Grief-Writing
Navigating Ecological Suffering Through a Relational Pedagogy

Jodi Latremouille

Volume 7, numéro 2, 2022

Poetic Inquiry for Synchrony & Love: A New Order of Gravity

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094865ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18432/ari29669

Résumé de l'article
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GRIEF-WRITING: NAVIGATING ECOLOGICAL SUFFERING THROUGH A RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY

Jodi Latremouille
Vancouver Island University
jodi.latremouille@viu.ca

Jodi Latremouille completed her doctorate at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. She is a professor in the Faculty of Education at Vancouver Island University. Her research interests include eco-hermeneutics, ecological, Indigenous and feminist pedagogies, social and environmental justice, life writing and poetic inquiry.

Abstract: It’s been a tough couple of years. Each one among us could list off the news headlines as a lengthy and overwhelming reminder. And each one among us could certainly curate a personalized list that amplifies and extends our collective sufferings. The past couple of years have left me wondering, “what could possibly be next?” I heed David Geoffrey Smith’s (2014) call to “reimagine new, wiser human possibilities” for our overlapping worlds of suffering. As an educator, mother, world-lover deeply concerned with all forms of justice, I share grief-writing: poetic stories of small-town sufferings through floods, stories of family hurts, heartaches and loss, stories of love enduring through hopelessness. I engage life writing and poetic inquiry to undertake a dialogue with my own heart-memories, my loved ones, my scholarly ancestors— towards hopeful pedagogical possibilities for healing.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; life writing; grief; ecological pedagogy; relational pedagogy
An Invitation

Without deep reflection, we have taken on the story of endings, assumed the story of extinction, and have believed that it is the certain outcome of our presence here. From this position, fear, bereavement, and denial keep us in the state of estrangement from our natural connection with the land.

We need new stories, new terms and conditions that are relevant to the love of land, a new narrative that would imagine another way, to learn the infinite mystery and movement at work in the world.

Give praise and nurture creation.

—Linda Hogan, 1995, p. 94

It’s been a tough couple of years. Each one among us could list off the news headlines as a lengthy and overwhelming reminder. And each one among us could certainly curate a personalized list that amplifies and extends our collective ecological sufferings. My little hometown of Merritt, British Columbia has had a tough couple of years: hit with fires, floods, renewed Residential School heartaches, school closures, layered overtop of the grief of pandemic times. My little family has also had a tough couple of years: shaken by mental wellness troubles, evacuation orders, broken limbs, destroyed homes, injured brains, crashed cars. The past couple of years have left me hurting, struggling, lashing out, retreating within, sometimes hurting those I love most at the very moments they needed me the most. The past couple of years have left me wondering: “What could possibly be next?”

David Geoffrey Smith (2014) calls for educators to “reimagine new, wiser human possibilities [economic, ecological, social, cultural …] given the deep damage suffered at local domestic levels, both at home and abroad” (p. 1). I heed the call, but in these times of ecological suffering, I do not feel up to the task. I am lost, lonely, twisted by confusion, short-sightedness, and a stubborn dislocation from my sense of purpose. I keep wandering, stumbling, bumping into walls and tripping myself up, falling headlong into crisis after crisis. I have a near-constant low-grade headache. I feel untethered, yet invisibly weighed down. I cannot shake this feeling. As an educator, mother, world-lover deeply concerned with all forms of justice, I am constantly “struggling to raise [my] consciousness and figure out the best action to take” (bell hooks, 2003, p. 107). But there is something about these days. Each day feels like I am pressing a reset button. I start the struggle over again from the beginning. There seems to be no progress, these days, in figuring out much of anything. I am constantly reminded, from all quarters and reliable sources of information, that “we are living in extraordinary times” (Ellyn Lyle, Jodi Latremouille & David Jardine et al., 2021, p. 3).
The past couple of years have also left me wondering, “[i]n the mess of the world” (James Hillman, 1983, p. 49), has it ever been any different? “Was there ever a time that was not extraordinary? Even as [I] acknowledge some of the unique experiences that make our time remarkable, [I] feel [my] focus shifting away from the immediacies of contemporary distraction and exhaustion and panic toward a newly-emerging consciousness of and presence with” (Ellyn Lyle, Jodi Latremouille & David Jardine, 2021, p. 3). In my embodied attempts to compose, de-compose, and re-compose, to follow these tangled threads of life through a relational pedagogy of consciousness and presence, I remain “willing to endure the shame of falling short as a price of admission” (Wendell Berry in Bill Moyers, 2013, n.p.). I bring this deeply personal poetic grief-writing into the light as a movement towards resonance, towards kinship, towards generative dialogue, towards our collective earth-healing. I seek to share with others “a new narrative that would imagine another way” (Linda Hogan, 1995, p. 94). As it is shared out in community, I learn from others just as much as I teach. I am nourished and replenished in the writing, the reading, and the return.

