



The Faces of Love: The Curriculum of Loss

Carl Leggo

University of British Columbia

Abstract:

My brother was diagnosed with cancer in early July, 2017. He died on August 22, 2017. I have written many poems about growing up with my brother, and now that he has died, I am revisiting the poems I once wrote and writing more because writing is my way of addressing grief. Writing is an integral path in the curriculum of loss, and I trust writing will lead me to the understanding I need to begin each new day with hope, even joy in the midst of loss. Joy Kogawa (2016) sees “the world as an open book embedded with stories” that we can hear “if we have ears to hear” (p. 149). When my brother died, the loss was grievous, but the loss reminded me I am alive and I must keep on telling stories. I am learning to live with the curriculum of loss. As one who is left behind, my calling is to remember my brother and to share stories about him, but my calling is also to explore connections between life and loss, and the possibilities that extend beyond loss. Ultimately the curriculum of loss is a curriculum of hope. I want to be open to learning from my brother. I am not satisfied with remembering or memorializing him. I want to continue in a pedagogic relationship with my brother so that I learn from both memories and loss, as well as from the possibilities that continue.

Keywords: curriculum of loss; grief; poetic inquiry

Words are a sieve. We are briefly held back, we are briefly remembered by them. (Schweizer, 2016, p. 59)

Do we write to be free of our ghosts or to welcome them? (Kogawa, 2016, p. 190)

Perhaps gaining a little wisdom from a grievous loss is the most any of us can hope for. (Givner, 2009, p. 183)

While travelling through Gros Morne National Park on the west coast of Newfoundland, I read *The Phases of Love*, a book of poems by Dorothy Livesay (1983). I sat in the back seat of a CRV while my brother-in-law drove. I read poetry as we passed by Wiltondale, Rocky Harbour, Sally's Cove, Western Brook, and St. Paul's on our way to Cow Head, a familiar journey filled with countless memories after a lifetime of driving this highway. My friend and colleague, Kedrick James, gave me *The Phases of Love*. Kedrick and I share a long, deep love of poetry. I had been waiting for some time to read the book. I wanted to read it slowly at a time that called me to linger with Livesay's wisdom, courage, and art. I carried the book from Vancouver to Newfoundland with the anticipation that I would know the right time to read Livesay. This drive along the coast of the Great Northern Peninsula was the right time.

My brother Rick was diagnosed with cancer in early July. After seeing an oncologist for further diagnosis, he texted, "Not looking good." The news was bad! In the middle of July, I spent a couple of days with my brother. Our sister drove him and his wife from Mt. Pearl on Newfoundland's east coast to Corner Brook on the island's west coast so he could see the town where he grew up one more time. He came to say good-bye. We sat in our mother's house and remembered the past. After a couple days he returned home.

I then travelled to Cow Head with family to walk on sandy and rocky beaches, to savour the familiar scents and rhythms of Gros Morne National Park. Long before the park was established as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, my brother and I went with our father, mother, and sister to Bonne Bay, Norris Point, Woody Point, Neddy's Harbour, and Rocky Harbour to visit uncles, aunts, and cousins. We once camped on the edge of Western Brook. There are even a few photos of my brother and me. We look like we are having fun.

On the drive up the coast, I read Dorothy Livesay's *The Phases of Love* and I lingered with favourite lines from Livesay, and I thought about my brother, and I wondered if he would celebrate his sixty-third birthday in November. I wondered if he would phone me on my birthday a week earlier in November to remind me he was now two years younger, even if only for a week. I thought he might still have at least a few months. My brother died on August 22. A sudden absence! A long time ago I wrote a poem about an adventure when my brother and I were boys. I have written many poems about growing up with my brother, and now that he has died, I am revisiting the poems I once wrote and writing more because writing is my way of addressing grief. Writing is an integral path in the curriculum of loss, and I trust writing will lead me to the understanding I need to begin each new day with hope, even joy in the midst of loss.

