



# FLOATING

and other movements  
through transition

Interviews by LEO ALAS

with Cesar Alas  
Madin Lopez  
Danny War  
gloria galvez  
Genna Bloombecker  
Gray Hong  
& Troy Stevenson



# Table of Contents

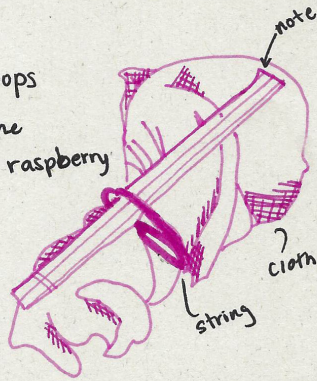
Introduction	5
Cesar Alas	8
Madin Lopez	14
Danny War	20
gloria galvez	26
Genna Bloombecker	29
Gray Hong	34
Troy Stevenson	40
Special Thanks	47



# INTRODUCTION

This morning I made an offering to Tinsley.

two big lollipops  
one cherry & the  
other blue raspberry  
a cigarette  
(Marlboro Gold)



wrapped in a red cloth  
with string  
and a rolled  
up note on  
notebook paper

I'm not sure yet what I will do with it.

Where to leave it so Tinsley can receive it.

I have neither a spirituality to guide me, nor a physical  
burial site to visit. All in all, it feels like a modern form of  
alienation.

If there is anything I learned from <sup>\* \* \* \* \*</sup>Queerness is that I need  
not be limited by what is or isn't in place for me.  
\* \* \* \* \*

I can create & recreate my own culture.

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In a way, my journey the past 2 years has been to  
create ways to grieve.

(maybe create is a strong word, the ways exist already  
but how to develop + transform them is perhaps  
an act of creation/recreation)



I've talked to many people about grief, through surveys, focus groups, and now interviews.

The act of asking questions often feels like a quest for answers. And with all things emotive, we know there can not be answers.

I really wanted to make space for people in my life to express their situated knowledge & document ~~our~~ our collective experiences & lessons.

Despite my insistence to take on a Queer lens, I will note that not everyone I spoke to identifies as Queer or even shares my political world view.

My first interview was with my dad. We have always butted heads around our beliefs.

He, a man brought up strongly Catholic in the midst of a brutal and horrendous Civil War, and I, his queer first generation child.

There are things he can never share with me — things I may never understand about <sup>how</sup> he sees the world, and he concedes to me the same — he will not understand me in this lifetime and that's okay.



my graduation  
May 2022



It is hardly a soapbox (I hope) to say that most people want the same things in life, regardless of belief system.

I hope to reach an apparent interconnectivity and at the same time never lose sight of real systems of power.

It cannot be overlooked the ways racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, heteropatriarchy, and colonization/global imperialism are springing sources of grief and affect the ways we access grief.

AND with that in mind;

I am defining my current phase in processing grief as  
**FLOATING.**



To FLOAT is to exist slowly and mindfully.

It is to be attuned to one's body so that stillness is not drowning.

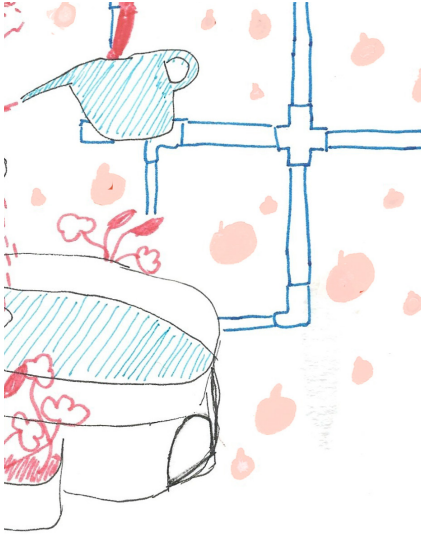
I have found this movement helpful to return to.

It is a good space to listen. The following interviews

were conducted between June 2021 - January 2022, loosely responding to the same questions. I chose participants whose community roles were varied from each other, though my reach was biased towards artists and young folks, mid to late 20's.

Please enjoy ♡ LEO

# Interview with Cesar Alas



L: So I have some questions for you.

C: Name is Cesar. I'm 51 years old.

L: Okay. Well, luckily my first question was name. So you answered that. Thank you. I wanted to know also, if you can introduce your profession(s) and how long you've been doing those professions.

C: I'm a DJ. I've been doing that for 23 years. No, more than that, I'm sorry. Let's say 30 years.

L: Really?

C: Yeah, professionally, yeah, 30 years.

L: Oh, wow.

C: I'm also a nurse I've been doing that for seven years.

L: Thank you. And besides being a DJ and a nurse, you're also my father.

C: Yep.

L: Yep. You're my father. So, you know that the project that I've been working on or the themes of the projects that I've been working on have been centered around grief, and I have chosen you amongst the people that I wanted to talk to about grief for a particular reason.

So I guess to start, I wanted to hear where you see grief being present in your life or in your work.

C: There is grief every day at work, my nursing job, because people don't always get better. So people grieve over their loss of good health. They grieve over the loss of loved ones. They grieve over the ability to function the way they used to.

L: Mm-hmm I should have asked this earlier, but what do you specialize in, in your nursing

C: Cardiology. Heart.

L: So what kind of people come to your floor?

C: All kinds. Young people, old people, very sick people who have other issues and the heart takes a hit because of their other health issues. People who are heartbroken literally, just sad, upset, angry, you name it.

L: And what wisdom, experiences or lessons do you feel like you have brought with you to your job in relation to grieving?

C: The wisdom to look at the positive and to know that there's always hope, even if we are in our last moments of life.

L: That's interesting. What do you mean by that? What does hope look like in the face of death?

C: Typically at my job, in my field, people don't just die. I'm not in an intensive care unit. People usually receive bad news and get treatment for whatever it is that they are gonna be facing because of those bad news.

So that usually gives people time to change things, whether it's because that's gonna help



them survive, whatever it is they're going through or get better. Or that at least gives them time to right whatever wrongs they might be experiencing in their lives. So to me, that's still something that was gained by the knowledge that perhaps your heart is gonna stop working a month from now a year from now, but you were given that warning, that advance notice it is. And so as sad and as, no pun intended, heartbreaking, that might be, it still gives the person a warning, sometimes to perhaps make changes.

L: I'm also wondering, because when I asked what wisdom, experiences, lessons have you brought to you to your job that helps with grieving and your response was having hope and seeing the positive-- Where do you think you in your life you picked up that wisdom

C: From my parents.

L: Can you tell me more about that?

C: Well, they always believe that no matter what happens, we're gonna get through hardships that we are going to survive, that there is a way, that no matter what we have to move forward and keep doing what we can and that we have to, sometimes if there's no hope, be grateful for what little we have and to make the best of it.

So in other words, not to give up and not to despair because something is horrible in our lives.

L: I'm wondering also-- I'm thinking about conversations that I've had with you in the past. I'm wondering if you feel like that mentality was something that you feel was part of your family's survival.

C: Yes. It always has been. We probably couldn't have made it out of many situations that we have encountered as a family without having that faith. And don't get me wrong. It's

not a religious faith where you pray to God and you know that he's gonna perform a miracle. It's more like, you need to do something about it. So in other words, God is gonna provide a miracle through your hard work, through your resilience.

L: Yeah. So I had asked what you brought into your job and now I wanna know what did your job train you for in regards to grief, if anything?

C: My school, my job, they train you about the technicalities. They train you about the law. They train you about what is proper, what is not, but they don't train you about the way you should help others through the gift that you can provide to others. And I think

there is a lot of legalities that come with that. And because of that, they cannot really be specific about what you can and cannot do or what you should and shouldn't do.

They find themselves in a situation where an employee might do something that is not in agreement with, what the institution can back you up on. So that's why they usually leave that up to the experts. And they do have experts, people who will come and will take over whenever there is a need for spiritual guidance or anything like that, because an institution is always afraid of what you, as an individual might say, that might be taken as coming on behalf of the institution. So there is very little that they do when it comes to that.

L: What is an example of something that they say?

C: That they do say for you to do?

L: Yeah or any training or response.

C: To listen. To be there to offer help in the form of others who might have had formal training in counseling those who are grieving.

*[I learned] how unprepared institutions are to deal with grief... To them, [only] the people who have had "proper training" [can] deal with such situations. And the problem is that they are rarely available, and they don't have the proper training when it comes to different cultures, different people, different religions. They're not culturally ready, most institutions.*

L: Like referring people.

C: Yeah.

L: Was there anything that surprised or challenged you that you had to figure out while you were on the job, in terms of responding to either your own grief or the grief of your coworkers or the grief of patients?

C: Yeah. How unprepared institutions are to deal with grief. They are very ill-prepared to deal with grief. To them it's all about the people who have had, in my opinion, proper training deal with such situations. And the problem is that I feel that sometimes they are rarely available, they don't have the proper training when it comes to different cultures, different people, different religions. They're not culturally ready, most institutions. My institution is one of them, they try, but I feel that they don't do the best job that they could that would satisfy the need.

L: So like what kinds of things do you think you would like to see?

C: Language is very important. I mean, you could help somebody who is grieving by holding their hand, by sitting with them, by listening, by keeping them company. But sometimes, it's not a matter of what you say. It's a matter of knowing that the person that you are talking to about your grief understands what's going on, what the situation is, what the background is. That anytime you have something that you wanna let out of your chest, it helps if the other person at least understand what's going on. At least the minimum details of what the person is going through and, that, you can only learn by making small talk. By listening and understanding, comprehending what is going on. Not just, well, somebody died. I know that, and that much sucks. That's horrible. So it has to be beyond that. It has to do with fully understanding the situation. And I think that's lacking in a lot of institutions.

L: Right, right. You kept saying language. Are you saying that you wish that there was more training as far as like, emotional intelligence?

C: Yes. And to have some sort of sympathy.

L: Right. And I'm wondering, would you say the same thing about various types of grief beyond death, but also the grief of a loss of ability, for example. Do you feel similarly that there's not quite the language for that kind of grieving?

C: Yes. Caregivers try their best. God bless everybody who is a caregiver because they try their best. They do what they can. They go above what is required of them. But sometimes it's just lacking. And I think institutions, and I don't wanna complain about the health-care system, but I think institutions fail to see the population they are serving and making that a priority when it comes to serving them. There are few institutions that make that their priority and make that their main point of focus. And I think that's a shame.

Because as much as a caregiver might want to do something for someone there are limitations based on their cultural knowledge, background, or language.

L: Yeah. I hear you. This was prior to you being a nurse, but I have this memory of you that was really impactful for me. As you remember, Cesar's (my brother) friend whose mother passed away, John, do you remember that? I have this memory where he came to visit after his mom passed and nobody really acknowledged that that had happened. I had pulled you aside and I told you just so that you were aware and you went up to him and you gave that acknowledgement and were like, I'm so sorry to hear that. After you left, he turned to all of the friends that were there and he was like, "you know, you all met my mom and I've been here for like an hour, and none of you have acknowledged that she died." That was really impactful for me because I remember feeling like I didn't know how to say anything. I really admired seeing you without hesitation being able to do that. I'm wondering, because I, I feel like you already sort of went into your profession as somebody who doesn't have a lot of that discomfort that I think a lot of people have-- someone with an ability to name things. I'm wondering if there are things that you've seen other nurses do or that you've seen, like just in your life, outside of work even, that have been inspiring to you

in that way, as that moment that I had in that memory with you?

C: My thinking is that you're always gonna find moments when other need you. A lot of times it's easy to go up to someone and congratulate them for a promotion, for a birthday, for something good, something that is meant to be cause for celebration. I mean, yes, you need to acknowledge success. You need to acknowledge good times, but I think people are gonna be fine, whether you acknowledge their success or not. But when it comes to something sad, something that they are going through-- it's hard because most people are uncomfortable with sad situations. Most people, because we are uncomfortable, we don't know how to respond to it. But if there's one thing that was ingrained in my brain, from my mother especially, is that, and I don't mean to be preachy, but, the Bible teaches you that those who take care of the, those who are the most in need, those are the ones who are gonna get credit, but going beyond that its just the fact that when you have had suffering in your own life, it feels good to be given a helping hand or a pat on the back or somebody to let you know that you're gonna be okay, that if you need anything, they're there for you. So I think it's, most importantly, a matter of being on the other side of the situation or having had experienced bad situations, sad situations, that's when it comes from the heart. And that's when you don't see any other option, any other way of doing things, but to try and help those who need help or just to offer yourself if the need arises, because you've been in that situation yourself and you know how it feels.

L: Yeah. That makes sense. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how when the pandemic was at its highest and you worked on a COVID floor, you had mentioned that there was some coworkers who were having a really difficult time, understandably, processing that or having panick attacks at work. You talked to me a little bit about ways that you responded to your coworkers who were experiencing that. And I was wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about that.

C: I think it all goes back to my experiences as I was growing up, my upbringing, where I

come from, a war torn country, the difficulties, everything that we went through, the sacrifices we have to make to survive that, has prepared me for at least having a head start on trying to be able to help others whenever I can. I'm 51 now. So I have had a lot of experiences with different situations, different people. So, my family has helped me learn how to react to people's fear, anger, stress, anxiety. For someone who is 51, I'm grateful that I've had those experiences, both with my parents and my children. Sometimes it might seem like a joke to some people, but it's really not. It's something serious, what they're going through-- sometimes people just cannot do something physically, mentally, cannot do something. They will not be able to do it, even if in their heart, they wish to. So that's when a person who knows that they are able to do it, has to step in and has to take over, knowing fully that we all have limitations and that you have to use your gifts as much as they are needed. I have many gifts, even in the mundane, my own mother pointed out that those are gifts. Those are things that a lot of people cannot do or are not physically, mentally, or able to do for whatever reason. And that it's a gift that I have that, that I have to share with others. And so by sharing my gift, hopefully I make other people's burden a little bit less, because God knows that I will have situations where I'm not gonna be able to do something and I'm gonna be grateful to those who are doing the things that I cannot do any longer.

L: What was it that your mom said was your gift?