In the coulee a pocket of darkness.
Marbled pairs of reflected light,
briefly glow, then shimmer and fade out.
Alone now, they wind through tangles, relentless,
    And re-emerge into one.
Call up to the creators; we are here, we are here.
—Judson Innes, 2014, p. 102

I often feel alone in my grieving. I recognize that I have been conditioned through cultural norms to pick myself up and carry on without a hitch through great loss, to put on a brave face, to be strong in order to protect others from big feelings, to numb out with prescriptions, distractions and other coping mechanisms, to reserve my scary emotions for moments of aloneness. As a teacher and educational leader, what I am slowly learning is that our collective strength of spirit may emerge through the courage to be vulnerable, to share the earthly mystery and profound beauty of love and loss, grief and praise, in a communion of continual emergence (Ted Aoki, 1993) with others. This writing is offered up as an invocation to this communion, and as an “invitation to readers to listen for the call, to hear their hearts, to hear the hearts of others beating with poetic rhythms” (Carl Leggo, 2006, p. 75).

I engage poetic inquiry and life writing (Ivan Brady, 2009; Lynn Butler-Kisber, 2005, 2010; Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers & Carl Leggo, 2009) towards a relational pedagogy which asks for “openness to vulnerability as we attempt to reconceptualize ourselves as teachers” (Ellyn Lyle, 2019, p. 2). This grief-writing is one small attempt to “address the complicated issues of living ethically and with empathy.
among all our relations” (Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers & Carl Leggo, 2009, p. 14). This grief-writing is also an attempt to “recognize [myself] in the mess of the world” (James Hillman, 1983, p. 49). This grief-writing is a dialogue with my own heart-memories, my loved ones, my scholarly ancestors; it is a request for comfort and reminders, a small attempt to tell new stories, to “give praise and nurture creation” (Linda Hogan, 1995, p. 94). The grief-stories in this collection are written in my own voice and travel poetically down the left margin of the page. They navigate from school hallways to bathroom floors, from 200-year-old floodplains to cattle ranches. These stories engage in an intergenerational dialogue with the voices of my scholarly ancestors, through a series of brief and pointed reminders located on the right margin of the page, written in italics to represent the quietude of these voices of our elders, who are always present and waiting to teach me, when I am ready to hear them. In my panic, suffering, and untethered moments, these wise interruptions may ground me, or carry me, or shake me awake, as they call attention to the vastness, incompleteness, and mysteriousness of life on this planet. They remind me that I am not alone; nor am I the only, nor the first, to walk this path. These grief-stories and the responses of my scholarly ancestors are shared in hopes that I, indeed we, may orient our living and teaching to healing. This wholeness (Old English: hale, healthy) is not an endgame or goal, but rather a process that is already at play, a potential, poised for the moment when I can give in and allow my bodily responses and grief-stories to flow through me. The work of healing “is never perfect, never finished, yet always [already] whole. Through healing, scarred bodies [and stories] may become sites of remembering: sites of difficult, hopeful, joyous learning” (Jodi Latremouille, in Jodi Latremouille, Antonella Bell, Mandy Krahn, Zahra Kasamali, Lesley Tait & Dwayne Donald, 2016, p. 11).

