Note: The Editorial Board made a special request that the author write this essay, and she kindly agreed.

A Kind of Poem for My Friend and Me

Hilary O'Neill, M.D. (PGY4)

Physicians are taught to use technical, objective, impersonal language. Does a person lose personhood if she's described as "a 54-year-old African-American presenting with increasing lethargy, frequent crying spells, hopelessness, helplessness, plus suicidal ideation"? Or, more condensed even, "a 54 yo AAF w/ hx BAD,1."

Coffee in my M-mug, and grief's palpable. It's my opinion. I don't know about an afterlife. Watching her die made me think of my end, too. Grief is palpable. Nothing's felt right off: so we're taught. I went to work next day. What else is to be done? Stop? I could see myself cold and callous: I'm training myself to be professional. I'm a doctor. My friend's dead, nonexistent. L just called: it's true, M's dead.

Apologies. "Sorry for your loss." Thanks. Shame. Of course I'll miss her. And your excellent care of my friend, thanks so much, Dr Z. Goodbye. A bunch of us read Joyce aloud together in her room. Talked of our love of her company as she went right on dying. We were opposed to it, but not to her wish, for it was her wish. No relatives there; none had been called, none. She trusted us, her friends, our band of eight. We followed her commands. Those things of hers I wanted, like the Chinese tea chest; but I didn't get it: another and better friend put in her claim. How could she? How could she not know what it meant to me. Well… "I never said I want *that*!" I wonder if M might have thought we went for the spoils before she was cold, even. My grandmother used to say, "Would you be in my grave as quick as you're in my chair?" Marking territory, *homo sapiens* finding her way home. I held her hand thinking it might be, just could be, the last breath: she and me.

Can I know how another feels? Feel yourself in another's shoes. Can't happen, of course, if the other isn't feeling. My life progresses, and my attitude about you does, too. Family trees get bigger, leaf out. I mourn all the changes, losing childhood even as I get the college of choice.

© 2006 by the authors

I'm lonely a year and a day after M died. I look around for her business card, call the old number. Lo! Her voicemail still works; I say I miss her a lot. Voicemail for the dead. I feel better. Therapy is messaging the dead.

I'm vague about existentialism, feels like nihilism. I used to read Jean-Paul Sartre. Didn't occur to me then there are times for meaning and times for meaningless. It's grey in the tunnel: grey at the end, too, maybe. Not winning wars but living lives. The Oedipal phase, triangulation; Shakespeare and the web we weave; triangles, lines, family trees, missing the forest for the trees. Me, you, me, God, existentialism; I, my aunt, I, my grandmother (which?); mothers, fathers, mine?

Last night I read old journals I'd kept in college, crying, crying: all this way, all this way since then, and I still say the same things to myself. My friends, now in memory, seem more distinct than they were then, on paper. Scary. Still, it's my handwriting; yes, it is. I don't remember now each one I wrote about then. I loved. I got angry. Ill-understood passions. Go on. Apologize later, cut and run, stay; be happy. Combat rock, Clash; is it a jagged little pill? For music soothes the savage beast; others it lulls to dreamland. The universals: music, dancing, celebrating, mourning. The custom of the uncustomary. What sense is there in waking (one is as in "I went to the wake") the dead? I think wakes are sad and celebratory, for the life that's gone and the life going on. I've been to a couple. Not unhappy, not happy. The meaning is not all about being happy, for which there's neither pill nor secret. (Only two sure things, says Poor Richard.) Our Declaration guarantees us the pursuit not the capture of it. Nor is the meaning all sad, although sad has a big role in the thing; maybe there's a pill for that. Not for me, though, given my natural gift already of it. I used to like math, thinking it had a lot of the answers: you got them or not. Then I liked literature: a study of people in their time by someone in it, their time, with them. I love psychiatry; I love medicine; I love the black, white, and grey of them. Points, so many, many points, of view. Right and wrong and happy and sad and lines and triangles and enviously or jealously and Latin and English or Greek and English or English and English and so forth.

Once I wanted to be a veterinarian. My brother sneered, "You want to be a doctor because it's the most prestigious!" I cried and cried. Can't be true. "You don't know anything about me! I want to help dogs and cats and hamsters." Or was it true? I thought then prestigious was a bad word, one I could never know and therefore bad. Makes me laugh now. Not the word being bad but the way he said it. Maybe he was explaining something. Maybe big brothers are not so…

People ask me if 40's really bad. No. Twenty nine was bad, 39, too. I hope I get to know about 49.

© 2006 by the authors

Is my green like yours? My blue your blue. Yellow's like sunshine, yellow's the streak on my back. Red is my fury and that flapper's dress, I imagine. ROYGBIV or the rainbow? Is there no word rhyming with orange? I live alone, don't I? With somebody or everyone else?

SOURCE INFORMATION

From the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, Philadelphia. Direct inquiries to Dr. O'Neill: Hilary.Oneill@jefferson.edu

---

© 2006 by the authors