C: She said that when I go play at people's weddings as a DJ, that that's a gift because not a lot of people can do that. Not a lot of people can entertain others and lead them in their celebration of whatever they are celebrating. And that I provide that and that, you know, to me that's mundane. It's just playing music. You know, just having people dance. But after she told me that I looked at doing my job as a DJ and I see it with more respect. Because yeah, because of something that my own mother pointed out, which I thought about it, and I realized that it's true.

L: Right. It definitely is. I think that not every-

one can do it.

But also going back to what I was asking earlier-- I'm wondering, what did you do in those situations? Like, how did you respond to coworkers that were reaching their limit?

C: I pulled them aside and I told them to go take a break and to come back when they were feeling better, that I would take care of their workload and that they should take care of them first before taking care of others. We are the most important beings in the profession. We have to take care of ourselves and we have to be okay. You know, "just go take a break, I'll take over, tell me what I need to, what you are taking care of right now. And I will do it." And, that's something that you might think, 'oh, that's so heroic. That's so nice.' You know, in this particular case, it was a girl who just started crying because she was just so anxious and, it's not heroic. It's just something that you need to do. That's what I would hope others would do to my loved ones-- to pull them aside, to help them and to let them take a moment to get back on their feet. You know, unfortunately that girl ended up quitting and ended up going into a different field and that's okay. That's also okay. Because we have to know our limitations. We have to know when it's better to let others take care of whatever needs to be taken care of. So that's okay. That to me is perfectly fine. No points deducted for that. That is actually good because it's good for everybody.

L: What kinds of things do you do to care for yourself in preparation to be open and available, to care for others?

C: I used to do some walking, some hiking every now and then, I listened to music. Now that the pandemic is not as bad, I DJ, which also gives me an outlet. I wish I could do more hiking because that really helps me. I feel good. I don't know if I am healthier, but I feel I'm healthier. Also you cannot let your job, whatever it is, take over your life and burn you out, cuz that could also happen and then you're not good for anything. When you are no longer needed, you need to step back and take care of yourself. Even by not doing anything, just being at home, doing nothing,

gardening, doing things that need to be done around the house-- even that takes your mind off the stress that you might have as a caregiver.

So to answer your question in a concise way, gardening, hiking, listening to music, those are things that I enjoy very much and walking Olaf (our dog). Well, now you do it.

L: No, you can take over if you want. <laugh>

C: That's okay.

L: Okay. I'll keep walking Olaf.

I wanted to ask you what the tool is that you will be sharing and how you arrived at that tool?

C: Prayer.

L: Okay.

C: A lot of people died during the times of COVID. That whole year was horrible at the beginning. People couldn't even go see their loved ones. They couldn't even go inside the hospital. We had to use an iPad to call them and have them see their loved ones, sometimes taking their last breaths and being there with them. So this can be done as a spiritual person. It can be done without injecting anything religious in it. You can do it as a tool for the person who is not there or for the person who doesn't know how to approach it, but who would appreciate it, and who would like it. Who might be afraid to ask for something else that can be done for that person.

My first question is, do you practice any particular religion, to someone who is in need of comfort, and whatever they tell me, I offer to have somebody come up and visit with them, you know, whether it's the patient or their family member to come and visit with them, like a religious person. It's called spiritual care and there's these people who come to sit with the person and they sometimes lead prayers. Most of them are non-denominational, but if the person asks for a rabbi or a priest or someone specific, they will try to provide it. The problem is that, they're not always available.



It might be one spiritual care person for the whole hospital and they might be busy with something that's more pressing in nature. So they might not be available or there's a matter of language, where the person is not able to communicate that well with the patient or with the family member. Keep in mind that just like any other culture, Spanish is comprised of many, many, many, many countries who each have their own mannerisms, their own words, their own way of speaking. So the spiritual caregiver might not necessarily be able to connect with all of the people that they intend to serve.

So that's going back to what we were talking about. Those are some of the issues that I see on a day to day basis. But going back to the advice, I would ask them if they would want me to lead a prayer for their loved ones and or even the patient, if they would like me to say a prayer with them. And most times they say yes. And then we say a simple prayer and just words from the heart. As far as asking God to be in that person's heart to, to help them, to keep them company, to give them strength. And if it's somebody who has died to ask God, to receive them in their kingdom. So it can be something simple. It can be something elaborate. You kind of have to feel what the person is going through, gonna have to be respectful of what their wishes are, how eager they, they are, how receptive they are of what you might be able to offer them and go from there. So that is not something that you are required to do. That is not something that you're not supposed to do. That is just something that I take it as communication, which is part of my being a nurse. Communication is a big part of what I do. I take it as, that was just another task that I was providing as a nurse.

I'm not trying to convert anybody. I'm not asking them to go to my church-- which I don't go to church anyway, so it doesn't matter. I don't see it as something that is in conflict with me performing my duties as a nurse. The most important thing is to ask permission, to ask the patient or the family members, what they want. Suggest, and then if they say, yes, then you proceed and nine out of 10 times, they are very appreciative of that. Sometimes it's something as simple as going to get them a

chair to sit or getting them some water. Simple as that, it doesn't have to be a prayer. It doesn't have to be anything in particular, just giving them access to their loved one.

And comfort in that moment. So whatever you can do, whatever you have at your disposition, I don't see a better time to make use of it than at that moment. I think that's the moment where it counts. That's the moment where I wouldn't ask, should I, should I not?

That's a moment when you have to act it's, it's just like when somebody is falling, hanging by a thread, falling from a cliff, you don't think about it. You don't ask them, would you like to be pulled? You go and tell them, Hey, I'm gonna pull you right now. This is what I'm gonna do this. I need you to help me. This is what's gonna happen. Give them instructions, be clear about it and do what you need to do. So you help them. You don't question it.

L: And where do you see prayer fitting in your own grieving process?

C: I do it every day, because I think it's the only thing that is a reminder of who I am. I think when it all goes down the tubes, it's the only reminder that I have of who I am.

Even if a person is not religious, understanding that sometimes you're not gonna have a person that looks like you, of flesh and bones standing next to you or in front of you.

It's good to know that there's a being that is gonna listen to you that you can say what you're feeling and just let it out. People don't wanna be labeled as crazy talking to themselves. So spirituality is a very good way to let it out-- to say it out loud, to remember what matters to you the most, whether it's the safety of your children or your parents, the good health, the desire to come back safely from a trip, the, the faith and the hope that your loved ones are okay after they die, it is a good way to let it out. It's a good way to acknowledge it and to remind yourself. So that's why I pray.

L: Thank you, Papa. That's all my questions. Thank you for telling me all of your thoughts.

# Interview with Madin Lopez

had identified with for so long. So, I think that we have a lot in common to be able to go over today.

L: Yeah, definitely. That goes right straight into my next, very broad question, which is how is grief present in your life and how is it present in your work, which you responded to a little bit there.

M: I feel like grief is present in my life. Like I mentioned, we are moving our space, but we started on a moped and I would go into shelters. And then on from the moped, I turned that into a mobile self-esteem building salon that's made out of an Airstream trailer, I call it the "Hair Stream." But going from inside the shelters to outside the shelters, there was a grieving process from there. We opened our brick and mortar space, our first one, and there was a grieving process there. I remember very clearly walking in and I had so much of my business in so many different places. I had stickers at home and cards in my wallet and I had a storage utility space. And finally we're moving everything into one space and I had this grieving moment just in case anything happened to this space that it was all gonna be fine. That was a really interesting thing to have, especially knowing, historically what happens to small business owners, around crises.

Now we're moving into our new space and along the way, I'm so thankful for the ways in which we'll be able to grow, but just recognizing what is no longer necessary, the ways that we were resilient, I'm starting to mourn those little things. But on top of that, literally losing people to skid row, losing people to drugs, losing people to the next part of their journey as a spirit. All of these ways we grieve people, and then also losing members of our community that can no longer be outside of the closet because if they are, they will not receive the type of housing that they need.

There's just so many levels to it. So those are the many ways I feel as though I grieve, but also as we change and transition... A good friend of mine just changed their name. They're non-binary as well. My friends change their names all the time. It's not the hugest deal in the world, but every time that I think



L: Okay, my first question is just, what is your name? You can include pronouns and tell me about the work that you do.

M: My name is, my name is Madin Lopez. My pronouns are they, them, and theirs. I'm the executive director and founder of Project Q Salon and Community Center. What we do there is give haircuts and self-empowering workshops to homeless and housing insecure queer youth of color. It's a space where we get to invite our young people in to learn how to be members of society in a different kind of a way, where we accept who they are, and help to flourish, who they are, and also help them maintain who they are. We also give folks an opportunity to work with us and other queer-affirming spaces, and, in that, help to build out what they like about themselves and how they wanna work in this world. And so that's a little bit about who I am. Because I work so closely with the homeless population, I've definitely seen my fair share of people, leave this plane, and my fair share of people having to grieve parts of themselves that they

of them and I almost say their dead name, I have to grieve just a little bit. As trans people, we get to kind of force the world to view us in a different way. Something that I have thought about doing, which I think would be really cool for Trans Day of Remembrance, which is coming up too soon for that, but to have eulogies for people to come in and honor their dead names and honor their perceived gender that they were assigned as at birth, in order to honor the parts of ourselves that we often dismiss. Because we are not the opposite of what we were born as, as trans people. We are still ourselves, we just get to then shun the gender norms. I wanted to do something like this in order to bring light to androgyny. Androgyny does not simply mean as masculine as possible, if you're in a female body assigned at birth, and it doesn't mean as feminine as possible, if you're AMAB [Assigned Male at Birth], right? It means, however you feel comfortable and not allowing society to take that over. So I just feel as though being able to eulogize the way that the world has viewed us will give us an opportunity. And inviting people that might not understand our pronouns and our names and all of that, so that they can speak about it too, and understand that we are laying rest to a part of ourselves, or we are remembering a part of ourselves. That's something that I've thought about doing. I feel like when somebody cuts all of their hair off, we're doing it in ceremony anyway.

L: Yeah, absolutely. I'm so in love with that idea. I have that conversation with my brother because my parents still call me by the name that they gave me and I allow that for them, because I know that is a part of me that is connected to them in a way that is really special to them. I think they have a hard time processing anything else. I think that, from my perspective to be able to shift it from like, "okay, I can honor that part of myself for them and that relationship to them" and not see it as I once had of feeling disrespected. Shifting that mentality has been really helpful for me in particular. I don't think would benefit everybody, but I really appreciate what you're saying about how it's a part of who we are.

M: Yeah. I feel as though a lot of Cis people identify their gender with being the opposite

of the other, and I just would really love to eliminate that. I feel like that creates a zero sum game with our gender identity. That is exactly what we're trying to diminish, right? It is exactly the barriers we're trying to break down. I feel like it's okay to start to do that and the world is changing to meet us there. Yeah. So, I hear that. I mean, I changed my name legally, and then my family started to use it. They say it incorrectly, which I think is interesting, but they still use it. They respected it all of a sudden.

L: Oh, that's so interesting. <laugh> Yeah, it's so strange how the legal system gives it authority or something.

My next question is, what wisdom experiences, histories, or lessons does your practice contain that lends perspective on grief?

M: Well, we do a lot of, uh, when we're doing haircuts, we try to focus on consent based consent based styling, um, which just means, and it can almost be obnoxious, um, to folks that I've just known for a really long time, but it's, it's a habit now. Um, I just ask every question along the way, are you doing okay, how are you doing? Does it hurt? Is this so right? Do you mind going a little bit shorter here? You know, like the it's its first haircuts take the longest almost because I feel like it's a therapy session, you know, to really sit and say, what's going on with you, what's going on with your hair? What do you do with your hair? Really get to know the person and the relationship to their, to this extension of themselves, um, before even getting into touching their head.

And even before touching their head, I ask, is it okay if I touch your head? That salutes autonomy in my mind. Octavia Butler's one of my favorite authors of all times, so I quote her a lot. She talks about change a lot. In one of her books, her main character believes that the only lasting truth is change, God is change, and that kindness eases change. Even as I'm helping someone achieve a change that they want, which is, again, its own end and its own beginning, just being kind and giving the person the autonomy along the way is the best practice that I've found to keep people able

to have choice. You know, you mentioned getting your cut and they say they're gonna do it [the way you asked], but then they don't. Well, I would probably do the same thing and then get to a point and say, okay, "we can make this bigger chop, are you ready?" That's because sometimes people want a change, but don't know what they want. And sometimes people know exactly what they want, but if I just met you, I don't know that.

L: Right.

M: So giving folks the opportunity to say, "oh, this is good" or say, "you know what? No, I wanted it shaved. I told you I wanted it shaved. I don't know why you're stopping me." Okay. Let's go. And so just along the way, giving people the opportunity to, kind of like in a haunted house, this is your opportunity to exit right now. <laugh> Cause it's about to get real.

L: Okay. I have, I have another question for you that I have written in here, which is: How do you see your work as being-- oh, I kind of, maybe this question's not great for you actually. I have standard questions that I ask everybody, but I feel like it's like a little obvious maybe, but:

How do you see your work as being in community with others?

M: Oh, that's why you said it was obvious because it's a physical, actual community.

L: Yeah. Yeah. I can move on

M: No, no, no. I mean, let me give you an answer, if you need it for any reason. Yes. We're in community. We build community. My whole focus is community. I'm gonna give you another long winded answer and quote books because that's what I like to do. There is a book called God's Debris by Scott Adams. Not a lot of people like him and he started doing some weird stuff recently, so we don't need to quote him all the way. <laugh> People always prove me wrong. I'll be like, "I love this person," and they prove me wrong.

L: Nobody's perfect. This is why we can't

idolize anybody.

M: No one's perfect. Right. People are infallible. So he says in the book, it's sci-fi almost-ish, but he says that God realizes that if you can have everything all at once that there's almost no point of being alive. So God actually commits suicide. That's what the book is about. That was the big bang and all of our connections between each other are God trying to figure out how to re-form itself.

L: Mm.

