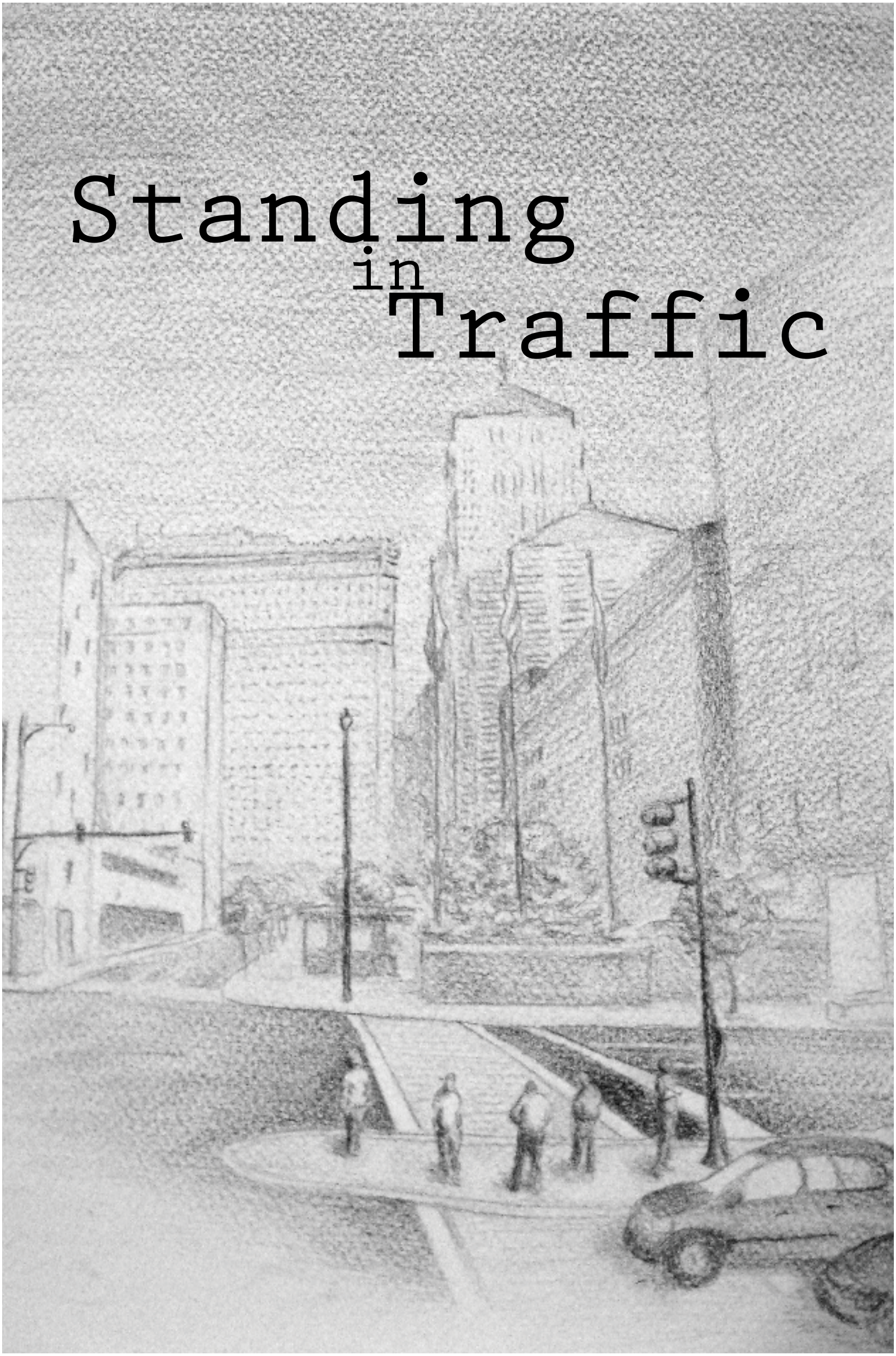
Standing in Traffic



Standing in Traffic

Lisa M. Lilly

A Note from the Author

The year my parents were killed by an intoxicated driver, I felt alone, despite friends and family who shared my grief and love me. I started a blog about DUI issues, my feelings about the driver, life after loss, and hope. Sometimes strangers e-mailed me after reading entries to say no one around them understood how they felt about the death of a loved one or their own severe injuries, and that reading the blog helped a little. For that reason, the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists (AAIM) offered to publish a booklet compiling the blog posts.

The entries include what I learned about the criminal court system, the gratitude I feel for people who helped me, how angry I felt and how dark the world seemed at times, and some ways I found to cope. If you've lost someone you love because of, or if you or someone close to you has been injured by, an intoxicated driver, my heart goes out to you. I wish I could say that in these pages you'll find answers to why this happened. While I don't have answers, I hope reading these pages will offer a small amount of comfort and perhaps a few ideas for living during and after loss.

This booklet has been edited a bit to try to avoid repetition that appeared in the original blog posts. For the most part, though, the entries are included as they appear in the blog and in the same order. A special thank you to my niece, Kate, the artist who created the cover, and to AAIM for making this book available.

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When It's Always Three A.M.

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day."

That's how I felt after the crash that killed both my parents. The driver was drunk-- it was his third DUI.

It happened on January 22, 2007 around 7:30 p.m. in Brookfield, Illinois, in front of St. Barbara's Church, the same church where my parents got married 51 years before. My mother died in the street. My father was taken to Loyola Hospital, and for six and a half weeks he struggled to live. I worked when I could, slept in waiting rooms, got up in the middle of the night to be sure I saw him again before emergency procedures. During the first week, my brothers came into town and we spent the week driving from intensive care to the funeral home to St. Barbara's. We chose a coffin and mass cards, music and readings; we met with interns and specialists, nurses and hospital chaplains. We tried to honor my mom and be there for my dad.

Much as I appreciated everyone who cared and wanted to know how my father was doing over the next weeks, I grew to hate the phone. Every moment on the phone was a moment away from my dad. People so wanted to hear good news and the good news was, for an eighty-eight year old man, my dad was doing amazingly well. One doctor referred to him surviving the crash and two surgeries as miraculous. But the injuries were severe, and eventually we agreed to stop treating him. That was the hardest thing I've ever done.

An acquaintance who heard about my father's death sent an e-mail saying, "At least you will be able to get on with your own life now," and I didn't get in touch with him again until six months later. I knew he was trying to find a bright side to an impossible situation, but I just didn't know how to respond to anyone who didn't understand that I would have sat at my dad's bedside for months, years, or forever if that would have made a difference.

Most difficult for me were those who insisted everything happened just as God wanted it. The idea of a god who wanted my mom to die in the street, who wanted my dad to struggle through surgeries and pain and frustration, who wanted my nieces and nephews to lose their grandparents in such a terrible way, made me want to smash the world to pieces. I told those who said it that I knew who had been driving the car that hit my parents, and it wasn't a god. It was a drunk driver.

How People Helped Through Hard Times

As awful as it was to lose my parents, and to watch my dad struggle to try to recover, the people around me renewed my faith in love and human beings. So many of them – friends, co-workers, strangers, professionals – went out of their way to be kind and do whatever they could to help.

