

## Waxing the Storyboard: Writing and Performing Stories of Family Loss

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*This essay attempts to, narratively and autoethnographically, perform the stories of three individuals' experiences with the death of a loved one. These individuals' written stories were collected and performed to spark inquiry into the philosophy and praxis of expressive written narrative as a form of meditation. Building upon research on expressive writing, expressive written storytelling was used to aid these individuals in opening up to a richer, more clear present moment for remembering and storying. The performance of these three stories studies the power of restorative storytelling and enhances the connection between story and restoring to necromancy (Friedlander, 1979). Moreover, they speak to the power of love and story in families, and the creation of complex possibilities for healing, living, and loving.*

### Story: The Tie the Binds

When a life ends it's as if it bursts, leaving wet weights all over the landscape. The living live in a state of dispersal.

– Kathleen Stewart (2013, p. 661)

“Do not pity the dead...Pity the living, and, above all, those who live without love.”

– Albus Dumbledore (Rowling, 2007, p. 722)

*I dreamt about you last night, Grandpa. Strange... I do believe it was the first dream of you in many seasons. I've thought about you so much lately. This dream feels a long time coming.*

It's been over five years and I still have not fully come to terms with or wholly expressed my grandpa's death. I don't know if I'll be much closer in a full forty years. But that's how it goes after you lose your first loved one, right? There is a wound—a burn, laceration, contusion, concussion. We are marked by unrest.

In the years since, I've peeled back the wound. My silence on his death has receded like a low tide. Each time I tell, I learn something new about my experience. I better understand my grandpa and me. The wound doesn't fester as viciously—the gash isn't quite as deep, the pus doesn't reek of decay, the blood clots much more quickly.

My grandpa and I are separated in life yet tied together by story. And in storying him, I have been able to explore the relationship between us, in life and after his death. When evoking my grandpa, I am reminded of John Kabat-Zinn's (1994) recollection of the poster of a yogi surfing Hawaiian waters, with the caption: *You can't stop the waves but you can learn to surf.*

Life and death, water and wave. Wounded and healing, suffering and surfing.

I have restor(i)ed my grandpa in/from a messy memory, a fractured story that longs to be whole. Because of my efforts, I wash and bandage my wound regularly. I pick at it every now and then with stories written or told. These stories are quite like a surfboard—a *storyboard*, rather—for surfing the waves of my suffering.

But these things are not enough. The partiality of stories makes it quite impossible.

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Big thanks to a pair of my graduate school mentors, Drs. Loreen Olson and Chris Poulos, as well as the two anonymous reviewers of this piece for their guidance and feedback throughout the process of drafting this essay, this *attempt to story*. I thank my first scholarly sherpa who inspires me to reach compassionately into the shadowy places of life, in search of the promise that is hidden there. It would not feel right without dedicating this essay to my good friends the Postmaster and Tobias, and their loved ones lost: this is a sheet of music and the beautiful notes are yours. Grandpa, I am sorry to have lost you here on earth, but I thank you so for what I've been able to do with your memory, story, and legacy.

Still, memory and story are all I (we) have...

### Looking Inward, Telling Outward

Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find  
A thousand regions in your mind  
Yet undiscovered. Travel them and be  
Expert in home-cosmography.

– Henry David Thoreau (1854/1997)

We are inseparable from, awash with, and stitched together with threads of stories (Freeman, 1997, 1998a, 1998b). In Poulos' (2008) words, "we arise in—and out—of our stories" (p. 127). We use stories to help make sense of our experiences (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Clark, 1993; Weber, Harvey, & Stanley, 1987). And yet our suffering creates a need for stories: they are an integral part of the healing process (Frank, 1995). This is no different for families either. Stories and experiences with death are no less intricate, and as with all suffering, Death's visits are unique and intimate. However, collective stories weave together a less fractured, maybe more resonant understanding of it. Our public and private stories about death illuminate its captivating, elusive, mysterious, and often heartbreaking nature. O'Brien (1990/2010) elucidates when he writes,

What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. I can look at things I never looked at. I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can be brave. I can make myself feel again. (p. 180)

Motivated by the story tie that binds us—the living—to the dead is my hopeful response to Pennebaker and Smyth's (2016), Patti's (2012), and Poulos' (2006, 2008, 2009, 2010) calls to tell stories that move us toward personal and familial healing, to open the "story-door" to *possibilities*, to write our way through life, and to use those *possibilities* with practical utility that may help move in and out of suffering as a type of meditation.<sup>1</sup>

