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“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

## Absent Aunt-ing:

## Connections to/with Grief, Loss, &amp; Forgiveness from a Dying Aunt

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

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