"The Cracks Are Where the Light Shines In": Grief in the Classroom

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Our dream of life will end as dreams do end, abruptly and completely, when the sun rises, when the light comes. And we will think, all that fear and all that grief were about nothing. But that cannot be true. I can’t believe we will forget our sorrows altogether, that would mean forgetting that we had lived, humanely speaking. Sorrow seems to me to be a great part of the substance of human life.

—Marilynne Robinson (104).

I am sitting with my mother in a restaurant. It is a day before she is to be admitted to the hospital. We are, in fact, discussing this possibility. She is wearing a pink corduroy hat that covers her balding head and a thin pink shirt with a stain on it. We argued about this shirt before we left the house that morning. My mother was an impeccable dresser, the kind of woman whose shoes matched her purse and whose shirt was always tucked in. On this day, for the first time, she didn’t care that her shirt had a stain on it and this worried me. We sat in the dark restaurant. Her meal, ordered from the children’s menu, sat mostly untouched. She rested her head in her hands, her elbows propping her up. The last few days had been difficult. She had awoken the day before speaking in riddles and we were trying to make sense of the gibberish. We didn’t know yet that the tumors were in her brain, we didn’t know yet that it was affecting her speech, we didn’t know yet that she would die in less than seven days. We didn’t know. But she knew.

She closed her eyes as had become her custom over the last week. I watched her, let her rest at the table. “Mom,” I said, after a few minutes. I was taken aback by her own startled response when her eyes jerked open. She had fallen asleep with her chin cradled in her palms. “I think we should ask the doctor about these symptoms.” She had explained away the odd behavior as side effects of the drugs she was taking. There were red pills and blue pills and yellow pills and green pills and orange pills, so many pills, she had said, perhaps she had mixed them up? Perhaps she had taken too many? “Still,” I persisted, “it’s good to ask, just in case.” She looked up suddenly. Her head had become too heavy for her neck in the last week; she seemed to be continually hunched over. Her beautiful piercing blue eyes were dulled, laced with a grayness I had never seen before.

“I’m scared, Leeatie,” she confided. “What if I’m dying?”

My mother’s death was not a surprise. Despite eighteen years of relative psychological and physical health while she lived with metastatic breast cancer, the last year of her life was a violent struggle against the disease that aggressively invaded her body. My mother fought her death until the last moment. One day we were shop-
ping, eating lunch, we were united, arm in arm, solid and content in our togetherness, and the next day she was in the hospital, attached to tubes, wires, and pain pumps. Suddenly her face was swollen, suddenly she was confused, suddenly she was no longer my mother but a body withering in pain, uncomprehending in her terrible, terrible suffering. Within five days of being admitted, she died.

My mother was a cancer patient for as long as I can remember. I was nine when she was first diagnosed and twenty-six when she died. I don’t remember much before that. I remember the matching dresses we used to wear when I was a toddler, a visible sign of our unity. I remember the comfortable weight of being embraced, nestled contentedly in the concave shape of her curled body. I remember the weight of her scent that used to envelope me when I came back from school each day, familiar and intoxicating. I remember the feel of the long, flowing cotton nightgowns that she slept in. I remember the sound of her keys jiggling in the door and of her footsteps as she passed by my bedroom in the hall. I remember her deep throaty laughter, famous for dragging everyone around her into fits of hilarity, filling the air. I remember her soft hands, eerily identical to my own, caressing my hair.

My mother used to tell the same stories over and over again, each time with more passion and more excitement than the time before. I remember that she used to love to tell jokes, but would never get to the punch line, because she would be laughing so hard. We used to laugh too—not because of the joke, but because her energy was contagious. I remember my mother in all of these things. I am pained by the yearning for such mundane sensations; the smell, sight, sounds of my mother are what I long for most. These things are so painfully ordinary. In the end, we are missed by the people who mean the most, and it is the things we paid the least attention to that stand out as the most significant.

