



Looking west towards Mandeville Canyon/
Pacific Palisades from the ridge of
Crestwood Hills Park, in the Santa Monica
Mountains of Los Angeles, on Jan. 7, 2025.
PHOTO: Elaine Didyk

Listening From the Other Side of Grief

by SHANNON MCGAW /// EAC Volunteer

We hang in the balance, as my best friend waits for news of her home on a ridge of the Santa Monica mountains, the traditional land of the Chumash and Tongva, in Los Angeles. I notice she has taken to lovingly calling it her ‘tree house’ during this emergency; this Palisades fire that still threatens as I write. We wait as her ‘tree house’ and the woodlands around it huddle at the mercy of the wind’s whim, and I am reminded of another vigil I shared with her over a decade ago, when her mom was dying of brain cancer. Now, the glint of hope remains; back then, the gloom of inevitability loomed. Both times, grief: love, and so grief.

“Seeing the end of something precious to you gives you the chance of loving it well,” writes Stephen Jenkinson. “Loving and grieving are joined at the hip, for all the beauty, soul, and travail that brings. Grief is a way of loving what has slipped from view. Love is a way of grieving that which has not yet done so.”¹

The psychiatrist Dr. Daniel Amen reminds us “grief activates the suffering pathways in your brain, keeping you in a cycle of sadness. Recognize the loss, but remind yourself that healing begins with action” (@doc_amen on Instagram, Jan. 12, 2025). That bedside vigil with my friend and her mom inspired me; in the years afterwards, I took courses and training to volunteer in hospice,

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TAKE ACTION

Listen to your heart, to the nature around you and to your local Indigenous wisdom keepers. Consider listening to botanist/chemist Diana Beresford-Kroeger, who would have each of us plant an indigenous tree where we live and relearn the skill of listening to trees: callofftheforest.ca/how-to and dianaberesford-kroeger.com.

which is “a special kind of care that focuses on a person’s quality of life and dignity as they near the end of their life.”² Today, as the fires burn, I feel I’m of little help to my friend from afar; but then I remember the deep listening of hospice, so I lean further in, lending not only an ear but the fullness of my attention.

People often think of hospice as a place; this is sometimes the case, but to me it’s a quality of attention, deep listening and presence that we can bring anywhere. As a patient shifts from an urgent or chronic crisis to the world of palliative care and hospice, the ferocity of diagnosis, results and quantity defers to a softer focus, encompassing whole-person care and quality of life. Care teams still attend to whatever the patient needs and wants for comfort, but

somehow in hospice there descends upon us a quiet knowing: we are attending to a hero's journey as they approach the horizon. It is a time of grief, but the traveller's agency shines like the sun, and each breath feels like an honour.

Loss in the urgency of the California fires feels like a far cry from hospice; the gentle comfort of hospice seems like a luxury in comparison. As this firefighting ferocity battles on, first responders lead the charge with muscle memory leaping into action. Neighbours and communities follow, rising like an army of organizers, donators and service and space providers, attending to chronic needs that build with each loss. Others, from near and far, radiate help in the form of words to console, connect or inspire. All these shades of courage push past the pain to serve a common cause. In the shadow of this horror and destruction, the goodness of human nature shines. This is the silver lining of loss; this is love in action.

In nature, we can see with patience that death is not an end, but a transformation; the materials that once constituted a living body are reconstituted in new forms, over time. In these fires, non-native and highly flammable trees like eucalyptus and palms contribute to the spread of fire, while many native, fire-resistant trees like the coast live oak are more resilient.³ If damaged, these oaks are able to resprout from their base.⁴ In the eyes of grief, thousands of trees are slipping from view, but beneath the soil, life scurries on. Roots, mycelium, bacteria and critters: the web of life continues hatching its plans. Fires can be urgent, pollution causing and climate changing, but nature is a beautiful genius. Still, we grieve; we so love this thing that is changing.

Together, in grief, we keenly feel our interconnectivity with the world, and our kinship with one another. We are in sympathy: "sym" from the Greek, meaning together, and "pathos," meaning feeling or emotion. Grief runs through us all; a sympathetic vibration not only through the human body but the very fabric of nature, mirroring its cycles of death, decay and rebirth. As I finish writing, on the anniversary of her mother's death, my friend and her family are given clearance to return to their 'tree house.' A fortunate outcome, this time: the Santa Ana winds have turned northward, instead of pushing east towards her door. The destruction of adjacent neighbourhoods remains, and fires continue elsewhere; but so too do the many acts of courage and ingenuity.

As our ecological crisis continues, we can set our intention to remain present and accounted for; doing what we can, from wherever we are. If we listen deeply, we'll hear the web of life that sustains us, calling us to face loss courageously from the other side of grief. We'll find ourselves showing up in ways we never knew possible. Forever entangled with the world around us, we are a living part of its transformation; by drawing action from our grief, we can play our part in making this transformation beautiful.

"To honor our grief, to grant it space and time in our frantic world, is to fulfill a covenant with soul—to welcome all that is, thereby granting room for our most authentic life." - *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: The Sacred Work of Grief* by Francis Weller (North Atlantic Books, 2015).



"Seeds," artwork by Anita Matusevics

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