

A Rabbi's Wisdom

Sheldon Sager

Riley Scott Harness Memorial 12/20/13

I am overwhelmed by the support that this wonderful community has shown to my wonderful daughter and son-in-law in the very difficult times they gone through these last several months. Your generosity and kind words should be an inspiration to everyone. I'd also like to express my extreme gratitude to the many doctors and nurses at Children's Hospital for their steadfast support of Riley and their compassion they showed to our families. Also, thanks all of their family and friends that are here today to express their caring sympathies.

I know many of you never met Riley, at least in person. However, in the electronic age we live in, his picture was sent around the world and his beautiful smile touched the hearts of so many. Although he was too young to speak, the expression in his eyes, his smile and laugh and his dance moves said more than any words. He spread joy to whoever saw him and he will continue to spread joy through the beautiful images of him forever.

I'm not a religious person, but a few days ago a business associate who I speak to almost every day called and was lost for words, as many of us are, about this ordeal. He decided to consult a Rabbi of what to do and what to say to those who are deeply mourning Riley's death. His responses to me are words that deeply touched me

1. Jewish wisdom specifically teaches that there are no adequate words with which to try to console the inconsolable. We want to use words to make sense of things but Judaism teaches that this kind of tragedy does not make sense. JEWISH WISDOM TEACHES PRESENCE/BEING THERE TRUMPS WORDS...SILENCE EXPRESSES EMPATHY!
2. The universe is crying right now, the universe has been torn by this unfairness, the world has been diminished and our job is to admit this with the Stephanie and Chris and then simply affirm that we care about them and will be there for them. Make yourself vulnerable so they can be vulnerable.

3. Take care of Steph and Chris in real ways – Jewish wisdom teaches that they should not and ought not be expected to simply go back to real life...so offer real help be it meals, helping out driving, with errands, giving time off anything that eases their physical burdens...Jewish wisdom teaches that our help and care in physical ways is the method of slowly rebuilding a person's ability to function in a world that has been unimaginably harsh...
4. Oftentimes, we are great for the first week or few weeks...being there a month from now and six months from now is the real practice of compassion and "healing".
5. The key as someone who cares about them is to assure them with love, affection, honesty to the loss, concern, and no illusionary words...you can say things like every single one of us grieve for you...that there are questions with no answers, and answers that will remain forever elusive yet we will stick together, and we will cry together and we will take care of each other, and we will support one another and thereby do the only thing we can do...make the memory of Riley – a child that taught us about love in ways we never could have known – a blessing...a blessing that stretches far, far beyond the painfully tragically short year of life...that despite this being the most painful and unfair thing that has ever happened in our life and which will leave brokenness forever we will bless his memory by not despairing, by defying the unfairness of life by loving ever more deeply.

Lastly, when you are blue and don't know why—remember—Riley rhymes with Smiley. I'll always remember him in that way.

Service for Riley Scott Harness

Officiated by Rev. Vanessa E. Owen

December, 20 2013

Timberline Church

Ft. Collins, CO

Welcome

Good morning. My name is Rev. Vanessa Owen. I am one of the chaplains at Children's Hospital Colorado and I had the amazing privilege of working with Riley and his parents over the last few months. For those of you who know Steph and Chris well, you will not be surprised to learn that they didn't actually ask for the chaplain to come visit them. What happened was that I had been hearing about this unusually special baby for weeks, and finally I just couldn't stand it anymore, I had to go see for myself. I am not exaggerating when I say that every day when I would come onto PICU unit at Children's Hospital, I would inevitably hear someone talking about Riley. Often, it was staff who had never even worked directly with Riley but knew about him and had updates to share on how he was doing or what cute thing he was doing as he rolled down the hallway in his wagon that day.

So, despite the lack of invitation I decided to go introduce myself to Riley, Chris, and Steph. And, of course, they were endlessly welcoming and friendly and they let me in. They let me in that day and then many, many subsequent days after that initial visit. I am grateful beyond words that I ventured their way and was blessed with the honor of knowing sweet Riley and his awesome parents.