M: So that's why sometimes when you're trying to build a connection with someone that's just not working, that's not the part that is supposed to connect to that, right? Like you can't put the foot where the finger goes, right? It don't work, it don't work. But also when you do find connection in people and you're like, "what is this?" That-- and I'm realizing now that I'm speaking a lot about an entity that I don't understand anything about that I've mentioned it now maybe three times-- but I do believe that within change, within community, that is where that entity lives. That is, I've just kind of taken all of these things to create my own mental religion. And I do believe that when we create positive connection, that is a reformation of an entity of a godlike being. There's a reason that people feel familiar. Because it's very, very possible that we were connected at some point in time. And so about creating community, I don't believe that I'm the middle of that. Right? There's no way. So the fact that I may not be of Filipino descent, but one of my friends is, and then she starts to mentor another one of our trans girlfriends that is of Filipino descent. I mean, that's a beautiful thing and that is creating community in a way that I can't be centralized. I think that that's a great way to view it. So to be completely honest, I wanted a congregation, I need congregation. I really do feel as though I value it above most other things. That's how I quantify success-- by how well our community's thriving together.

L: Yeah, totally. I love that idea-- a higher power has been a recurring thing in a lot of your responses. I think that's super interesting. And also that at least two of them were



connected to books, which by the way I have read Parable of the Sower.

M: Yesss!!

L: I was glad to hear you say that. I love reading and it sounds like you like reading too. I'm like, I bet you have a good recommended reading list.

M: <laugh> I would say so. I read a lot of sci-fi and I read a lot of manga and I read fantasy, as well. I'm a nerd, you know? That's where I live. But I think it's because I grew up with this mythology of religion that I've been trying to find myself in again, and what's hard about, even speaking to grief and speaking to religion, being a queer person and being completely separated from my community because of my orientation-- that was a huge loss. What I ended up doing was severing my relationship to spirit, severing my relationship to whatever entity does exist, which meant that, because that lives inside of me, I separated myself from a part of myself too. So I did have to grieve that. And thankfully, I feel as though I have regained it, but it did take a long time.

L: Yeah, as you were talking about building community, you used the word congregation and that's so tied to churches. I was thinking about how churches function as community and to lose that, besides losing a relationship with spirituality, there's a loss of community and having to rebuild both community and spirituality, and maybe even spiritual community... you were talking about cutting hair as almost a ritual... like contained within this community-building is spirituality even when it's not explicitly God-related. Which is also totally related to grief and the loss of life and spirits that come and go. I'm super interested in this flowing motif in a lot of what you're saying.

My next question was, what do you see as missing from care around grief?

M: I mean, bedside manner. I feel like specifically death in grief. Specifically I would say the death of the body, because there are many types of death. I mean our medical system

is not set up for-- again, it goes back to the business of death, right? You're literally a number, even in hospice. My wife's aunt's was just given about two months to live. So we've been talking with family and we were able to give one care provider a list of grief techniques and resources. And we were like, we'll see if she uses 'em, you know? This is specifically coming from my partner's job. Like these are real grief techniques and real resources, not just us saying, join this Facebook group.

And she looked them up and she like listened and she has peace. And I never thought that I would see the day, but she's calm. And she was able to calm her mom and there's love there, and there's beauty there. But doctors, medical physicians, veterinary clinics-- all of these spaces where grief can be involved. I feel as though most people that go into those fields have a disconnect with humanity. My dog is about 14, she has been sick and I've been taking her to work with me every day to spend as much time with her as I can. I know in the past, when a spirit leaves a body, people would sit with the body and say goodbye. And now, it goes instantly from a human to a corpse. That is a weird concept to me. Okay, I'm gonna get into weird stuff that I know now because of books <laugh>. This is from Neil Gaiman's American Gods, another really great sci-fi book, but they talk a lot about the creation of embalming fluid and the creation of the coroner and the disconnect that was created within that industry specifically, so that people would not have-- I can't say that it was created so that people wouldn't have connection with their bodies once they've gone, but that has come out of the practice of calling a morgue or calling a coroner to come and retrieve a body-- I feel as though we have lost the connection with the spirituality, again, that revolves around a passing of a life. That makes me so sad, that makes me really sad. I also feel like there's definitely practices that specifically black people have lost coming to this land of what we do with our loved ones once they're gone. And that makes me sad as well. I think I'd like to research that now that I'm thinking about it, so that I know how my people buried their dead. I want to know these things and how they were celebrated as well. Other than that, I feel in general that there's

not enough kindness to ease change and not enough knowledge around how to have it when you're afraid.

For myself, the way I do that is I try to create a lot of space when things are going to change. A lot of room for the way that things might change. And then that way, when something unexpected happens, because that's what happens when change comes along, you don't know what will happen. So creating room for that is necessary. I don't know if you care about astrological signs, but I'm a Libra, so I'm like, I need all of the balance.

L: I'm a Leo~~

M: Okay. Well word, Leo the Leo. I'm also first day of Libra. So I have a lot of Virgo tendencies around certain things, I'm noticing as I get older. What that means is that I try to plan so hard. I try to plan so tight and thankfully I have the balance so that I can plan, have a structure, and leave room for variability. Right. I think that's what's expected, like, please leave room because things will change. And the reason that people don't like to change, and the reason that people stay in habits, and the reason that people don't want change to come along and hit them in the face is because they're used to the repetition and they're used to knowing the outcomes of their circumstances. Yeah. Long-winded again.

L: No, it's perfect, it's so good. I feel like there's like so much richness in everything that you have to say. Each part could be its own dissertation. Yeah. You give it the space it needs. Um, definitely. Building off of that question, this is getting into the more speculative space and I hear that you like sci-fi, so if you wanna get into that head space, you can.

My last question was: what is an object, real or imaginary, that you would put in a grief first aid kit?

M: This is a two part answer. This is a little silly, but very sweet. My dad, who I had just come out to and I was having a really hard time with, when I was about 22, he sent me a birthday card and the birthday card was in Japanese. I don't speak Japanese. I have a lot

of Japanese manga. We both definitely enjoy a lot of Japanese culture, and so he sent me a card in Japanese, and then he wrote underneath the inside of the card and said, "Whenever you need advice, whenever you need a pep talk, just imagine that the words above say what you need them to say."

L: Oh.... wow.

M: It was the sweetest thing in the world. I mean it, and dads aren't sweet, you know. <laugh> They are usually like pretty gruff, but it just brought tears to my eyes because, to me, that meant that he understood that maybe he didn't have what I needed and that was okay, but that he still wanted me to have it. Right? And then the second part of that answer is a physical recreation of that exact thing. In a manga that I love, there's an alien life form called a "Shmoopy" and it literally will turn into whatever you need it to be. So I guess that's my hope, because everybody's needs are so, so very individual.

L: Right.

M: Right. Like there's no way that the bandaid that fits you is going to fit me. It's just not going to. I mean, I guess the answer is therapy, then. <laughs> I just hope that people have access to self knowledge.

L: Yeah.

M: So that they can figure out what they need in order to grow into their new reality, whatever that is. Yeah. You know, that's my hope for everyone. Which I understand is like a Swiss army knife of emotional support. <laugh> And what I've noticed is that first you have to know what you want.

L: Yeah, true.

M: And then it's easier to attain. So that's my hope for people is be able to figure that out because after that-- put your mind to it and you can have what you need. The hardest thing about grief it usually has to do with loss of something that you cannot recreate. You can't replace something, someone, some relationship. So it is a whole new reality that

you're dealing with. You know, even if you just broke your favorite bracelet, it's like, well, shit that went with so many shirts, dang. And, they don't make it anymore! Like all of the things that come along with that, even if it's something as small as that, or as large as losing your home because you can't work anymore. There's so many different levels to that, but just having the tools and the knowledge and the emotional intelligence to get through and appreciate your new experience, I think is necessary. So yes, a cloak of understanding <laugh> to go into the knapsack <laugh>

L: What was the manga that you mentioned again and the Snoopy?

M: It was called a Shmoopy. The manga is called the Phoenix and it's by Osamu Tezuka. It's old. It's from the eighties manga and I just happen to be in love with all of his, work. He's like the Octavia Butler of manga.

L: Oh, really? That's high praise.

M: It is high praise. And I stand by it in my heart. All his work is phenomenal. And that specific series is really wonderful. You might like one of his double series called Princess Knight. It's about a member of royalty that was born with a boy heart and a girl heart <laugh>. And throughout their life, they have to figure out which part of themselves they most identify with.

L: And this is in the eighties.

M: Yes.

L: That's so cool. <laugh>

M: Yeah.

L: Yeah, no, I'll check it out. That's awesome. I actually don't read a lot of mangas. I read some sci-fi and I read fiction in general and also essay stuff, I don't know how to describe it. Like, adrienne marie brown, thinky things.

M: You can put those thinky things next to these speculative things and it'll crack open some safes.

L: Yeah. Yeah. That makes sense.

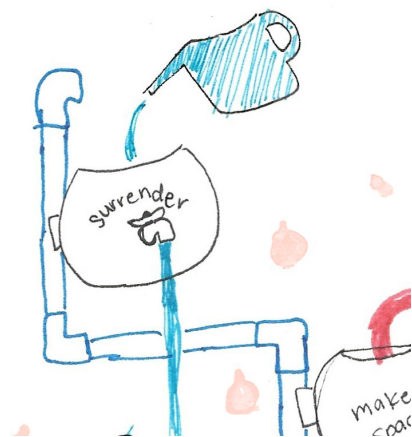
M: I was reading Parable of the Sower at the same time as I was reading Emergent Strategy.

L: I bet that went so well together.

M: Oh my God. Of course I realized she meant it that way. <laugh> But it was really beautiful to have in tandem, you know?

L: That's awesome. I will stop recording, but stay here with me and thank you for the interview

# Interview with Danny War



L: Okay. Hello! What is your name and can you tell me a little bit about your practice?

D: My name is Danny War. I use he/him/his pronouns. I am also commonly referred to as Pup Star Orion or just Orion. I am a BDSM educator specifically in pet play, dark pet play and navigating chronically ill and trans bodies in BDSM. I'm on the board of Obsidian LA, the founder of "Chronically Kinky," and the cofounder of the Ruckus Pet Play Pack. I'm also the Gender Identity Coordinator at Threshold LA. That's a small overview of who I am in the BDSM community. Adding to that, I am collared puppy to Daddy Oni Onyx and the service boy of Sir Wombat. Um, yeah, that's me.

L: Awesome. Great. Thank you. So just getting into it, how is grief present in your life and in your work?

D: So, I would start this by saying that I have fibromyalgia and throughout my life, I have had a waning immobility level and that extends to BDSM practices. Like if I give an example, I think I started the way most people did with like a paddle or spanking, which are now things that my body can't process. So I

had to go through a lot of grieving, not just in my vanilla life, where I recognized that walking and running and things like that aren't as accessible to me anymore. But also in my sexual life, realizing that there are things that I found gratifying that I don't find myself able to do anymore. And through that I had to learn to mourn and grieve my body and the shifts that it went through.

L: Yeah, yeah. And that ended up moving towards the workshops that you do that acknowledge that intersection of disability and kink.

D: So that's where I ended up co-founding chronically kinky with my friend Pup Garnet. Together we do a monthly social support group on zoom for people all over the world that identify as disabled and also as kinky. That has been such a beautiful process, but it's also brought grieving to the forefront of like my month, at least once a month, if I'm not grieving my own, like lack of ability to do something, then I'm grieving somebody else's because it's rather intimate and the same people tend to show up every month. And we have a discord server where we keep each other updated. So we're in almost constant communication with one another. And through that, we experience a lot of joy through one another because we see each other like, "oh, I, you know, I met up with some cutie over the weekend," or "I saw my partner" or "guess what I learned how to tie" and that's awesome, but there's also a lot of mourning with one another, when we noticed each other going through like a difficult time.

One of the members, who's name I won't mention, just had surgery on their knee because of built up medical problems where they had to, basically, have their knee like scraped open. I'm not entirely sure how it works. I'm not a doctor. But like, I know it was pretty brutal on them and it's an intense process. There's almost some guilt that comes with it. Like, if we have the same disorder, but mine isn't nearly as bad that month or that year as someone else's, or there's the opposite.

Like sometimes people find answers and you don't, and you have to sit in that displeasure



of saying “my doctors are, unfortunately, gate-keeping procedures from me, but I know that they’re possible because I’m watching somebody else have them.” Right? So I think there’s a lot of like mitigating of emotions that comes up. And although we are all very understanding, it’s also easy to have mixed feelings about watching somebody else get a procedure that you desperately know you need. Right? Or even, on the fun end of the spectrum, to be happy and experience compersion for a friend, but also a tinge of jealousy. Like, maybe you’ve been in bed for three months and you haven’t been able to play, or you don’t have as much access to community because you live in X, Y, Z town where there’s no parties. Or through the pandemic, there are parties, but you don’t feel comfortable attending them just yet.

So, I think it comes from a mixed bag of emotions and it’s definitely something that I’ve learned to not only just manage myself, but help other people manage.

L: And for people who don’t know what compersion means, can you explain compersion?

D: So in a lot of polyamorous circles, compersion is considered the opposite of jealousy. So, as opposed to feeling disdain towards somebody doing something with someone else or something that they enjoy, you would feel joy at that.

L: Right. And also I was wondering, do you find that being able to see people, for example, get procedures that you weren’t offered, does that help with advocacy at all?

D: I think it’s inspiring, I can only speak for myself, but it reminds me that there are medical professionals out there who will listen. A lot of the time, with chronic illness, unfortunately, especially depending on your age, a lot of people shrug it off and tell you to power through it, or they don’t believe you and say that this isn’t something that you should be feeling at your age. And there’s a lot of like issues with it that we can like break down, whether it be, you know, barriers from institutional racism or misogyny. These assumptions like, “oh, women are exaggerated about their pain” or my “I don’t like going to

the doctor cause they’re just gonna misgender me” or, “I’m gonna be labeled as drug seeking,” et cetera, et cetera. I think there is a certain amount of hope to me when I see other people get procedures, because I recognize that there’s someone out there that’s listening to them and maybe if I keep going through the right doctors, I’ll find someone that listens to me as well, or that thinks of a solution that none of my doctors have been able to think of.

L: Right. Right. Totally. Where do you find grief present your pet play communities?

D: I think, unfortunately, grief is all around us. Like a lot of people use kink or, specifically, pup play or pet play where I tend to have my expertise, as an escapism, which is great. Until you have to eventually realize that escapism only goes so far. So if I gave an example, I’m a former LA Pup meaning that I used to hold a fetish title where I was the representative of LA’s pet play community. And someone who ran a few years before me recently passed away at the start of the pandemic. To this day, I don’t know what the cause of death was, but there were a lot of rumors around why he died. I think there’s something that’s unescapable about grief. It’s always gonna be there. Death is gonna come for us all, as we know, and I’ve watched a lot of people in the last like year and a half/two years pass away, whether it be from COVID or something else.

