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Visions of Intergenerational Grief Work as Education for Liberation

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ABSTRACT

There is no teaching and learning untouched by grief, and any classroom concerned with love must also be concerned with loss. Education for liberation requires the study, struggle, and praxis of grief. In the spirit of communion with the reader, we each offer story—along with our own analysis of how we understand the importance of story—as an invitation to encourage our readers to conjure their own stories and analyses of grief. Our process of writing included virtual healing sessions where we engaged in intimate inquiry to explore and share our own grief, each other's grief, our shared and distinct experiences, and how we each think about and experience grief as a liberatory teacher. These sessions were recorded, transcribed, and collectively analyzed for the emerging themes: The value and necessity of intergenerational villages of grief healing, the *relations* within these villages, and grief work as education for liberation.

Keywords: grief, humanizing education, liberation, healing, educators, social justice

Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion.
~bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions*

We three offer this piece in the spirit of communion with you, its reader. As you join us in the space of these few pages, we know you do not arrive alone. You are here with those you are grieving: those who came before and endured to make you possible; those you mourn and miss; those with whom you share some past chapter of life in a way that changed the arc of the future generations of your story. We welcome you—and all who arrive with you—with love and tender grace. Thank you for being here with us, and for bringing your people.

We know that this, too, is how young people arrive at classroom doors. These toddlers, children, teenagers, and young adults come to school as individuals but carry with them the collective strength, spirit, sorrow, and trauma of their past, present, and future grief villages. We see one, but they arrive as many. *As educators, what are the visions of love and grace we can conjure to recognize, invite, and welcome all who arrive at our classroom door with our students?* This is the question that guides our offering here.

Because we recognize that all people are part of past and future lineages, we also recognize that we are all bereaved. Though we tend only to recognize grief in those recently and acutely affected by loss, all lives and bodies are imbued with grief because no lineage touched by love is untouched by loss. How the grief of loss is tended to—whether it has opportunity for expression, how it is understood and metabolized, whether it is welcomed in healing acts of communion—has deep and lasting impacts on future generations of lives and bodies. Untended loss seeds and feeds harm. This is why we commit ourselves, as educators, to grief work; the work of grieving is the work of creating more sustainable, well, and free futures.

Educators, by necessity, are concerned with these futures. We offer the preciousness of our own lives in service to young people because we believe in the futures they make possible for all of us. Abolitionist educators, in particular, are concerned with creating free futures—futures in which no human being is caged or discarded. *Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators* (2021) is an education organizing project that we collaborated on over several years that offers snapshots of liberatory education that challenge logics of carcerality, including the idea that there is ever such a thing as a *throwaway person*. Abolitionist educators believe in the sacred and immeasurable value of life. For this reason, abolitionist educators must make it their business to tend to grief, including their own (Anderson, 2022; Devich-Cyril, 2021; Cariaga, 2023; Poole et al., 2022; Pour-Khorshid, 2022). An educational space must recognize, honor, and mourn the dead if it claims to be a space concerned with the preciousness of life. To recognize the dead is to uplift, again and again, the idea that no person can ever be erased or made invisible.

Guided by this core belief that there can be no abolitionist education for liberation without tending to grief, in this piece, we each offer story—along with our own analysis of how we understand the importance of the story—as a way to encourage our readers to conjure their own stories and analyses. Speaking from our own experiences of death-related grief, as well as our perspectives as people committed to educational spaces of healing for young people and educators alike, we offer liberatory visions of the kind of intergenerational grief work that might seed and feed abolitionist futures.

Our Own Intergenerational Village and Process of Writing

Our team of authors is itself a tiny intergenerational healing village. Farima and Carla, both teachers of young children and scholars of education, first came to know and love each other through the Education for Liberation Network—a national coalition of educators, organizers, and human beings committed to the teaching and learning of freedom. We quickly became chosen sisters. Kaliyah, Farima's niece—who is now a 20-year-old double major in Ethnic Studies and Gender and Women Studies, and a poet, activist, daughter, friend, and everyday healer—became an extraordinarily beloved niece of Carla's through this extended relation of chosen family.

We arrive at writing together and being together with our ancestral villages beside us, mourning the deaths of many beloved members of our families. These include Mazyar "Mike" Pour-Khorshid, Jr., Farima's brother, and Kaliyah's uncle, Thomas Nikundiwe, Carla's partner, Farima's chosen older brother, and Kaliyah's elder mentor; and many more ancestors that've invited us into grief praxis spanning childhood to adulthood. These painful and traumatic losses draw us into healing communion with one another, and writing together offers an opportunity to invite *you* into communion with us in the ways the three of us have already practiced our own intergenerational relations of healing and grief praxis.

