

From the Editor: On Language, Bear Grease, and Sage

*We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language.
That may be the measure of our lives.*

~ Toni Morrison; Nobel acceptance speech

(<http://www.brainpickings.org/2016/12/07/toni-morrison-nobel-prize-speech>)



Sharon Dardis

I was selfishly hoping the seat next to me would remain vacant. Airline seats these days seem to be getting ever tighter, infringing on our personal space. My usual travel plan is to settle in, put in my earbuds, then read or take a nap. An empty seat almost always facilitates that. But just before the aircraft door closed that morning, a tall middle-aged man slid into the cramped aisle seat next to me. As he stowed his bulky duffel, I noted his thick black braid, streaked with grey, resting on the back of his brightly embroidered jacket. He struggled to buckle his seat belt, then pulled a highlighted itinerary out of his pocket and studied it nervously. As we taxied, he glanced at me, pointed to an entry and said, “My sister helped me arrange this trip. I don’t travel much. Can you help me figure out what time we get to Seattle?”

Over the course of the three-hour cross country flight, I was blessed with conversation that felt ordained. My seat mate, it turned out, was traveling to a small town in Oregon to sit

with a dying friend. His journey had begun early that morning as he left his tribal home in North Dakota to make a series of complicated connections. He told me he was an elder in his community, and a medicine man. He explained his duffel bag contained sage, other herbs, a small drum, and bear grease, “to minister to my friend who has just been admitted to hospice.” He said he hoped his friend, who knew he was coming, was resting comfortably and would wait for him.

I didn’t tell him I had a hospice background, but I offered up my most-often utilized tool from those bygone nursing days: my ears. I listened as he shared his story in terms I understood; a universal language of compassion, love, and friendship. He worried about his friend’s possible pain, about the man’s estranged teenaged daughter he hoped he could coax to the bedside, and about making it in time to say all he wanted to tell his old friend. I listened, nodded, encouraged. His connection to Seattle looked tight. I felt like a small puzzle-piece in his long journey, helping him reach his destination. Talking and listening were key to this particular moment and I suspect, blessed us both.

Language is, as Toni Morrison says, the measure of all of our lives. Someone speaks, we listen. We network and respond. We comfort, we write, we read, exchange ideas, and hopefully, we make a difference. Certainly our spring conference with Serena King demonstrated this. 175 of us registered early, got up before dawn, braved city traffic, and with coffee or

tea in hand, tucked into a tight spot next to other MCDES colleagues to absorb the day’s stories, wisdom, and knowledge. During breaks, we shared thoughts and conversation with one another. We caught up; we comforted. We cared.

It is with gratitude that we are able to send along another quarterly newsletter to further this particular thought. Here again are articles presented in hopes they may answer a need in you or prompt further thoughts or study... or maybe even inspire a welcome newsletter submission of your own! (send to sdardis@aol.com) Thanks to scholarship winner, Rebecca Long for volunteering to contribute her spring conference reactions and review. Serena King’s presentation was, as Rebecca says, “engaging, informative, and easy to understand.” With scholarly compassion, Serena linked the topic of opioids, addiction and grief, leaving us all with a thirst for finding answers and addressing this issue further. MCDES member Ted Bowman’s poignant hour of personal stories and poetry, shared as a result of the overdose death of his grandson, made Serena’s lessons even more personal. “Be bold,” Ted told us, “in talking about this topic with others and sharing your own stories.”

Dive deeper into this issue and you’ll find other thoughts from Ted regarding how “looking back inspires looking forward.” He lists noteworthy events and people who inspired us in the field of bereavement. Please note Ted’s appeal to each of you to send

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MCDES is a nonprofit 501(c)3 volunteer organization whose purpose is to promote and provide education, opportunities for networking, and support to individuals and groups involved with the care of persons confronting death and their families and friends, and those who are bereaved, regardless of the cause of death.

Editor continued on page 4

Editor continued from page 2

him your own ideas of other noteworthy dates or mentoring colleagues whom he might add to his influential listing. Send them to: tedbowman71@gmail.com. Contribute your suggestions, please, and then watch for further additions of those who've helped pave the way in the ongoing history of grief care. Thanks, Ted!

Chairman Ben is back with a thoughtful piece asking if we are “infectious agents.” As usual, you'll enjoy his interesting insights and encouraging words. Thanks, Ben. Thanks, too, to Eunie Alsaker, who never fails to convince us that her latest book review is a “must read” selection. She calls “The Group” a “must read for all clinicians” and told me personally it's a book she will read again and again. Be sure and check out the Sundries and Resources page for further events and especially, note the MCDES Fall Conference with Louis Gamino from Temple, Texas, addressing “Competence to End-of-Life Care on Friday, October 5. Brochures will be available in late July and online registration opens on August 1. Register early to avoid a sell-out!

I'll close here by saying that the story of my conversation at 30,000 feet, for now at least, goes unfinished. I doubt I'll ever know the ending. I hope my seat mate made it in time. I hope he was able to minister to his friend with a bear grease massage, the room awash in pungent burning sage. I hope he was able to encourage a young, newly-reconciled daughter, who may have wept and drummed beside her dying father. I hope my fellow passenger was able to say his goodbyes. This is my fervent hope for how it all turned out. I'll probably never know.

But I do know I'm glad I was open for the gift that day. I'm glad I kept my

Editor continued to the right

Editor continued from previous column

earbuds in my lap and shared an intimate moment by simply being present; an act as sacred as native grasses blowing in a warm prairie wind. It is truly language which is the measure of all of us, and it is our privilege to continue always to be willing and brave enough to engage and be open to the

lessons it teaches. With that in mind, buckle up for a wonderful summer. I hope you make lasting memories with loved ones. And please plan to join MCDES on October 5th for the Fall Conference. And as always, thanks for all you do, so well, for so many.