



## Linda Brodsky Memorial Journal

### Creating Space for Grace

*Mollie Marr*

My father passed away on a Tuesday. I said goodbye to his body an hour after he passed. He donated it to science as a nod to my path in medicine. They came quickly because they needed to preserve the body. I started making phone calls. The church was not available that weekend. Thursday night was the only option for a service. Six hours after losing my father, I sat at his kitchen table struggling to write the obituary for the local paper so that I could announce his service to the community. The next morning, I started planning the service. I planned it, but I do not remember it. I remember where I sat. The box of tissues the minister awkwardly handed me before it started. I remember faces and feeling numb. I declined to deliver a eulogy. It was too soon for me. It was too much.

I returned to school on Monday and my life continued as though nothing had changed. I was weeks behind in my coursework, but a leave of absence was not an affordable option. I decided not to tell people because talking about it was too difficult and I did not think I could manage to get through the day if everyone kept asking me how I was doing. I put my head down and tried to get back to work.

I remember the call. I was in the middle of an experiment in lab and the number was from Virginia. I rushed outside to try to get adequate cell reception. The March air was crisp. I was cold, pacing outside without a jacket. His body was ready to be returned. One final service to plan, but a chance for me to have the ritual I missed in the fall, to have a chance to say goodbye.

I started making plans with his family that week. Spring break was coming up. The ashes would ship to his childhood home in

Kentucky and I would fly out for the service and the internment. The travel ban was announced that Friday. I did not even have the chance to purchase the ticket. I thought my family would wait for me, but they were carrying their own grief and responded to its weight. They held the service, selected a headstone, and buried his ashes without me. I heard about it after it was over by text. The opportunity for the ritual was gone.

We need rituals. They are a part of healing, a way of memorializing and honoring those we love, and honoring and acknowledging our own loss. Families and healthcare professionals around the world have lost the opportunity for communal rituals. Goodbyes have been shared over cell phones and funerals over zoom. We have lost our past ways of grieving.

My father died in late October before the first case of COVID was announced, but because the timing was close, I empathized with the grief I heard about from healthcare professionals and families—the helplessness in the face of loss, the numbness, the uncertainty, the unexpected goodbye. I felt isolated, reaching for the phone to call my

Dad and talk about the new public health measures before remembering he was gone. I felt the weight of loss over and over again.

I carried on that Spring, like so many of my colleagues who suffered loss after loss and returned to work, to serve. I kept going. I turned in assignments late, cried in rooms and stairwells all over the hospital, and exploded in anger over an honest mistake. In my pain, and fear, and anger; on rare and magnificent occasions, I experienced what my father, a minister, would have called grace. People who were unaware of what I was carrying and looked past my failure, my unkind words, to lift me up.

Grace is a rare gift these days. We blame and penalize for tardiness and tiredness. We assume health, wellbeing, and intention; instead of considering that any number of things outside of someone's control might have occurred, might be present with them in the room. We assume we know what is going on and project our narrative onto others. We force disclosures to justify allowing a late assignment or a missed class. We are not owed an explanation for what someone else carries, and we should not

Mollie Marr | Creating Space for Grace

demand one. I received grace when I needed it, and it made me aware of how often we respond with judgment instead of kindness.

To cope with my loss, I have attempted to create my own rituals. I burn a candle to remember my Father on holidays and anniversaries. I keep reminders of him in each room of the house. However, the ritual I will carry with me as I begin my clinical rotations is about creating space for grace. When I interact with someone now, I pause to attend to how they are in that moment. I challenge myself to consider what they might be carrying. I remind myself that sharing their story is their right and that it is an honor to receive someone's truth. I try to create a space where I can respond with grace and kindness and love.

We have all been affected by the events of this year. We are all struggling in our own ways. We have all experienced losses. We are all in need of healing.

We are all deserving of grace.

## Biography

Mollie Marr is an MD/PhD candidate and fourth year student in the Department of Behavioral and Systems Neuroscience at Oregon Health & Science University in the laboratory of Drs. Damien Fair and Alice Graham. Her research examines the intergenerational transmission of childhood maltreatment. She double-majored in Theatre and Psychology with a minor in Applied Theatre, receiving her BFA from Tisch School of the Arts at New York University.

She was one of the founding members of her school's AMWA branch, and co-authored and produced the AMWA film *At Home and Over There: American Women Physicians in World War I* with Dr. Eliza Chin. Mollie is working to expand the research on gender equity in medicine and is currently developing a tool to analyze letters and evaluations for gender bias

(<https://github.com/gender-bias/gender-bias>)