Dealing with and Writing about Death

For the old life is gone, the old love has vanished. Grief is the most humane of emotions but it is a one-sided emotion: it is not reciprocated.

—Joyce Carol Oates, “Why We Write about Grief”

It all began with an apology.

I had missed a week of class after the death of my sister, and when I returned—still haunted by her loss at only 52—I wanted to explain why I had been absent. It was an incredibly poignant moment, filled with pauses for tears, and when I progressed from a brief explanation to a chronicling of my life with my now-deceased kid sister, a litany of questions were asked, followed by people adding their own stories. Deshauna had lost a brother to a drive-by shooting, and Langle had suffered the death of an uncle killed while in prison. Andy, a veteran of Iraq, had been traumatized by death as a vivid and ubiquitous part of his life. Suddenly, the plan for a cursory apology for being away had resulted in a classwide discussion about death and the way it changes and even empowers those who experience it. My students had grappled with death too but never felt it suitable for a classroom. They wore T-shirts with the names and faces of siblings lost in gang fights and aunts and uncles who were victims of random shootings. Some had seen young siblings lost to the streets in the most bizarre and harrowing ways.

With tears still in my eyes, I asked the class if they would like to formulate an assignment around their experiences with death—the way it had changed their lives, values, personalities. I knew I had yet to understand how I would deal with my unspeakable loss and wondered if my own writing and sharing with others might help. Would they, I wondered, be interested in exploring not only what it meant to them but also how to move forward with it as permanent baggage? The answer was an enthusiastic yes. Many argued that they had long grappled with the long shadow of death in their lives but felt it could never be accepted as a writing topic. Others had already written about it and were excited to cross the academic boundary that seemed to always divide their lives from what they did in their composition classes. “It’s so personal,” argued Teresa, “but it’s also so much a part of our lives and all that we do. It affects the way we think about everything we write, because we know someone who has died or experienced death.”

As the session for our class came to a close, we agreed that this would be an assignment that crossed several boundaries or borders in terms of what one considers to be an appropriate academic writing assignment. While most of us focus on the typical essay, we wanted to invite poems, songs, letters, or even stories. The goal was to use language to better understand, to better negotiate our lives with this permanent and forever searing scar. I finished the class that day—the first after leaving my sister’s funeral and coming to terms with her death—with a sense of optimism as to how I could...
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better understand my grief while helping my students to turn their own pathos into a meaningful piece of writing.

And it all began with an apology.

First, a brief explanation. My sister had been found dead in her kitchen after what seemed to be a fatal reaction to pills and alcohol. My siblings and I had spent more than a year trying to help her to stop drinking and find peace in a life that did not include destructive behavior. But, as I explained to my students on that surprisingly warm October day, she died just days before she was scheduled to fly to my other sister’s house and get professional help. My other siblings and I were left bereft, confused, angry. The tears had come in torrents, and I was sure that I could never put into words the immense sorrow that poured through my body. It was a cruel hoax of the most bewildering kind. Why, after months of personal care from each of us, had she died alone in her kitchen, only hours before yet another sibling was on her way to make her life better?

Joyce Carol Oates’s opening quotation is perhaps the most important reason why one should write about death. As she suggests, grief is a truly harsh, unforgiving emotion, and it is virtually always experienced alone. Yes, there are others who are touched by the tragedy—there are dozens of those who commiserate with us—but in the sleepless restlessness of another night in bed, wondering about the contradictions and loss, one is utterly alone. “You know,” writes author Meghan O’Rourke, “writing has always been the way I make sense of the world. It’s a kind of stay against dread, and chaos.”

In Virginia Woolf’s memoir “A Sketch of the Past,” there is an ardent discussion about how her need to write had emanated from childhood trauma. In writing her autobiographical To the Lighthouse, Woolf declares that she “rubbed out” (108) the effect of her father’s violence by writing about it. At the same time, writing had served her in a way similar to what psychoanalysts do for their patients. In the same way, for me and for many of my students, writing about the loss of a loved one—through poems, stories, essays, and songs—helped us to make sense of the world. It was perhaps the most successful way to confront this dark entity that had entered our lives and left us feeling alone and impotent.

But how does one write about death, and equally important, how does one design a writing assignment that invites students to delve into this mysterious and seemingly impenetrable demon that plagues us? To begin, it is important to become reacquainted with the empowering aspects of expressivist writing and its goal to liberate writers to pursue the goals of self-discovery and personal understanding. “Writing is discovery,” writes Yvonne Siu-Runyan, former NCTE president. “I know that if my writing hasn’t led to me to some new discovery then it isn’t worth much. I uncover what it is I have to say—the hidden messages behind the words” (24).

Pure expressivist writing has been increasingly scrutinized as of late, especially with the call from many to write with an eye toward social justice and equality—a writing that is more in line with a social constructionist approach. Indeed, as Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy write, “in the 1980s, expressivism as a philosophy of composition came increasingly under attack, and social constructionism—the view that good writers must master the accepted practices of a discourse community—was widely adopted as an alternative” (647). With much of the language arts world becoming more aware of the many discourse communities that populate our classes and the linguistic apartheid that often defines the writing class, it has become glaringly obvious that writing must include an appreciation of the social and ideological aspects of writing. Indeed, expression is forever tinged with a political component.