The three stories featured here are an attempt of this meditation. I did not simply ask myself and two others (collectively referred to as "the Authors") to write for the sake of it. I asked us to take up the heavy task of writing about our lived experiences with the death of a loved one, inspired by some of the most current expressive writing techniques set forth by Pennebaker and Smyth (2016). What might we discover when the eye is turned right inward, when the undiscovered is discovered; when the untraveled regions are traveled, each step an act of peacemaking with inner fears, pains, sufferings, demons; and when the strong are made weak (Kabat-Zinn, 1994)?

Because expressive writing can help us process the ties of suffering and stress, it is a unique tool for individuals to open up their own possibilities (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). In a paper journal, the Authors were requested to do just that: spend 20 to 30 minutes responding to four prompts in as many days, completing one prompt per day in succession. Their journals were returned to me upon completion. I asked us to write about the death of a loved one in order to make present our experiences, to (re)look at things, and to give a face to our suffering and our pity and love. What began as an open-ended response to loss, turned into three separate pieces about family

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<sup>1</sup> In Eastern philosophies, mindfulness meditation (de)centers suffering as it pervades our everyday existence, the goal of peacefully moving through it for a more clear appreciation for the present moment. Thich Nhat Hanh (2013) writes,

With mindful awareness, we can look into the nature of our suffering and find out what kind of food we have been supplying to keep it alive. When we find the source of nourishment for our suffering, we can cut off that supply, and our suffering will fade. (p. 7)

To Thich Nhat Hanh and many others, meditation may take the form of breathing, drinking tea in mindfulness, writing a "love letter," and hugging. To John Kabat-Zinn (1994), "Meditation is neither shutting things out nor off. It is seeing things clearly, and deliberately positioning yourself differently in relationship to them" (p. 30). To Christophe Andre (2011), "Meditation means withdrawing a little, stepping back from the world... To meditate is often to move through a land without paths" (p. 4).

members that speak to family communication and loss. The use of specific prompts<sup>2</sup> helped me piece together these stories with the ultimate aim of performing each, descriptively and interpretively, through my own eye as the researcher-performer. I must also note that I made diligent efforts to present each story in each Author's own unique style, with format, syntax, diction, emphases, and errors verbatim from our journals.

What follows are the three accounts of the Postmaster, Tobias, and myself. Each of us took noticeably different approaches to the journaling process. The Postmaster opens with a story about his wife of "49 years and one day": their life history, her illness, and her death. Harkening back to when he was 11 years old, Tobias follows with a story about his grandfather's unexpected death, the heroism of a "father figure," and moving on from loss as a child. I round us out with a story about my grandpa's death, the first death in my large extended family, which occurred when I was 20 years old.

Inspired by Martel (2001), it feels natural that each story is told in first person, and like Martel, "any inaccuracies or mistakes are mine" (p. xii). I hope the stories performed here are insightful and generative and suggestive. While these are stories of three particular experiences, "they are stories about all of us" because "all families feel pain and loss and trauma" (Poulos, 2008). Hopefully they cultivate a greater awareness of the present moment, of memory, and of story.

### Storied: Three Accounts of Loved Ones Lost and Discovered

#### "Chiseled In Stone"

Look, I was one of the first mail carriers to ever wear shorts! That's how long I've been around. I dressed like a pickle in Vietnam (you know, standard U.S. Military olive drab camouflage), was a letter carrier, and then a postmaster until I retired. We moved several times, to four different towns—Karen never complained. She was my whole life—we worried, cried, laughed, had fights, and loved!! We had two children. They gave us four grandchildren!! I was 68 when she passed. We were married for forty-nine years and one day...

August 1961—Freshman year in high school

I had turned 15 in March—I was a real 15-year old. Smart alec. I was the Fonz before the Fonz was ever seen on TV. 14-year old Karin started the same year. We were both in homeroom and civics together. I heard from other students she thought I was "cute"! She and I became good friends and started thinking we were in "love" before we even knew what love meant!

June 27th, 1965—Wedding day

May 1965 we graduated high school and got married 3 ½ weeks later. (She went to nursing school and I joined the Marine Corps! What a way to start!)

2001

Karin retires on disability because of deteriorating arthritis. She was a nurse.

