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## The Boston Marathon and the good boy who fell out of the sky

by Eugene Cullen Kennedy

Bulletins from the Human Side

The people of Newtown, Conn., including some of the family members of those killed in the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School half way through December, found themselves asking an unanticipated and painful question early in the new year. According to *The New York Times* (1/5/13), "dozens of such heartfelt memorials" had been placed "on roadsides, in yards and on storefronts" but the town, still "suffocating in grief," was faced with an unexpected and "daunting question: when do public displays of sorrow and sympathy become barriers to moving on, especially for the victims' families who drive by them???"

As winter edged toward spring, it was announced that new fragments thought to be of victims had been uncovered in the materials taken from the site of the World Trade Center bombings, each discovery reawakening the uncertain peace, or at least truce, that survivors thought they had reached with the sorrow that had overwhelmed them on 9/11.??

It was also a hard dying winter of discontent for people who found that sorrow and loss also inhabited the new venue of social media. On Facebook and other sites, *The New York Times* reported (6/14/12), "estrangement is being redefined, with new complications" as relatives stumble upon information about the weddings and births in the lives of adult children with whom they have not spoken in years. Vera Shelby, director of a support group for estranged families, tells the *Times* that estrangement has its own stages of grief and that these new Internet revelations are "almost worse than death, because when they are estranged from you, they aren't gone." Sorrow has found a place beyond closure in social media.??

"How," *The Wall Street Journal* recently asked (4/11/13), "should we deal with nuclear waste?" "High-level nuclear waste," it continued, "has been piling up in the U.S. for decades, and we still have no

permanent home for it. ? [B]illions of dollars and decades later, the U.S. is back to square one.???

Written a few days before the deadly explosions at the Boston Marathon, the question melds with the grim reminders that we also stand at square one with human sorrow. Unlike nuclear waste, sadness never decays, so that a few bars of music, a crooked smile like someone's we loved, or something so small we never thought it could affect us can bring any loss back at full strength as if we were experiencing it again right now.??

Our sadness is not a waste product but a by-product of being human, a distillate as pure and invisible as breath of our loving and being loved. The only place we can store it, therefore, is inside ourselves and although it is powerful enough to send a sudden tsunami of emotion rolling through us, the person we are talking with may not notice or, turning away or changing the subject, not seem to care that unintentionally, so often unintentionally, they have twisted the knife of sorrow in our wound of loss. Poet W.H. Auden writes of how, in Brueghel's painting of Icarus, "everything turns away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster" and how the passing ship that "must have seen/ Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,/ Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.???

A boy fell out of the sky for all of us, not a mythical Icarus arrogantly flying beyond his powers, but an eight-year-old with a crooked smile revealing the power a good boy possesses to break our hearts by just being himself. The great American writer Willa Cather once tried to temper our mortal fears by imagining death as a moment of surrendering oneself into the arms of one's beloved.??

Now Martin Richard has faced death down for all of us by being fully a boy, waiting for his father to finish the race as all boys do for their fathers to come home at the end of the day and, excited as little boys are when their fathers are arriving home at last, he hugged him, slipping in and out of his father's arms, loved and loving, an embrace more powerful than the one imagined by Cather, as it sang of a boy in full, as vulnerable as only the innocent can be, smiling and unafraid to face death waiting for him, something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky to enter the Mystery, to make way for us to be braver and stronger about entering it ourselves.

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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