

Affecting Eternity: Sharing Eulogies in the Classroom

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Abstract

Death educators have largely ignored the value of writing and reading aloud eulogies in a college classroom. A teacher's decision to read a eulogy in the classroom can encourage students to write similar eulogies, helping them to grieve the death of a loved one. Classroom eulogies can be a powerful form of death education, enabling teachers and students alike to come to terms with loss and bereavement.

Keywords: eulogy, bereavement, death education, love and loss, personal writing, teacher self-disclosure

“A teacher affects eternity,” Henry Adams famously declared; “he can never tell where his influence stops” (p. 300). Despite these inspiring words, teachers rarely know whether and how their courses influence students' lives. This is especially true at a large public university, where teachers and students may have no further communication with each other after a course ends.

Sometimes, however, teachers have a powerful impact on their students and families, especially with respect to death education, a subject generally not taught in the college classroom. In mid-December 2015, less than a week after Jeff's undergraduate course "Writing About Love and Loss" ended, he received an email from Kayla informing him of her grandfather's sudden death. Jeff's elderly mother had died a few days before the end of the semester, and he read to his Love and Loss students the eulogy he had given for her. Now Kayla was asking Jeff for advice about how to write a eulogy for her grandfather. In what follows, Jeff and Kayla describe from their own points of view how a teacher's eulogy for his mother emboldened a student to write a eulogy for her grandfather. We discuss the ways in which teachers can help bereaved college students; Jeff's emphasis on personal writing in his Love and Loss course, including some of his writing assignments; the importance of empathy; the idea of an "assumptive world" and "shattered assumptions"; the extent to which a teacher's self-disclosure encourages student self-disclosures; and the role of writing in bereavement.

Teachers seldom share a personal eulogy with their students — such writing is generally considered too private and perhaps too painful. Nor is there much research on the pedagogical implications of writing and reading aloud a eulogy in the classroom. Writing a eulogy turned out to be a transformative act for both Kayla and her family, an example of a life lesson that extended beyond the classroom.

December 18, 2015

Dear Jeff,

I lost my grandpa last night and one of the first memories that popped into my head was you reading your eulogy you wrote for your mother. His death was unexpected although he was 84 years old; he lived a great life. Taking your class has given me the confidence to write something for my grandpa and read it at the wake despite the sadness that surrounds my family and me at this time. I was wondering if you could give me advice or pointers as to how to go about writing a eulogy for my grandpa.

Thank you so much for your response and for teaching a class that I know will help me get through this time.

*Sincerely,
Kayla Rees*

Jeff responded immediately to Kayla's email:

Hi Kayla,

I'm so sorry to hear about your grandfather's unexpected death. I'm glad that I read my eulogy for my mother to your class. My only advice is to write your eulogy in advance, filling it with examples of your love for your grandfather and his love for you and your family. Then read your eulogy aloud several times before the funeral, so that you have practice reading it. Bring two copies of the eulogy with you—in case you lose one copy, you'll have the other. Perhaps you can send me a copy of the eulogy when you're finished with it. Also, can I read this email to my Love and Loss students next semester, when I teach the course again? If you give me permission, I'll read your email anonymously, of course. By reading aloud your email on the opening day of the semester, I'll be demonstrating how relevant the course is to their lives.

Please send my condolences to your family.

*Warmly,
Jeff*

Kayla appreciated Jeff's practical suggestions, but she wasn't sure she would be able to write a eulogy, something she had never done before. Her confidence in her ability to write a eulogy seemed to waver. "Thank you for your advice and your condolences. If I decide to write a eulogy (I'm still not sure if I am going to yet) I will definitely send you a copy. Please, by all means, read my previous email to your next Love and Loss students. Hearing emails from your past students enhanced your class for me; I would love to do the same for others."

The death of an eighty-four-year-old grandfather will not be a shock to most people, but it may be startling and unexpected to a college sophomore who has had little experience with familial loss. The challenge of writing a eulogy requires emotional as well as intellectual intelligence. Penning a eulogy is an example of crisis writing that occurs during a time when the eulogist and fellow grievers are still in the aftermath of shock. Grief is contagious: the eulogist seeks to provide words of comfort to the other mourners, but no one can predict how the eulogy will be received or whether, indeed, the eulogist will be able to craft the language to convey love and loss. The eulogist's challenge is further complicated by the fact that we live in a death-denying culture, which makes it difficult to "give sorrow words," as Shakespeare observes in *Macbeth*: "the grief that does not speak

whispers the o'er fraught heart and bids it break." How can a eulogist give sorrow words, thus performing textual resurrection, when she has never before been in this situation?

