Guest Shot

My Memorial Garden

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Abstract

In this article, a doula describes one way in which she can honor infants who died prematurely.

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Editor's Note

Inevitably, each perinatal educator shares the unhappy experience of infant death with parents. Here, the author demonstrates one positive way in which perinatal educators can create a private memorial as a means to cope with these tragic events and, more importantly, a way to honor those souls who briefly passed their way.

My Memorial Garden

During the last eight years, I have attended over 100 births as a doula. Bits and pieces from each of these births remain with me—a tapestry of doula experiences that I can draw on while working with future clients. My tapestry is made of many memories, but I especially remember the exceedingly difficult births that have ended in triumph and the heartbreaking births that have ended with the death of a baby.

I have worked with six babies that have died. Last fall, I planted hyacinths to honor these babies. The flowers are in full bloom now. Watching them emerge and flower has been an extraordinary experience. I chose hyacinths because they come in pink and blue, smell lovely, and are beautiful despite often flowering incompletely. I wanted to plant five or six hyacinths, one for

each baby (two of the babies were a set of twins), but I couldn't find an economical way to choose the colors for each baby. So, I bought a package of five bulbs, in unknown colors, and blindly planted them. I planned to designate one of the five flowers as "the twins."

All winter, I looked forward to the flowers blooming, and this spring I've eagerly checked them each day. The first hyacinth to bloom was dark purple, tall, magnificent, and almost full. It honors Gabriel, a 9-pound-plus baby boy who suffered a cord accident several days before his mom had "known" he would be born. Everyone but his mom, who sensed something wrong with his spirit, was expecting a straightforward labor. But he developed fetal distress, was born by emergency cesarean, and, much to the surprise of everyone but his mom, was born brain dead. The machines were disconnected a day later. He was a beautiful, large, baby boy that died in 1992.

The second flower to come up was a beautiful, totally full, pink bloom. It grew taller and taller and taller, and just before it was fully-grown it fell over. This one honors Baby Kate, a 9-pound-plus baby girl who died without warning of an undetected infection during labor in May of 1995. A smaller flower also emerged from this bulb (I attended this mom again last year for the birth of a preterm, but otherwise healthy baby).

The third flower to bloom was lilac colored and almost fully formed, but definitely smaller than the two

previous flowers—a match for Mitchell, a perfectly formed baby boy who died at 28 weeks gestation in late 1996. This small, purple flower developed a curve in its stem and is now growing horizontally to the ground.

Almost simultaneously, the fourth bulb to bloom produced two flowers—to honor Max and Eli, a set of preterm twins born at 26 weeks who died, contrary to expectations, a few days later of a hospital-acquired infection. Both flowers are very small. Max and Eli died in late 1996, just a few weeks after Mitchell.

The fifth flower honors Dillon, who died before he was born when his mother died unexpectedly during last year's DONA conference. Dillon's hyacinth is small, blue, and perfectly formed.

It has been eerie, delightful, and magical watching each flower emerge in chronological order, with the right color and form to match the babies I'm honoring. Because the flowers are near my front door, I see them numerous times a day and have spent many quiet, happy moments observing them over the past few weeks. When I began doing "birth work," I did not expect to do so much grieving. My garden has brought joy and healing to this, most difficult, part of my work. Although my hyacinths are purposely planted in an area with room for more, I very much hope I will not need to add to my garden for a good long while.

Peace be with you, precious ones.

Remembrance

In this world of change, nothing which comes stays, and nothing which goes is lost.

—Anne Sophie Swetchine
Russian author

What a strange thing is memory, and hope; one looks backward, the other forward; one is of today, the other of tomorrow. Memory is history recorded in our brain—memory is a painter, it paints pictures of the past and of the day.

—"Grandma" Moses
U.S. folk painter

Every artist dips his brush in his own soul, and paints his own nature into pictures.

—Henry Ward Beecher
Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit (1887)