I remember that my mother was always full of life. I remember that this was her way: to find joy in the midst of sadness, to find hope in the midst of despair, to find laughter and humor in the midst of disease. I remember her kindness and her smile and her intense blue eyes. I remember that I felt best, the most myself, the most at home and the most relaxed when I was with her.

I was devastated when she died. The impact of her death dropped on me so heavily, it reverberated and spread to every area of my life. I was twenty-six and a day when it happened. It was late in September, when the air had already turned cool and the leaves had just begun to transform into a cacophony of reds and oranges and yellows. It was a time of transition for the trees and for me. But I have gotten ahead of myself. It is better to start at the beginning.

A few months earlier, I had been finishing the third year of a doctoral degree in psychology and had been awarded a course directorship to teach in the fall. My mother’s health had continued to deteriorate all through the winter and into the spring. In an impulsive act, which I later recognized as my intuition taking care of me, I quit my job at the Hospital For Sick Children, dropped out of the courses I was taking, gave up my downtown apartment, broke up with the man I was seeing, and moved into my parents’ suburban home to be with my mother. All of these things would have been unthinkable even just
a few weeks prior, but at the moment it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to do.

I had a plan for that summer. I have always been the kind of person who does things ahead of time. I am compulsively early for every appointment and have never missed a deadline. It was, thus, reasonable for me to imagine that that summer would be dedicated entirely to working on my course. It was a warm day in June when my father put together the old desk that I had used in junior high and set it up in the spare bedroom. On this desk, I piled dozens of textbooks on the history of psychology, which I had planned to sift through that summer. I was twenty-five years old, it was my first course, and I was excited in a way that only a young, inexperienced academic can be. I had grandiose visions of forever changing the lives of my students combined with a hopeful desire to fill their hearts with a love of learning that would last for a lifetime. It was a half-year course. It was on the history of psychology. As I said, I was twenty-five and I had never taught a course before.

The summer had a languorous quality to it, slow but enjoyable, like the sensation of swinging on a hammock on a hot August day. After getting over the shock of living in a suburb when I had spent the last five years in the city, I found that I started to enjoy it. I had been working part-time since I was twelve years old, and for the first time in many years, I had nothing else to do but be with my mom and plan my course. I would sit with my mother on the porch making notes about Freud as she read her novels. Or I would try out on her one of the many “interactive games” that I intended to use with my students in just a few months. On days where she was feeling particularly ill she would lie on the bed in spare bedroom that doubled as my office. She would say, “Leeatie, I just want to be with you, I won’t talk, I promise!” And surprisingly, she didn’t. I typed, she slept, we were both happy. Often I would put down my books altogether and we would chat or watch A Baby Story on TV, which would be followed by the requisite argument about whether my mom would allow my future children to eat junk food and watch TV. My heart breaks now when I think of those conversations; we still harbored an illusion of a future. In retrospect, I think we believed it at the time, even though her deteriorating body clearly indicated otherwise.

The summer passed, and my first class that fall went off without a hitch. I had planned a “cocktail party,” complete with apple juice “champagne” in plastic flutes, and napkins with questions on them like “what do you do for fun?” or “what is your favorite movie?” for the students to ask each other. We discussed the syllabus, my “no laptop” policy, my expectations, and the textbook. It was both ordinary and extraordinary. A typical first day in the classroom. I liked the students immediately and I thought they liked me too. I left feeling confident and excited for the next class.

The following week, however, was not quite as encouraging. My class was on a Tuesday and my mother was admitted to the hospital that Thursday for tests. I was the first to arrive in the hospital the next day. I was carrying two coffees, one for me and one for my mom. A young doctor I had never seen before caught me in the hall. “Are you related to Mrs. Granek?” he asked. He looked ashamed as he blurted out the bad news when I told him she was my mom. “She’s dying. The tumors are in her brain.” He said this quickly and
sharply while looking blankly over my shoulder. I stared at him wide-eyed, my jaw slightly ajar. I was more shocked by the way he said this than what had actually come out of his mouth. The next few days would prove to be just as jarring as we negotiated the final days of my mother’s life.