College Students Confronting Mortality

"Many college students faced with the death of someone they care for," writes David E. Balk in *Helping the Bereaved College Student* (2011), "are thrown into a maelstrom of emotional and cognitive confusion that challenges core assumptions on what life is about and what it means to live in a moral world" (p. 3). Balk notes that between 22 percent and 30 percent of college students are in the first twelve months of grieving the death of a relative or friend. The main cause of a relative's death is illness or old age, particularly among grandparents and great grandparents. Balk offers six broad principles for helping bereaved college students: giving permission to grieve, encouraging expressions of grief, supporting acceptance of all aspects of loss, listening to the bereaved, sharing information about the grief process, and assisting in practical and concrete ways (pp. 149-152). What do bereaved college students find most helpful? According to Balk, safe places, helpful or close persons, and comfortable situations (p. 152).

Death educators largely ignore the value of reading and writing eulogies in the classroom. Erika Hayasaki, for example, makes only a passing reference to a "eulogy assignment" in *The Death Class* (2014), based on a course Norma Bowe teaches at a college in New Jersey. Christopher M. Moreman briefly discusses — in his edited volume, *Teaching Death and Dying* (2008) — Eric Vance's 2007 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled "A Professor's Own Grief Informs a Course on Mourning in Literature," about Berman's literature and writing courses on love and loss. "The article ends by citing a student in Berman's class, who says, 'Mr. Berman taught the class less as an authority and more as a student himself. It was his own experience with death . . . not his position as professor, that gave him authority'" (Moreman, p. 5). Although Moreman then raises several questions about whether students should write personal essays on dying and death, the contributors in his book fail to respond to these questions, a missed opportunity to discuss a teachable moment.

Many questions arise about the sharing of eulogies in the classroom. To begin with, how does the sharing of a eulogy change the teacher-student relationship? What are the benefits and risks of encouraging teachers and students to share eulogies with each other? To what extent might this pedagogical practice enable teachers and students alike to mourn the dead and work through grief?

Might the pedagogical sharing of eulogies be an example of a teacher affecting eternity? Before we can answer these questions, however, we must explain the course.

For the past decade Jeff has taught Love and Loss nearly every semester, sometimes as a 400-level course for English majors and minors, other times, as in Kayla's case, as a 200-level course in the Honors College. Kayla and her twenty-four classmates first became aware of "Writing About Love and Loss" through the catalog description of the course:

English 226:
WRITING ABOUT LOVE AND LOSS
FALL 2015

In this course we will focus on how writers use language to convey love and loss and the ways in which they seek consolation and hope through religion, nature, art, deeds, or memory. We will explore different kinds of love--love of God, family or friends, romantic partner, or self; we will also explore different kinds of loss--loss of religious faith, family or friends, romantic partner, health, or self-respect. Plan on writing an essay each week: the minimum writing requirement is forty pages, typed, double-spaced. In addition, you'll write a weekly diary entry exploring your feelings about the course. I will not grade you on the content of your essays or on the degree of self-disclosure but only on the quality of your writing. We'll run the course as a writing workshop: expect to bring 26 copies of your essay about once every three weeks.

Please note that this will be an emotionally charged course, and there may be times when some of us cry in class. How can one not cry when confronting the loss of a loved one? Tears indicate that we are responding emotionally as well as intellectually to loss; tears are usually a more accurate reflection of how we feel than are words. I'll try not to make the course morbid or depressing--indeed, I believe there will be more smiles than tears in the course. The only requirement for the course is empathy: the ability to listen respectfully and nonjudgmentally to your classmates' writings. The class will not be a "support group," but we will be supportive of each other's writing. Our aim is to write about the most important people in our lives while at the same time improving the quality of our writing.

A member of the English Department at the University at Albany since 1973, Jeff began teaching Love and Loss shortly after the death of his first wife, Barbara, to whom he had been married for thirty-five years. Barbara was only fifty-seven when she died from pancreatic cancer on April 5, 2004. Jeff's 2007 book, *Dying to Teach: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Learning*, includes the eulogy for Barbara he read to his writing students a few days before her death. The book also includes eulogies written by his two daughters, Arielle and Jillian, and Barbara's sister, Karen, as well as a discussion of how his students responded to his own eulogy. When Jeff's mother, Roz, died on December 2, 2015, at the age of ninety-three, he decided to read aloud his eulogy to Kayla's class during the last week of the semester:

JEFF'S EULOGY FOR HIS MOTHER

Thank you for coming today to honor grandma's memory. She led a long and fulfilling life—longer, indeed, than anyone else in our extended family. What makes this more remarkable is her understandable lifelong fear of cancer, to which nearly our entire family has succumbed. Despite this fear, she survived two different forms of cancer, in the process amazing everyone with her courage and determination to live. She was a survivor.

