

CAMPUS INSIGHT

Sitting Shiva with Grief

Z Nicolazzo 

I**N LATE AUGUST 2020**, my mother passed away suddenly. I say suddenly, but depending on one's vantage point, it was a long time coming. While my mother had just told me about her having cancer of the mouth, throat, and stomach three weeks prior, friends of hers told me after she passed about clues and indicators regarding her having cancer for a considerable amount of time prior to my knowing. One story even had it that a dentist had told her

almost a decade prior to get a small growth on her cheek looked at—a directive she decided not to follow. However, the details about my mother's passing are little more than a curious footnote in this particular telling. What is more intriguing to me is how I talk about this devastating moment in my life, and more specifically, how I talk about this devastating moment in my life in relation to my work. The main takeaway from this story is, then, about how my mother's death uncovers the implications of how we do not deal with grief in higher education, as well as what that means about our work alongside students and each other.

The timing of my mother's death coincided with a semester teaching leave. In conversation with my department head the year prior, I had decided to save

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two course releases until the semester after I was promoted with tenure. This would allow me not only to rest after what had been an incredibly busy five years of professional work, but also the space and time to focus on two book projects, one a co-edited book on Indigenous and resistant methods and the other a co-authored text about trans life online. The universe, however, had some different ideas for my fall plans. Much of my time and energy was sucked up into dealing with the aftermath of my

mother's death. I spent countless hours listening to other people tell me how sorry they were and how bad they felt regarding my mother's passing: bank and insurance representatives, distant relatives, and work colleagues. For the people with whom I am close, I spent countless hours detailing my pain, crying on the phone and in person, and learning which of my friends had also lost a parent with whom they were desperately close. To put it simply, each day unfolded as a slow-forming misery without end.

As time unraveled in the wake of my mother's passing, I began to notice a pattern in my telling others about her death. There was a sentence I kept using that, while seemingly benign, has caused me to pause as of late. When I talk about what has been one of the most gut-wrenching moments in my life, I

almost always utter the following sentence: "Fortunately, I was on teaching leave, so I had the time to be able to cope with her passing."

In less than 20 words, I continually rendered the experience of grieving as wholly irreconcilable with my work in higher education. This is strange-making for me for two reasons. First, it is so odd to me as I teach in graduate preparation programs focused on holistic understandings of self and others. Not only that, but I studied alongside some of the field's foundational and leading scholars on holistic student development. Thus, my statement creates a particular friction, an encounter through which, in my telling, I need to segment portions of myself away. My grieving is separate from my work, and nary the two shall meet, lest my sense of professionalism start to crumble.

Secondly, this telling occludes how I really dealt with my mother's passing, which was that I quite literally worked through it. Each evening, I made a list of things I needed to do the next day to keep going, with many of those things being work-related tasks. I became an unruly co-author, chafing at the slightest missing of a deadline, and drowned myself in work as a way to avoid dealing with how I was drowning in my own grief at the loss of the one person without whom I never wanted to imagine living. I am sure I was not a good roommate, know I could have been a better pet parent, appreciate my partner and friends for sticking with me, and have no clue how my co-authors suffered through my insufferable approach to coping.

In thinking about my dual responses, I see a common thread: I was making work and life inherently disparate and wholly distinct. In the first view, I saw work and life as irreconcilable realities, and in the second, I used work to supplant having to deal with the grief I was experiencing; yet another way of how I set work and life into antagonistic relation to each other. Thinking ethnographically—as I am often prone to do—it is not a far cry to imagine how my own segmentation signals a desire that others ought to do the same. To be clear, this is not how I

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practice in the field; and yet, one's own actions indicate particular desires, unconscious as they may be, for how one may want others to engage in their work. Thus, my actions signal unconscious desires for how I may want others to separate their grief and feeling from their work as educators.

My late mentor Peter Magolda often encouraged me to look askance at that which I thought I knew. He encouraged me to *make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar*, as the ethnographic saying goes (Magolda & Ebben Gross, 2009). I also agree with Chang's (2008) metaphor of the autoethnographic camera lens. Chang suggests autoethnographers zoom in to their own individual experiences to create a rich, thick description that they then zoom out from to make sense of broader sociocultural patterns of life. What, then, does my unconscious desire to tear apart grief and work tell about cultures of work in student affairs and higher education? How might my own race/gender be implicated by my responses to grief? And how can I—which is to say autoethnographically, how can *we* as educators—understand, explore, and embrace the ongoing altering effect of grief on our lives? In essence, I have begun to wonder: if grief has always been a component of my/our work in higher education, then how might we reimagine our worlds as educators?

Work is a large part of our lives, and often cannot be easily compartmentalized. While this has long been the case in a US context, its reality was amplified during the latest¹ pandemic when we were forced to confront the uncomfortably close entangling of work and life. Whether it was housing professionals realizing their working from home was a potentially life-threatening proposition or that while faculty could be somewhat flexible on assignment deadlines, semesters imposed ending points by which projects needed to be turned in, the most recent pandemic corroded the over-idealized vision of a separation between work and life. And yet, while work and life are an entangled reality, our attending to the feeling leaking across this comingled confusion was (and is, and likely will continue to be) utterly devoid of the attention it deserved (and deserves, and likely will continue to deserve). Not only was I burying my own grief, but I was also unable to attend adequately to the grief students were sharing with me. Even for those of us who are

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empaths (as I myself am) may have found our exteriors hardening to the ongoing waves of grief circulating. For example, I found I was both separating from my own and others' pain and sorrow. In doing so, I was cultivating a scene in which this mode of separation—occurring as it did through/as a function of work—was a desired mode of life. Even as I held space for students voicing their struggles, their sharing how they could not even pay attention to the words on the pages they were expected to read, I held as truth that one ought to find ways to, quite literally, work through it. After all, the semester demanded a final project, didn't it? And my publisher demanded a final manuscript, didn't they?

