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My Feminist Grief Mon deuil de féministe

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My Feminist Grief

by Rebecca Godderis

“Grief is forcing new skins on me, scraping scales from my eyes.”

—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Notes on Grief* (2021)

My therapist asked, “How do you understand death? What framework do you have?”

Answer: “My feminism.”

Neither of us really knew what this meant. She felt that I was intellectualizing (again) as a protection against the deep grief I was swimming in. Bathing in. Twisting and turning in.

Admittedly it was protection. But it wasn't *only* that. If my feminism guided me in life, wouldn't it also have something to say about my grief in the face of so much death? I knew there was a connection, but I couldn't articulate it.

My best friend died in March 2017. My mentor and close friend who helped me cope in the face of my best friend's death, died in September 2018. My mom died in January 2019.

In February 2019 I shattered my ankle. I didn't break it. I shattered it. I couldn't walk and was at home for months. Isolated. Me and my new life companion, Grief. Being swallowed by it and swallowing it. I swallowed my Grief and was shattered by it.

I hung out with Grief for a long time as my bones and skin grew back together. We hung out with all my dead, who were present in my dreams while I slept, and in my memories while I was awake. I learned to walk again in May and went back to work in September. By all accounts I was “recovered.” Not healed but recovered enough. Then COVID came. March 2020. Now the whole world was bathing in Grief. We were all swimming in it together but having dramatically different experiences. Everyone's life had changed, sure, but it wasn't every *body* that was dying of COVID.

So much death. So much grief. So much pain. What was/is my framework to hold this all? How do I live a feminist life while staring down all this death?

It is 2022. Five years since my first death (her death and also mine because a part of me died along with her). At her funeral I read *Death Is Nothing At All* by Henry Scott Holland (n.d.). She wanted it read out loud. To help us. To soften the sharp edges of loss. She was always thinking of us.

The poem begins with the following words:

*Death is nothing at all.
It does not count.*

*I have only slipped away into the next room.
Nothing has happened.*

*Everything remains exactly as it was.
I am I, and you are you,
and the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged.
Whatever we were to each other, that we are still.*

I cried. And cried. I cried by myself so, hopefully, I wouldn't in front of others. But I still cried in front of everyone. Because of how much she was caring for us by asking for this poem to be read. And I wept because it felt so full of lies. Her death was *everything*.

We became feminist killjoys together, and I couldn't imagine my feminist life without her. I read her excerpts from Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) in the emergency room. The book had just been released. We knew my friend was dying but we didn't know it would be so soon. I read to her to feel like we were still living our feminist lives together. And I read to drown out the noise of the ER. I read louder than the screaming patient beside us but not so loud as to be screaming myself. Even though I wanted to scream. I was desperate to scream.

She died five days later.

And so began my Feminist Grief.

What makes grief feminist?

In speaking of her father's death, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2021) talks about how "The layers of loss make life feel papery thin." My Feminist Grief also made/makes life stand at a distance. In the corner. Crumpled like tissue paper. Thin. Easily torn.

The words of Sara Ahmed (2017) that I read in the emergency room left traces of ideas for my grieving self to consider: "theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin." Grief was insisting that my Feminism settle into my skin in a new way. Not just onto it—*into* my skin. My Feminism and my Grief. My Feminist Grief.

My Feminist Grief is what Sara Ahmed calls a *sweaty concept*: "Sweat is bodily; we might sweat more during more strenuous and muscular activity. A sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying. The task is to stay with the difficult, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty" (Ahmed 2017).

Feminism has taught us that the personal is political. What happened, why my dead died in the ways they did, and what resources they could access—and what resources I could access—are all related to who I am. To my whiteness. To the other privileges I carry. All the people I loved died of cancer. Creeping inside their bodies. Filling up their bones and brains and chests. My mom's was in her pancreas. We found out three weeks before she died. She was there and then she wasn't. And we had time to say goodbye.

Those I love died from cancer. They were not gunned down by police. They did not vanish; missing, presumed murdered. My families' histories show the same pattern. Heart failure, chronic bronchitis, a car accident, a choking incident, and more (endless) cancer. My Ancestors are not lost at sea continuing to breathe alongside the "sharp exhale of hunted whales" as part of what Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020) calls *a context of undrowning* that continues to recognize the resistance of enslaved people. My loved ones have not "endured 400 years of genocide, murder, and dispossession" and then continue to survive contemporary systems that target their children and families and languages so that they can be part of the revolution Christi Belcourt describes in *The Revolution has Begun*: "We do not need to bring indigeneity into universities; we need to bring our Indigenous selves out onto the lands to rebuild our ways of learning, to keep this earth and water pure and beautiful for 10,000 more years" (Belcourt 2018).

