

“What is a Stage but an Invitation?”: Performance as a Method for Grieving

Patrick Santoro

Grief theories provide us with approaches to understanding and coping with death. Perhaps most familiar is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’ five stages of grief: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. More contemporary contributions include Therese A. Rando’s phases constituting her Six Rs of Mourning¹ and J.W. Worden’s Four Tasks of Grieving.² But processing grief is anything but clear cut—messy at best—and though helpful, no theory can assuage the fallout from death, especially when it comes to ambiguous loss. What is clear, however, is that to grieve constructively is to labor: it is work—stages, phases, tasks—without shortcuts. Choreographer Bill T. Jones offers another perspective when asked how he copes with grief: “Locate your passion, find out what you love, and give yourself to it” (249).

Performance—the stage—is a powerful space to process grief. In “The Language of Loss: Grief Therapy as a Process of Meaning Reconstruction,” Robert A. Neimeyer proposes a constructivist theory of grief, beyond “‘brute facts’ themselves” (263), toward a narrative approach: “Like a novel that loses a central character in the middle chapters, the life story disrupted by loss must be reorganized, rewritten, to find a new strand of continuity that bridges the past with the future in an intelligible fashion” (263). For Neimeyer, grief is a meaning-making—storied—endeavor. The same is true of performance as a methodology. Ronald J. Pelias explains a performative “way of knowing” (186):

Patrick Santoro is Associate Professor and Artistic Director of Theatre and Performance Studies at Governors State University.

¹ Rando’s three phases include 1) the avoidance phase (recognizing the loss), 2) the confrontation phase (reacting to the separation, recollecting and re-experiencing the deceased and the relationship, and relinquishing the old attachments to the deceased and the old assumptive world), and 3) the accommodation phase (readjusting to move adaptively into the new world without forgetting the old and reinvesting emotional energy) (43-60).

² Worden’s four tasks are 1) to accept the reality of the loss, 2) process the pain of grief, 3) adjust to a world without the deceased, and 4) find a way to remember the deceased while embarking on the rest of one’s journey through life (41-52).

Whether performers see themselves as participating in order to replicate, construct, or provide alternatives to current constructions, their task remains constant: They are to perform actions that are available for others and for themselves to read. And, in the doing, they come to know how embodiment reifies, insinuates, destabilizes, interrogates, and alters their own and others' ways of seeing the world. (187)

Pelias invokes Dwight Conquergood's work with mimesis (faking), poiesis (making), and kinesis (breaking and remaking), and, in so doing, argues for a constructivist nature of performance. If death is dislocation and grief disorientation, the stage, then, is a location to orient the grieving self in the wake of death.

In *Suicide Punchline*, Jennifer Tuder (re)constructs meaning of her father's death with precision of craft and emotional immediacy. As a written and performed artifact, *Suicide Punchline* is a heightened rhetorical endeavor, "the artful use of language to achieve pragmatic ends" (Neimeyer 264-65). She structures her narrative around tripartite personas—Questioner, Celebrant, and Architect—each representing a perspective of Tuder's loss. Tuder uses visual rhetoric (labeled as such on a file box: "Death, Rhetoric, & Misc.") to express the (dis)embodiment of grief. She enters the stage wearing a black party dress and pearls with yellow dishwashing gloves as she "cleans up" the spill from her father's death. This juxtaposition strikes a resonant chord, as mourning is surreal, complicated (Rando).

Through the Questioner—modeled after Athena and the first character the audience meets—Tuder seeks justice as she searches for the origins of her loss: the impetus for her father's suicide. She asks a series of questions without answers: "Why? Were you sick, in your heart, in your soul? Why couldn't you ask for help?" which beget more unanswered questions: "It was me, wasn't it? It was because I wasn't there, wasn't it? . . . If I had been happier, would you have stayed?" She also questions herself: "What will happen to me? What will I be when I grow up? What will grow up inside of me?" In this haunting, Tuder illustrates the relational nature of grief (Neimeyer 266-67). Death, for Tuder, is not bound up in just her father taking his life, but about the ways in which she (and her family) is affected by his suicide: "a gun, preceded by a few decades of alcoholism and undiagnosed depression."