As I worked on the following grief-writing, I shared the bits and pieces with trusted friends, colleagues, and family members. I give thanks to Lesley Tait and Robyn McLeod for sisterly friendship, our years of shared ecological suffering, grief-work, laughter, and writing, and for their permission to share some small overlapping strands of our interwoven life stories. I also give thanks to David Jardine and Tiffany Cece, who make the time to read everything I throw their way. I also give thanks to my scholarly ancestors, whom I cite with first names and family names, in order to properly address and recognize each contribution to this poetic research. Last names may refer to ancestries and family relations, communal and even often contested histories, while first names may highlight the importance of the role each of us grows into within our communities, as well as the unique gifts we bring to this work and this life. Multiple authors are listed repeatedly, as a kind of meditation, repetition, return to those names, over and over, in the same sense that working through grief is a cyclical process without an end point or final resolution. The end-piece, entitled A Return, emphasizes this insight, by providing no final, clear, or tidy resolution. I give thanks to puppies and newborn teenagers and husband and garden
and piano and volleyball and bees. In offering these thanks, I recognize that grief, as both a mirror and outgrowth of love, is also a form of gratitude for what is precious.

**Grief-Writing**

*Grief: Emptiness.*

My dear friend, Lesley, co-author and conspirator, reached out. Lesley wanted to write. She wanted to write about grief. I started writing with her, for her, alongside her, through her. I held out my strand of the braid writing through my own heartaches and hardships.

*You stand on the edge of a canyon and you shout something.*

—Richard Wagamese, 2016, p. 118

But I wasn’t ready. It was too fresh, too open.

I used to pride myself in my quick thinking. Now the words won’t show themselves. They play peek-a-boo behind the aspens, popping up here, disappearing, peeking out there, behind my back. I turn to catch it in action, a shadow flits out of sight again. I know what I want to say. It just stays embedded, tucked away deep in the forest, just out of reach. Giggling and whispering.

My mind is stuck. Slowing, miring, grovelling, begging, insignificant, purposeless. It was too fresh, too open.
I was so wrapped up in my own grief at the time, 
I had a hard time recognizing or maybe remembering 
the grief of everyone else around me, 
and all the different ways it happens.

—Robyn McLeod, personal communication, February 25, 2022

I used to be a writer. Now I don’t know what I am.

I have nothing left to write.

**Grief: The river.**

In the old days, our backyard used to be a river bed. 
When you dig down into the sandy soil, 
you can see the pathway it used to take, 
the river rocks buried 
deep and cool. 
We keep digging, around, 
Under. 
River rocks, turned up and flung aside 
in little piles around the yard 
to make way for a new garden. 
Each year, they just keep turning up. 
They were once sitting strong on the surface, 
now turned up again 
burst through 
for a new purpose. 
The earth shifts ever so slightly.

You must believe in spring ...
Because silence is not silence without sound.

—Jan Zwicky, 1998, p. 76

Renewal—once again.

**Grief: Future-Memories.**

I once read about an ancient woman 
who had no memories left to hold 
but only memories- 
so she danced around the old folks’ home 
barefoot in her too-long nightdress 
cuddling and cooing to a smudge-faced plastic baby doll 
wrapped in a receiving blanket
wrapped and re-wrapped many times a day
to make sure she was comfortable.
Babies like to feel secure, so we
wrap them nice and tight.
Her aging daughter once kidnapped that baby doll
and threw it in the washing machine. So callous
and practical.
Baby’s matted, spiky half-melted hair
bore the hot trauma for all the world to see.
She smoothed it down with a low lullaby,
her crow hands keeping time
to the rhythm of her forgotten grief.

My daughter’s neck arches back, grin wide
as she spins
around, around, and around, again.
I can see my own wiry, young-aging hands
crossing over themselves,
gripping so tightly to her smooth-padded palms,
my eyes locked in on her face as we whirl.
The blue grass swirls and blurs
but her face is frozen, shimmery-clear in the spring,
her dandelion sundress billowing out above
those familiar, knobbly, playful-bruised knees.