I would give myself at best only a C- as a son, but that's because I'm an easy grader. I would give my brother Elliot an A as a son. He not only provided our mother with the best dental care in the world—he was recognized as one of Connecticut's best dentists—but he saw to it that all her needs were taken care of when she lived in West Hartford. No death affected my mother more than Elliot's death two years ago, not even my father's death in 1998 at age 76. My parents loved their two sons, but my mom was completely dependent on my brother when she moved to Connecticut. He always rose to the challenge. His death left her bereft. As wrenching as it is to lose a parent or spouse, it's more devastating to lose a child, no matter how young or old the child may be.

Elliot would agree that our mother was a good enough parent but an extraordinary grandparent. She offered unconditional love to her five grandchildren: Arielle, Jillian, Courtney, Russell, and Alyssa, and she took great pleasure in their lives. The first question she would ask me when I visited her was "How's the family," and her eyes brightened when I told her that everyone was doing fine. She was especially generous to her five grandchildren in the last months of her life.

A hospice nurse told me a month ago that I would learn something important about grandma's dying and death. The nurse was right. Grandma never expressed any anxiety over dying or death, and she never made any demands on anyone in the final two years of her life. She accepted the inevitability of death and had no regrets about her life. Toward the end she mastered the art of doing nothing, something I would not be able to do, and she seemed to enjoy her remaining days without feeling frustrated or depressed. She mellowed so much that I worried, "could I have been wrong about the darker side of my mother," which I saw many times during our conflicted relationship. I smiled broadly when Arielle told me last weekend that for a moment my mother's capacity for anger expressed itself while she was giving blood. I find something affirming about grandma's flash of temper. She spared me from the need to idealize her.

Without my mother and father, my brother and I would not have come into existence, nor would her grandchildren and great grandchildren be alive. My mother's life made so many other lives possible. Perhaps my deepest gratitude lies in the fact that my mother was so welcoming of Julie. She always made Julie feel that she was a central part of the family, and she was always grateful for the many kindnesses Julie expressed to her. Julie bought clothes for my mother, brought her flowers and chocolate, and made sure she was comfortable. My mother's heartfelt love for Julie was important to both of us. Julie has inspired me to be a better son than I would have been without her.

It's noteworthy that Jeff mentioned in the opening paragraph of the eulogy his mother's lifelong fear of cancer. In the mid-1980s Roz Berman developed ovarian cancer, a particularly deadly form of cancer because it usually has metastasized before diagnosis. The day before surgery, at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City, she told Jeff that her mother had died of the same cancer at the same hospital. Roz then said, "I'm glad I got it." Mystified by the comment, Jeff asked her, immediately following surgery, "Mom, when you said "I'm glad I got it," did you mean that the reality of having cancer is less terrifying than the fear of developing it?" "No," she responded without hesitation, "All my life people thought I was crazy for worrying about this, and now they know I was not crazy."

It's also noteworthy that Jeff expressed gratitude in his eulogy toward his wife, Julie, who has brought new joy into his life. Jeff's writing course is implicitly

about love, loss, and *recovery*. The other writing course he teaches is “Gifts and Debts of Gratitude.”

Assumptive World

The psychiatrist Colin Murray Parkes defines “assumptive world” as a “strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self which is confidently maintained and used as a means of recognizing, planning and acting. . . .

Assumptions such as these are learned and confirmed by many years” (p. 132).

Central to Roz Berman’s assumptive world was that she would die of cancer, as had her mother, father, and older brother and, decades later, her husband, daughter-in-law (Barbara), and younger son. The surgeon removed an ovarian tumor the size of a grapefruit, but the cancer was self-contained. Roz was fortunate, and though she later developed colon cancer, on which she was successfully operated, and then intestinal cancer, to which she finally succumbed, her family regarded the nonagenarian as a survivor of cancer, not its victim.

Jeff usually shares with his students his mother’s statement that she was “glad” she developed cancer as a striking example of the power of an assumptive world. One’s assumptive world may be correct or incorrect — or both, as it was in her case. Her fear of mental illness was stronger than her fear of cancer, an indication of the continuing stigma surrounding depression.