A year after the crash, folksinger Mark Dvorak and friends of his, the band Thursday's Child, agreed to perform at a concert I organized to raise funds for the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists (AAIM). The night was special in so many ways, including the wonderful songs, the many people who attended, St. Barbara's Church, which donated its space, and the fact that my mom and dad had supported Mark's musical career early on, something he always remembered and was able to talk about during the show.

The night of the concert was bitter cold and snowy, yet we had over 100 people there from all parts of the Chicago area. A man named Ryan who had witnessed the crash attended. I had seen his name on the police report but didn't know until later that he was the one who identified the vehicle that hit my parents. He stopped that night to tell me that he'd seen my parents crossing the street just before the crash. They were arm in arm, and he said they were smiling. He felt that they looked happy. He left the concert shortly after that, and my sense is he attended and donated the suggested amount mainly so he could tell me that. It meant so much to me to know that my parents looked happy in those last moments. And that someone cared enough to seek me out and tell me.

After my dad's death the Chicago Tribune ran an article about the volunteer work my parents did. A woman I didn't know sent a note saying that she'd read the article and it inspired her to increase her own volunteer work. She wrote that she had not known my parents personally, but she was sure from what she read that they were wonderful people and that they had made a difference in the world. I'm tearing up as I write this. It was so kind of her to send the note, and it came at a time when I so needed to find something positive to hang onto.

Things that friends did for which I'm forever grateful: Adela called people she knew and many she didn't know to tell them about first my mom's and then, six weeks later, my dad's funeral arrangements. We have a large extended family on both sides and our family has many friends, and this was invaluable. She also, on a day's notice, baked a casserole large enough to feed 10 for family members from out of town. Mindy drove me around to run errands that just seemed overwhelming to me when my dad was in the hospital and I hated to be away from his side. Andrea sent me a list of things she might be able to help with, and that in itself was a blessing, as it lessened the amount I had to think about. I ultimately asked her to help me take down my Christmas tree, which had still been up on January 22 when the crash happened, and I didn't take down until late March. Steve not only loaned me his car almost every weekday to drive

to the hospital after work, he then took a cab or got a ride to the hospital to drive me back home, knowing how tired and stressed I felt. These are only a few of the things friends did and offered to do, and it meant the world to me.

The world is full of amazing, kind, wonderful people.

Not Just An "Accident"

I don't remember what word the chaplain used in the Emergency Room. But it seems to me he first told me my father was crossing the street and was hit by a car. He explained how severe my dad's injuries were, and that my dad was in emergency surgery to stop internal bleeding in his pelvis. I asked about my mom, because I hadn't been able to reach her after I got the call that my dad was at Loyola Hospital. I was told she'd been hit, too, and died at the scene.

As I sat in the tiny room off the ER, waiting to find out if my dad would get through the surgery, along with everything else, I felt bad for the driver. I imagined how awful I would feel if I were driving and killed someone.

I'm not sure who told me the driver had been drinking. It might have been the Brookfield police chief, who came to the ER that night. Later I also learned the man had driven away from the scene, running a stop sign while doing so. And that this wasn't the first DUI.

These are the types of things that make "accident" a hard word to hear or use for many people who've been injured by or lost loved ones to drunk drivers. The driver who hit my parents had a DUI years before that resulted in supervision. Then, two days before the crash, he was driving drunk and hit a utility pole. He damaged his own car, but didn't seriously hurt himself or hit anyone else. When he hit my parents, he was driving his brother's Geo Tracker. My mother was pulled under the vehicle and was dragged, my father flew into the air, hit the hood or roof, and landed at the side of the road. The crash caused multiple pelvic factures, tore his urethra, tore his diaphragm so that his other organs started poking through into his lung area, and caused head trauma. He suffered a mild heart attack due to the collision. One doctor called it a miracle that the heart attack didn't damage his heart. He was eighty-eight and in amazing shape before he was hit.

At sentencing, the driver's attorney argued it was an "accident." He didn't say "just an accident," but he might as well have.

As Twyla, one of the victim advocates at the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists, says, an accident is when you slip and fall on the ice. Drinking and getting into a car is a choice. This man knew what could happen, what was likely to happen. His drinking led

to a collision two days before. And it's hard to be a living, breathing human being in the U.S. and not know consuming alcohol affects driving ability.

The driver was sentenced twelve years for the "accident."

The Sentencing Hearing

The man who killed my parents was sentenced to twelve years. In Illinois, the crime of aggravated DUI resulting in the death of 2 or more persons carries a maximum sentence of 28 years. It is an 85% crime, which means the defendant must serve at least 85% of the sentence, unlike many crimes for which defendants only must serve 50%.

My two brothers, my sisters-in-law, and my nieces and nephews came in from out of town for the hearing. A number of my friends attended with me, too. It was a crowded courtroom and a long morning. Other court proceedings took place before ours. I read my victim impact statement, my brother Keith read his, and the prosecutor read my brother Tim's. The defendant's attorney asked me, while I was on the stand, if as an attorney myself I understood that his client had not apologized sooner for what happened because his attorney advised him not to. I said I understood that. I don't handle criminal law, but I assumed that most lawyers would tell their clients not to say anything about the crime to anyone except their lawyer.

The police officers and detectives involved in the arrest for the DUI that led to my parents' deaths were there, as were the ones involved in the defendant's previous DUI arrests. They sat in the jury box. It made me feel better that they were there. I know it probably is part of their job to attend, and yet it still helped me feel that it made a difference that my parents were killed, that people in the police force cared about what happened and wanted to be sure this man could not keep driving and putting other people's lives at risk.

The defendant's attorney played a DVD of the defendant's former boss who said what a great guy he was. The defendant sold and serviced wheelchairs, and possibly other medical equipment, and in written statements customers said how friendly he was and how he would stop by on his lunch hour and visit or sometimes not charge for parts if the person really needed them and couldn't afford it. It told me he was a good salesperson, but not anything about his character. I don't know what sort of person the defendant is, only that he was arrested three times for drunk driving in about five years and he caused my parents' deaths. Nothing else seems relevant to me.

At the same time, our statements talked not only about our personal loss, but about the type of people my parents were. All the volunteer work they did and organizations they belonged to. There were some really nice newspaper articles about them. My parents rarely told my brothers and me while we were growing up that we should volunteer our

time or donate to charity or help people out whenever we could. They just did those things and we thought that's what everyone did and so that's what we did, too. It means a lot to me to have been raised with those values.

While I appreciate that we got the chance to talk in court about the kind of people my parents were, I feel sad that so much in our justice system depends not on the crime, but on who the victim and perpetrator are. If two drug addicts were hit by a drunk driver, chances are there would be fewer articles written about it and less outrage about it, and possibly a lower sentence for the driver. Yet the crime would be the same, and the driver would pose just as much threat to the rest of society. It raises the question--is one life worth more than another? Are there people that we as a culture just aren't as concerned about dying? Similarly, are there people we are less concerned about putting in jail?

Not Just An Accident Part 2

The other day I was out with two friends, both of whom were a tremendous help to me in the days and weeks after my mom's death, while my dad was in the hospital, and after he died. So they saw what I went through and how hard all of it was on my whole family. One of them told me about going to her nephew's wedding recently. She said she had 3 or 4 drinks over a few hours and was about to leave. Her nephew offered her another drink and she said no, she was driving. And he said she'd be fine. And she told him no, that it's really a hassle to have your license suspended.

