

The Ties That Bind Us, the Shadows That Separate Us: Life and Death, Shadow and (Dream)Story

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Abstract:

This is an autoethnographic account of a family's struggle to respond to a series of tragic losses and to fend off the encroaching shadow that descended on them in their grief. The story unfolds as a study of the redemptive power of story to penetrate the shadows of collective grief and speaks to the possibility of healing from tragedy through the fusion of dream and story into a new nexus of possibility.

Keywords: death; dream; family; grief; shadow

Article:

Life and Death

It is Thanksgiving Day, 1970. I am twelve years old. We are at my grandparents' old bungalow, in a small Georgia town. This is my father's family.

Years before, my grandfather—a Greek immigrant who stowed away on a banana boat to get to America—met up with a young Alabama farm girl. There she was, in the front row, sparkling blonde hair framing a fair, sweet seventeen-year-old face. My grandfather, a professional touring wrestler known as “JIMMY THE GREEK” (no kidding), winked at her, and quickly wrestled his way into her heart.

Her name? Fair Jewel Poss.

No kidding.

Too young to marry, they ran off, chased by the barrel of an enraged farmer's shotgun, to northern Georgia to start a life together. The culture of the family evolved as a curious mix—a clash, really—of old-country irascibility and genteel southern manners. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* moves South.

Today, the smells take the air; I can almost taste the feast as I wander about, waiting for that moment when we are called to the table. I am at loose ends. The kitchen is off limits to children. The dining room is in chaos. It is cold outside.

There's nowhere to go because my uncle, in his early forties, occupies the den. He is dying of cancer. He has drifted into a coma, and these past few days have been drenched with dread.

The cancer took him quickly. It started as a little black spot on his lung but spread rapidly to his brain, ravaged his body. Then the chemo, and the radiation, almost killed him. This young man was transformed, in my eyes, to an old, weak man. A mere *shadow* of his former self. Then, one day, he stood up, and seemed his old self again. For two weeks, he was energetic. The doctors said he was in remission. Then, just as suddenly, he fell into a deep coma.

We all know IT is coming, but nobody can speak of IT.

Nobody WILL speak of IT.

Maybe we will never speak of IT.

I spend an hour or so shuffling around, poking through the closets upstairs, wandering out into the yard, hoping desperately to escape that feeling of dread, trying to avoid the adults bustling about. They are cooking and putting food on the table, aprons flying, aromas wafting, my aunt's famous baked macaroni and cheese mingling with stuffing and turkey and corn and sweet potatoes and bacon-soaked green beans ... it will, as always, be a hearty southern meal....

The call finally comes. "It's time!"

We gather at the table, and just as we sit down, the nurse, who has been tending my comatose uncle, calls my dad's name, "Bill! Come in here!"

Everyone freezes.

Everyone, that is, except my dad.

He bolts into the den. For some strange reason, I follow. An irresistible force, like a great magnet, draws me there.

Just as we enter the room, my uncle thrashes. His eyes open wide in recognition. He stares at us for a long moment, gives a great heaving jerk that lifts him off the bed, lets out a ragged, gasping sigh, and ... dies.

It is the first time I have seen death.

I had no idea it would be so wet.

The nurse covers him with the sheet.

My dad is frozen. His older brother, too young to die, has just left us, forever. I stand stock-still. A shiver runs through me. I look to my dad. I do not know what to do. And then, somehow, I find myself back at the table.

Oddly, everyone else has returned to the table as well. Maybe they never left. Nobody is eating. Nobody is speaking. We sit down to a silent Thanksgiving dinner, knowing there is a dead body in the next room. It is the quietest meal of my life; this half-Greek family is usually anything but quiet.

Today, we are as silent as ghosts.

Today, there will be lots of leftovers.

A Dark Dream

I awake in the dark, screaming, shaking, palms sweating.

In my dream, I am having some sort of seizure. I am rattling apart ... violent tremors take hold of my body. I cannot breathe. I cannot speak. I cannot ... call out ... for help.

I thrash. A great, heaving jerk lifts me off the bed. My eyes spring open, wide, shocked ... but.... All is darkness ... dark ... you are dark ... the world is dark ... the sky is utterly black ... I cannot tell where ground ends and air begins... .

WAIT! Air does not begin!

I can't breathe.

“Oh, God,” I cry silently, “help me breathe!”

I try to cry out... but all is darkness and suffocation.... I cannot see, cannot feel, cannot breathe, cannot speak.

I am terrified. Everything is dark, I am dark ... am I darkness itself?

Am I a shadow?

I seem to have no substance, no body. Am I nobody?

I have no feeling ... except terror.

Am I nothing but shadow?

I do not know.

There is no answer.

I can no longer sense my own presence. I am, literally, in the dark. I am darker than the darkness that engulfs me. I am darkness. Or maybe I am a shadow in the dark. I suddenly realize I am being pulled underground—into my grave(?)—by some invisible force.

