UNBRAIDING

REFLECTIONS ON WIDOWHOOD

SUSAN STRASSER

strasser@udel.edu
www.susanstrasser.net

CONTENTS

PREFACE: THE PERSONAL, MADE PUBLIC.....2

BRAIDING

US.....5
BOB.....10
ME.....15
THE BRAID.....19
SHADOWS ON THE SPHINX.....21

GRIEVING

STAGES OF GRIEF.....24
SITTING SHIVA.....26
CRYING TIME.....28
LEANING INTO THE PAIN.....30
CONDOLENCE NOTES.....31
ROCK CREEK CEMETERY.....32
EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE.....35
LABYRINTHS AND MAZES.....36
SLOW AND FAST.....38
GRATITUDE.....40

WIDOWHOOD

THE FELLOWSHIP OF WIDOWED PEOPLE.....43
THE WORK OF THE WIDOW.....45
BLUE CHEESE AND OLIVES.....50
COLONOSCOPY. FIRE ON THE TRACKS.....52
RUMINATION.....54

BUSY BEING BORN

KINTSUGI.....57
THE MAPLE TREE.....58
DAYS OF BOB.....60
FERNS ON THE LOCKSCREEN.....61
RECOVERY.....63
THE GOLDEN BACHELORETTE.....64
METABOLIZING.....67
NOT KNOWING.....69

AFTERWORDS

A YAWP.....72
SEE ALSO.....73
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....75

PREFACE:
THE PERSONAL, MADE PUBLIC

On July 10, 2023, my husband Bob Guldin died, drowning after a hypoglycemic episode in a public swimming pool. I was expecting him to come home for dinner.

Since the night I found Bob nearly dead in the Washington Hospital Center ER, I've tried to stay reality-based. This accords with my longtime habits: I'm not a reader of genre fiction, I don't spend much time fantasizing. And I've been learning to reckon with the reality of death over more than twenty years of reading and listening to Buddhist teachings and pursuing an intermittent meditation practice, becoming Buddhist-adjacent without calling myself a Buddhist.

Not that I've liked my reality since Bob died. I have wailed and bawled precisely about not wanting the reality I have, just plain not wanting him to be dead. I didn't want him dead that first night; I didn't want him dead eight months later, when I began to draft this essay after signing our final joint tax return; and I don't want him dead now.

I've kept journals on and off since childhood, but for many months after Bob's death, I didn't write at all. What was going on in my head seemed far from anything I might want to record, much less share. For somebody who has long depended on writing to find out what I think, this was a long exile from the page. Bob's death, and Bob himself, now dwelt more in the realm of feeling than of thinking. Everything I did think about him or us or me seemed as true as all the other possibilities, no matter how wildly contradictory.

I eventually started writing again by enrolling in Megan Devine's online "Writing Your Grief" course, which I cried my way through. Later, when I decided to create something for others to read, I had to find a voice for the personal made public, something I've only tried seriously once before, in a piece about getting assaulted in Rock Creek Park, which happened a few months before I met Bob. One huge difference between that essay and this writing, I discovered when it came time to send these pages to friends who had offered to comment on a draft, is that I loved Bob and didn't love my assailant. I could care less what the guy who beat me up might think about my description of our encounter. I do care what Bob would think about this. I imagine there are parts he would not like, or would not like my making public. I have struggled with the fear that I am betraying him. I have persisted in hopes of formulating something difficult and true for myself, a memoir of this time, and a piece to offer to others, a contribution to a literature about partner loss that has been important to me as a reader.

Grieving is ordinary. Everywhere, every day, mourning people walk among us. Becoming suddenly single and trying to envision a daily life and a future in a Bob-less world has been a challenge enhanced and informed, if not made any easier, by my understanding that so many other people have gone through something like this. I have learned much and taken much heart from the accounts others have offered about their own experiences. Longstanding friends widowed before me – Cristy from my high school group and Bethany, Judy and Deborah from college -- have become sources of a kind of wisdom I never knew I would be seeking. Members of my partner loss support group have helped me see both my idiosyncrasies and my ordinariness. My pre-Bob housemate Loretta, widowed twice, and my neighbor Ashley, widowed many years ago at a young age, came to visit during my first week, each telling a story uncannily like my own and helping to lift a veil of guilt and remorse. Women I am newly meeting whose husbands died years ago seem eager to offer me heartening news of the road up ahead. And writers I will never know have taught me much; I've named some names in the essays, and listed more below in "See Also."

Grieving is singular, too, and the specifics of mine have had everything to do with the particulars of the three strands braided in my title -- me and Bob and our marriage. Bob's death has turned out to be far more complex and challenging for me to grieve than the deaths of my parents, my older sister, and the three very close friends who have died so far. I lived with nobody else over such a long time. I never gave so much of my heart or had so many conscious hopes for any other relationship. And now it is over, suddenly, in its wake a relationship not with Bob Guldin but with my memories of him and of us, with my imagination of him, with my grief, and with my ruminations about all of it.

No matter how well I write them, I know these essays will have less meaning to those who have not, or not yet, lived with this particular hole in their hearts. Not long after Bob died, I ran into a man who lives up the hill, whose wife had died a couple of months earlier than Bob. I rolled my eyes when he asked me how I was. "I had no idea," I said. "How could you have?" he said kindly.

Takoma Park, Maryland
October, 2025

BRAIDING

US



Bob and I were together for more than thirty-three years. We met, we used to say, "in a magazine." Bob, a magazine editor for much of his career, took particular delight in this phrase. Here's our story, as I told it in the program for his memorial:

> *In 1989, Bob placed an ad in The Nation that brought him Susie Strasser; they married in 1992. Together, they discussed innumerable films and marched in countless demonstrations, soaked in springs from Breitenbush to Baden-Baden, explored antiquities from Malta to Machu Picchu, hosted dozens of Thanksgivings, and delighted in their friends and family.*

I thought I'd given up on looking for love in the classifieds. I'd had some dismal experiences in Seattle, but when I moved to Washington, D.C. in 1988, I tried again. I had one date with an actuary, a Mensa member who took me to Duke Zeibert's, a legendary Farragut Square lobbyist bar. That same bleak weekend, I had coffee in a hippie café in Takoma Park with a stringy-haired man so unattractive I didn't want to look at him. Both seemed like decent people looking for love, but they were not for me. I swore off the ads.

If Bob hadn't gone for the multiple insertions deal, I would never have responded. But I was a *Nation* subscriber, and though I passed on it the first time, the ad showed up twice more.

> ***MARXIST-HEDONIST SWJM, 42****, enjoys kids, camping, Graham Greene, Brecht, Truffaut, old and new rock, seeks partner to create committed relationship, family. Box 13302, Silver Spring, MD 20911-3302.*

This was, I used to tell people, targeted marketing, a description that delighted me, a historian of consumer culture. ("What does that mean?" my 11-year-old great-niece whispered to me when somebody quoted "Marxist-Hedonist" at the memorial and the grownups laughed. "I'll tell you later," I said, and I did try when she asked again as we walked to the reception. She had not yet heard of Karl Marx, so I didn't get very far before we arrived at the food table.)

Bob and I moved fast for the first three years. Eight months after we met, we rented a sweet cottage with a spiral staircase, on a forested lot above Sligo Creek Park. When a slate-roofed house in the neighborhood went up for sale, we talked about buying it. The next year, we became joint tenant owners of a different house, a small stucco Dutch Colonial in Washington's leafy left-wing suburb, Takoma Park, Maryland. I still live there.

I was forty-one and Bob had just turned forty-three when we met. Neither of us expected to marry. We were both steeped in radical and feminist ideas, and had both experienced "committed relationships" that had not led to marriage. Neither of us assumed that "family" required state sanction. Our friends and relations had long given up on expecting weddings. Three years before Bob put the ad in the *Nation*, a highly publicized study from Harvard and Yale had suggested that our statistical odds were slim, mine especially. White women college graduates still single at 30 had only a 20% chance of ever marrying, and for those over 40 like myself, the chance was 1 per cent. Reporting on the study, *Newsweek* said we were more likely to be killed by terrorists, something Americans could apparently joke about then. By 1989 when Bob and I met, the figures were being disputed by Census Bureau statisticians, who said it was bad, but not that dire.

We were late for having babies, but we met at the right time for us. We used to laugh about how incompatible we would have been had we met during our many years in the Pacific Northwest. He had been a hippie in Eugene, working at a day care center and an early recycling business, hanging with Jesus freaks and country communards and Rainbow Gathering types. I saw myself then as a serious radical and feminist, and didn't have much truck with hippies and freaks. Now I understand that Eugene was one of the few places — Berkeley also qualifies, and a few other college towns — where those categories commingled. But I was not in any of those places.

Which of us first said the M-word? When? After we moved in together, the story I told myself was that I wasn't necessarily interested in marriage but wanted a deeper level of intimacy, and was coming to believe that the only way to get there with Bob

was to marry him. That may have been true. But probably it was my most reliable route to greater intimacy, too, setting this affair apart from the others I'd had, including eight years with one partner during college and graduate school in the late 1960s and early 1970s, an era not noted for lengthy monogamy, at least in my circles.

We were both working at George Washington University, where I had served on a committee with a wise rabbi and professor, Max Ticktin. Bob and I went to see him, to ask if Max would marry us and perhaps hoping for some pastoral counsel. He wanted to know how we were raised, and whether we were observant Jews. We certainly identified as Jews – Bob had even put that "J" in his ad. We both knew some Yiddish words and phrases; we both made excellent chicken soup. Bob had no history of observance, not even a bar mitzvah. I had attended a Reform temple as a child but had not pursued Jewish life beyond Chanukah menorahs and Seders with friends. Max told us he'd be glad to marry us, but he didn't think we needed him or anybody else. He encouraged us to go to Rockville, the county seat, for the legalities, and to gather our community, invite all those surprised skeptics, and make a commitment to each other in their presence.

Rockville was so uneventful that neither of us could ever remember the date of our legal anniversary. We celebrated May 9, the date we said vows in the backyard garden of the house I had lived in when we met, with Loretta and her husband Tedd and their housemate Stanley. Bob and I made mixtapes for the gathering time, the eating time, the dancing time. Guests congregated around the pond. A friend had suggested that we say what would make us feel married, and Judaism notwithstanding, we both turned to the Book of Common Prayer. I began my homemade vows with "Dearly Beloved," and repeated the phrase several times – dearly beloved backpacking companions and dearly beloved cousins, etc. Bob said the for better/for worse part. Till death do us part.

My decades-long friend Paul, a stellar cook and party maestro, brought many pounds of salmon from the Pike Place Market in Seattle and orchestrated a feast. The cake was chocolate, with chocolate frosting, in both of our opinions the best kind of cake. Little brides and grooms, in different gender combinations, paraded around the layers. "Make Love Not War" from Bob's already substantial button collection sat on top, along with a tiny electric mixer, representing our domesticity and my historical work. The next day the out-of-towners gathered in our backyard, and the day after that we flew to Rome, for three weeks of art and antiquities, pasta and espresso, traveling by train to Naples and Pompeii, the Amalfi Coast, Florence, San Gimignano, Siena, Pisa, Cinque Terre, Portofino, and flying home from Milan.

During the following decades we created something together from those films and Thanksgivings and protests and hot springs and relics from previous civilizations. Verbally playful, we shared countless private tropes and pet names. He looked at me with such loving eyes that many people have commented on it. We hosted great parties, perhaps most memorably a borscht and vodka sendoff for Bob's three months in Russia. We traveled well together, and saw a lot.

But we were not joined at the hip. Bob would charge across the street like the New Yorker he was, leaving me standing on the curb waiting for the light to change. (Now I

try to channel him when I get impatient with the wait.) We spent months apart, more than once. I commuted away from home for two or three nights a week during the school year for sixteen years. We had many separate friends.

We didn't have kids of our own, but we did have family. After Bob's mother started having medical crises in the Flatbush apartment where he had grown up, we moved her to a Jewish retirement community eleven miles away from us. Until she died in 1999, Bob took her to dinner and a movie most Sundays. Rose was eager to forego the Kosher meals and eat Chinese shrimp and pork; she was game for any movie, no matter how much sex or gore, and cheerful about not understanding "Fargo" and "The Truman Show." I usually went with him, or skipped the drive and met them at the theater. Rose, who was diabetic, doled out Dove candies during the show -- milk chocolate for Bob, dark for me.

Twelve years after she died, my nephew Jed and his wife Nazgol moved to Washington and made us a new local family. Their daughters Asha and Taba still have a room in our house; they love the swing that hangs from a tree in the backyard, the hammock on the screened porch, the popcorn I make with coconut oil for the movies we watch when they stay overnight. Bob and I sang "Dona Dona" and "Erie Canal" and "Down By the Riverside" at bedtime. We hosted Camp SusBaba one week every summer, and one year we took Asha to see the actual Erie Canal, visiting the Corning glass demonstrations and the Cornell botanic gardens, and eating at Moosewood. Covid shut us down, but only for a few months until online school came to our house three days a week. For more than a year, the four of them were Bob's and my only IRL company. Not a bad pandemic story.

We went through some difficult eras. Separately and together, we dabbled in anger and resentment, toyed with what we hoped were minor betrayals, dipped into intransigence. Many of our differences were rooted in the gendered stereotypes we'd grown up with and had both committed ourselves to struggle against. Others were rooted in ideas we had about ourselves as individuals, ideas that had developed robustly in two people who, until our forties, never went so far with anybody as to marry them.

For all our stubborn independence and our willful expressions of it, we were a "we," for a very long time. What are we having for dinner? Should we buy a new toaster oven? Let's go to Malta, or Medellin, or that new restaurant. Wanna watch a movie tonight? How will we pay for the driveway repair? What will become of us?

We had no models. Bob could see that his parents were on their way to divorce before he was a teenager. My mother was disabled physically and mentally by multiple sclerosis. I adored my father, though I came to see that he lived in a stew of denial and determination; he did his best, but his best was not good enough. None of these parents related to their partners with generosity or compassion, let alone both.

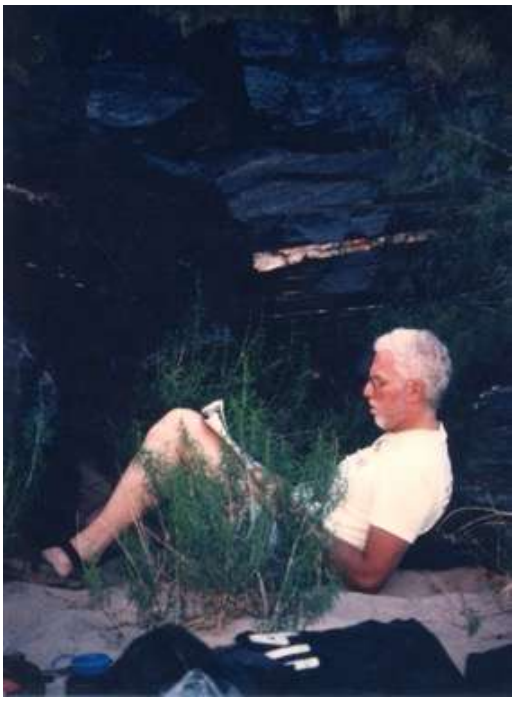
But we had ideals, many of which we had learned in the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s. I had been a high school activist, guided by Quakers and the civil rights movement to nonviolent struggles for justice and against war. Feminist consciousness-raising helped me connect the personal with the political, and like most

women of my generation, I was accustomed to doing without models, all of us making it up as we went along. I could count on Bob to participate attentively in serious conversations about our relationship, thanks to good lessons from previous feminist girlfriends and groups that taught him radical techniques of criticism and self-criticism. We both believed in seeking help when we couldn't work things through on our own, and over the years found two caring and perceptive therapists who got us through some sticky places.

