

# Grief and the New WPA

Laura J. Davies

## ABSTRACT

*A new writing program administrator replacing an outgoing WPA can set off a series of emotional and practical reverberations that can be difficult for the new WPA to understand. This essay discusses such a transition through the lens of grief theory, specifically the concepts of disenfranchised grief, secondary loss, mourning tasks, and the recursive nature of the grieving process. These concepts illuminate how the people in a writing program—its teachers, administrators, and staff—react when a WPA leaves a position or retires. This essay argues that WPAs need to acknowledge grief in the workplace, and it offers WPAs practical strategies for helping the people in their programs mourn productively and cope with loss.*

Two years ago, with angst and department politics bubbling over, I sat down in my colleague's office. David was my department-assigned faculty mentor, and he took that role seriously. He handed me a cup of coffee, looked me dead-on, and said, "It's not you. They're mourning the loss of Nancy."<sup>1</sup>

As I reflect on my first two years as the junior, untenured WPA, I keep coming back to David's diagnosis that afternoon, a version of the classic "It's not you—it's me" breakup story. For much of that time, I was focused on what I could do or should do, who I was to the teachers in my program, how I needed to do everything just right. David's comment reminded me that I am only part of the story. For the full-time and part-time lecturers in my writing program, that first year wasn't Laura's inaugural year. It was the first year without Nancy.

Grief is complicated. When we experience loss—be it the loss of a beloved family member, a friend, a colleague, a pet, a home, and so on—our grief often ripples out, pops up in unexpected spaces, and stays present and sore long after others deem it necessary. The more I think about it, the

more I'm beginning to understand my first two years as the new WPA as an exercise in managing the grief of the teachers in my first-year writing program.

When I reflect on it that way, my first two years remind me of my mother-in-law's kitchen. My mother-in-law was a wonderful woman who taught preschool, played the piano beautifully, made casseroles with Velveeta cheese, bought too many Christmas presents, and loved her six children more than anything. Ten years ago, she was diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer at the age of 57. Soon after we heard the news, my husband and I decided to move back from New Hampshire and buy his childhood home, to be there to help as much as we could.

My mother-in-law lived eleven more months. I remember first tiptoeing around her in the kitchen, making scrambled eggs for my year-old son. The kitchen was her space. Before and immediately after her diagnosis, I remember her making batches of oatmeal muffins, trays of stuffed peppers, and vats of chili. As the cancer accelerated, she was in the kitchen less and less, until finally, she lay dying in her upstairs bedroom. Her sisters and children came, stayed, and went. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen, cooking with my mother-in-law's pots and pans.

My husband and I lived in that house for six more years. For a long time, my own dishes, knives and forks, and skillets and cookie sheets stayed packed in cardboard boxes in the attic. I was the new woman of the house, yet the kitchen was not really mine. I knew that for my husband's brother and sisters, the loss of their mother stung raw for a long time and in ways I couldn't understand. I respected that, and I tried not to rock the boat. I pulled out my mother-in-law's recipe cards and cooked Christmas dinner for his family, the first Christmas without their mom. I scored on the pot roast but botched the cinnamon rolls.

As time went on, I started to transform my mother-in-law's kitchen into my kitchen. Every now and then, I'd open one of boxes in the attic and rediscover something, like a corkscrew apple peeler I received at my bridal shower, and add it to a kitchen drawer. I embarked on little re-organization projects, moving the coffee mugs from this shelf to that one. After a few years, I packed up her stack of plates and replaced them with my own. Without my mother-in-law there to ask, I didn't know what things in the kitchen were really special or what was just junk stashed away in the cabinet above the refrigerator. Some of the spices were so old and stale, yet at first, I didn't feel like I could trash them. Perhaps I was too concerned about my sisters- and brother-in-law's feelings—they aren't really the type of people who are going to notice (or care) that their mother's oregano is in the garbage can. Still, I felt as if I was walking a fine line. I was trying to

balance their mourning with my desire to respect the space and memory of a woman I admired as well as my need to feel established and to move forward with my and my own family's life. I wanted to do right by them, by her, by us, and by me. At times, doing all of that was impossible.