I panic ... the tremors shake me to my very core. I am out of control. Slowly, I realize I am being pulled into a thick, dark sack, darker than the darkness itself, darker even than the darkness I have become. And suddenly, I *know*. I do not know how I know, but I know: Once I am fully inside the sack, engulfed, stolen from this world ... there can be no return. No light, no air, no ... anything.

I struggle ... I scream ... I need help ... I cannot speak... .

Help me!

I am dying.

With a final heave of determination... a last-ditch push, a dying gasp....

NO! NO! It can't be!

Is this my death rattle?

NO!

I manage to scream, for the last time, “HELP!”

And with a great, heaving jerk, my eyes staring wide but seeing nothing, I sit bolt upright in bed, struggling for breath.

For two whole minutes, I cannot speak. I heave in breaths, heave out sobs.

Then, I see him. Standing at the foot of my bed is my uncle, who is supposed to be downstairs lying in a coffin.

A sardonic grin flickers across his lips, but it quickly fades. “A shock, ain’t it?” he says, simply.

I cannot speak, but my eyes speak my question for me: “What?”

“Death,” he says, “It’s a bit of a shock, to tell the truth, even when you expect it. And believe me, it ain’t pretty.” A long pause as he takes a deep drag on his cigarette, then, “It’s not what you think. It’s not what *she* thinks.”

He’s referring to my grandmother, a Baptist who believes with all her heart that her “little boy” has gone off to be with Jesus.

I want to ask him, “What’s it like?” But I still can’t speak. Instead, I sit in silence, gasping for breath. He turns, walks out the door of this little bedroom in my grandparents’ house. Once again, that magnet pulls me. I follow as he walks down the stairs, enters the living room, and points.

There, in the center of the living room, is the coffin where my uncle’s embalmed, lifeless body has been lying in state these past two days—a good, old-fashioned, country southern Baptist tradition, that.

“He looks so natural,” my aunt had said, earlier in the day.

“He looks so dead,” I thought. “Is that natural?”

As my uncle points, I see something different about this scene. The body is not lying down at all. It (he) is sitting upright, eyes open, a shocked look on his face.

My uncle walks over to his body, puts his arms around himself, pushes the body back down into the coffin. Then, he fades away. Or really, they fade together... .

The coffin lid falls shut with a loud “THUMP!”

I am standing at the foot of the coffin as my dad enters the room. “What are you doing?” he says loudly.

I turn, and I wake up, a wet trickle of sweat running down my neck.

For days, I cannot shake my dream.

I am haunted by my dreams....

A Shadow Descends

In grief, my grandmother is demonstrative.

The day after my uncle’s death, the undertaker returns his body, now clean and dry and wearing a gray suit, lying “peacefully” in that shiny silver velvet–lined coffin, to my grandmother’s living room. Soon, a parade of friends, neighbors, and family members, all bearing food, begins to appear at the door. As each new face appears at the threshold of the living room, my grandmother, sitting in her favorite chair next to the coffin, handkerchief gripped tightly in her hands, lets out a loud sob.

From time to time, she will wail, “Oh, my baby! My poor baby! What will I do without you?”

She is clearly miserable.

Everyone else is silent.

Occasionally, a female visitor will break the silence, muttering as she looks at my uncle, “He looks so handsome,” or “He looks good, doesn’t he?” or worse, “Doesn’t he look natural?”

As a twelve-year-old boy, I am a bit of a literalist.

I cannot help thinking, as I look at him for the first time since that moment when he stunned even himself by expiring, that he does NOT look handsome. He does NOT look good. He does NOT look natural. He looks like a mannequin in a wax museum. He looks like a *corpse*. His skin is ashen and too made-up to be anything but artificially perfect. I cannot help thinking that my uncle, who was, to be truthful, a bit dissolute in life, NEVER looked like that. His hair had never, in my memory at least, been so perfectly coiffed. I had never seen him wear a suit. And I rarely saw him without a cigarette perched on his lips, even when he was in the advanced stages of lung cancer.

My uncle, who drank a bit too much, who, in fact, had few friends in life, suddenly has a coterie of friends, admirers, loving family members, genial neighbors.

But mostly, what strikes me as I watch this scene unfold, is that most people have no idea what to say.

So they say nothing.

On the day of the funeral, I enter the living room. My dad is standing there alone, looking at what used to be his only brother. He turns as I enter, and I see tears in his eyes. This is the first time I have ever seen my father cry. He does not speak. I walk to him, and he hugs me for a moment. We cry.

And then we are standing apart, looking at each other, unable to speak.

We have no idea what to say, how to begin.

So we say nothing.

Now, many years later, that silence still haunts my family.

Truth, spoken plainly, eludes us.

Emotional pain, born of loss, and felt but unacknowledged, dogs us.

So often, when we feel such pain, we do not know what to say.

So we say nothing.

We do not speak of my uncle. We don’t tell the story. Rarely do we speak of such things, of the events that shaped us while they threatened to destroy us, of the raw wounds that we felt as we tried to make some sense of our loss, and the staggering losses that piled up on top of this one.

