

Resilience Story

An excerpt from Alex Zautra's (2003) *Emotions, Stress, and Health*. New York: Oxford University Press

The Greene family was driving through Sicily at night when they were attacked. A group of bandits brandishing firearms pulled alongside the Greene's car. As the family tried to flee, the bandits opened fire. After a chase, the bandits pulled away, and the Greens came upon an automobile accident with police and ambulance present. At first relieved, they stopped their car to report their brush with lawlessness. When they opened the back door, however, they found that a bullet had pierced the skull of their six-year-old boy, Nicholas. Two days of intensive care did not reverse the fact that their child was brain dead. When they told this story on National Public Radio¹, three years after the event, few of the millions of listeners could hold back tears.

Mr. and Mrs. Greene lost a life very precious to them on that Sicilian highway. But what happened next seems nothing short of miraculous. By donating their son's organs, the Greens ignited an international movement that has saved the lives of countless people. Their story provides a dramatic illustration of the opportunities for positive thought and emotion that are embedded within even the most tragic circumstances. And when you hear them tell it, as a simple matter-of-fact, a kind of, "Well, wouldn't anyone have done the same?", we know that the warmth we feel is not due to the way they told the story but from how the story itself touches us within.

When Diane Reeve, their interviewer, asked them whether they had hesitated to donate their son's organs, their reply was soft-spoken yet decisive. It was the easiest decision there was to make, they said. Diane persisted, "Were you not angry at the Italians, at their country, for the death of your son."

Mrs. Greene answered, thoughtfully, "You know we had two days after he was shot, and that might have made a difference. During those two days, the people there surrounded us with so much concern, so much caring and support. Everyone we came into contact with would have done anything to bring our son back. It wasn't the Italian people who did this to our family, it was just five men."

Then they told the stories of some of the people who had received their son's organs. A teenage girl without a functioning liver, who was in the hospital waiting to die with family and an entourage of relatives, suddenly had a new liver and a new life because of the Greenses. The girl lived, married, and gave birth to a son. They named their child Nicholas. Listening to them telling this story, those of us who were in tears before suddenly are breathless, overwhelmed with joy over this turn of events.

In all, there were seven children who receive life-saving organs from Nicholas's body. And the response from the people of Italy was remarkable as well. Though Italian customs forbade removing organs to serve as transplants, thousands of new donors came forward in Italy alone to offer organs to save people's lives. The Greenses themselves have played a prominent role in developing charitable groups around the globe dedicated to encouraging organ donations. The number of lives saved due to these events is inestimable. Nor is it possible to fully gauge the strength of the positive emotions these events have generated, but I think it is safe to say the emotional gains on the positive side of the ledger have been enormous.

Would we try to weigh these events to see if the scales tilted in favor of good or bad? No, there is no counterweight that justifies a murder such as that. Their profound sadness over this death remains, and no amount of consequential "good" makes up for

that loss. This is interesting for the Greenes especially. They do not appear to be particularly religious; they may even have no belief that these events had a special purpose, or were divined in some way. They remain in tears, and in joy over the events of that day, events that propelled them into the work of saving lives both with their son's body, and by telling their story and inviting others to emulate them.

Contained within this story of the Greenes is a great lesson in the building of community. Hidden within even the most distressing experiences lie potential acts of kindness that foster the strongest communal ties. These ties are fortified not by sharing sorrows alone. The shared experiences of joy that follow successful resolution of the tragedy are also part of the community equation. The development of Community requires sharing of emotions in both dimensions.

ⁱ This show was broadcast on National Public Radio on May 20th, 1999