When she told me that, I couldn't help myself, I said, "Or you could hit someone because you're impaired and kill that person." And my friend told me about a car accident where another driver merged into her car on the expressway, and neither of them was drunk, so accidents happen even when people don't drink. And I pointed out all the research that alcohol impairs people's driving ability and reaction time. And she just shrugged.

I felt such despair. If people who are otherwise caring and who have seen almost firsthand the effects of drunk driving simply refuse to believe that drinking alcohol increases the risk of a collision, how much hope is there for change?

I am convinced we need greater penalties not just for people who injure or kill others while driving drunk but for anyone who is arrested for DUI. If people knew they would lose their licenses for a year the first time they were arrested, and would lose their licenses forever the second time, that would seem more real to them than the risk of hurting or killing someone or themselves. There needs to be jail time for driving without a license after a DUI, too, otherwise people will just keep driving without licenses.

The Holidays Part 1

Yesterday I attended a candlelight vigil the City of Chicago hosts to remember victims of intoxicated drivers. I am glad the City does that, and having Mayor Daley, and Anita Alvarez, Jesse White and other state and city officials there helped me feel that at least my city and state take this issue seriously. But so many deaths still occur due to impaired and drunk drivers. One of the statistics read was that 60% of fatal crashes over Thanksgiving were due to intoxicated drivers. Over 30% of the fatal crashes over Christmas are expected to be caused by intoxicated drivers.

I wish everyone would be careful. I wish everyone who has a drink would forego driving. I wish no one's holiday -- and no one's life -- will be ruined this Christmas due to people choosing to drink and drive.

The Holidays Part 2

I found the holidays harder this year than I thought I would. It is the second year without my parents. The first is a bit of a blur. I know it was hard and I also remember my friends all making sure I had enough to do for the holidays. So much that I felt a little exhausted and overstressed, and I feel it was better to err on that side than to not have enough to do.

This year I was busy, too, but took more time to reflect. My mom really loved Christmas. She used to make Christmas trees out of pinecones. Everyone in our family has them, sometimes more than one. She put her largest one up every year around Thanksgiving on a tray table in front of the picture window. From outside, it looked like a regular tree with the lights and garland. She had other trees in almost every room of the house. A couple weeks before Christmas she and my dad put the big tree up. I loved all the ornaments. Mom liked to buy an ornament everywhere they traveled, so there were ornaments from a couple World's Fairs, from Disneyworld, from their trip to Europe. Then there were the ones the nuns made for my mom every year when she volunteered at the Bethlehem Infirmary. And ones we'd made over the years. I was so upset when I was little that Mom always hung my gingerbread ornament (which actually looks more like King Kong -- I was about 4 when I made it) inside the tree where it couldn't be seen very well. Mom was a little more concerned with aesthetics than sentiment when it came to the tree. It was beautiful, and was like looking at a history of our family.

We split the ornaments, so I have about a third of them. Last year it was hard to put them on my tree, but this year I really enjoyed it, despite feeling sad. King Kong is in

the front -- so goofy he is cute. And there are the theater mask ornaments from New Orleans when my mom and dad went there on an Elder Hostel trip. And some Pluto ornaments and a whole lot of others I remember from when I was growing up.

This year I thought a lot, too, about Mr. Postulka, the man in prison now for killing my parents. It must be a terrible way to spend a holiday. A life. The only thing bleaker seems to me to be death. I believe there must be consequences for his actions. Yet I only feel more sad when I think of him. I am glad he is somewhere where he can't drive, but he's also somewhere where he can do nothing to even try to make up for what happened. Nothing can bring my parents back. But I wish there were some sort of release program where he could go out and work for groups either to help families who've lost loved ones or do other community service to try to make some positive change. Or even pay back the government what it contributed through Medicare to my dad's hospital bills.

Does It Get Easier

People ask if it gets easier as time passes from when your loved one died. It's been over two years now since the crash in January, 2007. My mom died at the scene, my dad in March, 2007, just short of his 89th birthday. I feel like I miss them more as time passes, maybe because the time since I actually was with them is longer. Also, the first year there was so much going on, and it was so overwhelming, that I was more stressed and angry and depressed. Now I feel less angry, less stressed, and happier overall, but I miss them more. I feel the loss more.

So does it get easier? For me, yes and no. Day to day life has gotten easier. The criminal part of the case is over, so I no longer go to criminal court every 3-4 weeks and see the man who did this and listen to the details of the crash and my parents' deaths. The hospital bills are taken care of, the house is sold, for about a year now life has been more "normal" in the sense that most of the hours of the day are not consumed any longer with things connected to my parents' death. So, in that sense, my life is more focused on the here and now, on the good things in it, and there are many, for which I am grateful.

But no in that I don't feel I'll ever get over the loss or the way they died. I still think about the pain they must have felt, and still tear up at odd times, even at happy memories. And I still struggle with what to say to people. Sometimes people joke about drinking too much or drinking and driving, and I can't laugh at that. Sometimes people who don't know what happened talk about their parents and ask about mine. And I am stuck on how to answer. Part of me wants to tell everyone my parents died because of an intoxicated driver, because I hope that will make more and more people be more careful. Yet, it seems inappropriate at times during a casual conversation to introduce

something so painful. And sometimes it is too hard for me. I don't want to talk about it at that moment.

Coping

I think back to the months and even the year after the crash. I wonder, if I could go back, what advice could I give myself about what might make that time less hard than it was. Maybe nothing. But I wish I had been able to let myself take a few minutes to try and rest. There was no rest in the sense of an undisturbed night's sleep – so often I lay awake and cried, or ran through in my mind what I imagined had happened during the crash, or how my father struggled when he was in the hospital trying to recover. I don't think I could have stopped feeling all of that, could have quieted my mind enough to really sleep. But perhaps I could have taken just five minutes an evening to have a cup of tea, or sit still and listen to music, or play my guitar. At the time, it seemed impossible. Any five minutes doing anything not absolutely necessary seemed like time I could not afford to lose from being at the hospital with my dad. And, after he died, it seemed like time I couldn't afford away from catching up at work, and taking care of the hospital bills and my parents' house, and getting the estate opened, all things that truly I didn't need to do immediately, other than perhaps the work aspect. But it all felt so urgent, perhaps because I thought if I got those things done, I would finally have some peace.

It is normal, I suspect, when grieving or trying to care for a loved one after a tragedy to feel that any time for yourself can -- and should -- be put off until later. But if I could tell my former self anything, it would be to at least try now and then to stop and breathe, to stop and sit. No terrible thing will happen because of those five minutes, and it might have helped me just a little.

What Good People Do When Bad Things Happen

Sunday I attended the annual benefit for the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists. Nearly everyone there had a loved one killed by an intoxicated driver, was injured by an intoxicated driver, or knows someone well who had one of those experiences. AAIM's deputy director spoke and said that we often hear the question "Why do bad things happen to good people?" She prefers, "What do good people do when bad things happen?" The people in the room included victims who speak on AAIM's victim impact panels, advocates who help families through the criminal proceedings against the intoxicated drivers, police officers and prosecutors who do their best to eradicate drunk driving. Our celebrity speaker, Gary Meier of WGN, generously donated his time for the benefit. Looking around me, I felt so moved. Everyone there took tragedy and turned

it into something positive, tried to ensure that no one else would be harmed or would die due to intoxicated driving. I hope that all my life I can remember to find a away to create something good from difficult circumstances.