Within a year and a half, you see, the family suffered three major losses. Shortly after my uncle’s death, my grandfather, the Greek patriarch, went to bed one night and never woke up.

And then one day, my aunt didn’t call.

My father found her, his only sister, naked and dead in her bathtub, blood trickling out of the corner of her mouth, victim at age forty-six of a massive coronary. In each case, we repeated the ritual wake in the living room.

My grandmother heaved and sobbed and wailed.

And fell into a deep, permanent depression.

And the silence in the family thickened.

My brother and I disappeared into a cloud of smoke and drink. We were too young to do this—much too young. But we did not know what else to do.

We were all stunned, stricken. Each member of the family died a little during those days. And the shadow grew. Silence took us. Nobody knew what to say, what to do.

How do you speak when the pain of loss threatens to tear your very skin off your flesh, when you feel like screaming so long and so loud that you fear that your soul will fly out of your body?

What do you say when you know words will fail to express the grief that is welling up like a great flood in your heart, threatening to burst the dam of composure you have tried to build in your mind?

How do you rebuild a life-world when one third of the most important people in your universe have left you forever bereft?

How do you heal a broken heart?

How do you heal *five* broken hearts?

When we did engage with each other, we fought. The pain welled up inside and by a curious emotional alchemy, emerged into the world as anger. Rage took us, shook us. My brother and I had bloody drunken fistfights. Our parents screamed; my sisters cried.

And nobody ever spoke of our loss.

With each passing moment, our family splintered a little.

And the silence that had protected us now threatened to destroy us.

To my young mind, it gradually became clear that we were carefully avoiding the shadow that had grown up around us and between us, that had entered into us as we gasped for air, searched for light and life. Death had gripped us, but we were unable to face IT.

A shadow and a threat, a dreadful darkness and a searing pain, had descended on us. And for many years, this shadow lived on—it seemed, in fact, to have a life of its own. It seemed destined to grow and thrive. And it seemed that there was no escape.

Shadow and the Collective Will

“Everything with substance casts a shadow,” wrote Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams (1991, p. 3). In this case, they are speaking not just of objects in nature, but of *subjects* as well. Philosophers, writers, psychoanalysts, and poets—from Plato to Nietzsche, from Robert Louis Stevenson to Joseph Conrad to Alice Walker, from C. G. Jung to Marie-Louise von Franz, from William Blake to Robert Bly to Maya Angelou—

have played with this theme. Human selves, so the theory goes, cast a sort of shadow—a shadow that lives in the unconscious world of each of us. This is the “dark side” of human being. The shadow consists of those parts or aspects of ourselves that we cannot, or sometimes will not, face—“that part of us we fail to see or know” (Johnson, 1991, p. 4), that we do not like or that is socially ugly or unacceptable.

“The shadow goes by many familiar names: the disowned self, the lower self, the dark twin or brother in bible and myth, the double, repressed self, alter ego, id” (Zweig & Abrams, 1991, p. 3). The shadow is that dismissed part of us, that part that we do not wish to acknowledge. The shadow is the “heart of darkness” that beats in each of us.

Perhaps the darkness is so dark that it scares us.

Perhaps the darkness is just too much to bear.

Whatever the case, each of us, according to Jungian theory, harbors a Mr. Hyde—a shadow self—somewhere within the skin, the cells, the consciousness of the Dr. Jekyll that is the everyday persona-ego that we show to our world.

Sometimes, that shadow descends on us, catches us off guard. And for a moment, or for many years, it can grip us, holding us in its sway. The problem, of course, is that this kind of “seizure” can make it very difficult to walk in the ordinary world of functioning humans. We may take on negative living patterns, developing neuroses or engaging in addictive habits or building destructive communication patterns. Once these patterns are established, once we begin to live lives of deception and betrayal—what Brian Spitzberg and William Cupach (1998; Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994) have called “the dark side of relating”—the patterns are difficult to break. In any case, according to the Jungian literature, if the shadow is not somehow met, faced, owned, and dealt with, evil can erupt.

Sometimes, the shadow descending on the person will take the form of Despair. Hope fades, becoming just a trace, a wisp, of a ... memory. Once Despair takes hold of the human heart, terrible things can happen. If we are not careful, Despair can kill us.

Like it killed my grandmother.

As Despair grips us, we may find ourselves . . .

battling madly, if you will, for possibility, because possibility is the only salvation. When someone faints, we call for water, eau de Cologne, smelling salts; but when someone wants to despair, then the word is: Get possibility, get possibility, possibility is the only salvation. A possibility—then the person in despair breathes again, he revives again, for without possibility a person seems unable to breathe. (Kierkegaard, 1980, pp. 38-39)

There is, in the end, but one way to conquer Despair. We need to breathe again. We need to feel *possibility*.

This, my grandmother could not do.

With a huge, heaving sob, my grandmother stopped breathing. At the last funeral, her breath was simply taken away. And although she lived on for more than a decade, she never breathed again, never sensed possibility. She simply waited to die.

