



The Things We Carry: Understanding Grief and Loss through a Memorial Ceremony, the Elegy, and the List Poem

Curriculum Unit 10.02.07

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Introduction

In this unit, as in all of the Co-operative Arts and Humanities Magnet High Schools's (Co-op's) Creative Writing Curriculum Units, we endeavor to provide sequenced, relevant knowledge, skills, and rich content in a braided manner. In addition, this unit is devoted to an issue that I find is critically missing from our students' education: how to deal with grief. As recently as the day I began writing this unit, a crisis committee had to be called in our urban high school because there had been a shoot-out over the weekend in which three teenagers were injured and one died. None were Co-op students, but all had close friends at Co-op. Students were crying, afraid to stay in school, afraid to go home, afraid of the coming Spring vacation, when many students would be on the streets with nothing to do, and already dreading the summer vacation. "Things are going to pop-wild over the summer," one of the students said through her tears.

I am hard pressed to find a class in which more than 25 percent of the students haven't experienced violence, death, or significant loss first or secondhand this year alone. How do students, children, and the adults they look to for guidance and stability learn to incorporate such experiences into their lives? Does wearing an RIP (Rest in Peace) pin with a picture of the deceased help the student understand or explain the root of his/her grief? Does putting teddy bears, signs, and candles at the spot where a friend died give a student the vocabulary to discuss where his/her grief lives? Is one Crisis Team Meeting, on one day, out of 180 school days, enough training in the process of moving through the stages of grief when students don't even know that there are identified stages to move through? Each of these actions is an attempt to memorialize and each is certainly important. These actions give students a feeling of control over one small part of an event that is uncontrolled and uncontrollable. But I think there is something to be learned from the process of grieving that requires language to examine, interpret, express, and in the end to decide what things you will let go of and what things you will carry away from grieving.

I am not about to make the argument that writing is the cure. It's not. But I do want to make the anecdotal observation that over the last ten years of teaching Creative Writing to urban high school students, who have deep and intense life experience, but seldom have deep and intense literary experience, reading and writing can change the way they see themselves and their lives. I strongly believe that if we do not begin teaching students methods for incorporating, for learning how to carry the weight of what they experience, see, feel,

fear, and do, we will be creating a society of people who act and react in a violent cycle too reminiscent of A Clockwork Orange.

As the lead teacher for Creative Writing at the Co-op, I seek to develop a creative writing curriculum that is artistically and intellectually challenging, mindful of form and the elements of writer's craft, engaging, text-based, and sophisticated, and that builds each student's authentic voice. There is no question about what a tall order this is; however, the filling of that order (unit by unit and in collaboration with my department colleagues) usually comes down to three questions: what do we want our students to know that will stay with them and help them now and in the future; what do we want them to read to learn it; and what do we want them to write as evidence of their ownership of the new knowledge?

Another way of looking at how we attempt to scaffold learning in the Creative Writing Curriculum is expressed well by the updated version of Bloom's Taxonomy, which proposes that learning occurs best in the following way: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. (Wilson) This version of Bloom's Taxonomy is different from the original, better-known version in three ways: it is in verb rather than noun form, the order of how knowledge is acquired is different, as it places creativity at the highest point of knowledge, and as John Hattie says of the new Bloom's "This is a major advance on the better-known Bloom's Taxonomy which confuses levels of knowing with forms of knowledge. (29) Of course, as creative writing teachers, we believe that every student has the ability to use his/her knowledge both as a basis to learn more and as a means of creating something original and authentic. And guiding students to that level is always our overall objective.

No matter how student-centered a classroom is the tone and educational environment are set by the adult actions of the teacher. I have included some pedagogical thoughts, concepts, and strategies that I have found successful in creating a student-centered, adult-lead environment in which students understand what I mean by Authentic Voice, The Master Apprentice Method (aka MAM), Making My Process Visible, and Feedback.

Learning About, Writing About, and Integrating Grief

This unit takes students through a four-stage process in order to achieve a fluency with the intellectual idea of grief and loss. "The process of learning is a journey from ideas to understanding to constructing and onwards. It is a journey of learning, unlearning, and overlearning [...] or fluency of achievement [...] there is over-learning when we consider a person fluent in a language or with a musical instrument. [...] A sufficient level of fluency can lead to other desirable outcomes such as retention, endurance, stability, and application within a domain." (Hattie 30)

In order to create fluency it is necessary to create a series of exposures to the ideas we want the students to work with. This unit begins by exposing students to the Five Stages of Grief as developed by Marion Kubler-Ross and then invites students to use the vocabulary of the five stages while they are thinking, reading, and writing about grief and loss in the three creative mediums they will work with creatively: a memorial ceremony, an elegy, and a list poem.

In preparing yourself (the teacher) to work with teenagers in this most delicate emotional area it is important to remember that most teenagers are experiencing most of what they go through for the first time and that is

scary for them. They also have a tendency to get most of their information from other teenagers and that means they are attached to a lot of incorrect information. But they are real people with real prior-knowledge and that prior-knowledge must be respected and accepted throughout this process or they will simply shut down and not trust you.

The Five Stages of Grief

Background Thinking: The five stages of grief as outlined by Marion Kubler-Ross are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The five stages of grief are experiential and not necessarily linear. And while one person may go through all five stages and another may not, each person is likely to find that the progression is recursive with dips back and forth through the stages over time...even over a lifetime. According to David Kessler, a colleague of Kubler-Ross:

The stages have evolved since their introduction and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives. The five stages, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling. But they are not stops on some linear timeline in grief. Not everyone goes through all of them or in a prescribed order. Our hope is that with these stages comes the knowledge of grief 's terrain, making us better equipped to cope with life and loss. (Kubler-Ross and Kessler)

It is not the intention of this unit to perform psychotherapy. The goal is to learn about the emotional journey of grief and to use that knowledge to deepen and broaden our ability to understand, explain, and create expressive means to share what we've learned and what we think and feel.

