



By Caryn Sullivan

## **FAMILY PLANNING: FOR THE WORST CASE SCENARIO**

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I had been ruminating about death for days before I saw the images of the I-35W bridge jutting out of the mighty Mississippi at grotesque angles. Just two weeks earlier, I had experienced my own close encounter, having T-boned a vehicle whose driver was also chatting on her cell, then striking a seemingly sturdy tree that buckled from the 45 mph impact. Reeling from post-traumatic stress, I obsessed about how the young driver and I would likely have landed in the morgue instead of the emergency room without air bags and seat belts to brace the impact. Angry and depressed, I considered how the accident would not have happened if I had not chosen the shorter route that night.

My family was also rattled by the accident. I heard the fear in my typically reserved teenage daughter's voice when she told me twice that night that she loved me. I sensed the same worry in her older siblings, who got the photo of my smashed vehicle on their cell phones and called from afar. My teenage son with autism, who adores mom and abhors change, welcomed me home from the hospital by loaning me his cobra statue to protect me from demons. And my harried husband returned from a business trip to meet me at the hospital, shell-shocked but greatly relieved that while the vehicle was totaled, I was intact.

My ruminations about my personal scare ended when I saw the TV footage of the trucks, cars, and bus on the I-35W bridge and heard about the children who escaped from the bus. With a truly remarkable disaster at hand, my concern, like millions around the world, shifted to the families whose lives were shattered when the unthinkable occurred that evening. A bridge, the most important of our physical foundations, faltered, then failed.

Knowing how freaked I was when I realized that my crash was inevitable, I cannot imagine how terrified both the survivors and the victims must have felt when the bridge shuddered, then split. My crash was not inconceivable – a novice driver, talking on the phone and looking the wrong way, pulled out in front of me. But for a major bridge in a major metropolitan area that spans a major river to split in two – that is inconceivable. As I read the stories about the victims, my mind was immediately drawn to the children they left behind - children whose hearts may never fully heal. As one who had lost two parents by age 23, I have lived their loss. I know about the painful moments they will endure without parents who should be there. My deepest condolences go out to all of them.

Within the survivor camp, there will certainly be many walking wounded – those who will be unable to put the sounds and the images of the collapse out of their minds for a long time; those who will be unable to drive across bridges because they cannot escape the horror of what they experienced; those who cannot comprehend how they made it to the other side instead of landing in the river. I hope they find a cobra to fight off their demons.

Officials have reported that in this post-9/11 world they were well prepared for this unexpected disaster. I wonder if other families are better prepared than ours for life after an unforeseen tragedy. I've wrestled with this issue for awhile now and can't seem to get my arms around it. For if tragedy struck our family, our teenage son with autism would have a rough road to traverse. Unlike his three siblings, the goal is not simply to get this 16-year-old through high school, into college, and on the road to independence. He'll need help with transitioning from high school to a currently unknown destination – school, vocational training, or work — as well as with suitable housing, recurring medical issues, complicated social challenges, and ongoing financial support. Since the large shoes I wear would be difficult to fill, I've not been able to ask anyone to slip them on in my absence. So, truth be told, we have no real plan for the worst-case scenario.

Other families may face different, but equally difficult challenges, in addressing these concerns. They may have blended families, military families, or families residing in different countries. All present unique challenges in preparing for the worst. But these recent events have affirmed that there is no upside in avoiding difficult decisions. There truly is no time like the present. The bridge collapse illustrates that we cannot assume that when we enter our vehicles we will reach our destinations. Truth be told, we all need a plan for the worst-case scenario.

Caryn Sullivan, a recovering attorney, lives in Mendota Heights with her family. Her essay, "Dancing with Despair" is featured in "Special Gifts: Women Writers on the Heartache, the Happiness and the Hope of Raising a Special Needs Child" (Wyatt-MacKenzie). Her email address is [carynsullivan@comcast.net](mailto:carynsullivan@comcast.net).