Does It Get Easier Part II

One of the blessings in the past year is that when I think of my parents, the crash does not always come to mind. For years after it happened, my first thought about my parents was to imagine how my mom died in the street after she was hit, lying in the cold and snow. I'd imagine my dad flying over the SUV that hit them, landing in the road beyond. I'd remember how much pain he suffered during the six and a half weeks he was hospitalized, how hard he tried to communicate, how hard it was to make the decision to stop treatment and to say good-bye to him. In the first year, month after month, I went to the criminal court to watch the proceedings against the man who killed my parents. He was eventually sentenced to twelve years in prison. It was his third DUI.

Now those memories are still there, but other things come to mind. Fun things we did together, advice they gave me, what I valued about having been their daughter. Annoying things, too. (After all, they were my parents. We most definitely got on one another's nerves at times.) Perhaps that is the only real healing time offers. The ability to remember what is good and happy, even though the memories are tinged with the pain.

I know if my parents could have communicated with me during the years after the crash, they both would have told me not to dwell on the pain they suffered. My mom in particular was a very practical person. She didn't believe in focusing on hard times in the past, or dwelling on things you can't change that make you unhappy. I'm not sure I could have stopped doing that any sooner than I did. Now I feel like part of why I thought so much about that last moment of my mom's life, and those last 6 or so weeks of my dad's, was that it helped me feel connected to them in some way. If I could understand what they felt, what they went through, perhaps they wouldn't seem so far away. Or perhaps I could somehow slide back in time and magically change that night. There's no logic to that, but grief is not logical.

Now I nurture my connection to them in other ways. I've framed photos from different times in their lives and hung them on one wall in my condo. I spend some time every week thinking about something about them that I'm grateful for and something I learned from them that has helped me in life. It does not bring them back, but it is a way I feel they'd be pleased to be remembered.

Taking Care of Yourself

We planned and attended my mom's funeral during the first week my dad was in the hospital, during which he had two surgeries, both on an emergency basis. The months that followed my dad's death were no easier. I felt overwhelmed by anger and grief, and by everything that needed to be taken care of, from my parents' home to the will to the hospital and doctor bills and insurance issues. Even when I was home to sleep, which was rare, I often couldn't. I tried to go back to work full time (which in the world of large law firms generally means far more than 40 hours a week) a little too soon and had trouble handling the stress.

With all of that going on, I assumed that feeling exhausted and sometimes faint had everything to do with grief and lack of sleep and nothing to do with anything physical going on. I'd read that in times of grief it was good to go to the doctor for a check up, but I didn't. Part of it was I felt all the doctor could do would be to prescribe sleeping pills or some type of anti-depressant, and I didn't want that. Then, in the summer, I went to the doctor because I thought I had an ear infection. I was flying the next day and couldn't imagine getting on a plane with my ear hurting so much. It turned out to relate to my allergies and was fixed by a strong decongestant. But I also learned, because my doctor did a blood test to look for infection, that I'd become somewhat anemic. At my physical the previous year, my iron count was so good the doctor had told me I could stop taking iron supplements if I'd been taking them. Now she recommended them, and I was amazed how much better I felt. I still had some trouble sleeping, still felt sad and angry and exhausted at times. But the feeling of being dragged out all the time, the faintness, and most of all the overwhelming sense of hopelessness improved significantly. I mark that as the time when I started moving toward feeling better, though it was a long journey.

So if you are grieving, I hope you will consider seeing your doctor for a check up. Grieving may be affecting you physically as well as emotionally. And while not everything can be fixed, if it helps you just a little with all you need to deal with, it is worth it. I wish I had done that sooner. I feel like it might have made that first six-eight months just a little less awful.

Stillness and Grieving

Asking "What if the worst thing happens?" is a great way to up the stakes in a thriller. Or help a client plan and pursue legal strategy. But it is not a recipe for a peaceful life. The same mind that helps me take every possible plot line or legal question to nth degree also imagines or replays painful and tragic events and ideas. For months after my parents' deaths, I imagined the scene, which I'd learned about through

police reports and witness statements. My dad's body flipping over the top of the SUV that hit them, my mom lying in the road alone. My dad survived about 6 weeks after the crash, and even now, 4 years later, I flash back to holding his hand and telling him my mom died, or sitting in the straight back chair by his hospital bed with my brother, sister-in-law, and niece through his last night with us.

Before my parents' deaths, I meditated fairly regularly, not as a religious or spiritual practice, but to help clear my thoughts. My practice was to focus on one word as I breathed in and out, letting go of all other thoughts. It rested my mind during the fifteen minutes a day that I sat, and also helped me focus more on whatever I was doing at any particular moment, rather than letting my mind run in all directions (unless I was actually plotting a story or writing a legal brief, in which case I let it run). After the crash, sitting still, or only handling one thing at a time, felt impossible. To not multi-task wasted time. Every free moment lost was a moment with my dad I wouldn't ever get back. I also couldn't handle stillness emotionally. I played the TV whenever I was home, I paced when I talked on the phone, I read and ate and ruminated about what else I could be doing for my dad or how angry or sad I felt all at the same time. To stop, to sit, to simply breathe to me meant opening floodgates of emotion I might never contain. Yet as I raced away from my pain and anger, it rushed back, overwhelming me.

About 5 months after my dad's death, I took all my vacation time in one block. After visiting with family and friends, I spent a few days in Hawaii alone. Often I just sat on the grass, listening to the ocean, breathing salty air, and crying. At night, I stared at the stars spread across a sky darker than I ever see in downtown Chicago, and I cried. It was such a relief. No place to run to, nothing to do. Just the chance to be, to feel sad, to miss my parents.

I won't say I felt wonderful from then on. I still struggled with grief, loss, anger, all the feelings that go with a traumatic loss. I felt ungrounded with both my parents gone almost in an instant. After that break, I still felt sad, angry, and afraid. But I spent just a little more time each month being with people I loved, doing things I enjoyed, and planning my future.

Recently, I started meditating again. And focusing on doing one thing at a time. I'd forgotten the peace it can bring. There are moments when it's hard, when it intensifies feelings of sadness or pain. But it also means I am truly present for good feelings and good times too, rather than letting them rush past me in the scramble to juggle my law firm, my writing, my friends and family. I still miss my parents and always will, and still grieve for them. But I let myself remember the wonderful things about them, and notice how much of who they were exists in all the people who knew and loved them. Something I would have missed had I just kept running.

What God Wants (and Does it Matter?)

At my dad's wake, people told me my parents' deaths were "God's will," "God's plan," or "what God wanted." Even when I was religious, I'd had trouble with that sentiment. Was it really supposed to be a comfort to believe God wanted my mother to die by being hit by a drunk driver? And wanted my dad to survive two operations and emerge from a week-long post-surgery coma, struggle to regain some function, and then die as well, uncomfortable, confused and in pain in a hospital bed?