2009

Karin broke her hip

2013

Karin had a stroke and survived, but developed a seizure disorder!

August 2013 - June 2014

Karin is in and out of hospital and rehab on many occasions. She had a living will: ~~not to be res~~ artificial life machines not to be used.

June 2014

We started using home hospice care

June 22rd, 2014

I could not get her to respond to me—called EMTs and had her taken to hospital. E.R.

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<sup>2</sup> The prompts used by each Author are as follows: Day 1: *Write about the death of a loved one*; Day 2: *Write about what your loved one meant/means to you*; Day 3: *Write about your support system in the midst and aftermath of a loved one's death*; and Day 4: *What would you like to share about your experience in dealing with the death of a loved one?*

Dr. had her admitted and had me call our children in. They each live a few hours away.

Day of June 23rd, 2014

Was told she had kidney failure and must go under hospice care—we got a hospice bed 20 miles south.

Drs. told my kids and I she would probably not make it there. (She told me what arrangements she wanted.)

Evening of June 23rd, 2014

Ambulance took her to hospice. She was now sleeping and unresponsive!

June 24 - 26, 2014

Unresponsive, shallow breathing but still alive. Not talking just looking around

June 26th, 2014

My children sent me to a motel to clean up and get some rest. Our anniversary was tomorrow. (If she made it to midnight we would be married 49 years)

11:00 PM

I returned to the hospital. Told my children I had to be there at midnight and why!

12:05 AM on June 27th, 2014

I kissed her on forehead. Told her Happy 49th anniversary and that “I still love you very much”

She has not spoken for 3 days. She opened her eyes wide, looked at me and said, I love you too, big boy”

She never spoke again!

She passed June 28th, 7:30 AM—

I wish I were much better with words! I love hospice staff for what they do and I hate what they do!! I know it was for the best that we went there and she requested to go there so I would not have to watch her die at home. The staff at hospice are the most caring people in the world, but you go there to die! My children, my brother-in-law, and my father-in-law were there with me, and did a good job holding me up, but I guess you could say she was my biggest support and she was dying!!

I do thank all those who tried to help—but when a person whom was 80% of my whole life!! the grief is the most painful thing I have ever had to deal with. I am still in grief!!! Almost 3 yrs. now!!! I love to read and have read many books over the years, but I have never read a book I enjoyed more than my life!! She was and still is everything to me!!!

I have had many relatives pass over the years, plus many more friends and even comrades-in-arms.

None of those had the impact of Karin’s passing!!

No pain I have ever had in my life—physical or mental—is as bad as the mental grief I felt and still feel over her passing—yes I am still dealing with it after almost 3 years!

I guess the best way to tell you I deal with it is to say, “I just suck it up and go on living!!”

But I will tell you—and I truly mean this

I would rather have this terrible grief than to never have had her love for all those years!!!

*If the love is real  
So is the grief!*

### **The Better To See You With**

My name is Tobias. *These* are my grandfather’s glasses. There’s a story behind them, but first I have to tell you about him. I was 11 years old when he passed away. I’m an adult now, 22 years old. My grandfather, *my hero*, filled the role my father voided when he and my mother split. I was two. He loved me very much and I loved him. He was my hero, a male role model for nine years. My grandfather was a family man. He loved my grandmother, my mother, my family, and me very much. He and my grandmother were the PB&J of love.

He was a tall, dark-skinned man. He was awfully quiet. A Marine, too, for many years. They called him Topp—based on his rank. He could lift anything, fix whatever. He taught me how to tie my shoes when I was younger. He taught me how to fish, yo-yo, and cook. He meant strength, wisdom (HE KNEW IT ALL), love, being a man, spirituality, goodness, and everything. He wasn’t religious. He barely went to church. But he inspires me to pray. I ask about him in prayer, ask him to watch over me. He wasn’t perfect... but he was pretty damn close.

In his 50s he had a stroke. My hero was hurt. I don’t remember going to the hospital to see him. I do remember him coming back. He was all good and things were ok... for about a week. Then we found out he had cancer. I remember my grandpa going through chemo. I remember him becoming skin and bones. I remember his

smile never fading. I remember all this and then one day I remember my mom calling me and my brother into a room. She told us that my grandfather had passed away. I remember my room spinning: my bunk bed behind me and my glass mirror next to me. I just cried... I remember being in a sort of awe... I remember the funeral home. I remember they cremated the body... I remember a lot of crying.