Shattered Assumptions

Three of the assignments in Jeff’s Love and Loss course involve writing about shattered assumptions. The first assignment asks students to read the opening chapters in Jeff’s 2012 book, *Death Education in the Writing Classroom*, and write an essay in which they discuss one of Jeff’s former student’s experiences with shattered assumptions. The second essay asks students to write about an experience of love or loss shattering their own assumptive world. “What new assumptions do you now have as a result of this experience of love or loss?” The third essay asks students to write an essay on posttraumatic growth, which Tedeschi, Park, and Calhoun define as the ability to re-create one’s life following a devastating loss and grow in new, unexpected ways. Posttraumatic growth includes the “experience that one gains in areas of heightened appreciation of life, more meaningful personal relationships, awareness of increased personal strength, changes in life priorities and recognition of new possibilities, and a deepening engagement with spiritual or existential concerns and enhancement of faith.” Part of Jeff’s posttraumatic growth

was his marriage to Julie, and his gratitude to his mother, children, and brother for welcoming her into the family.

In the last decade Jeff has written several books on love, loss and bereavement. He shares these experiences with students, and they share theirs with him. Research confirms that self-disclosure begets self-disclosure. Jeff's openness with his students encourages their openness with him. Education is reciprocal: those who teach others are in turn taught by them.

A Self-Disclosing Teacher

Jeff has long believed in the value of judicious teacher self-disclosure in the classroom. Teachers who encourage students' self-disclosures should be self-disclosing themselves. He regularly discusses with his students the devastation he experienced when his college professor and mentor, Len Port, committed suicide on Labor Day, 1968, an experience Jeff has written about in two of his books, *Diaries to an English Professor* (1994) and *Surviving Literary Suicide* (1999). His discussion of suicide emboldens his students to discuss in essays and diaries their own experiences. Jeff's use of teacher self-disclosure is guided by several principles. He reveals aspects of his life only when he believes that the personal information will be helpful to his students. He believes that classroom self-disclosure is mainly for the students' benefit, not for the teacher's. He doesn't share anything with his students that he believes is likely to burden or depress them. Nor does he share any aspect of his life about which he is highly conflicted: a classroom is neither a confessional nor a therapist's office. He realizes that although the classroom is a safe place where self-disclosures can be expressed in an empathic, non-judgmental setting, anything said or written in a classroom can become public knowledge, with unforeseen consequences. A teacher's self-disclosure should not involve any information that would make a student feel self-conscious or undermine the cohesiveness of the class. Jeff is careful to protect the privacy of others, including his students' confidential self-disclosures.

Barbara's diagnosis of terminal illness shattered her family's assumptions: her parents and grandparents had lived to be in their nineties, and she could have been a poster child for living a healthy life. It was wrenching for Jeff to write and read aloud his eulogy for her. By contrast, Roz's death was natural and long expected, and it was not emotionally difficult for him to eulogize her. He tried to capture in a few words the essence of his mother's life, but he did not want to falsify their often fraught relationship. The humor in the eulogy was largely

directed at himself, a septuagenarian who would give himself only a minimally passing grade as a son.

The next time Jeff and Kayla met was in January, 2016, at the beginning of the new semester. She gave him a copy of her grandfather's eulogy, which opens with an acknowledgment of the writing course she had recently taken:

KAYLA'S EULOGY FOR HER GRANDFATHER

This past semester I took an honors course titled "Writing About Love and Loss." Not only did I learn a lot about my writing, I also learned a lot about loss and grief. I didn't think the lessons I learned from my professor would apply to my life so soon after coming home, but one of the first things I did when I heard of my grandpa's passing was email my professor. He asked me if I was going to eulogize my grandpa; I told him I wasn't sure. Now it is 3:30 in the morning before the funeral and I feel compelled to write my thoughts somewhere.

One of my favorite memories with my grandpa is from my senior prom. Before going to my friend's house with Tyler to take pictures, I went up the street to grandpa's with my mom. We found him sitting in his chair in an undershirt and shorts watching golf, poker game in hand and Schaefer [beer] on the table nearby. I asked him if he would come outside and take pictures with me before I left. His response was, "you mean I have to get up, put a shirt on, and stop watching golf?!" It was such a typical "grandpa" response. He eventually came outside with me, and that picture is one of my favorites now.