Tuder makes a place for her father in the audience—a "hostile witness"—designated by a reserved sign on an empty chair in the front row. Neimeyer notes: "It is ironic, perhaps, that the audience for our emerging self-narrative often includes the very person or persons we have lost, as our bond with them is transformed from one based on their physical presence to one predicated on their symbolic participation in our lives" (266-67). Eventually, she sits in the chair herself. As Questioner, Tuder balances absence and presence, entertains ghosts and the living—"Don't you know I can never put you back together again?"—as she grieves across a web of shifting meanings. She embraces the

ghost light that remains her point of connection in a grief of disconnection—illumination amidst the blackout of death.³

The Celebrant, based on Dionysus, removes Tudor from the highly personal inquiry of the Questioner and instead positions her as a suicide socialite of sorts at a cocktail party of excess. Her defenses are up as she uses a variety of distancing tactics, particularly humor. She understands the mechanics of comedy—the punchline: “Suicide is man’s way of telling God, ‘You can’t fire me—I quit.’” She contrasts the hard-and-fast of research with lived experience, demonstrating how grief is part of a larger system of discourse: cultural, subcultural, communal, and familial (Neimeyer 264). Comedy gets critical, however, with her theoretical invocation of Derrida and the pragmatic reality of suicide: “So I am divided. I am a problem. I am what remains. But I am more than my father’s remains, more than these remains. Because I remain.” No matter how much one distances herself from death, Tudor reminds us, there is no escape: “It ebbs and flows, but it doesn’t end. It doesn’t get resolved. . . . surviving is the opposite of solving.” As Celebrant, she challenges myths, complexifies arguments, rewrites the narrative of suicide for herself and others.

Finally, Tudor becomes the Architect: a markedly ambiguous character unlike the others. The Architect is mortal, barefoot, the most firmly rooted in human reality, yet she speaks in heightened language, “strange and ornate,” calling upon ancient texts and mythological stories—a bewildering bereavement. Tudor reveres the power of the almighty gods and goddesses—Questioner and Celebrant—and seeks solace in their wisdom: “Oh small worlds,/Oh little stages,/Take me out of myself/And give me the power of the gods.” *This* is the Underworld: “Here stands tortured David,/And wretched Jennifer, his daughter,/Suffering punishment/Punishment/That cuts both ways.” She finds knowledge among The Trees, voices past of souls who have suicided—her father now among them. As Architect, Tudor shapes—carefully, slowly, stylized—a new dwelling to house her father, another placement in this structure: “Like a richly woven sweater, language is viewed as having a texture that reveals itself to the touch, a partly visible structure that invites further exploration” (Neimeyer 265). Tudor is a rhapsode stitching a song of grief and survival.

Death is a cruel truth; grief is a precarious landscape. Both demand attention. Larry Russell writes: “There are few burdens as powerful as loss. In many ways it is unbearable, yet whatever we do, we must find a way to incorporate it” (36). In *Suicide Punchline*, Tudor does just that: incorporates the loss of her father. Invoking performance—“What is a Stage but an Invitation?”—Tudor stages a personal grief that “reifies, insinuates, destabilizes, interrogates, and alters”

³ The rhetorically inclusive Questioner’s ‘you’ becomes a unique strategy that functions not just as questions Tudor asks of her father and herself, but questions, whether intended or not, she asks of us—the witnessing audience—and our own lives, our own (past and future) losses.

(Pelias). She laments hopelessness, but not without hope. She contemplates endings, but not without beginnings. *Suicide Punchline* is a compelling and complex act of re-envisioning death—performing survival—but grief is ever a process, always transforming. Tudor knows well “this work of mourning is never finished,” the work of re-remembering is never done.

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