

Not for Publication  
Panel Presentation Nov. 28, Saturday  
9:00-10:00 BDAP Pandemic Litfest  
Panel: A Writer's Map of Grief

## **A Writer's Map of Grief**

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Good morning Cathy, Karina, and everyone who is here with us in this first panel of the literary festival. It's probably strange to begin a festival with a discussion of grief, our panel's thematic anchor. But in a world changed by our living with the pandemic, the invitation to share one's literary map to negotiate the vast spaces of grief is one that I accepted. Our panel's theme actually reminded me of an early poem I learned by Archibald MacLeish titled "Ars Poetica" which says towards its end:

For all the history of grief  
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

Well, talking of seasons of transition, last September, the Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Center of De La Salle University asked me to serve as director for the first creative nonfiction writing workshop for doctors with the theme "Writing the Pandemic," and in that one-month program, one of the prompts on the visceral proximity of death in the choice of a medical profession resulted in a brilliant young doctor's long-overdue story of her coming into medicine, which at its core was a loving tribute to her mother who had been crucial to her decision to become a doctor. After her mom died of cancer, she had been wanting to write about their relationship and the writing workshop gave her the protected time and space to touch base with her grief. In our discussion of her work, cued by the title of her narrative, we discussed the five stages of grief in the model offered by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross.

I'm proposing to use these stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance as a kind of map to bring forward the literary expressions of grief that may

speak to us of the possibilities of healing. It is my contention that when we grieve, we are not only mourning for the beloved we have lost; we are also mourning for our own finite selves and this equally finite and fragile world in which we live.

For the stage of denial, there's the behavior of Gilgamesh, the epic hero from ancient Mesopotamia, who, in his quest for immortality cries to Shiduri, the tavern-keeper at the edge of the world:

My friend whom I loved so dear,  
Who went with me through every danger,  
My friend Enkidu whom I loved so dear,  
Who went with me through every danger,

The doom of mortals overtook him.  
Six days I wept for him and seven nights.  
I did not surrender his body for burial  
Until a maggot dropped from his nostril.

For anger and bargaining, who better than Job in the Old Testament could speak of it eloquently? He vents against God saying [in 30:20-21]:

I cry unto thee, and thou doest not hear me: I stand up, and thou  
regardest me not. Thou art become cruel to me: with thy strong  
hand thou opposest thyself against me.

And in the conventional wisdom that presupposes good fortune as a consequence of goodness, Job seeks justice for his misfortune. He cries out [in 30:25-31]:

Did I not weep for him that was in trouble? Was not my soul  
grieved for the poor? When I looked for good, then evil came unto  
me; and when I waited for light, there came darkness. My bowels  
boiled, and rested not: the days of affliction prevented me. I went  
mourning without the sun: I stood up, and I cried in the  
congregation. I am a brother to dragons, and a companion to owls.  
My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat. My  
harp is also turned to mourning, and my organ into the voice of  
them that weep.

For the stage of depression, poem 372 by Emily Dickinson describes it with surgical precision:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –  
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –  
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’  
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –  
A Wooden way  
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –  
Regardless grown,  
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –  
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

Personally for me, it is the last stage of acceptance that is the most difficult to arrive at. The late Irish poet John O’Donohue speaks of this difficulty in a poem titled “For Grief”:

When you lose someone you love,  
Your life becomes strange,  
The ground beneath you becomes fragile,  
Your thoughts make your eyes unsure;  
And some dead echo drags your voice down  
Where words have no confidence  
Your heart has grown heavy with loss;  
And though this loss has wounded others too,  
No one knows what has been taken from you  
When the silence of absence deepens.

Flickers of guilt kindle regret  
For all that was left unsaid or undone.

There are days when you wake up happy;  
Again inside the fullness of life,  
Until the moment breaks  
And you are thrown back  
Onto the black tide of loss.  
Days when you have your heart back,  
You are able to function well  
Until in the middle of work or encounter,

Suddenly with no warning,  
You are ambushed by grief.

It becomes hard to trust yourself.  
All you can depend on now is that  
Sorrow will remain faithful to itself.  
More than you, it knows its way  
And will find the right time  
To pull and pull the rope of grief  
Until that coiled hill of tears  
Has reduced to its last drop.

Gradually, you will learn acquaintance  
With the invisible form of your departed;  
And when the work of grief is done,  
The wound of loss will heal  
And you will have learned  
To wean your eyes  
From that gap in the air  
And be able to enter the hearth  
In your soul where your loved one  
Has awaited your return  
All the time.