My autobiography is embedded in the land of my ancestors.
"—Narcisse Blood, 2009, p. xvi

I am already
lost to the dream
rehearsing this day, this moment, this spin-
over, over, over, again.
Nostalgia for this moment,
for the future
that has not yet found its rhythm. Pre-emptive
grief for this
baby girl growing
out of her too-short sundress.

Grief: Perspective.

I have sort-of studied,
without discipline or true understanding, for many years.
The first book by Thich Nhat Hahn, a bathroom book stumbled upon at 12 years old, stolen from my dad years later, when I realized the value, the famousness and godliness of the author. He suddenly became worthy of theft. “Peace is Every Step.”
I had no clue. I was just grasping at straws of substance Lifelines of love back then. Is it any different now? If I had known the famousness, the godliness of the author, would I have taken the words more seriously back then? How could I have missed them, sitting there, right in front of me? I think, I must still be missing the point.

_The moment we believe to be the moment of birth is only a moment of continuation._
—Thich Naht Hahn (Plum Village App, 2022, n.p.)

**Grief: Teachings.**

My best friend Robyn’s father. Bob. Robert, to his mother. The rancher. We grew up scrambling up and down his rows of haybales. We grew up camping out overnight in his barn. Hiding from imaginary robbers in his hayfield. Running from imaginary wolves lurking at the edges of the woods.
Coming home to him sitting in his office,
The corner of the kitchen island counter,
Perched on his stool,
smirking at us from his corner throne.
Cigarettes, honey sandwiches, Coors Light beer

*Coors Light forever and ever. Terrible stuff.*
—Robyn McLeod, personal communication, February 26, 2022

Generations of ranching
infused down-through-into his weary bones.
You can’t write that shit down.
You just gotta do it, over and over,
side by side, hand over hand,
following footsteps, stepping
in cow patties, stumbling along behind,
learning to keep up.

*an old dance held by an ancient beat*
—Garry Gottfriedson, 2010, p. 46

Nobody slows down for you.
They look back but they don’t slow down. There’s shit to do.
So much to learn.
Three daughters, wife, all those grandchildren you can’t even count on two hands.
All so busy that day cramming ranching into their bones.
I broke down, fell down,
right there in the middle of my garden
Fell down right there in the dirt I was digging up,
busy putting my garden beds to rest for the winter.
She wasn’t finished learning.
He had so many leftover teachings.

*[Reading this …] made me cry in a good way.
It’s been long enough that even the sad times feel …
Special somehow.*
—Robyn McLeod, personal communication, February 25, 2022

Nearly three years on, and on any given day, I still might break down
with her, for her, alongside her, through her.
in secret,
when she’s not noticing
when she’s busy
getting on with her life.
So much more for her to learn, still.
She’s just gonna have to figure that shit out.

and before the moon could comfort the night sky,
he left as he came
while I stayed to become a dancer.
—Garry Gottfriedson, 2010, p. 46

**Grief: Eternity.**

“Mom…did you know
I am born with all the eggs
of all the unborn children
I will ever have,
even the ones
that don’t even become babies?
Do those eggs
have all the eggs
in them already, too?”

*It is impossible for a cloud to die.*
*The cloud can only become the rain,*
*the snow, the hail, the ice.*
—Thich Nhat Hahn (Plum Village App, 2022, n.p.)

**Grief: Love.**


12 years of
building up- soil, gardens,
fences, irrigation- building up-
layering, laying down dirt and mushroom manure,
bone meal and fish meal, dead pets buried under rocks, layering,
laying down roots and wings and love and hope for a form of justice that
starts at home, that starts where I live and breathe, where my children
eat carrots seasoned with flecks of dirt and save worms from the
rain-filled puddles and pack flapping-squawking chickens
around in their skinny
scratched-up
arms.

Washed away.

**Grief: Justice.**

bell hooks.

No.

I wasn’t finished.

