

The Art of Grieving

McKalee Steen, College of Arts and Science

Wayne Porter is an artist who has never taken an art class. Still, he has created one of the most obscure, must-see attractions for those who find themselves traveling through South Dakota for whatever ungodly reason: a sculpture park full of his wonderful and whimsical creations. The main attraction is a massive cow head with horns, made of now-rusted metal, equivalent to the size of one of the heads on Mount Rushmore. My mother and I found ourselves in this sculpture park two summers after my dad died and three months after her dad died. Both of us now fatherless, we were treading the waters of pain together.

We were grievors who had never taken a grief class.

Our particular road trip was spurred, perhaps, by the two of us knowing that we were on the precipice of change. I was about to go to college six hundred miles away, and my mother would be living alone for the first time in her adult life.

Our destination: Belcourt, North Dakota, where my sister had just moved to start her career in clinical pharmacy in the Indian Healthcare System. It was a long, flat, desolate drive. It was a new, exciting, and terrifying chapter in all our lives.

December 10, 2014 was the last day my dad was alive. I can't remember if I told him I loved him, like I did most every other morning before I left for school. None of us knew that by seven o' clock that night he would be dead. A heart attack the perpetrator. The suddenness of his departure from this life was a slap in the face to a girl wholly unprepared to see the corpse of her father or a woman incredulous to see the body of her husband of twenty-nine and a half years. The most painful part of losing him was the window of hope – four unforgettable hours of uncertain faith.

It started with my grandmother finding my dad collapsed in our living room, and my mom, a teacher, rushing home from school two hours early. The principle came to get me and took me to the hospital where my dad was still alive, just a door away, but unreachable as the doctors worked to save him.

In the next hour my brother, uncle, and pastor showed up. A few others too. They processed the information for me, relayed it to those who needed to know. The doctors were honest with us. They had stabilized my dad, but he might not survive the life-flight from our rural country town to the nearest hospital equipped to save him.

The forty-five-minute drive to the second hospital was the longest of my life. They were calling a code blue on his room as soon as we walked through the door. My sister found out he had died as she was getting on the plane to leave San Francisco in her rush home from pharmacy school.

In the sculpture park, there is a depiction of the grim reaper, but instead of wearing a cloak of black, it wears a cloak of red. Bright and undeniably present. The grim reaper comes for us all, eventually.

For my grandpa, Papa as we liked to call him, it came on the side of a busy highway as he tried to make his way to a hospital. He didn't tell anyone where he was going and ended up an hour and a half away from home, suffering from sudden cardiac arrest. He died alone, and while I was in shock when I found out, at least hope had been taken out of the equation.

It seems cruel to say, but when hope still inhabits that dreaded Pandora's box, we cannot help but open it and wonder a whole slew of "what ifs." While I had many questions about how my grandfather died, I couldn't hope that he might live. I could embrace the finality of losing him. April 9, 2016. The date of my senior prom, and the day my Papa died. We didn't have a funeral for him, but rather a celebration of his life, with food and music and tears. He had made it clear to one of my uncles that he wanted us to celebrate his life, not mourn it.

If only it were that easy.

When we saw his body for the first time, there were sobs from my twenty or so cousins, aunts and uncles, but also the relentless teasing of my mom's middle sister for the abundance of hair she had as a child. They likened her to a gorilla, and my grandmother agreed, inducing laughs from all of us. Perhaps it was sick that we could sit in a funeral home, corpse lying in front of us, and somehow find a way to laugh, but we did it all the same. The trickster my grandpa was would have reveled in how we remembered him that day.

The melody of death has a crescendo but no finale. The song just ends. It is the seamless changing of verbs from "is" to "was."

For the living, though, death is not final. In a way, it is the beginning of every chapter that follows. Having to explain to new friends that my father was also an educator, three years into retirement, when he died suddenly.

In the same breath my dad lives and dies as I answer people's questions about what my parents do for a living.

I met so many new people when I came to college, and each time it seemed as if they found out about my dead dad a different way. Once, a boy was reading his bible in the common area, and our conversation ended, somehow, in me telling him that my dad was halfway through his third reading of the bible when he died. He said he was sorry for my loss.

Another time, I was with a group of four people, and they didn't know about my dad. We all went to the zoo together, to get to know one another better. One girl asked about the farm I grew up on and the cows. "It was really my dad's thing," I said, "but my mom takes care of them now." She

replied, “Oh, but what does your dad do now?” To which I replied, “My dad actually passed away when I was a junior in high school.” Awkward silence.

In the ever-popular Harry Potter series, there is a creature named a Thestral. It is a skeletal horse-like creature that only those who have seen death can see. Harry Potter and Luna Lovegood are the only Hogwarts students who can see the creatures pulling the wagons; to everyone else it simply looks as if the wagons were pulled by an invisible force. In this way, J.K. Rowling shows us how unifying and isolating death can be. For Harry and Luna, they are able to understand each other on a different level as they are the only ones who can see the Thestrals—but it is also isolates them from their friends for the same reason. They cannot possibly describe the winged horse skeleton thing to those who cannot see it, as we cannot explain our grief to those who have never grieved.

After my trip to the zoo with friends, I later found out that one of the girls I had been with also lost her father when she was in high school. She said she didn’t tell me then because she didn’t know how to be like, “Oh cool, I’ve got a dead dad too.” We both knew the pain of grief, and we both knew how awkward it could be to bring it up.

Sometimes, it is simply easier to say nothing at all. There are times I try to see how long I can go without telling anyone new I meet that my dad is dead. It gets too painful after a while, to relive it over and over and over again. I once went a whole weekend without telling anyone; it became a sort of game, one I was angry I had to play.

Once I knew that grief was a commonality between the girl from the zoo and myself, we were able to connect on a different level and have conversations that I was unable to have with other friends. There is a “dead dads” club. Just like with the Thestrals, until you’ve experienced death, there’s no way you could possibly join or understand this connection between people.

I do not wish it upon anyone that they should gain access to the “dead dads” club. It is a dark place that only we can understand. Still, there is a comfort in knowing that you are not the only one experiencing this particular pain in life.

At the end of the loop around the sculpture park, we came to a massive yellow hand, at least twenty feet high. Atop one of the fingers is a huge blue butterfly, looking as though it is about to take flight, and in the center of the palm is a thorn, precariously hanging on to the place it has been imbedded. My mom moved past the sculpture, but I stood and stared for a long while, something clicking into place for me.

Wayne Porter wrote, “Pain and joy can coexist, but neither one stays forever. Butterflies fly away. Thorns are pulled.” We can grieve and smile at the same time. Not only will butterflies fly away but they can fly away; not only are thorns pulled but we can pull them.

There exists a certain type of freedom in welcoming the messiness of conflicting emotions. People will die, and sometimes they will die too soon or in terrible ways. Grief is a process that lasts a

lifetime, and it is okay to simultaneously feel joy and sorrow. One cannot exist without the other, like a dark night and star-lit skies.

Pain and joy coexist.

But neither one stays forever.