

What came before the idea.

My Dad died six months before covid changed all our lives. This sentence seems to be the lead these days, at least in my own mind. And whispering right alongside it? “Don’t bury the lead.”

A few years before my Dad’s passing, my oldest friend Pamela died. It was a heightened, meaningful time of taking care of her in our home, being with her at the moment she passed, bathing and wrapping her body, readying it for her Green Burial. Hours after she died, we sat around her in good old fashioned wake style, telling stories, sipping whisky. Then after her burial the house went quiet, all visitors were gone. And I had time and space to mourn our 30 years together. Those first months I took the path of numbness. I fell into food and TV, letting both buffer and distance me from feelings. I was too exhausted to realize that I was cheating myself out of a continued connection with her.

I did not want to go this same route after losing my Dad. Caring for him felt sacred, months lived in heightened awareness. Every cup of decaf coffee or bowl of oatmeal I made for him felt sacramental. Every wink he gave or squeeze of my hand contained hidden depths. And after he passed, I still felt deeply in communication with him. I understood that this after-death-time was a continuation of our relationship, our love. It had a lot to reveal, to teach me. I knew in my bones that this was an important time.

But I was so jumbled up in grief. Focused thoughts seemed beyond me. I felt surprised and a bit scared that I could not journal since it has been a refuge from age twelve on. And sitting there, over in the corner, waiting to take over. . . numbness. I kept hearing Rumi’s words: “Don’t

go back to sleep.” The unimaginable, the great fear had happened. My Dad was dead. And, as his life so greatly influenced me, his death was now changing me, deepening me, working on my heart in ways I subtly felt, but could barely articulate. I was also beginning to feel that turning away from grief felt like I was somehow dishonoring him, diminishing who he was and is to me. So, I vowed to myself to have faith in it instead, faith that grief carried its own revelations. Grief no longer felt “bad,” but as necessary to a whole life as love. And I wanted to give it time and a place of honor.

My Dad and I shared the love of art, he in his painting and reading, me in teaching art history and writing. Beyond this, we both experienced looking at art as almost a wisdom tradition, a path that helped us understand our lives and see the beauty in, well, everything . . . at least eventually. I soon realized that it was time to seek help from our old friend.

The idea of the *Mourning Journal* arrived soon after. This journal would be a welcoming place that I could always go to for help and relief, a place where beauty would accompany me through all the uncomfortable feelings pooling around my heart. Like so many times in my life, I would rely on looking at art to help me untangle the knotted mass of thoughts, memories, emotions. I would write wherever it led me. I would be soothed by its beauty. And I would cry.

One year later, I continue to go to my *Mourning Journal* whenever I sense that building up of tightness, numbness, or flatness. I began this journey with my Dad. Now I understand that it is a source to reach for at times of loss of every sort, whether personal or social, death of a loved one or death of an ideal. Looking at art has helped me write about the illusion of permanence upon turning 60, the loss of a sense of

home after retiring, the transformation of the sense of “foundational people” in my life to their “foundational love” that carries on.

Although I am so fortunate to have a loving, supportive husband, family, and friends, ultimately my grief remains my own to experience and befriend. This is true for each one of us. Grief is so extremely personal in how it acts on us and what it reveals. And while I shudder to think how I would have gotten through the most acute grief without my loved ones, or the many wonderful books that have mirrored my own path through sorrow, most hours of each day I live entirely within my own emotional reality. As do we all. I hope your Mourning Journal will help accompany you through.