METHODOLOGY

Our methodology was rooted in a collective and shared intimate inquiry (Laura, 2016) qualitative research approach, "organized around three activities: witnessing, engaging, and laboring with and for the individuals whose lives our educational work aims to shape" (p. 32), including each other's. This qualitative approach was first developed by Crystal Laura (2011), who wrote her dissertation, *Bad Boy: My Baby Brother and the Social Ecology of Difference*, about her younger brother who was incarcerated (). Laura (2013) explained that intimate inquiry is rooted in *love as data* and that "writing as testimony—an incomplete account of events—is a considerable part of carrying out this task. The narrative becomes a vehicle through which we come to know other people and ourselves by implication; it reflects not merely a distant other but the social relations in our own environment" (p. 290). As co-researchers, our pre-existing intimate relationships situated in mutual trust, love, vulnerability, and grief created the conditions to engage this collective intimate inquiry process; without these factors, the emotional depth and safety required for this qualitative method could not have been possible (Borg, 2022).

Our collective intimate inquiry evolved through four healing sessions via Zoom, each lasting about 3 hours or longer. In every session the three of us curated time and space for bearing and baring witness as pedagogy (Wilcox, 2021) as we processed our own grief, each other's grief, our shared and distinct experiences, and how we each think about and experience grief as a liberatory teacher in our lives. There were no structured agendas, each session evolved from critical and healing centered dialogues about how we were regularly honoring our grief both in real-time and in reflection of past experiences. For example, in one session, Kaliyah Zoomed in from

her car while she was already visiting her Tío Mike at the cemetery. This opened the opportunity for Kaliyah and Farima to share with Carla how Mike's friends sometimes leave bottles, poured out in his honor, around his grave—markers of their communion with him. In another session, Kaliyah participated from her Tío Mike's old bedroom, which had since been transformed into his memorial room (see Figure 1), and Carla was blessed with a video tour of the precious, heartbreaking items he left behind. These sessions were painful, beautiful, easeful, brutal, and lovely. We imagine that these are the characteristics of all grief praxis spaces and wonder whether classrooms and schools can hold them. We believe they must.

Figure 1: Tío Mike's old bedroom repurposed now as his memorial room and Kaliyah's guest room when she is visiting from college

These sessions were recorded and transcribed, and then Farima brought initial emerging themes to Carla and Kaliyah for reactions and thoughts. Those themes evolved through collective analysis and became the narrative threads that guide each intimate testimony.

A Weaving of Narrative Threads

By way of navigating these narratives, Kaliyah's offering—a description of how we learn from our ancestors and from grief rites and rituals, from the firsthand perspective of a young person—invites educators to wonder how primary source texts can be reframed as ancestral archives. Kaliyah's reflections create space to wonder how artifacts left behind by the dead become teaching archives for the living. She invites us to consider how framing them that way allows us to not only learn from those who came before us but to grieve and mourn them into a future made better by their lessons and legacies.

Following Kaliyah, Farima moves across time and space—from home to school, from her inner child *Baby Fari* to *adult inner teacher Ms. Farima*, from teaching to organizing—to offer lessons about the need to grieve *intergenerationally and interspiritually*. She shines a particular light on the need to invite children into collective grieving as a way to heal our own inner children; as a way to heal other

grieving children; and as a way to model the value we place on the preciousness of life and legacy. Like Kaliyah, Farima offers readers lessons learned directly from both adult and child ancestors. What futures do our ancestors help us make possible?

Finally, Carla's reflections bring us directly into an elementary school, providing snapshots of daily grief work by both teachers and children that further support Farima's hope that we might learn to recognize the reciprocal, symbiotic healing of children and adults together.

Collectively, we invite readers to consider what hooks (1999) reminded us: none of us heal in isolation, and healing is an act of communion. We heal in intergenerational villages that include the living *and the dead*; our adult selves and our own inner children; young children and elders. Schools can and must be one place in which these grief villages are intentionally and lovingly cultivated, and in which ancestral archives are the liberatory texts that invite us to consider who and what we want to leave behind for those who will follow.

Ancestral Archives as Learning Texts, Cemeteries and Funerals as Classrooms: Kaliyah's Reflections

> *I just wanna be the one cheering at the finish line ready to lift you on my shoulders*. ~–Tío Mike

I was born out of grief. Aren't we all? Grief feels like it's been part of my divine assignment before I arrived on this earth and Maya Angelou taught me, "I come as one, but I stand as 10,000."