I’ve been fortunate that it hasn’t been anyone that I’m particularly close to, but I think when you see people that you have this connection with, that you share this community with, that you share this niche with, you feel their death more powerfully. Even if you didn’t know them particularly well. Because you know that there’s something that you two shared. I only knew Pup Rex in passing. I can only think of about a handful of conversations we shared, but I do think of his death very frequently. And I think of it a lot with remorse for not knowing him better and for not reaching out before.

But I feel like that’s something that a lot of us feel when someone passes away. A lot of people I’m sure get this, depending on what niche community they’re part of, but when

you're in a niche within a niche, you kind of know everybody. Yeah, so even if you don't know someone personally, word of mouth alone, you know everybody. I can't tell you how many people that I don't know, physically, I've never met in person, but they know all about me online or if I name someone in my local community, they've definitely heard of them just because word gets around. Like, "did you hear insert person won this, or is doing such and such event?" Or "isn't it great that somebody of these intersections can exist with a platform?" So when people disappoint us or pass on-- I wanna also acknowledge that there's a multitude of griefs and, not to get into too many details, we had a lot of people fail us right before the pandemic in our very local, LA trans kinky community.

And I think that's a form of grief as well. Maybe it's incorrect to put people on a pedestal, but I think we have a habit of doing that. I think it's not unheard of to see someone doing great things and, to look up to them. And then when they have a fall from grace, for lack of better words, how do you not grieve those spaces or that connection or that person. And especially when people lack accountability and don't always want to face their flaws, you know? Unfortunately there's been a multitude of griefs for me that I've faced in the last few years in the queer kink community. I feel like kink's taught me a lot about how to deal with it. Not just in play, but in practice. It's made me a lot more mindful and it's made me a lot more connected to certain people. And those are definitely people that I've learned a lot from about how to move through grief.

L: Yeah. I wanna ask you more about that. But I also wanted to like express, in my experiences, and I'm not even like in a niche within a niche kind of community, but, when I was in Santa Cruz and very involved with queer communities, it was like, this community's so small that any loss is so significant. I really felt that, and while I was in Santa Cruz, we had three deaths within a couple of years. And one person I didn't know at all. And one of them, I didn't know that well, and then one of them I lived with and was my friend. But, it was impossible not to feel that weight. Because it was like affecting everyone around. Yeah, in

communities that are already really small, it's very intense. And I wanted to acknowledge the realness of that. Then what you were saying just now leads into my next question, which is:

What wisdom, experiences, or lessons does your practice bring that lends you perspective on grief?

D: I think, and I don't know if this counts, but I think it's made me more aware of my feelings in my body. I can think of specific scenes and engagements that I've had with people where leading up to it, you have to be very aware of where you're at emotionally, because there's this acknowledgement that, especially with edgy-er play, that it brings a lot to the surface and if you're not well equipped to handle it, then you probably shouldn't be engaging with it to begin with. And there's usually this discussion of aftercare with one another, like understanding we're gonna do something together, that's gonna bring up a lot of things, that's gonna stir your emotions up. How do I take care of you afterwards? And that's never a conversation that I've had before kink.

Like there's never been this need to know how to take care of one another. Whether that be, do you just need a glass of water? Do you need to be left alone? Do you need me to hold you? Do you need to watch TV or eat or just sit in silence. Or, if I can't facilitate that, can I bring in a proxy to facilitate physical touch-- if your aftercare looks like physical touch and mine looks like being left alone? My aftercare looks a lot like eating and crying. Sometimes it varies. Very few people have gotten me to such a far place where I've had to cry. But it definitely looks like a lot of physical touch, which is something that, growing up I didn't really associate with too much and, and I was very like anti-touch.

So it's really interesting that I'll find out about myself that the thing that I was so militant about being away from, was something that I need to heal. And, even though these are like things that I consent to, ultimately they're still traumatic on my body. Like I'm asking for it, yes, and I understand that I can stop this whenever I want to, which is awesome, but I'm

not gonna act like asking somebody to stand on me and put their entire weight on me and jump up and down, isn't harmful to my body to some extent. Or to cut my skin, or to pierce me, or et cetera, et cetera. These are all things that throw your body for a loop, you know? And of course when it's over, there is this crash that you experience often, and you need to be taken care of. And I think like that's something that I've learned, is that we all need to take care of each other. And the only way that we can continue to engage in these highs is to acknowledge the lows as well, and to be there for each other's lows.

L: Right. Yeah. No, definitely. In talking with you, I've been impressed with the structures around care and communication. Maybe it's coming from somebody with sexual trauma, but, I think that those things should exist even for vanilla shit, you know? Even that can be scary or traumatic. So I've always been impressed with that acknowledgement in kink. I think it's really a concern for the safety and wellbeing of other people. Of course, no community is perfect. But it's aspirational, and it's an honorable aspiration, for sure.

What do you think is missing from care around grief? Either within your communities or just general world at large?

D: I guess to piggyback off of the discussion of aftercare, I'd say I think acknowledging that grief always looks different. Earlier, before you started recording, we were talking about like the size of grief because, you know, a lot of people think of large griefs when they talk about grief, but there's also small griefs as we were saying. And I think, in addition to that, everyone's processing is different. It's typically informed by the way that they've processed grief in the past, the way that they were treated and taught growing up. I'm a big believer that the way we grieve and the way we move through grief is a learned behavior. If I couldn't look to adults for healthy coping mechanisms growing up, then the likelihood of me having bad ways to move through grief is more. Or, you know, having "bad coping mechanisms" or more dangerous ones, whether it be self-medicating, et cetera, et cetera. So I think registering that grief should be

tailor-made to each person and problem, for lack of better words.

It's not a one size fits all. I think when someone passes away or when someone, let's say, gets fired or goes through something like that, everyone kind of goes well, this is X, Y, Z what you do and in what order, but I don't know if that works for everybody.

L: Right. Like the stages of grief.

D: Yeah. I don't know that that's exactly how everyone goes through it. I feel like I'm going through some secondhand grief, like I've mentioned to you in our personal conversations, my leather brother's mother just passed away. As someone who attended the services and has tried my best to be there, but also take care of myself-- it's brought up to the surface that I have a lot of trauma around maternal relationships. And I don't really know how to engage with people who had, what I perceive as, a better relationship with their mother. I also don't know how I would react in that situation. It's been a few weeks now and I still don't fully know how to be there for this person, but I did know that standing at the services was one way that I could show solidarity and understanding that like, this is a great loss for you.

And so I'm gonna be here physically, cuz that's the only thing I know how to do. And that's not something that I came up with on my own. To explain the dynamic a little bit, I refer to this person as my leather brother cause we have the same dominant. I originally didn't think that it was my place to show up to the services. I never met his mother. And although we're friends and cared for one another, I didn't feel like it was something in my positioning to do. But when I talked to our Sir and said, "I don't know what to do that day. I need help." I got the advice to show up to the services. If I wanted to show up for him, that's one of the ways that I could do that. And I think admitting that you don't always know what to do to help people and having other people kind of step in and say like, "Hey, here are your options. Here are ways you can be supportive." Also just admitting that we don't always know what to do. Because I think so many of us try to jump in and assume. I never

would assume that what looks like healing for me looks like healing for everyone else.

L: Right. Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. Can you explain more about how the leather F/ family structure functions or works?

D: Yeah. So there's a lot of historical significance, in my opinion, on queer families and houses. Like whether it be from the ballroom scene or drag or et cetera, etc. There is this historical presence of these chosen families because so many of us have been excommunicated from our families in one way or another. My leather F/family is a majority queer folks. W/we have one token cishet, but she's great. So W/we love her anyway.

L: <laugh> I'm really shocked to hear that!

D: Yeah. Right. <laugh> I'm shocked to see it every day. I remember she's a heterosexual and I'm like, wow, really? With that haircut? But it just goes to show, you never know <laugh> But yeah, it functions like a family much in the way that any family does.

W/we have a head of the household, not every family functions that way obviously, but like W/we have all recognized that this one person is in charge and makes the rules and, and W/we all abide by them and agree to them. W/we have gatherings, except for when W/ we were in Covid lockdown. But, as things are opening up and F/family gatherings can, resume, granted that W/we're all vaccinated, there is what Sir calls protocols, right? And it's His family protocols and they're the rules everyone's expected to fall under, unless you have discussed something outside of that and agreed to that with Him, . It's things like-- my Sir's in recovery, so there's no recreational drug use. There is a way that when you are at a formal event, that you introduce yourself and you introduce Him and recognize your service to Him while introducing yourself. There are ways to greet one another and also to acknowledge exiting from one another's space.

In all those ways, it shows this connection constantly. There's a lot of assumed power structures. There's a lot of folks who will look at a dominant and they'll be like, "when you

walk into a room all these people kneel to you, how powerful is that?" And then there's folks who have the opposite belief-- it's only as powerful as these people are allowing it to be. Really, they're in control. O/our philosophy tends to be more like, well, W/we all have power and it's what we're choosing to do with it that matters. So in O/our F/family structure, there's this acknowledgement that every single person, as an individual, has power. W/we all are just opting to take that and hand it over to Sir, and acknowledge and trust Him with it.

And there's a lot of protocols that include if there's a problem, talking about it and making sure that there's clear communication. Whether that be between the boys that are underneath Him or with Sir Himself. So far, I haven't run into conflict with Him, so I've never had to utilize that, or really any of my brothers, but I love that there's a system in place. Like if there's conflict and He's told me about times in the past where he's arguing with several boys, but how do you steer the ship at the same time? So, in my opinion, it's a big job. It's not the only family structure and kink that I'm involved in. I also have a pet pack and that one's a lot looser in form.

It's acknowledging that all of us come together as really close friends and, in that way, choose each other as chosen family. But we all have our own individualistic power structures with our individual partners. And that isn't anything that the pack needs to delegate with. There are some packs where there is a specific power structure involved and that there's someone at the head of the house and et cetera, cetera. And then people that fall beneath and people that fall beneath those. We don't function that way. We function more as like a queer family that just acknowledges that we all have something in common and then our dynamics inside and outside of that are our own to manage.

L: Right. Cool. Thank you for explaining that. I really liked what you're saying about how everyone in the house has power and they're choosing to give it. There's an intentionality there that's really important. Also yeah, a lot of queer people have been estranged from their family in some way. So creating these families

can be one way of responding to a certain kind of grief.

The next questions that I have are getting into the imaginary realm. If you could name a tool that would be in like this grief first aid kit or toolkit, what would it be and how did you arrive at that?

D: If I was designing something for myself, I think a stuffed animal. When I was a kid, I really liked animals more than people. I was one of those kids. I work with animals now. I do animal role play as like part of my escapism and as my community outreach. Most people know me best for animal role play. So I think for me, when I hold the stuffed animal, it pulls me back into a space where I feel a lot better. There are certain events that I host or help out with where there's a quiet zone and in that quiet zone, there will be blankets and pillows and stuffed animals, in case people need something like tactile. I'm a very tactile person. I also like sense a lot. So like, if you could sprinkle lavender on that even better <laugh> Yeah. I think that's, that's what I would need.

L: Yeah! What about its size? What is the ideal size of stuffed animal?

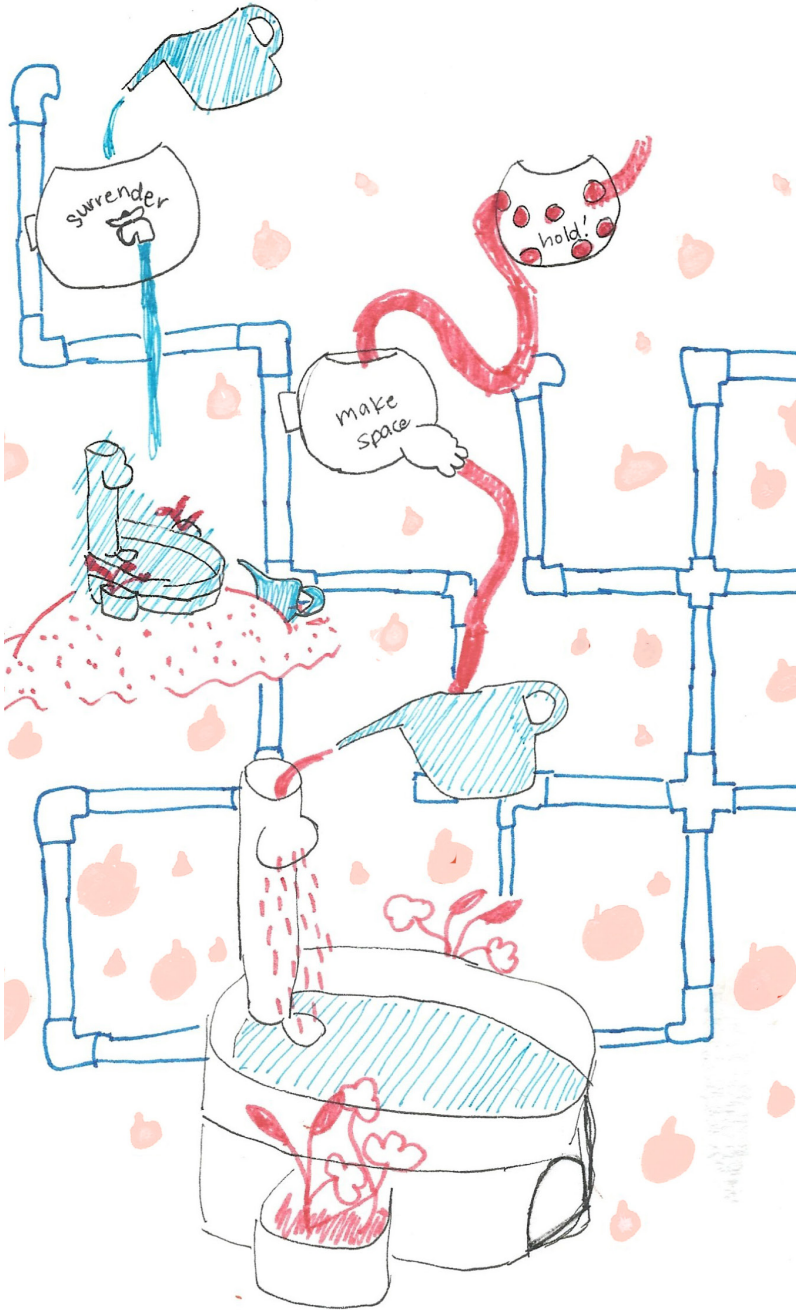
D: Ideal size, ideal size... Maybe something like, what kind of animal is it? I have this Fox and it's made for babies. I bought it at a baby store and it's super soft. The cashier definitely gave me a weird look. <Laugh> But it has this thing on the side of it that you twist and it plays music and every now and then I Frebreze it and then I just hold it. If I know I'm gonna do something like really strenuous and I need like to relax later. It's like about maybe like 10 inches. Most of the ones that I buy are 10 to 12 inches and that tends to be good for grounding. Yeah. I have smaller ones and they're cute to look at and maybe even holding in your hand and then I have bigger ones and they're fun too, but, I think 10 or 12 inches is like my preferred size.