Oddly there is a fabulous and funny cartoon from the television show Adult Swim that shows a giraffe going through the Five Stages of Grief as he sinks in quick sand. The video is available on Youtube by entering Five Stage of Grief Giraffe. While I by no means endorse making fun of anyone's pain, I do find that humor is often a very effective way to get a point across. This video gives a quick overview of the Five Stages of Grief in a

memorable, amusing, and easily recognizable way. It's a quick multi-modal way to build the vocabulary for discussing grief.

Creating a Memorial Ceremony

As a writing teacher in an Arts and Humanities school, I often have the honor of working with performing arts students who are in need of help expressing their thoughts in writing. Several years ago I worked with a 12th grade dance student (Ms. Pearson) who was creating her Senior Interdisciplinary Research Project (SIRP): a project that combined her art discipline (African Dance) with an academic subject (culture) to create a ten-page paper and a fifteen minute presentation of an original artwork.

In her research Pearson found many instances of African funeral dances as well as customs that included the making and breaking of a piece of pottery. She decided to create a mourning dance in honor of her father who had been murdered when she was five or six. She combined the customs she had discovered and created a memorial ceremonial dance. As the mourner she painted a medium sized terra cotta plant pot with symbols and images that were reminiscent of her father. She choreographed a traditional African dance for a group of eight dancers which she performed to a recording of African drumming. Before the dance began she placed the pot at the front center of the dance floor (facing the audience--who represented her tribe) At the end of the dance she was left alone in front of the pot. While the drums continued she raised the pot to the heavens and then brought it down quickly so that it smashed into pieces on the ground, freeing the spirit of the dead person and bringing relief to the mourner.

When she smashed the pot...there was an audible gasp from the audience. No one had expected it. After she smashed the pot she collapsed in tears. She told me afterwards that she had never cried for her father and that she had been holding all of her feelings and fears inside her since she was a child. She said this ceremony freed her and made her feel physically lighter.

While I was not able to find definitive examples of a specific culture or tribe that performed the exact memorial ceremony that Ms. Pearson performed in my research into mourning customs, I have found many instances of cultures worldwide that use aspects of the ceremony she developed. For example, the Gullah people of the American South use a drum beat to inform people that someone in town has died and sing, dance, pray and smash bottles and dishes at the graveside in order to "break the chain" so that no one else in the same family will soon die. (Opalah)

The Old Testament says that man comes from dust and returns to dust. Although Judaism does not allow open coffins, the closest family members are allowed to see the body before burial. When I saw my mother's body, her hands were crossed over her chest and she was wrapped in a fine muslin cloth. On top of her hands was a small white ceramic plate broken in half. This broken plate is both symbolic of breaking the worldly connection and is an echo of the breaking of a glass at a Jewish wedding. The breaking of the glass is a symbolic recollection of the tragedy of the Jewish loss of the ancient Temple and its inherent symbol of closeness to G-d. The breaking of the glass is a reminder that even at the pinnacle of worldly happiness there is a spiritual sadness. Likewise, at the moment of great worldly loss, there is the recollection of great worldly happiness. Another Middle Eastern symbolic idea related to clay pottery comes from the Egyptians who believe that "G-d created people on a potter's wheel." (Discover Armenia)

The Hindu's also have customs that involve the breaking of a pot.

The eldest son or the male member carries on his head, a water-filled clay pot and goes around the body thrice [...] during each round, one brother-in-law makes a hole in the clay pot, from behind with a sharp edged knife, allowing the water to spill on the ground. When the third round is complete, the pot is thrown backwards over [the son's] head, allowing the pot to touch the tip of the edge of a spade and to break into pieces. [It] is symbolic of saying that when the departed was alive, the body was brimming with life [and with the breaking of the pot and emptying of the water] the body becomes empty of life and joins the earth. (Nair)

Lesson plan one discusses the development of a memorial ceremony based on the customs discussed above as well as on Ms. Pearson's memorial ceremony.

Safety Concerns, Administrative and Staff Support, Parental Permission

It is a good idea to get approval for this part of the unit from your principal, administrators, and parents prior to implementation. Since the intent of this activity involves a class of high school students standing in a circle in order to smash clay pots it is a very good idea to have appropriate permissions as well as an agreed-upon location (preferably outside) where this experience (which is a form of performance art) can occur. The janitorial staff should also be notified since you might need their help, supplies (brooms, trash bags, and garbage pail) in order to clean up after the activity. Be advised that if you choose to perform this activity off school grounds a city permit may also be required. Safety precautions are also outlined in the Lesson Plan One.

Reading and Writing the Elegy

Background Thinking: The elegy is a time-honored method of writing about loss. It is often a public acknowledgement of the feelings and thoughts the loss engenders in a person, a group of people, a community, even a country. One of the elements I find appealing about elegy is that its structure is malleable. As D.A. Powell writes in *Structure and Surprise: Engaging Poetic Turns*, "The structure of the elegy is difficult to pin down; in fact, the elegy is more a mode of thinking, or a complex set of conventions, than a single structure. An elegy often serves as an occasion for considering numerous issues from the political to the deeply personal, apart from the mourning of the dead." (83). The idea that the elegy is a mode of thinking appeals to the concept of this unit, which is to bring some metacognition to an area that is often very emotional.

Even though the elegy can lack a discernable structure or form, there are elements of writer's craft that repeat throughout the genre. As Mark Strand and Eavan Boland describe in *The Making of a Poem*;

An elegy is a lament. It sets out the circumstances and character of loss. It mourns for a dead person, lists his or her virtues, and seeks consolation beyond the momentary event. Despite this, an elegy, unlike a metrical form, is not associated with any required pattern or cadence or repetition...In the traditional elegy the grief the poet expresses is rarely a private one...The best elegies will always be sites of struggle between custom and decorum on the one hand, and private feeling on the other (167).

The following elegy was written by my student Troy Smith, 11th grade. Mr. Smith has been majoring in Creative Writing at Co-op since his freshmen year and this elegy has been through roughly six revisions. It is reprinted here with Mr. Smith's permission:

He's On His Way
By Troy Smith (17)

Breaking News
He's passed on, at such a young age.
countless phone calls are made to
inform his family and friends of this
breaking news. Watery tears flow down
cheeks to exemplify the hurt and pain
of his death. Another young life lost.