Coming back from our first big road trip, to the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec, we stopped at L.L. Bean, where Bob bought a green fleece jacket. I already had a fleece in pretty much the same color, and I didn't want to be one of those couples in matching jackets. I asked him to pick a different color. He bought the jacket he wanted. I valued my expression of independence more than I liked my jacket, so I gave it away when I got home, though I'd always liked it and I didn't sit easy with getting rid of a usable fleece. Bob valued his expression of independence more than he liked surrendering to me.

Bob's green jacket was pretty ratty by the end of his life. He wore it around the house; his circulation had gotten worse and he was cold a lot of the time. I bought him a new fleece (not green) for his birthday, three days before he died. A few weeks later, I returned it to REI.

BOB



More from the memorial program:

> *Bob cared about good food, loyalty in friendship, peace and justice, the global environment, grammar and punctuation, fondue, interesting film and theater, swimming, Russian poetry, rock 'n' roll, river rafting and camping, biking, the people he loved, and, of course, buttons.*

By the end of the service, I was shaking my head about how great everybody made Bob out to be. Even in my grief I could offer examples both positive and negative of nearly any quality — kindness or the lack of it, generosity or stinginess. But there was no negativity at the memorial. People raved about qualities I had learned to accept but didn't particularly admire. A few speakers mentioned his stubbornness, but the whole time could have been filled with entertaining tales about what we both called his Bobness: an unaccommodating insistence on doing his own thing, his own way, sometimes in a manner sufficiently original and wry to come out loveable. "He had his own style and was very persistent in a good way," wrote an activist who knew him through Montgomery County climate politics.

He had no other faults that anybody complained of in their eulogies. What a wonderful guy. Over the next few days, I felt guilty and self-critical. Had I appreciated

him enough? Was I too hard on him? Friends assured me that everybody is more complicated to their partners than they sound in the funeral orations.

"Wonderful guy" is, of course, how we speak of the dead. I remember shaking my head more than a decade before at how my sister Judy had become a saint in her dying. We all admired how she handled terminal illness. When she lost her voice because her vocal cords were paralyzed by tumors, she began a blog that many people followed over the next fourteen months. When the time came to call hospice, she made that call herself, before inviting me and her sons and our partners to gather round for a few days of laughter, Wisconsin winter sunshine, string quartets, and little speeches she'd prepared for each of us. It was an extraordinary death, but she was no saint. Like most little sisters, I have a bill of particulars, though I rarely consult it now, instead helping to construct a positive portrait for her grandchildren, who will never meet her.

Bob was no saint, either. Early on, he warned me that he was lazy and selfish, critiques he had heard from those feminist girlfriends, but I didn't believe it because he had been neither lazy nor selfish in pursuing me. "Every love relationship," writes Milan Kundera in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, "is based upon unwritten conventions rashly agreed upon by the lovers during the first weeks of their love. On the one hand, they are living a sort of dream; on the other, without realizing it, they are drawing up the fine print of their contracts like the most hard-nosed of lawyers. O lovers! Be wary during those perilous first days! If you serve the other party breakfast in bed, you will be obliged to continue same in perpetuity or face charges of animosity and treason!"

He did turn out to be lazy and selfish, but not as much as some other people, nor as much as he sometimes claimed, and not in all arenas. He used these adjectives as cover, frequently taking the position that our essential characters are fixed, and people cannot change. No amount of therapy or meditation or self-flagellation or discipline on his part would alter his essential laziness and selfishness. And therefore, if he didn't want to do something, I would just have to put up with it. Unsurprisingly, I didn't always agree.

He was rarely lazy about political activism. He took seriously the calligraphed quotation near his desk, from the first century rabbi Tarfon, "It is not incumbent on you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." We courted each other with stories about demonstrations and meetings. I had picketed Woolworth's as a teenager, in support of the civil rights movement's lunch counter sit-ins; he had done anti-apartheid work when he lived in Eugene; we had both organized demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. Together we stood with neighbors at a monthly vigil against the war in Iraq. Without me, he led campaigns on Takoma Park issues, playing David against the Goliath of CVS, for example, in a group that succeeded in keeping a highway-style blinking electric sign off our tree-lined streets. Alone, he opposed a hiker-biker trail along Sligo Creek, since even those who shared his belief that the asphalted path would damage the creek bed wanted to walk and bike without car traffic.

During Bob's final months, as doctors struggled to identify the pathogen that took his left eye, he slept a lot but continued to spend hours at his desk. I had no idea what

he was doing – his climate work, he called it, transacted mostly on Zoom, where I figured he was getting away with the mental equivalent of wearing pajama bottoms to the meeting. After his death, eavesdropping on the group emails where his climate comrades shared their shock and grief, I found out I was wrong. "I am heartbroken about Bob's death," wrote a man I did not know. "He was a fellow climate activist who walked, biked and wrote the talk. Bob brought a sense of humor, passion, persistence, provocation, impatience, and considerable talent to our collective efforts." He detailed the public service announcements Bob had created for a weekly show on WOWD, Takoma Park's hyperlocal FM and internet radio station. "Without Bob," he concluded, "we are all going to have to work harder. Let's step up our activities and dedicate them to Bob."

All of this is known to others besides me. There's much that nobody else knows, especially about his health. Bob struggled with depression for most of our time together, he was declining physically for many years before he died, and he was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment during the Covid pandemic. He had numerous chronic conditions — seriously uncontrolled diabetes, a mild case of ankylosing spondylitis (a kind of rheumatoid arthritis), asthma, high blood pressure and cholesterol, severe osteoarthritis in his knees, eczema, sleep apnea that he refused to treat with a bulky mask and a noisy machine. A cough and respiratory thing went on for three or four years in his 70s, despite many rounds of antibiotics and two sinus procedures. The retinas in each of his eyes had detached more than once, he had glaucoma, and a few months before he died, his left eye got infected and stopped seeing forever. Our medicine cabinet held jumbo bottles of all the over-the-counter painkillers -- aspirin and Aleve and ibuprofen and acetaminophen -- and Bob took them for more aches and pains than I know how to catalogue. I did know to tell ER doctors and EMTs that he had no immunoglobulin A, and though I don't know much about what that means, I believe that deficiency made him vulnerable to pathogens and contributed to some of the long series of infections he suffered during his last decade.

But suffering wasn't his style. He prided himself on toughness, and did his best to show only his biker/swimmer side. I'm the one who heard his complaints and saw the sores on his feet. For years before he died, I worried about Bob every day — that he would get hurt when he fell (as frequently he did), that he would crash the car (as eventually he did), that something terrible had happened to him when he was late (also eventually true, the night he died).

In February 2023, Bob contracted a serious, mysterious illness. At first he thought his left retina was detaching again, and went to see his specialist, Dr. Fadi Nasrallah, whom he had once quoted in the *Washington Post*, in a health section article about his first detachment. Nasrallah diagnosed the problem as not a detachment but some systemic infection. The case was complicated. Bob was 76, he had many underlying conditions, the bloodwork showed contradictory markers. Nasrallah and our primary care doctor were very much on the case. Over the next few months, Bob and I saw them several times a week. He spent three days in the hospital, and a dozen hours in the ER of a different hospital, getting IV meds. Hospital doctors opined, but nobody knew what

was what. The docs talked with each other, they argued. They tested his blood and took cultures and scans. After many weeks, they found a pathogen – a bacterium called *pseudomonas*, especially bad for people with compromised immune systems. With the correct antibiotic, Bob became notably more himself by late April. But he continued to be bothered by other sores and infections, and lived only a couple of months longer, permanently blind in one eye.

Before those months of infection, we were not the kind of old couple who attend each other's medical appointments, unless the patient was under anesthesia. But Bob's ability to think and function was drastically reduced by illness, stress, drugs, fear, and pain. We both knew he couldn't keep track of appointments or medications or doctors' instructions. He had stopped driving after crashing the car months before, he was in no shape to take the metro, and he needed me to pay attention at the appointments. Nasrallah changed the eye drop and antibiotic regimen several times a week; I took notes and made charts for what to take and do when. Bob snarled at me if I seemed to be trying to oversee the actual administration of the drops, and he would not let me put his other daily medications on the chart. The Bob I had known for thirty-three years was not a snarler. But he felt weak, and he hated it.

Because he was taking so many steroids as well as antibiotics, his blood sugar was especially hard to control. The numbers were alarmingly high and alarmingly low, day after day. He seesawed between telling me the details and keeping them to himself. One night during the *pseudomonas* recovery phase, he woke me up, thrashing and moaning. "Bob," I said over and over, shaking him. No response. I called 911, and by the time they got to us, he had thrashed his way to the floor, wedged between the bed and the wall. The medic diagnosed low sugar and hooked him up to an IV, a bag of glucose solution that one of the five large men crowding our bedroom held up like the Statue of Liberty, until Bob returned to reality, dazed and confused.

During his last three weeks, once at home and once on Capitol Hill, I watched him again turn into a zombie. He didn't thrash or fall down those times, but he was unresponsive, literally out of his mind. Both times, I managed to bring him back with sugar. These episodes were terrifying for me, but he was not conscious, and when he came to, he didn't want to talk about my terror or his. I told him I didn't think he should be left alone, but that I understood he was not about to live that way.

We had both witnessed, he more closely than I, his mother's dramatic diabetes; she had many of these episodes, and an amputated toe. But Bob was never willing to let anybody tell him what to eat, and when he was first diagnosed, he had declared his intent to be treated with insulin and other drugs rather than have to think about his diet beyond using artificial sweetener. I discerned pretty quickly that trying to monitor my diabetic spouse's food would be a sure road to divorce, so for years I paid as little attention as possible, stopped buying and eating jam, kept my chocolate in my purse. Bob pricked his finger daily to test and keep track of his blood sugar and, at the end, he wore a continuous glucose monitor connected to an iPhone app. Eventually, trying to get serious about his diet, he enrolled in a Zoom "boot camp" with a diabetes nurse/educator named Amy, who promoted processed diet foods available at Target

and couldn't help him figure out how an old hippie might now buy food at the coop and the farmer's market.

He was recklessly greedy for sweetness. This, of course, brought me great pleasure on the days when we were both greedy for it. But it wasn't just metaphorically true. The man had sweetness in his mouth most of the day. He drank sweetened coffee all morning, Coke Zero all afternoon and evening. He chewed Trident. And for most of the time I knew him, he indulged himself with treats. During the nineties, when for eight years he edited the George Washington University alumni magazine, he went to Au Bon Pain every afternoon for a blueberry muffin. When I paid his final credit card bill, I saw he was still at it, stopping at Bethesda Bagel or at Dolcezza for gelato every time he visited the physical therapist.

I have shed many tears remembering Bob's suffering and complaining during his final six months. He didn't take good enough care of himself and he didn't want to be taken care of by anybody else, especially me. He got angry at me for trying, no matter what tack I took. For years he had insisted that he was in charge of his body and ignored my argument that his ailments affected my life. I didn't expect him to change. When I tried to get him to talk about it, he refused, saying he didn't want to be pitied. And in that, he was utterly himself, insisting above all else on his autonomy. I was constantly worried, and I was also angry, and I have shed many tears about that, too.

During our early years, we had come to realize that every time one of us was about to leave for awhile, somebody picked a fight, making the departure both easier and harder. Once we understood that, we both worked to tamp it down, and our comings and goings became just part of our life together, no longer cause for pushing each other away. Now, though he had no clear-cut diagnosis of a fatal disease, Bob was in the process of leaving bigtime. I knew he was dying, though I couldn't say it in so many words and had no idea what the end would look like. I imagine that he knew it, too. And much as I'd like to have had deep and intimate conversation about it, we pushed each other away.

We got nowhere near the level of suffering that many couples experience over many years. I did not lose myself, nor did I completely lose him. Even at the end, after he got over the worst of the *pseudomonas* infection, Bob could offer thought-provoking comments about politics, films, or interpersonal conundrums. He was sometimes making dinner again, and when he had favors to ask or household matters to discuss, he was back to writing me little notes with cartoon characters shaped like hearts with faces, sometimes with feet. But it had been a long time since he'd been a reliable partner, and I knew we would encounter more crises. I missed the "we" I'd had.

***

The first night I met Bob, I wanted to put my head in his lap. I didn't do it, but the impulse suggests that I experienced him as trustworthy from the start. I also remember times when I didn't trust him, and how hard his decline was on both of us. Still, I want him back. Couldn't he at least come by long enough to say goodbye?

ME

On September 9, 1989, when I met the man from *The Nation* for dinner at the Machu Picchu restaurant on Piney Branch Road, I was hungry for love and weary of being single. It had been sixteen years since Tim, my college and graduate school boyfriend. I'd had some dates, some flings, a bit of exciting sex, two unserious boyfriends who each lasted a few years, many celibate stretches. I lived alone or with housemates. Now, as I had written to Box 13302 in my best calligraphy, "committed relationship is on my agenda." I'd gone on to address other things the guy mentioned in his ad: "Camping galore. Old and new rock indeed." I summed myself up: "I do Tai Chi, like nearly anything once, prefer ethnic food, don't do well with boredom or routine. Have great (red) hair." I no longer do Tai Chi, and henna now keeps my hair red. I'm more cautious about doing some things even once, but I still like camping and don't do much better with boredom than I did then.

During those sixteen years, ages twenty-five to forty-one, most of the women I knew had kids. At around thirty, I thought seriously about having one by myself. I was teaching at The Evergreen State College, a Washington State experiment in interdisciplinary learning and team teaching, and a community where I could have had a child by myself without stigma. I decided that doing it alone was too hard.

I knew more than most childless women about taking care of babies and toddlers. When I was seven and Judy eleven, as our mother sank into dysfunction, we had begun taking on adult responsibilities. I changed my much younger sisters' diapers and gave them bottles of Similac, a powder I mixed with water to make their formula. As they grew, I sang them lullabies and helped them get ready for school. I didn't want to have kids alone, even in a supportive community.

For those sixteen years before Bob, I had no relationships with men I would have wanted as fathers for my children. Did I simply not meet likely candidates? I don't remember any. And much as I longed for love and connection, I wasn't looking for somebody to marry. I had stopped imagining diamond rings and white gowns by the time I was a teenage beatnik with black turtlenecks and long hair. Over the next decades I had enlisted in a feminism that produced new ideas about sex and love and partnership, one of a generation of American women who were rewriting the marriage plot.

Marriage to Bob became possible because, from the start, we encouraged each other's independence. He soon went to Russia, first for a few weeks, later for three months; I took his mother to the movies on those Sundays. When I went to London for an academic appointment, he came to help me explore my new neighborhood, equidistant from the Tube stops for posh Holland Park and lively Shepherd's Bush. "There's no crying in baseball," he said as he headed back to Washington and I began a

teary goodbye. He helped me settle in again when I went to Berlin six years later. I loved being on my own there as a married woman, an invisible thread attaching me to Bob across the ocean. I was part of a "we," I wasn't looking for something I didn't have, my something just wasn't here.

I pulled the thread in when I retired from sixteen years of commuting to teach at the University of Delaware during the school years. I liked being a married woman at home, too. I thrived on the normalcy of it -- our screened back porch, the egg toss contest at the neighborhood 4th of July potluck, the babies in our downtown family turning into toddlers. I had a glorious workspace, a backyard writing studio built with money that Judy had left me. We took two more international trips, experiencing the real Machu Picchu and the famous hot springs at Karlovy Vary and Marianske Lazne, which used to be called Carlsbad and Marienbad. And we adjusted pretty well to the enforced companionship of Covid, especially once we bubbled with that downtown family, our great-nieces and their parents.