Grandpa, thank you for teaching me to read and watching me when I was little. Thank you for getting me to and from school most days of the week. Thank you for teaching me to love school; not many people do. Thank you for taking me with you to the soda store and buying me a Welch's grape soda every time. Thank you for watching thunderstorms with me from the garage; you showed me they weren't as scary as I thought. Thank you for cutting your famous grilled cheese into four little triangles for me, even when I was 18. Thank you for wearing your Albany sweatshirt every time I came home for a long weekend or a break; I'm not sure if you did it on purpose, but it always made me smile. Thank you for letting me borrow your car when I needed to go to work and for never failing to remind me not to hit the wrong button on the key and accidentally open the trunk. Thank you for

inspiring me to be a teacher and for letting me take over one of the bedrooms in your house when I was younger and turn it into my “classroom.” It doesn’t matter how many people tell me how tough it is to be a teacher and find a job today; you loved to teach and it is what I have always loved. I’m not only following my passion for me now; I’m doing it for you, too.

I hope you enjoy your first Christmas up in heaven with grandma. I miss her a lot, too. I hope she greeted you with all the good snacks she used to keep under her bed and with a list of things to do. It’s been eight years, so you might still be reading that list. I’m sure it was gigantic. You two have a lot of catching up to do, and as much as I miss you, I’m glad you’re with her. Thank you for everything you have ever done for me; I will love and miss you forever.

P.S. I get my report card tomorrow; if I happen to find a dollar in the street, I’ll know it’s from you.

Literary Art

Jeff was struck by the excellent writing throughout the eulogy, which is grammatically and stylistically flawless. (He has not edited any of her writings here). Kayla took pleasure in crafting her words. Focusing on the technical aspects of writing may have been a welcome respite from the dark emotions associated with loss. The eulogy is filled with concrete, vivid details about her relationship with her grandfather. The adage, “show, don’t tell,” is apparent in every sentence. Kayla brings her grandfather to life, describing both his uniqueness and her special relationship with him. She uses repetition masterfully. One senses that Kayla’s eulogy was written not only for her relatives but also for her teacher of love and loss. Her decision to become a teacher, we suspect, was based on her grandfather’s teaching career—another example of a teacher affecting eternity. Kayla was an exemplary student in Jeff’s class and exemplary after the semester ended, when she penned her eulogy. Gladly would she learn — and gladly teach.

Kayla’s strong religious faith, including her belief in an afterworld, where a reunion with the dead takes place, cannot be more different from Jeff’s agnosticism. These religious differences underscore their differences over the meaning of death. Kayla sees death as a gateway to eternal life, an event that made possible her grandfather’s joyful reunion with her grandmother and his redemption through Christ. Death for Kayla makes possible the wholeness of mind, body, and

soul. Jeff sees death as an event that can be either brutal or merciful, a calamity that snuffed out his wife Barbara during what should have been her best years, when her children were marrying and themselves having children, or a blessing that came at the right time for his mother, who reached a ripe age and was ready to die. Kayla and Jeff also have different ways of honoring the dead. Despite these differences, each respects the other's belief system. They both believe in the sacred importance of keeping the dead alive through writing.

Coauthorship — and Some Questions

After reading the eulogy, Jeff invited Kayla to coauthor an article with him about the impact the writing had on her life. She agreed enthusiastically. Jeff raised several questions for her to consider, and within a couple of weeks she emailed him her responses.

February 15, 2016

Dear Jeff,

Since we met two weeks ago, I have been working on my responses to the questions you asked me to answer about writing my grandpa's eulogy for our potential project. I have attached a document which contains both the questions on which you asked me to reflect and my answers to those questions. I hope that we can work on this project together throughout the semester and that it yields something great. If you need anything else from me, please let me know. I look forward to working with you and meeting with you soon!

*Sincerely,
Kayla Rees*

(1) What compelled you to write about your grandfather? What made you change your mind since you initially decided you weren't going to write anything?

The day after my grandpa died, I emailed Jeff for pointers/advice about how to write a eulogy. I remembered how Jeff read the eulogy he wrote for his mother in our class at the end of the semester, and I thought that this class had given me the confidence to eulogize my grandpa at his wake. I ended my email by thanking Jeff "for teaching a class that I know will help me get through this time." Jeff gave me four important pieces of advice: write it in advance, fill it with examples of my love for my grandpa, read it aloud beforehand, and bring two copies, just in case I