Memories
They reminisce over him, wishing they

could have embraced him for the last time. His life is examined from beginning to end. His squeaky laugh brings smiles and reflections of when they first heard it. His intelligence is acknowledged and his soul will live on in them.

Life

Originally people perceived him as a quiet individual. That's only because they didn't give him a chance to open up. He was a writer, a son, a brother, a nephew, and a caring person who prayed to G-d daily and wanted to leave a legacy for his peers. He was a blessing in disguise.

Affection

His peers literally spend days remembering all of the times they shared in Reality. Males and females converse through laughter and sobs about the kind of person he was. Teachers speak about how intelligent he was for his age, followed by more tears of sorrow.

What he meant to them, they never got to say,
Until the news came of him meeting his dying day.

Family

The son of two Seventies babies, burying their son who was far from your average person. He was his baby brother's role model and father figure. All of his family members have separate but fond memories of something beautiful this boy has done. Now he gets to meet his other uncle, reunite with his grandmother and cousins who met their fate before him.

Funeral

A congregation of people from all walks of life come to mourn and celebrate his life. His spirit cries at how many come to see him for one last time, because in Reality he would've never guessed. It'll be easier for some to let go than others, they'll continue to grieve even after the

funeral is over. Some may even express themselves over the microphone about what the preacher could not, for they knew and spent time with him.

Burial

His casket slowly descends to the ground, like many others before him. Everyone stares at it, still not wanting to believe that he's not here. Whether you realize it or not, I loved every single one of you as much as I loved myself.

He came to say it through his writing, his laughter, and the times he shared with you. Now that he's at rest, he'll do it spiritually, until we meet again at the Place we all originally come from.

The following is a list of famous and well written elegies that are easily accessible in anthologies, on various websites, and in some cases in audio or video versions. Some websites that I frequently use and recommend to my students are: www.poets.org <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/>; www.pw.org; <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>.

- Maya Angelou, "Elegy for Michael Jackson" (Very contemporary and accessible)
- W.H. Auden, "Funeral Blues" (aka: "Stop All the Clocks". There is a powerful performance of this poem by John Hannah in the film *Four Weddings and A Funeral*)
- W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats (Part III)"
- Mary Jo Bang, "The Role of Elegy"
- Nathaniel Bellows, "Elegy"
- John Berryman, "Dream Song 324: An elegy for WCW, the lovely man"
- Gwendolyn Brooks, "the rites for Cousin Vit"
- Thom Gunn, *The Man With Night Sweats* (This is a book of elegies)
- Garrett Hongo, "The Legend: In memory of Jay Kashiwamura"
- Ben Johnson, "On My First Son"
- Kenneth Koch, "A Momentary Longing to Hear Sad Advice from One Long Dead"
- W.S. Merwin, "On the Anniversary of My Death"
- Pablo Neruda, "A Dog Has Died"
- Walt Whitman, "O Captain! My Captain!"

Lesson Plan 2 discusses some strategies for teaching reading and writing of the Elegy.

Reading and Writing the List Poem

Background Thinking: The List Poem is a deceptive piece of writing. It seems so easy...what could be easier than writing a list? But in order to write a compelling List Poem a writer has to answer the question why. Why this list? Why this group of emotions, understandings, tangible or intangible items or ideas? In his seminal book on poetic form *The Handbook of Poetic Form*, Ron Padgett describes the list poem:

A list poem (also called a 'catalog poem') is a very old form of poetry. It consists of the itemization of things or events. List poems can be of any length, rhymed or unrhymed. The original purpose of this descriptive, repetitive form was often functional. For instance, Polynesian list poems formed an inventory of all the islands in Polynesia. (100)

Everyone knows a list poem. This Little Piggy is a very basic list poem. One of the more sophisticated forms of

the list poem is called a Blazon. The Blazon itemizes the qualities of a loved one. Our objective in writing the list poem is to be closer to the Blazon than to the Piggies. In this part of the unit, we are seeking to use the simplicity of the list poem as a means of deciding what and why. What do we want to carry away from our grief? What part of the person, place, or thing we are grieving over do we want to hold onto and why? The power of writing the list poem at this point in our process is to choose what we want to carry rather than have the entire weight of grief bear down on us until we can't carry anything but the grief.

Here are examples of List Poems written by my former students Danielle Ardizzone, Desimone Carr, and Emily Kirchner, each written in 2003 and reprinted with the author's permission. Their class read poems from the book *What Have You Lost?* Collected and edited by Naomi Shihab Nye. Their assignment was to write a set of List Poems inspired by what they had lost, what they had found, and a moment that has no name.

In The Midst of Daily Life
by Danielle Ardizzone

I've lost in the midst of daily life numerous pens (replaceable friends for a writer)
I've lost in the midst of daily life the dolphin necklace I thought was magical
I've lost in the midst of daily life the fairy tale book I never got to read
I've lost to the seasons of maturity my "black days" of entrapment
I've lost to the seasons of maturity my feelings of inferiority
I've lost to the seasons of maturity my anxiety, which controlled me
I've lost to the seasons of maturity my violent habits
I've lost in the winds of time my elfin friend's daily presence, to distance
I've lost in the winds of time my father to illness
I've lost in the winds of time sixteen years

This is What I've Found Out
by Desimone Carr

As I grow I realize I've found happiness every time I think about my love
As I grow I realize I've found real friends who stay true
As I grow I realize I've found maturity within myself making more clever
decisions
As I grow I realize I've found love from friends when I least expected it
As I grow I realize I've found reliability in my mother
As I grow I realize I've found relaxation in my home
As I grow I realize I've found that I can deeply relate to soothing R & B music
As I grow I realize I've found improvement in expressing my thoughts
As I grow I realize I've found prosperity in my fantasies
As I grow I realize I've found honesty even when it hurts

Moments With No Name
by Emily Kirchner

When you're so immersed in a book, you miss the characters when it's done
When you won't catch what you're looking for, but you continue to run
When you've planned out all the words to say, but your lips are paralyzed
When you realize you could have gotten your way, but you compromised
When you sit on a swing in a distant playground, reflecting on a dream
When you learn that everyone you know is different than they seem
When you fear you'll drown inside the silence in your head
When you find refuge under a blanket and never want to leave your bed
When you catch a glimpse into a mirror and barely recognize your face
When you lose yourself in fantasy, transcending time and space.