And the family stood by, silent, splintered, unable to speak, unable to act, engulfed in shadow, barely breathing, teetering always on the brink of Despair.

Engulfed by a *collective* shadow, a *family* shadow, we scattered, desperately seeking away out of the darkness. Some of us tried drugs, or alcohol, or food, or sex ... to salve our wounds. My father disappeared, fell into his work. When he came home, he collapsed on the couch and let the television suck his vision, and what remained of his breath, away. The rest of us experimented, stayed busy, got addicted, ate too much or worked too much or drank too much, ran helter-skelter along our various paths of escape.

Meanwhile, my grandmother sat in silence, waiting to die.

Like her, our family had lost the will to live. We were, in fact, each trying in our own silent, desperate way, to escape the shadow.

Even if that meant hastening our own deaths.

Each day, we died a little.

But the shadow did not lift.

Family Secrets, Family Silences

In the darkening corners of our lives, we began to harbor secrets. At first, they were just small secrets—things like where we were going or where we had been, what we had been doing, and so on.

But the family shadow offered fertile soil for growing secrets.

We grew our secrets in the dark.

Soon, nearly everything we did was done furtively, in a secret, private world. Small transgressions, held close, morphed into epic secrets. Little lies became the foundation for deeply dishonest lives. It seemed that with time, we had lost all sense of what to say and what not to say. Soon, we had all lost track of what we had told—what we had opened up to the light—and what we had held in the shadow.

Engulfed in shadow, how do you discern the difference between truth and lie, between story and secret? Even if you begin to understand and see that something needs to be revealed that has been held close, how, after so many years of skulking in the darkness, do you begin?

A Knife in the Dark

One day, many years later, possibility knocked at our family's doorstep. It came in a strange, unexpected way.

Doesn't it always?

After a long hiatus, death visited my family again.

One fine, apparently ordinary autumn day five years ago, my last grandparent—my mother's father—died. It was the peaceful death of an old, old man.

But it was not a welcome interruption.

It was a dark day.

It has been a while, now, since that interruption called my life into question. I can just now begin to breathe through it, although I have been writing about it, off and on, for five years now. And now, writing these words, I find I am gasping for air, for sense, for ... life after death.

It's not that his death was particularly tragic. Grandpa was 94. When he died, people would say, "Oh, well. How old was he? 94? He lived a long life."

They were wrong, of course. It wasn't nearly long enough. Never again can I look into his bright blue sparkling-mischievous eyes. Never again can I hug his powerful body and feel his strength flow into my body. Never again will I hear his playful, joyful laughter. Never again will we walk through the forest behind his house, occasionally poking through old trash piles, searching for treasure. Never again will I hear his stories.

Never again ...

I remember the last time I looked into his eyes. It was during his last summer, as our beach vacation was about to end. I looked into his eyes, and he looked wistful—not a typical mood for this mercurial man. It was a knowing look, I realize now. He knew this was really *adieu*.

Three months later, he was dead.

The day before the funeral, I find myself standing in the entryway of my mom's house—the house where my grandpa spent his final years of life. I am unable to move. Today, on the day before the funeral, we are supposed to look through his stuff and see if there is anything of his we might want. I, too, want something to remember him by. Eventually, I summon the will to wander back to the apartment my parents built for him when he moved in.

I don't know about this. Maybe I should leave things like they are, undisturbed.

My brother is shuffling through some old junk in Grandpa's closet. I am standing there, watching. And suddenly, a wave of pain surges through my back. This pain is staggering. It is as though someone has jammed a hunting knife into my shoulder blade. I nearly collapse on the floor. I can't breathe. I stumble out of the room, blinded by pain and tears, and wander into the front yard.

I sit on a bench under a magnolia tree, sobbing breathlessly. My son, Eli, who is about the age I was when Grandpa and I were closest, notices me and walks up. He looks me in the eye. He is scared. I try to reassure him with my eyes, but all I can do is sob and sob and sob. I hold Eli close to me and sob.

Still, the pain in my back does not subside.

A knife in my back.

I wonder if that knife casts a shadow?

Pain and breath and tears blend together in the unspeakable sadness of Grandpa's passing. For a long time, I cannot let go. And so I feel pain.

After a long time, I can breathe again, at least a little.

Pain fades into numbness.

And silence.

On the day of the funeral, we all gather again at Mom's house. We are hot, nervous, uncomfortable in our funeral clothes. We don't get together like this very often.

Why does it take a death to get us together?

I feel the stabbing back pain again. I sit heavily in a chair.

Soon, we are piled into the limos. Twenty or more people in three limos. We ride out into the country, to a little southern Baptist church. During the last year of his life, my grandfather, a lifelong agnostic, joined a good old-time gospel-shouting southern Baptist church. I asked my mom about it one day last summer. She told me he had been raised in the Baptist church but that his experiences at Baylor University had led him to quit the church in disgust. Apparently the professors at Baylor failed to practice what they preached. Go figure.