lost one. He also asked if he could share my email with his next Love and Loss class as an example of how relevant the class will be in their lives; I said absolutely. Hearing notes from his former students enhanced his class for me, and I felt compelled to do the same for others. At first, I was hesitant and unsure if I was going to write a eulogy, but Jeff told me it was something I would not regret. He was right. Although I did not have the courage to eulogize my grandpa in front of my family and loved ones at the wake or funeral, I did have the courage to write a eulogy, and that was a big step for me. I initially told my mom that I was planning on writing something and reading it out loud, but then changed my mind. I thought it would be too hard for me to do. As I did more thinking, though, I thought that maybe writing something down would help even if I didn't plan to read it out loud. As the days between his death and the services followed and more family gathered together, writing a eulogy became less important in comparison to being there for my younger sister and younger cousins. Then, it was 3 o'clock in the morning on the day of the funeral and I couldn't sleep. I didn't want to wake anyone, so I composed the eulogy in a blank email on my phone, which was conveniently sitting on the end table next to my bed, and saved it as a draft. To this day, two months after my grandpa's death, I still cannot give you a definitive answer as to why I felt compelled to write something, as to why I changed my mind. All I know is that after I wrote the eulogy, I was able to fall asleep.

(2) Was the eulogy easy or difficult to write? How much revision did you do (or not do)?

The eulogy was both easy and difficult for me to write. It was easy in the sense that I did not struggle for content. I knew exactly what memories I shared with my grandpa I wanted to include. I knew exactly what qualities he possessed that I wanted to immortalize with my words. I knew what I would want everyone else to remember about my grandpa if they were to read my eulogy. I found difficulty in the emotions surrounding those memories and qualities. It was grueling to remember all of his "grandpa-isms" while at the same time knowing I would never experience them again. I will never eat another one of his famous grilled cheese sandwiches; I will never proudly show him another good report card and watch him reach into his wallet for his famous dollar bill reward. These happy memories became tinged with sadness, and that sadness turned to tears as I wrote my eulogy. Had I not been quietly sobbing while writing it, I would have finished quickly. Instead, it took me an hour to pull all my words and thoughts together into a cohesive piece of writing. After that hour, though, I did not do much revision. When I woke up in the morning, I read it over once for any obvious grammatical

errors; once these were corrected, I saved the email to my phone and computer and did not revise it any further.

(3) How did your mom and aunt respond to the piece when you shared it with them?

The only three people with whom I have shared this piece of writing are my mom, my aunt, and Jeff. I shared it with my aunt first because we are similar in the way we cope with death. I first emailed the eulogy to my aunt with the subject line: “I wrote something about grandpa. You can read it if you’d like to.” I prefaced the eulogy with these phrases as I did not want to impose upon anyone. I did not want my aunt to feel obligated to read my writing if she didn’t think it was something she could do. My aunt responded to me via email later that day. Her email contained one word: “Beautiful.” Two days later, I was talking to my mom and mentioned that I eventually changed my mind again and wrote a piece about my grandpa, and she asked to see it. I forwarded her that same email, except this time I did not get a response. To this day, my mom hasn’t said anything to me regarding my eulogy. I sometimes feel tempted to ask her what she thought of it, but I am always hesitant to mention it to her. I don’t want to evoke any unnecessary feelings of sadness; I don’t want to impede on my mom’s healing process. It is enough for me to know that the two women in my life to whom I am closest have read my writing. Although my mom hasn’t verbalized anything to me, I’m sure she appreciated every word I wrote.

Retrospectively, it is interesting to me that I chose to email my writing to my mom and my aunt, when I could just as easily have printed it out and given them each a copy. My only attempt at an explanation for why I delivered my words to them in that manner is that I wrote the piece in solitude, in a moment where I could be alone with my thoughts and emotions, and I wanted them to have an opportunity to read my eulogy when they were in the same environment. That, and it’s easier for them to keep track of an email on their smartphones rather than a piece of paper that they easily could have shoved to the bottom of their purses and forgotten about. Upon further reflection, I am thinking now that I will share this piece of writing with my dad as well. He wrote a beautiful tribute to my grandpa in a Facebook post after his death, so I think my dad will appreciate my attempt at finding comfort through words, as he did the same.

(4) Why have you shared it with only three people? Why haven’t you shared it with your boyfriend, with whom you usually share everything?