Additional selections for readings in the area of List Poems include:

- "What Have You Lost by Naomi Shahib Nye

The Things They Carry by Tim O'Brien (While technically this is a short story O'Brien's use of detailed lists containing the tangibles and intangibles the soldiers carry could easily be read as highly effective and affecting prose poetry. His title and writing inspired part of the title and concept of this unit.)

Lesson 3 discusses some teaching strategies for reading and writing the List Poem.

A Few Pedagogical Notes

Authentic Voice

In my prior YNHTI unit, *Uncovering Your Students' Authentic Voice*, I discuss and define what I mean by Authentic Voice in some detail. Since Authentic Voice is an important part of creative writing I think it's worthwhile to include a shortened version of that working definition here.

Something is written in [the student's] authentic voice when it contains ideas and details that could only [have been] written by him/or her. But young writers tend to write in broad sweeping generalizations and they do so for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is because they think that generalizing makes their writing more meaningful to their readers. It is our job to show them that in fact the exact opposite is true. It is important to let students know that generalized writing is first draft writing--which can be a good thing-- as long as they understand that part of the writer's craft is to replace the generalized with the specific in future drafts. Students need to be able to see and hear the difference between 'anyone could have written this' and 'only you could have written this in this way.' (Katz)

The Master/Apprentice Method (MAM)

Another concept that I have been developing for some time and that is discussed in detail in my prior YNHTI unit, *Uncovering Your Students' Authentic Voice* (Katz) that comes into play in this unit is what I call the Master Apprentice Method (MAM) of learning to write. I describe what I mean by MAM partially as follows:

Reading the work of the writers who came before us, listening to the unique voice each brings us, attempting to walk in the footprints left to us, is as good a way as any of learning how to find the unique, authentic voice within each of us. In this way writers are no different from any other artists. We must practice scales like musicians, we have to stand at the barre like dancers, and we have to break great paintings down into the major lines and shapes we see so that others can see them too. In order to begin to master the elements of reading and writing in our own authentic voices, we must apprentice ourselves to the "master writers" who have done this work so successfully before us. We must choose some literary elements to focus on, read for those elements, discuss them with each other, and then write using those elements, initially imitating what the master writer has done. We must question the writers by questioning what we see them doing in their texts. Of course they cannot answer us verbally, but their work answers our questions. Over time we make those elements our own and their use becomes as fluid and natural to us as our own ability to walk down stairs.

In guiding students through, what may be for many of them, the first purposeful, metacognitive process of grieving this unit will rely on MAM for its work with existing texts (elegies, list poems, etc.) but it will also rely on the students memories of people, places, and things they have lost. Those memories will also act like guides for this work. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot "No person has his complete meaning alone." Not in art or life.

Teaching by Making Your Own Process Visible

How will students work their way methodically through the updated version of Bloom's Taxonomy: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating? How will they begin to distinguish the general from the specific, the cliché from the original? These questions are deceptively simple to us (adults and teachers) because we have practiced these skills and strategies for years. It is not that we skip any of the steps we want our students to master; it is that we have come to do so many of those early steps, let us call them processes, so quickly that we are unaware we are doing them.

I believe that the best teachers are the ones who strive to make their own thinking process visible to their students. I do not mean that these teachers require their students to think the same way as they do. Rather I mean that teachers share what they see, think, and do: they model thinking not answers. Nowhere is this more crucial than in the arts where teachers and students are focused on creating expression.

Empathy for the students' thoughts, feelings, and attempts to make sense of a difficult area of life (grief and loss) can go a long way in helping the teacher model how to create the memorial ceremony, and write the poetry in this unit. Open-minded observation of the students and how they grapple with this work can also help the teacher simplify their own process. I am reminded of an apocryphal story that when someone told Picasso he drew like a child he reportedly said: "It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child."

Feedback

In his groundbreaking 2009 book *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement* John Hattie, Professor of Education and Director of the Visible Learning Labs, at the University of Auckland, New Zealand makes quite a compelling case for feedback being one of the top three ways in which student learning can be increased. Hattie is not talking about the "red pen" kind of feedback so many teachers rely on, nor does he define feedback as a one-way conversation that goes from teacher to student. He argues for feedback that is a conduit from teacher to student, from student to teacher, from peer to peer, from colleague to colleague. He says,

It is about teachers enabling students to do more than what teachers do unto them; it is the focus on imparting new knowledge and understanding and then considering and monitoring how students gain fluency and appreciation in this new knowledge and build conceptions of this knowing and understanding. Feedback from students to teachers involves information and understanding about the tasks that make the difference in light of what the teacher already understands, misunderstands, and constructs about the learning of his or her students ... It matters when teachers see through the lens of the student grappling to construct beliefs and knowledge about whatever is the goal of the lesson ... It is not the knowledge or ideas, but the learner's construction of this knowledge and these ideas that is critical. (238)

Like grief and loss and life learning is often uncomfortable, non-linear, recursive, clumsy, and full of mistakes. Neither teaching nor feedback is about filling an empty container (the students' head). Feedback that works, that keeps a student engaged and writing, rather than shuts him or her down, is feedback that accepts and respects what the student knows and builds on it, adds to it, and builds on that, all the while listening to and reading what the student knows.

Target Class

The target classes for this unit are the tenth-grade Creative Writing classes at Co-op (there are two that run concurrently). The tenth-grade is likely to be a class of approximately forty students who range from exemplary to special needs students. The unit is suited to all learners because its focus is on developing the individual's authentic voice through the steps of Bloom's Taxonomy (remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating). These steps are accessible to all learners. The unit can easily be modified so that students who work at a slower pace or at a lower skill level can work with shorter (more accessible) pieces of writing, as well as with fewer literary elements at a time.

Although the activities in this unit are designed to lead to an increasing understanding of the grieving process and the integration of what is lost into the person who has lost it, the parts could be separated. Each part could also work as a much smaller and less time consuming stand-alone unit.

