

## **Blue Christmas 2021**

He looked so small, curled on his left side unable to eat, drink, speak or hear much for six days. The personal support workers had just turned and resettled him while my sister and I waited in the hall. The visiting restrictions due to COVID-19 were impacting my Winnipeg family's time with my dad. It was agonizingly sad that people who deeply loved him were not allowed to say 'goodbye'.

Though his eyes were mostly closed, dad had not slept much through the afternoon or evening and was very alert every ten minutes or so. In those moments, when his eyes were open and seeking connection, we did our best to communicate with him – holding his hands, speaking with our eyes. I was trying to be fully present to him, silently communicating “Good-bye. I love you. Thank you”. It was now mid-evening and time to leave for the day. Dad seemed to be sleeping a little more deeply. I gathered the couple of things I was allowed to bring into his home, turned to my dad and kissed him good-bye. Hours later, before sunrise, he died.

Like most years, 2021 has no shortage of loss and grief to go around: ecological grief, pandemic griefs, grief experienced by racialized and Indigenous communities,

and so many untimely deaths due to mental illness, homelessness, and the opioid crisis -- an avalanche of losses felt around the globe. It is in this greater context of grief that I touch, like individual pieces of broken pottery, the loss of my dad and the various disappointments, painful moments, as well as gifts, connected with his final year. I imagine these as separate fragments spread out before me.

One piece that leaves me feeling unsettled is “deconditioning”. This is the physical, mental, and social consequences associated with inactivity and intellectual and social understimulation. From the start of the pandemic my dad lost almost all his daily exercise and his outdoor and social life he enjoyed beyond his LTC home. He accepted this situation and never complained, but it was difficult to see the negative effects from him being cut off from life-sustaining activities and relationships. When visiting was allowed, only two of my siblings had permission to see him, no one else. After Feb 2020, he never saw his sons-in-law, daughter-in-law or his eighteen grandchildren and great-grandchildren again. Though fully vaccinated, he was not allowed to leave his home to have his hearing aid replaced and he had no hearing in his other ear. This seems unjust in the face of

the freedom of movement enjoyed by the LTC home's staff and the general public. Hadn't the elderly borne enough suffering in the first wave of the pandemic?

On the other hand, there is the most beautiful piece in this story -- the fact that my dad had a good healthy life. He lived ninety-six and a half years. In his most elderly years he was attentively and lovingly cared for by my three siblings and the LTC staff. With the assistance of an amazing recreational worker, I was able to enjoy video calls with my dad every week for a year. Yet another priceless gift was being allowed to be with my dad in the days before he died. Compassionately, his home extended the number of visitors permitted from two to four, so my bother and I could also be with him. For all these gifts, I will be forever grateful.

Then there are the difficult pieces that followed my dad's death. Due to the pandemic, despite having made funeral arrangements and a liturgy years in advance, my family had to face a raft of changes and difficult decisions. The church where the funeral was to take place was shut down. The priest who had agreed to preside had retired. Only eight of my family were allowed to attend the funeral in-person. Following the

interment, how strange it felt not to be encircled and comforted by friends and extended family.

At the same time, I am deeply grateful for the touching and meaningful pieces during these same weeks: the kindness of the funeral home staff, the willingness of clergy and musicians to assist, the gift of a photo/music video of my dad's life, and Redeemer clergy and friends who joined the live streamed service from afar and sent cards, notes, and flowers. It is a *long*, good list.

But I ask myself, how have I grieved and accepted the difficulties of my loss? What about the painful pieces such as the inevitable tensions amongst family members that occur as people grieve differently and cope with new situations and unexpected stresses in their own way? With so many matters pre-planned, I'd hoped to be freed up to grieve, but COVID-19 scuttled that. Practical matters had to be focused on. I don't cry easily, so I wondered at times where I was in this grief process? How was I doing making sense of all the fragments of this experience?