Meanwhile Bob's physical and cognitive health declined. I was intimate with that decline, so his death was a shock but not a surprise to me. As I experienced the surprise of others, I came to understand that for some time, his energy had been going towards keeping up his public persona. Me, he took for granted; it's one of the perks of marriage.

But it's also one of the dangers. I didn't like being taken for granted. Of course, it is blindingly obvious to me now that there's a lot that I, too, took for granted about being part of a "we" — routines for eating and sleeping and paying the bills, a sidekick for evening plans or weekend or summer ones, somebody to join me on the couch for a movie.

I served as Bob's caregiver for short periods over the years, and at the end for a couple of months, during the *pseudomonas* infection. He relied on me to take him to the doctors, to make the medicine charts, to take over the cooking and shopping and household tasks. Within a few weeks I was seriously fried, making mistakes and bad decisions, like the time I fought the morning rush to take Bob to see Nasrallah downtown when the doctor was, and we were supposed to be, at the suburban Maryland office. As Bob got better, I started getting better, too. But he had lost an eye, and he soon had those terrifying hypoglycemic attacks.

I could never manage to help him with the completely open heart and willingness to serve that I held as an ideal. For more than twenty years, I had been trying to apply Buddhist teachings to my life, striving for qualities like generosity, patience, and wisdom. I know that the *bodhisattva* ideal is aspirational, I believe that the striving did make me a better caregiver, and I see that I was up against both Bob's resistance and the emotional residue of my own childhood. But it still makes me sad.

I had grown up with chronic illness. My mother's MS was the worst kind, incapacitating her mentally and emotionally as well as physically, inexorably getting worse with every passing month and year, with no remissions that I remember. MS often takes years to diagnose, it is frequently linked with severe depression, and therapies and resources now available to patients were not to be had in the 1950s and

1960s. I do not know how much my mother was capable of caring for me as an infant or a toddler, but when I learned of her diagnosis at age eight, I understood it to mean that her mothering was over. Over the next twelve years, she sat in a chair, leafing through magazines; in an era before Depends, she peed in that chair and our house smelled of it. Judy and I made dinners and changed diapers and wheeled the clothes to the laundromat when the machine was broken, as it frequently was. Our father cooked, too, and tried to provide care and fun and intellectual stimulation despite it all. He told us we could go away for college if we could get scholarships.

Hard childhoods don't necessarily build strength, but they can. By ninth grade, I was doing much of the cooking, my younger sisters still needed help, and Judy was about to leave. In my diary, I calculated how many years and months and days and hours and minutes and seconds it would be until I, too, graduated from high school and could start a new life. I learned I could put up with a difficult day-to-day as long as I knew when it would end. This knowledge later served me well in setting deadlines for myself as I pursued a career of teaching and writing. It enabled me to become reliable and competent, committed to trying to do my best even when it's hard. Facing difficult realities as a child, I learned to make it up as I went along even before the women's movement brought me together with other women doing so.

"I will help you to grow old, and I will help you to stay young," I promised Bob at our wedding. His father had advanced Alzheimer's, and Bob talked about suicide if he were diagnosed with it, to end his own suffering and to spare me what his stepmother had gone through. In getting involved with him, I understood that I was promising to risk another encounter with chronic illness, and that it could be an opportunity for an adult me to find another way to survive that encounter besides counting days until ... what? Decades later, I could see that the only ending dates were Bob's death or mine. I wasn't counting days, but I also didn't find another way that felt good.

I got angry as Bob declined, less at him than at his/our/my situation, though of course he didn't experience it that way. As he experienced more pain and more forgetfulness, he became a less dependable partner. I felt abandoned, feelings set in motion in my early life with a disabled mother. I wanted a companion who wouldn't fall asleep in the middle of things, who wasn't so often passive in ways I'd not seen before. And I wanted him to take care of his diabetes, much as I understood that I couldn't make him eat better. Mostly, I hated knowing that unless I got hit by a bus, things would only get worse until they ended in Bob's death. I wanted something to change before it would become time for me, too, to die, and I couldn't stand the fact that logically, this meant wanting his demise.

***

Writing in the publisher's sales catalog about C.S. Lewis's memoir of his wife's death, *A Grief Observed,* T. S. Eliot commended it particularly to "those who have suffered in this way and have thought, as well as felt, while they suffered." OK, T. S., I'm that reader, and now, that writer. I've suffered from a spouse's death and I've been thinking the whole time.

I have thought especially about how much greater this suffering has been than from my previous experiences of grief. As in so many aspects of this ordeal, I am not alone in my surprise at how hard this is. Memoirist Abigail Thomas, whose husband spent seven years in a nursing home with traumatic brain injury, writes that she was prepared for sadness when he died, but not for the clobbering grief that eventually hit her, bringing both memories of the man she had been married to before his accident and a deep understanding of the space he had continued to occupy in her life even after he had become somebody else.

I, too, have watched death bringing all the Bobs into focus. I hope I can invite them all – the man from *The Nation*; the 50-year-old in my favorite portrait, sitting at the bottom of the Grand Canyon reading a two-week old *New York Times*; the dying patient in the ER; the guy eulogized at the memorial service; even the intransigent Bob -- to help me incorporate the confidence that a long partnership confers. I don't forget the hard parts and I don't want to sentimentalize the past. But for more than three decades, I had love, and I want to rest in that knowledge.

THE BRAID



Jim Dine, *Braid*, etching, 1972
Whitney Museum of American Art

We unbraid from the bottom. The last strands entwined are the first to get unbraided, the first ones are last.

I'm glad enough to start the process of disentangling the three plaited strands of my title -- Bob, me, our relationship – with the era of the infection that took Bob's left eye and of hypoglycemic attacks that turned him into a zombie. Hard for and on us both, the memory of those final five months still makes me cry. We were both suffering, and we could not talk about it together. Rather, we followed a pattern that other widows have helped me to recognize, and maybe to understand better, at least about heterosexual marriages where the man dies first. The guy doesn't want to be sick, doesn't want to have to be cared for, doesn't take good enough care of himself, and gets angry at his wife for her attempts at caretaking, to whatever extent she is able to help him. She gets angry, too. Even a strong marriage can get frayed beyond recognition.

I'm just as glad to let go of the few years before those last months, when Bob was consistently in pain, and spending an awful lot of time and energy on doctors and their bills, when he was angry and depressed and complaining to me, when he was falling

frequently and sometimes hurting himself, when his developing cognitive issues were causing him to screw up in unfamiliar situations.

But so much was not terrible. We had many good times during those last years and months. Most importantly, the hardest months and years — interminable as they seemed — don't count for many among the months and years of our long relationship. I am especially grateful for some sweet memories of our final week together, a satisfying mixture and juxtaposition of private pleasures and good times with friends. We did the usual on the Fourth of July – the quirky Takoma Park parade and the neighborhood potluck, for which he made sesame noodles. Three days later we celebrated Bob's 77th birthday at Bistro Lepic in Georgetown; we happened on a nearby parking place, saving Bob the embarrassment of a difficult walk, and he ate duck, his favorite food.

The first twists of the braid created our romance: two lefties who met through a personals ad in a lefty magazine, in our forties, as well-formed individuals. Hard pulling and tight braiding created a strong plait with more complexity during our first few busy years: we negotiated personal styles and mutual ways of life as we moved in together, bought and furnished a house, planned a wedding and a honeymoon, created and maintained good friendships as a couple, organized and enjoyed other great trips, negotiated day-to-day life. Would we display Bob's beautifully framed Grateful Dead t-shirt in our mutual space? my rubbing of an eighteenth-century gravestone? Both, for awhile. Would we live on Bob's night owl schedule or let my lark tendencies fly? Neither.

Not everything we tried worked. We went to Quebec's Îles de la Madeleine with a fantasy of collaborating on travel journalism and found much to document, restaurants serving baby seal meat and an international sand castle contest. But the dream broke down in the face of our very different working styles, with plenty of anger and disappointment on both sides. And tight braiding was never to be our longterm mode; Bob soon established his need for independent travels, I eventually commuted for work and delighted in opportunities to teach and research in other countries. Neither of us excelled at accepting the restrictions that come with close connection.

When I got serious about this writing, I tried using a personal organization app to keep me working on my various projects. The library of icons offered no braids, let alone unbraiding, to stand for this writing. There was a comb, but that wouldn't serve: I'm not trying or expecting to get this content straightened out and combed into order. I would have liked to use a broken heart basted together with big sloppy stitches. The app of course had no basted hearts. I settled on a heart broken in two with a lightning bolt through it.

SHADOWS ON THE SPHINX



Attached to our refrigerator for decades was a snapshot of Bob's and my shadows together, one of a series of shadow pics I took of us over the years. In this one, from 1999-2000, when my aunt treated ten family members to a millennial trip to Egypt, our shadows are cast on the Sphinx. It's possible to make out what may be its haunches, but it might also be the back of its neck, and really, there's not enough Sphinx to offer a good clue. Bob's shadow is waving something that looks like a scarf that, with his arms, forms most of a circle around his head. Mine keeps her arms in to hold the camera, and takes a stance that looks like me even in blurry silhouette.

I think it is compelling to see that we had been able to get close enough to the actual Sphinx to take such a picture, and surprising to think that Bob and I could in any way cast anything on the Sphinx. Looking back decades later, our trip to the Sphinx and the Pyramids and the Valley of the Kings — the sights for which Thomas Cook invented modern sightseeing in the 1870s — seems apart from our other travels. Traveling was one of the things Bob and I did well together, but mostly we did it à deux, and never before or after with such a big family group, in such a storied place. Egypt was a marvelous trip. We partied in Luxor on the Y2K New Years -- as the Prince song goes, like it was 1999. The next week, Bob and Judy and Nate and I went camping on the Sinai Peninsula, camels carrying our gear as we trekked around with an Israeli guide named Dafna, visiting Bedouin villages and the monastery at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

Starting this piece, I thought the metaphor would be our shadows on the Sphinx, though I wasn't sure what the meaning of such a metaphor would be. Now I'm as interested in the artifact as the image. When I took the photo off the refrigerator to write about it, I was appalled to recognize the extent of the stains, the faded photo finish, the accumulated kitchen grime. There's no digital copy of the original image, and if I hadn't already gotten rid of the negatives, I probably trashed them when I went through photos preparing for Bob's memorial.

Once many years ago, Bob and I cast our shadows on the Sphinx. Here is a picture we took. You'll have to believe me that it's the Sphinx, and I know it's blurry and faded and filthy. It would take a lot of Photoshop to clean it up. I don't expect you to think much of it, but it's not easy for me to throw it out. Some things remain compelling even when they are faded and filthy, and even when you can't be sure about their meaning.

GRIEVING

STAGES OF GRIEF

Most of us can recite at least some of the "stages of grief" articulated by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who delineated those stages in her work with terminally ill patients as they came to terms with their own deaths. She did not describe the stages as a linear progression, though they have often been taken to be exactly that, much as they have also been taken to apply universally. Nor did she mean them to describe people grieving the deaths of others. These days, much of the grief literature rejects the notion of these five stages – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance – as empirical truth, though if you google "stages of grief" you'll get the impression that they still dominate conventional thinking.

I can tell you they don't work for me. I was never in denial except maybe for the first hours after Bob didn't show up for dinner and I hoped he would somehow come home from the pool. I'm not in general a person who traffics in denial. I'm not a bargainer, either; I saw my task as facing reality, not attempting to get around it. I experienced many of the symptoms of clinical depression – lack of appetite, etc. -- but they had a clear cause, Bob's death, and I understood myself as sad, bereaved, grieving, not depressed. I'm not sure what acceptance means.

For those of us mourning life partners, the process of grief is certainly a transition — moving away from the coupled self to a new single one as we take leave of the dead person. When I step back to consider my transition, I can delineate some phases or stages or periods that I've gone through. But there's also been a lot of back and forth, a lot of thinking that I've gotten to a next stage, only to discover that I'm back at square two or three.

I have been very aware, especially during the teary times, of how part of the sadness is precisely about taking leave of Bob, letting him go, and of how much I don't want to do that. There's no danger of forgetting him, any more than I'll forget my dad, who has been dead for more than twenty years. But I accept my dad's absence and unavailability while I still just don't want Bob dead. My dad, and the others I've loved who died more than a decade ago — my sister Judy, my aunt, my close friends Susie and Phyllis and Teresa — seem so very dead. I have no firm opinions about what happens after we die; as Iris Dement sings, I'll let the mystery be. But wherever or whatever it is, the land of the dead feels so far away, and I don't want Bob to live there.

At the same time, I welcome my phases and shifts. I liked realizing, two months after he died, that I had actually had a good time one evening, at a birthday party for a child I love. When I got the papers declaring that the Montgomery County Orphan's Court and Register of Wills were done with our case, it felt good to be moving away from the legal business even though there were still some tasks to be done for the estate. I enjoyed flirting with a stranger in the supermarket, though I only recognized it as flirting after the fact.

Four months after Bob died, I went to Sibley Hospital for an ultrasound (I'm fine) and cried in the hallway, remembering one of Bob's and my many awful days there, me feeling powerless and stressed, unable to help him, he responding stiffly to everybody including me, as if he needed all his defenses not to break down. Now those many awful days seem few, in the long history of us. But on the ultrasound day those times were fresh in my memory and I was both sad to remember them and grateful to have them over. And then I got to the waiting room, where an old couple sat working on the *New York Times* Sunday crossword together, as Bob and I did every week, times I'm not at all grateful to be done with.

I've generally prided myself on making my own changes, moving into new stages of my life on my own schedule. Before Bob died, I wanted to move into my own next stage as much as I wanted relief for his suffering and relief from the strain of trying to care generously and patiently for a noncompliant patient. His many hours of sleeping during the *pseudomonas* infection gave me an opportunity to try starting a work project that might create a next stage for me. And then his sudden death catapulted me into a new phase of my life, literally overnight.

But grief doesn't have tidy stages, and it seems there's no saying when any further periods of my life can begin. I can make all the schedules I like, but I can't do what I plan if I'm not ready. I understood pretty quickly that early widowhood is liminal and transitional, and that I had to go through it, step by step and box by box and item by item and account by account, before I could even begin to move into a new stage. I came to believe that doing that work would help move me there.

That has been true. I've given a lot of things away and sent much to recycling, and I'm still taking satisfaction from clearing out the house while I pay no attention to the things I don't yet want to move or change or look at or think about. Another widow told me recently she had started to date, after nine years. For me, it's still the early stages.

SITTING SHIVA

The night Bob died, I came home from the hospital and spent four sleepless hours in bed. I had two coherent thoughts: to call the Torchinsky Hebrew funeral home up the street from my house, and to sit shiva. More precisely, I thought I could use seven days, and that I could get that if I called it "sitting shiva." At 6:00 AM, I left a message for the funeral home, which fortunately facilitates cremations for people like me as well as providing traditional services to religious Jews. And then I set about sitting shiva. For seven days.

It's a little surprising that both of my coherent thoughts were about Jewish observance: I am not an observant Jew. Bob was even less of one. I had never dropped by to pay my respects at a shiva that lasted seven days. Nowadays, shiva might mean an open house or two. But what I knew about the custom seemed like my best hope: seven days of people coming by with food and hugs, seven days of putting off dealing with Bob's cell phone or his bank accounts or the lawyer for his estate. Maybe after seven days I'd be able to think, to function, to be alone.

I had no relationship with a rabbi. I was not going to observe the traditional customs: I had no plans to cover the mirrors or rend my garments or sit on low benches. I would not ask people to wash their hands outside the front door.