Intersectional feminism has demanded that I comprehend this death and destruction. Historical and contemporary. And that I see the resistance. That I be part of the resistance. But first I must witness how, in the words of bell hooks, the *imperialist white supremacist capitalist [hetero]patriarchy* literally cuts the flesh of some bodies and not others (hooks 2012). Cuts some bodies more, and more violently. Entire families. Entire communities. Cut to the bone. As Sonya Renee Taylor reminds us: "When we speak of ills of the world—violence, poverty, injustice—we are not speaking conceptually; we are talking about things that happen to bodies" (Taylor 2021). Can my Feminist Grief help me better integrate these understandings into my work? Into how I live my life? Can my Feminist Grief spill into my dreams—the ones I have when I am awake and those I share with my dead as I sleep? Can it make me more my *self* in life and in my own death?

My Feminist Grief is *not* a gift. It is a teacher. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said: "Grief is a cruel kind of education. You learn how ungente mourning can be, how full of anger. You learn how glib condolences can feel. You learn how much grief is about language, the failure of language and the grasping of language" (Adichie 2021).

That is why it has taken me so long to write this. Five years of feminist grieving before I could start to find the language. I'm still grasping (gasping), but I've found a few threads to pull on.

My mom was a fibre artist who worked with fabrics and thread. She didn't just put pieces of fabric together. She united them, placing fabrics beside each other to give them different meanings, and then stitching them together. She used the sewing machine to draw and paint with thread. She was a creator. Creative. She created me.

As we cleaned out their house so my step-dad could move, scraps of memories were everywhere. Like pieces of fabric and thread. I collected these scraps in a desperate attempt to give my Grief meaning. To try to unite them and stitch them together to better understand the relationships of me, my mom, my life, her death, my Grief. To create. To build a visual of what comes next. I haven't built much yet. My Feminist Grief has left me so tired. But I am starting to pull some threads together now.

In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes: "The Skywoman story, shared by the original peoples throughout the Great Lakes, is a constant star in the constellation of teaching we call the Original Instructions. These are not 'instructions' like commandments, though, or rules; rather they are like a compass: they provide an orientation but not a map. The work of living is creating that map for yourself" (Kimmerer 2013).

Building a map. Orienting. Stitching pieces together. Creating. The work of living.

I didn't have a clear sense of what would happen when I die before my dead began to walk in my dreams; I still don't. Not fully. But what I have learned—in a way I couldn't grasp before—is that I will die. Before, I knew this abstractly. Now, I know it in my body. In my blood and bones. In my tissues and muscles. And when you know you will die—

when you *really* know—you end up thinking a lot about life. And the relationships between life and death. And the stories you’ve been told about the relationships between life and death.

In her book *We Will Not Cancel Us*, adrienne maree brown speaks beautifully about these relationships. The many different relationships between life and death. About the time we are living in. About the *need* to imagine liberatory futures. She writes, “Our current collective circumstances require us to think about death, to grieve, and to consider that everything we have known has to change or come to an end” (brown 2020). She is speaking of the COVID-19 pandemic. She is speaking of the incredibly divisive political moment we are living in. And she is speaking of how we dispose of one another so quickly rather than invest in change and growth and transformation.

She goes on: “I have had to choose life from deep within me. That’s why I’m still here. I want to live. *I want to want to live*. I think everyone chooses each day to move towards life or away from it, though some don’t realize that they are making the choices. Capitalism makes it hard to see your own direction” (brown 2020).

The vulnerability. The honesty. My heart hurts with how much adrienne’s words resonate with me. I want to want to live too. And to do so, I need to dig. Deep. I want to love more. Others. Myself. The land and the waters. So much more. During a lecture I attended in the fall of 2021, Robin Wall Kimmerer posed what seems to be an impossible question: “What is the antidote to grief and despair?” I’ve been waiting for the answer to this question. Desperately waiting. Waiting with desperation. She answers: “Getting to work, gathering the medicine together, healing our relationships with Earth and others.”