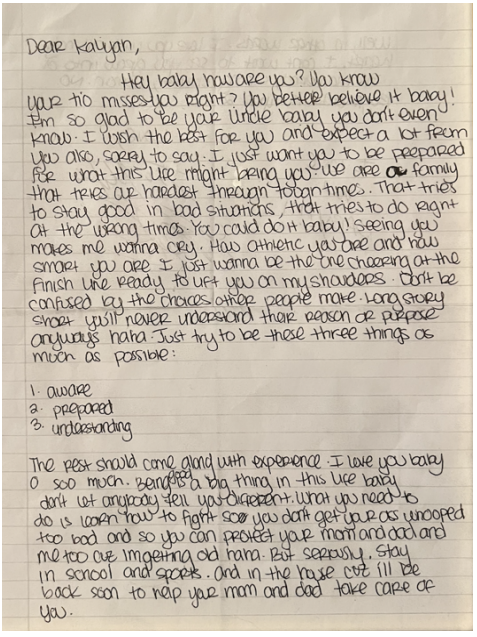
I was in my mother's belly as my maternal great-grandmother was dying and met me spiritually in her dreams during her last days of life. She loved me before I was even born; I came into this world two months after she passed away. I was only two years old when my paternal Grammy died; she loved me passionately before she transitioned, and the pictures of her embrace still fill me with her spirit. I was ten years old when my Tío Mike died, and the love we shared was so deep that it continues to teach me every day (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Kaliyah as a little girl with her Tío Mike

Grief has taught me about the importance of *ancestral archives*. I've learned to collect the stories of my people while they are still here so that their lives can keep teaching others long after they are no longer living. The pictures, cards, notebooks, music, clothes, jewelry, and videos are some of the ancestral artifacts that I call upon to be with the lessons from people I have loved and lost in this lifetime. These ancestral archives keep their spirit alive to stay connected to them; they are a grounding place to remember who they were/are, what they meant and still mean to me, and why it all matters.

In the moments when I am in need of inspiration, I look to ancestral archives: Imagine if we had nothing from the legendary Maya Angelou? None of her writings, no recordings of her speeches, no photos of her, or any other artifacts that keep on teaching us and those that come after us about her. How could we keep passing on her wisdom? How would we call upon her sacred energy and lessons? Every person knows someone legendary that they have lost in their own life that they still have so much to learn from.

In my darkest grief moments, I turn to my ancestral archives to find light: I re-read a letter that my Tío Mike wrote to me when I was only four years old (see Figure 3) and his words are timeless. I play his rap that he left behind and his voice becomes medicine for my broken heart. I look at his pictures because his smile is infectious. Ancestral artifacts remind me that his spirit lives in remembrance and our love can never die.



Dear Kaliyah,

Hey baby how are you? You know your tio misses you right? You better believe it baby! I'm so glad to be your Uncle baby you don't even know. I wish the best for you and expect a lot from you also, sorry to say. I just want you to be prepared for what this life might bring you. We are one family that tries our hardest through tough times. That tries to stay good in bad situations, that tries to do right at the wrong times. You could do it baby! Seeing you makes me wanna cry. How athletic you are and how smart you are I just wanna be the one cheering at the finish like ready to lift you on my shoulders. Don't be confused by the choices other people make. Long story short you'll never understand their reason or purpose anyways haha. Just try to be these three things as much as possible:

1. aware
2. prepared
3. understanding

The rest should come along with experience. I love you baby so much. Bengals a big thing in this life baby don't let anybody tell you different. What you need to do is learn how to fight so you don't get your ass whooped too bad and so you can protect your mom and dad and me too cuz I'm getting old haha. But seriously. Stay in school and sports. And in the house cuz I'll be back soon to help your mom and dad take care of you.

Figure 3: A handwritten letter from Tío Mike to Kaliyah

When grief visits me, I reflect: How am I keeping my Tío Mike's name and spirit alive? How can I honor the life he lived while he was here?

Ancestral archives allow those we are grieving to continue being our teachers, especially after death. A central part of my Tío Mike's living legacy was teaching me about tending to our gardens of family and community. He taught me how to be present for the young people that surround us because it truly does take a village to raise a child. He was and still is an important teacher in my grief village. Even though school never created space for me to grieve for him, I made space to commune with him in spirit and he's taught me so much more than I could have ever learned in a classroom. He still teaches me about the power of spirit: the energy you walk into a room with can transform spaces and people, and our energy can establish connections that can live on long after we stop living. The energy you exchange with people can be impactful in ways you might never know about but will transform us anyway.

The way Tío Mike approached life inquisitively in the writings he left behind taught me to do the same after he died—to always ask questions inside and outside of classrooms. To make life my classroom. My teacher. To remember that I am always a student, to speak up, ask for help, and help others. He taught me to be fearless about what I believe in, but more importantly, for what is *just.* I remember the moments when he would help me with homework or friend problems with so much patience and child-like understanding. He was affectionate with me and always gave me hugs and kisses. I needed to learn that affection from men in my life but only he knew how to teach that. He took me everywhere with him, bragging about me to his friends, and showering me with affirmations—he adored me and I adored him, too.