Sunday was my birthday. I had arrived first in the hospital again. It was not even 8:00 yet. My mother looked confused and frightened. “Where have you been?” she cried. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in years.” It was in fact only ten hours since we last saw each other. I had been forced by my family to leave the hospital early the night before; my friends had taken me out for drinks to celebrate my birthday. I had wanted to stay with my mother as I had every night since she had been admitted. “Where have you been? Why did you leave me alone?” she asked again, anxious and bewildered. “You were gone and I was scared and someone tried to kidnap Elran.” At this point the tumors were spreading rapidly and had started to press on parts of her brain. We were told that she would have delusions, but we weren’t prepared for the violence that took over her mind. She stared at me inquisitively with her one penetrating blue eye. The other eye had swollen to the size of a golf ball because of the tumors and was sealed shut. It was the same look my mother had given me a million times before. It was the look that said, “What were you thinking? How could you do this to me? How could you disappoint me like this?” I hugged her as gently as I could, wrapping my arms around her body, threading them through IV lines and tumors that were like land mines—explosively painful if touched.

I knew that day that my mother was going to die and that it was going to be soon. The doctor had said maybe months, maybe weeks; none of us were really expecting days, but I felt like I needed to be prepared. While my mother slept, I made phone calls. I couldn’t teach that week and some part of me knew that I was going to have to give up my course. Even as the harried thoughts ran through my head, there was a sinking feeling in my heart mingled with a hopefulness. Maybe it would all go back to normal, maybe things would be fine, my mother would pull out of it as she had every other time in the last eighteen years. Maybe I didn’t need to find a replacement quite yet. I forged ahead anyway, making plans for guest lectures and trying to conjure up the names of the films I had viewed that summer to fill the three-hour class time that now seemed like the most impossible task in the world. Three hours was an eternity. How to fill up the space? I couldn’t even begin to imagine it.

By the end of that traumatic day, I had had a dozen conversations with everyone I knew. My dad, my aunts, my friends, my mother’s friends, my supervisor, my colleagues, even the oncologist, who had become close to my family, chimed in and urged me not give up the course. “It will be your saving grace,” “your work is the only thing that will keep you sane,” “it could be months before she passes, don’t put your life on hold,” “it will ruin your career to do this,” “you made a commitment,” and on and on and on. At this point, I had made the decision to allocate the course to someone else so that I could spend every spare moment in the hospital with my mother. I couldn’t understand for the life of me what these people, who were supposed to be my closest and most intimate supporters, were talking about. It seemed preposterous that I should continue teach-
ing while my mother was *dying* in the hospital. There would be dozens, hundreds of classes to teach, an endless supply of them, in fact, once I became tenured, but I only had one mother and this was clearly the time to be with her.

Today I look back upon this scenario with a new understanding. Although I didn’t know it then, the pressure from others to “keep going,” “keep functioning,” “be normal,” and “go back to work as soon as possible” is part of the cultural script we have about grieving in North America. Heaven forbid, I should take time to be with my mother. That was, in retrospect, too threatening for everyone involved, and indeed, as I would shortly come to realize, was only the beginning of a very long process of negotiating my grief with the world.

The debate over the course proved to be useless in the end anyway. My mother died the next day. Going home, the funeral, the Shiva (seven day mourning period), and moving into a new apartment the following week passed in a blur. There are still large chunks of that first month that are opaque to me. I stumbled around in a haze, compulsively dropping a homeopathic remedy, aptly named Rescue, on my tongue to handle the anxiety, the shock, and the insomnia. My decision to keep the course was made in this state; I don’t recall choosing this option, I don’t recall how I justified it, and I certainly don’t know what possessed me to think that I could do a good job, but I must have decided sometime because one month after the course had started, I was back in the classroom standing in front of the room.

