

Confession of a rhinoceros

Sarah

The first time I talked to Adam, he was crying hysterically. He'd just gotten back at his house, filled with paramedics and sheriff deputies, to find out that his mother had died a few hours earlier. The lanky body of this 18-year-old spread out on the cold tile of the foyer and a wailing sound came out of his chest. I sat next to him, wrapping my arms around his body and mumbling "it's going to be OK." I couldn't help but thinking of my dear friend Emily, Adam's mother.

I had known Emily for a decade, since her husband Charles was my old friend. I could still see her warm smile and hear her laughter. The intense pain on the young face in front of me reminded me of her face the last time I visited her.

This was a month ago, after I learned that she had a nervous breakdown. She had to be rushed to the hospital due to a suicide attempt, and after staying there for a few weeks, she was released back home. The doctors still required her to visit the local day clinic for group therapies. When I visited her at home, she was telling me how difficult it was to muster her energy to do anything. I tried to persuade her to follow her doctors' order to take antidepressants, but she expressed feelings of alienation at the clinic and sense of hopelessness profusely. I left her feeling concerned and vowed to come back as soon as I could.

Unfortunately, I was too late.

I held Adam tight, tears streaming down my face. I didn't know him that well before, only occasionally seeing him at gatherings where he was often playing with one kind of electronic devices or another. My conversation with Emily usually revolved around our younger daughters since they took singing lessons together and performed in drama camps together.

I did know that just like my son, Adam left for college six months ago. I still remembered how excited, yet a bit worried, Emily was when she thought about sending him to a place so far away. She was concerned whether he would be able to manage the flight alone. The whole family ended up taking the flight – extending the send-off to the other side of the country.

Adam had high academic achievements, but he often had to rely on parental supervision and reminders to finish his work, like many high schoolers. Unknown to me, he also has had diagnoses of ADHD and depression for a few years and was taking medication to stabilize the situation.

At the new environment without constant reminders, he often had a hard time getting out of bed to go to classes. Instead he sought escape in the virtual world of videogames, and his mental condition deteriorated without consistent medication. His quitting two months later was a huge blow to Emily – who had always taken pride in his success. Now a mere two months later, she was gone.

The police were rushing in and out and Adam was in their way, so I had to pull him up with all my strength and walked him to the sofa to put him down. I knew the task was daunting, but I decided then and there that I had to do everything in my power to help the family, especially Adam, knowing how much guilt he must have felt in his mother's untimely death.

The next morning, I went back to Charles's house because we needed to discuss funeral arrangements. Adam was so upset that he spent a lot of time on the piano, playing sad soulful tunes. Charles was hoping that Adam could go to his class at the local community college, but I could see that Adam was in no state of doing so. I insisted that the family members all make counseling appointments, since losing an immediate family member was so traumatic that they would need something equivalent to CPR for their emotional state. Desperately hoping that having responsibilities would help Adam in his grieving process, I also encouraged him to go with us to check out the funeral homes.

In the car, Charles asked me whether we could create a slideshow of Emily's photos and I echoed the idea immediately. I even suggested that I would use many of her favorite songs as a soundtrack, for I knew she was a good singer and passed the passion for music to her children. Adam interjected before I could answer, "I don't know what music she likes, but I know what music she doesn't like." I was rather taken aback, "What music doesn't she like? "She doesn't like the music I like!" was the answer. I half joked, "Well, when you die, we could use your favorite music. But this funeral is for your mother, so we will use her favorite music." In my own interaction with children, I often find it easier to break the ice by being as silly or shocking as them. At the same time, I understood that death was like the elephant in the room – it had already presented itself to this family and we couldn't avoid it anymore. From that day on, Adam and I had many discussions of death, life and love, which brought us closer.

As we arrived at the funeral home, we were led into a room and sat down to face the funeral worker. Adam curled his body into a ball and buried his face in his arms. As we discussed various logistic questions, I tried to wrap my arms around Adam, which was rather awkward

given his size. I felt like an egret trying to put her wings around a giant clam. While hugging him, I whispered to Adam that if he had any thoughts or feelings, writing them out would be a great way to express them. Sure enough, that night Adam posted a poem on his Facebook wall, full of anger, frustration and sadness.

A few days after the funeral, Adam went back to his classes in the local college. He had a class in the morning and one in the afternoon, leaving four hours of free time in between. I made a point to stop by and eat lunch with him as often as I could. We would sit on the bench in the main courtyard. On our left was the grand performing center, on the right the library. The breeze was so pleasant that oddly it brought me a profound sense of sadness because Emily couldn't be there to enjoy it with us. We talked about her, my friendship with her, his memory of her, his other family members and their love of her. Once he brought out his mobile phone and told me, "if I had played piano on my mother's funeral (For various reasons, he didn't get a chance to play.), this piece would be my choice." From his Youtube app, a simple but soothing melody flowed out – it was called "We miss you – Them of Love" from a game called "Mother". My eyes were tearing up again.

Once I took him to talk to a friend who lost a few family members due to mental illness. He went along despite some reluctance. I was hoping to understand mental illness in more depth from other people's experiences. Afterwards, I asked Adam if it was OK for me to drag him along to meet various people who were usually strangers.

‘You were like an elephant pulling this old horse cart of mine, with all you might.’ Adam replied. I laughed at the vividness of the description but took mock offence, ‘Why couldn’t I be a giraffe? Giraffe is much more gracious and beautiful!’

Many weeks passed, I asked Adam again, ‘Do you still think I am an elephant?’

‘No’.

‘Good,’ I thought to myself, ‘That was the answer I’d like to hear.’

‘So, what am I now?’ I probed. ‘Well, you are like a rhinoceros now.’ The imagery again was surprising, and I had to protest again, ‘Why?’ ‘Because you are more purposeful now, with a better sense of direction, not like the elephant who was just pulling me all over the place!’

Many months have since passed, today I picked up the phone to call Adam at his university and he picked up right away. After making sure he was doing well lately at his studies and his life in general, I asked him if I could share his essay and submit it to an essay contest called ‘Hear Me Out’. Adam, in his usual grace and kindness, agreed.

For if an elephant could learn to be gentle and if a rhinoceros could find its direction, it may be that a young man could eventually find love and his own wings despite pain and misery.