“Absent Aunt-ing: Connections to/with Grief, Loss, & Forgiveness from a Dying Aunt”

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Abstract

Ten years ago the author lost her only aunt to cancer at the age of forty-eight. Although she felt remorse for the loss of her aunt, their aunt-niece relationship had never developed because of family hostilities and a sibling feud. For many years the author’s aunt remained absent in their familial relationship until the day of her death. In this poetic memoir the author reflects on her grief, loss, and forgiveness from her absent aunt-ing relationship. She draws on Ellingson & Sotirin’s (2010) book *Aunting: Cultural Practices that Sustain Family and Community Life* in an effort to understand the aunting gap created by family rifts and to remember an absent aunt still present in her childhood memory.

Keywords: Aunting, death, absence, loss, family kinscript
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This is a story about blood relations, not about what it means to be an “aunt.” I have many “aunts” though my mother was an only child and my father only had a half-sister, my only biological aunt. This is a poem, a story about my absent aunt. It is a short story indeed. It primarily existed in my child’s mind since my encounters with her happened at a young age. In many ways she became my imagined aunt. It was a relationship I longed for, a relationship that almost began but ended too soon. How do you write about a relationship that never truly existed? How do you create a bond that’s inherent, taken-for-granted, and assumed? A relationship that’s supposedly stronger and deeper than time and space? Yet the reality of it is some relationships never develop and we are left...literally, wondering, fantasizing, and dreaming about a bond that only exists in our imagination. My relationship with my aunt was, in the words of Ellingson and Sotirin (2010) “remorseful noninvolvement.” The authors state in their book, “some aunts, nieces and nephews expressed remorse over their lack of relational involvement” (p. 71). The authors further state that family kinscripts and family hostilities can deepen the aunting gap and that “time, courage, and family scripts that emphasize the importance of family membership and kin connections” (p. 73) are needed to overcome hostilities. But what if time, courage, and family involvement are not available? What if time was not given and family rivalries only ended when someone died? So we, the lost nieces of absent aunts are left trying to “bridge the gaps left by family rifts” (p. 76), to sew wounds never intended to heal and create bonds in the absence of another. Telling lost aunt-ing stories makes our gendered encounters come alive with the women who have shaped our lives, even in their absence. By sharing my intimate memories I seek to legitimize our taken-for-granted moments as more than inherent familial relations. Rather, in
these encounters we learn about the connections we have with these “older” women (either in age or life experience) and the formation of aunt-ing bonds strengthened and severed by our communicative acts. In this story I am left trying to understand our relationship in my aunt’s absence and forgive both her and myself for lost time never to be found. This is my absent aunt-ing story. My eulogy and tribute 10 years later.
Blonde hair
Blue eyes
Me
And not me
Gone
Absent
Far away but always near
Always in my heart

I saw inside myself
Saw inside her
We, the family, all saw inside ourselves that day
The day we stood around her hospital bed
The last day I saw her after so many years

I watched her eyes fall and last breath taken, my last breath for my only aunt

We were related
Connected by blood
Joined by heredity
Yet so distant
So far apart

She was beautiful
Tan, smooth skin
Short in height and tall in spunk
Lively and vivacious
Related yet disconnected

We met for the first time in Florida
I was ten
She was cool
My hip aunt
Half sister to my dad
Estranged by time
Separated by distance
Lost in “relative” space

I wanted to know her
To be her
To spend time with her
To go on outings together
To be with me in my impressionable youth
I saw myself being her one day
I saw myself as my aunt
But we left Florida
Ten short days later
Back to Wisconsin
I waved goodbye
I said “hello” to a reconnected bond
A re-imagined relationship
A new niece with a new role
I smiled behind blonde hair
My lost aunt was found

Death brought us back together
Her father’s funeral
My grandfather’s passing
She moved to Wisconsin to be closer to her family
She was closer to me...in distance
Our proxemics narrowed

She stopped by for Thanksgiving
Her cigarette smoke lingering with each hug
Her sultry voice whispering words of affection
Her blonde hair waving with each petite step
I became near-er to my favorite aunt
But distance and blood are not finite...they cannot mend all wounds

Holidays united us
My father’s temper divided us
Her nephew called
Her nieces pleaded
There was no answer
There was no response
There was no aunt-ing

Years passed
It was a phone call
You know the one
The call that leaves you breathless
The panic that intensifies
The sadness that lingers

A decade had passed
I did not recognize her
I would not recognize her if she passed, by me now

That day in the hospital, the last time I saw her
I gazed longingly into similar blue eyes
But I did not see blonde hair
I did not touch smooth skin
I did not hear a sultry voice
I did not feel any bond

Bound by time and space
Bound by blood shed
Bound by space with no more time

Watching oxygen machines
Watching heart monitors
Watching her, not recognizing myself

Staring at mysteries that rise and fall
The rise and fall of her chest
Her labored breath
My fallen tears
Her pale hands

I looked at her watching myself 24 years from now
She could be me
I could be her
But I wasn’t
And yet I wanted to be her
Be more like her...more present in our absence

Moments etched in time
We all experienced a new death fascination
The first family member to die so young
Forty-eight
Attempting to start over
We all attempted to begin again
While watching it all come to an end

Wanting to connect with those around me, with loved ones, with the unknown
Wanting to know her, to understand her, to understand why she stopped returning our calls
Knowing it was a sibling feud
Knowing she was uncomfortable around my father
Knowing money and tempers separated our bond

We would have to wait to reconnect
Connect sometime later, perhaps in another lifetime
Another time after lifetimes of waiting
Waiting to hug her thin frame
Waiting to feel her smooth skin
Waiting to see myself in her eyes
But we will meet again
I watched her eyes fall and last breath taken, my last breath for my only aunt

Feelings of failure
Despair
False hope
Forgiveness

A dream
A longing
A desire for a connection that never formed
Time passed, she passed
Our aunt-ing time was gone

How do you love another in their absence?
How do you form a bond that never truly began?
How do you connect when others divide you?
How can you have an aunt who isn’t there?
An absent aunt

How do you forgive when time is lost?
When the estrangement is from generation’s past?
When kinship is not enough to heal all wounds?
Love is felt even in loss
Even in another’s absence

She had blonde hair
Blue eyes
Tan, smooth skin
Short in height and tall in spunk
Lively and vivacious
Related yet disconnected

Me
And not me
Gone
Absent
Far away but always near
Always in my heart
References