

From The Editor: On Loss and Commemoration

“Nan knew, full well, that life was a series of bereavements and each stole from her one load-bearing beam, one bone....but this was not a wound; it was an amputation.”

~ Cara Wall; *The Dearly Beloved*, a novel

Surprisingly, given my age, there are still some risks I'm willing to take. I had not been to church since last March, but agreed to help on November 1st, at an All Saints Day service, reading and meditating over congregational prayer requests with a church staff member. Partly it was a selfish risk, because one of my best, most healthy, fun, fabulous, like-a-big-sister friends had died suddenly just two weeks earlier. I was still reeling. In truth, although I went for others, I also went for myself. I was hungry for ritual and commemoration during this time when there seems so little opportunity for that, just when we need it most.

I was impressed by the efforts of the church to follow pandemic gathering guidelines. Someone greeted me and opened the door. Touch-less. There were no paper programs. There was hand sanitizer, masks and extreme social distancing. Only 45 were allowed in a space that normally held hundreds. Pre-registration was required. Families sat huddled like intact floating islands in

a sea of sadness. My heart ached. Upon entry, we'd each been handed a plastic snack-sized bag. In it was a single-use hand wipe pad, a tiny sealed cup of grape juice and nestled neatly atop the cup, a wrapped communion wafer the size of a dime. Tangible ritual; I held it carefully. I felt very small sitting there, giving myself communion, like Alice in something that was definitely not a wonderland. I sat there before the service began, missing and thinking about the mysteries of life and death, about saints and pandemics, and especially, about old friends like Pat.

All Saints Day is a day of remembrance of those who have died. Songs are sung; candles are lit to commemorate departed souls. Slips of paper and clean pencils allowed us to write prayer requests and the names of those who had died, to leave in a basket, as we left, outside the sanctuary. “Say their names,” I thought. George Floyd came to mind. I wrote in shaky script, “My friend, Pat.” The pastor read ten names of those who had died from the congregation in the past year. He lit a single candle for each. Then other candles were lit for everyone, everywhere, who had died in the past year. The silence wrapped around us all like a comforting quilt. I suspect my mask wasn't the only one wet with tears.

Afterwards, folks slipped away as quietly as they'd come. Another woman and I stepped into an empty classroom and quietly prayed over, then divided, the several dozen slips of paper. We

read the names and requests aloud. We cried. We prayed again. She gathered the names to use for followup in the days ahead; clues the staff would use for further outreach during such troubling times. We sanitized our hands and said goodbye. It felt like this had been a risk worth taking. I walked into a bright November day, to another day of loss and longing. There have been so many deaths.

I finally made a list of the names of those we've known, loved, and lost since the beginning of the pandemic. In Stan's and my circle, I counted twelve since March. It seems small in comparison to how many have died in America from COVID. Unimaginable. Some of those we know were more distant friends and family. Others, like Pat, are people we loved dearly, whom we will mourn and miss for years to come. We will remember all of them and say their names. Many deaths were sudden, most not listed as COVID, but in my own heart, it feels like the causes of death are all related, in one way or another, to the virus.

In the past nine months, like so many, I have been witness to virtual funerals, both religious and secular. I have yearned for some that have been postponed until spring or summer. I am known, after all, as someone who loves a “good funeral.” But now, rituals and mourning have taken other forms. We are learning to reach out in new and sometimes familiar, but often, too sterile ways. Online-Meal trains are set up for the grieving. “Sign up for a day to deliver a meal. Leave it on the front step with an email to let the recipient know



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it's been delivered." There are phone calls. Cards and letters. Texts and emails. It feels cold; no hugs, no hand-holding, no sitting with the bereaved. And yet, in the face of such fearfulness and uncertainty, there is still outreach, still listening, still stories. In our wounded-ness, I also find more openness. There seems a desperate honesty to say what's in our hearts. Here are a few of the latest sacred stories I've been privileged to receive. May all these stories, and those who share them, be a blessing.

Carl and Barb had been married for over sixty years. He is a character; spry and witty, engaging and playful. Sweet Barbara suffered with dementia the last few years of her life. Carl was devoted to her, caring for her at home, and doing a good job. Word came that Barbara died this week. Carl left me a voice mail; "Call me Sharon. I need to talk. I have stories." So I called him. We had an easy conversation, one that flowed with memories of fun times we'd shared with them over the years, and yes, Carl's stories needed to be heard.

He shared that their local hospice had been a huge help. Late one night, trying to get Barbara up, she slipped out of his arms and slid to the floor. He called hospice for a "non-emergency lift." Because they live in a small town where everyone knows everyone, two young firemen showed up. Carl said, "I tell ya, they looked like kids. And well, they just picked Barb up like it was nothing and sat her down in her chair. Then they looked at me and asked if I there was anything else I needed. I told them, 'I need a hug!' Well, that young fireman, I tell you, he just spun around and gave me the biggest hug. I could feel all his equipment poking me here and there, but damn, that hug felt good." Carl's

willingness to trust me with his story made me cry. That's another ritual we can still share; our tears.

I called a facility recently to make a memorial donation and was given this story. Ninety-two-year old Mary lived in senior housing. She had made a brand-new friend there, who, over the course of the next 14 years, became like "her twin, separated at birth." They did everything together, singing, drinking coffee, sharing their family pictures and it seemed, even duplicating their life experiences. "If Mary hurt her leg, June would shortly follow and hurt her own leg." Mary died a couple weeks ago. The staff watched June closely. They suspected she would miss Mary too much. June died, 11 days later, probably unable to live without her best friend beside her. Other similar stories have followed, spouses dying within days of one another, mostly in long-term care. We are losing our finest treasures; our elders, and it appears, the very oldest are sometimes leaving together.

I am collecting my own stories about Pat, who surprised me with a call from ICU the day before she died. Her voice, deep but determined, stays with me. It was her parting gift. My gift to her, (and to me!) was a final chance to say, "I love you so much." There was a lone owl hooting by my window one night when I asked for a sign from her before I fell asleep. (She knew I loved owls!) And there's been her ten-year-old grandson, Luca's, startling gift of "goosies" running up and down his spine immediately after he asked his mother one day, "Why doesn't Nana visit me?" Meaning-making in the face of loss; a comfort.

This issue of *Coalition News* is full of stories and comfort, bravely shared personal experiences, and probably

more than a few opportunities for tears. This season of loss continues to challenge us in ways we couldn't foresee. We do our best to commemorate; to stay safe and support one another. Thanks to all the contributors in this issue who selflessly share valuable time and expertise. You'll find here reflections about our wonderful fall conference. It was MCDES' first webinar and it felt intimate! Our spring virtual gathering, April 30, will address meaning-centered grief therapy. Please join us.

Thanks, and farewell, to board members, Ed Holland and Jan Bergman, who served MCDES for so many loyal years. You will both be sorely missed! A tender and final farewell to long-time former board member Judy Young, who died and leaves a legacy of educating, mentoring, and caring in the Minnesota grief and loss community. Thanks to her friend, Allison Chant, for a beautiful tribute.

In this season of isolation and loss, we strive to do the right things. We make priorities to stay safe, to reach out, and say thank you to those on the frontlines of this pandemic. To you who do all these things, and more, who listen and comfort and take calculated risks, who also grieve and look for ways to commemorate, we are grateful. Thank you. Stay healthy, hopeful, in touch, and please, keep doing what you do, so well, for so many.