

INTRO: For many years before grief and loss took me on the journey to where I am now, I worked as a print journalist. I wrote for a daily news outlet in the Philadelphia area and had my own column, Life in LaLa Land, where I shared openly about my life as I experienced it. When a beloved father figure died, followed a year later by the death of my dad, it never occurred to me NOT to write about those losses. The feedback I received as I shared openly about my grief helped shape my awareness of just how poorly we do grief in this country. Some people wrote to me and shared deeply personal stories of their own losses. Some would approach me with the offer of a hug in public. One reader invited me to dinner. And another told me it was time to move on when my dad had only been dead a few months. What I sensed more than anything was a hunger to connect over something so intimate yet universal — a longing to express our grief and have it witnessed by another

Here are three of those essays

In the first, published in my column, I write about my mom's partner Lou dying and what it was like to begin grieving his role in my life, which had gifted me so much more than I realized or was willing to admit. Author and palliative caregiver Bronnie Ware writes that among the top five regrets of the dying is this desire: "I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings." I'm so much more mindful and intentional now in letting the people I care about know what they mean to me. I also share this column for anyone wondering how to eulogize a loved one. Capturing the character and spirit of our person through storytelling, memory sharing and heart is always a good formula — and something I'm happy to help with.

The second column chronicles my dad's death. So much from that time lives in my bones, including his words when he first saw me after I arrived at the hospital: "I'm on the way out." Being with him when he died compelled me to face my mortality — in a way that felt gentle, compassionate and curious. A way I wish to encourage us to reflect on death and dying in my work.

The last essay is from a personal blog I started when I left my journalism career. It speaks to the variations of a question I get often from griever: "How will I know when I'm healed and/or done grieving?" There is no end to grief. No arrival at a place of full and finite healing. But there are changes in the ways we carry our grief because of the layers of healing that come to us when we make room to care for and metabolize it in our lives



A LEGACY OF GENTLE LOVE AND KINDNESS

I wasn't prepared to let Lou Campanile into my life.

Yet I also wasn't ready to lose him.

Lou, my mom's longtime companion and, for more than 15 years, a vital presence in the life of my brother and I, passed away suddenly on April 30.

Two days after my mom told me a biopsy had revealed that an ongoing bout of pancreatitis, which we'd all expected him to recover from, was actually pancreatic cancer, he slipped away, quietly, in no doubt what was one of his last great acts of kindness to us all.

For though losing him so swiftly after such grim news came as a shock, I imagine that Lou, who'd spent a lifetime trying to shield the ones he loved from unnecessary pain, wanted to spare us all the agony of a long goodbye, bereft of hope and a cure for the cancer that would ravage his body, like it did to his dad and younger brother.

Still, the force of my grief has caught me off guard as I also struggle to grasp how he could possibly have gone so quickly, the light that he was to so many extinguished with barely an opportunity to register the thinning of its flame. In the void where his presence once loomed so magnanimously, I've longed for more: one more glimpse of him walking through the door, with beaming eyes and eager smile; one more meal together capped by his effusive "that was deeee-licious"; one more chance to laugh at the jokes he endlessly recycled or savor his words of encouragement. I wish I could hear the gentle warmth of his voice, even in the garrulousness that sometimes tested our patience, and feel the press of his cheek against mine in the hugs he reached for with unfailing appreciation to be on the other side of the love and affection he so effortlessly dispensed.

Most of all, I long for more of who he was and what he gave to my mom: the way he seemed to stand just a little taller and prouder whenever at her side; the adoration of his gaze, whenever his eyes followed her, lit with a quiet tenderness and protectiveness; the space he allowed for whatever mattered most deeply to her, holding all of those things as closely and carefully as if they were his own Lou was the one who brought her flowers for no reason and constantly reminded her of her beauty, the one who never tired of dinners out and long drives to

Lancaster and just about any place that included her company. And when she was away, on vacation with girlfriends or visiting family in St. Lucia, though they talked regularly, I thought it sweet that he would also call me, to tell me how much he missed her.

Lou came into our lives at a fragile and complicated time, my parents' marriage in tatters, my mom trying to fashion a life on her own, with a quaking fortitude, while my brother and I hovered somewhere between denial and a bewildered and pained acceptance of what had long been inevitable. For my mom, he was, at first, a safe, attentive listener. She found she could tell him anything, unburdening both her heart and mind with surprising ease in the face of his nonjudgmental acceptance.

But I wasn't so sure I wanted anything to do with him. I wasn't looking for another father, and while I realized the collapse of my parents' marriage was a combined undoing, I felt a loyalty to my dad that Lou's appearance seemed to threaten.

Yet he didn't try to be anything other than a friend to my mom, much in the way he had always gone about life, collecting friends in an ever-expanding tapestry woven from countless acts of generosity and compassion. At his memorial service, among the family and friends in attendance, were many individuals who remembered him for a single caring deed, people he said just the right words to at the right time, who he'd steered in a different direction during a crisis, who he'd sheltered, sometimes in conversation and sometimes under his very roof, when life had battered them down. Lou always had a recommendation, a resource, a gesture or nugget of wisdom to share. Sometimes, despite his own chattiness, what he offered best was silence, lending his ear to anyone, including his real estate clients, who needed that ear to bend.