One friend explained how a tapestry looks like knots and zigzags from the back but is beautiful and perfect from the front. This has never appealed to me – it can be used to justify humans doing awful things in the name of a mysterious greater purpose that only their version of god understands. Then my friend asserted all the pain on earth passes quickly compared to an eternity in heaven, so it doesn't matter what happens to us here. That may or may not be so, but if I stab someone repeatedly I doubt that person would feel much better if I argued it I only did it for ten seconds. I'm not sure why a god who does awful things should get more leeway. Shouldn't we hold our gods to a higher standard? And, regardless of the theoretical arguments about why an all-powerful god would cause or allow terrible things to happen, none of the things people said made me feel any better. Just the opposite, my whole being cried out against them.

The greatest comfort I found during the months after the crash came in a dream. My dad and I stood on the steps of the rambling house where my brothers and I grew up – steps my dad built out of scrap lumber when the original stairs wore through. Though he stood with me and alive in the dream, the crash had still happened, and my dad knew all about it. He said to me, "Sometimes these things happen. We don't know why." My dad was a very religious person, yet I believe he would have said exactly that to me.

Before I turned fourteen, I'd attended at least five funerals. I belong to a large extended family with aunts, uncles and even cousins 40+ years older than me, so death was something I learned about early on. Perhaps because of that and my Catholic upbringing, I am fascinated with themes of whether there is a god and, if so, what that god wants. I don't subscribe to the authors' view, but I read several of the Left Behind books. That apocalyptic series begins with people belonging to a certain Christian denomination being raptured away into heaven. The books then follow those left here on earth during the end times, some of them being tortured by beings sent by God because they've refused to accept God's teachings. (That's when I stopped reading the series; I found that world view too disturbing.) My first novel, The Awakening, focuses on a young woman who is mysteriously pregnant. Throughout it, protagonist Tara struggles to survive and searches for the purpose of her pregnancy. She's surrounded by people who hold completely conflicting views about her experience, some of them bent on Tara's destruction, each certain he or she knows what God wants.

What does God want, if there is one? Perhaps someday I'll find out, perhaps not. In the meantime, I've tried to stop asking why bad things happen and instead do things that might make the world a better place. Things like supporting Make-A-Wish, which sponsors wishes for seriously ill children. Like volunteering with AAIM, a non-profit in Illinois that every day does its best to prevent further deaths from DUIs. Like offering a hand to hold, or a listening ear, to others in times of trouble. I don't know if there is a god or if that god has a plan, but this is mine.

"Thank You For Everything"

"Thank you for everything." That is the last thing my mom ever said to me. Like a lot of mothers and daughters, we had some difficult times. There were a few years when she hardly spoke to me, as she was unhappy my boyfriend and I were living together (a little more unusual in the late 1980s than it would be now). But by the time my mom reached her 80s and I my 40s, we'd found a way to leave the hot button issues alone. She stopped asking if I was going to mass, I stopped trying to get her to understand what I believed and didn't believe and why. I felt she was pleased I became a lawyer and kept writing and was doing well in the world. But I often felt she'd be happier if instead I'd married a lawyer and had kids. Perhaps partly because it would have given us more in common.

In the last few years of my mom's life I really tried to find things we could do together. The last day I saw her, I read through and explained her and my dad's insurance and social security issues, helped her balance my aunt's checkbook (my mom's sister lived well into her 90s, and Mom was handling her affairs), and shoveled snow. And so, after all the ups and downs and difficulties, when I left that day, my mom said, "Thank you for everything."

The next night she and my dad were crossing the street and were hit by an intoxicated driver.

Neither of my parents were much for expressing emotion. I knew my parents loved me because my mom always stocked a refrigerator full of food when I came over and clipped coupons for me, and because my dad insisted on giving me a ride to the train every time I visited, even though the walk was only a few blocks, and saved newspaper and magazine articles for me. When my dad was in the hospital, I came in during one of his speech and cognitive therapy sessions. This was after a couple surgeries. Before then, he'd been clear headed and understood what was happening, after he sometimes was confused and didn't know exactly where he was and who was who. So the therapist asked him who I was. He said, "Lisa." And she said, "And who is Lisa?" And he said, "My daughter and close friend." It never occurred to me my dad thought of me as his friend, and that made me happy.

Of course I never expected my parents would die in a traumatic way, or so close in time to one another. But because they were in their eighties, despite their good health and history of longevity in their families, I knew they might not be with us much longer. So I thought a lot about wanting the time I had with them to be good, about not wanting to let past differences keep us apart, and about how I could best have a good relationship with them.

On an on-going basis I talk with people who lost children or spouses because one day someone else chose to drink alcohol and get behind the wheel. Not everyone gets the chance to hear kind words from, or say kinds words to, the people they love before they are suddenly gone.

We all have conflicts with people we care about, and we can't always say something kind. Sometimes we'll say something angry, and even if that is the last thing we say, it doesn't cancel out or define a whole relationship. At the same time, it's so easy to take for granted the great things about people, and life, and focus on the negative, on what we don't like or would like to change. Every morning now, I ask myself, what am I grateful for? Often the answer is that I am grateful for someone being part of my life. I try to remember to tell that to whoever it is, whether by phone or email or in conversation. At first I felt a little awkward (remember, I grew up in a family where people don't talk much about feelings). And then I discovered it means a lot to others to know how much they mean to me. And whether it is the last thing I say to a person or one of many things, it makes life richer for both of us. For me, that has been the best way to live with loss and focus on what's good and wonderful in this world.

Standing in Traffic

December 11, 2011

Yesterday, I stood in traffic. I posed with a bride, a groom, and two other bridesmaids on the median line on State Street, one of Chicago's busiest thoroughfares, half a block from the stoplight. With the historic Chicago theater as a backdrop, no doubt the photo will look amazing. But all I could think about as we shivered and smiled was how our lives depended upon the competence of the drivers whizzing past on either side.

Not only crazy people or bridal parties (or is that redundant?) stand on the center line. That is how my parents died. They were crossing the street to attend an evening church service at St. Barbara's in Brookfield, the suburb where I grew up. They crossed at a spot where many churchgoers do, in a direct line from the church parking lot exit to the church entrance across the street. Unfortunately, there is no crosswalk there, despite the number of people who walk that way. I was told the church tried to get the village to add a crosswalk, but it's only half a block from a stop sign, so the request was denied.

The man who hit my parents lived in Brookfield, and his parents belong to the parish, so he would have known people cross there. Not only that, but the crossing sits in between a jog in the road that has a stop light and a stop sign, so cars usually travel at a low speed.

On the night of January 22, 2007, traffic on one side of the street stopped for my parents. An ambulance driver, who later sped my dad to the hospital, saw my parents and stopped. A passer-by noticed they were smiling and holding hands. But the man driving to his home, which was only a mile away, who had stopped for drinks after work, didn't see them. He didn't stop. My mom died in the street. My dad died six and a half weeks later.

I didn't see the crash. But even nearly five years later, the crash never leaves my mind. In downtown Chicago, construction is frequent. Saw horses, yellow tape, and barricades often block all or part of designated crosswalks, requiring me to edge around them, partially exposed to the street. I look over my shoulder, I scan the cars ahead of me and on the cross street, I check again, I check again. Finally, I walk, stomach clenching, holding my breath until I make it to the other side. I get angry with friends who walk with me and insist on crossing against lights, in the middle of streets, or where there is no signal. Of course, the idea that being in a crosswalk or abiding by the lights will keep me safe is an illusion, one in which we all indulge or we'd never leave our homes. Traffic laws provide safety only when people opt to follow them, and that only works when the people on the road are competent to make that decision and care enough to make it.