As for the type of animal, I don't know. I'm a canine person, so that's where I would lean. Yeah, that's just me. That doesn't have to be everyone's preference.

L: Right. Yeah, how you were saying earlier, different people have different ways of responding or like processing. So, I'm like, I can't really make a toolkit that's gonna respond to everyone. But I still like these details-- I like asking, what is it for you? I think that's it then. Thank you.



# Interview with gloria galvez



Re: can my collaborator interview you?

gloria galvez [REDACTED]

Sun 11/14/2021 11:02 AM

To: Leo Danielle Alas [REDACTED]

hi leo

:)

so finally had a moment to sit down and in depth contemplate and review the content you shared with me and i realized that based on what you shared with me i really don't have an idea of how the stuff of this interview will be shared publicly or if it will be shared publicly at all.

so in light of that i wanted share some stuff and ask for some stuff

in terms of sharing, i wanted to share that for me my grief is a private affair that i share and process with only close friends and family, i find this process to be the best process for where i currently stand in life and for the type of support and needs i currently have.

and i wanted to share that in light of this current standpoint of mine i don't feel comfortable with what i share with you being used as a paint palette for art making (not assuming you will but just processing out loud) but that i do feel comfortable sharing with you interpersonally and know of course that an interpersonal exchange like this can inform your perspective and decisions as an artist.

so therefore i wanted to ask that you don't record or use the content i share with you as a pallet of paint (not assuming you will but just processing out loud) but invite you to consider using the stuff i share with you as force that influences the composition of your pallet of paint.

not sure if this totally not aligned with what you had in mind with the interview so therefore figured that i pre check in with you about this.

also i wanted to share i am genuinely excited about the work you are doing here and if i were not a good fit for the interview then i could support you in finding an organizer peer who would be down for the specifics of your project.

let me know what you think.

with care, gloria

Notes from my  
interview with  
gloria galvez

- Major Themes :
- Sustainable practices in political action
  - Self & Community

gloria is an artist + community organizer. We got to talk about grief in a political context and how important it is to prevent burnout by having a consistent attunement to our emotional selves — celebrate small victories, acknowledge grief consistently — these things can prepare us for bigger & harder losses.

Secondly, when everyone wants to help, it can be overwhelming! Sometimes grief has to be solitary and that's OKAY. We talked about having CARE PODS, or trusted people to filter resources on behalf of the griever.

The mediation can form a barrier of protection so one can do their own internal care.

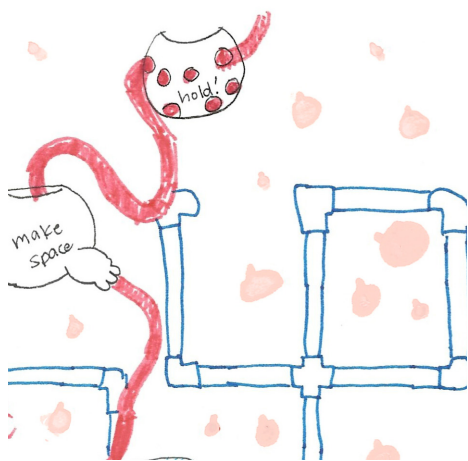
# Interview with Genna Bloombecker

What are ways that you see that grief is present in your life?

G: Grief is very present in my life. Especially recently for various reasons that I'll go into, but also initially from my dad's passing when I was 13 and the grief is still very present in my life from that loss, because my response to it was very avoidant and I didn't even start with the acceptance part until very recently. So then also there have been recent losses and just, you know, being a feeling person, once I started opening up my ability to grieve, it kind of is just kind of a constant now-- slightly in the background. And especially in the past couple weeks I've been feeling, you know, just sad some days and just realizing that that's okay. And that's a lot of growth for me, just that alone.

L: Yeah... yeah, I'm interested in what you said about how you felt like you were avoidant at first and that you're making these changes now. I've seen that as part of your art practice and I don't know if you would define it in a different way, but, I'd like to hear more about that transition, how things were before and the things that you're doing now.

G: Yeah. Mm-hmm, definitely, I think there is a big difference between the before and the now and what I'm aiming towards. I know there's still room to grow there. Basically, when I was 13, my dad was killed by his law client. And at the time, and for many years after, my response was just to get right back into what I was doing. And I was always a really passionate kid. I cared a lot about dance and school. I started dance at two and a half and I always loved school. Productivity and action and movement became my method of escape and avoidance from the pain and the reality of the situation. And I just lived in denial for many years, just not even wanting to think about the loss or accept that it could be real. Um, and you know, in that process, dance became the thing that I escaped into. But then it had all of its own challenges, right? Because it's a very complex world to grow up in, which I talk about in my podcast. And there's a lot there that I still have yet to unpack. But because of that pattern of avoidance through dance and through creativity, it's a very interesting ques-



L: Okay, so hello, Genna. Hi. How about we start by just introduce yourself. Your name and anything that you think we should know about you.

G: Okay. My name is Genna Bloombecker. I am a 28-year-old person living in Los Angeles. I'm from Santa Cruz, California, and I'm a multidisciplinary artist. Some of the art forms I do are film photography, fused glass jewelry, and homeware. I'm getting into more movement, modeling, writing collage. Yeah. I think those are most of it.

L: and Podcasting

G: Podcasting. Yes. The list keeps growing. Yeah, I'm a Pisces with a Gemini rising and an Aries moon. I am queer, I'm Jewish, and I hope to be a healer.

L: Cool. Thank you, Genna. I really wanted to invite you because we've had a lot of conversations about grief, and I've also heard the episode in your "Intuitive Movement Podcast," on grief and the episode about your life. I thought that there was a lot of richness in there and that you had a lot of wisdom, so I wanted to hear from you!

tion to consider now because I'm at the point in my life where I'm trying to be intentional about processing my grief and not avoiding it, and also being creative and being intentional in that. And I know that there is a disconnect there often for me when I do it automatically, cuz my habit is to avoid through those things. So in terms of my work recently, I feel like definitely the podcast is a huge aspect in my healing. Just having a space to process and talk about what I'm experiencing. And then photography. I've always had a very dreamy eye and just loved softness. So I feel like that has always been my intention with that. Or the photos I love the most that I've taken are the ones that make me feel at peace and, you know, hopeful and grateful for the beauty of the world and film and um, you know, chance.

So I feel like that's an inherent part of my photographic process. And then with fused glass, it's more about like my habits and my like actual time spent. That's where I see the avoidance. Like, am I just like doing a bunch of stuff because I'm trying to do a bunch of stuff because I don't want to deal with the other stuff? Or am I doing the things that I wanna be doing? You know, it feels different.

L: For people who don't know what your podcast is, can you explain what it's called and what the premise is?

G: My podcast is called "Intuitive Movement Podcast." I started it with my friend, Tammy during quarantine in 2020, and it's currently in the first season. It's a very personal project. It's a very open, honest sharing of the processes we are in as trained dancers, trying to find our place as adults and creators and healers.

It's on all streaming platforms and the intention is to build a community of people who care to, you know, whether it's someone who grew up dancing and identifies with those aspects or just a creator in general or anybody who feels things deeply or however you might relate to it. The intention is to build a community that's safe, welcoming, warm, and like motherly in a way. I feel like we talk about our parents and our upbringing a lot and the things from our society, this country, the city we grew up in, that we internalize. And being

in that intentional process of accepting what is inside of you that you don't necessarily want to be there and, you know, finding the steps to move away from that or finding the things that you love about yourself and knowing what they are and having the knowledge and the insight just changes a lot. So yeah, just a lot of talking about our lives.

L: Can you explain what is intuitive movement and how do you see it in relationship to your experience as a dancer?

G: Yes. I can definitely speak to that. It's very different. Intuitive movement is something I started thinking about, I think around 2017 when I was living in Berkeley. It honestly started when I was smoking a lot of weed and started moving again for the first time in years and I just started stretching, but kind of improving and just like using the training that was in my body, but without any external goals, other than feeling good and just literally movement. And so I kind of had that spark of an idea of like, oh my gosh, I can get back into my body. Like I really thought I couldn't because I was so simultaneously focused on it and disconnected from it at the same time while I was actively training in dance. That it's a very different perspective to come to it solely from my own, you know, only thinking about what I need to heal.

I have to be honest that I don't engage in that practice nearly as much as I would like. Even leading up to this interview, I told myself maybe I'll do some movement meditation in preparation and I didn't. I'm still at that place with it where it's like, yeah, I wanna do it. I know it makes me feel better and all of that, but I'm also, you know, avoiding it because that's the hard thing now. Yeah. But intuitive movement overall is basically just moving intuitively. You know, it's kind of just what it sounds like, but also so much more depending on who you are and how it makes sense to you. Every person has intuition, you know, and connecting to my intuition has been a long road and I'm still on it, but I've definitely made a lot of progress.

Having been a people pleaser (hardcore) and a perfectionist my whole life and only really ever



understanding how to process external validation and external opinions and advice, I didn't know how to trust myself. I just never trusted myself. I trusted everybody else over myself, always. I'm starting to turn that around and realize that my ideas and thoughts and feelings and intuition, which is all of those things, is meaningful. And I'll be happier if I listen to myself rather than what I think other people are thinking too.

L: I think this goes really well into my next question. What wisdom, experiences, lessons, does your practice bring you that lends you perspective on grief?

G: Yeah, definitely a lot. And it's interesting because I don't fully know what exactly I'm talking about when I think about my practice. I'm still figuring out what my practice is, but like in general, whether it's photography, glass, movement, talking to people on a podcast, whatever. A big one is joy and just like appreciation of what exists here. I feel like that's a really important part of grief too. Having processed a loss very recently, I feel like it's easy to lose hope and, you know, just be depressed. And I'm on antidepressants. I've been on them for a few years and I'm honest about struggling with depression and anxiety. Depression can be so consuming, but connecting to nature, like the beauty of nature, the color of a flower or a cloud. That always helps me remember to appreciate what is still here and not just miss what's lost.

Also connection to a universal energy. I feel like like color magic is a thing that is really cool. I just started learning about it. Just thinking about like how colors work and how they can bring positivity to a situation and then-- the regenerative properties of nature and how we can learn from that.

I still have a lot to discover with dance and movement in this realm though. My ability to tap into my emotions and heal is just starting to be there. But in the past, my perspective was really complicated because there were all of these levels of trauma and you know, things I was handling were very challenging things for anyone, especially for a 13 year old. So I feel like I'm still not sure, but definitely appre-

ciating what's here and inspiration from nature and the interconnectedness of all things. Yeah. That's what I would say. Those are helpful when dealing with grief for me.

L: Yeah. I'm hearing that there seems to be a very different relationship with your movement and dance relationship than the other art forms that you do. That there's this like push pull in the dance one and the other ones are more like, you do them and you don't have this intense relationship with them.

G: Yeah. It's why I have a podcast about it. There's so much there. That's just like, I don't even know fully, like I'm just starting to even understand that like this is all connected and the fact that I was avoiding my emotions through dance is now compounding with all of my experiences as a dancer and all of my insecurities and dreams and hopes and, you know, sadness and disappointment in myself and all of the emotions in that. And then how I have used dance and how I want it to be like, it's just really complex and always has been. And that's also kind of why I've always had a lot of other interests. Like I was a double major in college and just took like as many things as I could, was doing million clubs.

That was also when I started, you know, reassessing what dance meant to me because I wasn't in my home studio and hometown anymore. I was next to other dancers that were fully embodying themselves. Embodiment is something that I think I have yet to really even dive into. Um, and maybe that's part of why you feel that tension when I talk about that versus photography and fused glass and like collage or even podcasting, like I have confidence there and I have just a sense of ease because I always generally like the output like, well enough and I'm still a perfectionist and critical on myself, but like there's definitely a different perspective and dance is a performance art, you know, there's like aspects of it that, and it's like, yeah, I started when I was two and a half. So I've been, I was training for 20 years straight in a very specific mindset. I mean, I did come from a studio that tried to encourage just the love of dance and not doing it for any other reason, but I was also an ambitious person and wanted to, you know, be

the best I could be and had big dreams, which I still kind of have, you know, to like dance in the company or something.

L: Yeah. I'm wondering what was the turning point when you started to pull away from dance as your method of coping?

G: Yeah. I feel like that probably happened in college because as soon as I wasn't in a comfortable position, which I had been in my whole life, surrounded by friends and family that supported me and you know, teachers that pushed me, but still I got enough good feedback that I felt, you know, validated. I didn't have any internal validation and I kind of lived off of [external validation]. And then I got to college and it was like, it was just very different and I started to struggle with it a lot because it wasn't fun and easy anymore. It was hard and I wasn't chosen for the dances. So then I didn't perform and I was really sad.

After college I decided to go to a couple of pre-professional training programs. Cause I was like, okay, this is my last shot. I'm gonna give it my all, you know, go to these two places that I've been before, but go at this time and like, see what happens. And by the time I got to the second one, it was five months long in Israel. And I was just not feeling it like I had been there this summer before and had an amazing time, but it was also like during a war. So like we bonded and I like did my thesis on that. And then I went back and like had all these expectations and it just was different and I didn't connect with the dancers and it felt just like a struggle and I just wanted to leave. Yeah. But I ended up fulfilling the whole five months and like dropping out of whatever dances I could just cuz I like was depressed and stuck in bed.