I didn't plan to say Kaddish, which I only kind of know. This Aramaic prayer that Jews say to commemorate the dead holds memories of standing next to my father at Rodef Shalom Temple in Pittsburgh as he -- a committed atheist -- recited it. When I hear it, my response to the sound and the rhythm helps me to recognize some of what chanting in community, and chanting itself, do for people. Five days after my sister Judy died, I added a recording of the Kaddish to what was then called my iTunes library, in hopes of learning it and helping her sons Jed and Nate learn it, because it was important to her. Maybe they did better than I, but I never got further than the few lines I already knew. This doesn't surprise me; hanging out with yogis and Buddhists, I've learned that I'm not drawn to chanting in any foreign languages.

The funeral home provided a candle in a glass that was intended to burn for a week. The privilege of retirement made taking a week possible. Nazgol had moved in, working from my house and sometimes leaving for a few hours. I lit the candle and began to make phone calls. I don't remember who I called or in what order; I vaguely remember compiling lists from my contacts and Bob's. Fortunately I knew the code to Bob's phone. (He did not know mine, one of the many ways he'd have had an even harder time than I did, if I had died first.) Some of the people I called offered to call others.

Every day I went for an early morning walk, and then I stayed home. People came, from near and far. Lisa and Larry, friends since high school, showed up from four hours away. One of the teenagers from across the street sat alone with me for a long time.

People I knew well and people I didn't opened their arms and their hearts. I spent more than an hour at the dining room table with an old friend of Bob's, now disabled in his speaking but apparently clear inside his head, and I saw that I had slowed down enough to be able to listen. Loretta and Ashley, on different days, dipped into sad memories of the last days of their own husbands' lives, generously sharing their painful stories of very different men. Neighbors and friends brought a steady stream of rotisserie chicken, sweets from the local bakery, flowers from their gardens.

I've never made a better decision. Somehow I understood that I could make use of tradition in my mourning without being bound to the traditional. So before the seven days were over, I asked Gail, my most knowledgeable Jewish friend, what were the next steps. She sent me a copy of Anita Diamant's *Saying Kaddish: How to Comfort the Dying, Bury the Dead, and Mourn as a Jew*. I knew I'd learn about *yahrzeit*, the commemoration of the anniversary of a death, but I learned there also about *sloshim* ("thirty" in Hebrew), the first month of mourning. After that first week of shiva, mourners resume some regular activities but until a month has passed, they refrain from celebrations and parties. I was grateful for some guidance. A few weeks later when people might have expected me to emerge from mourning, *sloshim* helped me to recognize that I wasn't ready to go to a wedding celebration that I was really sorry to miss.

In traditional cultures, death was close and familiar and frequently came early. Even nineteenth-century industrial culture offered robust grieving traditions and rituals for individuals to call upon, identifying grieving people for a year or more. Religious cultures still offer some of that, at least for the few days at the beginning. Bring in the rabbi or the minister or the imam; they know what to do. Now those of us not affiliated with religious organizations have to figure out the plan, while life keeps going on, all around us.

CRYING TIME

Some people, I'm told, do widowhood without crying very much; some don't like crying and try to avoid it as much as they can. I am not one of them. I've always been a cryer. I had a reputation as a difficult toddler, and I now imagine that crying must have been a big part of that.

As an adult, I've mostly kept my tears to myself. Bob saw many, certainly over deaths, beginning with my best friend and backpacking buddy Susie, who died in a car crash a few weeks after our wedding, and then over the deaths of my father, my sister Judy, my dear friends Phyllis and Teresa. Sometimes I cried when we argued, but only sometimes, and Bob usually understood it as a sign to back off. I cried at the movies, though I hate swelling music or cheesy dialogue jerking my tears. I only saw him cry once, when his mother died.

I'm glad that I cry. I always feel better afterwards. But that doesn't make it any less wearisome. My friend Kate, whose son had died two years before Bob, wrote me after my first Thanksgiving without him to ask how it had gone. I'd cried a lot before and after, I reported, but while I was with the family I only once had to go do it in the bathroom. "As you know," she wrote back, "the crying (the fucking crying) has to be gotten through…"

Eventually I stopped crying every day, but for most of the first year I was on the verge of tears 100% of the time. Fortunately I spent much of that time alone and didn't have to display the cracks in my persona. With others I might well up, but after the first few weeks I didn't do any wailing or bawling or weeping or blubbering in public like I did in my house, where I cried so much that I started keeping a glass of water in every room so I wouldn't get dehydrated.

In January, after six months, I wept buckets when, within a few days, I went to sit shiva for an old friend's husband, lit a candle for Judy's yahrzeit, had a friend of Bob's assure me that Bob loved me and would not be surprised by how sad I was, and gave away most of his Russia-related books and memorabilia, collected over decades of study and travel and writing. The deaccessioning was satisfying: a neighbor hooked me up with a Russian-born historian of China. He specialized in Russian-Chinese relations but his department (like history departments all over America) is shrinking, so he is now teaching Russian history as well as Chinese. He was excited to take almost everything — dictionaries, history books, Soviet military pins, nesting dolls with images of Khrushchev and Gorbachev. So sweet to hand Bob's things over to someone who appreciated them. But it made me cry and I had trouble sleeping.

Seven months later, I had another lachrymal spell that lasted for weeks. This long crying jag began after I got through Bob's birthday and the first anniversary of his death so well that I hoped I was nailing this grief thing. By then you'd have thought I'd know better. Part of me, Buddhist-inflected, accepts wholeheartedly that there's no nailing it,

that I can't just decide to move on and figure out the next stage. But there it was: apparently another part of me, still struggling. And crying. (Was it a wave? Does grief come in waves, as nearly everybody says? I understand this description or metaphor profoundly, and not at all. Sine waves, up and down? Sound waves, reverberating? Ocean waves, ceaselessly pounding the shore? Ocean waves that I'm supposed to surf on? I've never even been on a boogie board.)

I cried a lot doing a program of writing prompts offered by Megan Devine, the author of the only self-help book I looked at that seemed even vaguely helpful, *It's OK That You're Not OK*. Writing made me see how vibrant my grief was. Those tears were about letting go of Bob, and also about letting Bob go. By then I felt good sometimes, occasionally quite like myself, and I didn't want to get stuck in bereavement or hold onto my grief like a precious jewel, a phrase I had heard from someone in 1992 when I was mourning my old backpacking friend Susie. But the sadness of using those writing prompts to put Bob in the past in the way that Susie is in the past seemed simply unbearable. And sometimes it still does. It's been hard to let go of what does feel precious: the comfort of our old life, my reliance on partnership, love, and everyday companionship.

For my first Valentine's Day alone, I went shopping for gifts to send to the kids in my life. Michaels offered a ton of heart-shaped possibilities — things to make, things already made, stickers to decorate it all. I started crying in the sprinkles aisle. I had ordered many flowers for myself – unarranged, enough for me to fill vases with pink snapdragons and purple irises and yellow ranunculus to set all around the house. I had hoped it would make me feel like I was taking care of myself. But the condition of my actual heart was still too bruised. "And what is it like for me to see that?" I wrote in my journal when I got home. "It is sad, sad, sad, it makes me cry, cry, cry."

A year later I was still crying many days, though maybe no longer most of them. As I edited this to show to others for the first time, I was crying a lot. I didn't usually weep for long, and often I didn't expect it. When it came, I just wanted Bob back, and I knew that wasn't happening.

On his podcast about grief, Anderson Cooper complains to therapist Francis Weller, the author of *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, that now that he's gotten in touch with grief, he can't get through a day without starting to cry at some point. "Is this a problem?" asks Weller. I see that though I sit easier than Cooper with calling myself a cryer, I, too, have sometimes construed it as an ambush from my past rather than as a welcome signal that I am on the right road, dealing with what comes my way.

LEANING INTO THE PAIN

Not long after my father died in 2002, I discovered the work of the American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön on the bookshelves at my yoga studio. I had never before been interested in Buddhism, but I was seeking some way of wrapping my mind **a**round my feelings, and there was *When Things Fall Apart*, which things certainly had.

Pema suggests that we learn to "lean into the sharp points." She and other Buddhist teachers I've encountered since have taught me to notice when I respond to reality by pretending or hoping or wishing that this just wasn't happening. More often than I used to be able to do, I can sit with whatever it is, feeling the pain, trying to act from and as my best self. More often than I used to, I understand that the present moment is just that, and that the feelings will pass, because feelings do, and that eventually things will change, because things do. And that I will do better if I have held the pain rather than pushing it away.

I understand that grief can seem unbearable and that trying to create distance from pain might seem preferable. But that's not how I've done it. Thanks to my never-perfectly consistent meditation and yoga and walking practices, thanks to Pema and other Buddhist teachers, thanks to the fact that I am surrounded by neighbors and friends and family, thanks to the money and time of the comfortably retired, I have felt safe and strong enough and able to face the pain for at least part of every day since July 10, 2023. (At first I wrote "pretty much every day," and I suppose I liked the casual, colloquial sound of that, but it's neither casual nor true. Even after two years, I face some version of this pain every day.)

I've operated on the belief that the impulse to run from grief wouldn't serve me well. Wendell Berry goes further, in a poem called "To Know the Dark." "To go in the dark with a light," it begins, "is to know the light./To know the dark, go dark." Some days I have called this wallowing in it, and some days I have celebrated it, understanding going dark to be another version of leaning in to the sharp points.

I don't know when it will stop hurting so bad, though I assume it will, since it doesn't now hurt as bad or as often as it did, and since I have experienced other major losses. I don't know if or when I will find something or someone that can fill the chasm created by the loss of affection, of "we"-ness, and of company. But I'm here, and so is the pain. Might as well lean into it.

CONDOLENCE NOTES

A little more than a year after Bob died, I found myself writing three condolence notes in one sitting, surely a sign of age. Like most people, I never know what to write. My expression of sadness at other people's sadness feels fundamentally trivial given the magnitude of their feelings and, for that matter, my own. I want a template that doesn't exist, some formulaic words to get me out of those few moments of concentrating on empathy. I'm gratified when I can get myself to write the most compassionate note I can muster that is also original, and on point with regard to the recipient, the person being mourned, and me. I don't always manage that. This is why people turn to AI.

The pile of notes I got after Bob died was not trivial. Each one was probably sent by somebody who didn't know what to say, but who wanted to say something on paper. Probably some were gratified by what they had written, while others felt they hadn't achieved the perfect note they wanted. But all of those expressions of condolences have meaning in community with each other.

Write a note. Of course you don't know what to say. It doesn't really matter. Just send it. And if you run into the person before you've sent it, don't apologize. Just say you were sorry to hear about the death.

ROCK CREEK CEMETERY



Adams Memorial, photo at Library of Congress

At some point in her program of writing prompts, Megan Devine asked me to personify grief. Not my kind of question. It felt foreign to all of the writing styles I'd developed – as a historian, as a journal-keeper, and, back in the day, as a prolific letter writer. I got nowhere with it until I remembered a sculpture that has often been called "Grief," depicting an androgynous person under a heavy cloak or shroud. Henry Adams, who commissioned it, preferred not to give it a title, and the sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, seems to have concurred, or at least went along with his patron.

I've known about the Adams memorial for decades. It's three miles from my house, in Washington's Rock Creek Cemetery, though until Devine's prompt I had never gone to see it. I had many times seen a different casting of the sculpture, which sits in a corner at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The casting in the cemetery is set in a granite pavilion, designed by the famous architect Stanford White, and surrounded by evergreens. Henry Adams, a historian and journalist who descended from two presidents, hired Saint-Gaudens and White to create the memorial in honor of his wife, Marian Hooper Adams, nicknamed Clover, a talented amateur photographer who killed herself in 1885 when she was 42, by drinking darkroom fluid. Henry, too, was eventually buried there. In letters he wrote after Clover died, he frequently referred to Rock Creek, Washington's oldest cemetery, as his future home.

You won't find much about Clover in her husband's autobiography, which pretty much skips over the years of their marriage. She has been called the inspiration for Henry James's bold young heiresses, Isabel Archer of *The Portrait of a Lady* and the eponymous Daisy Miller. Diplomat John Hay, the Adamses' neighbor and close friend, wrote to Henry of her "bright, intrepid spirit, that keen, fine intellect, that lofty scorn for all that was mean, that social charm which made your house such a one as Washington never knew before and made hundreds of people love her as much as they admired her." After Clover died, Henry Adams destroyed her correspondence and refused interviews about her.

One sunny February day I drove to the Rock Creek cemetery (which is not now attached to Rock Creek Park, and near which what is now called Rock Creek does not flow). I hadn't been in a cemetery for a long time, and I had fairly recently made a decision for cremation.

It was hardly even a decision. I have helped to scatter the ashes of people I've loved, in celebrations of their lives that were creative, meaningful, and even fun. Bob and I never talked about buying a cemetery plot. He had chosen cremation for his mother's body, and her ashes were in his study closet when he died. My family had no tradition of tending graves. Our relatives were buried hundreds or thousands of miles away from Pittsburgh, where I grew up. My mother was buried there when I was twenty, but I have not been to her grave since her funeral and it would take some research to find it. My father arranged and paid for his own cremation, and when the time came, his wife directed me to a card in his wallet with an 800 number that connected me to a kind and efficient person who took care of the whole thing. My sister Judy and my friend Susie were both cremated. And while we never had much conversation about it, Bob wrote cremation as his preference on the "5 Wishes" form that the lawyer's office provided when we made our wills.

The walk from where I parked to the Adams memorial was long enough to give me an opportunity to wonder fleetingly whether I should have gone for a monument. Very large heavy stones and pavilions marked the graves. Names and dates and sometimes a bit of description or a fragment of a psalm were carved into rock. Some of the people interred here are well known: Upton Sinclair and Gore Vidal, Alice Roosevelt Longworth and George McGovern. But I've never heard of most of the people, even many with large mausoleums. Do the names and dates on these solid monuments remind anybody of who they were, how they spent their lives, what people loved about them? At Highgate in London, I had been more impressed by the thousands of fallen gravestones marking plots that nobody had tended for generations than by the well-kept graves of the likes of Karl Marx and George Eliot. The lesson seemed to be that for most of us, erecting solid monuments doesn't keep memory alive very long. At Rock Creek I didn't see crumbled gravestones, but beyond the people now remembered for their work, the lesson seemed the same.

The Adams memorial was just as striking as I expected. I thought I might stay for awhile, contemplating whether the shrouded figure was indeed a personification of grief. But it was too cold to sit on the granite bench. And I was too curious to

contemplate anything but what seemed to me the great conundrum of the place. I could find no inscription — not the names of Henry or Clover Adams (though Wikipedia on my phone assured me their bodies had both been laid to rest there), not the signature of Saint-Gaudens the sculptor, no plaque recognizing Stanford White the architect. I thought I must be missing something. I knew that Adams was intent that the sculpture not get a name, but no names for the dead people? No dates? On a tract of land so dedicated to displaying the names and dates of the dead?

I asked several groundskeepers, who told me I must be missing something. They directed me to the church offices to ask about it. The woman at the desk didn't know, but she found me a pamphlet about the Adams memorial. No names, says the pamphlet. No writing at all. Just the mystery of grief.

EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

Eight months after Bob died, my dentist told me that his dog had died about a month before and he was heartbroken. "He is everywhere and nowhere," he said. I couldn't tell whether he meant to be expressing condolences, but I was certainly experiencing the same with respect to my dead husband. Though I spent months giving away his clothes and dismantling his files, other things of his are still everywhere I look. Beyond that, the whole house — the choices of furnishings and the art on the walls and the colors of the paint — represents a decades-long negotiation between my preferences and his. Every spot in the house holds memories. But he is gone.

The dentist's point is in part that it doesn't require artifacts or decisions about paint. The household itself reminds me of him. The emptiness of the house, the loss of companionship. The all-day-every-dayness, the everywhere-in-the-houseness — both husbands and dogs are beloved companions who fill our living spaces. Their deaths reverberate in our lives differently from those of people who are precious but who live far away or even next door.