He had not been inside a church again in more than seventy-five years, except for the day when Noah, my youngest son, was baptized and for funerals of his friends and loved ones, most of whom left us long before he did. Then suddenly, one day, he said to my mom, "I believe I'd like to go to church, sweetie." Mom replied, "You can go to church with us, Dad." "No," he answered firmly. "Not to that hoity-toity Episcopal church. I want to go to *my* church. A *Baptist* church." We never knew why. Maybe he knew the end was coming. But whatever the reason, he attended church *religiously* that last year, on Sundays and Tuesdays.

We arrive at the church, and file quietly in. There are fifty or so people at the funeral. Many are friends from the church, some are family friends who have traveled quietly to pay their respects, from Georgia and Tennessee and North Carolina. After the service, we move across the street to a little country cemetery for the burial.

So this is it, I think. The end.

He is sitting there, in an urn, nothing but a couple of pounds of ash now. They will bury the urn right here, in a country place he knew only for a year or so, all by himself. That was what he wanted, to be buried here, in this little no-name churchyard.

I look at the urn, and I know *that* is not him. It is, but it's not. His vibrant, powerful, living body is gone, gone, gone.

Gone to ash ... and dust....

As the pastor drones on, I look around. It's a quiet place, not too different from his Georgia farm. A pasture next door—the pastor is saying something about ashes and dust and farewells. I cannot concentrate, can barely hear or listen. I look toward the pasture and suddenly, there are four horses standing at the fence, watching the funeral. All eyes turn toward the horses as the words fade. The horses bow their heads, then move away.

My sons are standing at my sides, awestruck by the sudden appearance and disappearance of the horses.

He would have liked the horses.

In our awe, we do not speak.

He was a horseman.

Sometimes, silence is called for.

Has he gone to be with the horses, like wind in the grass?

Sometimes, life is so painful that silence is the only possible response.

The weight of silent Despair... .

Sometimes, the silence is too much.

Encroaching shadow... .

Sometimes silence holds us, and we fall into shadow.

And yet ... doesn't the wind in the grass make a faint sound?

And the light, like the horses, plays on the grass....

Dark Silence

In some religious traditions—in the ancient practices of the Yogis, Taoists, and Buddhists of Asia; among the mystics of Judaism and Islam; among the various orders of monks of the Christian church; in the practices of the Society of Friends (Quakers)—silence has a sacred quality. For Quakers, sitting in silent communion is how we access the “light of God” that is in the universe and its people.

In his book, *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension*, George Kalamaras (1994) attempted “to authenticate silence as a mode of knowing” (p. 1). In my own work, I have attempted to probe the communicative capacities of silence (Poulos, 2004). Indeed, silence can be a powerful force of peace and goodness in the world.

But there is another kind of silence we must acknowledge—a dark silence, a silence of truths unspoken and stories untold. It is a silence held in the shadow of emotions too painful to bear, too deep to speak or speak to. Perhaps at first it is a protective silence, one that allows us to escape the overwhelming grief that threatens—or seems to threaten—a very painful rending of our hearts. But as time goes on, and the silence deepens, it becomes an inescapable silence, a silence of doom. This shadowy silence is what descended on my family in the face of our tragedy. It is a silence from which we have not recovered, a silence that threatens to engulf us and destroy our *courage to be* (Tillich, 1952). It is the silence of despair, the kind of despair that Kierkegaard (1980) considered a “sickness unto death.”

Of course, one might well see this shadowland as a land of opportunity— or as Kierkegaard (1980) put it, as the opening to possibility. We can find meaning in the darkness ... Jung certainly saw it this way, as have Viktor Frankl, Stanley Hauerwas, C. S. Lewis, Otto Rank, Paul Tillich, and countless poets and purveyors of tragedy, from Homer to Aeschylus to Shakespeare to Blake to Eliot. The problem for the family was not the descent into shadow itself. The problem was staying there, engulfed in that shadow world.

The Psalmist tells us, *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil (Psalms 23:4)*.

But my family *did* fear that evil.

We feared the valley we inhabited.

It was a dark valley too deep and long and treacherous to navigate.

Our silent cries for help—our addictions and our transgressions, our lies and our dark secrets—fell on deaf ears.

Our voices were muffled by the misty silence that enshrouded our very consciousness.

There was a veil of silence that ate us alive.

Our problem was that, in all this tragedy, in lives taken too soon, we did not know how to find *meaning*.

How do you find meaning in Despair?

Our problem was that our family had no roadmap for navigating these experiences.

Dark Dreams on the Cusp of Dawn

I wake up. It is very early; the sun has not even begun to hint at the coming day. The sound of my own wailing is what startles me into consciousness. As I sit up in bed, I feel something on my cheek. Reaching up, I realize that whatever it is, warm and damp but now drying, has been there a little while. It takes me a few moments and a couple of shakes of my head to understand what has happened. I have been crying in my sleep, aloud. Hard, bitter tears; tears of the deepest grief; tears that run like a hot river of lava through my very soul. At this moment of realization, the feelings come storming back into my heart, and I remember the dream. I nearly cry out.... Can I bear this pain, this loss? I choke back the next wail, but just barely.

