

Why we keep the memory of my husband's late wife alive for our children

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By Amy Paturel

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On a bright and breezy day in June, I walked across the street to collect the mail. Amid the bills, coupon mailers and furniture brochures, I spotted a quilting magazine. I knew it wasn't for me. I can't hem a pair of pants. It was for my husband's first wife, Sherise, a woman who skillfully crafted quilts, blankets and holiday table runners.

Sherise died in a car accident 13 years before that magazine arrived in our mailbox. During our decade-long marriage, Brandon and I have moved so many times even our own mail doesn't get forwarded. But Sherise's quilting magazines? They always make their way to our kitchen table with her name affixed to the label.

Sure, I could tuck the magazines in the trash before anyone notices. I could spare Brandon the pain of seeing her name, and my children from wondering why Sherise's mail sidesteps heaven and comes straight to us. Instead, I take the opportunity to celebrate a life prematurely extinguished.

“Sherise must have been a very talented woman,” I say, as I bring in the mail for our family. “The quilting people want her to craft her magic from another realm.”

Even before Brandon and I married, I recognized that honoring Sherise’s memory was a part of appreciating my husband’s capacity to love and grieve. So when our boys came along, we didn’t hide Sherise under a metaphorical quilt. But we were strategic about when and how we told them about her.

Sherise had been a beloved member of Brandon’s family for decades before she married him. Brandon’s stepmom was Sherise’s godmother. When my children visited his family in Michigan, I knew they would see pictures of Brandon and Sherise’s wedding. I didn’t want them to have questions or make connections that weren’t grounded in reality. So when our twins were 4 and our youngest was only 2, we told them Daddy had been married before he found me.

Max, the most inquisitive of the bunch, wanted details about how “Daddy’s Reese” died. (He couldn’t pronounce Sherise.) We explained that she was in a car accident. Brandon and Sherise had been married for less than six months when she saw a car crossing the center divider during her morning commute. She flung her arm across her colleague’s midsection, as a sort of makeshift seat belt, just as the other car smashed into the driver’s side door.

My kids are too young to understand that they’re here because she’s not. They can’t quite grasp that their dad had two stepchildren, a boy and a girl, in the years before they came along. That when Brandon’s stepchildren were 7 and 4 — the same ages they are now — he dropped them off at school and their mom never came home.

The children’s biological father picked them up from school that day and within weeks, he moved them out of state. Brandon never saw them again. He lost an entire family in an instant. And he has a shoe box full of birthday cards to those now-teenaged kids, signed but never sent, in our garage.

One night as we were tucking Jack into bed, he asked about “Reese.” “She made your Star Wars quilt,” I said. Brandon chimed in, “And Brian’s Incredibles blanket and Max’s Shrek blanket.”

Wrapping my children in quilts that had belonged to Sherise’s children wasn’t a conscious decision. When my boys outgrew their baby blankets, we scoured our closets for larger ones. Each kid had their pick of about a half dozen. Now, as my boys snuggle up in her handiwork, I’m struck by how these keepsakes act as a bridge between then and now. I want my boys to understand that just because a person dies doesn’t mean their spirit — the essence of who they are — dies, too.

So, we celebrate Sherise by regularly indulging in her favorite things. We eat Reese’s peanut butter cups on her birthday and buy roses and stargazer lilies on the day she died. We keep a photo of Sherise and her two children in the upstairs hallway and a street sign with “Sherise

Dr.” adorns the twins’ bedroom wall as part of their planes, trains and automobiles decor. But the most tangible link to Sherise is our loving beagle, Charlie. Now more white than brown, and with only three legs to hobble around, he was a gift from Brandon to Sherise on her 33rd birthday. Every time I look at him, I think about his two lives — one with Sherise’s family and one with mine.

When Sherise died, Brandon was 27. Aside from purchasing a nominal life insurance policy when they got married, they hadn’t discussed death. Our family is a stark contrast. Death for us isn’t a taboo topic. We’re intentional about discussing it with our children, not because we’re morbid, but because we want our kids to understand it takes only one second for the world to flip on its axis.

I talk to them about family members who have passed away, share stories about lost loved ones and we watch Disney movies where death plays prominently, blockbusters such as “Finding Nemo” and “Lion King.” Each time Tinkerbell sails across the screen, I hear my boys’ singsong voices in unison, “Hi Tinkerbell,” not knowing “Tink” was Daddy’s nickname for Sherise, who loved all things Disney.

When one of Max’s classmates lost her father in a car accident, he took her by the hand and asked her how she was feeling. He said he wanted to comfort her. Then, he drew her a picture of her daddy watching over her and dancing in the sky. Even at 7 years old, he recognizes that while death is permanent, love lives on.

I imagine Max, Brian and Jack will eventually tire of their quilts, or wear them out. They might decide Star Wars, Shrek and The Incredibles are no longer cool. But they’ll always have an appreciation and reverence for the woman who made them. And every time her quilting magazines land on our kitchen table, we’ll remember the blessings her life and death bestowed upon us.

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