Writing in my journal that first day back, I had described my feeling like this: “Grief is heavy today. There is a band of pressure across my forehead so intense, I think my head might literally explode. Everything is so tiring; I’m moving through dark, wet, mud, every sensation seems drawn out, laborious, full of intensity, and yet at the same time, painfully dull. My thoughts feel tarnished and creaky as if they have been molded over with rust, as if I have to sand them down to get them to get them into some kind of working order. Never mind articulation, coherence would be enough for me today.”

It was in this state, with my “tarnished and creaky” thoughts, that I addressed my class and began to teach. I started out by apologizing for my absence. I told them something terrible had happened. I told them my mother died. I told them that I was very, very sad, but that I was going to do my best to give them a good experience and that I had spent the whole summer preparing for them. The room was silent when I said these things. Having now taught several courses and given numerous guest lectures and conference presentations, I have yet to experience the same kind of hush in a classroom that greeted me that day. (Indeed, there are days now when I dream of having a classroom so enthralled with what I am saying!) The room was absolutely still. It seemed that everyone has stopped breathing.

I had done the unthinkable, after all, I had brought death into the room with us. I had transgressed every taboo that exists in the classroom. The students, being close to my age, struggled with this information. I was almost as young as they were, I was in their cohort, I certainly looked their age, and if my mother could die, so could theirs. I had also broken the cardinal rule of academia: I had transgressed, or more accurately, erased altogether the line between The Professor and The Student. I was vulnerable, I was a human being, a
person who suffered, who had feelings, who was sad, and broken, and who was telling the truth about my life.

I had in fact, been strongly advised not to do this. My academic advisor and some others from the administration had told me that I didn’t have to share anything with the students. I didn’t have to apologize, and I certainly didn’t have to include them in my grief. Again, in retrospect, this seems to me further evidence of the pervasive death and grief denial that goes on in our culture and in academia in particular. The subtext was that I didn’t need to embarrass myself in front of the class by being vulnerable. But why was death so embarrassing? And why should I be ashamed of my sadness? What was it about it those pesky feelings that was so threatening to everyone in the ivory tower, including the stunned students that greeted me that day?

Writing a dissertation on grief, I now realize that although I was perplexed by this response then, it now seems expected and even pedestrian. The fear of emotion in academia is related to the fear of the body and of being out of control. Theorizing in the Western philosophical tradition has a long history of being disembodied. Based on the Cartesian disassociative split between mind and body, the Western intellectual tradition has considered the body irrelevant and thus easily dismissible (Jaggar and Bordo 376). My own discipline, psychology, is particularly guilty of this. In its attempt to align itself with the “hard” sciences, psychology has obsessively tried to remove the “contaminating” variables of embodiment (i.e., gender, race, class, ethnic/cultural background, religion) from their experimental conclusions. And indeed, one of the primary ways in which fear or shame of the body is practiced in psychology, is in the notion that emotions are embodied and subsequently irrational and out of control. Waltzing into the classroom and saying, “Look, I’m sad, I’m going to try my best, but this is where I’m at,” is a major faux pas when understood in the context of this tradition. I was admitting to having a body! I was coming from somewhere and I was being honest about it. This was too much for many people to handle.

There were many examples of this. My family’s, friends’, and colleagues’ desire for me to keep teaching while my mother was on her deathbed, the students’ silence and discomfort with my honesty, and the administration’s desire to maintain the status quo, were all driven by the same fear of death and sadness that led my dissertation committee to ask me to remove my personal narrative from my work. As if I could somehow disembodify myself and deny that my motivation to write the dissertation came from my experience of loss. As if I were somehow less objective about grieving because, ironically, I had actually experienced it.

