

Keeping a Journal When Words Fail
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I had been keeping a journal for nearly twenty years, so it seemed natural for me to continue when my elderly father suffered a major stroke. Writing in my journal kept me going for the five years I cared for him and witnessed the relentless progress of his dementia. My daily entries provided me with perspective when he was diagnosed with cancer and sustained me as I remained by his side through a series of medical crises that, by necessity, became the main focus of my own life.

Finally, the day came when I sat alone in his nursing home room with the body that had once contained my dad. Waiting for the funeral director to arrive, I wrote, “Death is a clawed and yellow thing,” before I closed the composition book that had served as my journal.

Immediately, I plunged into making funeral arrangement, cleaning out his room in the nursing home, and coping with social security and the insurance companies. I was too busy to write in my journal, I told myself when I returned home from the funeral. I was too exhausted to do anything, let alone pick up a pen.

I knew journal writing would be good for me. After all, I had been facilitating journaling workshops for fifteen years. I had read all the research about its power to reduce stress and strengthen the immune system, but as the days wore on, I couldn’t bring myself to practice what I preached. I was a professional writer. Now words deserted me.

A month later, I managed to thank a friend when she presented me with a beautiful blank book filled with reassuring sayings about grief. She meant well, but my grief was a dark, misshapen thing, ugly, with sharp edges. It didn’t belong on the pastel pages with beautiful illustrations. Neither did it fit into the grief workbooks that seemed to want to push me through set stages in an orderly way.

Instead I began making “to do” lists and then started writing down my daily activities, listing everything from getting out of bed and brushing my teeth to doing the dishes and eating. That helped some because no matter how emotionally bruised I felt at the end of the day, I could look at my list and remind myself that I was still among the living.

After more days passed, I began to jot down a few words describing how I felt each day. Sometimes, I could muster a sentence. “I felt like I swallowed broken glass today,” or “The sun shone brightly, I wished Dad were here to see it.” Other days my notations were shorter: “Black day” and “rollercoaster ride.”

Even though I had begun to express my feelings, words simply were not strong enough to contain the emotions churning within me. For the most part, those feelings remained bottled up inside.

One evening, as I sorted through a pile of magazines that I didn't have the energy to read, deciding which to discard and which to keep, I wondered what would happen if I built a picture of how I felt from bits and pieces of magazine photos. I had never considered myself talented at art, so I was put off by this thought. "It must be my grief talking," I thought. "I'm losing my mind."

Nonetheless, as I flipped the pages of the stack of magazines on my lap, I began tearing out pictures of a cloudy sky, a crying baby, a box, a tiny flower, and a booted foot. The ripping, felt like a release. Within an hour, I had a sizeable pile of scraps.

Although I had intended to trim the edges with scissors, combinations of images that arose in my mind gave my work an urgency I hadn't felt in months. In my mind, I saw the baby in the box, the huge foot, called grief, crushing the small purple flower of my heart. Since my grief, itself, had ragged edges, I grabbed a piece of typing paper, arranging and pasting my scraps.

As I daubed the glue on the fragments I had collected and slapped them on the paper, tears began to flow from the deep place inside where I had hidden them. When I looked at the finished project, I was not shocked at the dark colors. What did surprise me was that as I worked without thinking of caring how the collage would look, I had ripped a figure of a woman into pieces that I had pasted down in a scattered jumble. That woman was I—scattered, fragmented, ripped apart. I didn't want to look at my collage or even think about it, but I felt relieved—and that was enough.

The next day, I stored my leftover picture scraps in shoebox and hit two second-hand stores that I knew sold magazine. At ten cents each, I bought an armload of everything from hunting magazines to Sunday school papers and science journals. I liked the physical act of hoisting that hefty load into the trunk. There was a physical satisfaction to it as there had been with tearing paper, smearing paste and slapping paper on paper.

I was surprised, too, that I was actually looking forward to an evening of ripping and pasting. It had been weeks since I had looked forward to anything.

Over the next weeks and months, I kept making nightly collages. The only writing I did was to date the back of each one. I didn't know exactly why I cut and pasted, only that it felt right. Because I made the collages for myself and didn't plan to show them to anyone, I didn't have to worry about what other people would think. I wasn't making art or decorative works; I was making a story with pictures—the story of my grief.

One day after I arranged my growing collection of pages on my living room floor in the order I had created them, I realized that my story was about healing as well. As I worked, my collages evolved without planning. I followed the impulse to cut out words, added those to my shoebox and then eventually to my papers. I bought a child's paint box and splashed blobs of black and red on the pictures.

Eventually, my ripping gave way to cutting as the edges of my loss softened. My self-expression demanded bigger paper and then colored paper. I found some colored pens and began drawing and then writing in the empty spaces between the images I pasted. The colors became lighter and more vibrant. In time, the images I chose to use were different too. Jagged angles gave way to flowing lines. Paint blobs grew into swirls. When the desire arose to write my feelings on the back of the assemblages I had made, I did just that, surprised as the depth and power of the words that emerged from a place inside of me that I had thought was empty and barren. In time, I made collages less frequently, relying primarily on words again as I journaled. Even so, my style of journaling has changed forever.

The visual record of my bereavement journey is a legacy I treasure. Each time I look at my collection of collages, I am reminded of the strength of the human spirit as well as its capacity to endure loss and to grow from it. I am grateful that the innate wisdom of our spirits opens a way for healing when we least expect it. We can become the artists and authors of our own healing if we listen and follow the call.