My older brother did what he could. My big support came from my mom. She has given me so many hugs and so much support over the years. She helps me think about what he would say. I did JROTC in high school and would always wonder what my grandpa would say. *Would he be proud? Would he like this?* My mother would answer any question. She comforts me.

Now, my grandmother, I could write about her all day. My grandma knows how much I loved my grandpa. She knows that so well, that last summer she did something crazy. She gave me a box of his stuff. Mind you, my grandma is remarried, but to this day she still mentions him. The box had his glasses in it. This is one of my most prized possessions. I can see through them. We apparently had similar vision. This was so deep. My grandma wanted me to be happy and know that it's ok to still reminisce.

My experience with dealing with death is that it never goes away. It is going to take time. It is going to be a process. However, the pain might not be there anymore. I think it is weird, in the moment it is the worst thing to ever happen. However, one day at a time it hurts less and less. You start to get your bearings back. You can function again. It all happens in due time. You should talk it out with someone. Trying to tackle the complexities of death alone is too much. Having a confidence to put your feelings out too is useful.

I think that, in my experience, you have to do something to remind yourself about the gone-but-not-forgotten. It could be a tattoo, a picture, an event, or naming a baby after them. When you do these things, it helps you to disconnect from the negative and refocus on the positives. The positives are what keeps us smiling and moving toward our goals.

I think it does, however, differ for each person. I think that there are very good ways to deal with grief, as well as bad ways. When you can identify those good ways then it turns out a lot better. I think that if this happened recently I would not be able to handle it as well as I did in my youth. I realize that growing up and being able to deal with it at my own pace was a big factor.

I also think another thing is to not be afraid to say their name. Talk about them if you need to. Most importantly love yourself. Love yourself for being able to make it through. Love yourself for loving them. Love yourself because your loved one loved you.

### **A Bear Hug from Immobile Paws**

There are endless miles of frosted-white mountain roads between us... I am blind to it all.

I am visiting a friend for the weekend, when my mom calls me up: "Your grandpa had a stroke... he's in the hospital... they don't know how it's looking.... We're on our way there."

"Well... I can be there as soon as I—"

"No, I don't want you driving that far this late at night, especially if you're upset. Just come when you can."

*They don't know how it's looking?* still ringing heavily in my ears. What she said punctures my gut like the smallest needle. The pinprick grows and quickly I feel as if a mountain could pass through my torso.

"Okay. I'll come straight there tomorrow morning," my voice breaks, "It'll take a while, but I'll hurry." I hang up the phone, deceiving my mom: if I leave tonight, throwing caution to the wind, I might get to say goodbye. If I leave tomorrow I might miss him.

But I caved to caution. I'll leave here as early as possible for my place in the mountains of western North Carolina (halfway between where I am and where he is) so that I can repack my bags and make the drive through the Appalachians to where he lay dying in a bland, cream-colored hospital in eastern Tennessee. I've never made this trip before; the GPS says it's seven-hours in total, and the weather prediction is a blanketing snowstorm.

I speed the whole way toward my apartment. 60, 70 miles per hour and faster and faster. There wasn't much warning about him dying. I'm told, "He has some days left," but I hear that as, "He'll be dead any minute." I glance at the clock on the dash as numbers morph into letters: *HA:HA*.

With every sideways glance into the cold gray distance I see fear and uncertainty sharpen in my view. *My grandpa is dying?* I can hear each fat flake of this convenient late-October snowstorm whisper doubts in my ear. With stings of moist, cold breath that penetrates the windows, they taunt me: "You won't make it." The voices grow

louder and more frequent. This maddening rush overwhelms me. I am slipping farther and further into worry and despair. I cannot think of food or drink or breath for I am too busy dueling my grandpa's death.

Three hours and three inches of snowfall in and I reach my apartment. I throw together a few nights of clothes. "My grandpa's in the hospital. I'll be back soon," I tell my roommate with an effort of laziness. The snow dusts the roads while blanketing me in a cold doubt. I want to wrap myself up in actual blankets and sleep. *Why can't I just do that?* At 20 years old I am young and ignorant, still a child in my mind's eye.

This is taking too long... *Is too much snow sticking to the roads now?* I am going to miss my grandfather's death because of this snow, and I wouldn't have said goodbye. The dusting proves to be gracious. Mother Nature lets me out of the mountains as I finish the drive safely.