The only person with whom I (interestingly, as Jeff pointed out) have not shared this piece of writing is with my boyfriend. When I was a student in Jeff's Love and Loss class, my boyfriend was the subject of many of my essays. I write letters to him all the time, and I share everything with him. He rushed to my side the instant I found out about my grandpa's death, and stayed with me through the hardest moments in the week that followed. I am still uncertain as to why I have not shared this piece of writing with him, but perhaps it is because I am afraid of what his reaction to it would be. He has always been supportive of my writing; he appreciates everything I write for him. But, we cope with death differently. I am afraid his reaction will not be what I hope it will be. I am not sure that he would fully understand the amount of power this piece of writing has for me, and how helpful it was for me to write it. He knew my grandpa for almost four years, but was not nearly as close to him as I was. He wouldn't understand all the references to experiences and memories I make in the eulogy; I would feel obligated to explain them, even if I didn't want to. Perhaps I am completely underestimating my boyfriend. I most likely am. Maybe I am not giving him enough credit; maybe he knows me better than I think he does, and maybe he would understand and appreciate this piece of writing as he has others. This fear that he will not react the same way I wish he would is what is keeping me from sharing this with him. Someday, hopefully soon, I will overcome this (possibly irrational) fear and share my eulogy with him and share the memories I have with my grandpa with him, but I am not ready yet. This is the most personal piece of writing that I have written, and I believe this is why I have kept my audience to three people. This writing is vulnerable and honest, and I am still learning how to show people that side of myself.

(5) How do you feel about Writing About Love and Loss now, a few months after the course?

It has been two months since my Love and Loss class ended, and I believe that it is the most beneficial class I have taken in my year and a half as a student at the University at Albany. Love and Loss taught me lessons that cannot be learned in a traditional classroom setting. The learning that took place in Jeff's class was a kind of learning that can only be done through self-reflection and introspection, and sharing those experiences with others in a safe environment. I learned how to channel my emotions through writing while taking the class, and have continued to do so in the months after. Love and Loss taught me that writing is a powerful tool which I can use to help me make sense of events in my life that don't seem to make any sense at all, like my grandpa's death. Now, when I am struggling with something in my life, I turn to writing first. The experience of pouring my

emotions onto a piece of paper is more helpful than any therapy session. The process of then focusing on what I have written and revising it for grammar and style is therapeutic; it makes me focus on something other than what I am struggling with. By concentrating on commas, semi-colons, and misplaced modifiers, my anxiety decreases. Finally, when I read a finished product, it helps me cope with the situation at hand. Whether I am writing about love or writing about loss, it is the act of writing and articulating my emotions into something external yet still a part of me that is so rewarding. I will always remember Jeff, I will always remember Love and Loss, and I will always turn to writing not only to cope, but also to heal.

Understanding Kayla's Responses

Kayla's responses to Jeff's questions are revealing. Her decision not to eulogize her grandfather at the wake may have been because she feared it would be too emotionally wrenching for her to do so. It's often more difficult for students to read aloud an essay in class than it was to write it. Jeff has observed this phenomenon often in his writing classes. A student may not have a problem writing about a deceased relative or friend but then burst into tears while reading the essay aloud. It's also revealing that although Kayla cannot explain why she felt compelled to write a eulogy, she felt better after writing it. As painful as it is for students to write personal essays on love and loss, they never regret doing so. They feel proud that they have attempted to bring to life, verbally, a lost loved one, and they keep these writings long after the semester ends. Kayla felt relief after writing the eulogy—and immediately fell asleep.

After writing the eulogy, Kayla showed it only to her aunt and her mother. Her aunt's response—"Beautiful"—is not surprising, but her mother's non-response is. Was Kayla correct in believing that her mother's "healing process" might have been impeded by speaking about the eulogy? Might the opposite have been true, talking about a eulogy as a way to initiate healing? Perhaps the biggest surprise in reading Kayla's responses to Jeff's question is her reluctance to share the eulogy with her boyfriend, with whom she has shared all her other writings. The reader is left to wonder whether she would be willing to share the eulogy with him—and his response.

There is no doubt, however, from Kayla's response to Jeff's last question that she felt writing about love and loss helpful. "The experience of pouring my emotions onto a piece of paper is more helpful than any therapy session." Her comment validates the statement in the course description of Love and Loss: "The

class will not be a ‘support group,’ but we will be supportive of each other’s writing.”

Why did Kayla’s mother fail to respond to the eulogy? And why was Kayla reluctant to show the eulogy to her boyfriend? These were the next questions Kayla decided to pursue. Two weeks later she sent Jeff an email with questions to these answers:

The problem with sharing a personal piece of writing via email rather than in person is that you cannot tell the reader’s immediate reaction. I ran into this problem when I sent the eulogy to my mom. I emailed it to her because she told me she wanted to read it, and then she never told me what she thought of it. When I told my mom about this project on which Jeff and I had been working, she told me she would re-read it and let me know her opinion. The next day, I received a text message from her that said:

Glad you had me read that again. I didn’t remember a lot of it. It was so on point!! It brought many awesome memories back. Grandpa was such an important part of your life, especially in those younger years, and I am so glad that you were able to have that relationship with him! My favorite line was the ending.... Love it and love you!