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A Coffin and a Chevy

My father bought the '58 Chevy,
maroon and new, drove my brother and me
out of the city along the Trans Canada Highway
to cut a Christmas tree, parked on the shoulder,
left my brother and me, sank into the snow
like quicksand, my brother, only four, laughing,
and I was laughing at my brother laughing
as my father waved a hand, his mouth a tight line,
just before he was swallowed by snow and dark trees
and my brother jumped up and down in the back seat
while I pretended to drive away for help
but went nowhere, and my father didn't come back,
my brother full of fear, no longer laughing,
and the air was thick with chewy toffee,
my father gone, my brother going crazy,
so I grabbed the ice scraper and jabbed holes
in the maroon velvet over me like the inside
of a coffin, no escape, and my father returned,
creature from the snow lagoon, bearing a tree,
a wide grin where the line had been,
and the car was a car, not a coffin,
my father was alive, my brother was laughing,
and my father looked at the neat triangular flags
hanging from the ceiling of his new Chevy,
said nothing, drove back to the city
in a Chevy once more a coffin.

With my brother's death I now read the poem "A Coffin and a Chevy" with new understanding. As a child I lived with a lot of fear. My keen imagination was always composing monsters and ghosts lurking close by, always full of threats and danger. I remember another critical story in my childhood. My brother and I were energetic boys. We loved to play.

The Bed

at Coleman's Furniture World
my mother bought the bed
French provincial queen
gleaming enamel white
etched in lines of gold

a bed too grand for sleeping in

and when Mother and Skipper left
 on Saturday night for Merle's
 I watched my grandmother nap with Bob Barker
 and sneaked a step-ladder into the bedroom
 my brother and I, the Leggoni brothers
 aerial artists extraordinaire
 jumped flew tumbled dived
 from the ladder in the air to the bed
 a trampoline for bouncing to the moon
 I was practising my brother's trademark
 double pike somersault with a twist
 when the trampoline no longer bounced
 and my heart broke with long hard cracks
 my grandmother crying, Oh my, oh my
 the next morning my father called
 my brother and me into his room
 looked at us hard and harder,
 Boys, you've hurt your mother, hurt
 her bad; what can you do about it?
 what could we do? I didn't know
 and still don't Skipper strapped
 the bed together with black electrical tape
 and it stayed that way for at least
 a decade, at least until I left home

As my brother quickly grew weaker with cancer, I remembered the catastrophe of the broken bed. Just as I did not know what to do then, I still did not know what to do. After my annual summer visit to Corner Brook, I returned home to Steveston, British Columbia, but a few days later my sister texted to tell me that our brother would be moved to palliative care the next day. I booked a flight back to Newfoundland later that day, flew to the airport in Deer Lake, and picked up my mother in Corner Brook. Then, we drove across Newfoundland to the Miller Centre where my brother was carried by ambulance that morning. After flying all night, I drove all day, and arrived at my brother's bedside in the early evening. One eye was slightly open, but he made no response, and soon the eye closed. Family told my mother and me that Rick was waiting for us to arrive. He died a few hours later. I was sitting with my sister beside our brother's bed, listening to his breathing until he wasn't breathing. Joy Kogawa (2016) sees "the world as an open book embedded with stories" that we can hear "if we have ears to hear" (p. 149). When my brother stopped breathing, I felt a shudder of finality, like a shutter clapped hard in a late summer's wind. I knew I would never hear my brother tell more witty jokes or hopeful stories. The loss was grievous, but the loss reminded me I am alive and I must keep on telling stories. So, I will. Frank Davey (2009) notes that "part of grief is recollecting the

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missed opportunities: the call that could have been made, the things that could have been said more clearly, the farewells that may not have been farewells" (p. 100). I feel that loss intensely. Since I cannot do anything about what has been lost, I need to focus on what is now possible. On August 26, 2017, I read a version of the following poem at my brother's funeral.

Living Hope

(for my brother)

I have written many poems about my brother,
poems about our growing up together
on Lynch's Lane in Corner Brook.

My brother once claimed I made money
from writing poetry about his adventures,
especially his misadventures.

I always told my brother
poets don't make any money.
I don't think he was convinced.

