

El Lobo y La Paloma Grief Talk

Words spoken by Carol Schoneberg—End-of-Life Educator and Bereavement Services Manager at Hospice of Southern Maine—in the fall of 2019 at the Portland Museum of Art and again in February of 2020 at The Frontier in Brunswick, ME, following the showing of *El Lobo y la Paloma*. A one-hour film documenting a flamenco performance choreographed, written and performed by Lindsey Bourassa, *El Lobo y la Paloma* explores the themes of loss, connection, and ancestry through all original flamenco dance, Arabic music and song, poetry, and projected imagery, and tells a story about the loss of a loved one and the mystical connections between the physical and spiritual worlds:

Wanting to view *El Lobo y la Paloma* before speaking about it at the Portland Museum of Art last fall, Lindsey sent me an almost final version. Sitting at my kitchen table, watching the film on my laptop, I was filled with deep feelings within seconds of the start of the music and dancing. The presence of the musicians and the dancers—of the piece itself—called me to go deeper and get in touch with my own grief, as I suspect it has done for many of you here tonight.

Initially, my mind tried to interpret the dance, to watch from the perspective of a grief counselor, almost dissecting it frame by frame searching for what the creator might have intended, as if it was something to be figured out, the way one might overhear an obnoxious person doing in a museum, telling their companion in an unnecessarily loud voice what the painting means. In that moment I reminded myself that only the dreamer can interpret the dream, only the painter can interpret the painting, and only the dancer can interpret the dance. Attempting to use the intellect to understand something that can only be understood with the heart was getting in the way of my fully taking in the experience. Taking a risk and leaving intellect behind allowed the space needed for the music and dance to enter, bringing with it a transcendent experience.

The same is true of grief.

Our task is to create space for grief in our lives, to begin to understand there is a severing between the heart and the head when we are grieving, and that it cannot be understood with our intellect. Moving toward grief and embracing it is not something we naturally want to do. It hurts too much to allow ourselves to fully feel the weight of what we are experiencing—to actually embrace it rather than push it away—but this is a critical part of the path toward healing. Grief leaves us feeling vulnerable and uncertain, and it takes an extraordinary amount of courage to let it lead us where we need to go. You will encounter people who disagree with this, who might say things like, “Don’t dwell on it,” or “Just keep yourself busy and you won’t have to hurt so much.” While this advice is well-intended, it is never helpful. This unsolicited advice is the projection of someone whose recipe for coping with profound loss is to act as if it never happened—to simply put on a happy face, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, and carry on. Business as usual. The recipe does not include acknowledging and feeling the depth of your pain. Allowing ourselves to be with our grief does not mean we are dwelling on it. Crying does not mean we are wallowing in it or having a pity party. If ever there was a time to have sorrow for oneself, it is

now—this terrible thing *did* happen, it *cannot* be changed, it is *not* a mistake. To have sorrow for oneself is a necessary part of the healing process. It may seem that embracing our grief will only push us into a deeper state of sadness but doing so actually creates the space we need to begin the healing process. People who have not known profound grief do not understand the overwhelming power and immensity of grief. Some still imagine they are in control of their lives, that mind over matter can solve everything. They have not yet learned that Grief is bigger than they are, and that it will not be dismissed without a very big price to pay—the price of living half a life. Grief deserves and demands my attention and expression. Doing so, I will eventually find healing, growth, and transformation.

Grief is a normal part of the human experience—it is as natural as breathing and eating and sleeping. Death and grief are not normalized in our culture. Teaching about death and grief are not part of the curriculum in our first twelve years of school and beyond. For many people, death and grief are something to be embarrassed by, and bring shame for whatever human feelings arise in them. In his beautiful book, *The Smell of Rain on Dust*, indigenous writer Martin Prechtel reminds us that grief is praise—it is the natural way love honors what it misses. Indigenous cultures understand and anticipate major changes in life and have a built-in place for grief as a normal part of life. It is expected and allowed expression. The entire village participates and supports, and all are led to healing. Prechtel reminds us:

“Grief has a sound, a sound that embarrasses the repressed and offends the oppressive. Grief is the sound of being alive. Grief is not depression; a griever is not depressed. Depression comes from not being able to grieve, which converts our losses into violence. Because they are best friends, both Grief and Praise live together in the same building, but in opposing quarters; in the left and right chambers of Love’s great thumping house called the Heart.”

When we are deep in grief, *mourning* through the creation of art in any of its many forms—including dance, music, painting, or writing—can be a powerful path toward healing. It often helps facilitate the connection between the physical and spiritual worlds, as we witnessed in *El Lobo y La Paloma*. We learn:

“The Wolf embodies the departed displaced being, and the Dove guides the sufferer out of suffering—the griever grieves in order to heal, and the music guides our healing.”

The fact is that the grief we feel following the death of a central person in our life has a naturally occurring point of despair. The writer Miriam Greenspan—the daughter of Holocaust survivors and a psychotherapist for more than 40 years—speaks of despair in a 2008 interview for *The Sun* entitled *Through A Glass Darkly: On Moving from Grief to Gratitude*. Reminded by the interviewer of the alchemists’ saying about “*finding gold in the dung heap*,” Greenspan was asked if she was mining the dung heaps of our lives for spiritual and psychological gold, to which she replied:

“Despair is an existential emotion. It occurs when our meaning system gets

shattered and we have to construct a new one. But our culture does not value this process. We don't see any value in the dung. We want to flush it away. It takes courage to allow our faith and meaning to be dismantled. Despair can be a powerful path to the sacred and to a kind of illumination that doesn't come when we bypass the darkness. As the poet Theodore Roethke put it, *the darkness has its own light.*"

Grief can be our most profound spiritual teacher, deepening our connection to life, and leaving us transformed in the process. When I am deep in grief, I look to those who have travelled the grief journey before me and come out on the other side. They tell me it will get a little softer and easier over time, and the huge boulder of grief I now carry on my back will little by little get smaller and become more manageable until eventually it is reduced to a small polished stone I can carry in my pocket. Their ability to rejoin life tells me I will one day do the same, not so much as the person I once was, but rather a wiser and more humane version of myself, capable of once again living a life full of meaning and joy—proof of the mysterious resiliency and capacity for healing present in every one of us.