as possible. Four of us professional counselors were joined by eight volunteers from local and regional chapters of a national support organization who donated their time, training and personal experiences with drunken driving deaths in their own families. Most of all, they gave a priceless gift during a time of need. They donated their hearts filled with compassion.

While scanning the silent world outside the small window from my plane, some of my own memories emerged of working in Radcliff, Kentucky as the grief counselor following the nation's worst drunken driven incident which killed 27 children and 7 adults.

How easily these memories bring themselves forward, unbidden and unwanted, I thought. Again, as in the past 3 ½ years, I employed my faith in a higher power to keep these events emotionally manageable in my own heart. I cannot resist asking the tempting, unanswerable question, "Why? Why did 34, none of whom were even known to me, but whose names and faces will always remain in my heart, have to die?" All grieving people struggle to respond to this cry of disbelief. I am comforted by knowing it is a normal human response to not believe such a truth for as long as possible.

As I have learned from many clients, and from my own father's death, the passage of time gently washes away some layers of sorrow and helps us cope with the reality of our personal loss. In a less obvious way, the concept of time and healing was the therapeutic essence of what the critical response team hoped to bring to this rural town. Family members, high school and elementary students and community leaders were frozen in the immediacy of what had happened. Research has proven that trauma victims and bereaved people can experience altered perceptions about time and events happening around them. Time will help restore balance, if permitted.

On a more intimate level, we were permitted into a private world. Shock and profound sadness were visible in hundreds of family members who attended the seven hour visitation service held in the high school gymnasium for five of the seven women who died. Friends waited over an hour to offer caring tears, hugs and love to these families. Perhaps the gift of time will only reinforce the protective veil lovingly placed around these grieving families by their community. These moments were often captured by smiles and gestures because words of consolation sometimes fail to convey what the heart so earnestly yearns to say.

As Monday drew to a close, we searched out the small memorial of handmade crosses, flowers and cards which had appeared along side the two lane highway where the accident happened. A quiet group of teenaged girls were already there, speaking in hushed tones, so we waited patiently at a distance as they shared these moments together with their friends who had died four days earlier. Along the road's shoulder, grass was blackened or missing over a frighteningly large area. All that could be seen that might have belonged to the van were the remains of a steel-belted tire and a few snippets of wire. A man's light blue, very soiled work jacket had been tossed carelessly close to the fragile memorial, unknowingly contaminating the spirit of the place.  Who were these young girls and women of my own age I would never be permitted to know?

I returned Tuesday morning, privileged to step away from this nightmare of sudden, violent death that had blanketed an innocent community. Gratefully, I leaned back into the softness of my bus seat and gazed absent-mindedly into the blue sky above.  There, waiting for me to see, was an enormous feathery cloud formation that did not look like anything in particular. It grabbed me with its abstract beauty. Maybe it was an erupting fountain filled with the whiteness of joy and hope that I alone could see.

It was so enchanting and comforting against the clear blue sky that I was compelled to sketch it so as not to forget its secret message. To me, its arching beauty was certainly a message of hope, perhaps an unspoken reminder that I, as well as the people who had spent three days here, had given all that I knew how to give during this period of pain and sorrow. Within this brief moment of reassurance, or escape, my eyelids closed easily as the bus snaked its way through traffic, taking me once more to the airport and back to my own small town in east Tennessee.