**Grief: Failure.**

Why didn’t I check just one more time?
Why did I go to sleep?
Why didn’t I know?
What’s wrong with me?
I should be able
to protect my own babies.
Isn’t that my one single and precious motherly
only task?

I didn’t know.

Or did I wilfully turn a blind eye?
My sacred duty, dropped, abandoned, ignored
in a single instant.
I can’t see clearly through my clouded
tears of self-judgment.
How do I go on never knowing?
I should have stayed awake.

I will never know how,
but maybe
maybe I could have should have saved them.
It was sheer, utter, impossible luck!
An accidental stroke of aleatory timing.
I don’t even know where to direct my relief
Immeasurable gratitude
that they are still right here, now.

They don't know how they survived, either.
This not-knowing, it's not from stubbornness or pride or anger or shame or hate.
It’s just not-knowing.

It's just a mystery
I will have to live under it, walk with it, pack it around on my back.
maybe sometimes, I will manage to put it down temporarily,
stretch my arms, and close my eyes, get some rest
in rare, tiny in-between half-asleep twilight-daybreak moments of
blissful forgetfulness.

When despair for the world grows in me
And I wake in the night at the least sound
In fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.

Grief: Gratitude.
The day I finally grew up was tomorrow.
The day I learned to walk the unknown, twisting, forgetful path.
I fought that path. I am still fighting tomorrow.
I can't clear it, I can't make it change course,
I can't make it any smoother or more predictable
I can’t make the sharp rocks and hot sand any less painful
on my tender, reluctant, anxious soles.

I can't force anyone to walk with me.
I can’t even force myself to move
if I am not ready.
The scars will never heal if I keep picking, picking, picking.
I might manage to fall asleep
but I will never sleep again.

Grief: Humility.

My face is a battleground.
What is roiling inside explodes out through my eyes,
bursts from my running nose,
shaking and trembling lips, cracking voice,
sweating, soaked pores.
Collapse outwards in a hollow scream.
Vision shrinks to a tunnel of wavy spots,
sounds fade in the pulsing rushes taking over my ears.
This is not weakness
even though I am glued to the bottom of the bathtub.
Scalding water rushing, flowing over my rounded spine
Over my dirty, tangled hair.
Into my mouth and nose.
A long overdue eruption
that demands my immediate attention.
Demands surrender.
There is no room for anything else.
Not at this moment.
No room for thinking.
No room to turn. Only facing. Eyes closed.
No hiding behind thoughts. Only feeling.

What is the curriculum of being human?

It passes.
Recedes back within.
I faced another wave.
I peeled myself up off the bathroom floor.
Try again. Face up again. Eyes open.
Victory is everything.
Nothing more.

Grief: Noticing.


Some of us sat on our kitchen tables.
Some of us broke windows to catch our saving breath.
Some of us had nowhere to run.
Others had no way to run.
In our front yard, my still-young crabapple tree,
bent over to the ground,
suffocating under a pile of rubble poured on top of it
by the river that decided our front yard was the most likely pathway
for its now-toxic journey back to the ocean.

Suffocating under a massive solid wood picnic table
uprooted from its home next door.
Suffocating under a pile of fence sections pushed over
by their unlucky placement in the river’s new pathway,
a stray lawnmower come to rest after
a self-guided tour of the neighbourhood.
Suffocating, with only the bent-over still-flexible trunk sticking out
under the rubble, like the Wicked Witch of the West.
It was truly the last thing on our minds.

But my dad knows me too well.

He saw my pleading eyes.
He brought the excavator over, spent an hour picking off each
piled-up-piece of our washed-away lives,
the shreds and shards of neighbours’ and strangers’ activities,
concrete picnic tables,
asphalt roof tiles,
broken lamps,
soggy workboots,
stretched-out mud-smeared bras,
picking off each piece-
one by one.

He tenderly avoided the low-hanging powerlines as he revealed that little dormant tree,
lying bare and scarred on the ground.

