

OWL STORY

Thomas J. Cottle*

Of course I feel that Wes was not supposed to die of this kind of cancer. When a friend knocks down his door because he suspects something is wrong and finds his buddy dead, when the son of dear friends leaves us, we are shattered; the world cannot ever again be right.

Wes was spectacular, dazzling. Handsome, a gifted athlete, a magnificent musician, the guy traveled, after all, with a famous rock group, and played jazz with the best of them. Fender bass and upright bass, Wes mastered the instruments, although he never would have said this. All this, and a ice hockey player, a beautiful photographer, and best friend of hordes of people.

And still he died, and they will never chisel the grief off the beautiful faces of his parents and brother. Grieving with guilt is one thing, grieving with rage another. You want to talk unfair, this was one of the unfair ones. This is one that really tests a person's faith. This is one that breaks people down. The father who once built a crib for his tiny son, three decades later builds a simple wooden box to store that son's ashes at an interment ceremony. "Not good," my father used to say about such events. "Not good."

But the time passes, and some of the grief and rage, confusion and hurt recede. There isn't much closure, as they say, since closure for some of us stands as an inane concoction of television editors who have grown tired of a particular story. So they close it. Is there closure when the doctors say there was nothing more we could do? Is there closure when you bury your son? Is there closure when you celebrate the first anniversary of his death? And when you receive an invitation to travel to Philadelphia to attend an exhibition of photographs taken by Wes and his father to raise money for the music school from which Wes graduated a decade or so before, and where, as his aunt would say, he tore up the bass department, there's no closure; there's just a moment of celebration followed by still more sadness.

But you sort of have to go. How can you not go? How can you rage against unknown doctors and destiny and the fates? How can you experience the guilt and not go? What kind of a person would write these words, and think these thoughts, and not go! Because grieving for the young is especially hard on a person; that's a good reason for not going? Because being around mourners is hard on a person; that's a good reason for not going? Because you can convince yourself that grieving in public is never as profound and soul wrenching as grieving in private; that's a good reason for not going? You just sort of have to go.

The invitation announcing the opening of the photography exhibition was perfectly unambiguous. The date was clear, the location was clear, the description and purpose of the event were clear. And I mis-interpreted every item. I had the date wrong, the location wrong, even the purpose of the event wrong. You just sort of have to go even when your mind is doing everything it can to keep you from going. If you have the date wrong, and the location wrong, then how can you make travel plans? You can't, so you can't go. It's not that you didn't *want* to go; it's just that the invitation was confusing, so there is no way you *could* go, even if you wanted to.

I didn't want to go. Call it selfish, narcissistic, self absorbed, ungenerous, I was digging in the garden, playing with plants, down on my hands and knees spreading loam over the rocky earth and thinking, man, if there's one thing in the world I don't want to do next weekend it's go to Philadelphia. After a week of work, all I want to do is come back to this garden and fertilize plants, move them around, feed them loam, prune them, love them. Besides, it's not just Philadelphia. It's Swarthmore! Which means you not only have to get to Philadelphia, you then have to find a train to Swarthmore, and find a place to stay because the event is scheduled late in the day, which means you can't return that same evening. It's all about inconvenience. Traveling, everyone agrees, is about inconvenience. Making all these reservations and arrangements is about inconvenience, as is the death of a beautiful young man.

You want the truth? I'm probably muttering aloud in the garden, I am devastated by Wes's death. It's as if my own son has died, and still I don't want to go to Philadelphia, not to mention Swarthmore. That's the first thing that's bothering me. The second thing is why that owl, which I heard hooting throughout the night, is still hooting at ten forty five in the morning when he's supposed to be deep in the woods somewhere, fast asleep? For that matter, why does it seem that he's getting closer? Why does it sound as if he's literally a few feet away? People up here in Maine tell me they have lived in these woods for fifty years and never seen an owl. You hear them moving around at night, you hear the upturn hoot or the "who, who cooks for you" hoot, but when you go to look on the most moonlit of nights, you see nothing.

I am on my knees, not at all in prayer, merely an old man digging in a small garden he has tried to create in unfriendly, resistant soil. And I am thinking over and over and over again how I have not the slightest desire to go to Pennsylvania, any part of Pennsylvania next weekend. And I am thinking over and over and over again about my lifelong inability to tell people in a kind, loving but firm manner, No, I am not going to be able to do this for you, or give this to you. There is no way these grieving parents can expect people to make a trip for a photography exhibit. They would at once excuse my absence and never give it another thought. So, in fact, it is still possible to bow out. It is still possible to tell them, "Actually, I wanted very much to come, but I just couldn't make it." There is no way these grieving parents wouldn't understand. If I don't want to go, I don't have to go. This is exactly what I was thinking. This thought, and the thought of that owl whose hooting was now emanating from a location right around the southern corner of the house.

It was the noise created by the flapping of his wings that called my attention to the large predator who flew over my head and landed on a dead hemlock branch no more than forty feet away from me. There he sat, staring at me. And owls, I now have learned, don't blink. They stare. Let me add that he was big, not frightening exactly, but big, and his presence aroused the blue jays who began taunting him with their screeching and swarming about. Their action had an immediate effect on the owl, and he moved, flying

over to another branch, this one even closer; now he was twenty feet away. People in Maine have lived in these woods and never seen an owl, and this one is staring at me so intently I feel his urgency, or is it its wrath? No longer hooting, it is, nonetheless, insistent, unremitting. Unthinking, dare I say purely out of instinct, or is it some preternatural energy, and for reasons I cannot comprehend, I say aloud, with calmness, “Okay, Wes, I’ll go. I promise. I’ll go.” And with that, the owl, still silent, flies away, and for weeks, more than a month, almost two months in fact, no one around the lake hears the sound of any owl again.