And yet, I know grief to be a particularly moving experience that can bring people together. Not only that, I have found grief to be a keen teacher. Two brief stories come to mind as I write these words ...

Story #1: I am at a podium giving a five-minute overview of what will unfold at a professional conference. I have notes, as I am not a great extemporaneous speaker. I've practiced, and I know what I need to say. In my talk, I recognize and name Peter Magolda, a habit I often do in public settings as a way to continue sharing his brilliance. I feel tears well up in my eyes. I push through, thinking this is not the time to cry despite the two speakers before me tearing up at the overwhelming loss and grief we are collectively experiencing in this unending moment. After I finish, a colleague comes up to me, holds my hand, and tells me she was a student peer of Peter's and loved hearing his name. She and I had never met, but I felt a surge of warmth and connection. I began to

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recognize and see her more than I likely would have throughout the remainder of the conference.

Story #2: I have always cared too much about time and deadlines. Likely a function of my Northeast regional sensibilities, investments in my socialization as white, and ongoing gendering as a woman, deadlines strike a certain fear in me that I

dare not tempt. To be on time is to be late was the lesson I re/learned through my 30s. And then my mother died. There were days and weeks I could not do anything but crumple under the sheer weight of losing my best friend. While work was a coping strategy for me, it was also something I began to address with a renewed sense of tenderness. Because while my mother taught me to respect deadlines, her life was an object lesson in patience and learning to live a life she loved. This was hard won for her, enduring a too-long marriage out of a sense of obligation and then needing to rebuild, to find those things she was passionate about and wanted to spend her time doing. She may have rarely missed a deadline, but when she did, it was because she was in love with the life she was living.

Grief is a large part of our lives, and often cannot be easily compartmentalized. Grief, too, creates waves amidst which we wade; sometimes these waves are placid, while other times they are violent and seek to pull us under, drowning us in their depths. The timing of this all is unpredictable, as is the pull of the grief when it comes. The unmetabolizable feeling of grief is the only thing I can count on most days, weeks, and months, even the "good" ones where I can think of my mother without tears forming.

How we feel grief with/in higher education has often meant not feeling grief with/in higher education. In so doing, we create

worlds in which we encourage others to not feel with/ in higher education, which then gets passed along. Sagas are created around those of us who feel the altering effects of grief, and who share our grief openly. We are too much and our grief gets in the way of our work, which is always posed as separate from feeling. Those sagas then create cultures of willful unfeeling, all despite our profession's insistence that we are attentive to the "whole student." Even those of us who experience acute grief use and view work as a separate mode of existence, as a distancing tacit from the world of our hurt and sorrow.

The day my mother died, I began writing about her, me, and us. Mirroring the Jewish practice of sitting shiva,² I wrote for seven days. As someone who is paid to write, this writing was different, though, as I did not intend to submit it for publication. In fact, to this day, I have only shared my meditations with a handful of people. I did not need then—nor do I need now—to know if my writing passed the test of peer review. While some of what I have published has indeed been personal and inflected with pain, I did not want to seek answers around if my writing was "good enough" for public consumption; I just wanted to sit shiva with grief, and then invite in others with whom I wanted to sit shiva alongside me and my unfolding sorrow.

Feelings are fickle and irrational guests. They arrive when they want, with whatever vigor they desire, and often move us in ways for which we cannot plan. Feelings also have a habit of coming at inopportune times, as my grief did when I was on teaching leave. There are also no answers to grief, or at the least, I do not want the answers some people may offer. I don't want people to tell me how to "handle" or "manage" or "process" my grief, because all of these suggestions are only ways to sublimate that which I want to remain exposed. I want to feel, and I want the space in which—and company with whom—to do that feeling. There are no answers to these feelings, because ultimately, I have no questions.

Instead, what I find most important is to find ways and spaces to rest with our collective grief together, to sit shiva with our feeling, and be open to its altering

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character(istics). To sit shiva, then, is the point. It is not to come to answers, and it is not to eschew feeling(s). It is to sit, feel, and share with others in deep community, and to do so in ways that recognize and take seriously that which is unmetabolizable. If we can do this, then perhaps our grief can signal a coming together. Perhaps, too, we can use this coming together as a way to be better company alongside each other than we were previously. Because in the end, one of the main purposes of our work as educators is to find more

complex and meaningful ways to be with and recognize each other.

I wish my mother could have taught me this while she was still alive, and shared this with me over the phone or in one of her almost daily email messages. Something tells me she's likely happy I've gotten here now, though, and with her help.

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NOTES

1. I find it important to note that COVID-19 is not the only pandemic we are currently living through. Indeed, HIV/AIDS continues to alter life for many, especially trans women of color and broader Black populations in and beyond the United States.
2. Shiva, which is derived from the word sheva, meaning seven, marks seven days of reflective, community-based mourning in the Jewish faith. This period begins after the departed are buried, and is honored by Jewish mourners coming together, sharing stories of the departed, and being in community with/in grief.

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