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Wesleyan University's Michael S. Roth on an influential person in his life

By Michael S. Roth

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Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

Michael Roth, president of Wesleyan University

WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

The person who influenced my life the most is someone I never met. I can still see his portrait hanging there in our living room: a large oil painting of a little boy based on a close-up photograph. When friends arrived I waited with trepidation for the question that inevitably came. Who the heck is that hanging there? That's my brother Neil. He died.

Neil died from meningitis when he was about five years old. I couldn't have told you even that much until I was in my twenties. Afraid to ask, or unable to remember the answers we were given, my older brother and I just never raised this topic in conversation with our parents or with each other. We were, my parents determined, going to have normal childhoods. We were not going to grow up in a house of tragedy. Still, at the moments when the old home movies were brought out, or at the memorial services on Yom Kippur, our parents' pain briefly became visible.

I was born about 16 months after Neil's death. Only after I was a father myself did I learn that having another child was the balm prescribed to help heal my parents' pain. I was to fill the void left by this loss. Or perhaps I was supposed to create a new life for my family by reclaiming their right to happiness. In any case, I felt a special, but certainly unspoken, role. I was to be the hero who would set the family right again. I was to heal the wounds caused by the death of that beautiful little boy in the picture. Yet I was also to remain the trace of those wounds.

At least that's how I felt the influence of my missing, ideal brother. I was to excel in school, but even great grades never felt good enough. One of the most fulfilling moments of my life was winning a valedictorian award named for my brother at our religious school. As a college student at Wesleyan, I turned to the study of philosophy and psychology, always within some kind of historical context. I told my teachers I was interested in how people make sense of the past, especially in how they deal with loss. My first research papers and then my books focus on how we create a past with which we can live. I wrote about Freud and Hegel, about trauma and about revolution, always with attention to how individuals or groups find ways to overcome significant loss without merely forgetting it. The personal and the professional melded together.

In recent years I have turned to photography and film to understand how artists in these media have dealt with (sometimes triumphed over) painful memories. Even the film class I am currently teaching continues to deal with these same issues. The central questions of my work and life go back to that portrait.

I can still hear the question. Who the heck is that hanging there? That's my brother Neil. He died. The most influential person in my life.