

## Reflective Writing and Pedagogy: Processing Loss and Grief during 4C21

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My tale is short.

Like many, my experiences during the pandemic have been grounded in loss and grieving. During the first months, loss came from the loss of functionality—my body, already disabled by an autoimmune disease, felt the impact of losing medical support. I lost my ability to walk distances as my leg dragged behind me, and I grieved the things I used to do. It was a forced change in perspective, a forced reckoning with what I could do and what I would need assistance with.

Loss came in the form of losing people close to me. One friend died by suicide, the loss caused by the weight of the pandemic much too heavy to bear. I sorted through letters he sent to me when we were both teenagers, his excuse to practice calligraphy and test the efficiency of the postal system's computerized address recognition system. My name and address curled across the envelopes in shades of red, gold, and blue—some I received as many as six months after he sent them. The writing was too beautiful and too adorned with filigree for digital recognition.

In the months before the 2021 Cs, I lost both maternal grandparents—my parental figures who I lived with for much of my youth. My grandmother's death was expected, but I was not prepared for the grief. I saw in my own movements the habits and behaviors I picked up from her. I hunted for videos so that I could hear the sound of her voice somewhere outside my mind. Six months to the day later, my grandfather died in his sleep, the grief too much for his heart to bear. He spent seventy-one years of his life with my grandmother—one moment more without her was too painful to endure.

My grief remained isolated from the place I called home. I did not attend either funeral. It was unsafe for me to travel during the pandemic, my autoimmune disease leaving me immunocompromised and vulnerable to COVID-19. Instead, my husband and I shared memories and stories back and forth, but even that was sometimes too much.

I was actively pushing my grief down into tiny boxes that I stored for *later*. But if I believed I was healing after my grandmother's death, my grandfather's death ripped open any progress I had made, rupturing the stitches I had used to piece myself back together and bursting the seams of those tiny boxes. In this time, I attended and presented at conferences, completed courses toward my doctorate, taught sections of professional writing and first-year composition, and made progress on my own research. I used my calendar to avoid confronting my own grief—the busier, the better.

I believed I was not ready to sit within my grief; I was not ready to process or reflect or endure whatever transformative experience this grief had in store for me. When I look back on the decisions I made in the aftermath of my grandfather's death, they are characterized by using productivity to avoid processing grief. Attending Cs and acting as a Documentarian was one of those decisions. If I could keep myself busy, I could keep myself from drowning in my own grief. I noted in one postconference reflection that I was preplanning my schedule down to the minute, monitoring my movements throughout my house, and scheduling time to attend panels, grade, respond to students, read, and write. My conference days were done at 5 p.m.; my planned movements stretched into the night until I fell asleep, only to wake up and do it again the next day.

I did not have a plan for grief.

During Cs, my grief lurked in the corner of my office and followed me as I walked around my house, waiting for an opportunity to spill out of the tiny boxes I had crafted for it. My carefully planned schedule for the conference was not enough to ward it away. It sunk into the cracks of my plans: the brief breaks between panels, the moments caught zoning out while staring out the window in front of my desk, the presenter's nervous laugh and quiet movements as technology failed to cooperate and they worked to fix it. My grief would take me in those moments, and my entire preplanned schedule—the schedule I used to avoid confronting my grief—would be overridden. It didn't take much; it just took silence.

My reflections for 4C21 show careful plans in the mornings and constant disruptions to my plans by my evening report. On Wednesday, I wrote about several on-demand sessions I wanted to take in and was excited for; that evening, I wrote that I didn't attend any on-demand sessions. When talking about my schedule that day, I wrote, "I didn't

add anything to the plan, but I did take away from it.” This was a common theme throughout the week: I planned and wrote about my excitement—and then I didn’t follow through on the plan. I wrote about being confined to my house (“Forever in my office”), avoiding people (“I am purposefully not seeing anyone; I don’t have the mental bandwidth for it”), and struggling to keep it together (“Today has been rough”).