After the initial shock of the silenced students, the semester rolled on and the responses of the class varied. Several students dropped out that day. Many others who stuck it out told me that it was a great course despite my emotional state; some even said it was the best they had ever taken. Others were bitter and harsh in their evaluation of my emotional honesty. Overall, however, the students were kind and engaging, and although I could not give them my entire self since my self was broken, I want to believe they had, to borrow Donald Winnicott’s term, “a good enough” teacher. I am grateful to those students for giving me a reason to get up in the morning at a time where
nothing seemed to matter. I am grateful too for those who continued to want to learn, and most of all, I am thankful for their kindness and understanding, as I struggled through the material I had written for them several months before. I never heard anything more from the students who dropped out that semester. Many of the students who stuck it out still keep in touch with me today. I get occasional updates about their successes and failures, or more often, long emails about their frustration with academia and a plea for some advice about what to do.

The process of teaching my course while grieving my mother taught me many things about loss. One of the most profound lessons had to do with the very idea of personhood. As a psychologist, I was taught that “normal,” “healthy” development is about separation, especially from the mother, in childhood and adolescence with the goal of independence in adulthood. I sat diligently in class taking these notes, just as my students sat diligently with their notebooks in mine. I was told when someone you love dies, you grieve for them for a prescribed period—no longer than three months according to the psychological criteria or it becomes pathological—and then you “move on” with your life, perhaps a little sadder than you were before, but mostly intact. Losing my mother taught me otherwise. I could not carve this clean, bloodless line. No one taught me in my psychology classes what I ultimately passed on to my students that semester, which is that the deaths of those we love change us irreparably. No one told me that some of these pieces could never be recovered no matter how much I tried to will them back.

And there were other changes in my thinking too. Grieving my mother battered me, and it was, is still, painful, but in this process, I have also become weathered. In some ways her passing has prepared me to acknowledge, and even to accept, death. More importantly, I have learned how to stay open even when I wanted to close. In particular, I struggled to stay open to the students. It was a bloody battle to keep myself out of the trenches and remain open to their questions, concerns, and their need to have me see them and acknowledge them as their educator. There was nothing I craved more then to crawl back into bed and hide from the world until the pain passed. Although it’s not always possible to be in bed, anyone who has grieved knows that you can crawl into that silent space in your head instead, and shut down so completely, you might as well not be there. I tried hard to stay out of this space, and it took all the willpower I had to force myself out of it for their sake.

As the students and I tumbled towards the end of the semester, I wrote this in my diary: “And in this grief, my hands clench and unclench. I am fighting to keep them open, to be like the hamsas [a talisman in the shape of a hand used in Jewish and Islamic traditions to ward off the evil eye] my mother collected, still hanging faithfully on the walls. I pry my fingers open by force. I want to stay open, to stay soft, to stay young, to stay vulnerable, and tender, and without defenses. Like Jacob, I wrestle with the demons that threaten to cloak me each day in an armor of cynicism and hardness. ‘Open your hand and in overflowing abundance give all that life wills of you’ commands Psalm 145. (Verse 16). I am trying. I am trying. I am trying. I am
trying to be open to my pain, open to the pain of those around me, open to the possibility that they are connected, that they are part of each other, made from each other, dependant on each other for their meaning. I open my hand to give and to receive, to point and to be guided, to offer and to take and most of all to surrender to that is which is beyond me, above me, within me.”

Staying open, in the end, is what saved me. A saying in Judaism proclaims that, “there is nothing so whole as a broken heart.” I understand this to mean what Leonard Cohen implied when he wrote that “the cracks are where the light shines through.” The struggle to be a good teacher while I was grieving was about more than my ability to adequately transmit the information, it was about letting the students see the “cracks” so the light could shine in but also shine out. Although I cannot claim that the students in that history of psychology course learned a great deal about the origins of the discipline, or at least, learned it from me with enthusiasm, I believe that they, that we, experienced something much more profound together. Staying open in the classroom gave the students someone raw, but honest. And staying open gave me the opportunity to receive from them, as they were receiving from me. In addition to the knowledge, inquiry, and discussion that flowed between us, I also heard about their sorrows, their losses, and their tactics for coping with the horribly unfair world we inhabited together. And in the end, it was the togetherness that mattered.

REFERENCES