Oh, what a dream, I am thinking. What a knife of a dream....

In my dream, I am sitting on the edge of my bed. I have just learned that I am about to die—that in fact, I have only a few minutes left on this earth before my breath is taken away forever. I am sitting with my dear, dear family: Eli, my oldest son, just now a teenager, on my right side; Noah, my precious little child, all of nine, on my left; Sue, my partner and dearest friend these long years, sitting behind me, her hand on my shoulder. I am explaining to them what is happening, that I will be dead soon. They are crying. I am crying. As I say goodbye, my final farewell, the pain runs so deep and so strong that my breath is taken away. I think that this is my death rattle, which just shoves the blade of loss even deeper into my heart.... I feel as if I'm being run over by a semitruck of sadness, of grief and loss and pain. I sob, and sob, and sob.

As I sob, I am thinking of all the wonderful times we have had together and of the times that might yet be. “I have no regrets,” I tell them, choking back the sobs for a moment. But this is not true. I regret—so deeply, so poignantly, I regret—this very moment of loss, this destruction of possibility... .

“But I am sad,” I say.

I am so, so sad.

Together, we regret this: Possibility has vanished like a puff of smoke on an ill wind.

We will not be together again, perhaps for a long, long time ... perhaps we will never see each other again.

“Goodbye,” I say, “I love you.”

And they cry and cry and cry.

As they cry, I feel the deep agony of their grief.

I cry with them.

I cry *for* them.

We can only sob our loss.

After a long flood of tears, there is a pause.

You can only cry so much.

As we come to a halt, catching our breath, Eli says, “Remember that time at the lake when. . .” A story escapes his lips. It is a story of togetherness, of connection, of happy times in the long days of summer amid the short

years of childhood. That story reminds Sue of another story and me of a third. Then, it is Noah's turn. So we sit and tell stories, for a long time. Each of the stories is about *us*, about our family, our traditions and our love and our joys and our sorrows. The stories are a welcome breath of joy and meaning, an interruption of the sadness of this otherwise terrible moment. As I listen, I long to live on.

I long to live on, not because I am selfish, not because I want what I want. I long to live *for* and *with* them, these beautiful humans, my significant others who have made my life and its meaning and our joy possible. I long to live on so that, together, we can build and tell and live more stories.

After a time, we tire in the telling, and fall silent. And in our silence, grief returns like a wave on the shore, eroding our joy. We fall back into mourning. Of course, we all knew this day would come, but of course, we all hoped it would be later—much, much later. We all mourn our loss, sinking into pain and regret and despair. I sob and sob and sob ... and I feel a new tide of feeling rising in my throat.... I am filled to bursting with grief. I cannot hold that feeling in; it shoves its way up through my throat, forces my jaws open, erupts in a long, loud wail and suddenly, I am awake.

There will be no more sleep for me this day.

But there is a clue here.

Story and Light

One day, two weeks after Grandpa's funeral, my youngest son, Noah, age three, sidles up next to me. He looks me in the eye and says, very seriously, "Dad, tell me the story—how Grandpa Lucky died."¹

Taken aback, I sit down on the floor next to him. I tell him, "Well, one day, Grandpa, who was very old, got sick and died."

He replies, "NO! Tell me the STORY! The WHOLE story!"

Stunned, I look into his bright brown eyes.

"OK, son," I say. "The whole story ... well, you know, Grandpa was a very strong man. When he was younger, he was a cowboy in a rodeo. He loved to ride horses. And he was a farmer. He liked very much to take care of his cows."

"Did they have milk?" says Noah.

"Yes, they had milk."

"I'm allergic to milk."

"Yes, you are. Anyway, one day, he decided to retire and move to Florida. You know, he had a swimming pool in his yard."

"Cool!"

"Yeah, it was pretty cool. Anyway, when he got very old, he moved into Mama and Papa's house. He had his own rooms there."

"Yeah. He liked to watch TV!" says Noah.

"Loud!" I say, and he laughs.

“So one day he got very sick—he got pneumonia and he had to go to the hospital,” I continue.

But Noah breaks in, “NO! First tell about how he goes to the beach with us and plays that mouse game.”

And so I tell about all the good times Noah knew with Grandpa, about our trips to the beach and the little games he would play with the kids, about how Grandpa had to walk very slowly, with a cane, and about how he was very good at sleeping while sitting in a chair. And when we get to the part about the funeral, and the horses hovering over the fence, Noah grows very quiet. He starts to cry. I hold him.

The next day, Noah is standing beside me in the living room. He says, solemnly, “Dad, tell me the story of how Grandpa Lucky died.”

I wonder if I can get off the hook here. I don’t want to talk about it. I start to tell it the way I had started the day before.

But Noah grabs my sleeve. “No, Dad! The WHOLE story!”

