

## COMMENTS: A&D ASSIGNMENT #1 LOSS AND GRIEF

---

--, I loved that you wrote a poem for this assignment. Sometimes the complexity of an experience of loss and grief can better be captured through poetry than prose. I also appreciated your choosing an “unusual” topic – the loss of a younger, more innocent time. Very creative! The poem itself is poignant, with its quality of looking backward toward “irreplaceable days,” while knowing that the only choice is to move forward. The contrast between the first and last stanzas is also compelling –in the present, the only interesting thing will be a new hospital, with its distinct smells; whereas your “youth” was filled with the security and warmth of smiles, laughter, gaiety, romance, sweet people in a simple world. The poem has an elegiac quality of mourning and loss, a longing to bring some of those precious qualities into your future. I wonder too whether there isn’t the suggestion that in the absence of those “grounding” experiences from your past you might not be able to recognize when you are “falling off the tracks” in your future? In any case, thank you for this lovely piece of writing. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Hi --, thank you for writing such an honest reflection. Thank you for acknowledging that your initial impulse was to avoid the family’s grief (and hope) and hide behind the mechanical tasks of medicine. Thank you for acknowledging your feelings of helplessness and frustration. Thank you for being open enough to learn from the family’s own process of decision-making and grieving. Thank you for taking the risk of sharing some of your feelings with your “support system,” your fiancé. I’m so glad you got an opportunity to attend the family meeting. It sounds as though that was a really important turning point not only for them, but also for you. You did good work on this one, --, both in terms of grieving and accepting, and in terms of identifying a positive suggestion that might be of benefit to the remaining siblings. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, thank you very much for sharing about the passing of your grandmother. It is such a poignant image of you standing at the door, wanting to close your eyes to make your parents vanish. The unexpectedness of her death must have been especially difficult. I wonder how you feel now about your decision not to attend the cremation. Sometimes these rituals bring us closure; and sometimes they leave us with a “last image” that we would rather not have, that seems to violate the essential spirit of the deceased. I wonder too if, at the time, your choice might have been a way to give vent to your anger at her sudden loss. In any case, it’s important in these moments not to do “what’s expected,” but what we need for our own grieving and healing. Of course, sometimes it’s hard to know, but we must do our best. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

--, you wrote a very interesting essay about what the “loss” of a reliable home might mean; and what we need to develop that sense of belonging. Your reflection was thoughtful and insightful, especially its implications for how we know “where the heart is.” I really liked your awareness that at least some losses may have positive as well as negative aspects. You gained maturity and freedom, and perhaps, as the Bedouin intimated, even a measure of courage. And yet there is that hanging peach... I suspect you will craft your own unique understanding of “home” as your life evolves. I also appreciated your concept of a loss continuum. You are right, of course, that some losses are much more difficult to absorb than others, but it is also true that we learn about the meaning of others’ losses by searching through the ones we’ve experienced ourselves.  
Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

--, I am very glad (if glad is the right word in this context) that you addressed this horrific event in particular, and the moral implications of unbridled consumerism in general, in reflecting on loss. It is an important reminder (and unfortunately, I think it is needed) that things happen at a societal, cultural, and national scale all too often that degrade our hope and idealism in our country and our fellow human beings. As you state so eloquently, what part of our already “withered souls” have we traded for a bargain made possible by the exploitation of others? You really made me think about the chain of abuse and contamination of which this unfortunate man’s death was only the (perhaps unavoidable) culmination. You write with passion and conviction, --, and I think (I hope) that is one way of keeping your soul alive. You are experiencing a righteous anger, and I hope it can lead at some point to action that is both symbolic and meaningful. Thank you for singling out this man’s loss, which is a loss to us all, and which otherwise might have been consigned to the nightly news cycle. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

