

The look on Lily's face is devastating. She is usually full of giggles and stories; her face is usually lit with mischief and delight. Today her eyes are dark with sorrow. She looks at me so mournfully that if I didn't know better, I'd wonder what I had done wrong.

But I've been prepared. Before arriving at our writing workshop, I've been told that Lily probably won't seem like herself today, because one of her cats ran out into the road and was hit by a car last night.

Lily loves her cats. Just last week, the big news she wanted to tell about was that she was going to be allowed to bring one of them to school for a day. She talks about them all the time, and they often turn up in the stories she writes.

When I sit down, I let her know that I know what happened and I tell her I'm sorry. I thank her for coming to our weekly workshop anyway, even when she feels so bad.

I'm wondering what Lily will want to write today, and whether she'll want us to hear it. I've always told the girls in the workshop that they don't have to read their work aloud if they don't want to. If they write something that feels private, it's fine to pass when it's their turn to read. Lily, usually so exuberant and eager to share her work, has never taken me up on the offer to keep her writing private, and I'm not even sure she remembers it.

We begin as usual, with my suggested exercises, and all of us bend over our pages and get to work. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Lily concentrating on what she's doing. After a while, it's time to read, and when it's Lily's turn she says, "I'd rather not read this one." I say that's fine, give her a quick nod of reassurance, and move on.

After the third or fourth exercise, Lily is still declining to read. It changes the mood of the workshop session, that's for sure. Instead of her usual dramatic read-alouds we have silence at her turn, though she does manage a few comments when others read. The next time her turn comes around she looks at me a little sheepishly as she says no, as if she might be concerned that I mind her continual refusal to read.

"You know," I say to her, "I'm glad you're not reading aloud today." She looks at me and I know she's listening. "I mean, I always love hearing your stories," I continue, "but I'm glad to see you choosing not to read, because it means you knew I meant it when I said you didn't have to, and because it probably means you're writing something that's important enough to you to keep private."

For the first time in today's workshop Lily smiles. I don't even know if she *is* writing about her cat today, and it doesn't matter. Maybe she's using the writing time to work through those feelings of grief, and maybe she's using the writing time to take herself out of those feelings for a while, but either way, she knows that I take her feelings seriously and that the workshop isn't just about pleasing me.

One of the most important things we can do for girls is allow them to feel pain, without trying to cover it up or downplay it or cheer them out of it. Mary Pipher says that so many problems come from the effort to avoid or run from pain, and I think she's right. Bingeing, drinking too much, shopping too much – there are so many destructive things that girls do to cope with emotional pain when they *haven't* learned how to bear it and how to get comforted in healthy ways. Too often, girls are urged to cheer up, smile, stop looking so miserable. A well-meaning adult might have tried to comfort Lily by saying it wasn't so bad, or that there are worse losses to suffer.

Of course there are worse losses, but that's not what Lily needed to hear that day. She didn't need to hear that *her* loss was trivial or that the most important thing was to get over it and look happy again. What I was trying to do was let her know that she *could* feel unhappy, and she could write about it if she wanted to, and the rest of us would respect her sorrow, and make space for it, and be with her.

Originally published in *New Moon Network*, May/June 2001