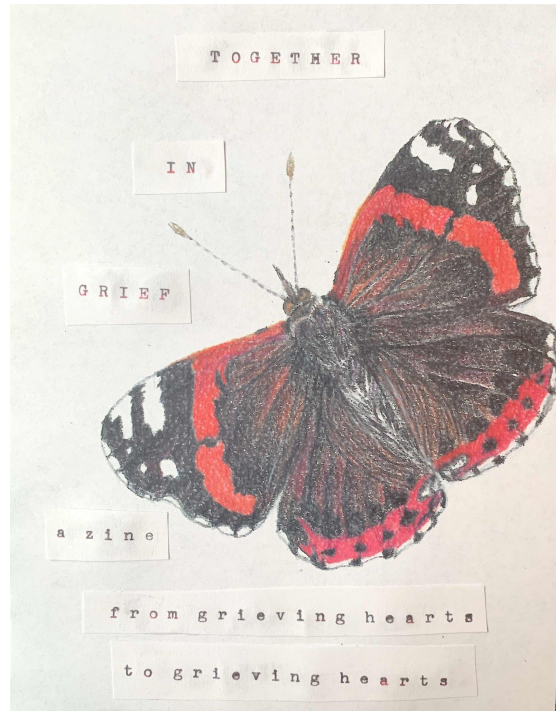


“Together in Grief”

A Zine from Grieving Hearts,
to Grieving Hearts



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Introduction & Rationale

Throughout this year in the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies Program, I have focused on researching capitalism's negative influence on the sacred rite of passage: death, dying, and grief. I believe there is a quiet invitation within humanity right now to look at our mortality and create more space to process, sift, and integrate death as a collective. With the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the constant violent atrocities that humans face right now, I believe there is more need than ever to heal our relationship to death and the grieving process. I find that this quote, by Francis Weller, a therapist interviewed by Tim McKee in The Sun Interview under *The Geography of Sorrow*, puts it beautifully:

Expressing grief has always been a challenge. The main difference between our society and societies in the past is how private we are with it today. Throughout most of human history, grief has been communal. ... And the psyche knows we are not capable of handling grief in isolation. So it holds back from going into that territory until the conditions are right - which they rarely are. The message is, 'Get over it. Get back to work.' Again and again, in my practice clients come to me with a depression that is more of oppression: a result of so many years of sorrow that have not been touched with kindness or compassion or community. You're left with an untenable situation: to try to walk alone with this sack of grief on your back without knowing where to take it. (McKee, 2015).

Within this paper, you will find the background, context, rationale, and personal process around my senior project, centered on community coming together in grief. I will first provide the history of zines, personal significance, and intentions of this project. I then will provide contextualization for this project, including the historical context of death practices in the United

States, particularly for anglo-Americans, and a summary of capitalism's negative influence on death practices. I will lastly provide a conclusion and reflection of my process within this project. All of this comes together to present my final senior project at the California Institute of Integral Studies BAC program, "Together in Grief."

Background

My Senior Project is to create a "Zine" centered around community coming "Together in Grief." Rona Akbari explains a zine as such: "Zines tend to be a bricolage of various images, texts, and messages." (Akbari 2018). Zines have a history of being connected to community. In reading "A Brief History of Zines" by Chloe Arnold, it is reported that the first traceable zines were created in the '30s and '40s, initially focused on sci-fi communities. Following that, in the '70s and '80s, zines were picked up by punk scene communities as a way of connecting to music and culture (Arnold 2016). Rona Akbari writes in "How to make a zine" that in the '80s and '90s, zines like Queercore "used zines to subvert dominant and patriarchal ideologies through the sharing of lived experiences. At the core of the zine-making ethos are subversion, freedom of thought, and a DIY attitude." (Akbari 2018). There are plenty of zines out there in today's world with a wide variety of topics; I am sure there are already many zines out there that speak to the topic of death and grief. Regardless, the magic of a zine is, I believe, rooted in the creative process and connecting to community. I believe that creating a zine with the topic of being "Together in Grief" is a unique gift to both myself and the collective. This is an opportunity to collage together gathered insights, resources, poetry, art, magic, words, photographs, love, and grief into an entity of its own that I can then gift back to the community. I believe this is a direct voice, out from capitalism's oppression, that creates more acknowledgment and resources to the experience of grief.