But a few days ago at the Miller Center
I told my brother I would continue to tell our stories,
and I would tell the stories as true as I can.

I promised my brother I would write
more poems so I would never forget
the ways he lived among us.

On Tuesday nights my brother called our mother
to help her with *The Newfoundland Herald* crossword puzzle.
What is a six-letter word that begins with h?

Humour? My brother lived with humour.

I recall how he mimicked Chanel No. 5 ads, whispered
with weary French worldliness, *It's not easy being*
Catherine Deneuve, left eyebrow barely raised.

A few weeks ago in Corner Brook my brother
introduced me to *90 Day Fiancé*, a sad, weird,
funny reality show far better, my brother assured me,
than *Big Brother*, *The Bachelorette*, and *Say Yes to the Dress*.

My sister and my brother were always a comic team.
They traded witty one-liners like manic ping pong players,
back and forth, like electricity, zipping and zapping.

My brother lived with humour, and he lived with heart.

The Christmas of '74 my girlfriend Lana
tramped through deep snow up Old Humber Road
to Lynch's Lane to meet my family.

My brother said nothing, just nodded, smiled,
slipped on his coat and left. When it was time
for Lana to go home, we stepped out the door

where my brother was leaning on a snow shovel
after ploughing a wide path through the snow.
He still didn't say anything, still smiled.
Lana kissed his red face. She met my brother.

My brother lived with humour and heart, and he lived with humility.

Growing up on Lynch's Lane in Corner Brook
Cec, Frazer, Macky, my brother, and I always competed
with one another, but my brother was always the strongest.

He alone rode a Raleigh one-speed bicycle
up almost perpendicular Lynch's Lane,
from bottom to top, spinning on loose gravel

with steely resolve to complete what he started.
But my brother was never really committed
to competition. He was interested in living

experiences, testing himself, exploring his own limits.
My brother did not need to occupy the centre of a room.
He did not need to boast, at least not about himself.

My brother lived with humour, heart, and humility, and he lived with hope.

For forty years at Newfoundland and Labrador Hydro,
my brother shone. He loved being an engineer,
an electrical engineer, the son of an electrician.

I will miss my brother, but I will continue
to write poetry out of the memories of a life
well-lived, poetry about a brother who helped
dream complex matrices of electrical equipment.

I heard him speak often about going to Bay D'Espoir,
the heart of Newfoundland's electricity generation,
and like many Newfoundlanders I heard *Bay Despair*,
even if the French name ironically means Bay of Hope.

My brother learned how hope lives
amidst each day's demands, how hope
flows in our blood with love's rhythms.

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I know many reviewers who would criticize my poem as riddled with clichés of the heart. I have received many such critical comments. Can the heart avoid clichés? Can the poet who is seeking to understand his heart avoid clichés? Grief is experienced by almost everyone. You would need to die very young to avoid the experience of grief. Almost everyone will experience grief, and most of us will experience grief many times. I want to call out my grief because grief is now my teacher, and if I am going to learn from grief, I must learn how to articulate grief, to speak grief into a world where the first response to the polite question—How are you?—is typically a quick “Fine. You?” Even when I am not fine, I respond with false politeness, except for a few times since my brother’s death when I told people who asked—How are you?—that I was grieving the loss of my brother, even caught up in the vortex of inexplicable paradox like a whisper that clangs. Their responses were not generally encouraging. After I tried to be frank a few times, I realized that most people I know do not want to hold my clichéd heart, now pickled in grief. So, I am back to smiling, “Fine. You?” I mostly walk the course of loss, this curriculum of loss, on my own.

