



Sometimes people leave you
Halfway through the wood
Do not let it grieve you
No one leaves for good

Dear colleagues,

Another year of tremendous loss draws to its close.

Donna Bassin offered us an exquisite elucidation and meditation on “The Art of Mourning” in her October Symposium presentation, within the panel entitled “Relational Perspectives on the Capacity to Grieve and Mourn in Times of Intense Frustration, Terror, and Destructiveness.” As any of you who had the privilege of attending her talk no doubt recall, Donna shared a photograph of a museum piece, “By Our Own Hand,” recalling both Tibetan prayer flags and the September 11th “missing people” posters from the days and weeks following the fall of the Twin Towers.

Donna shared that, following the great intensity of her volunteer work at Ground Zero supporting grieving September 11 families twenty years ago, she herself sought support. Looking for fellowship among those who knew great loss intimately, she spent time with American war veterans, in an effort to find or create “new models of community mourning after collective catastrophic loss.” She and a group of veterans with whom she had been working collaborated on a piece that offers just this, a public space for mourning in the presence of a community of empathic witnesses.

Donna explained:

“By Our Own Hand,” an installation created in collaboration with the veterans' organization of Frontline Arts, was inspired by the ancient practice of Tibetan prayer flags hung to mark a significant occasion. It was conceived to be a reflective memorial space – a refuge by which to contemplate the price of war and call our attention to military service people who have died by their own hand (a number that consistently remains at a rate more than twice that of the rest of the population.) The installation consists of handmade paper by veterans in the presence of others in the veterans' community. While seemingly a blank surface, the paper is made from military uniforms and symbolically holds their war experience, as the uniforms contained the blood, tears, and dirt of war. The colors of these flags reflect the various uniforms of each of the branches of the military.

Their process of making handmade paper from military uniforms embodies their mourning after traumatic loss: finding, reclaiming, re-assembling, and enlivening fragments into art in the presence of a community of empathic witnesses. The artist finds something new, vital, and fresh through the re-organization of the old. Hanna Siegel (1952) wrote: “It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we in helpless despair -- it is then that we must re-create our world anew, re-assemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments.”

With Donna’s permission, here is a photograph of the installation, currently on view at the Montclair Art Museum (Montclair, New Jersey) until September 2023.



Photo by Steve Hellerstein

Along with a number of other symposium reflections, Donna’s elaboration of aesthetic responses to death and suffering helped to hold space for us, giving us an opportunity to reckon with and grieve the enormous losses we have witnessed and suffered as a result of Covid-19, as well as all the other political and personal losses – of life, safety, stability, illusions (Layton, 2018) – that have mounted so intensely in recent time.

Here I hope you’ll indulge me a personal note: I lost an old and good friend over the summer, a man of immense talent with a nearly unparalleled appreciation for life, its beauties and absurdities, whose gifts for cherishment were an inspiration to many. Gone too soon at age 54 from cancer, Peter was a composer and lyricist who would otherwise have lived to see the premiere of his latest musical, some 14 years in the making, were it not for the year’s delay caused by Covid. A week from now I’ll return to the theatre – my first such visit since the onset of the pandemic, and, as fate would have it, in Montclair, New Jersey – to be in community as an audience member for Peter’s last show.

Peter had the good fortune to be mentored across nearly 40 years by composer and lyricist nonpareil Stephen Sondheim, a relationship borne of a teenager’s fan letter. As any of you with even a passing interest in Broadway musicals surely know, the master himself passed away at the end of November, less than 4 months after my friend’s passing, and less than 24 hours after enjoying Thanksgiving dinner among friends. I think of Sondheim as my own guide not just to the art and beauty of musical theater at its best and deepest, but also as an early and lasting guide to what it is to be human – joy, delight, beauty, pain, cleverness, brittleness, sureness, doubt, ecstasy, agony, ambivalence, love. He was also a fervent adherent of ongoing, unwavering commitment to work and craft, to the joys, frustrations and satisfactions of finding, creating, discovering something new: “Anything you do/Let it come from you/Then it will be new.” Winnicott never said it better.

A lot of great analysts are with me in my clinical work, a number of you readers among them, but there is no one I quote more often to patients – certainly to NY actor and singer patients, but by no means only to them – than that inexhaustible font of wisdom regarding the human condition, Stephen Sondheim, analyst of the psyche *par excellence* – himself a well-known analyst of many years’ standing. In fact, I recall my friend Peter once telling me appreciatively, “Steve never speaks of his ‘therapy’; it’s always his ‘analysis.’” Sondheim gave us so much beauty and helped us with our pain. His lyrics, so often limning love and death and love in the shadow of death,

offer great consolations during times of grief. As he wrote in *Into the Woods*, “Sometimes people leave you/Halfway through the wood/Do not let it grieve you/No one leaves for good/ ... No one is alone.”

In this year-end issue of [The IARPP Bulletin](#), a Letter from the President; reports from a dozen IARPP chapters from around the globe; updates from a number of IARPP’s committees, including an inaugural report from the newly-formed Membership Outreach Committee; and a special section collating a range of reflections on the recent symposium.

I wish you all the joys, and hopefully at least some of the rest, of the holiday season.