I can't tell what comes next: the easy part... or the hard part...

The next few days are a carnival. We have a castle of a corner room in the hospital that still too small for our family. We laugh, pray, tell streams of stories, and, maybe most important to grandpa, we watch his (our) beloved Buckeyes on the TV. We celebrate life in the only way we know how. My grandma tells us, "This is how Dad would want it." *I don't want this for him: I'm selfish.* The last time seeing my grandpa alive, in a peaceful state of comatose, is an intravenous drip of ice. I want to know him better. He's been a wise old man my whole life, and now that I'm an adult I am beginning to dig into the meaning of it all: life, death, love...

The mysterious lump on his chest and sullen frame and sallow skin burn a lasting image in my mind. The sight burns a hole in my memory of him as a perfect, invincible person, stout, six-foot tall, as rugged as a mountaineer, and as strong as an ox. It burns to hug him goodbye, but I must get back to school. *Must I?* It burns at the threshold of the door. It burns all over.

"It'll be okay, mom," I tell her wishfully.

"No it won't."

It must be some cruel trick because he dies a week later on Halloween night. I hunch over the kitchen sink in my apartment, looking out the window at the precipice of a parking lot-turned-tundra. My clammy hands find no grip on the countertop. I fold over onto my elbows and I am plunged over that edge beyond the lot. I am clothed, but feel so naked and cold as I slide through the snow and out onto the street fifty feet below. There are headlights, so bright and so hypnotic, growing larger so quickly.

Paralysis sets in. And it feels *right*.

I flick my welling eyes toward the heavens. The headlights are so bright and so large. For a split second I can see the steam made by evaporating snowflakes against the hot lights. There is so much light around me. All at once I feel the full force of metal on my bones. Blackness forces itself around me. It forces itself down to the bone marrow, floods my cells, coats my throat and lungs like soot. A terror jolts through me, leaving a void invaded by immense despair.

My eyes are cascading now. Pressing my hands into the counter, I straighten up. My heavy eyes are still fixed on the horizon of that precipice, but it is time for class and I must go. *Must I?*

He is a pale grey dust in a tissue box-sized urn the next time I see him. We scatter him down the mountainside of my grandma and his home. His ashes, the bag that holds him, and the spectators' audible gasps all make a harmonious hiss. I will never forget how small a great person can be.

### **An Ending, A Beginning**

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

— F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925/2004)

The three stories performed here are great personal tragedies. And through them, I hope I have been able to respond to Pennebaker and Smyth's (2016), Patti's (2012), and Poulos' (2006, 2008, 2009, 2010) calls to tell stories in ways that move us toward healing, to open the "story-door," to write our way through, and to open up *possibilities*. Whether the Authors' storytelling will have a lasting impact on their well-being remains to be seen; however, they have taken the risk of opening up and writing down their experiences with the death of a loved one. I do not claim that this method of expressive writing and performance is appropriate for everyone, nor should engaging with such activity be taken lightly. Expressive writing is not a substitute for other forms of treatment.

Reaching into the shadows, into the most painful caverns of our memory, requires considerable emotional risk. I do not suggest everyone adopt the practices used here, but I do believe the stories performed here resonate for those ready and willing and needing to cope. In the seemingly mundane task of journaling, these Authors have helped contribute to a collective understanding of death, but have also demonstrated a resiliency to suffer, live, and love after their loved ones have passed.

Further plunged into uncertainty and despair, there is a burning, the kindling is a feeling of inadequacy that I haven't done the Postmaster and Tobias justice in my performance of their stories. The words unwritten/unsaid keep me up at night. I worry that I haven't done *them* justice. As they are good friends, I face a conundrum best explained by Ellis (2007) when she writes, "The problem comes not from being friends with participants but from acting as a friend yet not living up to the obligations of friendship" (p. 10). Out of respect for the Authors and their stories, I, in Coles' (1989, p. 27) words, "err on the side of each person's particularity" by leaving some errors in grammar and some "loose ends" intentionally untied so the audience can harvest from the rawness of their stories. Moreover, I include most of their journals here in their own voice and style, but even that isn't the enough of the story. Even supplemental conversations don't capture the grief, pain, suffering, and love. But so it goes with experiences and emotions. In performing the Authors' stories, I work to heed Freeman's (2004) call to practice telling the *reality* of the Authors' experiences. Moreover, I work to appeal to a narrative performance that "support[s] the aim of increasing compassion and sympathy, and a sense of connection to others" (Freeman, p. 79). The aim is to capture what *really* happened, combining their journal response, our friendship, and my interpretations in a performance that explores each story and the love and suffering therein.