Tío Mike lived life as a narrator as he taught me the whys of his actions and decisions. His storytelling taught me how to value community and make decisions with them in mind but to also have a mind of my own. He taught me about the importance of also finding peace in being alone sometimes—standing in my solitude—to develop strong, firm, and confident boundaries and to never move from a place of lack, or a need for validation. His actions taught me about lovingly walking away from people, places, and things that were no longer in alignment. In his life and in his death, he showed me to take the lessons I need from each of my experiences, move forward with a renewed lens, and not repeat lessons that I've already learned.

Most of the lessons I learn from my ancestral archives are in the little things: When he'd take me to basketball practice, how he'd keep his word or tell me how much he loved me, how he'd talk to me like a whole person, when he'd ask me what I thought about things or how I felt, when he'd take time to listen and dig deeper beyond the surface. I'm now learning that the little things aren't so little after all—he taught me about love.

When Tío Mike died, my family and I would go to the cemetery and transform the space into an outdoor intergenerational classroom. We'd lay on blankets, play his album, have picnics, and share stories about him. I always feel comfort going to a place where I know he lies; connected by the same ground, I feel his energy and imagine standing on his shoulders through the soil. There is learning, clarity, and cleansing that happens when I am at the cemetery. I'm blown away by the reality that while I am here on Earth, a planet in the middle of an entire galaxy, just one small

piece of the vastness of existence, Tío Mike, Grammy, *Abuelita*, Grandpa, and other ancestors are in another part of existence that I haven't experienced yet but that I and so many others eventually will. I've mastered the lesson that tomorrow is never promised.

We've recently experienced more deaths in our family, so we've been spending a lot of time at cemeteries lately. When I think of every funeral and celebration of life I've gone to, I learn so much about the people who've died through the ancestral archives that I wouldn't have learned from otherwise. Young people, elders, family, friends, and community all teach us something about the person who's died. These moments teach me a lesson about giving people their flowers while they're still alive instead of waiting until their funeral. Grief teaches me to love freely and generously, and it can even decenter anger and resentment with its invitation to love deeper. I've learned that there is liberation in that kind of love, a love that sometimes can only be learned through loss.

As a future ancestor, I choose to honor life as an act of love. To be a future ancestor means that I have a responsibility to live like my legacy depends on it. Whose lives am I touching? How am I serving? What lessons am I passing on to future generations? What am I leaving behind for others to learn with and from?

I want to live into a legacy of love that is worthy of remembrance, the kind of love that can be learned through ancestral archives that I am leaving behind.

Intergenerational and Interspiritual Grief Villages of Liberation: Farima's Reflections

Writing poetry was a sacred practice I shared alongside my brother Mike before he died. He was a lyricist; his rap artistry was impressive for his age and he knew that he had a gift with words because he was on borrowed time. He talked about it constantly. He knew his words would outlive him and I hated every time he said it. He and I shared a sacred ritual of walking up the steep hill of my alma mater: we'd work out together, sit on the bleachers overlooking a beautiful Bay Area view, and end with a sibling writing session. When he died, I revisited those memories constantly and the thought of that ritual in his absence felt hollow and incomplete. I threw myself into work to hide from my grief.

Two years after my brother's death my kindergarten student passed away after she moved on to first grade. As her former teacher I didn't have bereavement time because I was not part of her immediate family. The school system could not acknowledge this child as my chosen kin. Anytime she'd see me from down the hallway or across the yard, she always ran screaming towards me like I was a celebrity—"It's MS. FARIMAAAAAAA!" When she transitioned to the ancestral realm, grief made it difficult for me to teach in my classroom, the work addiction that once held me through grief suddenly died too. And yet, there weren't enough personal or sick days in the world to honor the needs of the emergent grief that was slowly erupting. I stood in my classroom staring at the "student love" artifacts that she left for me. She was an artist and drew incredible portraits of us together. Drawing pictures of us was her love language and I kept every single drawing like a true teacher-hoarder and habitual griever does (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: A drawing and love note from Margaret to Farima

I could hear her voice in the corner of the classroom where she often pretended to be teaching. I could see her little hands holding the teacher's pointer and smiling from ear to ear. How symbolic it was for her to use her free time to roleplay teaching—and at that very moment, her spirit was teaching me how to be present with my grief—ironically while being systemically disembodied from it in our classroom.

I had planned to join an organizing meeting with Carla's partner, Thomas, but I broke down. Some might say it was an anxiety attack, but I believe it was ancestral intervention. I had collapsed on the colorful ABC carpet and wept like a child with an *ouchie*, but this one was deep in my soul. I struggled to breathe. I became overwhelmed with the pent-up tears stuck in my throat. I visualized myself drowning alongside my students carrying the same oceans to school with them in their superhero backpacks. Navigating grief while trying to survive schooling felt mutual.

