

Creative

On Visiting Our Dead

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Abstract: A redefining of the meaning of death and grief: this essay explores a rejection of conventional ideas about mourning and describes the experiences of two daughters after they have lost their beloved father. In the one case, it is an evocation of his spirit that feels like a conversation and, in the other, visits by the father to the daughter through palpable signs¹.

Keywords: mourning; death; sadness; feral; St. Francis; irrational; Holy Ghost; dread; skywriting; cemetery

1. Death is the Great Absence Maker

Death is the great absence maker. Someone we love is with us, *here*. Then, *there they aren't. Not here!* A whole continent in our lives has ceased to be. How can we possibly have any other response than a wild animal screech, No!

¹ Joanna Herman, Lucia Mudd, and Anna Mudd (sisters, aunt, and niece) collaborated on this piece about Peter Clapps, their father and grandfather. Anna created illustrations accompanying the essay, using collage and drawings to evoke her mother and her aunt's encounters with their father's spirit.

Figure 1. Collage from photograph of Peter Clapps, authors' father and grandfather, on his honeymoon.



At some point in my adult life, long after I had abandoned the idea of an afterlife, which I had grown up with as a Catholic, I came to accept as an ordinary truth the received ideas about grief: that there are stages to grief, that we proceed from one stage to another and that gradually over time acceptance comes to us. I accepted these ideas because that's what was there to be had, riding the currents around me.

While the thought that there are stages of grief seems reasonably to describe the gradual wearing off of the beheading that death is, recently I realized that simply isn't how I experience death or mourning. Stages? Gradual acceptance? Death is the great irrational other, the feral opposite of reason.

When I finally owned up to what I actually experience and believe about death and grief, I felt an immense surge of release; this idea about stages of grief was too neatly packaged. Death and grief can't be held in a series of containers. Death is a cataclysmic shock, then a planet-covering flood of sadness.

The acceptance of death is the ultimate contradiction, which we have no choice but to live with, but that doesn't mean that it isn't always the same maniacal paradox. If we're alive to think the thought of our own annihilation, it means we still have time to postpone death's arrival. Because it can't be comprehended, there's nothing to do but push it away.

Figure 2. Collage from photograph of Peter Clapps reading in his chair and images from his beloved copy of *Wuthering Heights*.



As I age, I am less and less afraid of death and dying. I've been lucky enough to have done a lot of living. I've always liked wakes, funerals, sitting *Shiva*, as these rituals set communion in our midst where we gather to take good care of one another. But accept death? My mind and my body just don't know how to do that.

As my father would say, Nah!

2. A Continent

This frozen, No! I assume goes back to that original shock that I suffered when I came to understand that everybody dies: Me too, I would die.

In the dusk of a late summer evening, sitting on the front step of our 1950s ranch style home, I was picking at one of the permanent half-dollar-sized scabs on my knee, our long lawn stretching to the bus stop in front of our house. My father, in his sleeveless undershirt, was sitting in his chair on the front porch just to my left reading *The Waterbury Republican American*. It was after dinner when the insect buzz of quiet comes on a summer evening.

In the center of that buzz was a gathering of dread in me as I worked up the nerve to ask my father: "Is it true that everybody has to die?"

He took in a short, sharp breath, then quickly gathered his reluctance. "We *do all die*," he said. "It's true," he said with a short nod of his cleft chin.

"Am I going to die?" I was turned toward where he was sitting.

"Yes, you will too," he said drawing in the air around him.

“I’m afraid of dying,” I said waiting for him to make this tectonic plate-shifting stop.

Into the air buzzing between us taking a long slow breath he said “Well it’s not as bad as it seems to you right now.

Figure 3. Drawing and collage, with typed letter written by Peter Clapps.



“Let me put it this way,” he said as gently as he could, “I’m so much older than you are and I’m going to die before you do. And I’m not afraid of dying.” His voice was quiet and convincing.

