

Honey Girls: Surviving Grief Through Narrative

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Abstract

This creative project is a theatrical production of *Honey Girls*, my original play, which tells the story of a high school senior whose mother is diagnosed with terminal cancer who now must reconsider the realities of a future without the center of her world. The play is a narrative inspired by my lived experience as the playwright. To supplement the play, I conducted research through the lens of narrative response to grief, using the framework of Joan Didion's play, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which chronicles her experience of grief the year after her husband's sudden death.

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INTRODUCTION

Death is one of the only completely irreversible phenomena of our universe. When someone dies, there is no going back to the way things were before. A death is a fact that irrevocably alters the fabric of life and especially those surviving the loss. The grieving are left with a world that looks different than the one they have always known and must navigate a twist to the story of their lives that cannot be undone. The story that they know about themselves and their family no longer makes sense in the wake of the loss, and they are forced to spin new tales. According to Kathleen R. Gilbert in her article *Taking A Narrative Approach to Grief*, “We need to create stories to make order of disorder and to find meaning in the meaningless. This ‘drive to story’ seems particularly strong when one is confronted with death, loss, and grief,” elevating the need for storytelling in bereavement (236). Whether shared or kept to ourselves, the stories we tell about our lives have extreme power to determine the way we live in grief. For some, this storytelling looks like sharing with a therapist what happened to their lost loved one, or connecting among close family and friends about the pain of the grief. For writers, that storytelling becomes incredibly intentional, an act of commemoration that factualizes the unbelievable events of a loved one’s death.

For Joan Didion, telling the story of the loss of her husband took shape in her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which she began writing nine months after her husband’s sudden death, chronicling her first year of grief. She later adapted the book into a one woman play with the same title, sharing her story in a live form, which I am interested in for the context of this essay. The play tells the story of the moment Didion’s husband, John Dunne, died through the details of the days and weeks following his passing, including Didion’s experience of her

daughter's illness and soon after sudden death. She moves through time and space to paint a full picture of both her emotional and experiential life in her grief. For myself, telling the story of the loss of my mother took shape in a play, *Honey Girls*, which I began writing a year and half after my mother's death to lung cancer after fighting the disease for two and a half years. The play tells the story of Mazie, a high school senior and in many ways my avatar in the play, whose mother, Marigold, has been managing to live with cancer until the disease accelerates, giving her six months to live. Mazie, navigating the upheaval of senior year, is now faced with the gravity of her mother's cancer and is forced to consider the possibility of a future without her mother in it. The play tracks from the moment of Marigold's diagnosis to her death, and the renegotiations, emotions, and decisions that happen in the wake of this tragedy.

The circumstances of Didion's loss and my loss vary greatly as do the intentions behind the writings we created. Didion writes as herself and about the circumstantial facts of her lived experience, chronicling the events of her life the year after her loss; I write through a creative reimagining of my own life, with emotions, themes, and driving questions from my lived experience expressed in the form of other characters and plots. It is my honest story, but it is not told through the factual truth of my life like Didion. Despite variances in grief experience, Didion and I share a need to write a narrative about our experience, and both of these plays serve as healing tools that encapsulate our moments of loss. Although the plays are different in form, situation, and tone, the plays are attempts "to generate new life stories, to craft enduring legacies, and to begin plans for the future" and are riddled with similar expressions, temporal experiences, and moments of liberation that demonstrate the power of writing to create meaning in crisis

(Buser 179). Both Didion and myself through *The Year of Magical Thinking: The Play* and *Honey Girls* respectively are using narrative as a tool to survive grief.

MAGICAL THINKING

One shared idea that Didion expresses in *The Year of Magical Thinking: The Play* and I express in *Honey Girls* that demonstrates the desperation of grief in narrative is the concept at the center of Didion's narrative, magical thinking. Magical thinking can be defined as "the belief that one's ideas, thoughts, actions, words, or use of symbols can influence the course of events in the material world" (Vandenberg). Didion dives deep into her experiences with this phenomenon as it relates to the possible return of her husband after his death throughout her play. To further exaggerate her struggle, Didion was also faced with her daughter's extreme illness, which led to her death not a year and a half after that of her father, as she is already grieving. Didion's character of herself describes a moment as she watches over her ill daughter in which she thinks, "I keep her alive, he comes back" (Didion 35). Didion gives herself immense responsibility in this image, painting herself as both a savior and a miracle maker. She makes meaning and causality out of her daughter's condition and her husband's, although her daughter's future health is out of her hands and her husband's death is irreversible. Didion's magical thinking shows a desperation to save the people she loves most and reverse her fate.

I express a similar magical thinking in *Honey Girls* through the character of Mazie, the daughter of Marigold, who has only six months to live after fighting lung cancer for four years. Mazie, despite not knowing the severity of her mother's new diagnosis, argues with her romantic interest, Grant, about the importance of her academic and career success as it relates to her mother's health. She confides in him that "If I succeed, my mom stays alive...If I fail, she dies"

(Grindell 41). Mazie is connecting her academic success to her mom's ability to survive, two ideas that are completely independent of one another, and thereby seeking autonomy over a situation beyond her control. These expressions of magical thinking in these stories exemplify attempts by the authors at "accessing and expressing complicated emotions surrounding loss" (Buser 181). By letting these irrational, honest feelings exist in the stories, Didion and I are honoring an aspect of our grief that does not follow logical rules. "Storytelling encourages reaction and processing," and by letting the truth about our magical thinking live in our characters, Didion and I are able to better understand and survive our grief (Glazer 132).