Still, companions are not the same thing as partners. Dog people don't like to hear it, but it seems to me that you may talk to Fido or Lassie about the movie you just saw or whether you should quit your job, but the dog will not offer opinions about those things. Nor does the dog's death require as much revamping of your identity.

LABYRINTHS AND MAZES



Maze at the Governor's Palace, Colonial Williamsburg
Photo, Library of Congress

I encountered the boxwood maze at the Governor's Palace in Colonial Williamsburg when I was twelve. I remember a lot about that stop on the last big trip my family took while my mother could still travel. We ate Welsh rabbit at Chowning's Tavern. The blacksmith's shop and the apothecary introduced me to the history of daily life, which was to become my lifelong intellectual interest. But my most visceral memory is of being lost in the maze. The hedges were well over my head; internet research suggests that they obstruct most adults' sight lines.

Many people describe grief as a labyrinth, which conjures the ones designed for meditation in churchyards and parks, and, for me, especially the one I've walked more than any other, at Breitenbush Hot Springs in Oregon, where I've been both with and without Bob. Those labyrinths comprise paths through low-lying plants and rocks. You can see across them. Usually they offer a single curved path to the center and back out, not a straight shot but a way of getting where you want to go by putting one foot in front of the other. They provide a kind of practice, an invitation to walk in contemplation of the here and now.

To me, grief seems more like being lost in a multicursal maze like the one in Williamsburg, with confusing paths that present both choices and dead ends, and shrubbery that blocks my line of vision. Where am I going? How does this end? What's the goal here? How do I get there? How do I put myself on the right path? Am I lost?

Loss is a euphemism for death: I lost Bob in July, 2023. In the spirit of confronting my reality, I'm not looking for euphemisms. I never describe Bob or anybody else as having "passed" or "passed away," for example. When I try to summon some consideration for other people's points of view, that seems like language for a belief that the soul passes from this life into the next. Which raises questions about souls, and about the next life. I'll pass on those.

I do say I lost Bob, but not without self-consciousness. "I'm sorry for your loss" is such a trope of corporate language that anyone who has made the calls to turn off somebody's phone and change accounts to the survivor's name understands it as coy. I've had some memorable encounters with non-euphemistic loss. Once I found a lost toddler on the street near the Pike Place Market in Seattle. Another time, I lost my keys on the Washington Metro and managed to get them back from Metro Lost and Found, which sounds more straightforward than it was. Calling death a loss is easy to make fun of. Whoops! I lost Bob! He was here in June!

But I actually do keep asking myself where he is. I don't talk to him much, but I do ask him this: where are you?

Maybe it's me that's lost, mired in a maze and unable to see past the shrubbery.

SLOW AND FAST

I believe there's something that must be said about time in these reflections on widowhood, but I have no confidence that I can describe it, let alone explain it, because time is itself hard to describe or explain. Several distinct time-related phenomena of widowhood deserve at least to be reported.

Grief, and Bob's death, have messed with the ways I have long understood the future, or at least with the ways I was accustomed to planning for it. I've been a planner, as a student who generally got papers in on time, as a writer who set deadlines for myself, and as an organizer of syllabi and dinner parties. Bob's death created a massive to-do list but sitting shiva taught me that as long as I got the funeral home on board to take care of his body, very little of the list had to be attended to on any schedule.

People tell you not to make any big decisions for a year, especially about your house. I, for some reason, took that make-no-plans advice very seriously. Have I ever before proceeded in such a one-step-at-a-time kind of way, so incapable of thinking long term? But at least two people I know sold houses soon after their partners' deaths, and they seem to have no regrets. Molly, from my support group, whose husband died about a month before Bob, waited longer. When she started to work on selling her house after about a year and a half, she had no plan for where she would live when all of her deaccessioning would be done and her house would belong to someone else. She said that many of her closer but not-widowed friends were alarmed. I was not alarmed. I saw her, like me, moving a step at a time, doing next what seemed right. And I wasn't surprised when, by the time the house closed, she had found an apartment.

The title of this essay, "Slow and Fast," comes from thinking about an email from my college friend Deborah, whose husband had declined slowly over many years. She commented about the oddness of the fast changes of his final days and her first days of widowhood, when set against all that slow change. The night Bob didn't come home from the pool seemed like an instantaneous speedup of what had felt inexorably slow, the one-or-two steps forward-or-back of his decline, chronic complaints accumulating over years. And then, suddenly, fast change.

Margaret Atwood describes a "warping or folding of time" in her story "Widows," a perception that life events no longer line themselves up "in a chronological row, like beads on a string." This seems similar to my feeling that soon after Bob's death I started to understand our whole thirty-four years as if it were mashed together. All the for-better, all the for-worse in one messy ball. Released from the stressful final months, I remembered the stress vividly, but it became jumbled up with happy visits to loved ones in Bogota and Berlin, with Bob's annual pesto production, with birthday parties and a baby shower. Bob himself has become for me an amalgam of the guy he was from 1989 to 2023, similarly mashed together.

The time since his death has been marked by commemorative events and annual observances — the shiva, the memorial, the holidays, our birthdays, the two anniversaries we celebrated, and his yahrzeit. It seems clear that as long as I keep his ashes, there is still a future to this grieving process, another commemoration to be had. The annual events will go on, and I'll always miss him on holidays and on our private festivals. My widowed friend Cristy, trained as an anthropologist, notes that the shiva, the first widowed holidays, the yahrzeit are all cultural measures that function "to move us survivors back to Atwood's 'beads on a string.'"

GRATITUDE

I assure you, reader, that I am clear on my advantages in living through my grief, and that I am thankful for them every day.

A lot of this gratitude is straightforward. My niece Nazgol called hospitals to find Bob's whereabouts the night he died, and stayed with me for most of the next week. After she left, my nephew Nate came for a night and accompanied me to the funeral home to pick up Bob's ashes. My Nashville friend Kate stayed for most of another week. Nate and his wife Meghan and his brother Jed brought me to Maine later that summer, to focus my attention at least for moments on ice cream cones and paddleboards, and on their kids Asha, Taba, Philo, and Calix, to whom I am grateful, too. Back in Takoma Park, many neighbors helped with the memorial. When school started, I picked up Asha, who was ten when Bob died, and Taba, who had just turned seven, for Friday overnights, with movies and popcorn and songs before bed. I'm healthy and financially secure. I do yoga, I walk, I know how to meditate though I don't do it as much as I think I should. My journey through early widowhood was the culmination and product of a lot of work on myself, some outstanding teachers, and some of the world's greatest teachings. I have an excellent therapist. I am retired and had time to attend to the details of ushering Bob out of this life, as well as time to slosh around in my grief. I have confidence about the work I've done as a writer and teacher, which helps with trusting myself, or having the courage, to face and maybe even cook up whatever comes next. I got to spend decades with somebody who knew and loved me, and though I'm still often sad, I'm starting to understand how to draw on the longtime fact of that connection.

When my older sister died, I could not imagine how I could live in a world without her. I had known her all my life. Bob and I, on the other hand, had a long marriage, but we had both had lives beforehand. It helps that I remember an adult Susie self before Bob. I am grateful to have met when we did, even though we were both set in our individual ways, which never stopped making it hard from time to time. I understand that my challenge now is to … create? experience? acknowledge? grow into? … a new, after-Bob self.

Some of my gratitude is more complicated. I never imagined I'd be grateful to have been part of the decision to turn off the machines that kept my father breathing and his heart beating at the end of his life. But that experience helped me hear the young doctors who told me as soon as I arrived in the ER that Bob's lungs and brain had suffered "catastrophic" damage, and pretty much begged me to give them permission to let him go.

I never thought I would be thankful that we kept different hours. From the beginning, unless he was sick, Bob stayed up past my bedtime, which he'd also done with a previous live-in girlfriend. He would come in to say goodnight, and sometimes stay for awhile, but I usually went to sleep by myself and crept out of bed in the

morning so as not to wake him up. At first I hated this arrangement, though not enough to stay up late. As we moved toward retirement and more time together, I came to appreciate that it offered each of us some welcome solitude. When he died, disappearing from my life and my bed, I already knew how to put myself to sleep alone. And I am indeed grateful not to have had to learn that.

Bob's reckless intransigence about altering his diet or paying good enough attention to his blood sugar also served me well. We were both afraid of a long dementia and his insistence on eating what he wanted spared me that. His father's Alzheimer's scared him more than his mother's diabetes, amputated toe notwithstanding. We went to Johns Hopkins for cognitive testing so early that the partner's questionnaire made me wonder why we were there — um, yes, he could surely dress himself. He wanted his life to end if he got an Alzheimer's diagnosis, and raised the issue when we began to be serious about each other. He asked me to promise to kill him, which I would not do, but years later I did hold onto the medications left over from my back surgery. Together we watched Julianne Moore in "Still Alice," playing a professor too far gone to implement the suicide plan she had made. Together we read Amy Bloom's *In Love,* about going with her husband to Switzerland to get legal assistance in dying from a clinic. But it was hard for us to get to conversations about Alzheimer's or suicide or death that could help us to make a plan or put our minds to rest.

I'm grateful that his and my and our suffering didn't last so long, in the scheme of things. I am grateful his decline didn't go on longer and that he never lost his Bobness, though it made me cry to write that. I am grateful not to have lost myself in caregiving, which I see can make widowhood even harder. And I am grateful that Bob died swimming, doing one of the things he most loved to do.

Most of all, I'm grateful that I went to the end with him, and I believe he would have said the same if I had died first. Isn't that what some part of me was hoping I'd be able to say when I answered his ad in 1989?

WIDOWHOOD

THE FELLOWSHIP OF WIDOWED PEOPLE

Some bereaved partners I know regard "widow" as a pejorative term, a word that makes us into objects of pity. Cristy's husband Ted died only a few years into their marriage. She says she hated the word, feeling like she was too young to be a widow, though she was sixty. Now she suggests it was the marriage that was too young for it.

I use "widow" a lot. It seems factual to me. I don't think of the word as insulting, but people sometimes react with a bit of surprise when I use it neutrally and it still feels like an odd piece of self-definition. Unlike "redhead" or "historian," two longtime descriptors that feel just fine, "widow" feels decidedly not fine. And it feels foreign. Will it feel better in the future? I get more accustomed to the reality of it every day.

C.S. Lewis, writing about his wife's death, suggests that bereavement is a stage of marriage. I sometimes wonder whether this means I will always be married, and if bereavement is just the beginning of widowhood. I am certain that the anticipation of widowhood is a stage of long marriages. My friends who are in that stage observe me closely, not necessarily knowing what to look for. I can see that looking is scary. When they encounter me together, they scootch their chairs closer to each other. I remember thinking, during my sixteen single years before Bob, that the chasm between the single and the coupled was vast and impossible to bridge. Now I feel like I'm hanging over the chasm, suspended as from a balloon or helicopter, not really belonging on either side.

So I welcome conversations with widowed people. It seems like they may know something of who I am these days. The ones I've talked with are mostly but not all straight white women — high school and college friends of mine and of Bob's, women I've met at a weekend yoga retreat or a community college jewelry class, people in my support group. It is, as the grief counselors tell us, a club that nobody wants to belong to. Like me, the other members have gone from having a partner, a "we", to hanging over the gulf. Some experienced sudden death and struggle with not having had the opportunity to say goodbye; others struggled with months or years of caregiving; my story has elements of both. Some lost their partners while they were still in the honeymoon phase or are attached to their romances, and are eager to declare the missing partners the loves of their lives; some have bitternesses they need to express; here again, my own truth offers both versions, and I believe that's common.

When I described my widows-and-widowers group to a woman friend of my generation, she said it sounded like the consciousness-raising groups of 1970s women's liberation. We examined our commonalities and differences. We shared our experiences with adult children, with coupled friends, with bureaucrats, with the departed spouses.

But it didn't require a group. I began to get that straightforward support describing both common circumstances and distinctive lives immediately after Bob died, from those two widows who came when I was sitting shiva. Loretta had been widowed twice, once months before and the other time more than a decade earlier. Ashley had a

five-year-old daughter when she became a widow in 2008. Those three husbands differed generationally, racially, and in their late-life maladies. Thanks to these women's generosity and openness, I quickly came to understand that Bob's unwillingness or inability to take care of himself, and his anger at the idea that I might take care of him or at any suggestion I made, were not just Bobisms, nor evidence of dysfunction in our relationship, but commonplace responses to being sick.

Since then, I've been all ears when I've been with other recently widowed people. Many of us are bewildered at the profundity of our grief, especially after long time caregiving and deaths that were expected and planned for. Many go back and forth between wanting to create new phases for our lives and sadness at the prospect of letting the married phase go. Some are bolder, selling houses and moving despite all that advice to wait.

And the not-so-recently widowed keep their eyes out for us. Twice in one week, at just the point where I saw I was okay most of the time but was still sometimes briefly incapacitated by sudden tears and my inability to grasp my future, longtime widows I barely knew told me it would get better.

THE WORK OF THE WIDOW

Washing the kitchen floor a few months after Bob died, I realized that the list of tasks his death had occasioned was not endless, though that's how it felt. Papers would not return from recycling; closed accounts would not reopen themselves. Each thing would eventually get crossed off a very long list. It was quite unlike washing the floor. This was only one of many understandings about work, and especially about women's work, that I've come to while washing floors and windows and dishes. The work of the widow is considerable and multifarious; this is the longest of these essays, and I have approached the topic with notions and habits I've developed as a historian of work.

Most of this work you would rather not do. But since the end of my week of sitting shiva, I've had a sense that giving my grief its due required me to resist my resistance, to do what had to be done, and do it as well as I could. With the benefit of retirement, and with respect for those who are not retired and struggle through it however they can, I took widow work on as my mission.

Ruminating and crying and facing a reality I don't like take first place on my inventory of widow's work. Describing emotional turmoil this way runs the risk of framing all human activity as work, yet I believe, and many others tell me, that if I do various kinds of emotional tasks, I may suffer less. Journal writing qualifies, in my opinion, as does the writing I did in response to Megan Devine's prompts, and the writing I've done here. The time I've spent with my therapist, and on thinking about therapy sessions. My widows-and-widowers group. Above all, I have cried. Though the weeping takes up less time now than it did at first, it feels no less imperative when it is required. As Kate wrote me, the fucking crying has to be gotten through. I no longer cry every single day, but taking care of my heart has felt like it should be the first thing on my agenda every day since July 10, 2023, and if I don't do it, grief may take me over and I'll find myself weeping in the midst of whatever.

Emotional work belies what I've said about endlessness. It's not at all like something you can cross off a list, and I don't expect that it will ever end completely. I have many times found myself crying about other loved ones' long-ago deaths. Nonetheless, I knew from the start that my grief over losing Bob would feel less intense with time, and it has, and I expect it will continue to change as I cry and talk and think and write about all three strands of the braid for the rest of my life.

From day one, and certainly before I had a chance to think about it, people wanted to know about a memorial event, and I had to contemplate the work of public widowhood. Later, I said. September, I guessed. I started by enlisting Bob's closest men friends, for support and advice. I'm grateful to them and to many others for comprising the cast and crew, and to Gail who came from Boston ten days beforehand to help me with final decisions and list-making. The printed program was beautiful; of course there was a typo, and my nephew Nate, the emcee, made a good joke about missing Bob's

excellent copyediting. The slide show and music and auditorium program were perfect; the food was delicious; I loved that guests took some of Bob's T-shirts and buttons as mementos. Even the Zoom worked. I wore a black linen dress that once belonged to my aunt, who recommended it for hot-weather funerals when she passed it on to me. I added a black and green silk scarf that my dearest hiking buddy had sent from Spain after I called her there to tell her that Bob had died.