He was about 33 years old at the time. He was in the fullness of his strength. While what I think about death has changed a few times over the course of my life, that moment on the porch with my father has been a signpost of relief and comfort. My father loved his job as a father.

What he said that summer evening relocated me *enough*, shifted the earth’s surface almost back to where it had been before I pushed out that dreaded question. He created a continent between me and death that was his own life.

3. The Holy Ghost

When our father died at 81, my sister, Lucia, and I were sent into a downward spiral of grief. A cosmic rent, a black hole opened up in front of us. Our continent was gone—but much, much worse *he was gone*, this mass of male love and protection. Where would we place our feet now as we tried to go forward? Would we forever have to circumnavigate this absence to move in any direction at all?

As a former Catholic, the myths and stories of the church are familiar and even dear to me. Once, as I explained to my Jewish friend what the Holy Trinity is exactly, as I began my recitation of God the Father, God the Son, it came to me in a flash of recognition that The Holy Ghost is the dead grandfather, those generations that are lost to us, that came before us. We have the present, the future, and, in the Holy Ghost, our beloved dead.

My father is our Holy Ghost. He is who my sister and I turn to when we need a place to be that transcends the broken macadam of the everyday beneath our feet. Our dad isn't here. His spirit or residue or dissolved matter might or might not be somewhere, which I sometimes believe in completely and sometimes not. I float about in the clouds of unknowing.

My own visits with my father go like this. I begin to think about him, his large spirit, his complexity and his great good fathering. I call him to myself. I see him in front of me, always standing not on this earthly plane but slightly up and off this earth but near. Sometimes I simply visit with this man who has been one of my great influences. I think about how much I loved and love him, about how much he loved and loves us. Sometimes I turn to him with greater purpose. At those times I need help. I begin to talk to him about something that is on my mind. Dad, I have to take care of this and I'm not sure how to do it. Turning to him immediately brings calm to me. I speak directly to him. I need you to stand with me in this and to help me find a way to deal with this. Help me figure this out.

At those times I see his large physical presence; he's in his gray workpants his sleeveless undershirt and I feel the fullness of him with me as a spectral presence. Please stay with me now. I place the responsibility of finding a solution between us at those times—we'll deal with this together. I think about him quietly and soberly and I leave my concerns resting there between us, knowing that something will occur to me in the next hours, days, weeks or months, and that this will emerge from what I have just lain before my holy ghost. He will help me with this problem. Very often something in the near future comes to me as a solution to my problem and it feels as if he has delivered it.

Figure 4. Collage with photographs of Joanna Clapps Herman and Peter Clapps, and keys collected for Peter's first grandchild.



These images draw on the Southern Italian religious tradition of Milagros and Ex Votos (literally “from devotion”). These are metal folk charms or paintings made *per grazia ricevuta* (for graces received, prayers answered) to place in the church as expressions of gratitude when a loved one has survived an accident or illness.

It's easy to say that it's my internal sense of him, that I am addressing a piece of my own unconscious, and that the good values he taught me are layered into my insensible self where I turn to call them up to help me face what I must. Sometimes, this is what I think. But sometimes, after some time has passed, I feel my father bring a solution to me. I feel him carry a possible path for me to follow. It has his "whiff" about it. I make no more case for this than that.

4. Signs

My father's visits with my sister are different from mine. Lucia and my father visit each other in ways that are in and of this world. These visits have substantiality to them and are based in the everyday. In them, he is represented by living creatures or by physical matter appearing here on earth. The gift of these signs is a powerful presence in her life.

Lucia has a gentle nature, kind and sweet in a way that one imagines St. Francis might have had. There is a quiet nimbus about her. People are drawn to this about her as soon as they meet her. In another time she could have been a holy person, monk or nun. But in this life she is a wife, a mother, a grandmother and a teacher. She loves to take care of the vulnerable, the aging, the beset. Perhaps this numinous radiance that accompanies her provides credibility to the experiences she's had with our father. I believe her.

Here is her description of her visits with our father since he died.