Personal Significance

The topic of death and grief has been significant to me for most of my life and has continued to evolve deeper and deeper over time. I came to know death at the age of eight when my mother died of cirrhosis of the liver due to alcoholism. Grief has been a companion to me for over 20 years now. I was privileged to have access to counseling through Hospice of Napa Valley (now called Collabria Care), where a Licensed Social Worker would come to my public elementary school once per week and hold a “Death and Dying” group for children experiencing loss. Attending that group with those few other kids was pivotal and the sole container for my experienced grief at a young age. My other parent was unable to hold any sort of space for our shared grief, and so I had to find my own way within the waves of grief throughout most of my life. I firmly believe that our society has a foundational gap in death, dying, and grief which I have experienced first-hand. It is not until now in my life, when more of my peers are experiencing death for the first time that I am beginning to understand some of the bigger gifts my experience has given to me. And it is with those gifts that I wish to create this project from; to ritualize grief and to open more conversation, exploration, and acknowledgment of the disconnect our society has from death, the impacts this disconnection makes on our communities and individuals, and hope for future reconnection to expand and deepen Anglo-America’s practices and rituals to better acknowledge and move with grief, death, and dying.

Another place I am creating this from is as a Licensed Homebirth Midwife. Having attended many births in various settings, I have had many experiences holding space and guiding families through a sacred rite of passage. To be a witness and facilitate the safe passage of life entering this world has been both an honor as well as a continuous reminder of the mystery of life and death. In addition to that, I have seen how the medicalization of birth has made a

substantial negative impact on birthing people within our country (especially on BIPOC folx). In my approach, I provide holistic care that creates space for my clients' physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual processes and well-being. While in hospital settings, when we transfer or I plan to be the doula for a client, I come from a background of providing education, support, and the tools needed to advocate while in the medical system to reduce the risk of unnecessary interventions. I mention this to recognize that both birth and death have been medicalized under capitalism, which has taken away some of the significant sacredness from the most significant rites of passage we experience as human beings on planet earth.

Hopes & Intentions

Overall, I hope for this zine to be a touchstone and ritual for those experiencing grief in the often isolating, oppressive, and systemically flawed Western society. For those of us that are grieving for our earth, a life before COVID-19, and the loss of beloveds - we tend to land amongst the disconnect from community that we so desperately need. In my previous writings through this school year, I have come across so much supporting evidence of the lack of ritual and integration of death and grief in Western society. By calling to my community to create expressions of grief and then weaving it together to gift back to the community, I hope that it can be a collective ritual. I hope that this subtly ties in our hearts together within our grief. I hope that this zine can be the territory of the right conditions that Francis Weller speaks to in his interview... a place to set grief down, together, and heal our collective relationship to death.

Contextualization

Within Western society in the United States, many deep flaws create the tapestry of this country, both occluded as well as glaring in plain sight. Of the many flaws, Western society (specifically, Anglo-America)'s relationship with death and grief is disconnected and

disempowering, rooted in the systems of capitalism and colonialism, perpetuated by the medicalization of death. This disconnection causes devastation day to day for most of the population in Western society. As Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) reflect, "The enactment of funeral and bereavement rituals in contemporary American culture is often inauthentic, a hollow and rigid practice, devoid of an opportunity for genuine healing (Imber-Black, 1991 ; Myerho, 1982)" (p.699). These authors create a powerful framework to understanding the rite of passage of death and how Anglo-America's current rituals around death are inadequate and unfulfilling for the bereaved. In human's ancient history, death was a natural experience integrated into the community. From looking at the historical context of death practices under capitalism and cultures worldwide, we can see that something is missing in Western society in terms of Anglo-America's relationship to death. Capitalism and patriarchy are power structures that have taken over much of the world with control, manipulation, and consistent deprivation of the human right to health and well-being. The oppressive systems that operate much of the West deprive the majority in connection to death. This disconnection creates a fear-based experience and significant emotional disruption when faced with the inevitability of the death of a loved one or a prognosis of dying themselves. Grief is an emotional experience that is unavoidable for all living beings, yet it is often ill-handled and misunderstood by the community members around the grieving. You will find in the historical context of death practices in Anglo-America, you will find how the medicalization of death in the United States is rooted in capitalism and has removed our connection to our beloved dead and navigating grief as a sacred rite of passage.