I remember sitting in the front row of the auditorium, and I know what happened at the service because I've watched the recording a few times. I have almost no memory of the reception. Friends tell me I did a good job, circulating and hugging and thanking people for coming.

An important distinction here. Sitting shiva didn't feel like public widowhood. I was home; people didn't all come at once. The concept of shiva assumes that the bereaved are not working, not planning the event. Not performing. The community takes care of all that, and of the mourners. And I am beyond grateful to be able to say that's what happened in my dining room and living room, for that whole first week. People brought food. People hugged me. I don't remember what I wore. It in no way felt like a performance, or like work.

When that week was over, I began to confront — never too much in any given day — the paperwork. Becoming a widow requires an encounter with administration and bureaucracy that seemed enormous to me as a retired person who no longer chairs meetings or prepares for annual reviews. Bob's affairs were in pretty good order. We had made wills in 2014, though the law had changed in 2020, which made for some kerfuffle. At an earlier stage of his life he had been interested in researching investments and making independent decisions, but by the time he died he had mostly consolidated his accounts, and he left a spreadsheet that I knew to look for, which listed all but one of them.

Still, I had to have what seemed to me like extensive dealings with the IRS, the Social Security Administration, the Treasury Department, my congressman Jamie Raskin's helpful constituent services staff, the Sandy Spring Bank, far too many nice enough people at the odious Bank of America, the estate's lawyer Helen, Dwanna and Joe at TIAA, our tax accountant, and the four organizations and one relative that Bob left money to besides me. I had to contact every financial account — credit cards, investments, bank accounts — that was jointly held or solely in his name. The gas bill was already in my name, but the internet bill was in his. Et cetera. Again, this was a long list, not endless work like the kitchen floor. But the hours on hold, the unexpected glitches, and the stream of perfunctory declarations of sorrow for my loss made it hard and often infuriating. And it would not be done until 2025, when I filed the estate's taxes for 2024 and closed the checking account.

Deaccessioning, to use the librarian's and curator's term, required more physical work than this legal and financial phone calling, form filling, and computer research. Bob did not like to throw things out. He was not a hoarder; his stacks of newspaper were relatively small and contained in a large basket. But, like many of us raised by Depression-era parents, he believed that most things might come in handy sometime,

he aspired to repairing things rather than replacing them, he organized and filed many pieces of paper, and this house has a basement.

I have not wanted to sell Bob's things, and am grateful I can afford to be generous with them. I have tried to give stuff to people who need or will appreciate it, and (for my own sake as well as his memory) I am committed to keeping as much as possible out of the landfill. I gave some of his clothes to friends, others to a neighbor whose church distributes them to people who need clothes, and his suits to a charity that outfits jobseekers for interviews. I felt satisfied that nobody had to pay for them. His many books and other materials in Russian and about Russia went to that Connecticut professor whose friend saw my notice on our neighborhood listserve. Other books went to the Friends of the Montgomery County Library. I gave his bicycle to the teenager from across the street who had sat with me alone during the shiva; his bike had just been stolen.

A journalist trained before computers, Bob had, over decades, opened a file every time he thought of a topic he might want to write about. Thick folders held materials on the topics he did write about, and clips of the published pieces. As he declined, I sometimes wondered what he did in his office, and in going through his file drawers I discovered that he had been devoting a level of attention to orderly file-keeping that I had not suspected, misled by the mess on his desk. The folders were clearly labeled and descriptive of their actual contents.

For many months, every recycling day I sent some of Bob's papers to be made into new paper. Having done this with many of my own papers as a pandemic project, I have done his without qualms. I look quickly to see what's there before sending them off, and I have sent materials to a number of libraries and archives.

In the basement, I found Bob's SDS card from Cornell, boxes of letters from previous girlfriends, his heavily redacted FBI file, obtained from a FOIA inquiry. He left folders fat with handwritten notes on decades' worth of phone calls and meetings; I donated some of those, and many pamphlets from local political movements, to Historic Takoma. He created a folder of memorabilia from our wedding, and folders for nearly everywhere we had traveled together, with maps and ticket stubs and brochures and clippings from the *Times* travel section. Those are still sitting in a pile; perhaps they will be part of some future deaccessioning, or perhaps they will get rebraided into my new life.

Some people have asked me why I was in "such a hurry" to get rid of Bob's things. I wasn't in a hurry. I just didn't know what else to do with my days. I understood the deaccessioning as part of the grieving process, physical and emotional work that would need to be done eventually, by me. And because I am old, I understand it as part of the larger project to clean out this house after thirty-four years in situ. Some days, I am more clear than ever that Death could be around the corner, ready for me with his scythe, and I think of this as death cleaning. Other days, I see it as preparing for some inevitable day when I will move to a smaller place that requires less of my time and energy. Every day, especially during the first year, I have understood it as key to getting through the hours until bedtime, accomplishment that could satisfy: I did *that*.

Could I have kept at it without the hundreds of hours of Andrew Hickey's astonishing podcast, "A History of Rock Music in 500 Songs?" Probably not.

I had begun deaccessioning my own papers during Covid, but did nothing then about our joint files. Now I am, more slowly, dismantling the life on paper that Bob and I created together, deciding what I want to keep in the next phase of my life. (Some days I wonder whether a next phase will ever come; this one still feels so transitional. Women who have been widowed longer assure me that there will be another phase, if not more than one.) For now I'm holding on to things that are so heavy with sentiment that I can't yet look at them: wedding and honeymoon materials, for example, sat for two years on top of Bob's dresser, along with his ashes, until I had to move them for a house project. But I put the fat blue file folder containing *Washington Post* restaurant reviews into the recycling bin. Bob continued to maintain it until about a year before he died; I had lost interest long before, consulting Yelp or Google instead. Even so, the blue folder tugged at my heart. We consulted it for decades; it was a tool in the making of our life together.

The music system was central to that life. Back in the day, before I knew Bob, I was a girl who knew how to put her stereo components together and had a substantial collection of music on LP, cassette, and CD. My components were better than Bob's, so we used them when we merged households. When, decades later, we decided to replace them, we went with a first-generation Sonos system, connected to Spotify by wifi but also to the turntable, the tape deck, and the CD player. Bob took charge of the Sonos project, but eventually paid little attention to it and let drop the parts he found frustrating. By the time he died, we hadn't played records or cassettes or CDs in years, since they no longer stably or easily played through the speakers. I didn't want to hassle him and I didn't want to take on the assignment, so I'd decided to care only whether I could get Spotify to play. Which I could, more often than not.

I thought that getting rid of the turntable and the vinyl would be straightforward. And I'd been lobbying Bob for awhile to get rid of the hundreds of cassette tapes, by then mostly stored in the basement. I soon learned the strength of my attachment to that girl who hooked up her own stereo. When my nephew walked out of the house with the turntable and all my Bob Dylan records, I cried. Not from grief, for once, but from nostalgia — not for this turntable, but for having a turntable, for the past of playing records and being young and being that girl. Nostalgia, I might note, for a self that predated Bob. And while I've given all the commercial cassettes to the Friends of the Library, and sent to the landfill all the ones that were copies of friends' records, I haven't yet let go of the mixtapes, mine or ours or most of his. We were both mixtape makers. Nor have I grappled with the now-flaky Sonos system, or with what it takes to reliably fill a house with music at this point in the twenty-first century.

I also haven't dealt with some other important things that helped define Bob. Above all, I have yet to decide what to do with his collection of pinback buttons — mostly from political causes and campaigns, but also some commercial ones. He had thousands; if you're going to marry a collector, I used to tell people, choose one who collects something small. We had, and I still have, many on display in the house, mounted on flags along the staircase – the U.S., the Soviet Union, the City of Takoma Park. When he

died there were also buttons in drawers, buttons in boxes, and many many buttons in big tins that Bob had gotten full of popcorn, as Christmas gifts from the firm that printed the George Washington University alumni magazine, which he edited for seven or eight years. Although Bob put little stickers with numbers on about 3100 buttons, and although he left a massive Word file that describes those 3100, the boxes and drawers and popcorn cans did not contain those buttons in any order that I understand.

A friend who was a curator at the Smithsonian once tried to get Bob to say what he wanted to have done with the buttons when he died. He wouldn't answer her or talk with me about them, as he wouldn't talk about what he wanted done with his body. He spoke easily about wanting to be in charge of his death, but he seemed uninterested in the consequences or the aftermath. Thank heavens he was willing to join me in making wills.

I spent more than a few hours sorting buttons before the memorial, where I offered some of the unnumbered ones for people to wear and take home. That was a time when most of my agenda was to get through the day, however I spent it, and a boring task connected to Bob fit the bill. Many more buttons remain to be sorted, but sorting buttons is not how I now want to spend my time. I always hoped that my curator friend would take all the buttons for the Smithsonian if I found myself with this collection on my hands. But when we talked about it after Bob's death, she explained that the bureaucratic structure of the museum had made acquiring such a collection difficult for the appropriate curators. Now she, too, has died.

My writing partner David found himself in a quandary over photo albums after his mother died, until one of her friends visited and let him off the hook. "Those are not your memories," she told him. And these buttons are not my collection. Eventually I may contact the auction house that deals in this kind of collectable, and give whatever money I get to a cause Bob cared about. Meanwhile, they're small. Even in the thousands, they fit in a closet.

BLUE CHEESE AND OLIVES

Bob was a picky eater. He didn't like blue cheese or olives, kale, chard, asparagus, polenta, sushi, or a number of other foods I consider perfectly good, if not delicious. He didn't like dill, and he didn't like pickles, dill or otherwise. He said he didn't like risotto, which I found hard to believe since what the heck is not to like, but I refrained from ever making it.

I bought some blue cheese not long after he died, and learned that even if you do like blue cheese, it takes awhile to eat a chunk of it. I didn't throw any out, mostly because blue cheese is already moldy. But I had to push myself. It was an early lesson that in eating alone, I risked having to throw out excess food. The learning hasn't been easy for somebody who has devoted years of her life to thinking and writing about waste. I'm still not as good at buying and cooking for one person as I wish I were. Bob and I ate dinner together every night that we were both home, and now I sometimes have yogurt and granola, or cheese toasts. I more often worry that I'm not getting enough protein or green vegetables.

How, in other words, do I go about living by myself?

I've changed the house. At first, I altered things, a rug here and a table leaf there, a new dehumidifier, a banister that I'd tried to get built for Bob before he died. I bought a new dish draining rack. Each thing nice enough, some even very nice, but not identity-shattering. It was still our house, and though I'd given away many things and sent much paper to recycling, there were still so many possessions to be sorted, as I began serious work on this essay nearly sixteen months after he died.

And then I rearranged the living room. My nephew Jed and I took apart a tall four-shelf étagère and made it into a long two-shelf étagère, which enabled me to get rid of two small and not wonderful pieces of furniture, and the whole thing looked great. It stopped looking like Bob's and my living room, though much is similar. I had fantasized doing this for months, as I divested the shelves of LPs and cassettes, and of the turntable. Bob didn't play tapes or records for years before he died, but he would not have let them go, nor would he have welcomed drastic change in the look of the living room.

Our house is becoming my house. The big basket that once contained Bob's saved newspapers is no longer in the dining room, but now helps to organize a closet floor. I have pushed the table against the wall facing the driveway, with one leaf in it; it's longer now, and I can use the dining room as my office and craft space, devoting half the table to piles and projects, and still have a clear space big enough to eat my granola or offer a cup of tea. Daniel gave me a beautiful Afghan rug for the front hall, signifying that things have changed from the moment anyone enters the house. I think about repurposing what's here, spending money that Bob would not have been willing to spend, doing things we talked about but never got to. Twenty-six months after he died,

I picked fabric and paid a deposit for reupholstering the threadbare couch and armchair – an expensive repurposing we discussed many times.

I don't yet know how to use the room that was Bob's office and private space. It's cleaner and emptier than he had it, and guests tell me that the foam-covered futon is comfortable for sleeping. Nor do I know how to use my own sweet writing studio in the backyard, built with money Judy left to me. When I consider opening my house and my life to other people, I am both intrigued and repelled.

The old dehumidifier died, so I needed a new one. Daniel gave me the rug. The étagère and basket and upholstery fabric decisions were made without having to run anything past my husband, not having to convince him or compromise with him or collaborate with him or take him into consideration. There's some relief in that license to decide for myself, and some pleasure in the discovery of my priorities as a single person. These piecemeal choices reflect my taste, but they don't help me answer the questions about how to use the space. How, I am asking, should I live? I no longer have a husband. I can buy all the olives and blue cheese I want. But how much do I even like them?

COLONOSCOPY. FIRE ON THE TRACKS.

There's colon cancer on both sides of my family, so I am assiduous about colonoscopies. When I had to schedule the first one after Bob died, I discussed pickup with the scheduler, who gave me a list of paid drivers who would come into the surgery center and take me home. A few days later, I mentioned this to some neighbors who had me over to dinner. One of us will pick you up and take you home, they said.

Months passed, and then the colonoscopy was a week away. I emailed the couple, to make arrangements. One wrote back to say the other would be out of town and the one writing was hoping I could find somebody else, since she had misunderstood the timing and wanted to accept a tennis invitation for the time when I needed to be retrieved. She assured me that if I couldn't find anybody else, she wouldn't leave me high and dry. I called the first paid driver on the list, who turned out to be a delightful character even through my anesthetic fog.

Widowhood provides a lot of reminders that you no longer have a person who's your person. Towards the end, when Bob had stopped driving, he escorted me by Lyft to an eye procedure that required sedation; even in our most distant moments, I never doubted that he was there for me in this way. While others may not abandon me if they think I really need them, they may place other obligations and desires above taking care of me. I imagine a day will come when I will ask for more help from my nephews, but for now I try to keep my expectations and their burdens low. I am not their first priority; I am no longer anybody's first priority. And while I care about and keep in touch with a lot of people, nobody is mine.

Also, when your partner dies, there is nobody to commiserate with you during colonoscopy prep. "You poor Ting," Bob would say, using one of our many mutual pet names as I complained about clear fluids. I would say the same to him when he needed commiseration. Commiseration was pretty much always on offer but with a wink; I'll feel a little sorry for you, but don't feel too sorry for yourself. Is commiseration maybe compassion with a bit of tongue in cheek?

Commiseration is what I needed most a few months after the colonoscopy, when the train I was riding from Baltimore got stuck at New Carrollton, Maryland because of a fire on the tracks. New Carrollton was the last stop before Union Station, and it is, I knew, at one end of the DC Metro's Orange Line. The train people told us that the fire crews had arrived, but there was no saying when the fire would be extinguished and we would be on our way.

I had been at a conference all day. My phone was nearly dead and, though I had a charger with me, there was only one electrical outlet, limiting my ability to research my options. It took awhile to learn that the Metro hadn't come to New Carrollton for some months, thanks to construction for the new light rail we've been waiting for. Eventually I learned there was a bus in forty-five minutes that could take me to within a five-

minute walk of my home. As it happened, I didn't have to take this bus because the train started moving again, after sitting for about an hour.

But what I most wanted to do with my phone was not research. I wanted to call somebody. I wanted to have somebody to call. Bob had stopped driving more than a year before he died, so the Bob who died could not have come to get me. But he would have commiserated. "You poor Ting," he would have said.

RUMINATION

I've sometimes likened the process of widowhood to breaking up. Which, as Neil Sedaka told us in 1962, before I had any experience in the matter, is hard to do. Cristy offers a different take. Fifteen years after Ted died, she wrote, "I'm still annoyed at break-up songs. (What are you complaining about?! Your break-up is painful, but he's still alive, for crying out loud! there may still be a friendship in there somewhere. And maybe, after 30 years, you can get back together) … but dead is dead, dammit."