As a child I learned that grief wasn't safe to be present with at school or at home. I remember when my father was murdered, my kindergarten teacher punished my dysregulation with elementary citations and time-outs. I don't think she ever even realized I was grieving. At home I watched adults transform into children when death arrived: the tantrums and invisible friends that they'd call on for help, the moments they needed to be fed and held, and the shaming and punishment from other elders that forcefully silenced grief just like my teacher would at school. I think the space between young and old shrinks as grief democratizes our need to metabolize pain together. And, I've learned how colonialism, whether at school or beyond it, exploits our bodies and denies us the dignity to grieve in order to survive extractive capitalism. Systems of domination create literal and spiritual borders in our mourning, but my younger self longed for bridges to grieve together.

We recently watched the recording of my brother's funeral, something we do from time to time as a family. There was a moment when his casket was being lowered into the grave and I watched my ten-year-old niece, Kaliyah, cry beside us as we wept and wailed. Kaliyah's younger self intuitively knew how to grieve *with* us—she rubbed our backs and wiped our tears while she wiped her own and wept alongside us.

There was a moment of mutual mourning that made me emotional as I remembered how my younger self was not allowed to grieve with adults and instead was sent away to play with other kids. I imagine sending kids off to play instead of grieving alongside adults is intended to protect a child-like innocence. But to witness my niece have permission to grieve *with us* was healing for my inner child, *Baby Fari*, who yearned for belonging in a sacred village of grief that she thought had an age requirement for entry. In fact, she still yearns for grief communion despite knowing it is beyond the capacity of the elders in her life. Maybe this is why the youngest parts of me always reached out to my ancestral village—the invisible angels and God that *Baby Fari* leaned on while processing grief the best way that she knew how.

To deny children of mourning without their consent is dehumanizing. Young people deserve the right to grieve alongside adults that they love—what some may fear as grief leading to breakdowns can be the breakthroughs that our families, communities, and nations need to become more fully human. Kaliyah didn't know it then, and neither did I, but now I understand that every time she allowed herself to break in her grief, she gifted my inner child the belonging that she searched for in the grief village that *Baby Fari* had once been denied. My inner child's grief felt seen and held by Kaliyah's ten-year-old self, and now by her 20-year-old self, because every iteration of our becoming has come to (un)learn how to navigate grief together.

When I think of the ways that some of the people I love have numbed their grief, hidden from it, weaponized it, or buried it deep down into their nervous systems, I feel somatic relief when I witness my niece experience the freedom to break and weep in our presence, a sacred invitation into her grief village that I do not take for granted. There's an ancestral element that exudes in her cries: each wail carries lost histories, as well as the present, and the future healing that breaks cycles and leads to newfound legacies of liberation. Children have so much to teach us—including our own inner children that need our attention and loving re-grieving. There is a sacred intergenerational and interspiritual village of grief that patiently awaits us, a village where we can find the medicine we need to heal the hyper-individualism, adultism, and shame related to grieving.

I've learned so much about the liberatory power of practicing grief in village. To grieve in village is to be present with our beloved teachers from all walks of life and realms. My grief village has consisted of teachers who could be found in my dreams and prayers, in my classrooms and living rooms, in protests and cemeteries, and even from strangers who became my teachers when grieving publicly through the virtual ethers—because sometimes that's the only way we can grieve in village.

I want to circle back to Thomas, my honorary brother and comrade, who followed up with me after missing that organizing call because of my grief breakdown/breakthrough in my classroom. T, as we lovingly referred to him, valued relationships deeply. It wasn't uncommon for him to check on us as fellow Education

for Liberation Network board members, but I think he tended to check up on me a little more often as I was navigating grief while working toward a PhD, teaching kindergarten, and organizing locally and nationally. We grew a stronger bond through mutual grief when our comrade and fellow board member we loved and organized with, Antonio Nieves Martinez, died tragically. We were devastated and processed the grief together when he stayed at my house to attend Antonio's services. It was the first time I witnessed T cry, we looked at pictures together (see Figure 5), I had taken so many over the years. I explained that death and grief led to the evolution of my s*elfie documentarian archival praxis*. I have lost so many loved ones that documenting moments together is both my love language and my grief in action. When T shared that he was diagnosed with terminal cancer, I wept and felt shame because I wanted to be strong for him and when I expressed that to him, he shared he wanted to be strong for me/us, too. I had never experienced anticipatory grief of a close friend; I knew sudden and unexpected grief all too well, but to slowly lose a loved one was new grieving territory for me. I couldn't make sense of what it meant to grieve someone when they were still living but I wanted to desperately honor his life before he left this world.