And so the story lives and grows. Each day, it grows longer, more detailed, as Noah insists on hearing the WHOLE story. One day, it hits me: This is not the story of how “Grandpa Lucky” *died* but of how he *lived*. His death is just one small moment in the WHOLE story. And so the story unfolds. Every day for three weeks, Noah makes the same request. I find myself searching for details.

I call my mom, explain my problem. I need to find out more about Grandpa’s life. She tells me some stories. I can tell she likes this. Then she suggests I call my Uncle Bud, her brother, to find out more. He is, it turns out, a master storyteller. So in the end, I am able to tell Noah the story of “Grandpa Lucky”—the WHOLE story. Every day for three weeks, we sit in the living room, and the story unfolds.

Gradually, as I tell this story, I begin to notice that the pain in my back is subsiding.

In the telling of the story, the knife of grief is released, falls with a clatter to the floor. I can breathe again. I can speak again.

Another clue.

Is this the glimmer of dawn?

Dreamstory

I dream I am sitting in my mom’s kitchen, surrounded by my family. We are eating. The day is sunny and warm and we are, for the first time in many years, *collectively* warm. There is but a trace of the shadow that has haunted us for so long; it shows up as a little hesitation at the beginning of a word.... Speaking into this air has long been difficult, shrouded in danger and darkness and mystery. There were times in our lives when it seemed, simply, that silence was safer.

But today is different. We begin, haltingly at first, to tell stories. I’m telling my family about Noah and his call to story. He is laughing, going along with the game. And somehow, we fall into a round of stories that center on our lost loved ones.

My dad, normally silent except when there’s a fight, breaks in with a story of my uncle: “I remember Jimmy came home one night when we were in high school. It was very late, and my parents were up, waiting and worrying. No sound of a car or headlights; then, he was just at the door, knocking on his own back door. Pop answered and said, ‘Where’s the car?’ Without missing a beat, Jimmy said, ‘Leaning up against the garage.’ Pop ran out into the backyard, yelling ‘LEANING?!?’ over his shoulder. We followed. Sure enough, leaning

against the garage was the front left fender of Pop's car. The rest was in the Broad River! Man, Jimmy got it that night!"

We all have a good laugh. This is the first time my dad has spoken of his dead brother in my presence since that grim Thanksgiving Day thirty-three years ago ... his brother, the rake ... his brother, the alcoholic(?) ... his brother, the wit ... his beloved, difficult, sardonic, charming pain-in-the-ass brother, now long dead, gone but not forgotten. A tear trickles down my dad's cheek as he finishes the story. You can see it in his eyes: My father is healing, a little, as he speaks....

The scene shifts. We are sitting in one of my favorite places on earth—a little lake cabin in Montana we like to visit in the summer. It is one of those fine summer days that happen only out West—warm and dry and long, not too hot, just a trace of humidity in the air. The sun is angling toward the horizon but there is plenty of day left. We are chatting happily at the picnic table on our deck. We are a family, and we seem to be enjoying that fact.

The family shadow has begun to fade in the early light.

I find myself wondering, "How did this happen?"

But my thought is interrupted... by a story.... My sister, Mary, speaks of our aunt, the one who died as she prepared to take a bath. Mary, who was only five when our aunt died, was Aunt Nicky's favorite. Mary remembers that day like it was yesterday. She has scarcely spoken Nicky's name since.

But today, the floodgates open, as she speaks her memory into story. She tells of a time when my aunt invited her to spend the night....

"She took me into her bedroom and showed me all her dresses and shoes—she had so many shoes! We played dress-up for hours. I wore one of her long, pink dresses and a long pearl necklace. High-heeled shoes. She let me wear makeup. It was the first time I ever wore makeup. And earrings! We had so much fun! We laughed and ate pizza and I wore that dress the whole time ... I think I fell asleep in that outfit. She was so nice. So, so nice."

My sister is crying, openly, for the first time in years.

I wake up, a little smile forming on my lips.

Familystory

According to scholars of family communication, the family's engagement in storytelling is a central form of family-making praxis. Family stories are vibrant and critical communication events that produce family culture, define family history, feature family uniqueness, develop identity, and display and establish family values (Langellier & Peterson, 1993; Pelias, 2004; Rehling, 2002; Trujillo, 2004; Vangelisti & Timmerman, 2001; Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1995).

Meanwhile, a family that lives in a pattern of unhealthy silence and secret making simply stumbles along in the dark.

What, then, to make of a family shrouded in silence, shadow, secret, pain? Can anything be done to release the family from the grip of its collective shadow?

In my family, our stories had deserted us. We had lost our capacity to make sense through story. The shadow had blocked the sunlight of story making. As a family, we lived for decades in a stricken state. We were stunned by grief and pain and loss. The knife of death stabbed us and ... left a deep wound, a hole ... in our hearts.

Into that hole, a shadow crept.