He had a way of showing up that, despite his towering frame, never felt intrusive or demanding. And this is how I came to let him into my life. He didn't ask or expect anything of my brother and me. But I saw the way he showed up time and again for my mom, helping her piece together a life worn down by so much cloaked suffering, and eventually, too, her heart. As his presence in her life grew, his kindness quietly leaked into our own.

If he could provide something we needed, he did, whether it was help fixing a car, getting a job, or assembling a piece of furniture. I remember the detailed directions he'd provide for me when I started performing weddings and had to travel to unfamiliar locations, checking in with me along the route to make sure I wasn't lost, and how he arranged to have me stay at his sister's house in Maryland

following one ceremony so I wouldn't have to make the long drive home at night. He was there for Betsy, my brother's wife, when they got married, and Josie, my niece, who, famously loved her outings with grandma and Uncle Lou.

And when my brother and I had our struggles or floundered amid our mistakes, he never criticized or forced a solution. Instead, he simply let us know he was on our side. When I finally walked away from a toxic relationship years ago, Lou, for weeks afterward, went out of his way to affirm the good that he saw and appreciated in me. And when my brother's self-esteem crumbled as he battled an unpredictable illness, it was Lou who bolstered it with his reminder of the geniuses who had suffered the very same thing.

I may have resisted his initial appearance in my life, but I came to view Lou as an angel sent to us exactly when we needed one. I first grew to love him because of the way he loved my mom. But as I crumbled under the weight of a heaving sorrow when I learned of his death, I realized just how much I had come to rely on his presence in my own life — and I was grateful, despite not being able to tell him goodbye, for all the times I'd expressed my love and appreciation to him in the last few years.

Losing Lou still doesn't feel real to me. But even with the ache of his absence, I realize how blessed we were to know and love such a man. His gentle goodness transformed our lives and healed much of what was broken and mistrusting without our even realizing it. Lou lived by one of his favorite expressions: "Keep the sunny side up." And like the sun itself, which cannot withhold its light, he tended and warmed our hearts simply by being the man that he was.

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THIS GOODBYE IS ONE I NEVER WANTED TO SAY

I didn't come to do this — not this, this terrifying thing whose scent has trailed me down the hall and into the room, where I greet my father.

Just two days before, when the call came, I'd felt it slip under my skin, pocketing a quiet dread against my breastbone, churning the uncertainty and drifts of sorrow of the days past into a tumult of anxiety and nausea that would steal any sleep from that night.

For 10 years, my father, who lives in St. Lucia, has been riven by calamity, suspended above one precipice after another, only to be pulled back, as much, it seemed, by the miraculous as by a sheer and ferocious will from all that would have felled a weaker man.

Heart disease, cancer, a spinal injury, life-threatening blood clots and blindness all have besieged his body, making it a map of plundered promise and broken hope. And yet he burned with a tenacious light, somehow stitching together a life from every setback and heartbreak, even if his body was slow to comply and true happiness was a grace that never roosted for long.

In the last four months, however, despondency has been a more-frequent companion, as the ravages of chronic pain and illness began to infringe on the independence he has strived so valiantly to maintain, to shrink the sense of vibrancy that was so much a part of his public persona.

Still, I never believed it would come to this moment, my unsteady legs carrying me down a hospital corridor and into a ward where my father lay, frail and anguished, a shadow of the man I had known.

When one of his sisters had called with the news that he'd been admitted to the hospital with internal bleeding — after only recently having been discharged following a previous visit — my heart lurched. The conversations all week, in a series of urgently exchanged phone calls and emails, had pondered my desire to come home, as I feared the worst even while obstinately stamping out such thoughts.

But with that phone call, the decision was made.

And so just three weeks after chasing innumerable joys across Italy and Austria with my mom on a celebratory vacation still tinged with the sadness of losing her

longtime companion, I found myself on another flight, traveling in a fervent clutch of prayers and aching worry.

Though a stark inevitable loomed, I reached for what I knew: my dad as fighter and survivor, Lazarus defying every odd. In the photos from a visit my brother had made just in July, his smiling face suggested optimism, the spark of endurance that had carried him through every health crisis still fixed in his eyes.

But now, he is bone pressing against skin, an intermittent chorus of agony puffed from his labored breathing and the pain that has seized his entire body.

When he is told I am there, he opens his arms, so thin and fragile, and I am careful with how I fall into them, pressing kisses and tears across his face, his forehead, his neck, wanting nothing more than to hold him closer, tighter, to fling back the blackness and sweep us into a sweeter reunion.

“I’m on the way out,” he murmurs.

And when I hear the words, which become his momentary mantra, even as he pats my back and is obviously happy to see me, I can feel the fissure, the first crack striking the heart.

I want to protest, to pledge to him the riches of time. But there is now no escaping why I have come as I reach for his hand and brush my love in whispers against the coolness of his cheeks.