Figure 5: Farima with Antonio and Thomas

Anyone who knew T knew that he loved learning from and with young people. So, it made sense that as he was dying one of the last projects that he wanted to see through in his last year of life was Liberation 101: a summer experience where young people would lead other young people in social justice learning and teaching. I remember when he called me about it, it was clear that this project was about his vision of education for liberation: intergenerational organizing and teaching led by

and for youth but supported by loving adult co-conspirators willing to learn from them. Since he knew he didn't have much time left among the living, he was strategic in starting with youth that inspired him, and my niece Kaliyah was the first high school student he recruited for Liberation 101 (see Figure 6).

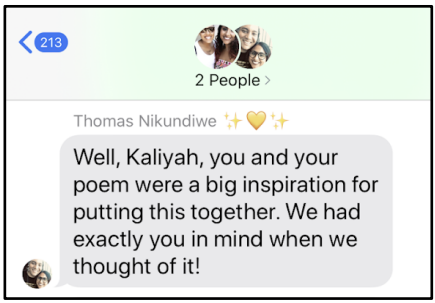


Figure 6: Screenshot of a text exchange between Thomas and Kaliyah

It brings me to tears when I think about how much Kaliyah and I loved co-facilitating Liberation 101, and T was so proud of us. Grief, I came to learn, could encompass more than what I thought was possible. In this sense, grief wasn't always debilitating, sometimes it could move you into profound action. When he became an ancestor a year after this summer experience, my niece and I entered into another intergenerational grief communion, this time for T. His memorial also invited me into intergenerational grief as I sat and watched youth and elders alike share stories, perform raps and poems, pray, and share short stories of moments that captured lessons from T's life and legacy—each of these moments transformed me and everyone else in that intergenerational public classroom.

When we understand grief work as an intergenerational, interspiritual, and interspatial abolitionist project, how might our pedagogy and praxis change shape? What can our inner children, ancestors, higher powers, and spirit teach us about honoring grief as internal and external forms of education for liberation? What might it look like to honor grief as a sacred site of humanization and transformation?

On Blizzards, Penguins, and Witness: Carla's Reflections

On a chaotic Monday morning in the first-grade classroom in Detroit, a first-year teacher is working to transition the kids from their desk work to the rug for their opening circle. My job is to offer embedded, real-time support and coaching to our new teachers during their first three years on the job. Placing me full-time at the school is a unique and too-rare university commitment to the profession of teaching, signaling the belief that new teachers need and deserve ongoing love, encouragement, and skill-building throughout their early careers in order to feel successful enough, sustained enough, and skilled enough to keep going.

On this day, the kids are even more rowdy than usual and it is taking forever to gather and settle them. It's only mid-September, and this new teacher is still finding

her stride. I'm seated on the floor alongside the kids already dutifully complying. I turn to the boy next to me in the circle, Zion[1], passing the time until we begin. "How was your weekend?" I ask.

"We went to the cemetery to visit my brother. It was his birthday. We got a cake from Dairy Queen and then went home to eat it."

There are moments that freeze time and I marvel at my brain for the number of thoughts it can process in rapid succession during mere seconds.

First, a flood of questions:

How did he die? Was he younger? Older?
What does Zion need from my response?
Why did he tell me this so early in the school year, in this moment of morning chaos?
Is this why he occasionally seems in another world, quiet and removed?
Is this why he is quick to tears?
What do I want to model for this new teacher?
What do I want the children listening around us to hear me say in reply?
Did the universe place me right here with this 6 year-old grieving baby on purpose?

The start of this school year followed a summer in which our own family finally got to memorialize the life of my partner, Thomas, whom we had lost to a rare cancer on July 4, 2021. He died before children could be vaccinated against COVID, and we didn't want to hold a large service that might risk the wellbeing of our loved ones and their little ones. So we waited a year to gather our community, and I started school still very raw from a beautiful, painful summer of finally marking his death and remembering and celebrating his life (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: A section from the ancestral altar honoring Thomas in Carla's home

[1] I use pseudonyms for all the children to protect their anonymity.

My brain becomes fixated on one detail of Zion's telling. Thomas had a sweet tooth, and Heath Blizzards from Dairy Queen were his #1 favorite guilty pleasure. On one of the last nights in which he was still eating, Dairy Queen released a Thin Mint Girl Scout Cookie Blizzard. A brand new flavor. I couldn't bear the idea of him dying without ever trying it. I grabbed him an itty-bitty mini-size, though in his healthy days he could polish off a large one before we even got home. My brain conjures this image and memory, all so quickly as to still happen in the impossibly short space of time between this child's expression of loss and my need to respond to it.