And while I agree that our writing classes must engage students in the social and political aspects of writing—replete with a look at the differences between academic discourses and the various racial and ethnic groups that imbue our language with color and power—it is equally important to respect the need for transformative writing that begins with the writer, that serves the needs of an individual who is grappling with authentic personal and social dilemmas. Further, to deal with death—especially as it relates to neighborhood violence, drug addiction, and debilitating personal loss—is not to be
completely isolated in an expressivist pedagogy. It is, in many ways, serving writers as problem posers in the Freirean spirit while broadening their horizons beyond pure expression for its personal remedies. Indeed, as my students evinced in doing this assignment—and as Peter Elbow has argued—“it must be remembered that there’s no black/white dividing line between personal and non-personal language, but rather a continuum” (17).

When David Bartholomae made the argument against expressivist writing, he contended that writing could not be done without a teacher, without all of the voices and power that are part of writing for the academy—and for other compelling contexts. “Thinking of writing as academic writing,” argues Bartholomae, “makes us think of the page as crowded with others—or it says that this is what we learn in school, that our writing is not our own, nor are the stories we tell when we tell the stories of our lives—they belong to TV, to Books, to Culture and History” (63–64). In arguing this, Bartholomae was contending that expressivist approaches to writing failed to acknowledge the social and ideological aspects of discourse, making it seem as if an author can be alone with their personal verities. While the expressivist argues for “using language to discover meaning” (Murray 86), Bartholomae suggests it is to “make a writer aware of the forces at play in the production of knowledge” (66).

But, as I previously argued, writing about death is in many ways a powerful way to bridge these two venerable approaches to composition, putting writers in touch with both their personal voices and verities, while also exposing them to the existential conundrums that are inextricably part of this kind of writing.

In writing her memoir “A Sketch of the Past,” Woolf uses writing to heal, but the efficacy of her prose does not stop there. Rather, as she wends her way through various experiences—including the sexual assault by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth—she comes to understand issues that transcend her immediate life. Sexuality, male power, and misogyny become more conspicuous, clearer, and more immediate as she recalls experiences through an expressivist, personal kind of writing.

Much of the same, I would argue, could be said about W. E. B. DuBois in crafting his classic book The Souls of Black Folk. “To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardship” (49–50), DuBois argues. In doing so, he was clearly writing from both a personal and political position, knowing that the pain of racism was affecting not only his world and thoughts but also the entire nation as a whole. When he told Americans that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line”
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(54), he was making a cogent argument that contained both personal and social elements.

Paulo Freire contends that the goal of liberation and empowerment cannot be reached without praxis, which is reflection and action. It is the act of understanding oneself and acting to become more fully human. It is the essence of problem posing and it begins with the writers’ ability to “perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as a reality in process in transformation” (71).

In writing their responses to death, I invited students to expand the typical academic response, using poetry, eulogies, letters, and even research essays to deal with the relevant issues they faced. I wanted each student to find—or try to find—some understanding and even closure in their writing. This began with examples. While students are quick to pour out stories of death and deep pathos, they are often uncertain as to how they can communicate these emotions in an academic essay. Most are accustomed to carefully choreographed papers that are designed to show what students have learned in class. They are teacher-led and have little to do with what is animating students’ lives. After some discussion of the assignment, I read students the eulogy I wrote for my sister. I knew I would cry while reading it—as I had on the day of her funeral—but I wanted to be vulnerable. I wanted students to see that it was OK to write with emotion and to share their deepest sense of loss, creating a safe zone from which writers could write. I wanted students to see that it was OK to write with emotion and to share their deepest sense of loss, creating a safe zone from which writers could write.

Jackie

My sister could get on your nerves. She could get in your face if you didn’t respond to her. If she felt that you were mad or sad, she’d ask what was wrong and push you for an answer. But when you got beyond the aggressively loving personality and the demands for her attention, you found a truly kind, giving, sweet, and wonderful person—the spirit of a little girl who yearns to be your friend, who smiles without pretense, without being careful or worrying about what others think. Jackie would tell you she loved you no matter who was around. And when she experienced severe depression—leading to lost jobs, self-doubt, and loneliness—she sought only the love of her family—especially her two beloved boys.

At this point, I paused and explained a little more about my sister. She had been dealing with depression, which led to drinking. The drinking had led to the loss of her beloved twin boys and later several jobs. She had spiraled down into a quagmire that seemed insurmountable, and I had been part of the solution—or so I thought. Then I read some more:

She spent much of this time searching for someone to take care of her and when she didn’t find it, she decided to be the person who takes care of others. As a therapist she was loved and cherished by her clients. They knew she could hear them. They knew she could appreciate the dilemma they were in. Jackie loved and gave. She looked you in the face, and asked you what was wrong. She cried when those she loved didn’t come home or answer her calls. And after she cried, she got up and again went back to work, never giving up or giving in.

Again I paused to explain the chapters of my sister’s life. She had never given up, but her drug abuse and severe depression had resulted in estrangement from her sons and a life that was solitary and bleak.

