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With this paper, I weave together the conversant experience of grief. Drawing from James Baldwin in the wake of the political assassinations of his close friends Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. As well as from the view of Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and myself. I will specifically examine James Baldwin's essay "Nothing Personal," Toni Morrison's eulogy of her beloved comrade James Baldwin, chapters 11 and 12 from bell hooks's "All About Love," and my lived experience.

My nephew Jacob died in a car accident in August, just fifty-one days before his 25th birthday. He is the youngest son of my oldest sister, Erin. Erin is eight years older than me and has always been part mom and part sister. She has two children: Andrew, 27, and Jacob, who is...was 24.

I lived with my sister Erin and her two sons while I was still in high school. I was sixteen, my sister was twenty-four, and the boys were one and three. I spent every single day during that time in the company of those boys. I was there when Andrew learned to tie his shoes and watched countless episodes of Barney with Jacob. We shared chicken nuggets, bedtime stories, and dance parties manifold. We were, all of us, growing up together. The boys' history is my history. I love them as if they are my own.

Jacob was the passenger. He was wearing his seatbelt. Still, he died. As far as the police have been able to reconstruct, a young man of twenty-two, was taking his new car out for a ride when he ran a stop sign at the intersection of Pawtucket and Caitlin Avenue in East Providence. It was at this point that the young man collided with my nephews, meeting head on the passenger door at a perfect right angle. Jacob bore the brunt of the impact. He was crushed. Held in place by his seatbelt and crushed until his death. Jacob never regained consciousness. I hope that means that he did not feel any pain.

At the hospital, I was able to hold Jacob and say goodbye. We all were, except Andrew, who was in surgery. When I first saw his body, he looked like himself, just pale. His eyes were slightly open, and I could make out a familiar expression, even in death. I kept expecting him to sit up and talk to us. Jacob's hair still smelled like his tea tree shampoo. I wondered if it crossed his mind when he showered that morning that he would not be washing his hair again. Not ever. I can still feel him. It is as if he has just walked out of a room I now occupy. Forever, I miss him.

The ER that night was chaotic, even for a Friday. My large family and nephew's friends appeared in force when they heard about the accident. We all held vigil to the

left side of the revolving hospital doors; an unmissable high visibility gang, thirty members deep, enveloping my sister in fellowship, flower, and covert flasks. All of us trying to numb the unnumbable. We took turns sitting with Jacob while we waited to hear if Andrew would make it. Jacob was never left alone in that room. Inside, outside, inside, crying, smoking, crying, and repeat. I cried so consistently that my voice was hoarse for weeks after he died. I never wanted my voice back. I liked that the physical expression of my sorrow for Jacob had broken me. I needed my pain to be measurable by the outside world. "Our mourning, our letting ourselves grieve over the loss of loved ones is an expression of our commitment, a form of communication and communion" (hooks, 1999).

Andrew was driving the car when they were hit. He was not wearing his seatbelt and was ejected on impact. This may be why he survived. After surgery, he was moved to the Trauma ICU on the 6th floor. He remained there, on life support, for six days. For six days, my family gathered in the hospital parking lot during the visiting hours of 11 - 7. We made camp in the crabgrass divider. We claimed our new territory with camping chairs, music from a speaker, takeout, and endless cigarette butts. Rain or shine, we were there. Dozens of people came every day to visit him. A motley crew of family, friends, coworkers, and kids from the neighborhood. In the Trauma ICU, patients are only allowed two visitors at a time, so we took turns.

In addition to the significant head trauma and numerous other injuries, Andrew was also intubated. Talking was not possible. During those six days, Andrew regained consciousness several times. Each time, asking for Jacob. He would make direct eye contact with whoever was in the room and crudely sign J A C O B into the air. Erin was advised by hospital staff not to tell Andrew that Jacob had died until they were able to remove the tube from his throat. They were worried that if he was told while intubated and became agitated, he may further hurt himself. They said it was for his safety. She took their advice, leaning on their experience where we had none. For six days, while Andrew silently pleaded with us for information, we pretended not to understand. Everything was wrong. One nephew dead and hiding that death from the other.

The morning the tube was removed, my sister waited until all significant players were at the hospital before going in to see Andrew. Erin, the boys' father Chris, their stepdad Paul, my brother Adam, my mother, and I assembled in the family waiting room discussing strategy. Once the plan was set, we walked the long fluorescent walk to Andrew's room. He watched us file in, and I knew that this inescapable moment we were all dreading was happening and would rank only second worst this week. We surrounded his bed. I had my hand on his foot. He could not speak above a whisper.

My beautiful, loving sister took her son's hand and slowly started telling him first that he was in an accident. She was trying so hard to get the information out before crying. He asked if he was on his motorcycle. No, you were not. You were driving with Jacob. Andrew asked, where is Jacob? He didn't make it, my sister told him. Andrew asked my sister if it was his fault. No. It was not your fault. You did everything you

could. You were hit. We cried as a family, all of us relieved to have finally been able to include Andrew. "Healing is an act of communion" (hooks, 1999).

Jacobs's obituary was the second that I have written. The first was for my child's paternal grandmother, Teresa. She was accomplished, well-traveled, and died surrounded by the love of family. I did not volunteer to write her obituary, but it was my honor to detail her beautiful life and recount the trail of admiration that she left behind. Teresa had long lived with a chronic disease, and she was in her seventies. Her passing was unfortunate but not unexpected.