I move closer to him so that my arm is just gently placed against his. "Was it a Heath Blizzard cake?" I ask.

"No. Oreo."

"Did you light candles and make wishes?"

"Yes. One candle. He was a baby but he didn't get to turn 1."

"What is his name?" I ask.

We chat for 2 minutes or so until everyone has finally settled. I learn the details of the death without ever directly asking. When it's time to hush and we are cut short, I say, "We can miss and remember him together. OK?"

Fast forward to mid-October. A girl is weeping in the calm corner of this same classroom. "I miss my grandma! I never even got to meet her!"

I am genuinely confused. "You never met your grandma?" I confirm.

"No! It's so unfair!"

"But why are you thinking about her right now, today? What happened?"

"I don't know!" She is annoyed with me.

Now another child wanders over, predictably, because she is the well-established caretaker of all crying people.

"What is it?!" she asks.

"I miss my grandma!"

"Oh is she dead now?" Matter of fact. No chill.

"YES! I never even got to meet her."

"Oh. My dog died, too." And she sits next to her classmate, gently snuggling her. The scene is getting attention and the children are all gathering to exchange their death stories and tears. In my 20+ years as an educator, I have visited hundreds of classrooms. Never have I seen so many children crying at once. It is as if some unknown pain has been held in sealed boxes deep inside their little bodies, just waiting for any invitation for communal release. It is an overwhelming, clearly embodied, collective, explosive and ambiguous grief. The teacher looks at me with a "what now?" panicked look in her eyes.

I shrug. Of course I have some ideas (kind of; not really), but she is learning and I'd like to see what she decides to do.

"OK. Let's all circle up," she says with authority. They share their losses as she holds space as best as she can. Clearly a novice, but with so much genuine love, and trying to just fumble through and figure things out as she goes. I make sure to sit next to Zion, arm against arm. This has become our "I'm right here" signal on the frequent occasions in which I sense a potential painful trigger. But there is only one of me, and clearly *lots* of grief. The children will need to learn to be the "I'm right here" person for each other. I start to wonder how to teach them.

Lunchtime is approaching, so the teacher takes them through a breathing exercise and tries her best to exude a healing calm so they can transition. She does great. I am so proud of her.

* * *

Weeks pass. In early winter, as we inch along toward the desperately needed holiday break, Zion and I are headed to the school's reading room to take one of our regular quiet breaks. These short times away from the classroom are built fluidly into his weeks just to offset the stress and noise a bit, and the reading room is peaceful, bright, and warm. On this occasion, we are joined by Damien, a fellow classmate. Damien has consistently struggled with the behavioral demands of school, and frequently opts out by simply leaving the classroom or making himself impossible within it.

We had spent months learning the kinds of supports and accommodations that helped Damien feel safe and calm enough to persist throughout the school day. One of these supports came in the form of JJ,a stuffed penguin to whom Damien had become deeply attached. JJ is Damien's anchor. Wherever there is Damien, there is JJ. The kids know that though JJ once belonged to the classroom, he now belongs to Damien. They recognize and can clearly articulate the calming effect the penguin has on him, and how much his behavior has improved since growing his relationship to JJ. Perhaps for this reason, though they tend to otherwise fight over highly desired objects, nobody ever tries to mess with JJ. If he goes missing for even a short time, everyone understands this to be a crisis and drops whatever they are doing to help find him.

After reading a book with Zion, Damien, and JJ, I remember a short, animated complement to the text and pull my phone from my back pocket to play it for them. "Who is that?" Damien asks, noticing the wallpaper on my phone, a photo of me and Thomas and his two sons, on the couch together on Christmas morning the year of his initial diagnosis. Christmas was once more approaching, our second without Thomas. The back-to-back winter holidays are always a particularly brutal season for grief, and the photo helps me stay afloat. "Those are my stepsons, and that's Thomas, my partner." I answer.

"You never said you was married to a boyfriend or this… manfriend," Zion chimes in, pointing to Thomas, curious now, and enjoying the drama of the line between my professional and private lives being crossed. He is studying the photo with wide eyes and a big grin, like some juicy secret has been accidentally revealed.

"Our family lost him," I say. "He got cancer and after being sick for a few years, he died."

The space between us, quiet for just a moment, feels surprisingly awkward. Despite all the talk of grief and death between us for months, this new information seems to be upsetting. Maybe I had waited too long to tell him we were connected through this shared firsthand experience. But it always felt like saying it would somehow steal the precious space we had created for his own healing.

Zion starts to softly cry. He curls up on one of the soft library chairs, sculpted especially for little bodies to lay on, and weeps.