And then I decided after that, that I needed a break instead of doing my original plan, which was to audition around Europe. Like after I ended that cause that's, you know, like a natural, easy goal to have like, yeah, I'm just gonna go dance in Israel for five months, make, make a bunch of friends and then go like audition in Europe and become a dancer and some European. So like <laugh> yeah. Sounds nice. But like I wasn't ready for that.

You know, I just, I didn't know that until I was there and it was, you know, became very clear that I needed time to just be a person and not be a dancer. Not be trying to make my body connect when the wires were not long enough or they were jumbled, you know, like there was no way it was gonna work.

I had an injury, that's just kind of chronic that I was always dealing with too. So that was another thing. Achilles tendonitis, which my dad had and he had to have surgery. So I was always nervous about that.

L: What do you see as missing from care around grief?

G: I feel like the concept of extended care and the acceptance that grief is a lifelong experience. Like from the moment it happens and for the rest of your life, especially losing a parent at a young age, like that's a very, you know, specific experience regardless of the circumstances that my partner and I, from the beginning, connected on. It was like, oh my gosh, we both lived without our dads from the same point in our life. And that defines you. And that will always be part of my story. And I've experienced a lot of death in my family and close friends and I know some people who haven't. So it's an interesting thing because not everyone necessarily has experience with it yet, but everybody will.

Also something that makes care challenging is just stigma and fear around grief. I feel (maybe not personally) like there is a lot of anxiety about not wanting to upset anyone and not wanting to be a bore, bring the mood down. And like you were talking about, you know, some people have the ability to talk about really hard topics lightly and like still keep the depth and have that range, but even if that's not the case, like we need to be okay with having hard conversations and letting things just be hard. Cause the world is fucked up. Like it is not simple or easy for most people. We need to also just normalize letting things be hard and bad and sad and not trying to always fix or cover up or move past something. Like sometimes you need to sit with it. Right? And, and something that helps with that is rituals and you know, some cultures do have

them around loss. Like in Judaism, you sit Shiva for the person that you've lost. And that happened for my dad, but I was so not mentally there that I don't remember it and I didn't benefit from it. And it only happens at the time of loss. So it's like, okay, what about rituals that are continuing? Some people have that with anniversaries. I haven't made that a part of my life because I haven't until right now realized that maybe that would help me. I feel like that's something that I can imagine someone telling me they do, but I feel like it's segmented and that's not the norm. It's not like, okay, we're all conscious and aware of reality is the bottom line.

Grief and reality are kind of synonymous to me right now in that when I was avoiding grief, I was avoiding reality. I'm trying to not do that now. It doesn't always work, I still slip into avoidance. I think it connects to a lot of the challenges of today because if you're not being truthful with yourself and others about your reality and the reality--- then there's this whole thing with post-truth and the internet and the fact that it's hard to even know what is true anymore. It makes it even more complicated, but connecting with our own intuition and inner voice and wisdom is a great place to start.

L: Yeah. I like what you said about grief feeling synonymous with reality. Because I think that, for a lot of people right now, even if they haven't experienced a close death, there's so much going on in the world that there is to grieve. And there's ways in which people try to not think about the real world that is out there that is affecting all of us. And having to sit with that is difficult.

G: Yes. And that's what quarantine did to a lot of people. It was like, "oh my gosh, we're forced to sit with ourselves." Some good things happen out of that and a lot of people were just itching to get out of it. And now we're still seeing things happening because of how everybody's reacted to this really challenging

global pandemic that we're in. Like that's not to be underscored. Like it is a big deal and individual actions matter. I don't wanna judge anyone, but also we are all connected and if someone else is not safe, it puts us all at risk. But then, without knowing what's real, and knowing that social media is so segmented, and there are so many powers that want to divide us, it can be very overwhelming.

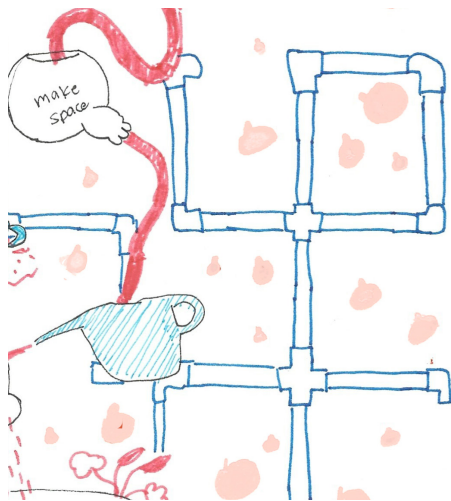
G: Yeah. But yeah, once again, just coming back to what is actually true for each of us and not just what we've been told from our society, our peers, our family. And I don't know, we're watching Saturday Night Fever right now and his brother like just left the priesthood. He's telling John Travolta's character that he has to follow what he loves to do, which is dance. And not just like stick around and try to make his parents happy because it'll never happen and it'll make him miserable. Right? So in whatever scenario that you're in, we all need to go through that journey of like realizing that we've been living for others and then turning it around to live for ourselves.

L: Yeah. I feel like we could have conversations forever. So, what is the tool that you will be sharing and how did you arrive at this tool?

G: Yes, I will be sharing a movement meditation. Part of it is a fruit tree meditation that I learned from my mom who is a therapist, and she was shown it by her friend, who was a therapist as well. And it's like a visualization, that aids in prosperity and abundance. I've used it for years, like on and off, just as a grounding place to go back to and remember that at any moment I can go to my mind and remember the fruit trees and be in another space internally and then come back to where I am with more awareness and gratitude of the beauty and the bounty.

Grief and reality are kind of synonymous to me right now in that when I was avoiding grief, I was avoiding reality.

# Interview with Gray Hong



L: Thank you for being here! My first question was just introduction. What's your name? And tell me a little bit about your practice.

G: Sure. My name is Gray Hong. I'm a florist and currently I run a business called Moon Jar Design and I sort of run the gamut on what I actually do with flowers. It's everything from doing florals for events on a large scale, doing installs and stuff like sculptural pieces with flowers or photo booths. On the other end of the scale completely, I do what I think of as intimate work with personal bouquets or wreaths that are made out of dried flowers or maybe small dried face arrangements and things like that. So yeah, figuring out my flower journey and trying a lot of things in the process.

L: How long have you been a florist?

G: Well, I would say Moon Jar has been a thing for about one and a half years. It was a pandemic baby and I started it in fall/winter of 2020 as a way to give myself agency when everything else had gotten pulled out from under me. So I was freelancing before that as a florist under other florists who had really big projects and needed help getting hands on board to get everything done. I was freelanc-

ing for maybe three years before that, but most of the floral stuff I was doing was dependent on events, which completely came to a halt in the spring of 2020. So that summer, it was me trying to find my footing again and figure out where to go. And that fall/winter was when I decided that starting my own business was what I wanted to do.

L: How would you describe your style with flowers? I ask that question because when I first saw your arrangements they really stood out to me. They don't feel like any run of the mill florist arrangement that I've seen. Which is a big reason why you've stood out to me. How would you describe it?

G: I would say that I am completely inspired by nature and nature is a freak <laugh>. And so I don't think that run of the mill or ordinary is my wheelhouse at all. That's what I try to stay away from. I find that I'm naturally drawn to stuff that's a little bit weird or unusual. The things that catch my eye in nature are the things that are really incredibly detailed or super funky, or it's just like this leaf that's growing out of a place where you don't expect a leaf to grow. So I try to carry that through in my designs and I try to respect these gifts that come from nature. I would say that I'm also pretty color forward. Most of the time I try to embrace color and not shy away from it because I think it can feel a little drab when florists stick to doing white flowers for weddings certain color palettes that do very well commercially or that play really well on Instagram. But I think, to me, flowers are about joy and celebration and life and death, you know, all of it. So really it's about embracing like (so corny) ALL the colors in the rainbow <laugh>.

L: Yeah.

G: Yeah. I definitely don't restrict myself as far as color palette.

L: Yeah. That's awesome. No, that's totally true, you get really vibrant, which is super sweet.

My next question was how is grief present in your life? And then the follow up was how is grief present in your work. You can start wherever you want, whatever.

G: Yeah. I think as far as where it intersects with flowers, I actually haven't done too much as far as sympathy flowers or bereavement arrangements. I've had maybe a few orders that were sympathy oriented, but I think I mentioned in the previous conversation we had that I feel like grief is present kind of in everything. I feel like that happens with celebrations in general too. Like when you're celebrating someone graduating, for example, they're always saying goodbye to something while they're stepping into something else. So I see grief as this ever present thing that might well up in certain moments or really be apparent in certain moments, but it's never not there. I think we just don't have the vocabulary to really get into the nuances of how grief is present in so many facets of our lives.

L: Yeah. That perspective that you had was really exciting for me when we spoke before. It's come up in other conversations, this idea of like grief encompassing all kinds of loss including moving or changes. In change, there is a loss and a gain.

G: Yeah, with any transition or just like in any moment at all, because we're always in transition. I would say on the flip side too, I feel like joy is present in everything. That's not necessarily something I would say to someone who's like grieving <laugh>, but I think as far as a life philosophy, that's probably where I land-- that everything's present in one degree or another. And it's just about tapping into those things or like flipping your perspective or looking at things from a different angle.

L: I mean, I think that a lot of people, even when it comes to death-related grief, respond so differently. Sometimes it's not how it's portrayed as being like a solemn mournful constant. Like you said, not necessarily imposing joy onto another person's experience,

but acknowledging that that could be part of a grief process.

G: Or like the grief is only present because there was so much joy that came before it, you know what I mean? So like losing that access to that... it's like, yeah, it's terrible to have something really good and then to have it go away.

L: Right. My next question was: what wisdom experiences, histories or lessons does your practice contain that lends perspective on grief?

[Grief] happens with celebrations in general too-- like when you're celebrating someone graduating, for example, they're always saying goodbye to something while they're stepping into something else. So I see grief as this ever present thing that might well up in certain moments or really be apparent in certain moments, but it's never not there.... we just don't have the vocabulary to really get into the nuances of how grief is present in so many facets of our lives

G: I think with flowers, it's interesting because in the floral trade we're typically working with dead flowers. It's interesting because cut flowers are already cut from the stem. So in a way, any art you see of them is kind of like the legacy of that plant. Like you've taken a piece of this plant and it's continuing on in a vase in your house for maybe a week, maybe past that, if it's really good <laugh> but I don't know. I think that just makes me think about how plants just are. They just exist. They thrive when they can and they grow when they can and they also wither away and die when conditions aren't right or just when it's time. So, I think working with flowers inherently is kind of about working with death, which sounds kind of intense to say, but yeah, you're working with things that have a shelf life. You're working with things that are inherently, somewhat fragile and once you cut that flower from that stem, you have to be ready to let it go.

It's interesting hearing people who say, "I don't wanna waste my money on flowers because they'll just die." Right? Like some people don't buy flowers for themselves because they don't like the fact that the flowers disappear after a certain point. Which I completely understand if you value certain things and if you're putting your money towards certain things that says



something about your values and what you're comfortable with. And your budget too. Some people can't afford to do that. I just always found that interesting because for me it's like, so what if they die? It's about the time that you have with them while they're there. Plus you can always dry them. If they're good dried flowers, you can keep them for a really long time, but yeah.

L: A lot in what you said was so rich. As you were talking, I was wondering if it's a thing for people to make living arrangements?

G: I think that's where the whole concept of a green wall comes from. People who want decor inside their homes that functions more like how a vase of flowers functions. Where it's more of an art piece and it's more aesthetic. People have a whole green wall of all these plants that are tucked into pockets and it's like ferns and mosses and it's super decorative and it's super like statementy, but um, they're living right. So you have to like water them and take care of them and everything.

There's that, I think, as far as living. Living arrangements makes me think of orchids. Like the reason why people buy orchid plants versus flowers would be that orchids produce these really beautiful flowers that last for a really, really, really long time and you can have them for a month or two months before they wither away. And if you know how to keep the plant going, you can keep the flowers coming back and they're just as impactful as a bouquet of roses. It's probably more bang for your buck if you're looking for something, that'll be a flower in your space for a long time. So I know people who do that, like my grandma buys orchids all the time and specifically purple ones. She loves that color, so she does that because she feels like it's more worth it to buy that versus getting grocery store flowers every week.

L: Right. I'm hearing that there's other strategies of maintaining life in flowers with orchids or the walls, but generally when it comes to your general florist work, it's dealing with impermanence.

G: Yeah. And a lot of floristry is about maintaining care of your flower so that you're

staving off that final death as much as possible. So keeping clean water in your vases, cutting the stems at a certain angle, putting them in a certain temperature of water, hydrating your flowers by spritzing them with water to make sure they stay fresh and plump. You know, it's all about staving off that eventual decay. It's like fighting death

L: Yeah, totally. My next question was how do you see your work as being in community with others?

G: Yeah. That's the really cool thing about flowers. Most of the time I'm making something for a specific person or I'm making something so that it will ultimately ideally get purchased or traded for, by another person. There's also the fact that with flowers, there's usually someone giving them to someone else. Not always, I really love it when people buy flowers for themselves, but it's usually out of an act of love or wanting to keep a relationship going or to solidify a bond. They're kind of all about relationship building. I really like that about the work that I do. I get to like write the little notes that people write for each other, you know, they're like, "oh, please say like Happy Birthday mom. I love you so much." Those little notes are very precious. That's what relationships are built on.

L: That's so true. And I've been even thinking in events.

G: Yeah, depending on the kind of event too. Like for a wedding, obviously they're adding to the environment for everyone there. Just from a vendor perspective, being a vendor at a pop-up market and interacting with other vendors there, even if they're not florists, even if they're pastry chefs, or bakers, or ceramicists, it's another way that I've been able to build community with my practice, which has been unexpected. It's a really nice side benefit of having a business that I get to be plugged into all these other amazing, cool small businesses. I feel like I have no excuse now to shop at a big brand store for gifts because I know so many people in LA who make really amazing things, who are in a similar spot that I'm in. So yeah, that's been a really cool part of all this.

L: Yeah. I was having that same realization this past holiday season. I was like, at this point, I know so many small, even queer businesses specifically. Wow. I really could be putting my money into a community of artists.