Sometimes at work, I have felt as if I am walking that same fine line but in Nancy's kitchen. Nancy was hired as the WPA in the mid-1980s, an administrative role she remained in for nearly 30 years. She successfully argued for full-time, non-tenure-track lecturer lines for the writing program's teachers, established a two-semester first-year writing sequence, founded a writing across the curriculum program, started a college-wide writing contest that features student writing from across the disciplines, and did a myriad of other things to encourage cross-disciplinary conversation about writing, improve the labor conditions for non-tenure-track faculty, and increase the rigor of writing instruction on campus. I know why the full-time, non-tenure-track lecturers in my writing program were grieving. I never knew her as a colleague, as she retired the semester before I came to the college and began my position. I am grateful for what she left me on this campus: a writing program that had significant administrative support, that was vertically integrated in the college's core curriculum, and that relied minimally on part-time contingent labor.

I know I can't be the new Nancy nor do I want that. There are some practices she put into place I want to do differently, and there are components of the first-year writing program and writing across the curriculum program that I want to revise. These past two years, I have struggled to honor the program's past, which bears Nancy's mark, while making way for the program's future through changes in curriculum, assessment, and professional development. Part of the skepticism I have faced from my program's teachers is because I am not just the new kid on the block—I am also a young, female, untenured jWPA without the institutional capital of her predecessor. I am the interloper in Nancy's kitchen. I am sometimes frustrated because I know I am being compared to Nancy in terms of what she did and of what she might have done in the administrative situations I have faced in the past two years. What I know from my research on grief is that when a person is no longer present—either through death, retirement, or a change in position—others ascribe their desires onto that person to validate those desires: “Nancy would have *never* [insert controversial departmental decision here,]” or “Nancy would definitely have [insert action here].” C. S. Lewis noted that grief and nostalgia distort how we remember the people we've lost, “with [their] supposed likings becoming a thinner and thinner disguise for [our] own” (9). A person's absence allows us to invent views of what she would do, how he would react, or what she would say if he or she

were here now, even if that view is an inaccurate, idealistic, and at times convenient to our own desires.

Much of the literature about new, transitioning, or junior WPAs focuses on what the new WPA can do or should do (Dew and Horning; Enos and Borrowman; Fulford; Micciche). What I've seen first-hand, though, is that the dynamics of writing program administration are only partly about you. When a person leaves a writing program, especially a person who has an influential and highly visible position, an undercurrent of grief pervades the program and can surface in unexpected ways. This is true even if the person was not beloved or a long-standing fixture in the writing program like Nancy was. Ideas, insights, initiatives, procedures, possibilities—all are lost, and this change and loss is deeply felt. Instead of dismissing or ignoring this grief, we should ask ourselves, “How might new WPAs use grief theory to acknowledge the uncertainty that accompanies change and to help the people in their programs anticipate and mourn workplace loss?”

To some, grief may seem a heavy-handed term to describe what happens when a WPA leaves a program, especially if they are still alive. But grief is not just about death. People grieve as they experience concrete and abstract losses, including those that occur during life and work transitions. As program leaders, WPAs can benefit from knowing about grief theory so that they can acknowledge workplace loss during transitions, understand more fully the affective responses that happen during transitions, and help the people in their programs mourn loss before, during, and after transitions.

After my moment of enlightenment in David's office, I began to research theories of grief and mourning. I immediately noticed the similarities between the grieving process and the writing process: both are complex, contingent, and often misunderstood. For example, one of the most commonly cited grief theories is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She developed this theory through her research on how terminally ill patients talked about their own dying, research that she presents in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Families*. Although Kübler-Ross's theory was not presented as a one-size-fits-all grieving process, the five stages of grief model has been applied to situations vastly beyond the scope of her study on terminally ill. Examples of these include dying outside of a hospital setting, the grief of children, the trauma of sudden and violent deaths, and the emotional responses of the family and friends who lose a loved one. The popular take-up of Kübler-Ross's theory has promoted a progress narrative about grief in American culture, in which the goal of mourning and grief is that a person ultimately accepts the loss, moves on, and is whole again. In reality, there is no such

thing as a rigid grief timeline with discrete beginnings, stages, and endings. Like writing, grief is ongoing and recursive.