As promised, we do go to Philadelphia, then on to Swarthmore. And our arrival at the college gallery is a most important event, especially because we are, by accident, a day early. But Wes’s parents are thrilled to see us. They cannot believe that we made the trip. We are angels, they proclaim, having arrived during a moment of especial loneliness for them as they prepare the space for the exhibit’s official opening the following afternoon, by which time we will have gone. I walk the gallery with Wes’s dad who peers at the pictures not as if he were examining them for the first time, but as if, perhaps, they might just bring back some piece of life. Or is it me, perhaps, who is studying the photographs with this purpose? I do see Wes in some of the pictures taken by his father. In one, Wes is crouched down on railroad tracks to get the perfect perspective for the photo he is taking. It is the pose of a dancer with a camera.

I buy two wonderful pieces, both water scenes, and am thrilled when I see the little red dots indicating SOLD applied to the glass.” It was so good of you to come,” Wes’s dad tells me, his voice more genuine than any I have ever heard from another man. I cannot tolerate the pain all of this is creating in us. “Hey, I happened to be in the area and I’m always looking for a tax deduction.” Dinner together that evening and even some laughs, honest to goodness belly laughs. There’s an account of a man in a convenience store looking closely at magazines and then methodically ripping the various pages into millions of pieces. It strikes Wes’s mother as hilarious. We are still laughing on the train platform where hosts bid guests good-bye. I think: They are waiting with us when they don’t have to. Just like I didn’t have to come. There is no closure to some events, I

reflect. We will always now be mourners, waiting. A poet once remarked that anger is a form of wandering mourning. Of course that line will live with me as long as I have access to my memory.

We stay in Philadelphia for the night, our hotel near Temple University, whose mascot, I muse, is an owl. Purely a coincidence. But it *was* an intriguing moment in the garden with that owl; everyone has to admit this. It was even a trifle eerie with his flapping wings and the screeching of the jays. And there are those lingering questions? Why was he there that morning in the brilliant sunlight? And why did he make a second landing in that branch close to me? It may not have been the spirit of Wes, but it nonetheless makes for a delicious story. Then again, it may well have been the spirit of Wes. Who is to make a pronouncement with unquestioned authority? It is amazing, really, how people whose lives and spirits rest on foundations of reason and rationality, don't quickly dismiss my story of the owl. They appear willing simply to accept it. Or are they merely being polite, tolerant, amused? Do they go home and wonder about my psychological health? Do they chalk it up to aging? Perhaps they know of Hardy's aged, frail darkling thrush who through his song brought "hope whereof he knew And I was unaware."

The Philadelphia journey recedes into memory and I am actually intrigued to discover the contents of the large flat package that arrives one humid morning. The return address, Swarthmore, PA, awakens my recognition: Wes's photographs are now in our possession. It has been two months since our visit to the gallery, two months of owl-less Maine nights. Friday cannot come quickly enough so that we may return to our unpolished cabin for the weekend and hang the photos above our bed. They will be perfect. Wes will watch over us. At least we may see what he saw.

But nature once again has a say and the trip that Friday is torturous. Rain pelts down upon the windshield for miles. The sound is thunderous, as if someone were emptying silverware drawers on the car. Visibility is practically down to nothing. I am reminded of a trip decades before when traveling with a friend we encounter a similar downpour. Smartly, we make no attempt to move. Congratulating ourselves on our mature decision,

we pull over to the side of the road and remark with disdain about any fool who thinks he can make progress in such a maelstrom. “Let ‘em *all* go!” Eventually, that one storm ebbs and my friend and I prepare to resume our travels, only to discover that we are not on the side of the road, but literally in the middle of a two-lane highway straddling both lanes.

This one Friday Maine rain is not quite as treacherous, but the drive is an arduous one. In time we arrive at the cabin. The sky is not letting up just yet, so it is best that we not carry supplies into the house; they will be drenched even with the few feet we have to traverse. Surely the package holding Wes’s photos must not be exposed to these conditions, even if they are framed. Water, I fear, like sad thoughts, can always seep in and ruin things.

The cabin is cool, even for a summer Maine evening. My wife elects to retire early. I am alone in the living room, scoping out potential carpentry projects that have become my life-blood in these woods. The scent in the room is that pure essence that always follows a rain; everything has been bathed, I think, even the lake. But with no rain, and only a decision of what book to read, I decide to empty the car of our gear, leaving the package with Wes’s photographs to last.

Eventually I transport the package, muttering to myself about its awkward size. I place the package on the floor, leaning it up against the dining room table. It is positioned so that no one will bump into in the darkness; it will be safe. For some reason I glance at the clock: Eight forty, the last of Friday’s light is all but gone and the bats have checked in for their nightly shift.

Package safe, bats at work, I walk across the room and sit upon the couch. At the precise moment my back touches the long bolster I hear it, sharp and distinct: a single hoot of an owl. Without thought I hear myself calmly reply: “You’re welcome.” Nothing more from any owl will be heard for the remainder of the summer.

For Wes Wehmiller

*The author is professor of education at Boston University. His most recent books are *Mind Fields: Adolescent Consciousness in an Age of Distraction*; *Hardest Times: The Trauma of Long Term Unemployment*; *A Sense of Self: The Work of Affirmation*; and *When the Music Stopped: Discovering My Mother*. Readers may be interested to learn more about the Wes Wehmiller Memorial Endowed Scholarship at the Berklee School of Music, Boston, MA.

Thomas J. Cottle
Professor of Education
Boston University
Two Sherborn Street
Boston, MA 02215
617-566-6426
email: tcottle@bu.edu