We agree, though, that rumination is part of the deal. "So much rumination," she wrote. "I ruminate still." And so do I. Was I right? Was I wrong? Do I have regrets for how I acted, for what I did or said? And what about Bob? Who was he, anyhow? Was he right or wrong? Did he have regrets? Is there any dependable evidence? I won't tell all here, but I've certainly felt like I've thought about it all. Indeed, the rewriting and remaking of the relationship seems like one of the tasks I've taken on as part of my widowhood.

I have thought about what Bob did, what I did; what he said, what I said; how he was, how I was; what we could and couldn't have done together, if only this or that. I have thought about Bob's last moments and I have tried to conjure how he really felt and what he really thought about me, things I can never know no matter how much I think about them. I keep wishing he could see me, that he could know how very sad I have been, not just about his death, but about how much he suffered before it, and about how I did and didn't care for him. About the ways that our relationship wasn't what I wish it had been, and about what I did to undermine it, and what he did to undermine it, and what he might have wished it had been, and what he clearly wished for that I couldn't or wouldn't give, and on and on.

The sadness is testament to the fundamental and indescribable way our relationship did work, well enough that in thirty-four years I never seriously considered leaving him, and I think he would say the same. As so many people say, grief is evidence of love. But knowing that doesn't stop the rumination.

One of Megan Devine's writing prompts described memory as "precious, the last links to the life that was. Memory becomes evidence: they were here, they mattered, we mattered." That part of the prompt didn't draw me in. Historians know, as do lawyers and therapists, that memory offers unreliable evidence. Besides, I have no difficulty remembering that Bob was here, that he mattered, that we mattered. I am an old woman. We were together for less than half my life and that proportion gets smaller every day, but it was close to thirty-four years. Not forgettable, and I know others think of him, too. "May his memory be a blessing," Jews say of the dead. May the thought of his good qualities protect and inspire us. "Let's step up our activities and dedicate them to Bob," wrote his climate comrade.

Still, the writing prompt was useful, encouraging me to think about what I want to remember and what I might be willing to let go enough to stop ruminating. I have plenty of sweet memories, and photographic and documentary evidence for some of them. I want to remember that I was loved, that I had some dependable emotional security for three middle-to-late decades of my life, from a man who brought me flowers on my birthday and kissed my hand in the movies. I want to remember what I loved – the pleasure of our rich verbal play, the Bob who even at the end drew hearts and funny faces on his quotidian notes to me, the satisfactions of seeing films and plays together and talking about them, the way he looked at me with love in his eyes, our many wonderful travels. I cry to remember physical intimacy, from holding hands on up.

All my rumination has made me think that I am willing to acknowledge the less pleasant parts but want to put them away, be done with them, let us both off the hook. I don't think I get to forget them all even if I want to, but I'm sure it doesn't serve me or Bob's memory to dwell on them. But does that just create for myself a version of the Saint Bob that left me shaking my head after the memorial service?

As I looked through his many papers, I sometimes had to work hard to let them go. I still haven't let go of them all. I was trained to analyze and interpret documentary evidence, but my analysis is of no consequence now. I allowed myself to read quickly through some journals he had kept — of dreams, of interactions with therapists, of trips. But only quickly, and only once. It was too easy to sink into an attempt to parse comments about me or us as if I could still work on the relationship after the other person had left it, and me.

It's been a long time since I broke up with somebody, but the feeling was familiar: every attempt to understand it all ended with the knowledge that I just can't take this thing any further with this person whether I want to or not. Eventually it began to feel like time to accept what needs to be accepted, and forgive what needs to be forgiven. I am not pursuing a research project that focuses on analyzing Bob Guldin. So in an attempt to limit rumination, I have given most of the evidence over to the weekly recycling collection, as I did with many of my own personal papers during Covid.

A widower in my support group once expressed guilt and regret about never having really looked at his wife's clothing when she asked him to. She would buy something new and model it for him, and he would pay little attention. The group discussion moved pretty quickly to people worrying that they hadn't been good enough caregivers during their partners' final months. But I was struck by how he had clearly been dwelling on the clothes, unable to let it go -- ruminating. From what I can tell, this man took excellent care of his wife as she died from cancer. Now he was kicking himself; it was such a little thing; it could have made her happier.

Dead is dead ... dammit.

BUSY BEING BORN

KINTSUGI



I am wearing this metaphor on the middle finger of my right hand. The picture above is not accurate. It was provided for me as the worst-case scenario by the jewelry store where Bob and I bought my wedding ring in 1992 and where I returned in 2024, anticipating our first anniversary without him, to have it enlarged. In the picture, the additional line of gold is obvious. They could do it at least this well, I was told. In reality, the German craftspeople who enlarged the ring made the break and its filling much more subtle.

But showing the line of gold wasn't worst-case in my book. I didn't actually want it subtle. My inspiration was *kintsugi*, the Japanese art of mending broken ceramics by filling the cracks with lacquer mixed with gold or other precious metals. Breaks and mending are highlighted; repair is celebrated; the new object suggests both catastrophe and glorious restoration.

On the night Bob died, the nurses in the emergency room handed me his wedding ring in a plastic bag. I put it on the middle finger of my right hand and wore it there, with my own ring where it had always been, until after his memorial. Over the next months, I did a lot of moving both rings from hand to hand. What do you do with two gold rings? I wasn't married anymore – or was I? I was still attached, but death had done us part. Should I be wearing one wedding ring, let alone two?

My college friend Judy put both rings on a chain, where hers fits beautifully into his, but her ring finger felt naked and so she bought a third gold band to wear there. She continued to wear all three until at least eight years after her husband's death, when she told me they all gave her comfort. When we talked about it, I too was wearing my husband's ring on a chain. As I drafted this piece, it was back on my left hand; as I edited it after getting my first comments, I had put that ring in my jewelry box, but then I started wearing it on the chain again as our second wedding anniversary without him approached. I've come to think of both rings as nomadic; they'll settle for awhile, but then they want to move.

Many months after I started wearing the *kintsugi* ring on my right middle finger, I took it off and put it on the windowsill to knead some dough. After I'd cleaned up the kitchen, I put it back on. Hours later, I discovered I'd put it on my left ring finger, where it had belonged for decades, and where it was now loose, thanks to extra gold.

THE MAPLE TREE



About two weeks before the first anniversary of Bob's death, the 100-year-old maple in our front yard gave up the ghost. I was out of town, at the beach with my beloved nephews and their families. It was the second or third day of the longest drought and hottest heat spell I'd experienced in thirty-three years on the property.

Together, Bob and I had loved that tree. Every fall it put on a show, turning our bedroom windows golden and delighting the many neighbors who called it the best tree in a neighborhood full of beautiful trees. We had hired people to cable it, to prune and fertilize it. I'd worked hard to cultivate a garden in its deep shade and around its widespread roots.

In his final months, I could no longer rely on Bob for help in caring for the house and the property, and he wouldn't have been able to take responsibility for any part of the tree's aftermath. He would not have talked with the insurance people, the tree people, the roofer, the contractor who did the repairs that were not in the roofer's purview, the hardscape guy who replaced the shattered slate path, the woman who rethought and reworked the front yard. But he would have listened to what I was

doing, offered his advice, given me an opportunity to whine about the administrative work. You poor Ting, he would have said.

I was determined not to see the tree falling as a sign of anything, or as a metaphor. It was an old tree, with a large fungus in the crotch of the branches that we could see from our bedroom window. We put money and love into keeping it alive for many years. We knew it was old and would die eventually.

Things change. Bob would certainly recognize our house, our street, our neighborhood. But much is different besides our new front yard. New people have moved in; houses are getting spruced up; people who got here when we did have embarked for new lives in smaller spaces or nearer their grown children. We have three new restaurants in walking distance. I made a point to try them all out, but it took me longer than if Bob had been here, and I felt that loss keenly. Opening our front door, you can now see the gorgeously crafted new banister, in addition to the rug Daniel gave me. I had to get a new washing machine. Our beloved old tree, sick for so long, died last summer.

I can now grow flowers and herbs, thanks to all that sun. I know that will eventually make me happy, but I am only beginning to be enthusiastic about it.

DAYS OF BOB

Bob turned 77 on 7/7, three days before he died. The next year, a couple of weeks after the tree fell, people came to celebrate the Days of Bob, a four-day open house. My plan was to spend the afternoons and evenings on my back porch serving food he loved. It turned out to be too hot for the porch, but we sat in the a/c enjoying lemon slice pie, his favorite birthday confection. I made both of his excellent potluck contributions: pasta with pesto and potatoes and green beans (which we discovered in Liguria in 1992 -- Bob would know the name of the restaurant, but I don't), and sesame noodles, which I sometimes begged him not to make for the two of us because I find them so addictive. I made broccoli slaw. There was bourbon slush, the perfect hot weather refreshment. I played the slideshow from the memorial on the TV.

If Bob's birthday hadn't been a few days before, I still would have done something to commemorate his *yahrzeit*, the anniversary of his death. Among observant Jewish families in the United States, the first *yahrzeit* is usually the occasion for the unveiling of the gravestone, an opportunity to remember the dead a year later. Candles are lit on subsequent anniversaries. I have only attended one unveiling, but my grandmother lit *yahrzeit* candles in my presence, and for many years I have lit them, too, to provide comforting reminders of people I have loved. I kept a candle lit for all four Days of Bob, and I have no idea what I would have done for either occasion if they were not so close together.

I was really pleased with the Days of Bob, each of which had its own character, according to who showed up. People seemed to appreciate the opportunity not only to remember Bob, but to recall their own dead people. Many conversations began "when my mother died," or brother or whoever.

I came up with the idea for the Days of Bob to stave off a four-day cry. The birthday/*yahrzeit* combination was powerful, and I was determined to keep it from doing me in. But I did get hives as the Days approached. I'd gotten them also around the time of Bob's memorial. Because I'd gone through a previous bout with hives during the years around my retirement, I have come to believe that my hives accompany not everyday stressful situations, but deep stresses, ones that challenge my sense of self. If they didn't itch so damn much, and if they didn't spread as fast as bad news, I could perhaps welcome them, practice all I've learned from the Buddhists about leaning into the pain.

I did stave off the big cry for about two weeks. Then I went through a spate of weeping and a depressive lack of energy that taught me — neither for the first nor the last time in this widowing adventure — that grief does its own thing.

FERNS ON THE LOCKSCREEN



My sadness about the maple tree was already compounded with my grief about Bob and about the planet during those terrible parched summer weeks of 2024. It was definitely not transplanting weather, too hot and dry to move all my shade plants out of the sun. All I knew to do was to water. And so I stood in the sun with my hose. So much of the foliage was gone – smashed by the tree, scorched by the sun -- but maybe I could keep some roots alive and move them in the fall.

A few weeks later some of the ferns near the house started to sprout, happier in partial sunshine than I expected they would be. That did feel like a metaphor. I took a photo and put it on my lock screen the day before Bob's birthday, just in time for the Days of Bob.

For all the sadness of Bob's birthday and *yahrzeit*, I had entered a sprouting phase, open to the possibility of new life, of a new life for me. Soon afterwards, my support group talked about it, somebody who had been widowed longer than most of the rest of us saying very firmly she was thinking of leaving the group because she no longer wanted such a focus on grief, and several others not yet talking of leaving, but nodding nonetheless. I knew from the start that I would be headed towards new growth eventually. I've understood that it's possible since that first time I realized I'd had a good time, the morning after Asha's birthday party two months after Bob died.

My first spring alone was the earliest in my memory, with crocuses and daffodil buds before mid-February. The metaphor of springtime sprouting was palpable, in that

way spring always feels metaphorical. But I wasn't yet there. Months later, these ferns offered me a more useful metaphor, new life sprouting after a disaster that was both sudden and prolonged.

RECOVERY

I have had Bob Dylan's phrase "he not busy being born is busy dying," and its tune, in my head for decades — not stuck in my head, but ever available to egg me on. As I begin this essay, a year and a half after Bob died, the phrase has taken on new meaning. I'm ambivalent about being born into a new life that, thanks to my age, can't last very long. Even though I'm healthy I'm constantly being reminded, by interminable colds and heightened anxieties and morning stiffness, that I'm more busy dying than I'd generally like to think. And I don't know what it is to be busy being born given the events of the wider world, where so much I presumed as not likely to change in my lifetime is undergoing fundamental upheaval. My historian self knew that everything changes, but even though I understood that nothing lasts forever, I kind of figured I could rely on, say, the Enlightenment for the rest of my life.

When parents or siblings or friends die, we may take some time off — sometimes during the final days, often in the immediate aftermath, and maybe again weeks or months later for a memorial event. It's rarely enough time, but however long it is, we then return to our lives.

When life partners die, the life we had is gone and cannot be returned to.

For a long time, when I thought about what I'm doing now as moving on to a new phase of my life, I believed I had to let go of — move on from or move on beyond — the last phase, and that seemed to mean I had to let go of Bob.

In an early draft, I next wrote "who has clearly let go of me." And that is true, in a literal sense, but his spirit or his soul or his ghost or his memory has not let go at all, and I continue to find myself sometimes … entwined with? braided with? tied by that invisible thread to? … some powerful nonmaterial Bobness. Will he let go of me?

Does being busy being born after my partner has died constitute recovery? Do we recover from grief? Is it "recovery" we're after? The term is so firmly attached to the addiction movement and to 12-step programs that I want to say no. I am not giving up Bob or trying to let go of his effect on me. I do need to learn how to honor and incorporate the life I had with him as I go on. My writing partner David suggests that I might use "recovering," rather than "recovery." "As a participle," he wrote me, "it's active, dynamic, tacitly optimistic. Maybe the goal is less recovery than recovering?"

But the urge is strong to resist both recovery and recovering, to hold onto that precious jewel of grief, in its burnished setting of my remembered life with Bob. Does recovering imply that everything is back where it should be, or getting there? Got along without you before I met you, gonna get along without you now. Good for breakups, not so good for widowing.

I didn't die with Bob. Staying alive and present to life, Francis Weller tells Anderson Cooper, requires understanding grief as a companion. Deborah, my college friend, offered me a related metaphor: "I'm aware there are two paths I travel at more or less the same time, one is loss and grief and the other is how to live and what to live for."

THE GOLDEN BACHELORETTE

Thanksgiving was Bob's favorite holiday, and he worked hard at it, taking charge every year of the turkey, stuffing, gravy, and mashed potatoes. I baked pies and made cranberry sauce and tapenades, and over decades we hosted family and friends who brought sides, cramming people into the house for raucous celebrations, scrumptious food, and plenty of thanks. Nobody watched football, or any other TV. We eventually moved it to our nephew Jed's place but until Bob died, he continued to be in charge of the turkey and its fixings. So there is no way of not missing him intensely for the rest of my Thanksgivings, more than any other holiday.

Jed, Asha, Taba and I spent our second Thanksgiving without Bob at their longtime friends' house in rural West Virginia, along with some of the friends' relatives. Over several days, all eleven of us – ages 3 to me (then 76) -- watched some episodes of *The Golden Bachelorette*, cheerled by one of the 40-something women. I was the only person much over 50, and surely the only one in the room who was watching the proceedings with my own life in mind. I can't begin to imagine what the 8-year-olds were thinking.

What I was thinking had to do with being a bachelorette myself. Almost seventeen months into widowhood, I was beginning to acknowledge to myself that I was lonely. After the maple tree had fallen on the wire that brings the internet to my house, a young man with dreadlocks had come to fix it. "Thank you," I said when he finished. "The internet is my friend." "I know," he said. "I live alone, too." I remembered learning from my University of Delaware colleague Kasey Grier, who studied the history of pets, that before radio and phonographs, singing canaries kept people company in American kitchens and parlors.

