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## Writing Down Death

by

Judith Langer

Two weeks before fall classes start, I drop in on Ken Anderson, my dean, to ask him what is going to happen if no one enrolls in either of the classes I am scheduled to teach at the community college. Three days later, he calls to tell me the cluster course Ina and I have spent two semesters developing has been canceled, and do I want to teach two back-to-back Basic Writing courses in addition to the Comp. class, which he is sure will run? I do, even though it will be the third semester in a row that I have to scramble together a course in less than two weeks. This time, though, I promise myself that I won't get sick from stress.

The Thursday before Labor Day, Thomas Kennedy drowned. Nancy calls me at eight, sobbing so wildly that I think her husband has died. It was on the news, she cries, it was on the news. It's Thomas; it has to be Thomas. How many ten-year-old Thomas Kennedys from Boston are there who are visiting in Maryland?

Thomas drowned when a wave came out of the calm sea and knocked him down and the rip tide dragged him out. His father couldn't save him. That is the horror; Jim couldn't save him. Max watched as his father and uncle couldn't stop his brother from drowning. Of course it was Thomas. How many ten-year-old Thomas Kennedys from Boston are there who are visiting in Maryland?

The first day of classes: I find my class lists, I find my classrooms. I give the writing placement test and thank God and the department that I don't have to do anything else for the first class. For the second class, I review my syllabus, which I know well enough to do on pilot. By the second week, I can function enough to teach, although I dream of Thomas drowning.

I know it will be a difficult Basic Writing class even before the papers come in. Arline, an older woman with Crohn's Disease, is constantly, noisily, intrusively sorry for herself. In spite of my determination that I won't get sick this semester, I lose my voice. I go to class anyway because I want to return the first papers and spend the class period writing on the board and whispering to students, "Please tell the class that ..." Arline insists three times that I have to explain the difference between "alot" and "a lot" to her at once, although I whisper to her to wait, as I am getting to it. During my next office hours, she comes to inform me that I shouldn't have come in if I couldn't teach properly.

The first paper from David, a small, shy, hunched boy, is about spending the summer with his two brothers watching his mother die. He wants to be a fireman, so he can save people.

Later that month, Scott calls to tell me that leukemia has finally killed Susie. "I can't hear this now, Scott," I say. "I understand," he says gently, and starts to hang up. "Wait!" I say. "How is Wallace?" "Relieved," he says. "The last two weeks were terribly painful. We couldn't do anything except watch and wait for her to die. This is the first time someone close to me has died. I feel as though Susie were my own sister." You must have led a very sheltered life to reach your late thirties without knowing any dead people, says my head, while my mouth says, "Tell Wallace I love him."

I have conferences with my students after the first paper. I have 75 students enrolled in three classes this semester, so even with allotting class time, office hour time, and making up the time I missed for Jewish holidays, it comes to seven minutes apiece. Steve comes into my office talking frantically about his brother's death three years before in a motorcycle accident, the lawsuit his family has been involved in since, the strain on him from having to give depositions in addition to attending his five classes and working full time. It takes fifteen minutes for him to run down so we can get to his paper.

We got to the memorial service for Thomas at the Cambridge Friends School. Jim's brother-in-law stands up and tells us that he and Jim had done everything possible to save Thomas, that if they had done any more they would not be here. We all know this, I want to say. We know you were taken to the hospital and put on oxygen. Please don't do this. Please, it's too painful.

Marie writes a paper about how her best friend died of a drug overdose after having been paralyzed from the waist down in a car accident. He had seen her through her own overdose and saved her life.

Julie calls to tell me that she cannot come to class. Her boyfriend's best friend had been found dead, and she has to go to the funeral.

Halloween comes and, as usual, I tell my classes about my friend Justin who died in a car accident on Halloween when he was joyriding with friends and throwing pumpkins at houses. I tell them that if they are going out on Halloween to enjoy themselves, but please to stay safe. Justin died 25 years ago, and every year I tell myself it shouldn't matter any more, and every year it still does.

#### MEMO

TO: Ken Anderson  
FROM: Judith Langer  
RE: English 110, section 6

I would like to request combat pay for teaching this semester. One of my students is writing papers about his mother's death from cancer last summer. One is writing about his brother's death in a motorcycle accident. Kerry's brother shot himself and his wife two months ago, and she keeps writing papers about her six-year-old nephew. Another writes about her best friend who died of a drug overdose, while Brian has had three friends die in drunk driving accidents in the past year (one last week). In all, Ken, I have six students writing me about recent deaths. I am not paid for providing psychotherapy, and I am coping with a tragic death myself.

