

FM REVIEW 2018 1 COMMENTS

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: This essay describes the death by suicide of the author's niece, and his own painful reaction contaminated by the shame and stigma that mental illness conveys. It is very difficult to write critically about an essay which is mourning the death of a loved one, but in general I do not think the narrative essay section is the place for eulogies. For our readers, we must consider what they can learn from the essay, and here this heartfelt effort is murky.

In my view, the potential of the essay lies with the author's awareness of the very different ways he responded to the illness of his nephew and the death of his niece. The grief was the same, but the transparency and sharing were quite different. To me, this should be the heart of the essay, and should be explored in a much more straightforward manner. As written, there are too many detours and indirections that simply confuse or vitiate the power of the story. Also, I found the transition to the letter jarring and not effective. I have offered suggestions to the author below, but in effect I am suggesting writing an entirely new essay.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: I am so sorry for the loss of your niece, who sounds like an extraordinary young woman. Any early death is much to be mourned, and more so one that is self-inflicted. It is very difficult to comment critically on such a heartfelt effort, but since that is my job I will attempt to do so.

It is important to keep in mind that the purpose of the narrative essay is to impart a lesson in some way to our readers or to provide food for thought. Therefore, no matter how moving, a eulogy per se is not a good fit for the journal. From this perspective, although it is important to see your niece as a very special young woman, this could be done more succinctly. The key is to distill what is the essential message that the reader should take away.

The opening is good, but because you "hide" the cause of B's death, you are unable to exploit its power. The significance of knowing that you were at a burn-out and wellness retreat is that these have grown popularity precisely because of the appalling rate of suicide among physicians. If you could explicitly point out this irony the essay would get off to a stronger start.

In my view, the potential of the essay lies with your description of the very different ways you responded to the illness of your nephew and the death of your niece. This is discussed authentically and honestly in the two major paragraphs on pg. 2. You show that the grief was the same in response to each situation, but the transparency and sharing were quite different. To me, this should be the heart of the essay, and should be explored in a much more straightforward manner. As written, there are too many detours and indirections that simply confuse or vitiate the power of the story. I would get to this central part of the story more quickly. The anecdote about the Christmas photo, although sweet, was distracting and a very roundabout way of introducing your nephew's illness. Perhaps learning of your niece's death triggered memories of going through your nephew's illness. If you were willing to put the fact of her suicide out early, you could simply compare and contrast both experiences, and elaborate on how the sense of stigma affected you personally and influenced your responses.

I'd avoid phrases like "emotional intelligence" and "cognitive dissonance." These are academic terms that serve to distance the narrator and the reader from the anguish and guilt described.

The letter to your niece, although touching, was jarring. It seemed to come out of nowhere. In this case, I think you would be better off to tie your guilt at your niece's death back to issues of awareness concerning both patients and colleagues (such as those at the wellness retreat!) who are at risk for anxiety, depression, and suicide. It is beautiful to see you reaching out to your niece even beyond the grave. Another way to do this in the conclusion of your essay might be to make a commitment to your niece that in your work and personal life you will combat the shame and secrecy that shroud mental illness and suicide, which is essentially what you do in the letter, but without necessarily using this particular format.

I cannot imagine how painful it must be to experience the loss of a dear child in such a way. As a tribute to your niece, this essay is perfect. I think that if you consider a bit more deeply why you are writing it for this particular journal and its particular readership, you will find a stronger focus and structure. Such an essay will cause journal readers to think seriously about their own reactions to suicide and how they may unwittingly collude in the conspiracy of silence and willful ignoring that continues to make intervention and treatment still so difficult.