Projected Timeline for Lessons/Unit

I would expect the lessons in this unit to roughly the amount of class time that follows:

- Introduction to The Five Stages of Grief: two class periods.
- Creating a Memorial Ceremony: five class periods.
- Reading and Writing the Elegy: eight to ten class periods.
- Writing the List poem: eight to ten class periods.
- Add one to two days for each section after which you would like to have the students share their work (which I highly recommend).
- Total number of class periods (approximately) 30 class periods

A note on modifying this unit

My target classes are sophomore creative writing students all of whom are experienced with both daily writing, as well as with the idea of using a primary text as the starting point for a piece of their own creative writing. They are likely to work through the lessons in this unit more quickly than perhaps students in an English class might. While they are self-identified writers, there is still a wide range of skill levels and abilities

from students with IEP's (Individual Education Plans) to Honors level students and every kind of student in-between. Modification of the unit, even with the more experienced writing students, will certainly be required and is easily accomplished by modifying the length of works chosen as readings and the length and depth of writing expected of the students, as well as by using one, two, or all parts of the unit as written.

Student Centered Objectives

There are two things I have discovered about high school students that are particularly important to keep in mind during this unit: they are quite young, and for all of their bravado they are often experiencing life passages for the first time. Often they do not have the vocabulary to describe what they are thinking and feeling and invariably they will attempt to get help from an equally inexperienced/inarticulate peer, before seeking out a more mature role model. This leads to a "sameness" in students' writing that goes against the idea of developing each students' original authentic voice.

Over years of exceedingly unscientific polling, I have asked my students to read countless pieces of famous writing and to underline words, lines, phrases, and ideas that they wish they had written. Not just words, lines, phrases, and ideas they "like" and think are "nice" or "beautiful"...but that they wish they had come up with before the writer they are reading did. Without fail they are able to identify the most powerful snippets and are able to explain why the chosen words could have come from their own minds or hearts, if they'd have just thought of them first. Often the link they are responding to is something quite specific and detailed. These specific details usually come in the forms of sensory and figurative language. When Walt Whitman writes: "...every atom in me as good belongs in you" (1) he is telling us that we are the same down to the atomic level. It does not get much smaller or larger than that.

Students' first draft writing will invariably contain clichés and generalizations that they believe to be powerful. They simply have not been on the planet long enough to know that it is the details and personal specific examples and observations that give writing its universality. As A.N. Whitehead said, "We think in generalities, but we live in details" (Hattie 22). They do recognize the power and transformative beauty of words when they see them used by great writers and, when they see it, they want that power. This unit is designed to help students move from sameness, cliché, and generalizations to specific, personal, powerful writing.

This unit is also designed to give students a working understanding of the vocabulary for and process of grieving so that they may own, express, and share their grief as a means of moving forward with their lives. Not to drop their grief like unclaimed baggage, nor to angrily throw it in the face of all comers, but instead, perhaps, to carry their grief as ee cummings suggests: "...i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)."

In this unit students will be able to (SWBAT):

1. Use reading to become better writers and writing to become better readers.
2. Use a common vocabulary of psychological terms to read, analyze, synthesize, discuss, and write about grief and loss.
3. Use a common vocabulary of literary elements to analyze, discuss, and guide the writing and revision in their own and the writing of their peers.

4. Begin the process of understanding, synthesizing, and expressing, their past grief and loss and will begin the process of empathizing with the grief and loss of others.
5. Begin the process of choosing what to carry away from their past grief and loss.
6. Begin to understand how master writers use detailed sensory and figurative language to create unique writing and express meaning.
7. Use a master text as a map that can help lead them to their own authentic writing.
8. "Listen with a pen" (take notes) during readings and discussions of the master-works studied.
9. Use a positive and constructive method for responding to the emerging writing of their peers.

Essential Questions

There are five essential questions I want students to ponder during this unit. Through the students' readings, discussions, writings, and responses to their peers' writings the teacher will be able to assess how well each student is, in fact, able to understand and make connections to the variety of elements they are studying.

The five essential questions are:

1. What is grief and how am I affected by my grief?
2. How have writers and artists before me used writing and art to understand, express, synthesize, and move on from grief?
3. What elements are the Master writers using and how do they make me feel, think, picture, and understand grief?
4. How can I use writing and art to understand, express, synthesize, and move on from my own grief?
What elements of a Master writer (pick one we've studied) do I want to apprentice myself to
5. (borrow, emulate, make my own) in order to make my reader/audience feel, think, picture, and understand grief as I see it?

Reading Poetry: A Quick Primer

Many people (teachers and students) find reading and writing poetry intimidating. Often people are relieved merely to have solved the puzzle of "what is the meaning of this poem." But even "meaning" can be illusive and difficult to describe if you don't have the vocabulary to do it. I am by no means saying that what follows is an exhaustive method for reading, writing, and discussing poetry but I find it to be a good start. I would put the following under the heading of basic Poetic Elements or Elements of Writers' Craft:

What Poetic Elements do you notice the writer using?

1. Figurative Language-Metaphor

- a. uses: like, as, is

2. Sensory Language-the five senses

- a. descriptions of: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching

3. Sound Devices

- a. rhyme: dog, frog, hog, analog
- b. Alliteration-repetition of initial sound: bear, baby, baboon, black, blue
- c. assonance-repetition of vowel sounds within word or line: thinking, thin

4. Form - Structure, organization, pattern

- a. repetition-words, lines, phrases
- b. rhyme scheme: aabb ccdd ee
- c. what it looks like on the page
- d. a known form (Ex: Sonnet has 14 lines with a rhyme scheme)

5. Meaning/message what does the poet want you to:

- a. feel
- b. think
- c. picture
- d. understand

Introduction to Sample Lesson Plans

I have designed this unit with four parts that I intend to teach in the order in which they have been introduced and explained earlier in the section entitled: Learning About, Writing About, and Integrating Grief. Since The Five Stages of Grief could be considered fairly standard content I leave the lesson planning of that part of the unit to your discretion. As a Creative Writing teacher I believe I have some insight into the way in which reading to write creatively is different from reading to write analytically and so I will concentrate my lesson planning in those areas, as well as in the area of how to create a memorial ceremony.