WGN radio personality Garry Meier was kind enough to speak at the annual benefit for AAIM, the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists, as was Illinois Senator Carole Pankau. Garry likens drunk drivers to terrorists because you never know when they will strike. At first, despite my parents' deaths, I thought this metaphor might be extreme. But then I thought about how I look over my shoulder, and I check, and I check again. And I never feel safe. Garry's right. It's not police enforcement that keeps roads safe at least some of the time. It's that as a culture we believe that those laws will protect us, so we follow them. If a person opts to violate that most important traffic law – refraining from driving while intoxicated – the others go out the window, along with the safety of any person in or near that driver's path.

Until as a country we decide that drinking and driving is unacceptable, we are all standing in traffic.

Questions & Answers Five Years Later

It took more than a year after my parents' deaths for me to feel good again, even for a moment. I often felt I should be able to pull myself out of anger and grief, should be able to stop feeling like I was flying apart inside, even as I walked through life with people telling me how well I was holding up (I wasn't). I felt certain I'd never be the same again. And I never have been. But I do feel better, more like myself, and happy with my life, though I still grieve. I've thought a lot about what helped me return to what feels like a normal life – normal as in ups and downs, with times I feel sad or angry about the crash, and more times I remember wonderful things about my parents.

A lot of it is questions. More than a decade before the crash, I read a book by Anthony Robbins called Awaken The Giant Within. A friend recommended it. I was skeptical, especially because Robbins, with his shiny white smile, reminded me of a used car salesman. But I found the book helpful in changing both how I thought and felt for the better, and finding solutions to seemingly insurmountable difficulties. One of Robbins' theories is that we think by asking ourselves questions. The questions we ask determine the answers our minds provide and so the quality of our lives. For instance, in a time of grief, if we ask, "Why do bad things always happen?", our mind obligingly responds with reasons, usually reasons that make us feel worse. That the world is a terrible place, that we somehow deserve whatever loss we've suffered, that people are, at heart, evil. On the other hand, if we ask a question like, "What can I do that might make things better?", our minds are almost guaranteed to return an answer that will help us take action in a positive way.

Robbins suggests a list of questions to ask each day, beginning with "What am I happy about?" This is one I found impossible to ask in the days, months, and even the year after the crash (though I ask it now). I'm guessing almost anyone whose loved one died would find it difficult if not impossible to answer that question. But one question I did ask and that I continue to ask is "What am I grateful for?" Even in the midst of feeling black and angry, I found things to be grateful for. The nurse-practitioner at Loyola who carefully explained my dad's medical condition and options, and who was always available to consult. The Brookfield police and the prosecutors who did everything they could to see that the man who hit my parents was taken off the road. Friends who did everything from organizing my parents' financial papers to cooking for out-of-town guests to driving me home from the hospital each night. And Twyla, the victim advocate from the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists who attended every court hearing in the criminal case and explained every step of the proceedings, then took me for tea afterward at a lovely coffeehouse near the courthouse so I could have some quiet time before returning to work.

Now I also often ask, "How can I best honor my mom and dad?" My parents donated monthly to charities despite being on a fixed income. When I'm feeling uncertain about finances (like any business, running a law practice has its ups and downs, as does being

a novelist), and I'm hesitant to give, I remember how my parents did this regularly despite their own concerns about money. Also, inspired by my parents' volunteerism, I've become involved with AAIM so I can offer support to others who lost loved ones or were injured by DUI drivers and work toward preventing further DUI-related tragedies. I also try to honor my parents by appreciating everyone in my life. (I'd like to say I'm perfect at doing that, which wouldn't be so, but I try.) All these things make me feel my parents still contribute to this world, even though they are not physically here.

Other questions I've found helpful are, "How can I feel just a little better right now?" "What are the things I learned from my parents that most helped me in life?" "Who in my life do I want to contact to say I love them?" "What is one thing I can do this day/week/month that might help someone else through a difficult time?" "Who is one person I want to thank for doing something kind?" "What am I really enjoying in life right now or, at least, what could I be enjoying if I would let myself?"

I wish I had something more to offer anyone who is grieving – something that would heal the hurt and anger or, better yet, reverse time and change events so no one would ever have been injured or killed. But I don't. Still, there's a saying that goes something like: "Better to light a candle than curse the gathering darkness." So I'll hope these thoughts light a candle or two and help keep the darkness at bay.

Sunshine and the Smell of Books

In 2006, my parents celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. For the toast, I talked about the seven most important things I'd learned from them. One year later, they were hit by a drunk driver while they were crossing the street. Both died from their injuries. I spoke at their funerals about what I'd learned from them. I am so grateful I had the chance to tell them while they were still here how much I appreciated them and how they'd impacted my life.

For more than a year after their deaths, I found it hard to focus on anything positive. Despite support from family and friends, the world felt dark. I remember the first instant I felt really good again, just for a moment. It was June. I attended the annual Printers' Row Book Fair in the South Loop area of Chicago. The sun warmed my face for the first time I could remember that spring, with just enough of a Lake Michigan breeze to keep the day from being hot. I stepped out of the Starbucks on Dearborn and Harrison. Book stalls and tents instead of cars lined the streets and sidewalks. I inhaled the sweet, spicy scent of my Chai tea latte and the earthy, dry smell of old books, a smell I've loved my whole life. I felt the surge of excitement I always do at that fest, surrounded by books and people who care about them as much as I do. While I hadn't put in my notice at work yet, I'd arranged everything for my move to open my own law practice. So I was in a wonderful state where I felt little pressure at work, and hadn't yet assumed the responsibilities and challenges of running my own business.

For the first time in over a year, I breathed deep. I relaxed. I felt happy.

For a second.

Then reality crashed over me. How could I feel good when my parents had died in such a terrible way? My mom lying in the street in the ice and snow, my dad struggling for six and a half weeks to recover, enduring surgeries, sometimes needing his hands tied to his bedrails because he got confused and agitated and tried to get out of bed without help. Those thoughts had haunted me since the crash. As I stood breathing in sunshine and the smell of books, I finally realized my parents would never want me to spend the rest of my life focusing on how awful their deaths were. They would want me to be happy and remember the good about them.

In memory of my parents on the five year anniversary of the crash, I've decided to do two things. One is to write about what I learned from them. One of those things is that trying to make the world better is part of what makes life worth living. My parents did all types of volunteering over the years. They donated money and ran events for veterans at Hines Hospital, took people who couldn't drive to doctor visits, the store, or church, and organized local citizens' movements to address village concerns.

After my parents' deaths, I became involved with AAIM (the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists). The first time I heard of AAIM came when Twyla, an AAIM court advocate, helped me and my family through the criminal court proceedings against the driver who hit my parents. I started attending a grief group AAIM hosts every month. Now I speak on AAIM's victim impact panels, where I tell first-time DUI offenders about the devastating consequences someone's choice to drink and drive had. These panels, like the high school programs AAIM runs, focus on preventing further deaths and injuries due to DUI. This is both a wonderful and frustrating goal, as DUI deaths are 100% preventable. 100%. No one ever needs to die or be injured again due to DUI driving, and it shouldn't cost a penny – only a change in attitude. Imagine if that's all it took to prevent every death from cancer. Yet, DUI deaths and injuries continue every day.