I am learning how to say good-bye. In his wise and moving book, *Rarity and the Poetic: The Gesture of Small Flowers*, Harold Schweizer (2016) asks, “How do we know another’s dying?” (p. 36) Because Schweizer does not think that most of human experience can “be rendered through conventional language,” he calls for “a poetic, lyrical discourse” (p. 36). I read Dorothy Livesay’s *The Phases of Love*, and I selected at least one or two favourite lines from each poem. The collection includes seventy-one poems. Many of the poems do not have titles, and the collection is not paginated. After I typed up those lines, I lingered with my selection, and chose thirty-five fragments that especially resonated with me as I reviewed Livesay’s lines in relation to the ways I was remembering and grieving and celebrating my brother. I then wrote two lines of poetry in response to each poetic fragment from Livesay. I had recently engaged in a collaborative writing project with my colleague, John Guiney Yallop at Acadia University, where John sent me two lines of a poem and I responded with two lines. He then responded with two more followed by me. We eventually wrote a poem together with twelve stanzas, six from each of us. When I began revisiting Livesay’s poetry, I remembered the kind of challenge I had enjoyed in the collaboration with John, and I decided to pursue a similar approach in responding to Livesay’s poetry. Initially I was thinking about the possibility of a found poem in which I used mostly Livesay’s words, but that would not have satisfied the sense of vision I had for the poem. I wanted to write a poem like my uncle Jim once built a boat. He told me there were two ways to build a boat. You can start from scratch, or you can begin with an old boat and replace each rib and plank, piece by piece. The second way is slower, but Uncle Jim explained that he liked a boat with family connections. I, too, wanted a poem that had connections, a kind of rhizomatic network of connections to other poets and colleagues. I wanted a poem that acknowledged genealogical or family connections. I anticipated that I would re-order the selections from Livesay’s poems, but after selecting and responding to thirty-five fragments, I liked the narrative that emerged from following Livesay’s poetry in the original order in *The Phases of Love*. So, the poem “Invisible Ink” emerged from a lingering with words and memories and processes. Ultimately I hope the poem honours my brother, but I also hope the poem honours others, and especially Dorothy Livesay, who will always be one of Canada’s most significant poets. We must

never forget her. As I hope many people will not forget my brother. Livesay's poetry is presented in italics in order to separate it from my poetry, not because I think any reader is going to confuse or conflate the poetry, but primarily to indicate a kind of dialogue between Livesay and Leggo.

Invisible Ink

(for my brother)

My heart –

A sandy dune… (1st poem)

children at Western Brook, we tumbled down
sand dunes, washed in Atlantic wind, glad

A lost wind calling (5th poem)

together, how many storms did we weather?
shaped by wind snow rain sun, never alone

The hoarse cry of a crow (7th poem)

I heard nothing, at least I remember nothing
all of life called, but I was deaf with death

Gravely considering the stars. (9th poem)

in light rain I stood at your grave, knowing
stars will light the sky in your absence

The time to remember (10th poem)

not now, I once long harrowed the past
with a tomb raider's penchant for pillage

Something unnamed I found (11th poem)

how can I name the grief written in
the illegible invisible ink of tears?

Never forget (12th poem)

I will not forget, but I know so little,
regret I cannot forget what I do not know

I shake and tremble (13th poem)

like a Pentecostal possessed with rock and roll
I dance with lost limbs, loose rhythms, lunacy

catches my breath (21st poem)

in ploughed packed banks of snow on Lynch's Lane
we burrowed tunnels, got stuck, found our way out

the notations of love (24th poem)

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I wrote poems like notes so you might know
I always loved you, but who reads poetry?

waiting (25th poem)

I am old, older than you, still waiting
now less hopeful, the wait like a weight

we build a bridge (26th poem)

I stand alone on the bridge, here and there,
fictions fired in the heart's question: where?

I stand still (27th poem)

I stand but I am not still, seeking to distil
life and loss in rum or a poem, at least

The hard core of love (28th poem)

whatever we had and did not have, your call
like a mallet broke me, the wreckage of love

When I got home (30th poem)

after flying through the night, vast geography
and four time zones between us, I kissed you

I touched (37th poem)

remember how we wrestled, tangled together,
but never learned how to hug, now too late

bright wound that will not heal (38th poem)

with faithful resolve, I seek the blessing
in the wound, full of stark endless hope

that love necessitates (40th poem)

instead of composing love with compelling
coherent coercion, I will cast love in spelling

feeling the emptiness (42nd poem)

when you were alive, I was glad, and I felt
no emptiness for silent absence: now stuffed

astonishing surprise (43rd poem)