G: Right, exactly. It's really great. It's a really cool space to be in. I feel like it's, it's not always possible depending on where you live. So I feel really grateful to be plugged in like this.

L: Yeah! What is your personal or cultural relationship to flowers?

G: Yeah, I would say it's a way to relate to my mom. It's something that I feel comes pretty directly from her. It's not like she taught me to appreciate flowers or taught me to appreciate plants, but she has the same bug for being in love with nature, being obsessed over different plants, learning their names, learning what they do, seeing how they changed throughout the seasons. Like she just will go ballistic over like beautiful fall foliage. You'll never find anyone who is as enthusiastic as my mom over pretty flowers or a red maple leaf. Her whole being is like... joy at the wonders of nature. So I feel like luckily I inherited a lot of that from her and it's been pretty amazing to have an immediate family that loves going on hikes and going to the botanical gardens. That's like a safe middle space for all of us to be in together, where it's like, even if we can't always talk about politics, <laugh> we can go to the botanical gardens and enjoy everything they have there. It's just a guaranteed good time for everybody. Yeah. On a personal level, I would say I feel pretty spiritually connected to plants and I feel like they have a lot of wisdom to offer and we don't spend enough time listening to them. We don't spend enough time just sitting with them and observing them.

L: No, totally. I really resonate with that. I was like thinking, as you were talking about how flowers serve this role that's almost similar to food that it's so universal and they bring people together. Like a shared joy in beauty.

G: It's like a shared language.

L: Yeah. Yeah. Shared language totally.

G: For people that like them. It's like, if you like them, you like them, you know? And you can talk to someone about how pretty a certain flower is and like, "oh my God. I totally agree. It is beautiful, you know?" It's just that thing that is a commonality that you have immediately with strangers or whoever.

L: Yeah. Um, yeah. I think it's interesting because you mentioned before some people don't like flowers because they're gonna die and stuff like that. I know that somebody fits that description, but in my head I'm like, I don't know anyone who doesn't love flowers. <laugh> Like, who is this person that doesn't love flowers?

G: I know a few.

L: No, totally, I believe you.

G: <laugh> And I think part of me wonders, if money were taken out of the equation... you know what I mean? Would these people still say, I don't like flowers because they die on me as soon as I bring them home or whatever. Like if money weren't an issue and if practicality wasn't so much of a thing, how would these people feel about it? And my suspicion is most of them would be like, yeah, I would love flowers in my house.

L: Yeah. I mean, do they like flowers when they're out in the world?

G: I'm thinking of like two people specifically <laugh> yeah, I think so there are some people who aren't super into nature like that. Yeah. But I think that you could always find that like one really cool plant, one really cool flower that like everybody will respond to. Like everybody loves a Dahlia. They're just super detailed. I don't know if you know what they look like exactly.

L: No, but I'll look it up.

G: They're just like geometrically super intricate. People a lot of times have a hard time believing they're real. Especially if you find a really good one. There's so many different varieties. They can get really, really big. They have a lot of like UMPH going on. People tend to really respond to those. Or a passion flower,

you know. The details of a passion flower will pretty much wow anyone who passes by one.

L: Yeah. These are so gorgeous. Are these the same ones like the tea?

G: Yep. <affirmative> yep. There's different species and varieties, but yeah. And they also produce a fruit called the may pop, which I'm not positive if that's edible or not, but it does have its own name. So makes me think it probably is.

L: Yeah. Okay. My next question is, what is missing from care around grief?

G: I think that we don't have the vocabulary for it. I think that a lot of times people just don't have the words. Not that you always have to have words. I'm including in that practices or customs or shared rituals. We don't have enough stuff that's shared that we can communicate that grief and have it bereceived by another person and understood as grief. At least from where I'm sitting today in the U.S. being mostly an English speaker, within my set of friends, within this broader context. I don't think we practice it enough for us to come up with enough shared customs around it. There's a Korean practice of honoring your ancestors and I took part in it because there was this Queer Korean collective that's really awesome here. They invited me to come out to Griffith for the quote unquote "Korean Thanksgiving" or harvest festival last autumn and it's called Chuseok. It's a celebration of the harvest and everything. You get together and you get a bunch of food. But you also pay your respects to your ancestors. So there's usually a table that's set up with photographs of people who have passed, maybe little trinkets and offerings like food and things like that. It's a really beautiful altar and you go up to it and you can say something or just bow or be silent. I thought that was really incredible and I didn't expect it. It had been a while since I'd done something like that. Because I haven't participated in a ton of Korean things since I was very young. But that was really nice. And it made me think that stuff like that should happen more often.

L: Can you share a part of that event that was

particularly impactful for you?

G: Yeah, I think it was the fact that everyone was acknowledging that these people had passed. They were acknowledging that there were people in their lives who weren't there anymore. They were sharing it with the group and we were all celebrating them together. So it wasn't a solitary grief. Like it wasn't a grief that you have to hold onto by yourself because you know, well maybe that's just how you need to process things personally. But I think a lot of times we don't have like those set practices and we don't have like that comfort with those types of conversations to be able to talk about how sad it is that people are gone or how amazing it was to know them or like how mourning can take place in so many different ways and change shape so many times and come back and then ebb and flow and go away and just keep cycling. I don't think it ever really goes away, but we don't really talk about that.

L: Yeah. I love that. I went to a Buddhist monastery this past Thanksgiving that was part of Plum Village. It was this whole honoring ancestors thing also, which was a really cool and special and different way to celebrate Thanksgiving.

G: Yeah, totally. It's important. It makes you feel super connected, not just laterally, like not just to the people who are there with you-- but also to the people who have gone before you. That was a type of connection that I really haven't felt a lot of as someone who is estranged from extended family. There's difficulties with communication. There's queerness, there's the anxieties around that. As someone who sees my family tree as me, my sibling and parents, and then, I know my grandparents, my cousins and stuff, but beyond that, I have no real record, not too many stories. So feeling that extension into the past was really powerful.

L: Yeah. I was thinking about Queer ancestors because I had a conversation the other day with somebody about how a queer elder doesn't necessarily mean somebody who's old, but it could be somebody who has been within a queer experience and out or in a queer community for a long time. And has that

knowledge for a long time versus somebody who might be older, but is more recently coming into queerness. I was thinking about that with ancestors because you know, statistically, more queer people die young, especially black and brown and trans people. I guess when I think of ancestors, I think of older people like great, great grandparents, great, great aunts or something. I think it's interesting thinking about the people that came before who were young.

G: Yeah, no, that's true, that's a really good point. That's super interesting.

L: Yeah. Okay, I'm gonna go to the next question. What is an object real or imaginary that you would put in a grief first aid kit?

G: My first instinct is to say a Clementine. Like a little fruit like a Clementine specifically. I say that because this is one of the tricks that I've heard about, as someone who's experienced depression. This is one of the tricks for if you're in a depressed mood or if you're feeling overwhelmed with emotions or something, it's a way to center yourself back in your body. If you have a Clementine in the freezer or a couple of Clementines and whenever you feel like you need to ground yourself, you take one out and you can engage all five of your senses with the Clementine. So you can look at it and see it's bright color. It's very, very vibrant. You can scratch at the peel and smell it and that's engaging your sense of smell. You can feel it in your palm. It's gonna be cold taking it out from the freezer. So that's like another stimulation to your senses. You can taste it. <laugh> You could like eat it and taste it. It's not all five, I guess you could peel the Clementine, you could probably hear the ASMR of the peel. So something about being asked to pack something for grief first aid kit, it makes me want to reach for something that would really ground me in my body. Like remind me of the feeling of being alive.

L: Yeah. I love that so much. That was a really good answer. Especially the vibrancy of it. Immediately I'm getting into visual artist mode where I'm like, oh wow. Yeah, just so strong. So beautiful.

G: Yeah. And it's also the easiest thing in the world. I really like that about it too. It's the simplest tool. It's not like anyone's going out and telling you to do CBT <laugh> Like CBT yourself out of depression. It's just a clementine, but sometimes that's all it takes to remind you of the meat of life, the zest of life. And maybe you still feel like shit, you're still sad after, but at least you have that spark you're carrying with you.

L: Yeah. And I love that also in this conversation about flowers that are so beautiful and you were talking about colors and being a color-forward person-- this Clementine is totally a beautiful object. Also, I don't know if you know this, but a little addition to your trick-- somebody told me about the dorsal vagal nervous system, are you familiar with like that terminal?

G: I think I've heard of it before.

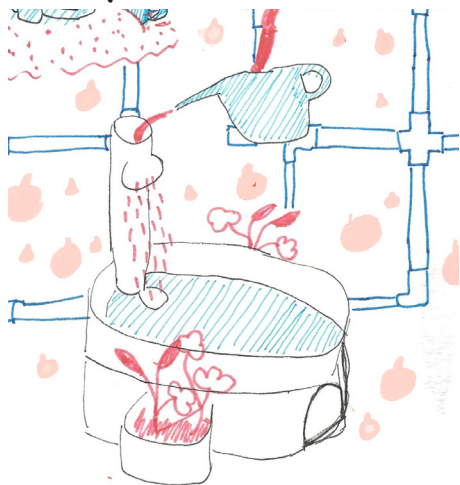
L: Yeah. It's the main nervous system that is activated when you are panicked, like fight or flight or freeze or whatever. It gets activated and it essentially swells when you're in a nervous or panicked state. Somebody told me this trick, which has been really helpful for me, of just getting something frozen out of your freezer and like putting it on like your neck or chest. Um, because that's where the main nervous system extends from, and it starts to reduce the swelling. I was thinking about that with the frozen clementine being able to hold it in those central places

G: So useful and then you can eat it after you're done <laugh>

L: Yes, totally. Yeah But that is all of my questions. Thank you for talking with me. I really appreciate all your thoughts. Do you have any final thoughts or final words?

G: No, except I do think this is a really good topic to talk about and to think about. And I think that it would help all of us to address it more, to kind of ease it more into our lives. The grief is there and if you don't give it space, it makes space for itself. So might as well welcome it and put out a rug for it and help it feel cozy.

# Interview with Troy Stevenson



L: Okay. So the first question that I have is just to introduce yourself, what is your name and your background/profession?

T: Oh, sure. Yeah. I am Troy Stevenson, almost 60 years old. Wow. I've been teaching for about 20 years in Los Angeles Unified School District. I'm at Portala Middle School right now, and also at the City of Angels Academy. Like we talked about online, I don't know if you know this, but I'm a professional musician. I'm a bass player. However, you know, I had to pay the bills. I remember when I was gigging a lot and, and playing in venues and it was fantastic and the money was great and all of a sudden the gigs dried up. So I had to have a real nine to five job because I got married and fell in love and all those beautiful things. So, teaching was always something that I was interested in because I always work well with kids at, at any level, but usually at the middle school level. So because of that, I knew that that was something either I could fall back on or make a career of, if I so choose. And I decided after I got married to make it a career, because it was a stable job, stable income. And plus I could carve out the level of teaching that I really wanted and the subject matter, which is history, I love history very much. I was able to get a job as a history teacher... and the rest is history. And I really have been thankful that I

was able to teach something that I really enjoy teaching. And I really enjoy teaching something that kids enjoy learning <laugh>. So those two things go hand in hand, especially in the magnet school that I'm in now or was in.

L: Awesome. Thank you so much. And I asked to interview you because you were my teacher in sixth and seventh grade. I don't know if you remember any of this, but I have memories of you being one of the most empathetic teachers that I had. You know, middle school is a very transitional, emotional time. And I have a distinct memory of you telling me to wear my glasses in class. I don't know if you remember this.

T: No, I don't. Not at all

L: Apparently I would go to class and just be squinting at the board.

T: I think I do remember that <laugh> yeah. And I'm saying to myself, I wear glasses, you know, I'm not wearing them now because of nearsighted and this works well, but you know, I wear glasses of course.

And I said, come on, be part of the gang. Wear those glasses. Yeah. I didn't know that that really mattered to you. That's great.

L: I really wanted to talk to you as I was doing this work because, as I was saying earlier, I think that teachers play a really important emotional role and we've had a very big year.

Yeah, so I wanted to ask from your perspective, where is grief present both in your life and in your work?

T: Oh yeah, that's a very good question because I have to look back a long ways growing up. My circumstance was unique. I was basically a black kid in an all white school, but that was just a side factor to the fact that, if you can envision the town I lived in, I lived in New Jersey. I was born in Philadelphia, but raised in New Jersey. The street that I lived on, if you walked across the street, you would be in a black community and have to go to an all black school. I'm on the other side of the street. I have to go to an all white school. And



these guys are being bussed to an all black school, about 20 miles away. I'm walking a mile away to an all white school, just because of the way the boundary line was.

Well, that created a lot of trauma for me, because one, before I went to school, these were my friends, the black kids. I hung out with them all the time. And then all of a sudden, when I started to go to a white school, I had white friends and didn't associate with my black friends anymore. And they thought that there was something wrong with me. They really took offense to that. And I never really spoke to them for a long time until I was in high school. So I felt alienated by the black community, or my black friends I in my community. But also the white kids, some of them were real cool, and some of them were outright racist. There's no doubt about it. Right. Racism hit me real hard growing up. The thing with me, L, is I internalized that. I did something different that I wish I didn't do, but I didn't have the role models that were strong enough to impart to me, "Hey, it's their problem, It's not your problem."

I thought I was the problem for their hatred towards me, if you can imagine that. And because of that, I've really felt like an outcast a lot in middle school and going into high school. That's where I discovered music and music really was the catalyst for me to express myself and be creative-- something that I thought I could never do.

Now, keep in mind, I had good people in my life. My mom was probably the strongest and greatest influence in my life. My dad, I loved him dearly. He raised me properly. He was a gambling man. He would go to the racetrack or he'd play a poker, or he was not there, but he gave me all the love and all the support that I could ever want. I can't blame him for being who he was. And my brother was about eight years older than me. And he was basically my father, which is bad news because he would usually bully me. And that just compounded all the problems that I was dealing with.

So the thing is, is that music really opened my mind about how people are treated. I saw the racism firsthand and you never forget that.

You never forget being a victim of racism. It lasts your whole life. And there's no way to un-think about it or undo it. But the fact is, is that when I was in a position of power as a teacher, I remember those days, I remember the times that people belittled me or humiliated me. And I swore that I would never do it to people that I know. I would be the exact opposite of that.