In the coming years, AAIM hopes to extend its advocate and court watching programs into Central and Southern Illinois, continue to support legislation to help deter DUI driving, expand the reach of school programs and victim impact panels, and keep providing financial help to needy people and families who have been victims of a DUI driver.

Which brings me to the second thing I am doing this year in honor of my parents. All royalties from my short story collection The Tower Formerly Known As Sears And Two Other Tales Of Urban Horror will be donated to AAIM. Horror writer Carrie Green referred to the stories as "horror in pinstripes," a description I wish I'd thought of

myself and which I'm happily adopting. The Tower is available for Kindle or any tablet, laptop or computer using the free Kindle app on Amazon's site. Simply click on the link below to buy. By doing so, you will have the chance to read about Chicago, enjoy some Twilight Zone-like tales, and support the most unknown and yet amazing non-profit in Illinois.

It Takes Forever and Nothing Happens: Criminal Court from a Victim's Perspective – Part I

I attended criminal court nearly every month during the year after my parents were hit by a drunk driver. The driver was eventually sentenced to twelve years in prison for causing their deaths. On television and in movies, courtroom scenes contain high drama. In real life, very little happens at most court appearances, and cases take a long time to get to trial. As a lawyer, I ought to have known that before I ever stepped into the courtroom. But I handle civil cases that involve money, not anyone being accused of a crime or going to jail, and I assumed criminal cases would be different. I was wrong.

Confusion about what is and isn't happening in criminal court can make the pain and frustration of losing a loved one, or recovering from severe injuries, so much worse. Below are some things I've learned both from watching the proceedings against the man who killed my parents and from the criminal defense attorneys I've gotten to know since then. If you are a victim of a DUI driver or of another crime, knowing these things won't make the case move any faster or ensure justice, but it might help you get through the process.

(1) It takes a long time. This refers to both individual court dates and the criminal case as a whole. You may learn from the prosecutor that your case – the one against whoever is accused of the crime – is set for 9 a.m. First, if this is one of the earliest court dates and injuries or deaths occurred, there won't be a trial. This is just the first of many court dates. Second, you may arrive at 9 a.m., only to sit through an hour or more of proceedings in other cases. There are lots of reasons for this. If the case is in a busy county, a dozen or more cases are probably also scheduled for 9 a.m. If just one takes more time than expected, all the others are delayed. If you are set for 10 a.m., that probably means you're waiting until after the 9 a.m. cases, so you could be behind twenty or more other matters.

Also, usually judges hear cases first where the defendants – the people accused of the crimes – are already in jail. So if the defendant in your case is not in prison, your case may be called later. Finally, sometimes – often in the Chicago area – the defense attorney is running late. Many criminal defense attorneys are solo lawyers. This means they are the only lawyers in their firms and drive to multiple courtrooms in the same day. Traffic, other court cases that run long, and car breakdowns can all cause delays.

Most judges try to accommodate these issues. You might be wondering why it is your problem – you made it to court on time, why can't the defense attorney? It doesn't seem fair. But, unfortunately, this and the other factors are part of how the system runs day-to-day. If you know that and are prepared for it, it may help the frustration level.

The case as a whole also can take a long time. The prosecutor needs to determine what charges to file – that is, what specific crimes under what laws to present to the judge or a jury. That can change with developments in the investigation or the case. My mother died at the scene of the crash, and my dad lived another six and a half weeks. When my father died, the prosecutor added charges and the potential sentence increased by over a decade. The judge needs to decide if the defendant can be set free while the case is moving toward trial and, if so, if a bond is needed and the amount. (The bond for the driver who killed my parents was originally set at half a million dollars, then increased to one million when my dad died. A million dollar bond meant the driver would have needed to deposit with the court $100,000 to be set free pending trial.) The prosecutor needs to put together evidence – police reports, witness statements, laboratory tests – and then share it with the defense attorney, who needs to time to review it and advise her or his client. A court-ordered evaluation may need to be performed of the defendant, such as to decide if the defendant has an alcohol problem.

If the defendant is considering pleading guilty rather than going to trial, there are discussions between the prosecutor and the defense counsel about what type of sentence will be agreed to, if any. Sometimes there is a conference with the judge about that. If the defendant enters what's called a "blind plea," that means the defendant pleads guilty but leaves the sentence to the judge. Both sides prepare written documents throughout the case to present their arguments to the judge. For sentencing, the defense attorney usually gets statements from witnesses who say the defendant is a good person. The prosecutor often asks family member to prepare victim statements for the court. All these steps take time, and most occur even if there is no need for a trial. A trial is the part of the case most people are more familiar with from books, television, and movies. That part of the case, if it occurs, takes even longer to prepare for.

(2) Not much happens. For the people sitting in the benches at the back of the courtroom, it appears nothing is happening as the case moves along. Most of the steps described above take place outside the courtroom, and then the attorneys come to court, report what they've been doing, and ask for a next court date. If not enough has been done, the judge may push them along, telling them what they need to accomplish by the following month. It's often hard to hear what the attorneys and the judge are saying, so from your perspective, you wait and wait, then the attorneys go in front of the judge, mumble a few sentences, and walk away. And sometimes you don't see even that much. The lawyers may talk on the phone or in the hallway before seeing the judge, agree there is little or nothing to report, and get a new date without saying more than a word or two to the judge or the judge's clerk. The thing to remember is that even when it looks like nothing is happening, usually the case is moving toward a conclusion. Also,

as I'll discuss more in the next post, you should be able to get specific information from the prosecutor or prosecutor's office about what's happening in the case and what you can expect at the next date.

Next time I'll talk about the emotional aspect of attending hearings, including that the defendant rarely apologizes, and the resources to help you through the process. Until then, my thoughts are with you.

It Takes Forever and Nothing Happens: Criminal Court from a Victim's Perspective – Part II

In 2007, an intoxicated driver hit my parents as they were crossing the street. The criminal court proceedings against the driver lasted a year. This post continues my guide for victims to the court process. (1) and (2) in my July 12, 2012 entry explain why the process takes time, and why it often appears little or nothing is happening.

(3) The criminal court process – whether or not a trial occurs – is emotionally painful for victims. This seems obvious, and I certainly ought to have known it, as in my law practice I've seen how upset and angry people get over business-related disputes even though no one has been physically hurt and no one has died. Yet somehow until I went through it, I didn't connect that with how awful I'd feel each month in court as I looked at the man who'd stopped for drinks after work, then got in an SUV to drive home, and hit and killed my parents. The whole time I waited for the court clerk to call the case, which often took an hour or more, I remembered my dad's surgeries and how hard he struggled to recover, and imagined how alone my mom must have felt in the icy street where she died. Sitting in the hard wooden court benches, watching lawyers go in and out, seeing the driver in his prison jumpsuit, I couldn't seem to think about anything else.

A couple months after the man was sentenced, I finally was able to let go just a little and focus on the wonderful things I remembered about my mom and dad, as well as on my own life and future. The best advice I can offer if you are attending court proceedings is to try to plan before court what you might do or think about if you are stuck waiting. You can't read or use cell phones when court is in session, but you may be able to during breaks. As for your thoughts, focusing on something pleasant or even something that just occupies your mind -- remembering a weekend away, planning your week's work, redecorating your living room in your head -- can help. Anything that draws your mind away from thoughts that make you feel even worse than you already do. It also helps, if you can, to bring a friend with you, someone who can distract you or just hold your hand. Also, try to be especially kind to yourself on a court day. Plan some activity you like, or at least used to like before this happened, as a reward for getting through the hearing – like getting a fancy cup of coffee on your way back to work, taking a walk

on a particularly pretty block, calling someone you've been meaning to talk to, or taking extra time to play with your pet.