Grief is also rhetorical. Grief does not obey positivist rules and cannot be theorized objectively because loss does not occur in a vacuum: the ways a person mourns are influenced by the larger context of the loss. Just as rhetorical action is intrinsically connected to the situation, a person's grief is also shaped by the situation (Bitzer 6). In his book, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, William Worden argues that the grieving process is affected by several "mediators of mourning," including who the person was that died, the mourner's relationship with that person, how the person died, and the other losses the mourner experienced in the past (57). Worden, along with other psychologists who have studied grief, critiques the passive role the griever plays in Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief model. Instead of treating the griever as a person who is subjected to certain feelings, Worden's theory of grief, often called the four tasks of mourning, acknowledges the griever's agency by naming tasks that a person chooses to do as they go through the mourning process: accepting the loss, working through the pain of grief, adjusting to life without the person, and finding a way to stay connected to the person while still embracing the present. Worden's word choice here is important. *Grief* is a person's instinctive feelings of sorrow that accompany loss; *mourning* is the deliberate expression of that sorrow. All the tasks attend to action or what a person can do to mourn in response to grief.

The theory of disenfranchised grief resonated with me as I thought about the circumstances of the change at my institutions. In contemporary American society, it's acceptable to grieve a parent, a child, a sibling, or a close friend. Those are recognized as significant losses. Other losses, such as a miscarriage, the death of a pet, a parent's diagnosis of dementia, or the loss of a home, are seen as less important and less grievable. People who grieve these seemingly insignificant things are often told to "get over it" or "move on." Psychologist Kenneth J. Doka calls this "disenfranchised grief," when people are deprived of the "need, right, role, or capacity to grieve" (3). Because there is no sanctioned forum for people to share and express their grief, their feelings of anger, sadness, and abandonment are dismissed and suppressed.

I am now able to see how disenfranchised grief has affected the lecturers in my writing program. To other full-time, tenure-track faculty at the college, Nancy was a well-liked and well-respected colleague who did the necessary administrative tasks to keep the college's writing program running, and now I fill that box on the organizational chart. To most of the full-time, non-tenure-track lecturers in the writing program, though, Nancy

was more than an administrative figure: she was a confidant, a mentor, an advocate. Nancy's WPA work and her presence opened up an opportunity for the non-tenure-track lecturers to forge a professional identity. Losing her as their WPA created a host of largely unacknowledged secondary losses and changes for them: the loss of their identity; the loss of a familiar support network; changes in the systems and procedures that shape their work life; and differences in their perception of how they belong to the writing program and the larger English department. Each of those secondary losses is a loss that needed to be mourned, and that contributed to the many, often conflicted emotions the lecturers experienced (and still experience) in the grieving process, including feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and fear.

The academic calendar and our academic workplaces compounded and contributed to the disenfranchised grief. There was a retirement reception for Nancy at the end of her last semester, and kind words were spoken, and a cake was presented. In the early summer, Nancy moved her books and boxes out of her office, and I moved in a month later. By the time the next academic year began in August, my name was on the door and the website. The college had moved on and replaced Nancy with me—her presence all but erased. Although the college and I were looking forward to the future—new students, new classes, and a new academic year—many of the non-tenure-track lecturers reacted negatively to the transition. The structure of the college's teaching schedule as well as the established rhythms and practices of the college's writing program also contributed to the persistence of the lecturers' disenfranchised grief and unrecognized secondary losses. The college has no dedicated common hour for faculty meetings during the week, and the writing program traditionally held just one program-wide meeting at the end of the semester. Without a public, legitimized institutional space for the program to come together and talk on a more frequent basis, the lecturers' grief was not recognized or even openly addressed.