Then one day, out of the mouth of a babe ... came a light in the darkness. As Noah issued his insistent call of story (Coles, 1989), I was forced to investigate the life of my grandfather. I did not know the whole story, the story Noah needed. I needed my family to fill in the gaps. As I talked about Grandpa with various members of my family, it became clear that they *needed* to tell these stories.

And I began to dream of story.

I do not know how my family's story will turn out.

I know only that we must begin to craft it anew.

Dreaming Method

As I move into my day, I wonder at my dream, at the power of the unconscious forces that shape and infuse our dreams. Dreams, if you listen to them, if you read them carefully, can cut through all the hubbub and haze and shadowy ambiguity of everyday life. I sometimes turn to my dreams to clarify the issues that arise in my research and my writing. My dreams “cut to the chase,” as they say in Hollywood.

These are the stories produced in that liminal state between shadow and light. These are the possibilities formed out of the shadowy unconscious, and they are open to us, sometimes. We find our dreams illuminated in the thin light of dawn. In the gray, misty, filtered light of dawn, possibility casts no shadow.

And so I find myself in the chase scene that this paper needs, just a couple of days after receiving that gentle but ever-challenging letter that tells me to “revise and resubmit” my paper.

Make it better. Make it more poignant. Make it evocative... tie it all together, make it sing! Most of all, show how it advances scholarship or method or something so that we can publish it, with purpose.

Reading these responses, I am reminded of Laurel Richardson's (2000) call to ethnographers. The ethnographer, according to Richardson, should offer works that make *substantive contributions*, that shimmer with *aesthetic merit*, that rebound in *reflexivity*, that deliver *impact*, that express—poignantly and evocatively—a *reality*.

How can I rise to such a high calling?

I have dreamed a clue....

I stand, and I thank my dream, and I sit down at my keyboard to write these words.

How did my dreams become so magical, so *alchemical*, as C. G. Jung put it? By what transformative magic can our dreams deliver possibility? What new meanings emerge from our dreams? How is any dream a helpful narrative, delivered by Hermes, the messenger god, to illuminate our lives? And what, as one reviewer put it, is at stake here?

In the rich literature focusing on ethnographic method, scholars from Bochner (2001) to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) to Ellis (2004) to Goodall (2000) to Pelias (2004) to Richardson (2000) to Trujillo (2004) have written in various ways of the *nexus* of observation-evocation-imagination-story-heart.

I think we should add another dimension to our growing ethnographic nexus of possibility: Dreamstory.

Let us recall the offerings of the unconscious.

Let us recall that threshold between our conscious and unconscious life-worlds.

Let us recall the signs, the symbols, the missives of Hermes.

Let us recall our dreams....

For in the gray mists of dawn, the shadows begin to fade. If we are to loosen the grip of shadow, we must attend to those betwixt and between moments—those moments on the threshold, when shadow is fading into early light. We must attend to our dreams, for they can be the key that opens the door to a new story.

Dreamstory.

What is at stake here?

For writers and readers of ethnography, the writing of dream blending into story—of the unconscious enriching our consciousness—is a rich, textured nexus of evocative possibility. Dreamstory takes us toward a liminal, shimmering space—a place where, when shadow fades in the mists of dawn, we find new clues to enrich our understanding of this human journey.

For a family shrouded in the shadows of loss, possibility awakens on the threshold. In my dark dream of death, we came to a point where we could bear the pain no longer. So we told a family story. In my dreams of family storytelling, we begin to heal as we *story* light into shadow, as we *story* Despair into Hope, as we *story* Life into Meaning, as we *story* Dream into Daylight.

Story-Door

Today, I asked my father to tell me a story....

He starts talking about his sister, about growing up with Nicky, about how she was a softhearted woman with a quick fiery temper—a real Greek, a contradiction. He tells me that she seemed destined to marry badly, that she smoked too much and drank too much coffee—way too much coffee.

He falls silent for a moment. There is a tear at the corner of his eye.

“She went home that weekend, to see Grandmommy and Pop. She usually went home on weekends, even though it was a long drive. She would stay the whole weekend, helping Grandmommy clean the house. They would work and work and cook and cook. On Sunday afternoon, she would drive home. She would usually call right when she got home. One day, she didn’t call, but I didn’t think anything of it. I was busy. But the next day, she didn’t show up at work. I went over to her place, and knocked and knocked. No answer. So I opened the door, and I knew immediately something was wrong. I called out, ‘Nick? Are you here?’ No answer. So, I don’t know why, but I went to the bathroom first. There she was, lying sprawled over the edge of the tub. The tub was half full, like maybe the last thing she did was turn it off. She was ... gone.”

My dad pauses, unable to speak, overcome by the memory.

Silence returns....

But this time, there is a little light glimmering at the edges of shadow... .

Maybe the story has opened a door ... to new possibility.

Maybe the shadow will lift, if only a little.

Maybe my dreams will fill in the blanks.

Maybe we will dream a new story....

Maybe....

Note

1. Noah always called his great grandfather “Grandpa Lucky”—on the assumption, we gathered, that anyone who lives to be that old must be lucky.

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