(4) The defendant doesn't say he or she is sorry. Week after week, month after month, the person responsible for your loved ones' deaths or injuries – or your own injuries – stands there and never apologizes. Until the sentencing hearing, if one happens. And then you wonder how sincere the apology is, because it could be the defendant is just trying to impress the judge. Or the defendant may seem truly sorry – but only for himself or herself now that the prospect of prison seems real. Some defendants apologize for "what happened" or "for the loss" without truly accepting fault. While someone apologizing couldn't bring back your loved one or erase the pain, most of us feel a sincere apology would help us a little, but we rarely hear anything that sounds like real regret or acceptance of responsibility.

In the course of speaking for and working with the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists (AAIM), I've met and talked with many people who killed someone while driving drunk. Many are remorseful and express genuine sorrow, but none I've spoken to apologized until after they pled guilty. That's because their lawyers told them not to. It's part of our judicial system – perhaps an unfortunate part – that if someone apologizes for a crime, that statement can be used against him or her in a trial. Because of that, lawyers advise their clients that they absolutely cannot apologize unless/until they plead guilty. At that point, they've admitted the crime, so they can apologize. Some defendants don't apologize anyway, as they don't feel remorseful and they think that driving drunk and killing someone is "just an accident." This attitude infuriates me, but it unfortunately is not an uncommon view in our culture, which is why AAIM works so hard to try to change public opinion. An acquaintance, despite knowing how my parents died, once commented resentfully to me that she had to stop after 3 drinks at a wedding because otherwise she might get a DUI ticket and lose her license. When I said, "Or you might kill someone because you were drinking," she said something along the lines of that accidents happen all the time, even when people aren't intoxicated. A friend's husband (who also knew about my parents' deaths) once asked me if I was involved in one of those organizations of "ladies with pitchforks who say 'don't drink and drive.'"

Even those who feel real regret about their actions often find it hard to truly accept responsibility. I've met genuinely caring people who are appalled at what they did and who have done everything possible – serving their prison sentences, engaging in community service, speaking publicly about their crimes in the hope that others will change their behavior– who still emphasize "I never meant it to happen" rather than "I chose to drink and drive, and I killed someone." It's hard for caring people to admit to themselves that their deliberate choice to drink and drive caused someone else's death or serious injuries.

These reasons do not make it all right that the DUI driver doesn't apologize or may

do so only in a way that leaves the victim feeling even worse. At the same time, understanding that the defendant may have real remorse but be unable to communicate it for different reasons can help a little as you sit through hearing after hearing. I always tried to remember that I could not know what was in the defendant's heart, and so I might as well assume he felt real regret.

(5) There are people to help you. The prosecutor should explain to you what's happening with the case, including what charges she or he is bringing, what you can do to help, when the next court date is, and what will likely happen. Many courtrooms also have a victim witness advocate who is there to help victims through the process. If that person has not found you, ask the prosecutor or call the prosecutor's office. You can also explore the prosecutor's website to see what resources are available. Finally, in Northern Illinois, AAIM, an Illinois non-profit, provides advocates to help victims of DUI drivers through the court process. Twyla, who was the court advocate for my parents' case, attended every court hearing. If I was there, she sat with me, answered questions, and offered emotional support. She also explained exactly what was going on and when the next court date would be. Afterwards, she took me to a local coffee shop overlooking a river, and we talked and unwound before I went back to work. If I couldn't be at court, she called me afterwards and told me exactly what happened.

AAIM's website, which you can visit for more information, is http://www.aaim1.org/. In addition, AAIM runs a grief group, as do many hospitals, churches and communities. Talking with others who've been through the same experience can be extremely helpful. If one group doesn't work for you, try another.

You can also visit my blog for future posts: http://lossdui.blogspot.com/
Please feel free to share your thoughts there, or to email me at lisa@lisalilly.com

Three Things I Learned From My Father

My dad died in a tragic way. But I was lucky enough that he lived and was happy and healthy until he was nearly 89. This year [2013] would have been his 95th birthday. In honor of him, and of Father's Day, I'm writing about three things I learned from him over the years.

Focus on what you can do. Soon after I was born, my dad had a serious back injury and needed to be off work for more than a month. But he never talked about how much pain he'd been in, instead, he told me how he'd enjoyed getting to be home with me when I was a baby. (Dads didn't do that very often in the 1960s.) When I was eight or nine, he had an even more serious back injury that required surgery and left him with a partially paralyzed leg and on-going back pain. He had to retire ten years early. He also had to stop doing many of the things he enjoyed, which was hard because he was a very active person. But he didn't complain. He pulled out his old

aeronautics engineering books from college and spent the next two years designing his own airplane. Later he built one of the wings out of scrap wood. I still have part of it hanging on my wall.

Get involved. For as long as I can remember, my mom and dad belonged to and volunteered with Amvets. (My dad was a World War II aviator.) Every third Wednesday night, right up until the week before the crash, my parents loaded their car with soda, no-sugar bakery, and bingo cards and took them to the blind ward at Hines Veteran Hospital. Amvets members and volunteers helped the patients with their cards, and Amvets provided small cash prizes. When my brother Tim and I were playing music, my parents organized groups of musicians to put on free concerts at the hospital. My parents also became involved in a local citizens group to help stop corruption in village government, were volunteer literacy tutors for many years, and well into their eighties gave rides to people who could no longer drive to doctors' appointments, on errands, or to church. My dad never told us we ought to volunteer, and I never felt he thought it was a big deal. It was just part of who he was.

Think for yourself and respect others. My dad always taught us we shouldn't assume whoever was in charge -- teacher, boss, president -- knew what she or he was doing or had all the answers. If we thought someone in authority had the wrong facts, we should do the research ourselves to find out what was correct. If we disagreed with a supervisor's viewpoint, we should stick to our own opinions if we believed them well founded. He didn't hesitate to say an idea made no sense or a statement was wrong if he thought it was, no matter who said it (which perhaps didn't make him too popular with his bosses). At the same time, my dad also taught us to treat everyone with respect. He might question authority or criticize an idea, but I never heard him call anyone names or address anyone by anything other than the proper title. And even if he had questions about someone's character -- for instance, a politician convicted of embezzling money -- he would say, "I don't understand why someone would do something like that," or "that's a terrible thing to do," rather than saying that person was a bad person.

I'm grateful to have had my father in my life. I know many people who lost their dads early in life or had fathers who weren't there or who perhaps did more harm than good. The main way that I try to honor my dad-- and my mom -- is by speaking at victim impact panels through the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists (AAIM) to first-time DUI offenders. My hope is that by sharing what happened to my parents and our family due to someone else's choice to drink and drive, at least a few other people will make a different choice, and other deaths and injuries will be prevented. I think my dad would appreciate that.

About the Author and the Cover Artist

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About The Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists

To learn more about AAIM, or make a donation in honor of someone you love:

http://aaim1.org/

Or write:

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