--, I am sorry to learn about the difficult dying of your friend’s mother. It sounds as though you cared about her too. I think I can relate a bit to the sense of shock. For fifteen years my best friend was a woman whose breast cancer was in remission when we first became friends. From that first encounter till the time she died of metastatic ovca, she was always someone with cancer. But somehow cancer just seemed part of her life, not something she would *die* from! I can also identify with the relief: the last several months of her life, with lung mets, brain mets, liver mets, were grim. And she, like X, was a woman everyone loved. It is just very hard to let go; and sometimes there is nothing you can do to “get ready.” “Anticipatory grief” doesn’t really save you from “real-time” grief. You’ve got to go through it all. I hope you are doing okay with this loss, and that her family is healing. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

--, thank you for sharing this “first love” loss. Although I agree with you, it probably wasn’t love, I think anyone can relate to that sense of wanting to be seen, understood, and

recognized by another. That truly is a precious feeling. I appreciated your awareness that when we abandon ourselves in another it can result in loss of self – this is what makes it so hard to lose the person, because it literally feels as though our self is disappearing. “Relationship is like a model airplane...” I like it! One idea I’d offer is that there may be a difference between connection/love and attachment to outcome. Attachment comes when we need our model to turn out a certain way, last a certain time, fly at a certain height. Sometimes it works better to hold a relationship deeply, but lightly. In any case, I’m glad that, even while recognizing this person was not your soul-mate, you were able to mourn the loss. Even if it is only the loss of a dream, rather than of a reality, we need to grieve it. Dr. Shapiro

---

--, I’m imagining this might have been a hard essay to write, and I deeply respect your honesty. Of course, you know that during the time you had to care for your grandma, you were still a kid, going through that truly awful developmental phase known as adolescence when all we can think of is being accepted and admired by our peers, and being as much like them as possible. Having a disabled grandmother just doesn’t fit. No wonder you felt resentful at times, and were more relieved than sad when she died. You were free. As I hope you heard during Dr. X’s presentation, there are no “right” emotions when someone dies – just emotions. With time, your feelings toward your grandmother have become more nuanced, and you can value her, not so much because she was an amazing person, but just because she was your family. You’ve probably heard that sometimes writing a letter to someone who’s passed on, when you haven’t had a chance to resolve everything while they were alive, is a good idea. It might sound a bit corny, but it can actually help us find resolution. I know it’s worked for me. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

--, thank you for sharing about these deaths in your family. You are quite right that different losses can affect us very differently – there is simply no single “grief response.” In your grandmother’s case, she was someone you knew well and obviously loved. With your uncle, it was more the loss of the possibility of knowing him that now could never happen and the added suffering to your family. There were also some similarities. After both deaths, family, culture, faith, and activity helped to sustain you. It also sounded as though both time you knew how to be strong for others, and even that this role gave you strength. That is a wonderful gift to be able to give to family members. Of course, the only thing about being “the strong one” is to be willing to grieve yourself, as you did when you talked about crying along. Sometimes that’s even harder. Thanks again for entrusting us with this aspect of your life. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, thank you for writing about this most personal and difficult loss (if I remember correctly, I believe your brother’s death actually also came up last year during the Peds humanities reflection session). It seems to me you’ve thought through your decision

about pediatrics very carefully and wisely. It requires great personal insight and awareness to work skillfully with our losses. The countertransference that is still triggered for you around sick kids would make caring for these kids, as you say, torturous; and that is not what you want as a physician. The love and anguish you experienced because you had to watch your brother die will always be part of you – that little “tightening” around your heart. You will never lose it, nor should you. But it is more likely that you *will* be able to incorporate your sensitivity and deep understanding of suffering into patient care at one remove – with adult patients, rather than children. This is knowing how to care for yourself so you can care for others. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, we recently realized that you never received feedback on your loss and grief assignment. We are so sorry! Please accept these comments, late but heartfelt.