I asked to write Jacob's obituary. In part because I wanted something else to focus on for a while but also because I wanted permanent testimony of how he tilted his head after telling a joke. I wanted the glint in his eye to be recorded forever. I wanted to make sure that nothing was missed. Erin never asked a single question about the obituary while I was writing it. Not one question. She trusted me. Trying to encapsulate who Jacob was and what he meant is a task that still lingers in my mind; it is haunting. The responsibility stained me. It will never be adequate for Jacob or Erin.

"The difficulty is your life refuses summation - it always did - and invites contemplation instead. Like many of us left here, I thought I knew you. Now I discover that in your company it is myself I know. ... You gave us ourselves to think about, to cherish" (Toni Morrison, 1987).

How do you summarize a child? A real person you love and whose heart was beating just days ago? When is the draft, final? When is their story done? It would seem on the surface that their story would end when their heart fails to beat. However, I know that is not entirely true because Jacob isn't here, but I still sense him. My memory of him is also part of his story - his legacy. Even though I can no longer observe him physically, he is present. He lives in my thoughts, my breath, my blood, and my tears. When the entire community who holds you dies, that is when the story ends. When everyone affected is gone, then Jacob will cease. This must be true because anything else is unacceptable.

"Sustained grief is particularly disturbing in a culture that offers a quick fix for any pain. Sometimes, it amazes me to know intuitively that the grieving are all around us, yet we do not see any overt signs of their anguished spirits. We are taught to feel shame about grief that lingers. Like a stain on our clothes, it marks us as flawed, imperfect. To cling to grief, to desire its expression, is to be out of sync with modern life, where the hip do not get bogged down in mourning" (hooks, 1999).

When someone you love dies, there is a black hole ripped into your world. Where there was once a person, there is now a vacuum; no light, everything collapsing in and on itself. The gravitational pull of sadness is so overwhelming that absolutely nothing can escape. You feel this void with every labored breath; lifting your feet off the ground is impossible. It hurts. Everything hurts, and there is no relief. That is grief.

Compound that with the shock of unexpected loss, and it is especially devastating. What you never planned for. What you could not plan for. An error in time. A mistake. When my sister called me to tell me about the accident initially, she had to repeat “Jacob is dead” four times before I heard it. You think this cannot be true. This is not happening. Not to me. Not to anyone I know. Except it is happening to you and the people you know. Not as any type of personal assault, it is just your turn. It is always someone’s turn and right now it is yours. It is random.

There are membership levels of grief. The more personal and devastating your loss, the higher the level you achieve. Someone who you only casually know, like the distant, elderly, and the sick. These types of deaths can be difficult but are, in fact, entry-level and only qualify you for Silver. This does not mean that you did not love the person, simply that in the Venn diagram of your life, they were closer to the outside. Everyone falls to the outside of somebody’s life.

With a Gold membership, you get access to feelings of general loss¹ and temporary forfeiture of interest. Eventually, you will recover. You may even forget. You will never return to 100%, but the loss of self is fractional, barely noticeable. Gold can only be obtained when someone in your inner circle dies, perhaps unexpectedly (you get extra points for unexpected death²), like a close family member, friend, or parent. At the Gold level, expect long periods reflecting on your mortality, moderate identity depletion, loss of general enjoyment.

Platinum is the big league. The show. My sister is platinum. You can only access this level when you lose a child, a sibling, an intimate partner, etc. Higher status given to blood relatives who provided custodial care. Age is irrelevant. With this level, you get all the perks of grief. Suicidal thoughts, loss of sleep, PTSD, and complete undoing of selfhood, just to name a few. When the person who has died is so intertwined with you that their beginning, middle, and end are not decipherable from your own, you are bestowed all of grief’s cash and prizes.

With the loss of Jacob, I have recently been upgraded to... gold+, platinum light...? He was not my son, but he was as close as one can get otherwise. “All lives are connected to other lives and when one man goes, much more goes than the man goes with him” (Baldwin, 1964). The only thing more excruciating than surviving in Jacob’s absence is watching my sister try to survive. She howls in guttural mourning, so full of despair that it makes me physically hurt. I want to take on the weight of her heartache. I want to swallow it whole, absorb the shock and shrapnel, drown to take it down. I want to be the one dead instead of Jacob. Without caveat or goodbyes, I would trade. Bargaining is an embarrassing and juvenile facet of grief. We do not get wishes. The relentless trade negotiation is not real, but only when you know do you know the verity with which you offer yourself. Seize my heart. Please.

¹ In order to access permanent loss of interest you will need to fall further down the pit of despair.

² Points have no value.

“For nothing is fixed, forever and forever and forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing, the sea does not cease to grind down rock. Generations do not cease to be born, and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses they have.

The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out” (Baldwin, 1964).

From the discomfort of my platinum-adjacent penthouse of grief, I have learned that every action taken in life is both correct and incorrect, depending on your unique latitude. Choices are comprised of random parts: experience, knowledge, and wind direction. With just a few altered decisions, any one of us could, at any time, end up in a place that we most hideously despised. Our lives are made up of choices, and it can all end with a spin of the Wheel of Fortune, one run stop sign as it were. We are as likely to be the antagonist as the protagonist, and more likely, we are both. Individual anti-heroes. All of us, both Jacob and the young man.

“Moreover, a day is coming which one will not recall, that last day of one's life, and on that day one will oneself become as irrecoverable as all the days that have passed. It is a fearful speculation-or, rather, a fearful knowledge-that, one day one's eyes will no longer look out on the world. One will no longer be present at the universal morning roll call. The light will rise for others, but not for you” (Baldwin, 1964).

Only in death will grief release you. That is the grand prize.

Citations

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