The only relief is that Arline has left the class. She has called to tell me she is ill and cannot make it and will I call her and tell her what she's missed? I call and leave a message telling her the assignment and reminding her that I will not normally call students with assignments; it is up to her, after this, to contact a classmate. I know she will be furious. I duly report this conversation to Donna in Disabilities Services, as we both see LAWSUIT in large letters looming behind Arline. Donna calls her twice, but Arline does not return the calls and does not return to class. We carefully document all of this.

James has been angry at me since the second day of class, when he transferred from another class because he didn't like the teacher. He doesn't like me either. He tells me he has ADHD and dyslexia and went to the Carroll School, if I know what that is. I assure him that I do and go over the procedures for LD students. I know I can do nothing about the anger, which comes from his having been placed in Basic Writing. He writes odd, elusive pieces in sentence fragments, which I keep telling him must be put into clear, coherent sentences so I know that he knows what a sentence is, or he will not pass Basic Writing. He continues to be angry and refuses to correct his errors, something I require of all students because, I tell them, if I correct them, you won't learn.

My daughter says, "Mom, I didn't want to say this to Thomas's mom, but I think maybe God had a reason for Thomas to die. I mean, maybe he would have had a terrible life or something." I say, "I hope you're right, honey," and wish I had her faith.

As usual, half the students never return to Basic Writing after Thanksgiving break. As usual, I wonder if I still have time, now that the class is a reasonable size, to teach the rest of them to write.

James gives me the draft of an essay about a girl drowning. It is in sentences and paragraphs and the tone is so detached that I suspect it was a fiction piece for a creative writing course in high school. I have just enough sense to ask him to come into my office and ask if the story is true. It is, he says, and begins to talk about his girlfriend who drowned in a hotel swimming pool three years ago, and how he thought he had forgotten about her until he began to write this story, and how he realizes he is still angry at her mother for letting her drown. He stands rigid in my office, his eyes swimming, and I listen and wonder what to do, since my impulse is to go over and put my arms around him and hold him. Finally I say gently, "James, you can sit down and cry if you want," and he says, "No." I tell him he may do whatever he wants with the paper: hand it in as it is, revise it, or write something else.

David writes a description of his mother's A.A. medal, and I know I must teach a class on grieving and recovery. I dig out my hospice notes and talk to the person teaching the death and dying class that is done through the computer lab, and I finally go to the town library and xerox the introduction to a book called *Up From Grief*. It was written by two widows who found on their own that recovery goes in cycles, and it contains no jargon at all.

I give the article to my students and let them talk. I speak a little about post traumatic stress disorder and the fact that I think it is a society that has no mechanism to cope with traumatic events that is disordered. David talks about his mother, and Steven talks about his brother. At the end of class, I ask the students either to write their reactions to the reading or to the class or to write what they would do for a friend who needed comforting after a death.

Marie writes:

In class today I felt almost like I was being forced to face something that I didn't want to. I understand that my friend is dead but I push that fact aside. I am afraid of those horrible feelings coming back. Although the class was depressing it was also comforting to hear that it's okay to feel the way I feel and it's okay to take as long as you need, as long as it's not your whole life. Today was a good class.

Steven writes:

As I rush up to the third floor of the CA building to join my Basic Writing class that was already in progress I sat down and joined in a conversation about death. This was not a normal one on one conversation but a class discussion on death. We discussed denial, shock, guilt, the normal steps people go through when you lose someone and as we talked I came to realize that I am still in denial from my brother's accident which happened 4 years ago. And I also realized that what I feel is normal that I am normal the emotions, the pain, the guilt, the loneliness. It is all real and someone out there has been there before me and went through what I'm going through today. And I pray that no one will have to endure the journey of losing a loved one for it is a long painful one.

David writes:

Death is a horrible thing it leaves a space that can never be filled. I have lost three people in my life a friend a grandmother and a Mother. The first two happened and I dealt with those.

But the problem I have is my Mom. My mom was the nicest person. She was a nurse in a hospice unit some patients that came to the wake said she was great because she really cared about them. There was nothing she wouldn't have done for anyone but yet there was nothing that could beat her. She was a wonderful beautiful person. When she died my two brothers and I were at her side we all had said good-bye one by one and were all at her side and we told her we would always help each other and she looked at us and that was the first time I really saw my mother cry and that is what really hurts. Not the loss, just that my mom cried. That is why if there is a god I'll never worship him or forgive him.

During the winter break, I use the money from the third course I didn't expect to teach to take my family to San Juan for four days to do nothing at all but be warm and relax. We have never before taken a vacation with no agenda but to relax. I find I cannot let my daughter go into the sea without being by her side at every minute, and at night I dream of Thomas drowning.