On behalf of Chris and Steph and their family--welcome and thank you for being here this morning. You are Riley's world, his beloved community. You are the people whose lives he deeply touched and you are the ones who touched Riley's life by surrounding him with all the love a baby needs. You are his friends, grandparents, physicians, nurses, other hospital staff, fundraisers, community members, cousins, aunts and uncles, news reporters, and the list goes on and on. The breadth of Riley's impact is likely immeasurable. I have no doubt that Chris and Steph will remain continuously amazed at the ways that Riley has changed the people and the world around him for years and years to come.

Today, we come with hearts full of love for Riley as well as hearts full of sorrow as we face the loss of him. Today we come to mourn Riley's death, but also to rekindle the flame of hope that remains. Let us enter into this time of healing, a healing that is made available to us through the love and presence of one another and in the lessons that Riley has left for us. We are here because it's important. It's important to remember, honor, and celebrate the life and joy of Riley Scott Harness. What a gift, what a blessing he truly was. I hope you will find some solace here this morning. Let our service now begin.

Closing Words

As we come to the close of Riley's service this morning I wanted to extend some of the wisdom that I have collected over the years working with bereaved parents (or parents who have lost a child). Many of you here today will be the people that Steph and Chris need the most in the months to come. I have often heard from the friends and family of parents who have lost a child that knowing how and the kind of support to offer can be overwhelming. I am going to share with you some of things that other bereaved parents have said they often need the most. I don't want to speak for Chris or Steph, but I trust that they will tell you if anything that I am about to share does not apply for them.

First, don't stop saying Riley's name around Steph and Chris. They will need to continue to hear all the ways the Riley was important to you. And hearing his name will be a cherished gift. If they cry when you talk about him or bring up his name, that is okay. They will likely cry often for quite some time, but that is going to happen regardless of whether or not YOU are talking about Riley. What's important is that you have given them the opportunity to talk about their beloved son and given them to space to continue grieving. If you have gifts, or pictures, or other remembrances of Riley in your homes, leave them up and let Chris and Steph know that you continue to honor and remember their baby. Being a bereaved parent is not contagious. I promise. Don't shy away from Steph and Chris. Now and in 6 weeks and in 6 months is when they will need you most. Don't disappear. Thinking of and praying for them is lovely and important but they will also need you to call, and send cards, and offer them your physical presence by taking them to get a drink or get out of the house. Stephanie and Chris are incredibly positive and loving people. They are resilient and strong and they will survive their loss of Riley, but their grief will be a long road, so please don't expect them to be done grieving in 6 months or even a year. While their pain will become less intense over time, they will always carry within them the grief of losing Riley. Let their journey be theirs without judgment or agendas. Sometimes, Chris and Steph will answer when you ask them how they are doing that they are doing fine, and there will certainly be days that they are doing okay, but please don't take that to mean that they are done grieving or that they don't need you anymore.

And finally, please know that grief changes people. When Riley died, a big part of Chris and Steph died too. They are not the same people that they were before Riley died and they will never be those exact people again. It is important to express to them your love for who they are now and who they will become. You may miss certain aspects of how you used to know them. Be patient and gentle with them and trust that they will find a new normal again with time.

Riley Scott Harness was a gift to the world. He was pure joy. He was our bouncing, giggling, radiant Tigger. He was strong and fought his disease process with great strength, endurance and courage. He was fun and funny. He was sweet and tender.

And boy, oh boy was he cute! As Chris has said, "I make beautiful kids!" Indeed, you did Chris. You and Steph made a beautiful boy, inside and out, who will be missed beyond words. As the song, "Let It Grow" from the Lorax says,

"You can't reap what you don't sow. It's just one tiny seed, but it's all we need. It's time to banish all your greed. Imagine Thneedville flowered and treed. Let this be our solemn creed. We say let it grow."

Riley's love, his joy, his tenacious spirit, his infectious laughter and bouncy happy self is that one little seed that we all need to let our best selves grow. He made us better, didn't he? Let his legacy become our solemn creed that we will let goodness grow. That we will let joy grow. That we will let love grow. In honor of Riley.

May It Be So.