That’s why Jackie could be a pain at times. She was, in the end, the innocent little girl who’s knocking on your door, waiting persistently for an answer. Don’t try to ignore it, because she’ll keep knocking, not because she’s stubborn or selfish but because she cares, because she wants to know you, because, in the end, she is used to having to wait for an answer.

Maybe that’s why we lost Jackie. Maybe she was tired of not getting an answer. I want to believe that’s not the case, because I loved my little sister and tried to help her when she was at her lowest. I do know that Jackie was one of the most
loving and caring people I’ll ever meet, and that she is in heaven right now, knocking on doors, ready to tell everyone about Michigan State and her kids, and her hopes for her new future. I know those doors will open for you, Jackie. Nobody can resist you for very long.

Students Writing about Death and Loss

To invite students to write about death, in at least my classes, is to explore an opulent and rich world of sorrow and emotion. It is a world that demands understanding and that engages students in a truly visceral way. And, as I contended earlier, it is an assignment that incorporates personal discovery with social and political issues, stretching writers in ways that many assignments do not. Calvin, for instance, wrote a truly poignant letter to his grandmother, who had taken care of him during much of his childhood and who died just months before he graduated high school. His letter was introspective and authentic. It transfixed the class as he read.

It’s been two years since you passed, and I can’t ever forget you. You are there when I read my books for college and you’re there when I go to sleep, always aware that the heat is turned down to save money. You died because you are black, a minority, a woman, you did not have the same opportunities for good health and safety. You died because the streets and even the water are still not safe. I know that, Grannie, and I want to make it better for others.

Calvin explained that much of his grandmother’s life was spent in the dangerous parts of Flint, where she was well known and loved. This didn’t protect her from the contaminated water or the indifference of the government, which ignored the problem in the predominately African American city.

I want you to know, grandma, that I will not leave Flint. I will never let your death, and all of the issues faced by people of color be forgotten. That is my promise to you.

In discussing the importance of writing about grief, Louise DeSalvo declares that “writing, then, holds the key to how we can achieve psychic growth, despite our pain and despair, and how we can imagine a hopeful future. Through writing,” she continues, “we change our relationship to trauma, for we gain confidence in ourselves and in our ability to handle life’s difficulties. We come to feel our lives are coherent rather than chaotic” (45). Such contentions can be verified in the works of other students in my classes who also wrote about the pain of family loss. DeShaundra wrote in the most vivid and personal terms about her brother Clinton, who had been killed during an apartment burglary. Again, her words were perspicacious and seemingly poignant, but beyond the deep personal loss is a social comment that reflects my writers’ tendency to see beyond the grief and to demand that their language be part of a solution.

I lost you to some thugs, probably people you knew. The pain is more intense because of this, and when I visit that place—with all of its cold memories, I can’t help but wonder why you had to be there. Why couldn’t you be safe? Why couldn’t I have helped you to be safe? Why were drugs more important than me? Than you?

Many of the students who wrote about death, whether it involved a family member or friend, made similar allusions to the world beyond their personal loss. They discussed political injustice, racism, crime, and the failure of a system to protect the lives of those most vulnerable. When they wrote, they engaged in an authentic, intimate kind of discourse that reflected both their commitments to the person and their increasing understanding of the issues that caused their deaths. As I finished my letter to my sister, which expressed my wish that I could have been there in time to save her, I also examined my own ignorance about alcoholism and how it had been occurring right under my nose. I researched the topic, interviewed others, and found that alcoholism—like any addiction—is pernicious in the deadly grip it holds on its victims. Ironically, the victims are adept at hiding it from those who might help them. Before the assignment came to an end, I also wrote a letter to alcoholism, in which I vowed to never take its perfidious dangers for granted.

You took my little sister from me. You stole her life with the promise that tomorrow would be better. You lied to her, feeding her a poison that seemed to be a friend. I know you better now.
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I appreciate your risks, your truly evil nature. You will never hurt another loved one again.

It all began with an apology. I never thought of it as material for an article. In fact, I had spoken to few of my colleagues about my profound loss. Going to school, teaching class was, it seemed to me, completely detached from the death of my little sister. But on that day, when I tried to explain the reason for my absence, a metaphorical light went on—one that helped me appreciate the incredible empowerment one can glean from writing about death. It is certainly not done lightly, but when done, it can help students to see the writing class as a place where their lives are important, where their loss has a place, and where expressivists and social constructivism can coalesce and serve both as a moment of discovery and a window into genuine, real-life problems. “When sudden loss enters our reality, we awaken in an unfamiliar world” (1), write Brook Noel and Pamela Blair. When students are invited to write about death, they become agents in their own recovery. They become problem posers. They accomplish much of what we strive to do as teachers of language and compassion.

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Works Cited

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION
Lisa Storm Fink, RWT
In this unit, students write autobiographies, illustrate them, and set them to music. Music is a powerful tool to evoke emotion, and students will carefully select songs to accompany the stories from their lives. Students brainstorm lists of important events in their lives, along with images and music that represent those events. They then create storyboards in preparation for the final multimedia project. After making revisions, they present their final projects to their peers in class. http://bit.ly/1HaEaN5