In the first weeks, reaching out to others helped me begin to find a path forward. Clergy and listening friends were certainly an important solace. Moving from isolation to connection helped me begin to deal with what felt most raw. Then unexpectedly, a few weeks ago a friend noticed a broken decorative bowl of mine with some pieces resting inside. She asked if I'd ever heard of the Japanese art of kintsugi. She explained it is a process of repairing ceramics by re-joining the pieces using gold and an adhesive. The resulting meandering, criss-crossing lines of gold transform the rough edges, hold the irregular shapes into a restored whole. The result is considered more beautiful than the original.

Shortly after her visit, I noticed the word "kintsugi" in the list of archived Redeemer sermons. In one of Andrew Kuhl's homilies, he makes a connection between kintsugi and Jesus' raising of Lazarus. At one point, Andrew focuses on the moments before Lazarus is raised, when Jesus grieved the loss of his friend. This parallels the first step in kintsugi when the craftsperson lays out the pieces to contemplate and appreciate just as they are. Jesus could have arrived and leapt into action. After all, isn't that what the family would have wanted? But he didn't hurry to fix the situation. First, he listened

and compassionately connected with the family and others present, to take in the full weight of their shock and grief. Then he responded by taking time to feel and express his own grief. *Jesus wept.*

Andrew's sermon was timely for me. I realized my mix of losses and gifts could be approached like that first step in kintsugi, like Jesus pausing to sensitively take in the whole scene. I can take a breath. I can unhurriedly sit with all the parts of this experience and allow the process of healing to unfold. I can move through my days, mindful of my grieving and gradually come to terms with the most painful aspects.

By peacefully taking time, I discover my list of what I am thankful for expanding. In turn, this helps me carry the difficulties more gracefully. Recently a friend used the word "capacious" when speaking about relationships. "Capacious" is a good word for the grieving journey too. I believe this process requires space for the uncomfortable emotions as well as self-compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude. As I step forward through my grief, I can be attentive to the present moment, appreciate the gradual progress, and be glad for what I'm learning. Healing insights from collective wisdom and

from within have become the beautiful strong kintsugi lines of gold.

Recently, a friend of mine visited the Red Cross museum in Geneva. She was particularly moved by a room of artifacts crafted by prisoners of war. The objects were given by the prisoners to Red Cross workers who visited them in prison. She wrote, *“I was awed by how human beings even in horrible circumstances have both the need and the capacity to create. And to create beauty which gives their lives meaning.”* This reflection echoes the restorative art of kintsugi.

As the prisoners accepted comfort from the Red Cross, they moved from isolation into a healing community. In response, they expressed generosity and gratitude, an important part of healing. This movement from isolation to connection and community is also the gold lines holding together what once was broken. I think it is in the sharing of grief, as Jesus modeled, that communities grow stronger, more loving, just as the repaired kintsugi is considered more precious than the original. It’s my hope that in sharing my grief I might also be moved like the prisoners towards generosity and to what is life-giving and authentic in relationships.

Hopefully this will help me to be more responsive to the needs of others.

Losses are often nested in other losses. The Christmas season can be a complex time – with lots of room for both wonder and pain. For many years, Christmas has been for me both a time of joy and a season just to get through. This has been true since my eldest son, Dylan has not been well enough to be home during the holidays. It is painful to think of him without loved ones on Christmas Day. During many of these years, my dad traveled to spend Christmas with us. His presence certainly helped us cope with missing Dylan. This year, happily, for the first time in over 15 years, Dylan is well enough to spend Christmas with us. Just as dad's holiday visits helped to ease Dylan's absence, Dylan's presence this year might ease our loss of dad and grandpa.

I'm hopeful strengthening gold lines of healing will continue to grow within me as I seek understanding and lean outwards towards others, following the pilgrim's rhythm of connection, fracture, repair.



And now, I invite all of us to become fully aware of this moment...here and now. I have shared with you some of my broken pieces of grief and loss. You sit with me as witnesses to my sorrow. With your attentiveness you may also be bringing your own broken pieces. We can be present to each other in a communion of love and compassion, a beautiful and sacred moment -- caritas. We are not orphans after all.

I wish us all, both comfort and joy this Christmas season.