I am gathering myself and getting to work. I am wanting to want to live. I have taken up the lawn in front of my house and created spaces for solitary bees to sleep on tall flowers. Neighbours stop and talk about the garden. We share moments we didn’t share before.

And I am pausing, resting. I am sharing moments with my *self*. Recognizing how the systems and the stories I grew up with were conspiring to disconnect me from land and water and Earth so they could continue to do their dirty work. Extraction. Exploitation. Disrespect. Disconnection. I am seeking and searching out new stories. Robin Wall Kimmerer shares more insight in *Braiding Sweetgrass*:

[O]ur human relationship with strawberries is transformed by our choice of perspective. It is human perception that makes the world a gift. When we view the world this way strawberries and humans alike are transformed. The relationship of gratitude and reciprocity thus developed can increase the evolutionary fitness of both plant and animal.... The stories we choose to shape our behaviors have adaptive consequences. (Kimmerer 2013)

I also grew up with stories that disconnected me from me, and me from others. Alok Vaid-Menon (2020) captures the consequences of this disconnection in such a concise way: “We repress ourselves and in turn repress one another, hurting everyone involved.” So clear. To the point. Alok goes on to say, “Repression breeds insecurity breeds violence.” My repression has bred my insecurity has bred my violence. And like Robin Wall Kimmerer, Alok gives us a direction forward: “Learned behaviours can also be *unlearned*: it’s possible to develop more kind and just ways of relating to ourselves and to one another” (Vaid-Menon 2020). I want to be part of stopping the violence and repression. I want to transform and to be transformed.

My Feminist Grief. Teacher. Teaching me to un-learn. Providing the possibility of transformation if I continue to step into it. It is difficult and sweaty. But I want to go back to school. In *Undrowned* Alexis Pauline Gumbs wonders “if we could trade the image of ‘family’ for the practice of school, a unit of care where we are learning and re-learning how to honour each other, how to go deep, how to take turns, how to find nourishing light again and again” (Gumbs 2020). I want to honour and respect and nourish, and I want to be honoured and respected and nourished. Together.

Alongside. Recognizing difference. Honouring difference. Not falling into the divides created by ableism, settler colonialism, the institution of slavery, white supremacy.

Division feeds those systems. They are beasts. And they are hungry. I can feel them feeding on my sadness and despair. They sit heavy on my chest. Stealing my voice. My breath. I don't want to let them have my Feminist Grief.

My Feminist Grief stopped me in my tracks. I was shattered. It literally demanded that I not walk. That I sit. That I exist. With my *self*. With Grief. No work to distract. No easy movements. Sit. Exist. Think. Feel. Grieve. My Feminist Grief demanded that I create a new story. A new perspective.

In Alexis Pauline Gumbs' words, "right now she is coughing and spitting and clinging to what she has known. She feels like she is drowning, but she's just meeting herself again for the first time" (Gumbs 2020).

I had to be with pain. Physical. Emotional. Spiritual. Every part of me was dripping in pain. A thick coating of tar like the tailing ponds in the northern Alberta oil fields. I have a memory of photography exhibit in a small Ottawa gallery that captured the Earth and birds covered in sand and clay and bitumen. Suffering. Suffocating. The Earth is suffering and suffocating. I was suffering and suffocating. My Feminist Grief was encouraging me to feel new connections. The connection of my *self*, to the Earth and to others. We have to figure out how to find one another.

The systems of violence, harm and oppression are all connected too. They are strong. They rely on one another. We are awash in them. Breathing and spinning in them. Flooded by them. They want us to be spun so hard that we can no longer hold onto each other. They want us to be thrown from each other so we can't breathe together. Unable to share our breath when the other is suffocating. Suffering. Divided.

In speaking of transformative justice, adrienne maree brown asks,

How do I hold a systemic analysis and approach when each system I am critical of is peopled, in part, by the same flawed and complex individuals that I love? This question always leads me to self-reflection. If I can see the ways I am perpetuating systemic oppressions, if I can see where I learned the behaviour and how hard it is to unlearn it, I can start to have more humility as I see the messiness of the communities I am part of, the world I live in. (brown 2020)

We need each other. We need self-reflection. We must ask ourselves—and each other—hard questions. Continue to work towards finding our collective breath. Figuring it out even though it is difficult and makes us sweat. Sweaty concepts. Sweaty, worthy futures. Futures that make us want to live.