Lesson Plan One: Creating a Memorial Ceremony

Safety Concerns, Administrative and Staff Support, Parental Permission

It is a good idea to get approval for this part of the unit from your principal, administrators, and parents prior implementation. Since the intent of this activity involves a class of high school students standing in a circle in order to smash clay pots it is a very good idea to have appropriate permissions as well as an agreed-upon location (preferably outside) where this experience (which is a form of performance art) can occur. The janitorial staff should also be notified since you might need their help, supplies (brooms, trash bags, and garbage pail) in order to clean up after the activity. It is also a good idea to have one or more additional adults at the ceremony in order to maintain a high level of decorum, seriousness, and safety. Be advised that if you choose to perform this activity off school grounds a city permit may also be required.

If you must do the ceremony indoors, it is advisable to cover the floor with a thick plastic tarp in order to contain the shards, as well as to aid in cleaning up after the objects are broken. It is also a good idea to borrow safety glasses from the chemistry department for the actual breaking of the object. Students may want to keep a souvenir piece of their broken object and may want to give a piece to someone else. Bring sandwich bags in order to have students safely carry souvenir pieces away with them.

Objective/SWBAT (Students Will Be Able To)

- Identify a person, place, or thing they have lost and wish to memorialize through a piece of transitory/transformational art (the memorial pot) which is a piece of art that is being made with the expressed intent of destroying it.
- Identify which stage of grief they are working from at the time they begin working on the memorial pot and after the memorial pot has been completed and destroyed (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance).
- Identify figurative words and images in various forms of art that remind him or her of the person, place, or thing he or she is memorializing.
- Use figurative words and images to adorn the memorial pot he or she makes.
- Participate in a community based performance art ceremony.

Essential Questions

- How have writers and artists before me used writing and art to understand, express, synthesize, and move on from grief?
- How can I use writing and art to understand, express, synthesize, and move on from grief?

Materials Needed To Make the Memorial Object

- Each student should have a terra cotta type of plant pot, or bowl, or plate (or something of that kind--do not use glass as it is very dangerous when smashed).
- Simple black paint and brushes are all that is needed to create classical Grecian- style imagery
- Additional useful supplies could include: finger paints, permanent markers, stickers, glitter, glue, etc.
- Newspaper to protect work areas
- Cleaning supplies

Materials Needed to Perform the Memorial Ceremony

- It is also a good idea to have one or more additional adults at the ceremony in order to maintain a high level of decorum, seriousness, and safety.
- Tarp to protect floor or ground and to contain broken pieces of object
- Goggles for each student (and others in attendance)
- Each student should bring his/her memorial object
- Dust pans, large and small brooms, heavy duty garbage bags, and garbage can
- Sandwich bags for souvenir pieces
- Prompt tone (drum, small gong, resonating bell)
- Something for students to write on and write with (journals if they have them)

Order of Activities

I have purposely not given a specific number of days or amounts of time to the following activities. How you move through this process depends on the length of your classes, the number of students you have, and the needs of your students as you progress. My classes are double periods daily and I predict it would take me five to seven days to complete the entire process.

- Begin by giving students an overview of the unit and the purpose of the memorial object. Talk about how objects like this are used in other cultures. Make sure students know that they are expected to break the object; otherwise students may become attached to the pot after they work on it and may not want to break it. Make allowances if students have strong feelings about this. They may feel differently after others break their pots or they may not.
1. Discuss Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's "Five Stages of Grief" to familiarize the students with the methodology. I suggest that you write the stages on the board or give the students a handout, so they can refer to this information when they are asked to identify the stage they are in.
 2. After the introduction is complete, have students take a few minutes to write about people, places, or ideas that they feel grief or loss about. Remind the students that there doesn't have to have been a literal "death" of a person in order to feel grief. People can have grief about loss of pets, dreams, a relationship, childhood, innocence, etc...
 3. Next have students respond to the prompts below with a quick write. The primary point of the quick write is to allow students enough time to write down their immediate responses to the questions without allowing them to focus too intensely on any one question. The quick write is the creative brainstorming that gives the students a wealth of beginning images and ideas to work with as they continue the project. Ask students to write something for each of the prompts. The quick write can take any form the student is comfortable with: bulleted list, paragraphs, poem, cluster chart, etc.
 4. Prompts: What person, place or thing do you want to memorialize? What are some of the tangible and intangible things you remember about this person, place, or thing? What words and images come to mind when you think about this person, place, or thing? What experience of being with the person, place, or thing are you thinking about most (you don't have to tell the story...just write down enough to remind yourself what the story is...a title might be enough). What stage of grief do you feel you are experiencing in relationship to this person, place, or thing at this moment (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance)?
 5. Ground Rules for Sharing: It is always a good idea to provide students a safe environment in which to share...so set the ground rule that students are expected to practice listening without commenting. This can be very hard for students who like to compare, contrast, and critique each other. But in this case opinions are not invited.
 6. Sharing: Ask students to choose one answer to a prompt to share with the group. Accept volunteers who are willing to share. This whole process is deeply personal and the rawness of feelings may take students by surprise. Students often like to share what they're thinking and writing and few people ever ask them about grief and loss, so don't be surprised if many students want to share.
 7. Bring out the art supplies and let students use their writing from the prior day to put figurative words and symbols in and on their clay pots. You may want to show students some photographs of Grecian Urns, Cave Drawings, and Egyptian Pyramid burial symbols in order to give them some ideas.
 8. Students may need between two and three days to research, think about, and work on their memorial pot. Remind students that the purpose of the object is to be broken in order to achieve a feeling of release, relief, or change.
 9. Once all of the students have completed their objects prepare to bring students to the agreed upon location for the ceremonial breaking of the pots. (See "Safety Concerns, Administrative and Staff Support, Parental Permission" before you begin).
 - 10.