Figure 5. Drawing and collage, with letter written by Peter Clapps.



4.1. Under a Tree

Standing in the new, flat, open, treeless cemetery, where we go to choose a resting place for our father, we look around, and say, “How can we leave him here?” Then I say to him in my head, “Dad, help us out here, we can’t leave you in this barren place.” Then the fellow taking us around says . . . “unless you’d like to go up to the old cemetery where we have pulled up some roads to make more places. The stones are already in place, so you won’t get to choose a stone.” We go. It’s beautiful! And it’s under a tree, surrounded by grass and beautiful gravestones with angels and St. Anthonys. It overlooks our town with many of the sites where dad has done ironwork.

4.2. Hawk

The first time I come back to visit the cemetery, I think as I approach his stone, “If you’re here, let me see the hawk when I look up.” (The hawk had been circling when we laid him to rest in the cemetery.) Before I can look up, I hear the hawk’s cry, which I had never heard before.

4.3. Star

Shortly after dad died we decided to sell the house in Upstate NY that he had loved so much. We invited the neighbors in to take things and pack the rest in the truck we had rented. The house is empty but I’m roaming around feeling that I’m leaving something. I go into the cellar still feeling I’m leaving something important. I say, “Dad, what is it? What do you want me to find?” I look up and there in the rafters is the Star he made when we were kids to hang outside our house at Christmas. It has blue lights.

4.4. Beach Stone

While walking on York beach in Maine, I suddenly think, “Are you here, dad?” I reach down and pick up a smooth black stone, which exactly fits in my thumb and hand like a handholding.

4.5. Lilies

Once, after mom dies and she’s buried in the same plot just above him vertically, we plant a yellow lily, a true lily, not daylily. Next time I go it has so many blossoms I couldn’t believe it. I decided to count them: forty one. When I told a friend, she said, “Does that number have any significance?” Significance? Oh my Goodness. 1941 . . . the year mom and dad were married.

4.6. Song

Another time after mom died, on leaving the cemetery, I get into the car, turn on the ignition and hear Nat King Cole singing . . .

They try to tell us we’re too young,
Too young to really be in love.
They say that love’s a word,

A word we've only heard
 And can't begin to know the meaning of.
 And yet we're not too young to know,
 That love may last though years may go.
 And then some day they may recall,
 We were not too young at all.

This is one of dad's favorites, which he sang all the time! I was not tuned to a music station, but NPR. They were doing some series about great American singers.

4.7. *Boy*

Once, after Leo Isaac Mudd is born to my son Peter and his mother, Lisa Hickey, my daughter Anna and I go to the cemetery. We're standing there and I'm thinking in my head, "How I wish I knew if you know about Peter's new family." Then Anna says... "Mom, Look!" She's pointing to a stone diagonal to mom and dad's stone on which is written...Leo. And directly behind it is another stone that says...Hickey.

4.8. *Skywriting*

This summer it was the 15th anniversary of dad's passing over. I was outside in the hammock when a paper fell out of the book I had taken with me. It was the lyrics, which I had copied a long time ago to the song dad sang over and over in the weeks before he died,

Let the Rest of the World Go By
 With someone like you, a pal good and true
 I'd like to leave it all behind and go and find
 A place that's known to God alone, just a spot we could call our own
 We'll find perfect peace where joys never cease
 Somewhere beneath the starry skies
 We'll build a sweet little nest somewhere out in the west
 And let the rest of the world go by.

I was amazed. I said, "Okay, is there anything else you want to tell us?" I looked up and see a giant, sky sized X (a kiss!) in the sky made by two planes crossing.

5. **Surrender**

Some might say that what I sometimes believe, and what my sister always believes, is an over symbolization of the environment. But I think that the cosmos is so huge and unknowable that it's too easy to claim we know what is much more immense than our planet, so hugely beyond our understanding that it's irrational to believe in only what is before our senses. Our senses are feeble instruments before the universe. I surrender that work to the dead.

Figure 6. Drawing, eagle.



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