A sea of regret and yearning surges forward, but I fight only for this moment and what it offers — the brutal gift of seeing all that is good and beautiful in my dad, when the past in all its turbulence and tangled tenderness falls away, and love is the only light that remains.

My father, Elliott Francis, died three days later under a gentle rain of prayers and hymns. I was at his bedside when he took his last breath, as were two sisters, his brother, a niece and a boyhood friend who had stopped to visit him after hearing he was hospitalized. He was 63 years old, a giant-sized, charismatic personality in a body too tired to keep up with all the bright, bold plans he never stopped making for himself.

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EXPECTING SORROW, LOVE IS THE GIFT THAT SHINES

There is a memory that rises often, tender companion, when I think of my dad. In the five years since he's been gone, it remains a favorite, perhaps for its unstinting sweetness in the sprawl of so many aching moments, too many fractured dreams.

We have been swimming in the ocean on an afternoon jaunt to Vigie Beach during one of my brief trips to St. Lucia from Philadelphia to visit him. And because his body is becoming a map of surgical scars, he tires more easily than usual, gets chilled in the water well before the sun begins its bronzed goodbye.

As he stands near the surf, waiting for me to emerge, he smiles, marveling at the strong swimmer I've become, though I'd hardly consider myself such. It is just that the things he might know about me, the ordinary ones, like my favorite color, that butterflies make me happy, that I spent all three years of my swimming lessons in the beginner's class, have slipped between us — lost to distance, the schism of lives in a busted home, dissolved marriage, the words that we never did say.

But now I let the small praise fill me, take a towel from the lounge chair and wrap it around his shoulders. We face the ocean, me at his back, running my hands up and down his arms to pump more warmth through the towel, while a hushed comfort settles over us.

Before we leave, we stroll along the beach, hands linked between our softened bodies, words a lazy lilt on the creep of twilight air. And I am happy, the kind of unfettered, uncomplicated happy that after all these years still stirs at the center of this memory, a pure gift of solace.

It perhaps should be no surprise then that this is how my father comes to me, as I float in the blue-green waters of the Caribbean Sea, with the sky a cerulean stretch above me.

Almost five and a half years after I buried my dad — just days after arriving in St. Lucia to find him in a hospital bed withered and wearily resigned to the end — I am back home. And, much to my surprise, where I thought I would be swallowed by sorrow, bruised by every memory of fading light and letting go, I am buoyant, loose, joyful even as this rich land welcomes me back.

I grew up in St. Lucia before my parents moved with my brother and me to the U.S. And while early returns there were fun, wrapped in all the laughter and ease of being with cousins, reconnecting with aunts and uncles and grandparents, once their marriage began to unravel, home was a weighted joy. My dad moved back to St. Lucia while we remained here with my mom. And visits to him were a tangle of love and longing, with regret and the spin of every bitter, recycled story he kept forever hovering above the moments we shared.

When he was diagnosed with cancer, after surviving a heart attack and a potentially paralyzing car accident, his spiral into depression created even more of a gulf between here and there, between a thousand unspoken possibilities and the ghosts of all we wanted the other to be. The fierceness of our love for each other never wavered — and there were reprieves, like that afternoon on Vigie Beach — but it wasn't until he lay dying that we gave up our wanting, our hurting to press ourselves into a seamless surrender, a communion with vanishing time.

I will forever be grateful that I was by his side in those final days, that I was there to read to him, cradle his face, help him brush his teeth. To watch his face grow luminous, to hear his shallowing breath.

But for all the beauty and unexpected largess of those moments, his death remained my last memory of home. And it is this that taunted as the weeks drew nearer for our family trip, this that undid me time and again, with a flood of anxiety, the erratic rush of tears.

So when I find my feet hitting the ground there with brisk and cheerful step, when I turn into every excited embrace with bright gratitude, when the sun and the sea and the taste of fresh coconuts sweep me up in a flagrant rapture, I am surprised.

On the afternoon where I drift into the deep blue waters, feel every gentle, rolling wave, like a benediction and liberation, I know my dad is with me in a way he's never been before.

I feel his spirit close, so blithesome, so light. It's as if he is saying, "Welcome home, darling. The home I always wanted you to know. The home that was and is a song in our hearts. Apart from all my suffering, my sickness. Apart from our brokenness and struggles. This is the land I love, the one now soothing you with its beauty, reshaping what was and what will be into something we both can hold."

I hear him on the breeze, his voice whispering “Cocoa,” his nickname for me. I think of how we danced in the streets of Rodney Bay as we have dinner there one night. Know that if he had been here for my cousin’s wedding, which we’ve come to attend, we would have gone out after the reception and stayed out until at least 2 a.m., eating and dancing some more. I feel him as the charismatic man he was, munificent of spirit and filled with unbridled zest for life. I see him as all he was before years of illness ravaged him.

And though there will be sad, and even hard, moments to come, where absence will swing its blade, memory will lose its luster, this knowing, this sensing, this being with my dad is a blessing that feathers its healing into every sorrowing place that misses our earthly shape.

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