I am astonished by the surprise with no prise
now want to astonish the surprise with a prise

the sentences we found (45th poem)

in the last hours in palliative care, I spoke

a few words, plain plaintive platitudes

I would find not you (46th poem)

I chased your memory across Newfoundland
to spend a few final hours with you, no more

must touch your heart (47th poem)

who can hold the brittle heart's shell, without
breaking it into smithereens, bits of shrapnel

the river flows on (48th poem)

does it? where? is *on* like *Oz*
a myth to hold the fantasy of *with*?

for the last time (50th poem)

our sister and I sat near, watched the pause
between breaths grow till we heard only pause

And I cannot lift the stone (59th poem)

when Lazarus died, Jesus said, Take away
the stone, and Lazarus lived (how I wish!)

I seek (60th poem)

I screak shriek sneak speak squeak streak
with a diviner's rod, seek water in the desert

He might wander back and forth (63rd poem)

when my brother died I knew he left me
to wander in wonder, glad to be alive

a throng of us are singing (64th poem)

sing, throng, to your heart's delight while
I gasp with the noose around my throat

searching far and wide (66th poem)

all my life I have been on a timely quest to
research the tensile tension of verbs: I am

let go let go (67th poem)

no, let's go, let's go, Richard Wayne Leggo
we are just beginning, I will not let go

to cover you with love (68th poem)

too late I understood how love is contact
not a contract with reciprocal obligation

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I heard you (69th poem)

you had words you wished to say but
who could hear your words after so long?

the memory of love (70th poem)

we bought our sister a stuffed monkey,
at Woolworth's, with our own money

teach me to be more human (71st poem)

while you taught me many lessons
your dying taught me most about living

Frank Davey (2009) understands how "grief is so often the gnawing desire to know why" (p. 110). I have been a teacher all my life, and I live with a well-honed penchant for knowing. I am learning to live with the curriculum of loss. Like Erín Moure (2009) I am learning that all I will likely ever know is "a bit of an answer" in the midst of "mystery" (p. 252). When I stood at the graveside in late August and watched my brother's friends carry his coffin from the hearse, I remembered many stories, and I was thankful for those stories. I will live with love and hope.

Sometimes It Takes a Long Time

while trout fishing in the beaver ponds
with Skipper and my brother and Cec
and his father Dave and anyone else we
could squeeze into the Nash, I could never
stay in one place, flitted back and forth
between this rock or point or sandbar,
wherever anyone shouted, I've got a bite

while my brother stayed in one place,
patiently waited for the trout to visit him,
didn't ever seem to get hungry or thirsty,
didn't swat flies, didn't move except
to cast his line, every move careful
calculated content, always caught lots of trout

I scurried here and there, heeding every boast,
sure only everybody else was catching
more trout, and in middle age with my creel
still empty, I am still hearing, I've got a bite,
and most of my life I've dashed back and forth

in the beaver ponds, sometimes it takes
a long time to learn to be still: surely it is time

Renee Rodin (2009) understands that "there is no correct or incorrect way to grieve. No right or wrong way, no timeline, no limit" (p. 305). When my brother called me with the news of his cancer diagnosis, I cried out and inadvertently ended the call. Lana had to phone my brother back. I couldn't see the numbers on the keypad. I couldn't see anything. Reconnected, I told my brother I loved him. I told him I would pray for him. I told him hope would hold us. I wanted words to weave a suture to close up the wound. I wanted words to replace the cancer cells with healthy cells. I wanted words to act creatively with spiritual and loving efficacy. My brother died fewer than six weeks later. Words could not heal cancer. Now, I hope that words will help me learn how to live with loss. Rodin (2009) reminds me that "closure is a myth. You learn to live with the hole in your heart" (p. 305). I know the hole in my heart; I hope I can learn how to live with the hole. Harold Schweizer (2016) suggests that "when we *sit* with the dead—and there is implicit in this *sitting* a duration and perhaps a great patience—we begin to earn the qualities that make a poet" (p. 35). When my first book of poems *Growing up Perpendicular on the Side of a Hill* was published in 1994, my brother sent me a silver pen with my name engraved. While he claimed that I was making money from his childhood misfortunes, he was always glad I wrote the stories of our growing up. Now, with his death I will continue to write, and I hope I will write with more wisdom, more attentive acuity, more faith in the possibilities, as well as the limits, of language. Schweizer (2016) understands that poetic "language is not language as representation but language as experience, embodied language, not language to produce knowledge but a fluttering, an intimation of that which speaks in us when we speak" (p. 16). He invites us to listen, "to hear a speaking that extends beyond the conceptual, visible, and audible evidence of the words on the page" (p. 90). Not only will I learn to live with the hole in the heart, but I will learn to listen to the music and poetry that resonates from the places of loss, absence, and silence.