Thank you, --, for entrusting us with this wonderfully vivid portrait of your Goggs. Isn't it amazing that, through language, you can create a picture so detailed and unique that I feel I know your grandmother? She sounds like an amazing woman, as you say the backbone of the family. To me it is not surprising that you felt relief and joy that such a strong and vibrant spirit was finally liberated from her increasingly confining body. Yet it is impossible to lose such a loving presence without grief, as you learned. Yet your Goggs was so deeply embedded and intertwined with every aspect of the family that you still feel her presence. She is part of you still.

For me, your essay showed the power of love (both from your grandma and for your grandma) to overcome even death. It is a beautiful tribute to an incredible woman. I'm honored to have glimpsed her. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Hi --. We recently discovered that no one had responded to your essay on loss and grief. We are so sorry! Please accept this response, late but from the heart.

When I learn of what you've gone through with your boyfriend's illness, I am heartbroken. I know what it means to have a soulmate, and the possibility of losing this person, and at such a tender age, feels devastating. How I wish life did not include such suffering – for him and for you.

You are also remarkably honest about your “coping” (such a cold, technical term). Crying and intellectualizing – these are two of my favored strategies as well. It made me laugh (and cry) when I read “It was mostly like it was before except his hair was falling out, we were hanging out in a hospital room, and there was a large elephant...” Yes, we try as hard as we can to cling to normalcy, even in the most abnormal and terrible circumstances. Yet that whiff of normalcy is sometimes the only thing that keeps us sane.

--, I want you to know I have great respect for your ability to learn lessons from this agonizing experience that you can bring to bear on becoming an even more empathetic, understanding, and compassionate doctor. Believe me, this is not an inevitable outcome of personal suffering, which can make you bitter and emotionally shut down. If you are not afraid of grief, but willing to endure it and, as you have done, allow it to bring you closer to the suffering of others, it will enlarge, rather than damage, your soul. I think you already know this.

Thank you for entrusting me and Drs. X and Y with this part of your life. Again, I apologize that you did not receive any acknowledgment from us, especially when you took a real risk in sharing your story. Please know that it was an administrative oversight, rather than a lack of concern for you. Wishing you the best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, we recently discovered that no one had responded to your loss and grief essay. We are so sorry! I feel especially badly after having read your essay, which is so full of anguish and soul-searching, and worrying that it must have seemed that you'd sent it into a void. Please forgive this administrative snafu on our parts, which I sincerely hope did not cause pain for you.

As you say, it is not *that* your grandfather died; but the *way* in which he died, especially the devastating image of your father, a cardiologist of all things to be, doing CPR and finally pronouncing his own father. I also hear your doubts about whether unwittingly you played a role in the whole situation; and by waking your grandfather precipitated a chain of events that was so painful for you, your sister, your mother, and your father.

You know, we all play that game of second-guessing. What if, what if... It is a way we have of trying to regain control of the uncontrollable. If only I hadn't, if only I had... Of course, the truth is, we never know. It strikes me that your grandfather got a chance to hug you all once last time, say a final goodbye, and even make a final joke. I'm certainly not saying this was "better" than his dying in his sleep (of course, we don't know for sure that this would have happened); or that it somehow mitigates those last moments that must have been so horrible for your father. Maybe your dad feels guilty that he was not able to revive your grandfather. But maybe he also knows that he, a heart specialist and a loving son, was there till the very end, doing everything his skilled hands and intellect knew how to do. Maybe there is some consolation in this. My main point is that it is hard to know what would be the "good" death.

I also think you showed great courage in reaching out to your father to try to help him express his own suffering. Your insights about his having had to be in the physician "role" to the very end, even as his father was dying; and his need to be strong emotionally in the face of your mother's grief make a great deal of sense to me. It is often pretty hard for parents to show their vulnerability to their children (I know this is difficult for me). But by your opening this door, in a way you've acknowledged that your dad needs to grieve his loss; and whether or not he is able to do this with you, it will help him.