Many people think that heaven is somewhere else.
—Thich Nhat Hahn, 2013, p. 61

We dug it out of the frozen dirt,
disentangled its mangled branches,
propped it up in a lop-sided brace
rigged up with a two-by-four and some binder twine,
For one moment, it was the only last thing on our minds.
Deep breath, sigh.

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
—Wendell Berry, 1991, p. 1

“Well, we’ll just have to wait til spring.”
“We did our best.”

Grief: Waiting.

In the act of crafting,
the spirit and the state of mind of the braid maker
shine through.
—Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers
& Carl Leggo, 2009, p. xxiv

My dear friend, Lesley,
co-author and conspirator, reached out.
Lesley wanted to write.
She wanted to write about grief.
I started writing with her, for her, alongside her, through her.
I held out my strand of the braid,
writing through my own heartaches and hardships.
Common breath.
Weaving life stories.
When it was time, she wasn’t ready.
It was too fresh, too open.
I miss her. My co-author and conspirator.
Half-woven braid in my hands.

We are so young we hardly know what it means to be a human being.
—Linda Hogan, 1995, p. 35

Grief: Unfinished.
I wait.

A Return

The work of this grief-writing was particularly difficult. I did not know if I was ready
for the writing, nor if it was ready for the reading back. It felt forced, at first. It started to
flow and roll, in time, but even now it still feels too vulnerable, too angry, too ugly, too
sharp, too broken. “Each time I return to a story, I am changed, too, and thus the work is never completely, neatly bound up and finished” (Jodi Latremouille, 2019, p. 222). And so it is with grief. And so it is with healing. And so, too, it is with relations. When I read, re-read, share, discuss, and return, it still feels incomplete and insufficient for the task at hand. Recall that “without deep reflection, we have taken on the story of endings, assumed the story of extinction, and have believed that it is the certain outcome of our presence here” (Linda Hogan, 1995, p. 94).

Short-tailed albatross

Whooping crane

Gray wolf

Woodland caribou

Hawksbill sea turtle

Rhinoceros


These ways of grief-writing are an attempt to attend to absences, through a relational pedagogy of consciousness and presence. These offerings attempt to take up Donna Haraway’s (2016) critical and creative challenge: “to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present” (p. 1)

Staying thickly present to the weight of the world—whether that weight is the shattering of a young child’s lightness of being, a permanent family rupture, a natural disaster that cracks a community wide open, revealing previously hidden or ignored injustices and abuses, or the ever-more-urgent stomach-acidification of the climate crisis—is a way of attending to our ecological sufferings, our experiences and interpretations, “not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal creatures entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (p. 1). As Linda Hogan (1995) reminds us, we need new stories, new terms and conditions attuned to the mystery and movement at work in the world.

When we as humans begin to tune our hearts and our minds back towards these relationships with food and seed and land, [we may see that] the nature of life on earth herself is actually rooted in exponential abundance [and that] that spectrum of diversity will return again, and I’ve seen it happen. I’ve seen it happen in tribal
communities where certain varieties have been lost. But when other varieties of corn were grown out in substantial and bigger quantities in bigger acreage, as they began to revitalize the seeds and grow them out, that certain sacred varieties actually re-emerged from other varieties. (Rowen White in Ayana Young, 2022, n.p.)

_Because silence is not silence without sound._
—Jan Zwicky, 1998, p. 76

Moving, writing, loving grief is _hard work_. It is digging up car-sized boulders from the centre of a gravel road. It is breathing through a child’s panic attack on the floor of the hospital room. It is driving a rescue truck through two feet of rushing floodwater. It is falling asleep in a crowded airport with all the lights blazing. It is emptying myself of the last tear that I didn’t think I had left over from the night before. And yet, in all its incompleteness and shortness of breath, it is unfolding just as it should—this grief-writing in praise and nurturing of all creation (Linda Hogan, 1995).

There are no formulas or timelines or step-by-step guides. There is only the desire to dream, teach, learn, and live well with all our relations. There is only abundance. There is only heartbreak. There is only praise.

“Call up to the creators: We are here, we are here”
—Judson Innes, 2014, p. 102
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