And when I have a classroom full of students, I think it's my duty and obligation to, one, make them feel comfortable. Two, make them thrive, or allow them to thrive and be themselves in my classroom. And three, to make them laugh, make them have fun, and enjoy themselves. And when you have all those combinations that come together through my empathy and my life experiences, that led up to me, going into a classroom, having to teach kids for the last 20 years, the fact is that something magical happens. And it did with you. And it did with all my students. And I'm happy to say that, believe me, I'm an acquired taste. Some kids they may have liked me. They may not have, I don't know, some kids may have loved me, but the fact is that I was always myself.

And I tried my best to honor my students. And this is the mindset that all teachers should have. The fact is that I may not understand what you're going through, but I have to respect that it's real for you. And if it's real for you, then I have to honor what you're going through and not give you a hard time, not judge you, not do something that could possibly make you feel uncomfortable in my classroom. Cause if you're uncomfortable, you can't learn. That's the bottom line. But if you're comfortable, if you're laughing, you're enjoying, then we all can learn. I can learn from you and you can learn from me. I always have that mindset. The fact is that I can learn from these kids. It doesn't matter that I'm 60 and they are 13, 14, the fact this is that they see the world differently than I do. And there's value in what they see. And if I allow that to happen, I can learn from them. And that happens every year in my classroom. So I think through my grief and my, and my pain, I was able to make that be the foundation for my teaching career.

L: Yeah, yeah. That resonates with me. I mean, I didn't know your background, but it makes sense to me. You know, my Middle School definitely wasn't an all white school or anything. But I don't know if you remember this, but in my year, there was one black student, in the magnet program, and there was two Latino students and I was one of them. Right. So I definitely remember feeling like a minority and, you know, middle school is a time when kids were the cruelest and yeah, the bullying was racist. And then I remember going to your classroom and it being a haven.

T: That's what I'm going for. That's beautiful. And thank you for saying that, that means everything to me is a teacher to hear that so many years later, I usually don't get the feedback about what kids experience in my classroom, especially when they leave my classroom and graduate. Rarely do I see that, but thank you so much for coming back in my life and telling me these beautiful things.

L: Yeah, of course. The next question that I have is, what wisdom experiences, histories, or lessons does your practice contain that lends perspective on grief?

T: Interesting. I think the empathy goes a long way. I had to get rid of certain prejudices that I've had. I'll give you an example, as a musician it's more collegial. What I mean by that is that musicians share information. We share knowledge, we share openly to make everybody better, because if I'm playing in a band with you, I want you to be the best you can be because I wanna be the best I can be. If you give me feedback, I can grow from that feedback and vice versa. Well, when I got to a place called the Berkeley College of Music, it's a very good music school in Boston.

The fact was is that whatever prejudices I had about people around me, were torn down because I could see that talent knows no boundaries. It doesn't know gender, it doesn't know color, it doesn't know ethnicity. If you have the ability and the talent-- boy, the sky's the limit. And it's so amazing to see and be in that environment. I mean, I'll give you an example, I was in a session with two female sax players and, you know, I didn't have many prejudic-

es growing up because, of course, I've been through a lot, you know, but I still thought that, "eh, these guys aren't that good. They're females. How good could they be?" Well, they were outstanding. And they blew me away and they ran circles around me <laugh> I wasn't at their level and I could feel it. And the fact is that I learned a lesson, "Hey, come on, Troy, you really thought that way? You really have to give that up." Especially with people you don't know. Cause that means you're judging them. And if you're judging them, you're gonna miss out because these people could give you gifts that you could never know about. And they could help you and they could make you be a better person.

So a long time ago, I needed those experiences to bring into my adult life as a teacher, because it really helped me to see that, wait a minute, okay, something's going on here. I have a student that may be angry or may have a behavior problem. Is it me? Or is it them? Or is it something that's going on in their home? I don't know what's going on, but I can't internalize it and make it something to where I take it personally and lash out at the student. And believe me, I'm not perfect. I've done that before. I flew off the handle sometimes and I didn't react the way I want to, but that's part of the learning process. I make mistakes, but in my life, the main thing that leads me to help and heal grief is righting the wrong. If I did something wrong to somebody, I automatically make it right. I apologize to them. I make amends immediately. Without question, there's no doubling down of my own righteousness and my own indignation and my own pride. To heck with that. If I did something wrong, I have to own it. And when I own that, it makes me feel better, but it also makes the person feel better. And I honor the person by doing that because I have to humble myself in order to make that happen. That humility really eliminates a lot of grief that I could possibly have as a human being.

And I think that that's probably one of the great gifts that people have given to me all my life, especially my students. The fact is that, if I've done something wrong to you, I make it right. It changes you and it changes me. We both grow because of it. And I think

that is probably the greatest lesson that I've learned to take to the classroom, to deal with people who are grieving, you know, whatever the situation may be at home. I'll give you your space. I'll honor you. If you need to go somewhere, if you need to take a break, if you need to leave my classroom, or if you need to talk after school, whatever you need, the fact is that I'll help you because that's equally, if not more important than the subject matter in the classroom, right? Yeah. I think it's sometimes more important.

L: Yeah. I really love what you said about, when making a mistake apologizing. Especially with children, because I think, one, it's a great example, but two, I don't think that children often get that from adults,

T: Right? Yeah. And why not? Why not? And the fact is that I know I'm an adult. Look at me, I'm older than you. I know of my experiences. However, if I lash out at you, I'll give an example. I was subbing for a class and one kid said, Hey, I really like your shoes. Now. I've never been to this class before. I think this kid was clowning me. I went off on him and I set him straight. But you know what, the fact is that he really wasn't that type of person that was malicious, or would do something like that. So I saw him, another year going by, and he was older and I walked up to him and said, "listen, do you remember me? Because I remember you." And he said, "yeah, I do." I said, "I wanna apologize for to you because of how I reacted to, to what you said. I don't know if you were clowning me. I don't know if you were being sincere or you really wanted to say something nice to me. However, I never gave you a chance. I indicted you. I prosecuted you and I laid you out and that was wrong. And I apologize." And he had this look in his face. That was just amazing. He just didn't believe that an adult would do that. And why not? And that kid was my friend for the rest of his time at Portola until he graduated. <laugh> You know, the fact is that, you know, there's no age discrimination when it comes to righting a wrong or doing the right thing. There really isn't. And I think that some of the preconceptions that we have as adults and as human beings, as teachers, whatever our profession is, whatever our status is, they need

to really be looked at in terms of how we deal with other people. Because I think this is one of the things that leads to where our polarization is in our nation today. The fact is, is that we're not communicating and listening to each other and honoring each other as much as we could be. And I think that that's something that, you know, let's look at it, let's talk about it. And don't judge.

You know, give that up for a little bit. I mean, believe me, if there's something that doesn't resonate with me or something that makes me feel uncomfortable, I'll tell you straight off and you tell me what you feel about what I feel. And then we have a conversation, we may disagree and that may be the end of it. Or we may find common ground. And that common ground is where the hope is for our society and, and for me and my students and whatever dynamic relationship that we're talking about, the fact is, is that common ground is the key.

L: I hear you, I'm curious if you, or how you navigate those bigger worlds conversations or current events within your classroom, in particular, within the age group that you have?

T: That's a very good question. The fact is, I think what they call "critical race theory, or being "woke": the thing is I really don't accept a lot of the terminology that is being advanced today, because I think it's designed specifically to confuse and divide people, and not unite people. And what I mean by that is there is basically the truth and I'm gonna give you different truths. Slavery is truth, racism is truth. It happened-just ask the people who were victims of it. The Eastern cultures have their truth. The Western European cultures have their truth. Everybody has their truth. Then, everybody has their revisionist history, which acts to change or deny the truth. I'm gonna lay it all out to you and let you decide what you think is true. I'm not gonna proselytize to you. I'm just gonna give you different facts. And I'm gonna challenge what you think, because you should challenge what I think. And if we both together are able to talk about these things and find common ground with these things, then this is where the good part begins. The fact is is that when it comes to religion, I teach 11 different religions

in my classroom, how do I do that? I do that by laying everything out and letting the kids decide, let them draw their own conclusions about what religion means and how it is. And if they ask me questions, I'll do the best I can to answer them. And I admit, when I don't know, and this is another thing that teachers need to do, admit that you don't know the answer to a question. "I don't know. Let's find out, look it up, let's see what happens." And because of that, I think that's where it's easier for me than a lot of other teachers in terms of navigating those waters. That could be real tricky when it comes to polarization, politics, religion, all the things that really plug people in. The fact is that I don't have that problem because I think everybody deserves to be heard. And I think all religious points of view deserve to be heard. And then we can decide from there. It's called the marketplace of ideas. Take it or leave it if you want it, if you wanna believe in it, subscribe to it. That's fine. If you wanna leave it alone, it's not for you, then you're free to do so.

L: Yeah. That makes a lot of sense. And I think that it also parallels your subject matter.

T: Yeah. Oh, very much so. I've always believed that every culture that's lived on this planet has contributed to humankind-- in a positive way and in a very, in enlightening way as well. And of course there's a lot of bad, there's a lot of evil, there's a lot of bad things that have happened. But if people, as cultures and as groups have decided, "you know what, we know this was wrong, we know slavery was wrong. Let's try to right the wrong, let's do what we can to make sure that future generations don't go through what you've gone through." And that's the foundation for healing when it comes to these types of beliefs. Because if we look at all beliefs, they all have common themes, universal themes, and the universal themes are the same. So why are we different? <laugh> We have to ask that question. If we believe in charity, if every major religion believes in charity, then let's be charitable. If every major religion believes in love, then let's love each other. I don't see any major religion proselytizing hate. Where is it? I don't see it. You know? And that's the idea. The fact is that I look at the universal themes

and I rely on them to get the message across, to let the kids have enough information to judge for themselves.

L: Yeah. Mm-hmm So, my next question: what is missing from care around grief? And that could be within education or at large.

T: You know, I have to admit that, over the years, people are becoming better at understanding what students need in the classroom. I can see that as a professional, when I have my professional developments, I can see that we really are trying to balance the idea of the mind versus the body that we can't stress our kids out and we have to have these kids have outlets in order for them to be able to cope when they come back into the classroom and whether it's something like PE or something like that, or whether it's the idea that they are able to take time for themselves and then come back to my classroom.

One of the greatest things that really has helped my classroom was allowing people to go outside and then come back in again and gather themselves. Just the idea of having that time and me allowing them to have that time-- because teachers never would, that's unheard of, you know?

And the fact is that, unfortunately, I can't leave a kid outside alone unattended, by law. So I have to leave the door open or something like that, but I can still do it and give the kid their space. But I think that care is essential to allowing the kids to be comfortable in my classroom or any classroom. And there are various other things that I think we are trying to do. The fact that nutrition is important. The fact that we have a lot of counselors and people that are there for us to support us. The fact that there's peer counseling as well. All these things make my job easier basically. Because I know that I'm not gonna be able to communicate to everyone. I'm not gonna be able to solve everyone's problems. I'm not gonna be able to make everyone feel good about themselves. I'm gonna do the best I can, but I'm limited. And because of that, if there's some other vehicle that allows for that type of care and attention, then it translates into my classroom and makes my classroom a better

place.

L: I only have one last question for you: what is an object real or imaginary that you would put in a grief first aid kit?

T: Yeah, food.

L: Food. Oh, good

T: Food. Any type of food. You know, usually something sweet <laugh> Something to make you happy. And, I mean that, because, you know, believe me, I'm close to 300 pounds. I love to eat. There's no doubt about it, but I find that, you know, when you are able to be distracted by a certain stimulus and you can eventually go back to that stimulus, or whatever the problem is that that's creating grief in your life, you tend to have a little different perspective. You seem to be more calm about it, right? I would say that the idea of having a cup of coffee and a bagel or a donut or something like that is very therapeutic. Or just something to where, you know, you can take time out for yourself and separate from whatever is bothering you for that brief moment of time to get your head together, to go back to it and deal with it. And it gives you perspective. I've always thought that about food. That's why I love it. That would probably be the number one thing. I think that the second thing would be some sort of music. If I knew the music that the person really liked, like a CD or something, pop it in there with them and let them listen to some music to disengage because music is very therapeutic. I've always known that my whole life as a musician and as someone who, before I became a musician got a lot of love out of music itself and listening to music and understanding what was going on and really listening hard to see. And I was doing ear training before I was going to Berkeley because I could hear different instruments and I separate that. And if you have to do all that, believe me, whatever's on your mind that's bothering you. You forget about it completely, totally. It's outta your mind because I'm listening to a bass line or I'm listening to a guitar player, or I'm listening to something like that. That's my singular focus, and I can lock into that. And I think that students need that in order to disengage from the stress and the

trauma that they're going through, or the grief they're going through, especially grief of all things. And believe me, I've had songs that have taken me through a lot of hard times in my life. And they've made me a better person, because I found strength in those songs. And I found courage in those songs. And because of that, that translates into me being a better person and a strong person.

L: So do you have a song or an album that would be in your grief first aid kit?

T: Oh, very good question. Very good question. Yeah. Ones is Badge by Cream. I don't know if you've everheard of it or not, but that really happened at a hard time in my life. That song really resonated with me and really got me motivated to do something about it instead of feeling sorry for myself. So Badge by Cream and also, an album called Kind of Blue by Miles Davis. That was a game changer for me. I was never the same after that album, because it opened up my mind to something I've never experienced before. I've never been the same since, because, you know, I was able to hear music in a whole different way, and I was able to immerse myself and lose myself in the amazing playing ability of these musicians. And I realized how much I love jazz. I realized how much I love music. I realize how I can, whatever it is that's going on in my life, I can use this to escape from it. And believe me, I gotta go back to whatever crap there is out there. I have to deal with. But the fact is that this'll give me pause to get myself together, and then I can go back and look at things differently and solve problems. And those two, the album Kind of Blue by Miles Davis and Badge by Cream-- definitely gotta have it.

L: I'm gonna listen to those tonight.

T: Right. Oh, that's great.

L: Thank you so much.

T: My pleasure. And I really hope that we stay in touch because I'd like to see how this comes out for you.





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