--, thank you so much for entrusting us with this very painful and personal story. Again, I apologize for our not honoring this trust as well as we might have. Please forgive the apparent insensitivity and know that was not our intent. All the best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, first please accept my apologies on behalf of the AoD faculty for not responding in a more timely manner to your essay on loss and grief. We only just discovered that no one had acknowledged your essay. We really feel badly about this, as we asked you to engage in a soul-bearing exercise; and then seemed to ignore it. We are sorry and ask forgiveness for any pain this might have caused you.

In terms of the essay itself, I agree with your conclusion that people grieve in different ways; and above all we should not have expectations how other people mourn the loss of a loved one. Perhaps what does matter is that the person him/herself feels that she or he is grieving in a manner that does not deny or hide from the loss. What that looks like to others shouldn't matter.

I found your description of the "generational divide" between the physician grandchildren and the adult children to be a fascinating and insightful observation. Of course, there are differences in the way adult children and adult grandchildren feel about a parent/grandparent. Perhaps somewhat paradoxically, because grandchildren often have less complicated relationships with their grandparents than do the adult children, they can be more able to let them go more easily. Your uncle's anger is a normal way that adult children can express grief when they feel unresolved about the death. Yet I also hear you wondering about the possible effects of medical training on blunting the emotions. There is much in the process of becoming a physician that desensitizes learners to death and dying, and encourages a more clinical, instrumental response (how *does* this ventilator work?).

Again, in my view, what matters most is that you feel comfortable with how you respond to loss; and that you can recognize the difference between personal loss and loss experienced in the physician role. Both require a certain grieving, but depending on the circumstances, the form, intensity, and duration of this grief will be very different. Further, as you intimate, your Christian faith has a strong influence on the meaning you assign to death; yes, triggers sadness, but as you say, also joy in the comfort of salvation.

--, thank you for sharing so honestly and authentically your experience with the death of your grandmother; and again, please accept our apologies for the delay in responding.  
Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, first please accept my apologies for the fact that no one responded to or acknowledged this essay. All I can say is that it fell through the cracks, and we are very

sorry. We are trying to rectify our oversight now and hope you will accept the comments below in that spirit.

Wow. Question 36. I have very vivid memories of where I was, what I was doing when someone very important to me died; and I think this is a common occurrence that speaks to the traumatic nature of the loss. That moment in time is fixed in our memories, often without much normal cognitive or emotional processing.

This was quite an amazing rumination, and I wished I'd read it earlier. Should grieving be used to "fill in the cracks of our lives?" I'd say there is nothing wrong with postponing grief – as you poignantly point out, the emotions will still be there – but not indefinitely. As a society, we seem to be very good at filling in "the cracks" with anything other than difficult emotions of loss, sadness, guilt, rage – the Super Bowl, working out, sleeping in, a bowl of chips, whatever. I guess it is your very observation that physicians are people who must "wade in the most basic elements of human existence" (great phrase, by the way, so expressive!) that makes me think you (or any doctor) don't want to wait too long to start to become familiar – and dare I say even comfortable? – in "the fog." Who knows, but I suspect the more willing you are not to wallow, but even to briefly touch these difficult depths of existence, the more you will find your footing. In fact, this is likely part of the course that your grandma would want you to stay.

Thank you again for such profundity --. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, first, please accept the apologies of the faculty for inadvertently overlooking your assignment on loss and grief. We are very sorry if it seemed as though your essay fell into a big void. Please accept the comments below, long overdue but sincere.

Your essay painted an extraordinary picture of your grandfather, and it was a privilege to encounter him, even if only through your words. He clearly played an important role in your life, and in your family. I was very touched by the way you described experiencing his death; first, as a sense of great emptiness, the hole that is left by the loss of a loved one. But then, as you say, "the feelings of emptiness filled back up with his presence." What a beautiful way of expressing the mysterious yet real way that those dear to us are somehow still with us. You know, from what you wrote, your grandfather sounds as though serving his family and supporting their dreams was very important to him. I suspect he would be very proud of you. Thank you again --. Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, first, please accept our sincere apologies for accidentally allowing your grief and loss essay to fall through the cracks. We recently discovered that no one ever responded to you, and we are deeply sorry. However, I would like to remedy this mistake with the comments below, and hope you will forgive the oversight.