I put my hand on his back and tell him it's good to cry. We are here for it. The release is a cleanse. Words keep leaving my mouth even though I know he doesn't need them. I know he needs us to just be with him, quietly and in still witness, but for some reason my instinct is to keep blurting words. I suspect it was to keep myself from crying. Damien is looking a combination of concerned but unsure. He is carefully watching my moves, and observing the futility of my words.

"Here," he says, and places JJ in position to cuddle Zion, letting go of his own anchor to keep his friend afloat. Zion squeezes the penguin, and the tears begin to slow their flow.

* * *

One final fast forward, to the first day back to school after a two-week winter break. I find Amira, Zion's kindergarten sister, being tended to in the hallway by one of our paraprofessionals. She is refusing to go into her classroom, finding the transition back overwhelming and impossible. "I want to go home and lay down," she keeps saying.

Grief is many things. Among them, grief is a lens. A griever recognizes a griever. Because of my newly and painfully acquired grief lens, I can see that Amira's hesitation isn't just school avoidance, or defiance, or kindergarten transition issues, or fatigue, or homesickness. It is maybe some or all of these things, but it is also grief. My body immediately recognizes what is happening in hers; the sheer exhaustion of even just the thought of having to face a very high-demand 8-hour day. A day where she will have to concentrate and work, act like a normal person and not cry, be up and about instead of curled up safely at home in the protective cocoon of her family. "I've got her," I say. And though she and I are not yet in relationship and we have never taken a break together before, I begin walking her down to the reading room. She is holding my hand, trusting, and tired.

En route, we unsurprisingly pass Damien and JJ; unsurprising because here he is opting out of the classroom before it's even 8:45 a.m, starting his usual wandering around the hallway. No easy transition back to school for him, either. "Oh no," he says, seeing Amira crying, and knowing her to be Zion's sister. The "oh no" isn't generous, or soft, or sad in tone. It's more of a slightly annoyed, shaking-his-head type of "oh no." He knows what he sees. Four months of school days made of each other—of first-graders and their adults circling up, breathing, talking, taking breaks, holding space, and sharing tears—have made him capable of knowing grief when he sees it. He has acquired the grief lens without firsthand experience with this particular trauma. His grief lens is acquired through empathy, through proximity to grief, through village, through witness.

"Here," he says, shoving JJ the penguin into my hand. "Bring him back when she's done with him." And he returns to class.

* * *

I began this school year expecting to do the work of healing children, and feeling like my own firsthand experience with the indescribable pain of grief would be of

service to me in that effort. What I am learning instead is that the children and I are healing each other. Grief dismantles hierarchies of authority between adults and children. Thomas believed deeply in young people as teachers, so I know the universe aligned to remind me of what he always knew. The children and I are making and holding intergenerational space that is multidirectional, symbiotic, and horizontal in the relations of power. It is messy and unpredictable. I think that may be all there is in grief as a liberatory teacher: fumbling, connection, and witness. Breaks and breathing and Blizzards. Softness, slowness, and space.

CLOSING LESSONS

Learning to make and hold space for grief is liberation in practice. It is a form of knowledge, and a type of skill, that cannot be acquired from books or lesson plans. A curriculum of grief is learned through witness, through practice, through village. Recognizing, naming, expressing, and metabolizing grief—in ourselves and in each other—can best be practiced in intergenerational relationship, and classrooms offer an opportunity for that practice.

The reflections above use grief as itself a source of teaching and learning to advance two key understandings about the nature of the relationships between grief, schooling, and freedom.

First: the traditional "texts" we use in schools must be expanded and reframed to leverage ancestral archives and artifacts as primary source texts from which the dead can continue to serve as our teachers. When we read the works and words of the deceased, let us name them as ancestral archives, and let us invite young people to engage their own familial archives as part of the classroom canon. Kaliyah seamlessly weaves together the wisdom and teachings of Maya Angelou and her Tío Mike in her writing. May all young people be invited to learn to do so.

Second: grief work is an opportunity for schools to challenge bereavement policies and the hierarchical power relationships between adults and children that too often plague them with struggles for authority that create harm, conflict, and toxicity for educators and students alike. Solidarity, empathy, and connection are seeded and fed when grief is understood as the responsibility and the work of the intergenerational village. Children become teachers; adults heal their inner children; and the words and works of the ancestors become the archival texts through which they teach on.

Because we believe in education *for* liberation and education *as* liberation, we hope to move educators away from understanding the process of grief as only private and individual, and instead toward recognizing the act of grieving as a form of collective, intergenerational public pedagogy that warrants a place in school. And as abolitionists committed to dismantling carcerality, public grief is a reminder of the preciousness of life and an antidote to the culture of disposability that perversely justifies the grotesque violence of policing and prisons. Can schools act as grief villages? As abolitionist educators committed to free futures, we believe they can, and that they must.

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