I realize now, perhaps too late, that part of a new WPA's job is to acknowledge the grief that accompanies transition and to find ways to help the people in her program mourn the constellation of losses they might have experienced. Ideally, the outgoing WPA, the other faculty in the program or department, and other administrators at the institution would prepare for the transition in advance. Part of that transition preparation should be anticipating workplace loss and finding ways to support the mourning process that accompanies that loss. However, a WPA transition is not always planned or anticipated. In those situations, and especially when the incoming WPA is new to the institution, new WPAs should reach out to other administrators and department or program colleagues. Colleagues from within and outside the writing program can help a new WPA under-

stand how a program's history and institutional context might affect the ways people may react to and mourn the loss of a leader.

How might WPAs openly address the disenfranchised grief that accompanies changes in leadership and help the people within their programs mourn? To answer this question, I draw heavily from psychologist Therese A. Rando's theoretical framework of the mourning process and the practical strategies for mourning explained by Beth L. Hewett. Rando's theory, called the Six R Processes of Mourning, argues that the end-goal in the mourning process is not to eliminate grief. Rather, the purpose of mourning is to discover ways to join the past and the present and to live with the loss (63). This end goal requires going through a series of interrelated processes. Rando's processes are similar to Worden's and include confronting the loss, remembering the person who is now gone, adjusting to life without that person, and reinvesting in new people and relationships. Like Worden, both Rando and Hewett emphasize the action of mourning instead of the feeling of grief. This focus on mourning is intentional. Hewett explains that mourning "is an externalized response to the grief that we can choose to engage or forgo," and she advocates using practical, deliberate mourning activities in order to address the pain of grief and loss (*More Good Words: Practical Activities for Mourning*). WPAs cannot get rid of the grief people in their program may feel, but they can help people in their program intentionally mourn by acting as "companions," as described by Alan Wolfelt (17). It is not a WPA's job to serve as a counselor or to tell the people in his program what they should feel or do. Rather, it is our job to listen, to be present, and to set up an environment that removes the stigma of grieving workplace and secondary losses.

The activities below, drawn from Rando's and Hewett's work, can help WPAs plan for the grief that may happen during transitions in program leadership. These activities can support the mourning process as well as serve as opportunities for the writing program to publicly reflect on its identity, history, and future.

*Announce the transition as early as possible.*

We don't always know when a colleague will leave or when a transition is imminent. If possible, announcing a retirement, resignation, or change in position early can help the people prepare for the transition. Grief can be even more difficult to deal with when the loss is sudden and unexpected. An important first step for the mourning process is acknowledging the loss, and this can begin before a person leaves. If you are a WPA who is planning on leaving, letting people know ahead of time gives them the opportunity

to talk about the many ways the transition may affect them, to express their thanks, and to say goodbye.

*Archive and share past administrative documents.*

Nancy left me a binder and a zip drive filled with important administrative files: agendas and minutes of program meetings, proposals, curricular documents, assessment plans, syllabi, and assignments. I am grateful for her generosity in compiling this binder and these files, and I continually refer to them for insight into how my writing program was constructed and how it evolved over time. As Shirley K Rose and Irwin Weiser argued, WPAs need to see archiving their program's records as an integral part of their administrative work. Not only is archiving helpful for the new WPA, it can also be seen as part of the mourning process, as it is a proactive way a WPA and a writing program can keep the program's past alive and relevant. Making plans to curate and manage an archive of administrative documents is a deliberate and practical mourning activity that members of a writing program can contribute towards before, during, and after a transition in leadership. Where appropriate, the WPA might ask people to help with parts (or all) of this project, in order to provide a sense of closure.

*Recognize that the transition is different for everyone involved.*

The new WPA should remember that every person in her program had a different relationship with the former WPA, and this relationship influences each person's professional identity and sense of well-being. Some people may have worked with the former WPA for decades; others may have only known her for a few semesters. Change creates upheaval and fissures, and the transition will shuffle established routines and relationships within the program, perhaps opening up leadership opportunities for newer members of the program and displacing others. The new WPA should recognize the secondary losses that emerge from this change and know that the resulting adjustment after the transition will impact how people in the program relate to one another.