I was not confronting my grief, but when I look at the things I created during the period and my reflections from the 2021 Cs, it is clear I was sitting in my grief the entire time, processing and reflecting on loss and considering what moving forward would look like. When one of the Documentarian surveys asked, “What was one news item, headline, or event that impacted you today,” I responded with the deaths of Prince Philip, DMX, and Janice Lauer. I wrote that I was “very attuned to death,” though I had no connection to those whose deaths were dominating the news cycle. “Death,” I wrote, “seems constant.” I sat and watched as the internet poured out its grief on public forums while I was pushing mine down.

By Friday night, I was physically sick. My autoimmune disease is triggered by stress, among other things. Shoving grief into tiny boxes for *later* is stressful; filling every moment of the day can only be maintained for so long. I had been maintaining my busy schedule since March 1, 2021, the day after my grandfather died. It is no secret that institutions did not respect virtual conferences and the time required to attend them; I simply added the 2021 Cs to my scheduled teaching, coursework, and projects. When I look back on it, it is unsurprising that my body couldn’t take it. Friday evening, I wrote, “I got a case of the most wicked vertigo I’ve experienced in a long time. It knocked me out . . . As a result, I missed some panels I wanted to attend.” The world was spinning, and my grief lurked.

Grief doesn’t take (nor have) a standard form; what I was expecting—to be wracked by inconsolable waves of tears—isn’t what happened. I didn’t deny my grief so much as I avoided confronting it head-on. Instead, I wrote from within my grief, designing a choose-your-own adventure fiber-arts game that played through my memories, inviting the player to take me home to visit my grandparents’ graves and literally stitch my soul back together as they traveled paths I had traveled. My grief lasted for months and it affected each moment of my day, whether I was ready for it or not. A song on my playlist, a bird visiting a feeder outside my window, a smell from the kitchen, a

brief moment of silence while trying to fall asleep—nothing was truly safe from grief’s long reach.

When my grandmother died, I was teaching a section of asynchronous first-year composition. When my grandfather died, I was teaching two sections of asynchronous professional writing. Both times, I emailed my students and both times, my students sent messages of support and care. Some students shared similar experiences, writing that they had been struggling to keep their lives together as they grieved loved ones, worked, and studied. Their lives had gone on, but their grief had stayed. To the institution, their grief had a time limit: five days for an immediate family member, three for an extended family member or a friend, and only within two weeks of the death.

The time limit sticks with me. How could I place a time limit on my grandparents’ place in my life, on the hole left when they were gone? Could I fit my grief into five days, two weeks after their respective deaths? As an adult, I was lucky to spend a decade living just six miles from their home. I visited every Saturday, the number adding up to at least 520 visits, with the countless times that I would just stop by unaccounted for. When I left to pursue a doctorate, I replaced those visits with phone calls; in the week before my grandfather’s death, I called him four times. I didn’t know he was dying; I just had news I wanted to share with him. Could I take the pieces of me that felt splintered and bruised and fit my grief into five days allotted within two weeks? The simple answer is no. Cs occurred roughly seven months after my grandmother died and roughly one month after my grandfather died. My institutional timeline was up—and I was still caught within my grief.

There were fantastic panels at the 2021 Cs; I have notes from them. Roxane Gay gave an amazing keynote; I have notes from it. But when I think of that Cs, I don’t remember the panels or the keynote. My grief was too heavy, too deep, *too present*. What I take from my experience attending the 2021 Cs is that grief doesn’t have a time limit, nor a timeline. How could I take this experience and expect my students to place a timeline on their grief, on the pain they felt after a loss? The institution wanted me to treat my students’ grief as it had treated mine, as something finite and easily contained, and I could not reconcile that with my experience. The institution can’t show grace or compassion, but I can. As a teacher, I am acutely aware that I never know what experiences my students are carrying with them into my classroom,

and so much of their experiences are mediated by validation from the institution. Grief is an easily overlooked experience that has only become more visible during the pandemic. Centering compassion and transparency within my pedagogy costs me nothing but may make a difference for the student whose grief outlived the days given to them by the institution, the student who found themselves sitting within their grief at the most unexpected (and inopportune) moment.