The Music of our Souls

Susan Devan Harness

Riley Scott Harness Memorial – 12/20/2013

*“Music . . . can name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable.”
— Leonard Bernstein*

Music has always been my saving grace, a way to express my exploration and experiences of the world.

Simply put, I loved it – all kinds. A strong beat caused my toe to tap, my knee to bob, my body to sway, my head to nod, and my hands to tap my bobbing knees.

*So, how my heart soared when I witnessed this very same characteristic in Riley, one day when I'd come home for lunch. Chris lay on the couch while Riley sat in the bouncy seat nearby, the iPhone on the coffee table between them. The band Fun was singing *Some Nights*. As the music grew in rhythmic intensity Riley danced, jumping up and down, feet tapping the floor, hands thrown into the air, while a smile that challenged a sunny day brightened his face.*

I knew I'd found my musical soul mate.

But within the next few days the music was interrupted when Riley vomited blood in the early morning of September 7. Station 10 responded to my shaking 911 call and within a couple of hours Riley was airlifted to Children's Hospital Colorado, and met by the liver team. By noon he'd been placed in the pediatric ICU, in a small room with a glass wall, so foreign from anything he'd experienced before. Gone were the sounds of the radio or the television, replaced by muted voices, footsteps and monitor alarms. Gone was his music.

But it came back after I'd made a few trips to his new world, realizing he probably missed it as much as I did. I figured an exploration of the rich world of sound might take his mind off the smallness of his space. So, while Riley watched on, I extracted my phone from my purse and began to sample my Pandora library, whose breadth ran wide: pop, hits, alternative, techno, acoustic, coffee-house, traditional Celtic, symphonic, baroque, choral, Gregorian chant, and New Age. Riley and I explored and experienced them all. Within a few days I had a

pretty good idea of what was going to work based on his reaction. He wasn't jazzed about jazz, nor did he like techno; both were too unpredictable and he soon lost interest. But, alternative rock, top hits, and Celtic brought his body and his mind to motion and his smile returned. Those were played on good days. There were quiet days too, when he enjoyed listening to the texture of classical, cocking his head to the interplay of tone, or taking particular interest in the tympani, or the cello, all the while waves of music carrying his imagination on a rippled stream of sound.

But then quiet days became unsettled days, when sedation from procedures and intermittent pain caused Riley to seek the softer tones of Suzanne Vega, or Enya; he always loved female voices. But as time moved on his pain became overwhelming. His liver had grown large, butting up against his pancreas, and his skin grew sensitive to the touch. At these times he didn't want to be touched, let alone held. So, on those days, while he lay on his bed and closed his eyes, I allowed the gentle nature of Gregorian chants or New Age meditational music to stroke his soul, giving him respite in the ether that existed between wakefulness and sleep. Unfortunately, after he'd been at the hospital three months, there were a lot of those days.

*But then one day I witnessed a beautiful gift, a gift that will always define the true love of a parent for a child. Chris and Steph sang to him. They sang his favorite song from the movie *The Lorax*, while they bent over his bed and cradled their son, while the monitors were unhooked and step by step Riley began the journey from this world to the next. Then, it was as if God choreographed his final scene, because when the movie stopped and the song stopped, so did Riley's heart.*

But I know the rhythm will continue, as it always had. It can't be helped.

Sing beautifully, grandson. I will miss you terribly.

One Voice of Many – A Letter to Riley Nii Martey

Riley Scott Harness Memorial
December 20, 2013

My voice is but one voice of many who delighted to welcome you, with your quiet roar of an arrival, determined to make sure your parents were up to the challenge of handling the unexpected, and to look out for you.

My voice was one voice of the many that celebrated your parent's enthusiasm for you, as they Confidently embraced the challenges - I loved to see you thrive, surrounded by strength, independence, love, and large canines - comfortable and protected by your pack.

My voice is but one voice of many that joked that you were curious and resourceful like your father; smart and determined like your mother; and certainly cuter than either of them.

My voice is but one voice of many that was constantly charmed at the infectious impact your smile had, you spread it everywhere you went.

My voice is but one voice of the many that gave thanks to you on Thanksgiving, your birthday.