*Find ways to remember and honor the past.*

Outside of my chair's office, there are two engraved academic award plaques, one for Van Byrd and one for Robert Rhodes—both of whom taught at our institution for decades and were influential fixtures in the life of the department. Every April, our department gives these two awards to two of our current students. What I like so much is that above both award plaques hangs a faded snapshot of Robert and Van, smiling together at a

department holiday party. Both men passed away this year, yet I remember them almost every day when I see this picture and read their names on these plaques.

Grief is compounded by fear, and as Hewett explains, one aspect of this fear arises from the worry that we will forget the person who is lost (37). If we forget about this person, we may lose a part of our identity that was shaped by our relationship with them. One way a writing program can deliberately and publicly remember a person who is gone is by naming things after them, such as awards, classroom or meeting spaces, or a program's professional library. To name something is to perform a powerful rhetorical act. Naming brings the person's name back into the life of the writing program, and it argues that the work this person did for the program is still valuable, even as the program changes in the future. It is important, though, to think carefully before choosing to memorialize a person in this particular way, as it could set up a precedent that may be difficult to follow in the future.

*Welcome the new WPA publicly and early.*

Many writing programs have an established calendar of events that include program-wide workshops, kick-off meetings, or an in-house teaching conference. Often, these events function as rituals that define a program's identity. If there is an event that is traditionally held at the beginning of the academic year, when a new WPA typically begins in their role, it may make sense to deliberately use that event to welcome the new WPA to the writing program. Rando explains that two important mourning tasks are acknowledging what has been lost and deciding to be open to reinvesting in new relationships. By organizing a public welcome for the new WPA, the people in a writing program can be supported as they work through these mourning processes. Hosting the welcome early, ideally before the semester begins, circumvents the rushed, awkward hallway introductions that may otherwise happen in the flurry of the first few weeks. The new WPA doesn't need to give a speech or lay out a plan for curricular change—in fact, it's best that the new WPA do neither. Rather, the point of the meeting is to set up a public, institutionally-sanctioned environment in which the people in the program can work together to welcome a new leader, and the new WPA has the opportunity to learn names and get to know the people in her program. A welcome party is often a good way to do this.

*Spend the first year (or two) listening and learning.*

This suggestion is nothing new—a number of WPAs and academics have written about the strength that comes with slowness, stillness, and space (Fulford; Micciche; Berg and Seeber). Instead of succumbing to the whirling hamster wheel that seems to define our corporatized institutions, new WPAs can deliberately decide to “defer action” (Micciche 87). In doing so, WPAs can make room for the mourning that needs to happen before many of the people in the writing program can productively work together towards the program’s future. This listening is purposeful, not passive inaction. Listening allows a new WPA to discover assumptions and insights about the program’s students, the program’s history, and the institution. I learned a great deal when I invited teachers to get a cup of coffee, when I offered to sit in on their classes, when I asked them to walk with me over to the library, or when they stopped by my office to chat.

As we know, it is important to remember that a writing program, like any human organization, is not a time capsule. It lives, grows, and changes; indeed, the only constant is change. Because change is inevitable, loss and its corollary feelings of grief are as well. New WPAs cannot let these feelings of grief paralyze their programs nor palliate the grief by perpetually postponing changes. New WPAs need to make their writing programs their own—they need to move the coffee mugs and put their things in the kitchen. At the same time, new WPAs cannot ignore the legitimate feelings of grief the people in their program feel as they come to terms with the losses and secondary losses that happen during WPA transitions. Although confronting grief is uncomfortable, new WPAs can address it and make room for it by designing and leading practical mourning activities.