Historical Context

A Brief History of Death Practices in Anglo-American Culture

Anglo-American Death Practices in the 18th and 19th Century. Within the United States, inhabited by colonizers of Europe, many death practices utilized in much of Europe were carried through into North America amidst their arrival. Churchyards, funerals, and the basic honoring of loved ones who had died were standard practices. What shifted through the years was the significance of *who* was working with the bodies of the dead, how they were handled, and the eventual commercialization of funerals and body preparation. Gary Laderman provides a clear account of the procession of dying and death during the early 1800s in his book; The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death 1799-1883, "When death had finally occurred, a series of actions were set in motion to prepare the corpse for the journey from the home to the burial ground. The actors involved in these arrangements were community members, friends, relatives, and family members. Preparing the body was a duty for the close living relations of the deceased, and they rarely hesitated to participate in these activities. The intimacy that survivors maintained with the corpse preserved it, at least until the actual interment, as evidence of a valuable, and vital, social relation. Although the body had lost the spark that animated it, deeply rooted social conventions demanded that it be given proper respect and care from the living." (p. 29). As you can see, there is a deeply ingrained and connected sense of community still engaged with the practice of caring for the dead. Family and loved ones are involved in preparing and honoring the body before burial. Another notable piece to this era: "By the end of the eighteenth and into the middle of the nineteenth century, women in the Protestant communities of the northern states indeed had the primary responsibility of getting the body ready for burial - a crucial activity performed by women in England for centuries." (p. 30). Just as birth was seen as a midwife's role to facilitate at home during this time, so was death, as mentioned by historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich referenced in Laderman's book, "midwives and

nurses mediated the mysteries of birth, procreation, illness, and death.'" (p. 30). These practices were majorly the midwife's role or other women in the community for a long time. It was not until there was a rise in the medicalization of birth and death that these sacred rites of passages became a place of profit rather than honoring.

The rise of the medicalization of birth and death came with expanding medicine and medical schools through the 19th century. In the 18th century, medical schools emerged in the United States, such as the first one founded by John Morgan and William Shippen in 1765 in Philadelphia (200 Years, National Library of Medicine). Dead bodies were used to practice medicine in medical schools throughout the Civil War. As Laderman shares in The Sacred Remains: "Dead bodies were essential for anatomical studies, and, in the reform era of the late nineteenth century, many argued that laboratory work required cadavers for the professionalization of doctors and the legitimacy of medical schools themselves." (p. 165). As there became a more significant connection with the study of dead bodies and the increased medicalization of life and death, more and more we saw death moving out of the home and into the hospital.

_____ As there became a unique role, facilitation, and specialty in the form of embalming, the title "undertaker" soon became an aspect of the process following a death that would become an expected and supposed "essential" role to the rite of passage (Laderman, Death Reference). The funeral home became a place of business that would organize and perform all the duties, tasks, and arrangements that once were simple and at the hands of the loved ones who had passed. As Laderman points out in his book, The Sacred Remains, "According to the historian Philippe Aries, by the early decades of the twentieth-century death had become 'hidden' and 'invisible.' death was eventually understood as 'dirty' and a source of pollution, which led to

the medicalization of death and its banishment to the hospital. Simultaneously, as individuals in larger communities and major urban centers grew more and more alienated from each other, social solidarity in the face of death dissolved. The forces of life, the disappearance of hell, and medicine's success began to transform death into something shameful and unnatural. Under these conditions, American society became 'ashamed of death, more ashamed than afraid,' and proceeded to eliminate it from public life." (p. 7).

Anglo-American Death Practices in the 20th and 21st Century. Much of the history from the past 150 years has been a general expansion upon the foundations laid out by capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and the medical establishment. Funeral homes continue to be the go-to for after-life care, death continues to be a medical act, embalming continues to be the primary practice (in addition to other toxic resources put into the earth with our beloved dead), and death is ultimately a money-making machine. One of the few remaining aspects of our ancestors we have carried forward as humans for hundreds of thousands of years is the gathering we now call funerals or memorials.

Gathering in the community has been a practice that has been a part of human culture with death practices for hundreds of thousands of years. The way we have done so has most definitely changed, and in today's world, we continue to gather together to honor the memory and life of the one who has died. Although that practice has survived, there is the commercialization of funerals and an entire industry that profits on a ritual intended to be a place of grief, community, process, and sacred honoring.

Although we have seen some changes towards eliminating some of the toxic practices such as embalment in the last 25 years, we still have a capitalist foundation and drive behind the business of death. We are now seeing more practitioners being "death midwives" and

providing a space for home funerals, utilizing ancient practices and other modalities to preserve a body naturally (such as with dry ice and essential oils) (Lyons). These practitioners can serve as an educator and guide to families who want to step out of the mainstream medical and funeral industry and make informed decisions about their beloved dead with the guidance of a professional (Lyons). However, it is still a business. Despite the challenging times in which we are still living under a capitalist society, there is still a movement away from the machine that drives our world in an oppressive and harmful way; One that calls in our connection to community and ritual in a way that provides the connection and healing needed on the whole.