There are many ways in which the ceremonial breaking of the memorial pots can proceed. But at its simplest the students can stand in a circle holding their objects. They should have their journals and pens easily accessible, as they will be asked to write immediately after their pots are broken. There should be some space between each student and safety

11. goggles should be worn during the breaking. There can be a moment of silence and on the prompt of the teacher (a drum, small gong, or resonating bell sound works well) students should lift their objects up to the sky and then they should throw them down in front of them. They should aim for the piece to hit the ground within a foot of where they are standing...the objects should not be thrown far away from themselves or toward another.

- Once the objects have been broken, there should be another moment of silence and the prompt should be sounded again. Students should do a quick write immediately in which they reflect on the experience they have just had. There should be no talking until writing step is completed.
- 12.

- Prompts could include: How did you feel when you broke your object? How have your feelings about the person, place, or thing you memorialized changed? What stage of grief do you feel you are experiencing at this moment (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance)?
- 13.

14. Have all students help clean up the area.

Sharing: If there is time after the ceremony, allow students who want to share to do so.

Again, ask students to choose one thing to share with the group. Accept volunteers who are

15. willing to share. This part of the process can be very emotional and may affect different students in different ways that may surprise the students themselves. Don't be surprised if many students want to share at this point. Remind students of the ground rules listed above.

Lesson Plan Two: Reading and Writing the Elegy

Objective/SWBAT (Students Will Be Able To)

- Read and analyze the Elegy
- Students will write their own version of The Elegy
- Identify a person, place, or thing they have lost and wish to write about
- Identify the stage of grief they are working from as they begin and end writing the elegy. (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance)
- Publish their elegy by sharing it with the class

Essential Questions

- How can I use writing and art to understand, express, synthesize, and move on from grief?
- What elements of a master writer do I want to apprentice myself to (borrow, emulate, make my own) in order to make my reader/audience feel, think, picture, and understand grief?

Materials Needed to Read and Write the Elegy

The teacher should put together a packet of at least five or more elegies that the class can read aloud, analyze, synthesize, utilize as written models. See the list of elegies I consider to be well written and high interest in the section entitled, "Reading and Writing the Elegy".

I strongly recommend that the elegy "He's On His Way" by my student Troy Smith be included in your packet as the first poem to be read since it was written by a high school student.

The teacher should include the section entitled, "Reading Poetry: A Quick Primer" in the elegy packet so that students have it available for analyzing and discussion of the elegies.

Order of Activities

I have purposely not given a specific number of days or amounts of time to the following activities. How you move through this process depends on the length of your classes, the number of students you have, and the needs of your students as you progress. My classes are double periods daily and I predict it would take me five to seven days to create a final poem. This final poem is based on each student doing at least three revisions before completion.

Reading the Elegy

1. Begin by giving students an overview of elegy as a poetic form. Include the idea that elegy is usually written to be delivered publically.
Take a few moments to have students read aloud the "Reading Poetry: A Quick Primer" part of the handout and tell them that you will be asking them what Poetic Elements they notice the writers using.
2. Give students the packet of elegies and have students read the elegies out loud. Have students begin with "He's On His Way" by Troy Smith. I suggest that when using Troy Smith's elegy that each stanza should be read by a different student.
3. Immediately following the reading of "He's On His Way" have the students discuss the poetic elements they see in the poem. The discussion can happen in small groups or the whole class.
4. What is important is that the teacher (or a student) writes all of the poetic elements that students find in the poem on the board.
The teacher must insist that students use content vocabulary from the hand out and assist/translate when needed. In the same way that students prefer to write in broad, sweeping generalities, they also like to speak that way. One of the objectives of this unit is to give students fluency in the content vocabulary of writer's craft and poetics.
5. Read around each poem in the packet and then have students call out the poetic elements. If a poetic element (example: Figurative Language) is used in more than one poem have the students put a check mark next to it for every time it is found.
6. When all the poems have been read and analyzed the class will have formulated a very complete list of poetic elements found in elegies.
7. Teacher should fill in any poetic elements s/he notices that may have been left out by the students.
8. Review the idea of the meaning/message of each elegy as it relates to what the poet wants you to feel, think, picture, and understand.
- 9.

Writing the Elegy

- Prompts: Begin the writing portion with a Quick Write. Ask students to take out their elegy packets and to write down their favorite line or phrase from any one of the poems. Ask them to write down what they like about it and why. A good rule of thumb for choosing a line or phrase is the question "What line or phrase do you wish you had written?" This Quick Write gives the students a reason to reread the elegies and think about what elements of the writing is powerful and why.
1. Review the complete list of poetic elements students found in the elegies.
Tell the students that when they write their elegy they must use at least three of those elements. You can also tell them that they must use a specific element you want them to explore (figurative language is a favorite of mine) and two or three other elements of their choosing. The number of elements you want the student to use is a good place for modifying or differentiating the writing as needed.
Students must decide what person, place, or thing they will write their elegy about. They can choose the same person, place, or thing they used for the memorial ceremony or choose a different one.
My general recommendation for first drafts is that they include a minimum of twenty lines. Detail is imperative, as is a working title, and students are expected to be able to identify the poetic elements they have chosen. A first draft is an experiment and an attempt to get thoughts down on paper not to the best of the student's ability. It is not an exercise in speed. Stanzas are optional as is rhyming.
 6. Students are encouraged to use the forms of the elegies that they have read, but not the content. The former is using the Master Apprentice Method and the latter is plagiarism.
Sharing: When a number of students have completed their first drafts, have a read around. Remind students that the work they will be reading and hearing is deeply personal, sensitive, and is that it is in first draft form. Accept volunteers who are willing to share. This subject matter can be very emotional and may affect different students in different ways that may surprise the students themselves. Don't be surprised if many students want to share at this point. Never force anyone to share.
 7. Ground Rules for Sharing: In order to provide students a safe environment in which to share the ground rule is that students are expected to practice listening without commenting and this can be very hard for students who are used to commenting with abandon. Student to student feedback should be restricted to only the poetic elements. Listeners should have the handout at the ready. An example of an appropriate comment would be: "I really liked the way you used alliteration...it made your lines flow" or "I could really picture what you were writing about". An example of inappropriate comments would be: "That junk was thorough" or "I really liked your poem". The teacher must model what will likely be a new way of responding and use it to create a safe responsive environment.
 8. Normally I would collect the first drafts read them and give the students feedback on how they might clarify what they are writing. I would expect a second draft that I would read for editing (grammar, spelling, etc.) and then expect a final typed version to be handed in. How far you want to go beyond draft one is up to you.
 - 9.

