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SEQUOIA SPEAKS



MINGLING TEARS: BEREAVEMENT DURING COVID

PERSONAL ESSAY · ROSEMARY KEEVIL

He died on a late September, Sunday afternoon. It must have been the Tuesday after that my neighbor, Nancy, visited with a tuna casserole. Then I think it must have been the next day Cynthia dropped in with Montreal-style bagels. On Thursday, Sarah made a visit with a bouquet of colorful roses, my favorite flower.

These human encounters are abnormal during the COVID pandemic. It has wreaked havoc with bereavement rituals such as celebrations of life, funerals, and burials.

After my husband died, I was absorbed by the planning for his funeral service that upcoming Sunday: what flowers, who to give the eulogies, who to play the music, etc. I remember meeting with the organist, who surprised me, as he was wearing John Lennon glasses and looked just like the former Beatle. I think I surprised the young organist, too, as I hardly looked like a widow—37 years old and dressed to the nines. Then there was the service itself, in the enchanting St. Francis in the Wood Church,

nestled into lush and tiny Tiddly Cove in West Vancouver, British Columbia. There were some 150 people there. I saw old friends squished into the pews in the balcony. I was in the front row, flanked by my two- and five-year-old daughters. I did not know how much they would remember of their daddy, who died after an eight-month brawl with cancer.

I do remember all the hugs and tears afterwards in the sun-soaked English garden outside the church.

Then there was the get-together at my home. We gathered on the steps outside by the backyard swimming pool and sang a song my husband used to sing to our daughters, "You Are My Sunshine", which includes heartbreakingly apt lines such as *Please don't take my sunshine away*. That was a spur-of-the-moment singalong of friends and relatives sharing sorrow side-by-side.

All these traditions involved gathering with others. During COVID, this act of getting

together has been impossible, so we grieved in isolation. Virtual celebrations of life services became the norm. Natalia Skritskaya, a clinical psychologist at Columbia University's Center for Complicated Grief, has something to say about that.

"We're not really designed to be totally in a digital space," Skritskaya remarked. "We still need that physical contact. That is one of the disruptions of the pandemic. We're lamenting the lack of the physical and it's not the same to just have faces on Zoom. It's important to have somebody hold your hand or give you a hug."

Skritskaya says that all cultures have rituals for bereavement and that structure is important during the grieving period: "Having a kind of a set, predictable activity or things to do, can be helpful during that time. It's helpful both for the bereaved person and for people around them."

On February 29th, 2020, 79-year-old Jim Hayhurst died with medical assistance in Collingwood, Ontario. His children had been planning a service for May, but that was cancelled due to COVID, which began to strangle the world right when Hayhurst died. His son, Jimmy, said that when the planned service for May "stopped being a possibility, we actually resisted planning the virtual thing for two reasons: "Number one, we thought that we would be out of this sooner than we were, so we said, 'Let's just hang on and we'll get together in the fall.' The second is that the Zoom experience had been so bad and it's still not great, but it just hadn't been the norm."

As time went on, the Hayhurst children realized they had to do something to mark the passing of their father. They ended up producing a remarkable two-and-a-half hour Zoom memorial service on November 22nd, attended by some 200 people from around the world.

As successful as the Zoom experience was, Jimmy Hayhurst later said, "I'm an in-person

person and there's this energy that is missing [during the virtual experience]." Jimmy was the MC, and he didn't know where to look when he was speaking: "I'm looking at the camera to give you eye contact, but I'm not looking at anyone and I hate that."

During the peak of the pandemic, Jimmy Hayhurst also attended the funeral of Canada's former Prime Minister John Turner who died on September 19th, 2020, at 91 years old. The funeral was held in October at St. Michael's Cathedral Basilica in Toronto. There were 170 invited guests.

"While the recently renovated cathedral has a capacity for 1,600 people," writes The Globe and Mail, "concerns over the spread of COVID-19 prompted organizers to limit the guest list. Many in attendance wore black face masks and were spaced out among the pews to maintain physical distance. There was also no communal singing."

Jimmy said the church was very empty, "and it was for a former Prime Minister, it should have been packed to the gills." Turner had requested a church service.

Jimmy was a dear friend of Turner's son, David, who was terminally ill when his father died. David passed a few months later. The family waited until September of 2021 for the burial at Mt. Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto. Jimmy said it was just family and two friends allowed, "and a bunch of other friends just showed up and hung out in the woods to see them, but they couldn't hug the Turner family. They all had to disperse really quickly, so that was awful."

Holly Prigerson also had a horrid burial experience for her mother, who died in January, 2021, from COVID at 87 years old. Prigerson is a professor of sociology in medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College. The burial was on a frigid New York City day. The gravediggers wore masks, and "there was definitely the sense of *don't infect us*. They were doing their job, but they kept

their distance. They just wanted to bury her and get the hell out of there. There would have been a rabbi there. We would have had a service there, but there was none of that. We were like, Let's just get this done. We'll make it up to her later, but because of COVID, it didn't really happen."

My husband's death was devastating but I was blessed with an atmosphere supportive of grieving. I learned that, although our western culture does not handle grief that well, the rituals we have in place do work: the busy-organizing-the-service immediately after the death; the visiting of loving friends and family; the gathering of tens or hundreds of caring people for the celebration of life; and the physical closeness of those occasions. All this kick-started my grieving journey. Those people grieving loved ones during the pandemic have been robbed of these comforting traditions, of bodily contact such as a hug or a kiss.

When I was sharing a hug with my sister in that sunlit garden after my late husband's church service our cheeks brushed, and our tears mingled.