I thought your analysis of your own defense mechanisms was extremely honest and perceptive. Who wouldn't want to get back as quickly as possible to their normal, cheery life? Sadness, grief, and loss hurt to experience, and that's why we try to avoid them. Only, as you discovered, we really can't. We grieve and are deeply affected, whether we acknowledge it or not.

It is very impressive that you were able to "step back" from yourself sufficiently to realize that your grief was becoming a mild depression. This really sounds like part of a normal grief reaction – life does indeed look less bright when we are in the throes of loss. Even more impressive is that you were able to "intervene" with yourself, and reach out to your family, who obviously were also wrestling with their own reactions to your grandfather's loss. In my view, this whole process shows great "emotional fortitude." Having the courage to acknowledge our own vulnerability is what enables us to connect with our self, and with others.

Thank you for sharing this process, --; and again, I'm sorry it took so long for you to receive an acknowledgment. Best, Dr. Shapiro

-----  
Dear --, I hope you will forgive us for seeming to have ignored your honest and heartwrenching essay about the death of your father. We only recently discovered that none of us had responded to you. We are very sorry! Please accept these comments below, even though they are long overdue.

First, this is something of which you may already be well aware, but paradoxically, when we have conflicted and unresolved feelings toward someone close to us, it is much harder to deal with their death than if the relationship is uncomplicatedly loving. As you discovered, there is plenty of guilt and what ifs, as well as feelings that may seem "inappropriate" – like relief. I commend you for sorting through so carefully your own mixed reaction to your father's passing. Under those difficult circumstances, "holding the family together" is no easy task, and it is a tribute to your perseverance and commitment that you succeeded in doing so.

I think it is quite a wonderful thing as well that you have begun to "reclaim" your father; and to understand some of his choices and actions in a somewhat new light, filtered through your own life experience. Even from your brief allusion to "the cultural and linguistic barriers that refused to crumble" suggests to me that your father likely struggled as best he knew how to succeed in a strange and often hostile new world. Of course I am in no position to judge or even comment on a man I didn't know, but it is true that life is sometimes so hard that we face almost impossible choices.

Finally, a wise person once told me that, as we become adults, we learn to value all that our parents were able to give us; and to forgive them for all that they failed to be able to do for us. As we become parents, our task is to build on the foundation our parents provided (no matter how rocky in some ways that might be); and try our best to build a



little better foundation for our own children. As the exciting – and overwhelming! – moment of parenthood rapidly approaches for you, this might be something to ponder :-).

All the best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, please accept our apologies for not responding to your poignant essay about your grandmother's conversation with you about death and dying. We only realized recently that no one had acknowledged this assignment. We are truly sorry, and hope that this did not cause you any distress.

Now that I have read your essay, I am moved and humbled by the wisdom of your grandmother X. What an amazing thing for a grandma to sit down with her young doctor-granddaughter and impart her intimate experiences with the loss of her own mother; and her husband. She must trust and respect you very much to give you this difficult but invaluable gift.

Like you, I was struck by the details that she was able to share. These made me realize again how distant we have become from death in our modern society. These days, even with hospice, folks rarely die at home (like your grandmother, most of us, trying to do the right thing, make that 911 call faced with our loved one in extremis); and as a result most of us are estranged from this fundamental aspect of life. What your grandmother offered to you was the chance to know, albeit at one remove, what it is like to lose those closest to you, not in any sanitized, protected way, but literally holding their hand, singing to them, making impossibly difficult spur-of-the-moment decisions. It seems to me these are precisely the stories we should all be sharing with each other.

And by the way, confronted with the option of being a doctor or a granddaughter, it seems to me, you made exactly the right choice. Doctors grow on trees. The hug of a granddaughter is irreplaceable.