Self is connected to other is connected to self is connected to other. Alok Vaid-Menon (2020) expresses this beautifully when they say, "Becoming ourselves is a collective journey."

Harsha Walia adds incredible insights:

One of my own realizations over the years has been that decolonization is more of a process than a goal. It is the process whereby we intend the conditions we want to live and intend the social relations we wish to have. It is a process that forces us to reconnect with each other and the Earth...Ironically, I would argue, decolonization has also come to mean that we get rid of terminology such as "solidarity," a concept that implicitly signifies the "otherness" of those with whom one is in relation. (Walia 2012)

What do we do if we can't rely on the now habitual language of solidarity and allyship? How do I, with all my power granted by the violent systems, be in the sweaty fight with those targeted by these violent systems? Harsha Walia offers up more gifts:

Striving toward decolonization requires us to challenge a dehumanizing social organization that perpetuates our isolation from each other and normalizes a lack of responsibility to one another and the Earth. I have been encouraged to think of human interconnectedness rather than isolation in building alliances with Indigenous communities. This has not translated to a simple unity across our differences, in particular those that are rooted in systems of power and privilege. Rather it has created a radical terrain of struggle where our common visions for justice do not erase our different social locations, and similarly, that our differing identities do not prevent us from walking together toward transformation and mutual respect. (Walia 2012)

Relationships. Community. Land. Water. Love. Life. Christi Belcourt writes, “reconciliation must begin with the animals and the waters. It must begin with us as human beings asking for forgiveness and deciding, together, that we will set a new course based on respect and sharing, so that all living beings can be healthy and thrive... We must shift our thinking to have responsibility rather than rights” (Belcourt 2018).

I want to live in *this* world. This vision makes me want to want to live.

And I am responsible. It is my responsibility to live differently. Violence is always hungry for more emptiness. More fear and isolation. More division. My Feminist Grief is guiding me towards doing the work of liberatory living. I must tell different stories about life, about death, and about the acts we choose to do every day that make up living.

In Sara Ahmed's words: “Feminism is a sensible reaction to the injustices of the world, which we might register at first through our own experiences. We might work over, mull over, these experiences; we might keep coming back to them because they do not make sense. In other words we have to make sense of what does not make sense. There is agency and life in this making” (Ahmed 2017).

My Feminist Grief and I. Making. Creating. Living. Dying.

Speaking on how we move forward, adrienne maree brown shares these beautiful words:

We will not cancel us. But we must earn our place on this earth. We will tell each other we hurt people and who. We will tell each other why, and who hurt us and how. We will tell each other what we will do to heal ourselves, and heal the wounds in our wake. We will be accountable, rigorous in our accountability, all of us unlearning, all of us crawling towards dignity... We must all do our work. Be accountable and go heal, simultaneously, continuously. (brown 2020)

I am crawling and I am crying and I am working towards healing. I am learning from my Feminist Grief to embrace being broken open. Being vulnerable. To say I have hurt people. And I know I *will* hurt people. To recognize myself as able to hurt others so I can be accountable. I can change. Transform. And to name the ways I have been hurt. The ways I hurt right now. I see the violence of oppressive systems. I am hurt by these systems, and I use them to hurt others. I am both at the same time. Simultaneously.

Reading and listening to your words—adrienne, Alexis, Alok, Chimamanda, Christi, Harsha, Robin, Sara, Sonya—I feel an invitation into a new way of living that moves us towards your vision of a liberatory future. Thank you for in-

viting me in, even though I still have so much to learn. Thank you for laying down a path, for clearing the ground. For helping me be grounded. My Grief is not the same as yours. My deaths, and my life, have power and privilege that have been violently taken from your communities. But my Feminist Grief—my state of being undone, broken open—has helped me hear your words in a new way. Your words continue to teach me how to see and experience death, and violence, and harm, and exploitation, and still choose life every day.

I am learning about living. To see what I am swimming in more clearly. To clear my eyes. To breathe deeper. To deeply breathe. And to be vulnerable and humble, yet still put together enough to be in relation with everything. Every living thing and every thing. The land, the waters, the rocks, the trees. Humans. Animals. Our communities. Our collective. Collectivity.

After so much death I needed to learn how to live again. And I needed to learn how to live differently. And so my Feminist Grief has settled into my skin. We hang out with each other and with others. And we smile and we cry and we sweat together in this life. Until it will be time for our death.

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