Yet my shortcomings and feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy—that which is expressed by many ethnographic storytellers—bring to light the ongoing process of suffering and the need for compassionate relationships in our lives. These Authors, much like everyone else who has lost a loved one, have more to remember and tell. "The rhizomes of memory. One story recalls ten" (Patti, 2012, p. 154). *Everyone's got to face down the demons* (Jenkins, 1997). These demons live in all places of our memory, and facing them may be as solitary and private as a journal, but also may require an audience and a support system. Living with and for another should call us to listen compassionately to our sufferings and those of others.

Kabat-Zinn (1994) hits the mark when he teaches: "Stress is part of life... [b]ut that does not mean that we have to be victims in the face of large forces in our lives" (p. 30). Capping the waves of life or succumbing to the undertow is not the intention (for more on this surfing metaphor see Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Instead, we could consider what paths we might clear in our consciousness that help us better navigate the forest towering with the trees of our sufferings and celebrations. In what ways can we look inward to focus on our most visible and unseen pains so that we can tell outward and live a sweeter life nearer to the bone<sup>3</sup>, opening us up to richer, fuller, and more balanced senses of self and relationships?

However, I arrive at the question: What does processing and expressing a loved one's death have to do with mindfulness? In 2016, I wrote a blog unpacking this very concept (see Patti, 2016). I write,

I once wrote my wife a letter with a section titled "Sunflowers and Bear Hugs". In it, I expressed to her how I come to terms with my grandpa's passing... [Symbols of loved ones] help us cope. They bring the spirit of those passed into the present moment... They bring us into a present state of mind that presents us the opportunity to reflect, discover, and move through the suffering of loss and death.

"I would say the compassion is in you, right. For you, you had a chance to see, kinda empathize. Say, 'Hey, this is how this person felt in this moment,' " Tobias tells me. Compassion is in me, the researcher-performer—but more importantly it is in *us*, the listeners. Compassion is in all of us, we just have to drop in and compassionately listen. I hope that others can find direction and healing by writing their own stories and listening compassionately to others.

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<sup>3</sup> This line is in reference to a quote from Henry David Thoreau's (1854/1997) book *Walden*. The entire quote reads: "Moreover, if you are restricted in your range by poverty, if you cannot buy books and newspapers, for instance, you are but confined to the most significant and vital experiences; you are compelled to deal with the material which yields the most sugar and the most starch. It is life near the bone where it is sweetest."

## A Beginning

June 2016: “Whenever your wife is mad at you, and I mean MAD at you, you play her ‘Chiseled In Stone’ by Vern Gosdin and tell her that you love her.” A popular 1980s country music song, Gosdin’s chorus ends with the lines: *You don't know about sadness / 'Til you've faced life alone / You don't know about lonely / 'Til it's chiseled in stone* (Gosdin & Barnes, 1988). In the months after my wedding, I think it’s no coincidence that the Postmaster gave me this one piece of advice among the 49 years and one day’s worth of marital wisdom. I think embedded deep within this advice is some longing that the Postmaster feels. For him, *it is* chiseled in stone. Reading his book of life is how the Postmaster recaptures the ups and downs of his memory. Reading his story is how he lives on.

By sharing Gosdin with me, there is little doubt my friend-mentor-grandfatherly figure was urging me to live and to love before *it* too is chiseled in stone.

In a smear of colors and haze of light, the scene changes...

March 2017: A blue-grey sky mixes outside the window. A spring rain has feed the flowers. I am warm and dry behind the glass where I write this. Lazy beads of water drip heavily off the fingertips of the crepe myrtle opposite the glass. I feel so insignificant and miniscule looking up at the widening storm. The sky becomes heavy once more, and I feel myself plunged into a puddle outside. Like an innocent, ignorant animal, I shiver before taking shelter. Swallowed by all this fluid, I am again reminded of my grandfather and the way he died of dehydration after the experimental medication failed to capture him from his state of comatose. All his lazy dandelion-yellow fluids dripping into a collection bag tied at the foot of the bed. His life dripped away into that bag. His corporeal body is cremated, a dry gray and black dust, but I wish we would’ve kept that bag of dandelion-yellow and spread his fluids down the mountainside. I romanticize his death story, but I like to think it’s what he would have wanted. Like the Postmaster and Tobias, I tell of my passed loved one in the best way I know how, possibly in the way they think their loved ones would have wanted, too.

