The Language of Loss: Transformation in the Telling, In and Beyond the Writing Classroom

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Abstract

Countless students enter college suffering from traumatic losses such as the death of a parent, and many choose to write about their grief in composition classes. Many orphaned students compose their sorrow in order to find hope, without which their chances of thriving are limited. Some feel ill-equipped to meet academic and other challenges as they are preoccupied with feelings of homelessness and abandonment. Because the loss of a parent irrevocably alters one's home—and the yearning for home and security lives in all of us—the need for naming, knowing, and revising grief is crucial in the process of figuring out who and what remains after a parent dies. This study incorporates multiple genres and disciplines: personal narratives, mini case studies, poetry, literature, and theories drawn from composition, medicine, trauma studies, sociology, anthropology, psychology, literature, and feminist research. To illuminate the consequences of bringing painful stories onto the page and into the classroom, I explore what happens when students choose to write about the death of a parent and share their embodied writing with teachers and/or classmates. To understand the long-term effects of such disclosure, I interviewed and reviewed the writings of three former students who wrote about a parent dying. Writing and telling their traumatic losses to a caring audience enables many survivors to transform their suffering into compassion for themselves and others. Articulating their grief gives students a chance to integrate their losses and revise their stories in ways that lead to re-envisioning their homes and identities. Considering the paradoxical presence and denial of death in our culture, educators should acknowledge grief and related emotions in curricula and graduate programs. Instead of resisting students' grief by claiming that "we're not therapists," writing teachers should prepare to meet students' sorrows and fears, for in so doing, we offer them a path forward. Because grief writing has proven beneficial for orphaned students and other trauma survivors, composition teachers should study the interdisciplinary field of writing, telling, and healing in order to respond better to students' voluntary disclosures of significant loss.

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