

# **Mourning Journal**

**looking at art   writing through grief   resting in beauty**

When someone we love dies, we enter the landscape of grief. We may have begun anticipating this death much earlier though, watching sorrow rise at the moment of diagnosis. Most of us will likely spend time in this world of death and grief. As our parents, family and friends, and we ourselves grow older, mourning becomes part of our lives, whether in anticipation or bereavement after loss. It is an on-going, mostly private journey. So, what do we do with it? How do we recognize, be with and honor it? Can we learn to integrate it into our everyday lives rather than naming it aberrant? I am learning the answer is yes.

## **Mourning**

While I have experienced death throughout my life, these last seven years have felt like an immersive course on the subject. Every year another loved one has fallen critically ill. Life has felt defined by caretaking and helping them through their end time. Then grief takes over. Through these years of intensive and repeated practice, I have learned what helps me during the mourning season, what does not, and what makes it all worse. And how changeable and confusing emotions can be when death calls. Each one of us experiences grief in different ways and at different times. However, there may be one characteristic of grief that is common to us all. Fatigue.

## Looking

A strange exhaustion has marked my mourning off and on. All will be fine one moment and the next will feel like the rug has been pulled out from underneath me. For months after my Dad died, I could not sing, pick up my guitar, write in my journal, exercise, focus enough to read a novel . . . any of my lifelong, soul-nourishing pursuits. This kind of fatigue insisted on being heard. It bellowed out warning: listen to your grief, *this is real*, you cannot run from this. If you do it will only show up in ways unacceptable to you . . . irritation, edginess, anger, illness. So, listen to it now.

But how? This kind of fatigue had me sitting either in front of a window or in front of the TV (British mysteries have been their own balm). Unfocused window-gazing has been so necessary in waking to the realities of loss inch by teary inch. But, as fatigue slightly lessened, I watched my mind begin to agitate. And confusion set in. Emotions, memories, thoughts began banging into each other without resolution. Round and round, they began to knot. I felt caught between a mind waking up a bit and a body still too weary to act. Then I remembered art. I may have had little energy to make, to do, to create. But I could *look* at art and try to focus, at least for a moment.

I started with W.M.D. Turner's *Norham Castle: Sunrise*.



A reproduction of this old friend sits at the bottom left of my gazing window. Immediately after shifting my eyes down to it I felt that familiar aesthetic quiver. I was still alive in there! I was not just a limp mass of tears! And for the first time in so long, I knew how I could help myself. Look at art . . .

## **Writing**

. . . and listen to my reactions. Then write them out. I started slowly, like a creature coming out of torpor. Something in me knew that this was an important time, a personally ripe time if I would only respect it. But I had to give grief attention, putting a close ear to it. Looking at art began to act as a portal into this mysterious land of loss. I sensed a single strand in that emotional knot loosening and becoming distinct, understandable. Then another. And another. Words slowly came, focus slowly grew. I was tangibly feeling clearer, lighter. This process - of synchronistically pulling an art image, listening to how my heart, body, and mind respond to it, writing until I am done - quickly became the place for me to consciously open to grief, to listen to it, to feel the feelings building up asking for release and . . .

## **Resting**

. . . the place to rest in beauty. Looking closely at art can calm *and* enliven us. It can also connect us with all of humanity, our lineage of spirit. Whatever we may be living through today has been lived through countless times. Art reminds us of this; we are not alone in our experiences. We can look to each other through art to find answers, questions, and solace.

Looking at art and writing through grief have helped me re-engage with life. The pure sensuality of color, the emotion of light, the energy of line. This process has been a tender offering to my wounded heart. I offer it now to you hoping that it may soothe you in your mourning time. May your Mourning Journal grow to be an anchoring place that helps steady this emotional ride, an outlet that helps bring to the surface what is simmering below, and a process that nudges you to engage with the beauty of this world. In these writings I offer you my untangling. May they help to ease and illuminate yours, strand by written strand.