That text made me grateful that I had my mom read my writing again, too. It is reassuring to know that my mom appreciates and understands my writing about my grandpa and what it means to me, and I am glad it means that much to her.

The last person with whom I shared my eulogy was my boyfriend, Tyler. I wanted to share it with him the second I wrote it, but I wasn’t sure how he would react to it. I wasn’t sure if he would understand what this certain piece of writing means to me. This past weekend, though, I summoned the courage to let him read it. I’m glad I did. I showed it to him in person, and watching him read it made me anticipate his response that much more. After he read it, he told me that he thought it was sweet. He said he liked how it was such a positive piece of writing even though the circumstances which produced the writing were sad, and that he wished he had gotten to know grandpa better in the four years that they were both a part of my life. His final response to my essay is the response that means the most to me out of all the responses I have received. He said, “I know

he would have loved to read this.” Until that point, I had never stopped to think what my grandpa would have thought about my writing. In that moment, though, I agreed with Tyler, and I felt reassured that this piece of writing is just another accomplishment of mine of which my grandpa would be proud.

As a result of Jeff’s questions, Kayla spent more time reflecting on her grandfather’s eulogy than any other writing project in her life. Curiously, however, she had never read the eulogy to an audience. An opportunity arose on April 20, 2016, when Kayla was invited to participate in the English Department’s annual Undergraduate Research and Writing Conference, a showcase of students’ original and innovative critical research and creative writing. The conference presenters were encouraged to bring relatives and friends. Kayla invited her mother to attend, and Jeff attended as well:

In the days leading up to the conference, I was nervous. I am not usually nervous about public speaking, but since I had not yet read the eulogy aloud in front of an audience before I was this time. The morning of the conference, my mom arrived on campus and was eager and excited to hear my presentation, and this helped ease my nerves. I think my biggest worry was that if my mom heard me read it aloud, she would have wished I did so at the wake or funeral for the rest of my family. I didn’t want to regret not reading it for my family by reading it at the conference. This was not the case. My mom was extremely proud of me and so happy with my presentation; she was also delighted to have finally met you!

In his forty-three years teaching at the University at Albany, Jeff has attended countless conferences, both as a speaker and a member of the audience, but this was the first time he had heard one of his students read aloud a eulogy—and the first time he had sat next to a student’s mother. As Kayla read the eulogy in a strong, unwavering voice, Jeff could see Mrs. Rees’s eyes well up with tears, as did his own. It was a profoundly moving moment for Kayla, her mother, and Jeff. A lively discussion followed Kayla’s reading. One of the most interesting comments was made by a graduate student, who said that her grandfather was “mean,” the opposite of Kayla’s grandfather. “I’m jealous,” the student told Kayla, who smiled sympathetically. After the conference Kayla received an email from her mother:

It was such a privilege to be able to attend your conference on the essay you wrote about Grandpa. I can’t begin to express how proud I am of you and

the young lady you are! You were the first grandchild, and grandpa was the one to watch you when I went back to work when grandma was still working. I think this time of your life was when you and grandpa formed a special bond. I know he was so proud of you as well. The essay was beautiful; it really brought back so many wonderful memories that you had with my dad, your grandpa. Thank you for writing it and sharing it. Love you, xoxo.

Kayla, always thinking like a writer and editor, added the following sentence after her mother's email: "I may have edited her words, omitting the occasional 'very' she had written that I felt obligated to remove."

The story of Kayla's eulogy for her grandfather reveals her efforts to describe love and loss, part of her continuing education. The teacher-student relationship extended well beyond the end of the semester. Contrary to her fears, Kayla was able to write and then speak her grief, giving sorrow words. Jeff's Love and Loss class enabled her to hone her writing skills while simultaneously channeling her emotions through her writing. What began as an intensely personal utterance, the creation of a eulogy, developed into a scholarly presentation given at an undergraduate research and writing conference. Jeff put into practice the broad principles for helping bereaved college students, and the result was a memorable learning experience for teacher and student alike.

Henry Adams did not have death education in mind when he suggested that teachers affect eternity, but the sharing of eulogies in the classroom is an excellent way to connect the living with the dead. There is no better way to honor the dead than by giving both sorrow and joy words in a loving eulogy, where teachers and students alike instruct and learn from each other about one of life's central mysteries.

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