

Now Is a Time
Tom Pankiewicz
When Writing Teachers Write VII
October 15, 2008

“Mom, I’ve killed two people.”

Julia’s call came about twenty minutes after she left early Thanksgiving evening for her home in Overland Park. When she called, she was lying in the grass alongside I-29, a mile north of Faucett, waiting for the highway patrol and ambulances to arrive. Julia told my wife, Cathy, that she had been in an accident but did not think she was injured. She also told Cathy that a bystander could not find pulses on the two people in the other car. “I didn’t have time to do anything. The other car was just there when I hit it. They said it came across the median.” Cathy told Julia that we would come immediately; Julia said to meet her at the hospital. As Julia ended the call, Cathy heard the sirens of the arriving emergency vehicles.

Julia had just been admitted when we were led to the cubicle she occupied in the trauma unit. She was strapped to a back board; her head, neck and back immobilized by braces and straps. An IV gave her fluids. Nurses hovered over her, checking her pulse and blood pressure, searching for signs of shock or trauma. Julia did not seem to be injured, but it was clear she had been in an accident. Bits of glass and dried grass littered her hair and her sweater. Still she was remarkably calm as she replayed the story of the accident, pieced together from her memory and from the state trooper’s information.

She was listening to music, driving on cruise control in the right lane. A Honda Civic was traveling north when the driver lost control. His car skidded across the northbound lanes and plowed into the grassy median at such an angle the Civic went

under the cables that were constructed to stop cars. After it squirted out from the cables, the Honda pinwheeled out of the median and across the interstate until Julia's Ford Focus hit it, behind the driver's door.

I interrupted Julia. "It went under the cables? That can't be. The bottom strand is just a couple of feet off the ground"

"That's what the trooper said."

I could not picture how three steel cables could stretch so far that an entire car would slip under them.

Julia said she saw a blur and thought "What . . ." The cars collided before she could finish her thought, before she could tap her brakes to slow her cruise-controlled seventy mile-per-hour speed. Air bags and a seat belt saved Julia. She got out her car and began to wobble weak-kneed to the Honda when a man from the car following Julia, a paramedic on his way home to Liberty, put his hands on Julia's shoulders and ordered her to lie down and wait for the ambulance. Julia watched as he went to the Honda. I asked if the driver was hurt, Julia said. The paramedic said he could not find the driver's pulse and, while he detected a pulse on the passenger, it too had stopped. That is when Julia called home.

In the coming hours, my wife and I relaxed, certain that Julia would be all right. The nurses who cared for Julia checked her body and her conscience. They measured blood pressure, searched for broken bones, and reassured her that the accident was not her fault. "From what we've heard, there was nothing you could have done. This accident was unavoidable." They, too, could not fathom how a car could slip under the cables that were designed to snag them and prevent accidents like the one that just occurred. But the

nurses did not seek a reason for the accident. They knew, from experience, that accidents just happen.

As the hours passed the nurses' visits became less frequent; the attending physician said she was waiting to take X-Rays so the backboard could be removed and Julia could be released. Even the business office sent down a representative to complete insurance forms and verify payment.

While the hospital settled into its normal routine, I continued to wrestle with logic. How could a car get under and through three cables with the bottom one strung just a couple of feet off the ground? Were the cables improperly installed? Was the driver of the Honda speeding when he lost control? Was the driver drunk or high on drugs? Did he hit a deer or lose control in trying to avoid one? Waiting in the trauma room, I wanted to make sense of the accident. I wanted someone to blame. I wanted to know why such a life-altering and life-ending collision occurred. Perhaps searching for the unknowable was my way of avoiding the reality of that night.

Even in writing the early drafts of this essay a year and half after the incident, I avoided its dark reality. I played with the obvious clichés about Thanksgiving, about not taking life for granted, and about living with trust instead of fear. I found it much easier to consider how blind chance created the complex mathematical equation where speed, angle, distance and time equaled a collision and two deaths. I hid from the fact that two people died...two innocent people died. Even though I wanted to attach blame because it would make me feel better, I could not do so. Even as Julia and Cathy and I relaxed, we knew somewhere other families were receiving visits from the police, but we did not—could not—speak of that that night.

After tests and x-rays, the head and neck brace and the backboard were removed. Julia could go home with pain medication after she filed a more complete report with the trooper. We asked him about the victims and the cause. He said there was no sign of drugs or alcohol; no sign of excessive speed, no sign of a deer, no sign of mechanical failure. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until the Honda's driver lost control and careened across the interstate. The only new information he shared was that the used Honda had just been purchased the day before and that the police were having trouble locating the victims' families.

Before he left, Julia asked the trooper, "Did they suffer?"

"No, they died instantly. They would have never known they had been hit."

"Were they disfigured?"

The trooper said both were wearing seatbelts but that the force of the crash caused massive internal injuries that led to the deaths.

The next morning I drove to the tow company's lot to gather Julia's possessions from her car. The front end of the Focus was crushed; the engine had dropped as engineered instead of being shoved by the impact into the front seat; the windshield was cracked into a spider-web; the driver's door window was shattered; a fine powder from the air bags dusted the interior. I grabbed papers from the glove compartment, CD's from the front seat and folding chairs from the trunk. I found her glasses under the front seat, missing one lens. I sifted through the beads of broken glass on the floor board, searching for the missing lens, but it had disappeared. After seeing the wreckage, I knew the violence of the crash and marveled that Julia walked away with only bruises and soreness.

Later that weekend, I drove Julia home. As we approached the accident site, I slowed. Gouges plowed through the median. The cable drooped but was still in tact. Skid scars arched across the left lane until they suddenly became black blocks moving the opposite direction. I noticed that just before and just after the accident site, guard rails protected cars from dropping into deep gullies. Returning later in the darkness later, I found the northbound skid marks. I also studied the headlights and speed of oncoming traffic and realized that even if I drove hyper-cautiously, constantly on guard, I would only have micro-seconds to stop or to swerve in an attempt to avoid a collision.

Early the following week, the victims' obituaries were published in the local newspaper. Their homes were Washington and Kansas before moving to St. Joseph and they had a child. One of my former students stopped me in the hall and told me that she knew the couple from her church and that they were nice people. But she had little other information. On the day of the funeral, Cathy visited the church to leave a card of condolence and a memorial.

A couple of weeks ago, a friend of mine spoke about death sentences, not the kind meted out by judges as punishment for murder, but the actual sentence that begins the end of life. What was said or thought in the Civic that night during those final, out-of-control seconds? What preceded the phone call that began, "Mom, I've killed two people"? On Thanksgiving evening 2006 that death sentence would have mattered to me because it may have explained the accident to me.

I had thought the events of that night were past until I started to recall the death sentences that I have heard. "Dad was just walking down the stairs when I heard him fall." "Your mother has suffered a massive brain hemorrhage." "Tom, I think Mom has

stopped breathing.” The words of these death sentences are still vivid. At the times I heard them, they frightened me. Today I realize the meaning of the death sentence is not in its words only, but in what those words announce:

Now is the time to say good bye.

Now is the time to reflect on your own mortality.

Now is the time to pray.

Now is the time to hold another and offer comfort.

Now is the time to be held and be comforted.

Now is the time to remember.

Now is the time to grieve.

Now is the time to mourn.

Nearly two years after the accident, I can finally admit my fear of dealing with death that night and I realize that I should have listened more to what the accident announced:

Now is the time to pay attention to those I love and to those I never knew.

Now is the time offer prayer and comfort, not to seek answers or assign blame.