

ESSAY

Grief's extraordinary power

Loss comes in many forms: an ended relationship, the loss of a job, or the death of a colleague, a friend or a loved one. On a bitterly cold and snowy day in January 2014, the medical student community at the University of Ottawa lost an outstanding classmate. Most also lost an unforgettable friend. Death never makes sense, but when it comes out of nowhere, it is the most difficult to cope with and the most heartbreaking of all.

In life, all good things come hard. But it is wisdom that comes the hardest. In the devastating weeks that followed, amid the numbness that enveloped us all, I witnessed something amazing unfold. Classmates who had been virtual strangers to each other now stopped and talked in the hallways. Each of us somehow became the sturdy shoulders that others cried on, the open ears that listened to someone who needed to talk and the comforting arms that embraced with empathy. In short, the class that before was simply a class, the faculty that was before just a faculty, was suddenly revealed to be a family.

As John Green writes in his novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*,¹ grief does not really change us. Rather, it has the

extraordinary ability to reveal us for who we are, who we have always been and, underneath it all, who we have the potential to be. The grief made us a family. The grief also brought to the fore a part of me that I had forgotten, a part that I had previously cherished and relied on before medical school but now had no time for. It was the me that I had temporarily lost, and the me that I needed to get back.

Before starting medical school, I painted — a lot. And I took photos — many, many photos — of intimate



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moments between loved ones, spontaneous smiles on strangers' faces and innocent joy in children's eyes. I took photos of things that I no longer notice, such as the delicate petals of a flower unfurling in the early morning light; or things that I no longer have time for, such as the changing hues of the sun as it sets over the glittering snow. It is easy to get caught up in the constant and unyielding demands that we put upon ourselves in medical school. So easy, in fact, that we can come perilously close to losing the

Grief does not change us, not really. It is infinitely more powerful than that. It has the amazing ability to connect us not only to others but also to the lost and forgotten parts of ourselves. It has the power to bring us to awareness, to show us what we have forgotten and, ultimately, to make us whole again.

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Reference

1. Green J. *The fault in our stars*. New York: Dutton Books; 2012:286.

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