As leaders, we are called to take care of the people within our program by attending to both their professional and emotional needs. We have theorized the role of affect, emotion, and empathy in the writing classroom and in our work as teachers (Lindquist; Robillard; Worsham). We also need to consider how the emotions that arise from human relationships—grief, joy, love, shame, worry, hope, and so on—affect our workplaces and our writing programs.

## NOTES

1. Nancy is a pseudonym.

## WORKS CITED

Berg, Maggie, and Barbara K. Seeber. *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. U of Toronto P, 2016.

- Bitzer, Lloyd. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 1, 1968, pp. 1–14.
- Dew, Debra Frank, and Alice Horning, editors. *Untenured Faculty as Writing Program Administrators: Institutional Practices and Politics*. Parlor P, 2007.
- Doka, Kenneth J. *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow*. Lexington Books, 1989.
- Enos, Theresa, and Shane Borrowman, editors. *The Promise and Perils of Writing Program Administration*. Parlor P, 2008.
- Fulford, Collie. "Hit the Ground Listening: An Ethnographic Approach to New WPA Learning." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2011, pp. 159–62.
- Haley, Eleanor D., and Litsa E. Williams. *What's Your Grief*, 2016, www.whatsyourgrief.com.
- Hewett, Beth L. *More Good Words: Practical Activities for Mourning*. WestBow P, 2014.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families*. Macmillan, 1969.
- Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. 1961. Harper Collins Publishers, 2013.
- Lindquist, Julie. "Class Affects, Classroom Affectations: Working through the Paradoxes of Strategic Empathy." *College English*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2004, pp. 187–209.
- Micciche, Laura R. "For Slow Agency." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2011, pp. 73–90.
- Rando, Therese A. "The Six Dimensions of Anticipatory Mourning." *Clinical Dimensions of Anticipatory Mourning: Theory and Practice in Working with the Dying, Their Loved Ones, and Their Caregivers*, edited by Therese A. Rando, Research P, 2000, pp. 51–101.
- Rose, Shirley K, and Irwin Weiser. "The WPA as Researcher and Archivist." *The Writing Program Administrator's Resource*, edited by Stuart C. Brown and Theresa Enos. Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002, pp. 275–90.
- Robillard, Amy E. "We Won't Get Fooled Again: On the Absence of Angry Responses to Plagiarism in Composition Studies." *College English*, vol. 70, no. 1, 2007, pp. 10–31.
- Wolfelt, Alan D. *Companioning the Bereaved: A Soulful Guide for Counselors & Caregivers*. Companion P, 2005.
- Worden, William J. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. 4th ed., Springer Publishing, 2008.
- Worsham, Lynn. "Coming to Terms: Theory, Writing, Politics." *Rhetoric and Composition as Intellectual Work*, edited by Gary Olson, SIUP, 2002, pp. 101–14.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the many people who helped me think through and revise this piece. My sister-in-law, Eleanor Haley, a social worker who co-founded the nationally recognized website *What's Your*

*Grief*, often says “grief makes you crazy.” My conversations with her over the years have helped me understand the complexities of grief. My mentor and friend Rebecca Moore Howard encouraged me to write up this essay, which began as a CWPA conference presentation. My faculty writing group colleagues—Geoff Bender, Tyler Bradway, David Franke, Laura Gathagan, Andrea Harbin, and Matt Lessig—supported me throughout the writing process. The teachers in my writing program have taught me the importance of listening and acknowledging grief. Finally, I would like to thank the *WPA: Writing Program Administration* journal editors and reviewers for their careful reading of this essay and apt revisions suggestions. Special thanks to reviewer Beth L. Hewett, who generously shared her own wealth of knowledge about grief and mourning and, in doing so, helped me strengthen this piece.

*Laura J. Davies is Assistant Professor of English and Director of Campus Writing Programs at SUNY Cortland, a Regional public state university that grants bachelor and masters degrees. She researches writing teacher pedagogy, histories of writing program administration, and student reading and writing practices. Her work has been published in WPA: Writing Program Administration and Composition Studies. Her current project investigates how military tropes such as command complicate our field's representation of the ethic of care in the first-year writing classroom.*