In addition to these changes we see in recent times, we now have a global pandemic that has radically changed how we interact with death. When the COVID-19 was named as the cause of a worldwide pandemic, a quarantine order required us to stay home to protect ourselves and one another from this new virus in our world. Suddenly, the world slowed down and stopped in a way that ultimately put a pause in this crazy machine of capitalism we are constantly working under so frantically. Moreover, through this era, we have experienced death in a new way, one that has kept us away from those we loved dying in the hospital. Life continues to unfold within Western society to inform us for the time to come. How will this impact our relationship with this sacred rite of passage as time goes on?

Negative Impacts of Capitalism's Influence on Death

Within Anglo-American history and Western society, we see a clear theme emerging under capitalism's oppressive structure: separation. Separation from one another, separation from nature, separation from ritual, separation from ourselves, and separation from the sacred rites of passage such as birth and death. Death is a place where we, as living beings, have an inevitable connection. As there has been a medicalization of a natural event and separation from old and

known ancient practices, a disconnect and disempowerment have unfolded. There is a general aversion to death and grief in our Western culture, creating a more profound disconnect between ourselves and each other. Our disconnect from death perpetuates the oppressive structures of capitalism: It keeps us powerless, discontented, isolated, and afraid. And capitalism feeds on fear.

Not only does this cataclysmic force of separation and fear keep a sense of powerlessness alive day to day, but the capitalist paradigm pushes death through a system foundational in and oriented by profit. Because of this, the medicalization of death has taken loved ones away from the rituals that have been with humans for thousands of years by handing their dying family members and friends to a broken system that utilizes extreme measures to keep someone alive beyond the point of a gentle death. There are, of course, so many benefits to modern medicine and the multitude of different technologies that can be used to save a life or create a more manageable scenario for humans. Moreover, on the other side of that, something has become lost in the Allopathic Medicine system that leaves family members disempowered, disconnected, and devastated when facing the death of their beloved.

Conclusion & Reflection

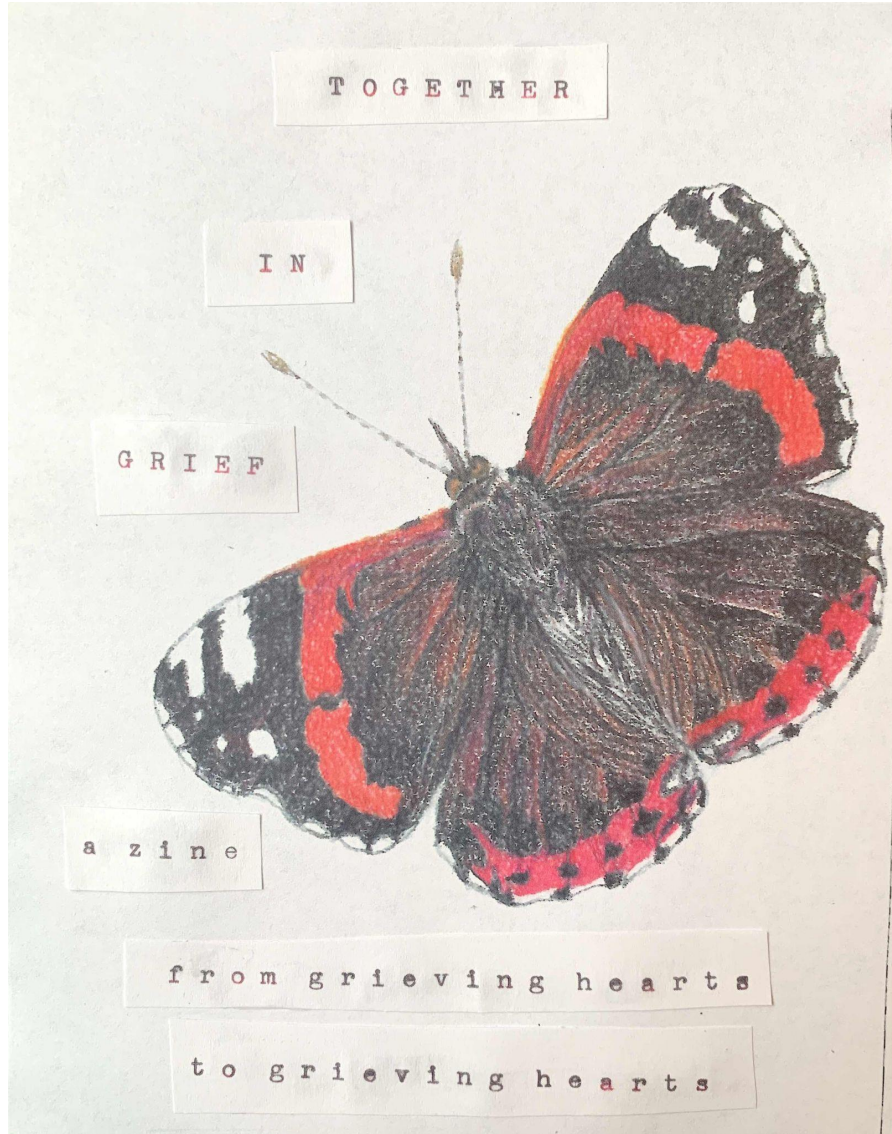
_____ When observing Western society's relationship to death, it is apparent that there is a significant disconnection that leaves Anglo-America at a loss of healthy emotional navigation of grief. Within my journey in exploring this topic throughout this year, one of the pieces of literature I found has become foundational in my deeper understanding of the missing aspects of ritualizing grief: "*Bereavement: An Incomplete Rite of Passage*" by Jennifer Hunter, PH.D., RN. Hunter provides a cross-cultural analysis and comparison of "death and bereavement rituals" within this journal article utilizing Arnold van Gennep's Rites of Passage Stages. These three