Lesson Plan Three: Reading and Writing the List Poem

Objective/SWBAT (Students Will Be Able To)

- Read and analyze the list poem
- Identify and utilize the poetic and writer's craft elements of the list poem
- Write their own version of the list poem
- Identify a person, place, or thing they have lost and wish to write about
- Identify the stage of grief they are working from as they begin and end writing the list poem. (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance)
- Publish their list poem by sharing it with the class

Essential Questions

- How can I use writing and art to understand, express, synthesize, and move on from grief?
- What elements of a master writer do I want to apprentice myself to (borrow, emulate, make my own) in order to make my reader/audience feel, think, picture, and understand grief?

Materials Needed to Read and Write the List Poem

- The teacher should put together a packet of at least five or more list poems that the class can read aloud, analyze, synthesize, utilize as written models.
- I strongly recommend that you use the list poems by my former students Danielle Ardizzone, Desimone Carr, and Emily Kirchner since they were written by high school students.
- The teacher should include the section entitled, "Reading Poetry: A Quick Primer" (see introduction) in the list poem packet so that students have it available for analyzing and discussion of the list poems.

Order of Activities

Because the List Poem is the culminating writing experience of this unit, I am suggesting that you use it as a form of reflection on the entire experience, as well as a form of closure. I have purposely not given a specific number of days or amounts of time to the following activities. How you move through this process depends on the length of your classes, the number of students you have, and the needs of your students as you progress. My classes are double periods daily and I predict it would take me five to seven days to create a final poem.

Reading the List Poem

1. Begin by giving students an overview of the list poem as a poetic form.
Take a few moments to have students read aloud the "Reading Poetry: A Quick Primer" part of the handout and tell them that you will be asking them what Poetic Elements they notice the writers using.
2. Give students the packet of list poems and have students read each poem out loud.
Have the students discuss the poetic elements they see in the poem. The discussion can happen in small groups or the whole class. Write all of the poetic elements that students find in the poem on the board. Insist that students use content vocabulary from the handout and assist/translate when needed. In the same way that students prefer to write in broad, sweeping generalities, they also like to speak that way. One of the objectives of this unit is to give students fluency in the content vocabulary of writer's craft and poetics.
3. Read around each poem in the packet and then have students call out the poetic elements.
The class will have formulated a very complete list of poetic elements found in list poems. Fill in any poetic elements that may have been left out by the students.
4. Review the idea of the meaning/message of each list poem as it relates to what the poet wants you to feel, think, picture, and understand.

Writing the List Poem

- Prompts: Begin the writing portion with a Quick Write. Ask students to take out their list poem packets and write down their favorite line or phrase from any one of the poems. Ask them to write down what they like about it and why. A good rule of thumb for choosing a line or phrase is the question "What line or phrase do you wish you had written?" This Quick Write gives the students a reason to reread the list poems and think about what elements of the writing is powerful and why.
1. Review the complete list of poetic elements students found in list poems.
 2. Tell the students that when they write their list poem they must use at least three of those elements.
Students must decide what person, place, or thing they will write their list poem about. They can choose the same person, place, or thing they used for the memorial ceremony, or the elegy, or choose another one.
 3. Reflect on all of the work we have done in this unit: the Five Stages of Grief, the memorial ceremony, the elegy, and the people, places, and things you have been thinking about.
Begin making some lists. Ask yourself these questions. Bulleted list here? What have I lost? What have I found? What are my moments that have no name? What is grief and how am I affected by my grief? What do I choose to release and why? What do I choose to keep and carry with me and why?
 1. You can work on each list individually...or you can work on all of them together and go back and forth between them. The lists are informal, stream of consciousness writing.
 2. Please do not judge your lists...put down everything you think of...do not edit anything out during this brainstorming session.
 3. Review your series of lists. Pick words, phrases, lines, whole lists, ones that you like and that resonate for you. This is a gut feeling, not an hour-long decision-making process. Do a quick read through, and highlight or otherwise mark the ones you like and feel like thinking about, or that strike you at that moment.

5. Develop a repetitive (or a series of repetitive) introductory words or phrases to connect your lists. The word or phrase may already exist in the words or phrases you just chose. (Example: My jewelry box holds my grandmother's wedding ring)
6. If you can't think of a repetitive (or series of repetitive) words or phrases...ask for help.
7. Write your list as a list poem. You don't have to use the exact same intro throughout...you can make slight variations.
8. Have at least 10-15 specific, detailed lines. Students are expected to be able to identify the poetic elements they have chosen. Stanzas are optional, as is rhyming.
9. Sharing: When a number of students have completed their first drafts, have a read around. Remind students about the Ground Rules established in previous lessons.
If you have time, collect the first drafts, read them, and give the students feedback on how they might clarify what they are writing. I would expect a second draft that I would read for editing (grammar, spelling, etc.) and then expect a final typed version to be handed in. How far you want to go beyond draft one is up to you.
- 10.

Annotated Bibliography

Readings and Resources

Ardizzone, Danielle "In The Midst of Daily Life" Previously unpublished.

This poem is a student work and is used with author's permission.

Carr, Desimone "This is What I've Found Out" Previously unpublished.

This poem is a student work and is used with author's permission.

cummings, e.e. "i carry your heart with me" <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/i-carry-your-heart-with-me-2/>

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They do a phenomenal job at explaining the elements of the elegy plus they have an impressive number of examples of well known (likely in the public domain) elegies that can be quoted and used as examples both in the unit and in the classroom.

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Theune also wrestles with the structure and form of the elegy when he says, "[...] the elegy is more a mode of thinking, or a complex set of conventions, than a single structure."

Whitman, Walt. "Song Of Myself" http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_2/whitman.html

A seminal line of poetry from the 1855 version.

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This is the new, updated taxonomy that puts creativity at the top of the learning pyramid.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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