

Loving

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(So I wrote this piece, read it to my daughter, and was ready to publish. And then, that night, tragedy struck again, and 2 ducklings passed away because of the ridiculous Virginia summer heat. And yet...we still choose to believe in Love and we still don't fear Love's Shadow of Pain. It's more true now than ever.)

In the third grade year of my life, Laura Ingalls was my Spirit Animal. My friends and I saved our monies for the long-awaited Scholastic book sale each year, where we'd buy and read all of Ms. Ingalls's books: *Little House*, *Little Town*, the one where she went into entirely too much detail about food (I'm looking at you, *Farmer Boy*), the tales of the sod home they built. Each copy was shared and re-shared and treasured.

During recess, which was an actual thing in the 1980s, we gathered on the playground and pleasantly discussed (read: argued) about who would play the role

of Laura that day. Everyone wanted to be her. Mary was pretty, but boring. Nellie Olson was the only B word we sheltered schoolgirls had ever heard of: A Bully. Ma was just too....motherly. Once our casting was set, we imagined new and thrilling adventures that we were sure, if the author had been around to hear us, would have resulted in a new book immediately being added to the *Little House* canon.

Now that I live in a rural area, I have realized, to my great sadness and to the astonishment of exactly no one who knows me, that I am no Laura Ingalls. The fact that I call my location "rural" even though it is within 30 minutes of a real, live Starbucks is evidence enough. However, my family recently became Country Enough that we decided to raise ducks, and by "we," I of course mean my daughter. My main role in the Duck-Raising Operation has been to take photos of their progression from fluffy bundles of yellow fuzz to quacking lap-swimmers of the pond in our yard, to watch my daughter mother them better than any waterfowl mama ever would, to observe as she extended her little hand into their crate and allowed them to sleep on it for hours just so they would imprint on her. I have witnessed her tender bandaging and medicating of injured webbed feet as her sweet and unflinching care brought her beloved ducks back to health.

Until it changed. A few Sundays ago, I was the first to arrive home from church, and the sight of two trembling ducks huddled under the porch immediately alerted me to the fact that something was very, very wrong. My eldest child arrived behind me and joined the search for the missing third duck, and it was he who made the tragic discovery: One of the ducks had been savagely attacked and mauled and left to die in the pond.

The days that followed were ones of tears, of reassurance that it was no one's fault, of laugh-crying through old photos of the fluffy babies, of remembering the missing sweet pet and watching in great sadness as her sisters searched everywhere for her, calling out and hearing no reply and calling out again and again, their little feathered heads peeking in every hiding place to see where she could be.

The days that followed have been reminders that, when we love, whether it is a precious pet or a trusted person, we risk everything. We are guaranteed that in order to feel the greatest joy of this planet, we will nearly always feel the greatest pain as well. My heart has shattered as I have watched my daughter grieve, as she has perched herself by the pond, not wanting to leave the ducks alone, her tears streaming, the sadness mingled with the new and terrible understanding she now possesses: She cannot ultimately protect those she loves. She sits, watching over them and I sit, watching over her and wishing I had the choice to change it all. But I know that my daughter, as I, will only ever have one choice...

Once pain has touched our lives, we cannot change it, but we can become changed by it.

In the days when the grief is newly-carved on our hearts, the wounds pulsing and aching, we do not want to hear these words, nor are we ready for them. But as the

stretching and pulling of the healing begins, we can choose. We can decide to try everything to forget the hurt, to numb it, to pretend the deep scars it has etched upon us aren't truly there; or we can open our hearts to it, brave right in the midst of our fear, acknowledging that this dark visitor has already arrived at our doorstep. We can stop our futile pushing against its entry and allow it in, allow the hurt to move us, knowing that this uninvited guest will come again and again. Our choice isn't in the allowing of his arrival but in the acceptance of it.

We will never put out a welcome mat for pain. But when we make the choice not to deny it, when we sit with that visitor, we open up the curtains to throw the light upon his shadows, and discover that we, the ones who considered ourselves the small and the weak, are stronger than the pain.

My daughter's ducks still look for their sister. They are more skittish around the tall grasses and reeds surrounding the pond. The pain's effects still exist. But not that many days ago, I drove my girl to the post office to pick up a new shipment of fluffy yellow babies. All the way home, she cradled their fragile, newly-born selves in her arms and whispered to them of the food that waited at home, the waters they would explore, the dog that would sniff them curiously. My daughter had opened her heart again to Love. With that open door, she knew Pain could be following close behind. After all, it is Love's shadow. But she would take them both on, the Love with the Pain. It would always be worth the cost to open that door again.

"This is the sound of surviving. This is my farewell to fear. This is my whole heart deciding, I'm still here, I'm still here. And I'm not done fighting This is the sound of surviving." Nichole Nordeman

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