stages of Rites of Passage are as follows: “1) separation of the individuals involved from their preceding social state; 2) a period of transition in which they are neither one thing nor the other; and 3) a reintegration phase in which, through various rites of incorporation, they are absorbed into their new social state” (Hunter p. 155). With this model at hand, Hunter brings attention to a missing third stage in Western society: “a ritual occurring later in the grief process remains a missing piece for many individuals whose socio-culturally practiced grief rituals stop with the funeral service and burial of the dead” (p. 155). Throughout this journal article, Hunter emphasizes that there are two rites of passage happening with the death of a person: “the passage of the deceased individual from the world of the living to the world of the dead. The other is the passage of bereavement for those left behind, which involves redefining one’s role in life without the deceased individual. ... Bereavement-related rituals are so integrated with death rituals, in fact, that bereavement is rarely considered its own ‘rite of passage’ (p. 159).

It is from this place of my understanding regarding these missing aspects within the collective of Anglo-America that brings me into the heart of this project. By providing a community call for submissions to this Zine, “Together in Grief”, I believe it is a form of ritualization that connects a deeper process beyond what is currently offered within Anglo-America’s culture. In inviting community members to create artwork and expressions of grief, a ritualized process is offered that cultivates a finished product from each community member that is then woven into a collection. Although this outreach is small and currently only subject to my immediate community, I believe that this project has a ripple effect impact and hope it can be the seed for much more to come. My process with this project has been one that has helped me find a place of conversation amongst the community about the importance of connection within grief; from my viewpoint, there has been a door that has opened for every one

of us. During the span of the beginning of this project to the conclusion of it, I have had four people in my life who have experienced the deaths of loved ones. Death is an inevitable experience that is currently deeply programmed in Western society as an isolating experience. Death is often out of sight, out of touch, out of a warm, familiar, communal experience within the medicalized process. My love's ex-father-in-law passed away last month due to COVID-19. Her experience of witnessing his death in the hospital was quantified as "traumatizing" and "void of ritual." Witnessing my loved ones experience the negative impacts of capitalism's influence on death is a complete catalyst to this project and so many more projects to come.

So much of Anglo-America's relationship to death and grief is saturated in isolation. Amidst a day in age when more people are dying, we are facing extreme climate change, and a worldwide pandemic is still in full swing, I believe it is more important than ever to return back to community and to take steps towards building more sustainable, supportive, and complete practices connecting us to the sacred rite of passage that is death and grief. As I have walked my path in this world, I have come to know and understand death and grief in an ever-evolving relationship rooted in my childhood. Through the years, I have come to understand this relationship as the cultivation of tools, insight, story, and wisdom that I feel is meant for a bigger purpose. I see my experience in grief as a gift that I am called to give back in ways that I know I still am unclear of. "Together in Grief" is just the beginning of a personal purpose in my life to provide pathways to more profound meaning-making, insights, and healing in Anglo-America's disconnect from an inevitable human experience of grieving and dying. In this cultivation and healing, I hope that it enlivens each of us to the meaning of life. By honoring death and grief as a companion, I believe we can live a more meaningful and whole life that echoes outward into a more connected, peaceful, and intentional world.



To view and download the completed zine, please visit :

together-in-grief.com

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