But company was not all I had begun to miss. Could I acknowledge, that Thanksgiving weekend, that my body longed for company? I can now. One night I watched a movie with Asha and Taba and Nazgol and couldn't help wishing to join their pile of intertwined limbs. I miss holding hands. I miss snuggling. I hug hello and goodbye with many people, but I miss long hugs and I miss spooning with Bob's familiar body, his familiar smells, with hints of both funk and chlorine from the pool. Writing this made me cry. My body consorted with his for decades, in ways that changed as each of our bodies changed and as our marriage changed. It's not easy to wrap my mind around the idea of encountering someone else's body.

At my saddest and least optimistic, it seems to me that the pool of men I might have to choose from is small and that I've always been picky. I can imagine being fixed up by friends, but the idea of getting on Bumble or Tinder seems like a nonstarter. And then I remember that Harvard/Yale study that said Bob and I were as likely as death in a terrorist attack. And that we found each other in a magazine.

What will become of me? I wouldn't have chosen The Golden Bachelorette as my Thanksgiving weekend entertainment, but maybe she had some answers or could bring

me to new ways of thinking. Will I date again? Will I find love if I do? How can I be sure I am not offering my heart to someone who, as Alice Walker put it years ago, eats heart meat? Where does trust come from? Is there anything for me to learn from watching this?

I don't watch much TV and I've seen few other reality shows. Hoping for some stimulating history and criticism, I bought *Cue the Sun! The Invention of Reality TV* by Emily Nussbaum, who covers TV for *The New Yorker*. She writes about the earlier Bachelor and Bachelorette shows that feature younger people, but not directly about the golden version.

This show oozed with cheesy glamour — sequined dresses and thornless roses grown in controlled environments. Everybody was groomed to look as good as possible. Joan Vassos, the Golden Bachelorette, looked great, in a Vegas kind of way, too skinny and glitzed up for my taste. It's hard for me to discern what was set up by the producers and what happened spontaneously, but it seemed like not very far below the glitz, the show offered some glimpses of real life. Joan is a widow; the men are all widowed or divorced; they all came to the show marked by some experience with love and optimism and tragedy and sadness. The men seemed surprisingly supportive of each other. Joan appeared to falter once, when she told all her suitors that she was unsure whether she could do this at all without betraying the memory of her late husband.

I was drawn in by the "golden" part, the modification of this established show to feature old(ish) people, the ways the Bachelor/ette template works or doesn't for people in their sixties and early seventies who are widowed and divorced. Through cracks in the glamour there seemed to be actual life stories, people who had loved and lost and were both sadder and wiser. So I believed that something real was happening when Joan told her suitors she was not sure she could carry on.

I enjoyed watching the men in their bunk bed mansion, set up for 20-something women competing for the original Bachelors. They cooked for each other and did each other's laundry and offered some real-seeming empathy rather than scheming against and fighting with each other, as apparently suitors of whatever gender do on the non-golden versions. I was interested in Joan as a "merry widow." I was interested in the haunting of the show by the dead husband and all the dead and former wives. If I were to watch more, I'd be looking to see how Joan interacts with the widowers as opposed to the divorced men.

I mentioned the show to some friends, and Jaimy, who writes novels, took it upon herself to check it out. She seemed to be putting herself in Joan's place in a different way than I had. She found none of the men attractive, she told me. I hadn't, either, but I'd hardly thought about whether they were or weren't. "I don't quite believe in her deep interest in getting all these men to open up," Jaimy wrote. "When they do open up to deep knots of neurotic preoccupation, I can see her inwardly eliminating them, even as she is outwardly praising them for being so candid. I don't really blame her – I would do the same."

Joan's late husband, I learned while doing some research for this piece, died while awaiting sentencing for wire fraud, tax fraud, and mail fraud, to all of which he'd pled guilty. Maybe he really was the wonderful partner and parent that Joan made him out to be. People are complicated. Joan – like all of us – has a complex story to tell.

METABOLIZING

Not long after Bob died, my lifelong friend Lisa sent me a quotation from Ross Gay's *Inciting Joy:*

> The griever knows, or comes to know, again and again, that it's not only my beloved friend grandchild dog lover tree sibling auntie teacher parent relationship belief home glacier species that is changed, or gone, because when that one thing changed, *everything* changed. Light through the trees in October now different. The sound of the playground. Making love. Pushing the cart through the aisles of the store. Dreams. The Eagles game on Sundays. Holidays. A walk by the river. Celebration. Changing the sheets. Taking a nap. Cooking a meal. Reading a book. The future. The past. All of it changed. That is what the griever is metabolizing.

Since I first read this, I have taken "metabolizing" to mean incorporating my grief into myself, into who I understand myself to be.

I've experienced this kind of incorporation before. In the aftermath of sexual assault, I wondered how I could live with the knowledge that this had actually happened, to me. Who I could be if fear ruled my body and my life the way it did at first, when I was afraid of everything — walking, driving, sitting in a restaurant where strangers could get close. Eventually I incorporated the assault into myself. I metabolized it. I was no longer so scared so often, but I also no longer pursue solitude in nature, once one of my central pleasures. When my older sister died, I had no idea what it meant to be me without her in the world. Eventually I learned it could be done, though not without thinking of her often. I composed the first draft of this essay within days of Donald Trump winning the 2024 election, and many months later I see myself and everyone I love still metabolizing this turn of events, working through what it means to live now, what it means to be us now. I'll change the tense of that last sentence when I feel like I've actually done the metabolizing.

"The future. The past. All of it changed," writes Ross Gay.

In starting this essay, I read a bit about metabolism, and learned that metabolic processes do three things — converting the energy in food to the energy for running cellular processes, converting the food to nutrients, and eliminating (toxic) waste.

So maybe it's helpful to understand this metabolizing as processing grief, bad news, my helplessness in the face of both private and public reality. Using the energy,

incorporating the nutrients, letting go of the waste. But where is the energy from my grief about Bob and losing Bob? What are the nutrients? What is this waste and how do I let go of it? We do not will our bodies to metabolize food; the body does this without our being in charge. Is it the grief that's in charge here?

NOT KNOWING

I am grateful to have gone through the Covid pandemic as a member of the online Socially Engaged Buddhism community created by Roshi Joan Halifax and her colleagues at the Upaya Zen Center in New Mexico. Developing comfort, or at least acceptance, for the concept of "not knowing" was the most profound lesson I took away from the program. My historical training had prepared me. I was comfortable with the idea that we can never fully understand the past, that evidence is open to interpretation, and that the future is unsure, lacking evidence and frequently disproving extrapolation. But like most people, I squirmed at not knowing in my own life – not knowing what I was doing, not knowing what was going to happen, not knowing how to act. The pandemic – which I had not expected, though some knowledgeable people did – and the teachings in the Upaya program helped me to settle more comfortably into what the Zen master Shunryū Suzuki called "beginner's mind."

Combined with the immediate understanding that nothing really matters in the face of death, the idea of not knowing enabled me to hold my seat when Bob died. I did not like the reality I was experiencing but it was, indeed, my reality, and I understood that eventually my reality would change, as things do.

There was so much I didn't know — how long the administrative and legal and financial tasks would take, for example, but guess what, they take as long as they take. Or what happens after we die, and therefore what had happened to Bob. Or at what point he lost consciousness at the pool that day, and what he might have known about what was happening to him. Or what would become of me.

I have had to let go of these questions. Most of all, I have had to let go of knowing Bob, wanting to understand him better. When you share a life with somebody over such a long time, you come to know them very well in some ways. But, of course, we are never in each other's heads and we often wonder what they are thinking. I sent many pieces of paper to recycling upon which I could have tried to use my well-honed interpretive skills. But could I have really understood what I wanted to understand about my husband and who he was and how he felt about everything, including me? And which him are we talking about, anyway? The Bob I met in 1989? The Bob who died in 2023? Or one of those interim Bobs?

I wrote above about the invisible thread that attached me to Bob when I was gallivanting or working abroad. It made me feel secure. I was loved. I had my person, and no need for searching. I was part of a "we." The thread didn't break when Bob died: it attached itself to grief. But in the long run that doesn't feel secure or dependable, and eventually I started to want it to be attached to something else.

But what to attach it to? I am coming to understand that this may be something I discover rather than something I decide on. It seems unlikely that I will get to attach it to somebody else. Maybe I can tie it to my memory of Bob, and to the knowledge that I

loved and was loved over a long period of time. That does seem more like a secure mooring. But the knowledge doesn't feel so sweet as the love did.

"Part of the state of not knowing is entering into the worlds I am afraid of," writes Roshi Bernie Glassman. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Glassman ran retreats both at Auschwitz and among the unhoused on the streets of American cities, "entering into worlds about which I have no idea. I'm drawn to those aspects of myself that I do not understand, that I fear, that are a mystery. I'm drawn to enter that realm."

I am afraid of this world of widowhood, a world about which I had, as I told the man up the hill, no idea. Am I drawn to the mystery, to the fear, to the parts I don't understand? Not really. Mostly, I have no choice.

There is still so much I don't know. What will become of me?

AFTERWORDS

A YAWP

"Yawp" is Walt Whitman's word, though the *OED* takes it back centuries before he wrote. "I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable," he writes, comparing himself to a spotted hawk in *Song of Myself*. "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." He didn't mean "tears and sobbing," which is a big part of my version. But I imagine he did mean something more cacophonous and more complicated than Robin Williams' character in *Dead Poets Society* (the leading interpreter of "yawp" on the internet) would have you believe.

Thirteen months had passed after Bob's death as I began this final essay, and nineteen as I first let this partially undone braid out of my computer for others to read. After yet another eight months, there are sometimes still days that defeat my sense of purpose, days that do me in, days that require a yawp of I want Bob back, usually not "Bob" as I'm yawping it, but one of the many pet names we used, some for us both. You already know I want my Ting, but there were many of these monikers, and I don't plan to share them all.

The yawps, untamed and untranslatable, come when they will — despite good planning (as after the Days of Bob) and often with no obvious prompt (as one evening walking among the lobbyists' office buildings on K Street, not the likeliest place to be missing Bob). I like to think I will learn to open myself to new activities and people and possibilities. But I expect I'll be yawping from time to time until I, too, die. If I believed I'd be joining Bob in some kind of afterlife, would I be comforted enough to cry less?

SEE ALSO

Bob's death altered my reading habits. I've heard so much from others about what screens and social media and horrific public events have done to their ability to concentrate in recent years that I don't want to ascribe my changes only to grief. But since his death, on top of all that, I've simply been unable to engage. With only a few exceptions -- *Huckleberry Finn* stands out -- I haven't been able to participate in the kind of sustained interaction with another person's mind that reading books has always offered me.

Especially during the early months, when I couldn't get past thirty pages in any novel I tried, including some I was sure I'd love in other circumstances, I read and listened to others' experience of grief and widowhood, the topics that had overtaken my life. Somehow no matter how different from me these people are, I'm grateful to them for revealing the commonalities. I have come to see *Unbraiding* as a contribution to that literature.

Megan Devine's *It's OK That You're Not OK* was the only self-help book I found even remotely helpful. Some of the writing here originated as responses to her program of online writing prompts, which helped to get me back to writing, about six months after Bob died. Devine offers a range of other resources online.

Enough people had recommended Francis Weller's *The Wild Edge of Sorrow* to me over the years that it was already on my shelf when I needed it. This book has been a source of wisdom for me and its ideas have surely found their way into these essays, along with a wonderful talk from Weller that I heard thanks to a link from my friend Lisa. That talk is unfortunately no longer online but you can find Weller on various podcasts and on YouTube.

Anderson Cooper interviews Weller more than once on his podcast "All There Is," framed by his reflections while cleaning out his mother's apartment. Cooper, who has lived among celebrities since he was born, generously demonstrates that the experience of grief is incredibly ordinary, as painful for this TV star and scion of Vanderbilts as for any of the rest of us.

I first read C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed,* written after the death of his wife, as a library ebook, but soon bought it on paper so I could reread and underline. Lewis thought deeply about emotional life, and though his worldview seemed so different from mine, much of what he says shed light on my experience. Many people have noted his observation that grief feels like fear: "The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing. At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me." I was more struck by "bereavement is not the truncation of married love but one of its regular phases—like the honeymoon."

For enjoyment, I recommend Margaret Atwood's 2023 book of short stories, *Old Babes in the Woods*, many of them about a couple named Nell and Tig, in the wake of Tig's death. "Widows," my favorite story, was published in the *Guardian,* and can be read online.

I found the audio version of Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story* compelling during my early months as a widow, though I didn't much like the reader. Compiling detail from journal entries and emails, Oates describes a life and a marriage quite unlike mine. She was suicidal in the wake of her husband's death and describes demons far scarier than any I encountered. She found new love surprisingly fast, and annoyed me, as well as some reviewers, by barely hinting at this in the book. Yet I was consistently grateful to her for writing it all down and sharing it. She says she thought of titling it *A Widow's Handbook,* and while it is surely not that, I did feel like she had other widows in mind as readers.

Many people have compared Oates's book with Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which I'd read not long after it won the 2005 National Book Award, when I knew nothing about any of this. The first time I tried to reread it after Bob's death, Didion's prose felt too full of precise detail, some heartbreaking and some I didn't care about. Reading about magical thinking then felt threatening, even though I was resolute about using my Buddhist training to face reality, and not a magical thinker. Some months later, I returned to the book, shuttling between the text and an audio version. Didion's work remains the most powerful expression of some of this that I know of, though I experience her as even more distant from me than Oates.

Elizabeth Alexander's *The Light of the World* is a beautifully written heartbreaker, a compelling portrait of a love-filled marriage and a husband whose life ended suddenly at 50.

Geraldine Brooks's *Memorial Days* came out around the time I shared the first draft of *Unbraiding.* She ends her story of her husband's sudden death and of isolating herself on an Australian island three years later to write about it, by encouraging her readers to tell their stories. "Take control of this essential moment in the narrative of your life," she writes, advice I took as encouragement for this project.

For more book suggestions, see this *New York Times* article. Be sure to check out the comments section for many more suggestions from readers. And there's lots of help online for the grieving — documents, videos, podcasts -- some of it too religious for me, some overladen with the notion of stages. In addition to the many podcasts and web pages and videos you may find by googling the authors I cite here, Jo McRogers and Nora McInerny deserve mention. They are quite different from each other but both generous, straightforward, and knowledgeable – good company for grievers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to have gotten comments on earlier versions of these essays from a number of writers, and widows, and writers who are widows, and readers who are neither but gave their time to respond to my work.

Kate Daniels and Jaimy Gordon generously provided page-by-page critiques, offering their many decades of experience teaching creative writing, and persuading me to disclose more and to write less abstractly. Gail Reimer and Marianne Hirsch contributed deep insights. These four women are among a group of indispensable friends who met in 1984-85 at the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe. For more than forty years, I have taken comfort in their support and inspiration from their lives and work. They surrounded me on the zoom gallery screen the Sunday after Bob died, and have accompanied me on this widow journey ever since.

I received extensive comments also from Trish Polach and David Suisman. Cristy Willer, Lisa Marshall, and Bethany Weidner offered numerous important suggestions for rethinking and restructuring. A number of others read early drafts and offered essential support, including Wendy Berger, Lauren Boyle, Katya DeKadt, Lewis Hyde, Kathleen Lloyd, Loretta Neumann, Laura Shapiro, Kitty Sklar, Mary Tigner-Rasanen, and Patsy Vigderman. Most of these people, like the Buntings, deserve effusive thanks for their support of my grieving process as well as of my writing.

Melissa Zeiger was the first reader who didn't know me. I'm grateful for her encouragement, and for sharing with me some of her own experience.