My Mother's House

Last spring I returned to my mother's house.
Like living in a Volkswagen van
each move had to be exact and slow and smooth.

My mother's house is a museum
of artifacts from Woolworth's and K-Mart,
every room crammed, everything in place.

My mother has two or three of everything,
just in case, because it was on sale,
because she found space not filled:

stacks of satin-bound blankets in cellophane,
more than the Glynmill Inn,
enough dish towels from Duz detergent
to wash all the dishes in all the restaurants
of Corner Brook, salt and pepper shakers
and pots pans mugs jars jugs cups cans tins

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filling every cupboard corner crack cranny,
nothing ever used, just collected and stored
and protected like the treasure in Ali Baba's cave.

My mother's house is not a house
for dancing in, and yet I recall I once danced
in rubber boots. I was a Cossack from Siberia.

Every Wednesday night I wrestled
my brother in a match to the death
or the end of Skipper's patience.

My brother and I played pool in the kitchen
on a table with collapsible legs,
sometimes opening the fridge door to make a shot.

I was going to be the first Newfoundland
to make the Canadian gymnastics team,
somersaults and handstands on the sofa cushions.

My brother and I shot ceramic animals
with darts from spring-loaded guns
like Hemingway hunting elephants in Africa.

But last spring in my mother's house
I was like a reformed bull who knows
how to behave in a china shop.

If I moved quickly I would upset
the balance. I learned to move little,
always slowly, but that is not how

I once lived in my mother's house:
perhaps I have grown bigger,
perhaps I have grown smaller.

In a memoir about family Plum Johnson (2014) suggests that "at the end of our lives, we become only memories. If we're lucky, someone is passing those down" (p. 253). I hold to a more robust spiritual commitment than Johnson, and I believe in life after death. I believe in eternal life, and I support the perspective that those who have died are still present, still caring for us, still eager for communication. As one who is left behind, my calling is to remember my brother and to share stories about him, but my calling is also to explore connections between life and loss, and the possibilities that extend beyond loss. Ultimately the curriculum of loss is a curriculum of hope. I want to be open to learning from my brother. I am not satisfied with remembering or memorializing him. I want to continue in a pedagogic relationship with my brother so that I learn from both memories and loss, as well as from the possibilities that continue.

I admire Joy Kogawa's (2016) wise observation that "there seems to be a kind of music, a rhythm to life. Something painful happens. Pause. Beat one, beat two. Trust, trust, trust. Something unexpected happens next. A dance step back, to the side, leap up" (p. 67). Life is full of chaos and catastrophe; life is full of cosmos and community. My brother still lives, not corporeally but spiritually. Like Kogawa, I acknowledge how I know my brother lives "as the Presence of Love" (p. 70). According to Giorgio Agamben (1993), "the root of all pure joy and sadness is that the world is as it is" (p. 91), and "seeing something simply in its being-thus ... is love" (p. 106). I will linger with my brother as I continue to explore the stories of love that hold us fast. According to Ernst Bloch (2006), "every trace of our days on earth is framed by an enormous night, backward as well as forward, individually and above all cosmically" (p. 148). I know I know little. I especially have always known I do not know very much about my brother. He was always inscrutable, he was a mystery. He reminds me that we are all mysteries, swirling in a whirlwind of loss and love, still calling to one another with hope.

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