

A Mother's Scream in the Night

"The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning" (Eccl. 7:4)

"My mother is in the hospital, and I have a new baby sister!" It was show-and-tell time in Mrs. Gibble's first-grade classroom. I was bursting with real news: I was the first in our class to announce a new baby had been born in our family.

"Do you think your mother could bring the baby to school so we all can see her?" asked Mrs. Gibble.

"Oh, I'm sure she will," I replied. My teacher and classmates clapped with glee.

Mary Louise Hershey was born on Armistice Day, Nov. 11, 1954. Now we had the perfect 1950s family: Mother, Daddy, me, Henry and Mary Louise. Just like in our schoolbooks: Mother, Father, Dick, Jane and Sally.

Mother said she would bring Mary Louise to school after Christmas vacation, when the baby would be a little bigger. I couldn't wait to show off Mary Louise to my classmates.

At age 6, I was ready to understand the role of big sister now that I had had three years of experience guiding my brother into and out of adventures. We noticed that our sister sometimes had bluish fingernails and lips, but Mother said that Dr. Hess said babies usually grew out of this symptom.

Just before Christmas, after sundown on Dec. 20, Henry and I were playing in the little stack of hay next to the cow stable, making tunnels out of bales and talking about what we hoped for in our stockings. Down the row, cows chewed contentedly. The DeLaval milkers sounded almost like

heartbeats—lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub—as they extracted warm milk from each udder.

And then we heard it: a horrible, penetrating, animal-like scream, piercing that night and my life to this day. Until Mary Louise died after only 39 days on this earth, I didn't know one mother's voice could hold the sounds of all the weeping women of the world. The terrible sound grew louder as Mother came toward the barn. She ran to Daddy and, still screaming, started pounding him on his chest.

"My baby is dead. Our baby is dead. My baby is dead." That was all she could say, over and over again. Then she would throw back her head and wail.

Mother never attempted to hide her grief. Losing Mary Louise tore her scarred heart in two—again. She had lost two grandmothers when she was a teenager. Her first pregnancy ended in miscarriage. Her mother died suddenly just three years earlier when Henry was a baby and Mother was 24.

My mother already knew grief like a river. But this one threatened to engulf her. No other loss sears the soul like the loss of one's own child. I would not fully understand my mother's courage until I became a mother myself. But what I did understand was that my magical childhood had changed.

Mother coped with this death by going back to her first dream of becoming a writer. With other Mennonite women, she started an organization called the Homebuilders. She and others sent packets of solace, letters of condolence and poems to other grieving mothers when they found their names in the newspaper along with the notice that a young child had died.

I didn't understand then how much work my mother was doing to transform trauma into growth. But that effort would teach me more than any words she could have spoken. For the next decade, Mother would help to lead the organization of mothers by speaking and writing as a way to use her gifts for the

church. Her healing happened best when she fulfilled her dream of expressing her deepest feelings in writing.

The cause of Mary Louise's death was never clear. Dr. Hess said he could find only two paragraphs on this condition in the medical books he consulted. There was no known cure.

If I ever want to know the limitation of words, all I have to do is hold the bronze-colored book provided by the funeral home for Mary Louise's viewing. Next to the guest register is a little sketch of a heart, drawn by Dr. Hess himself, and the words that took Mary Louise away from us: "subendocardial fibroelastosis."

One of the large bouquets of flowers delivered to our house in those sad and somber December days right before Christmas came from all the teachers and students at my school. My parents read the card and wept again.

It would be a long time before I would stand up to make any new show-and-tell announcements in school. When I did, the words came from a new place in my heart, a place that had visited death.

Excerpt from Blush: A Mennonite Girl Meets a Glittering World by Shirley Hershey Showalter. Copyright © 2013 by Herald Press, Harrisonburg, Virginia 22802. Used by permission.

Shirley Hershey Showalter grew up in a Mennonite farm family and went on to become the president of Goshen College and a foundation executive at the Fetzer Institute. She is now a writer, speaker, blogger and consultant living in Harrisonburg, Va.