

By Robert S. Schick

The scars we bear

I was introduced to a whale named Lucky during my first year of grad school. I study North Atlantic right whales—many of whom are scarred by traumatic injuries. Lucky's were dramatic: jagged marks from a brush with a large ship propeller when she was a juvenile. My own story, I've come to realize, is similar, although my scars are less obvious. Eleven years ago, when I was a third-year Ph.D. student, my son Silas died in my arms. He was just 3 days old. The birth nearly took my wife's life as well. Graduating the next year felt like nothing short of a miracle. I was Dr. Schick—the first in my family! I thought it meant that I had recovered from the depths of my loss and had a bright academic future. But there was more to my story—and to Lucky's.

Researchers studying Lucky were thrilled and amazed when she became pregnant. Yet as her pregnancy progressed, she gained girth, and the increasing pressure ultimately split the scar tissue. She developed sepsis, and—along with her unborn calf—Lucky died.

Two years after my son's death, pressure was building on my own internal scars. My family and I had moved to get away from the constant reminder of our loss, and at first it seemed to be working. I had a good postdoc position, my wife was healing, and my daughter was heading into kindergarten. On the surface, we were all doing relatively well.

But when I took a work trip back to our old city, suddenly everything started to fall apart. I began to struggle with anxiety. I started to have panic attacks that led to a nervous breakdown. I realized that I needed to devote time to healing instead of burying my grief. I needed to acknowledge and treat my wounds so that they wouldn't put me in danger in the future.

The best way to do this, I thought, would be to make a major change. I found a new postdoc position across the ocean, in Scotland. The change of location and perspective put me on a better track. Our 4 years abroad helped heal my family, and the challenge of living in a new culture made us even more tight-knit. I worked with a wonderful, kind therapist who helped me unpack and examine my grief. I started to feel a little bit more comfortable with our trauma—sometimes telling people about Silas rather than always keeping the story hidden.

At the same time, I needed to figure out my next career



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work surrounded by colleagues whom I respect and admire.

Though I will always bear the scars from my son's death, time and emotional work help keep them from reopening, and I have found peace with how my trauma is woven into the story of my life. Like the whales I study, we all carry the scars of our pasts. The burdens can be heavy, but we needn't add to them by trying to ignore or hide them.

As for the right whales, their population now numbers approximately 410 individuals, up from an all-time low of about 50. Though the future of the species remains uncertain, for now, at least, they too have found ways to survive. ■

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