It was an accidental friendship—accidental but authentic. Friendship led me to a unique book-sharing experience in a life populated with many opportunities to share literature with children and adults.

A request to take an in-depth look at a children’s book, share it with colleagues, and write a review seemed less like a task and more like an honor. The book arrived unceremoniously in a package with a smile on it and the adventure began.

*Cry, Heart, but Never Break*, written by Glenn Ringtved, was originally published in Denmark in 2001. Inside the cover, I discovered a softly illustrated picture book that was simultaneously lyrical and wistful. I found an author’s compassion for children facing loss, and I learned that this compassion was developed from his personal experience. With deliberate, thoughtful determination, the overall impression is life-affirming in the face of death, grief, and loss. It is a quiet, hymnlike tale that begins as four siblings, aware that their grandmother is gravely ill, devise a plan to keep death from taking her away. Personified as both thoughtful and tender, Death arrives and gently shares a simple story as he drinks coffee, in response to the inevitable “WHY?” voiced by the youngest child.

I found the plot logical and the characters’ behavior consistent. While Death’s response to the “WHY?” was a rather ambiguous and slightly confusing story of the marriage of two
brothers and two sisters, the author took on a daunting topic that is socially significant and was able to teach without preaching. It struck me as an intelligent and imaginative effort to assist a child to make sense of death and find comfort. Charlotte Pardi’s illustrations seemed to perfectly capture the tone and underscore the message from the first page, as a scythe leans outside the home, to the last, as a white curtain flutters in the breeze.

With conviction about the power of literature, the need for this theme, and the opportunity to share, I carefully practiced my read-aloud and prepared some questions for my audience. If I heard a slight whisper of caution deep in my soul, I willingly set it aside in the name of friendship.

It was a simple read-aloud to a group of 30 college students on November 14, 2017. They were enrolled in a course titled “Trauma-Informed Teaching,” taught by Dr. Ashley Krause. This was the last evening of the semester in which much time and effort had been exerted to provide a strong foundation in trauma-centered schools and practices. An ideal group, I thought, comprised of educators of all-aged students assigned to multiple sites within the district, ready to listen to a trauma-themed children’s book and provide objective feedback. Before the read-aloud began, questions were distributed to small groups. Students in the class were invited to think about the questions as they listened. After the read-aloud, all class members were provided with time to write a response to one question. Next, each person shared their answers and opinions in their small group, and finally, they were asked to locate others in the room who had answered the same question and share with them. After the final sharing, all class members were invited to respond to the whole group.

This experience led to an unanticipated glimpse into the human condition.

The book elicited strong, predominantly negative adult reactions. The loudest voices shared comments like the following: “Scary drawings.” “Hated it.” “Do not have it in the classroom.” “I want my kids sheltered from things like this.” “This contradicts my Christian faith.” “Would be angry if this were read to my child.” “Does not belong even in the school library—maybe a school counselor’s office.” “This would only be for middle school or above.”

The minority opinion in this class was felt more than heard. There were eye rolls and shrugged shoulders and downcast or amazed looks. Affirmative comments included: “I would be fine with my daughter reading this.” “Provides some understanding.” “Helps students understand the balance in life.” “Our students are going through traumatic experiences.”

This reaction was unanticipated on my part given the course of study. In hindsight, this important experience served to confirm the need for this genre. Adults, even in a college class on trauma, react to death—and some adult reactions are not helpful for young children. Mortality petrifies. We run from discussions of our own deaths and, especially, those of our loved ones.

If we were to rationalize and internalize and compartmentalize this terror in an adult world, how do children ever make sense of death? “If you are protected from dark things,” Neil Gaiman states in his adaptation of the Brothers Grimm story Hansel and Gretel, “then you have no protection of, knowledge of, or understanding of dark things when they show up.”
My experience was somewhat like a death—the death of naiveté. It was also somewhat like a birth—the birth of conviction. Thanks to an accidental friendship, an unanticipated reaction, and unexpected reflection, I recommend Ringtved’s book, along with others like it. This theme is worthy of credence in the world of children’s literature.

Work Cited

About the Author
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