The scene changes again...

April 2017: Tobias and I sit in an “interview” session. Truth be told, it is a conversation between friends. “I think with the journal in particular, it was something that was very near and dear to me so I kinda wanted to do it... justice and I had to think really deeply.” Tobias’ stream of consciousness style shows, too. The physical words are undisturbed: there is no apparent evidence of erasing and no words are crossed out.

“Being able to write it out was really good. If I had tears it was in the pen. If I had laughs it was in the pen,” he tells me. Each word is charged with emotion. “The emotions didn’t have to come out and they didn’t have to deter me in real life. I wasn’t scared of how it was perceived.” He emphatically informs me that because he has gotten past the pain of his grandfather’s death, he would not have done journaling like this if I hadn’t asked him. He would only journal unless there’s no way to verbalize his feelings. A well-spoken conversationalist, I see why Tobias might feel this way. Yet time and again in our conversation he describes the journaling process as “cathartic and cleansing.”

“It felt good to get it out,” he says. “I felt a sense of unified thoughts. I deserved to explain to myself my own emotions,” and, without hesitation, he adds, “I enjoyed it.”

He deserves to explain. He deserves to explore. He deserves to write *possibilities*.

The scene changes once more to a hot, windy day in June 2017...

A stroke constrains another family member to a hospital bed—this time it’s my partner’s grandmother. On a hot summer day, I feel a cold wind tickle my skin. The scene is too familiar. All her fluids drip lazily into a collection bag tied at the foot of the bed. I cannot bring myself to fully enter the room, to see this again. I find the courage though. Borrowing from the Authors, I have some loving words to share: “Talk about them if you need to.” “If the love is real so is the grief,” I tell some others. I have opened my heart even wider in effort to compassionately and deeply listen.

At the burial, there is a figure off in the distance. The figure and I feel intimate, as if I know its face, yet cannot place it. I request, “Come, dear friend, please... come,” but it disappears as the chatter yields to the pastor’s opening remarks.

Some remarks are shared and the figure shows up again. It sits playfully on the grass. The funeral reminds me of my grandpa. So I think about him in this moment. On the grass I can see one blurred face and... then another?... The chatter slows again, and they both disappear.



We begin to tell stories at the memorial in the church up the road. I can feel the figure breathing beside me on the pew. The stories have evoked, revived, restored my wife's grandmother. I can hear her voice, see her movements just as they are told in the story. For the first time since my grandpa died, I am lucid to the presence of loved ones lost. They are not so far away anymore.

Here in this church, I am reminded of my grandpa's memorial, and the second figure appears again. Story has summoned them—conjured, perhaps. The stories stop and they both disappear... until the next story comes.

\* \* \*

Perhaps our experiences, the opening of our own "story-doors," may shed light on the shadows in others' (your) lives. Perhaps our experiences teach us something about death and life, shadow and light, loss and love. Perhaps the recording and performance of our experiences responds to Freeman (2004) by building compassion, sympathy, and connection between teller and audience, between the Authors and you.

Perhaps we teach about suffering and surfing.

Perhaps we have waxed the storyboard.

### Dear, Grandpa

It has been over four years now. Time sure does fly. I hope you are proud of me. I hope I have used your legacy with generative intentions that help others (re)story their loved ones. I hope our connection does good and right by others. I hope I have inspired others to pick up boards, when ready, to then go surfing. You live on in my memory and in my stories. You live on in the *this and thats* of my life: your plumbing license in my wallet, a firm bear hug, and a phone call with my grandma, your dearest wife, filled with funny yarns that unravel ever so playfully. You live on in the places still unseen, waiting to step out of the shadows. You live on here in this essay, this *attempt* to story, this attempt to shine a light toward where you may be hiding. You live on deep in my soul, held so close to my heart.

I miss you still, felt all over, deep down into my cells. I will tell your stories to heal. I will tell your stories to love. And so I write, with feeling, like we sang at your wake:

*Ain't no grave can hold your body down.*

Amen, Johnny.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Johnny Cash was Grandpa's favorite musician. A pair of my cousins and I covered Cash's rendition of "Ain't No Grave" on guitar and vocals at his wake.

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