Thanks again for sharing, --, and please forgive the tardiness of this response. Dr. Shapiro

---

Hi --, we have just realized that no one ever acknowledged your grief and loss essay. We are embarrassed and sorry for this unintentional oversight. We believe strongly that when we ask students to write something intimate and personal, it is our responsibility to respond in a timely and sensitive manner. We apologize for letting you down, and hope that you are able to accept a better-late-than-never reply.

In the tragic situation you describe, it occurs to me that you (and your entire family) experienced a double loss – first, the loss of your aunt to alcoholism; and secondly, to death itself. No wonder her passing led to your mom's and your unanswerable questions.

Why do things like this happen? Why can't we intervene to change what we see unfolding before our eyes?

You have had the terrible misfortune to experience firsthand how the havoc of addiction can send not just ripples but shock waves throughout a family. You have also learned the intensely difficult lesson that medicine, family, love, everyone's best intentions are not always enough. This is a hard thing to realize, but it is also true. It doesn't mean we shouldn't try our hardest to change what we can; but as AA itself acknowledges, sometimes we need to accept that which cannot be changed.

There is no way that we "forget" about such traumatic events, no way to fill that sense of emptiness. But we can hope that eventually they will take their proper place in our lives. May this be true for you, your cousin, your mom, and your family. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, we have just discovered that no one ever responded to your essay on grief and loss. We are so sorry! When we ask students to reflect on intensely personal and difficult topics, our intention is to acknowledge their efforts in a timely and thoughtful manner. Please accept our apologies for not having done so in your case. I am offering a very belated but heartfelt reply.

I thank you for choosing to share the terrifying nightmare you have about your brother, rather than a more conventional loss that nevertheless has not distressed you as deeply. Your profound love for your brother expresses itself so movingly in this dream; he is clearly not someone you can imagine living without. The vividness of its detail also shows how much you want to be close to him, even when he confronts mortal danger. Sometimes, as I'm sure you know, our unconscious minds rehearse in dreams what we cannot even bear to contemplate in real life. As such, it is a kind of way of approaching that which frightens us the most. However, I think you've extracted the best possible lesson from your dream already – which is to hug your brother every chance you get :-). He sounds like a wonderful person. And that is what loss, or threatened loss, often reminds us about – to cherish those we love. I will join my prayers to yours that he remains safe. Best, Dr. Shapiro

---

Dear --, we recently realized that none of us had acknowledged your essay about your father's death. We are very sorry! Our intention is always to respond promptly and with sensitivity to writing assignments where we've asked students to share difficult personal experiences. We apologize for letting you down, and hope you will accept this belated reply. It was painful to me to read your heartfelt story, written with such care and honesty, and to know that, from your perspective, it apparently had sunk into a void. Physio redux.

I know that you were able to extract critical lessons about compassion, empathy, and what it feels like to be the family member of the dying patient. It also sounds as though, as a result of this incredibly painful experience, you were able to discover yourself as "an emotional being," a realization that surely will serve you well as a physician. Nevertheless, as I reviewed your words, what I felt was anger and shame – at our society that allows people to go without health insurance; at our system of medical education that prioritizes exam-taking over caring for one's dying father. Enduring the death of a parent is extremely challenging emotionally and also, as you and your siblings discovered, instrumentally, as you try to cope with bills, arrangements, insurance etc. It is appalling that the necessary suffering is compounded by unnecessary suffering inflicted by misplaced societal and educational priorities.

It struck me that you and your brother and sister went through your father's dying and death mostly with only each other; and that the responsibility for navigating this terribly difficult journey fell squarely on your shoulders. That is an awful lot to deal with. From your description, it seems as though you all handled it with grace and courage. I hope that you were able to emerge on the other side of this loss with love and affection for each other intact, and respect that you were able to be there for your father.

I am very sorry for the loss of your father. I think you realize that you will continue to learn from his death throughout your life. In a way, this is his final gift to you. Thank you for this essay, --, and again please forgive us this dilatory response. Dr. Shapiro