The great mystic poet Jellaludin Rumi, offers another way of looking at the paradox of grief and our acceptance of loss. In the tavern of life, we hear this dialogue:

I saw grief drinking a cup of sorrow and called out, 'It tastes sweet, does it not?' 'You've caught me,' grief answered, 'and you've ruined my business. How can I sell sorrow, when you know it's a blessing?'

I feel that this unimaginable blessing of grief makes its visitation upon the grieving one when the mind, heart, and spirit are instructed on how to open oneself up to the grace of loss. Mary Oliver's "In Blackwater Woods" says when it turns its seeing inward:

...  
Every year  
everything  
I have ever learned  
  
in my lifetime

leads back to this: the fires  
and the black river of loss  
whose other side

is salvation,  
whose meaning  
none of us will ever know.  
To live in this world

you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it

against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.

It seems then that knowing the time to let go is part of this grace making its visitation at last in one's life and initiating the healing. I would like to end my presentation with three poems that shift the soul's attention to how one ought to live with death every single day. Gary Whitehead's poem "Arboretum" locates death in a lush garden:

Then you will have held something beautiful—  
the hand of the old one dying by degrees,  
the bloom of the almost undone season—  
and you will have seen that, even now,  
the scars—dark rivers, overgrown cities of light—  
might heal still in the way  
the aging and the broken have sometimes of rising  
suddenly despite whatever sores or the atrophy  
of the body might bear upon a soul—  
and maybe you'll see it  
in some place so ordinary as a public garden  
and its most private space, late one afternoon,  
leaning against a fence, taking the last  
bright bell of morning glory like your great-  
grandmother's open hand, and you'll hold it  
as if it's the last bloom left on earth,  
and you'll hold it as if to empty into it  
the ringing in your ears that evens out  
suddenly to birdsong and the buzz of bees

there in the garden's remotest place,  
late one summer, late in the millennia,  
safe with the company you keep, safe as the earth,  
and the blue, silent bell closing into sleep.

This penultimate poem is a witnessing of death by Pamela Uschuk called "Green Flame":

Slender as my ring finger, the female hummingbird crashed  
into plate glass separating her and me  
before we could ask each other's name. Green flame,  
she launched from a dead eucalyptus limb.  
Almost on impact, she was gone, her needle beak  
opening twice to speak the abrupt language of her going,  
taking in the day's rising heat as I took  
one more scalding breath, horrified by death's velocity.  
Too weak from chemo not to cry  
for the passage of her emerald shine,  
I lifted her weightlessness into my palm.  
Mourning doves moaned, who, who,  
oh who while her wings closed against the tiny body  
sky would quick forget as soon as it would forget mine

Finally, here's a meditation on the perfection of wisdom in the heart of Prajnaparamita sutra where Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion speaks to the monk Sariputra about emptiness or *shunyata*, referring to the fact that no thing— including human existence— has independent substantiality. No thing is permanent; everything is interconnected, in the constant flux. This wisdom offers an alternative to the suffering caused by ignorance: our egos, our attachments, and our resistance to change and loss.

Body is nothing more than emptiness,  
emptiness is nothing more than body.  
The body is exactly empty,  
and emptiness is exactly body.  
The other four aspects of human existence --  
feeling, thought, will, and consciousness --  
are likewise nothing more than emptiness,  
and emptiness nothing more than they.  
All things are empty:

Nothing is born, nothing dies,  
nothing is pure, nothing is stained,  
nothing increases and nothing decreases.  
So, in emptiness, there is no body,  
no feeling, no thought,  
no will, no consciousness.  
There are no eyes, no ears,  
no nose, no tongue,  
no body, no mind.  
There is no seeing, no hearing,  
no smelling, no tasting,  
no touching, no imagining.  
There is nothing seen, nor heard,  
nor smelled, nor tasted,  
nor touched, nor imagined.  
There is no ignorance,  
and no end to ignorance.  
There is no old age and death,  
and no end to old age and death.  
There is no suffering, no cause of suffering,  
no end to suffering, no path to follow.  
There is no attainment of wisdom,  
and no wisdom to attain.  
The Bodhisattvas rely on the Perfection of Wisdom,  
and so with no delusions,  
they feel no fear,  
and have Nirvana here and now.  
All the Buddhas,  
past, present, and future,  
rely on the Perfection of Wisdom,  
and live in full enlightenment.  
The Perfection of Wisdom is the greatest mantra.  
It is the clearest mantra,  
the highest mantra,  
the mantra that removes all suffering.  
This is truth that cannot be doubted.  
Say it so:  
Gaté,  
gaté,  
paragaté,  
parasamgaté.  
Bodhi!  
Svaha!  
Which means...  
Gone,  
gone,

gone over,  
gone fully over.  
Awakened!  
So be it!

Thank You.