TEMPORAL CONFUSION

Another aspect of these plays that exemplifies the surviving power of narrative is the temporal confusion experienced by the characters and authors in grief. Both Didion's character of herself and Mazie express moments of feeling like time is moving faster than they can handle. As Didion's character describes the events immediately after her husband's passing, she speaks in the present about friends arriving to help her. She seems to remove herself from the present of the memory to the present moment on stage and says, "This is all happening too fast," implying that the memories are flooding together and feel beyond her own temporal sense (Didion 14). Or, perhaps she is speaking within the time of the memory, and friends arriving is the object of what is happening too fast; maybe it is a double meaning of both ideas. In either interpretation, Didion is experiencing and attempting to narrativize that the very concept of time did not make sense in her immediate grief. She employs a "static and fragmentary configuration of autobiographical time in which every plot is situated around the death event, yet the narrative moves back, forth, sideways, and beyond different time modes" that demonstrates her grief as existing in a different

temporal sphere than she was used to (Chawla 386). In the wake of the loss, the story of life is so broken that time itself fails.

Through Mazie, I show a similar feeling of temporal wrongness in a different context. Mazie is experimenting with drinking and intimacy with Grant, and she finds herself needing a moment of pause from the fun. She becomes emotional and expresses to Grant that, “It’s all happening so fast, and I feel like I’m failing all the time, and I don’t know what to do or—,” seeming to be talking about senior year moving quickly or her relationship with him (Grindell 65). Perhaps Mazie is talking about something bigger--that time itself is fleeting and with it, her mother’s health; perhaps it is my own voice entering into Mazie’s, expressing that the story of the play is moving beyond what I was ready for. Again, within any of these meanings is the idea that time is not behaving the way it should. Didion and I are using our plays to explore the temporal experience of grief and try to narrativize our own confusion through interpretable, vague expression. In writing through grief, the impact of the story “is not about what is said but how and why it is said” (Gilbert 229). The need to explode the concept of time passing is evident in both of these theatrical moments, and Didion and I both are using the narratives to honor that time ceased to make sense in our grief. The narrativizing of time helps us survive our grief because it legitimizes the intense impact the losses had on the very basis of our lives.

LIBERATION

Both *The Year of Magical Thinking* and *Honey Girls* end with an idea of letting go and liberation, demonstrating that the writing of the narrative itself led to a discovery of healing. In Didion’s piece, she turns outward to the reader to offer directive through her own found perspective on her year of grief:

We all know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a time when we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead.

Let them become the photograph on the table.

Let them become the name on the trust accounts.

Let go of them in the water. (Didion 60)

Didion seems to have reached a place of resolution, a bitter acceptance of what she knows she must do. She is out of other options, and the magical thinking has left her to face the facts of her new life. This moment of opening to her audience is particularly strong, inviting their dead into her own story as well. Didion is healing through “not only in the telling of the story but also in the sharing of the experience” (Glazer 137). She reaches toward her audience and toward her husband, putting him in the water and to rest. Didion is able to endure her grief anew because of the act of writing her story; she finds freedom in the language to let her husband go.

Mazie has a moment of reaching a liberation through acknowledging her audience at the end of *Honey Girls* as well. In the final scene, Mazie reads a eulogy for her mother at her funeral that doubles as her college essay that she has been struggling to write through the journey of the play. The piece of writing is a culmination of Mazie herself owning her own story and finding words to encapsulate the experience of her mother’s cancer, mimicking my own writing experience with the play. Mazie shares her discovery with the funeral attendees and her mother’s spirit. The central idea of the essay is expressed in this stanza:

My mother is the ocean. She is more than a sailing ship or a course to follow. She is waves and tides and crashes against sand. She is the ever-flowing rumble of life. She lives on, and I will always stay afloat, as she washes over me. (Grindell 121)

Mazie seems to say that her mother will always be with her in some way, but she accepts that she will not be here in body. She likens her mother to the ocean, a natural phenomenon that will always remain. Like Didion, the image of water is associated with letting go for Mazie. It is not clear whether these women mean literally taking their loved ones' remains to the water, or if their meaning is beyond the physical realm. There is a poeticism to both Didion and Mazie's ideas that implies a greater meaning, calling on the spirits or souls of their lost family members. Through the water imagery, Didion and I, through Mazie, rewrite the story of our lives and weave our grief and our dead into our new selves. The journey of the narrative was an attempt for Didion "to resurrect and lay to rest her husband [but] in writing, she resurrects her self, a salute to her own aliveness" (Chawla 381). Through trying to tell the story of her husband's death, Didion finds her new self; Mazie experiences the same discovered self through writing the essay, and I do as well through writing the play.

CONCLUSION

The process of writing makes evident the process of grief in "understanding that the person is no longer there, allowing the feelings, and reinvesting in life" as demonstrated in the journeys of these plays (Glazer 133). The moments of magical thinking and temporal confusion have to be accepted and able to live on the page and stage in order to find liberation. As evident in the journey of these two pieces of theatre, "The griever's world is shattered and before reconstructing a new sense of meaning, he or she must take things one step at a time" (LaLoggia 92). The writing itself is the act of saving oneself in grief. Didion and I own our new stories and the new frameworks that our losses have created to survive the grief by rewriting our life narratives. We do not leave our passed loved ones behind, but instead find new versions of our

stories in which their passings are integral. Didion is open in her play about needing writing to cope with the loss, and I share her feeling. Through writing, our grief became not a weight to bear but an act of love, inscribed forever in ink on pages. Writing our stories made us survivors.

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