Our daughter has known your parents for most of her life. They have been there for so many of her achievements; her first explorations on rollerblades; proudly showing them the first time she rode her bike; and before I left for a visit to you last week making me promise to tell them that she got her first A+ in school. Your parents were happy to demonstrate, encourage, guide and applaud. I looked forward to seeing her look out for you in the same way in which they looked out for her. I trusted their character, and was always proud to see the way she has grown in confidence in their presence, and looked forward to watching you do the same. I was looking forward to watching you and your grandparents conspire to cause your dad many headaches.

My voice is but one voice of many that has become quiet.
I am angry, and I am sad.

If my own heart could talk, it would say – Riley, I won't forget you.

PICU Memories

(Pediatric Intensive Care Unit)

Molly Friedson

Riley Scott Harness Memorial 12/20/13

About a month ago, Chris mentioned to me that he and Steph felt so blessed that child was so incredible that he made even the most professional people – his nurses and doctors – unprofessional. And he was absolutely right.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Molly, and I was lucky enough to have gotten the chance to spend three months taking care of a patient who was so easy to love. Two of his other primary nurses who loved him very much were not able to be here, and I have the honor of speaking for all three of us. From the moment Shanda, Nicole, and I met Riley we knew we had met someone so special that we wanted to be with him for the long haul. I always felt like I was taking care of a nephew, although Steph and I would joke that Riley was my future second husband. With Steph and Chris it wasn't long before we no longer felt we were just taking care of a patient's family but spending time with close friends.

To say that Riley was just a patient would be a lie. He was so much, much more. He was our partner as we strolled up and down the hallways cheering up the other staff with his smile; and he was our company at night dancing to music while we charted on the computer. He was our handsome date dressed as Tigger on Halloween, and our reminder to give thanks on Thanksgiving, when we were lucky enough to share in the joy of his first birthday.

Riley's chubby cheeks and toes, his belly laughs when Curious George came on TV, his little bobbing dance along with "Thneedville", and the peaceful way he would drift to sleep as we cuddled him close are all moments that will be forever engrained in our memories. I know I can speak for Shanda and Nicole in saying that my three months with Riley were the most enjoyable of my nursing career. I am a better nurse, and a happier person, for having known him.

This week is the winter solstice, and the spiritual care committee came around the unit giving out small gifts with messages of hope on them. They wanted to remind the staff that even in this –the darkest week of the year, there is light and joy and

hope to be had. It has been a very dark week for all of us, but what we should remember is the light and the joy and the hope that Riley brought into every life he touched.

Steph and Chris, from the three of us and our entire PICU staff, we want to thank you for sharing him with us. We love you very much.

Rest in Peace My Son

Stephanie and Chris Harness

Riley Scott Memorial 12/20/13

Nobody ever thinks about what they would say at their child's funeral. So many emotions and memories. But Riley would have wanted me to speak about the good times, so that is what I am going to do

Riley was the best little boy that any mom could ask for. He was always happy and had an infectious smile. It was such a joy to come home from work every day to see my two favorite boys. Riley would always let out a big smile and wait for me to come pick him up. Most of the time he wasn't wearing pants, or clothes in general, but he was perfect. You could tell by looking at his face every day that he loved life and loved spending each day with his dad. Riley lived life with no fears and no regrets. He lived every day to the fullest even when he was so sick.

We will never see Riley crawl, walk, smile with his first tooth, or say Mom and Dad. But we have tons of memories of happy times. We will always remember Riley in his bouncy chair, his high chair grabbing anything in sight, strapped onto the back of his dad going for walks, or even just sitting up and smiling. Riley's smile will live on forever through all of us. As my grandmother put it, the world would be a better place if everyone had Riley's smile.

Thank you all for coming today and celebrating the glorious life of Riley. We know he touched a lot of lives and will never be forgotten. I want to personally thank everyone at Children's Hospital Colorado and especially to the PICU team. The support we received and the excellent care that was given to Riley was remarkable and memorable. He was always in the best care.

Riley is no longer in pain. Rest in peace my son. We love you