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We're All Going To Die: Conversations With A 5-Year-Old, 7-Year-Old And A Squirrel Named Eli

BY JOE WILSON

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Canada is a nation of wildlife. In the summer I saw a peregrine falcon circling over our semi-detached house in downtown Toronto. But it's also a nation of cars and sometimes the two meet, with predictable results. But how do you explain that to a five-year-old?

Cycling home from work the other day, I spotted a squirrel in the middle of the street, frozen in place on the yellow line. It was alive but staring into the middle-distance with glassy eyes. I gave it a nudge with my foot hoping it would shake its head and run for cover. It took a weak step but remained in the street. We were only a few steps from my house so I decided to put it in the brush at the end of my backyard to provide some cover for recuperation. Plus, the kids were home and I wanted to show them a real live squirrel.

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I ran to the backyard with my surprise.

“Woah!” said the girls, “Is he alive?”

“He is,” I said, “but I think he’s sick, he needs to rest.”

“Can I touch him?” asked Sonia, who is seven.

“OK, but softly,” I said.

The girls stroked his fur and murmured maternally. As I held him in my hands, I could feel his heart pulsing furiously like a frantic metronome. Without slowing down, his heartbeat grew fainter, until it faded altogether. Shit. My daughters were petting a dead squirrel.

“I, uh, don’t think he’s doing very well,” I said.

“He needs water!” said Olivia, who is five.

“I don’t think...OK, we can try,” I said, wanting desperately to believe that a splash of water might revive the motionless animal.

The girls awkwardly dipped his nose into a bowl but he did not partake.

"They looked at me for what to do next; they had never been to a funeral."

“Squirrels like nuts!” said Sonia. “Let’s try that.”

“I think, actually, um, he might be dead” I said.

“What?” they said, looking at me like it was my fault. “He can’t be...”

“I think maybe he got hit by a car...” I trailed off.

We left him alone under some bushes in the backyard beside a bowl of nuts. We agreed that if he didn’t eat some nuts in the next hour, he was definitely gone. After we confirmed that the squirrel was not interested in eating hazelnuts anymore in this life, we decided to have a funeral for him.

We realized we didn’t actually know if it was a he or a she, so the girls thought of an appropriate name. “Eli!” offered Sonia, explaining that she had two friends named Eli, a boy and a girl (short for Elizabeth). They painted a grave marker with the new name and we interred the body in a shoe box. They looked at me for what to do next; they had never been to a funeral.

“Now I’m going to say some things,” I said.

“Like what?” they asked.

“Like, good memories of Eli and how Eli’s family is going to miss him...her.”

They were still looking at me.

“I remember fondly that one time I picked Eli up from the street and then he died in my hands. I hope you were really nice to your family and friends, Eli. Sorry you’re dead.”

That seemed to satisfy them. We shovelled some dirt onto the box and then headed back inside, scrubbed our hands with the harshest soap I could find, then settled in for dinner.

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After dinner, Sonia snuck outside to sit beside the grave. Later, I asked her what she was doing.

“I was praying,” she said.

“Oh,” I said. “What for?”

“Just thinking. Like Buddha.” She mimed the position of a sitting Buddha, palms pressed together, eyes closed.

Olivia did not have a similarly philosophical point of view. She sobbed when she thought about “poor Eli.”

Sonia tried to comfort her sister.

“It’s ok, Olivia. He knows the secret now.”

“What secret?” she asked.

“The secret of what happens when you die. Nobody knows.”

I looked at my wife. Where did she get that ontological gem?

"Processing death is the most fundamental (and some say, impossible) requirement of being human."

From us, it turns out. We try and raise our kids to be open-minded about religion and what happens when someone dies. Grandma believes that after we die we go to heaven; Moana’s family believes that a person’s spirit comes back in the form of an animal; our friend Max believes you get to re-live your favourite memory over and over.

The truth is that no one really knows.

"No one really knows" — it’s the kind of thing parents say when they’re flailing through a complicated topic, but we had no idea it actually made sense to Sonia.

Olivia seemed momentarily calmed but I could tell she was puzzled by Sonia's existential riddle. Or, to be more accurate, she deemed it irrelevant: later we realized she was mostly sobbing for her own loss because she thought we were going to keep Eli as a pet.

Still, she was processing something. Some days later I was walking to the bus stop with Olivia and I noticed she had her eyes closed.

Relevant Reading: How My Kids Helped Me Deal With The Loss Of Our Beloved Cat (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/how-my-kids-helped-me-deal-with-the-loss-of-our-beloved-cat>)

“You ok?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, “just making a wish.”

“A wish?” I said.

“Yes. I'm wishing some nice thoughts for Eli.”

“Nice thoughts?”

“Yeah, like Mary does, with her hands together. To say goodbye to Eli.”

I kept asking questions; I didn't really understand what she was getting at. But I didn't have to. Processing death is the most fundamental (and some say, impossible) requirement of being human. However weird their process, my girls need to figure out their own path through the unfathomable reality of death. One squirrel at a time.

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