

We shake with joy,  
we shake with grief.  
What a time they have, these two  
housed as they are in the same body.

—Mary Oliver, “Evidence”

## **Of Loss and Light: Teaching in the Time of Grief**

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News of my mother’s death reached me mid-sentence. I was writing my portion of a co-authored chapter on the role of storytelling in the study of politics when I received a Facebook message from a woman I had never met. She urgently asked me to call her aunt, who was my next-door neighbor in my hometown in Greece. “She does not have your new phone number in Scotland, so please call her. Do not delay,” the woman wrote. I knew, in the way one knows right before a feeling transforms into articulation, that my mother had died.

My mother’s friend Maro reached me before I could call the neighbor. She sobbed before she could speak. I felt that saying the words myself was necessary for both of us. “My mother died,” I said to Maro, less a question than a statement. “My friend is gone,” she replied between sobs. Both of us located ourselves in our losses.

When I returned to the chapter to finish my revisions a few weeks later, the cursor was still blinking mid-sentence, and I could hear the echo of Maro’s voice in my head.

Four days after that phone call, I stood in my classroom at the University of St Andrews, in the company of my third-year undergraduate cohort of Feminist Theories in Global Politics. It was the long middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and some of my students were in the room with me, masks on their faces, while others were dialing in from home, faces bare, air full of static. “Take your time,” everyone had advised. “Don’t rush back into things.” Several colleagues on the teaching staff offered to take things off my plate. Yet, I insisted on showing up.

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Students have sometimes asked over the years why I don't send them the tutorial discussion questions in advance so they can prepare better. While I offer guiding questions for the reading each time, I like to allow for the improvisational nature of conversation, for the spontaneity of catching one another's drifts and listening to each other's silences. My own 'plan' for tutorial is visual: a garden of questions that spring non-linearly from each other, each of which I'm happy to abandon in favor of a different direction should my student companions choose to guide us there. On this particular day, the opening question in my notebook was "What am I doing here?"

Answering that question was an invitation to, once again, attempt to locate myself in loss on my own terms. Institutional language sanitizes life and death. On the university website, 'bereavement leave' is a category of 'special leave,' even for those of us who, thanks to closed borders and pandemic restrictions and prohibitions of funerals, did no leaving at all. "My mum died" felt truer to me as an auto-response message than "I am away from email due to bereavement leave," but the truth of it also felt proscribed because it made the subjects of loss visible. What are a feminist teacher's responsibilities towards her own losses?

It felt important to me on this day to claim the terms of my presence in the classroom, to sketch the contours of my grief. "I am not here out of obligation," I began, trying not to touch my face mask. "Nobody has made me come to teach today, and plenty of colleagues have generously offered to be here with you if I could not." I sometimes arrive at learning objectives by pushing against the wall of the kind of lessons I do *not* want to impart. I did not want the students to infer that my presence was a keep-calm-and-carry-on commitment, a sense that we must embrace the "mythical language of resilience" (Shwaikh 2021) through all that hurts.

All semester long, we had been taking up Sara Ahmed's invitation to consider that "theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin" (2017: 10). On this day, and every day for me, teaching IR as if people mattered meant staying close to the skin, telling a first-person story of experience and grief, not because I felt I owed it to students by way of explanation or apology, but because this is how I truly believe we live our pain, politics, and pedagogies.

I spoke to the students about how I had spent the four days since I had initially messaged them through the course website that my mother died and I would be 'on bereavement leave.'

I told them that, with no safe way to get to Greece and no legal way to have a funeral, my partner and I walked through the forest near my house at the time my mother's cremation would have been, pointing at migrating fieldfares arriving from Scandinavia and noticing moss catching the light.

I planted autumn bulbs in the garden, I scrubbed mud off boots. The forest as ritual, the garden as memory—these are incomplete attempts at honoring loss, and I was making my peace with their partiality.

I thanked my students for the kind messages that had landed in my inbox in the intervening days. I resisted the urge to belabor the metaphors, to say “and here is how this moment of pain connects to everything we have been talking about when it comes to feminist conceptions of crisis and care and borders and time.” I trusted in their subtlety.

Most everything I have learned about teaching and research, I have learned through loss—both my own and the witnessing of others’ losses. My reluctant fluency in grief over the years has shaped my research on the politics of victimhood during transitions from violence, and my commitments to caring feminist pedagogies. I believe in the invisible language of loss, the register that bereaved people recognize each other as speaking, even when it is not stated. Though hierarchies inflect it, the shared language of grief is not one of equivalence, nor of entitlement. Having experienced protracted and sudden losses of different kinds in life does not give me automatic permission to investigate the losses of others. Losing a father suddenly is not ‘the same as’ being a victim or survivor of violence; losing a mother to protracted illness after a lengthy period of caregiving does not cloak me in goodness. What loss does, however, is to tune inquiry, to calibrate responses. It can inform the “mmm,” the sound of empathy.

Yet, loss itself is a ghost that haunts the story when job applications, grant committees, journal articles, or other Professional Commitments expect me to narrate my academic expertise. Why am I qualified to undertake this “sensitive research”? Because I have completed trauma-sensitive interviewing training, I say, and attach the certificate. How will you protect the privacy and confidentiality of your interlocutors, the research ethics committee asks? So often, the expected answers are ones of distance and credentialism; I give nothing of myself, except that which is certified to be professional.

In my classroom this year, my students have paved the way for different kinds of answers. They have expanded my imagination for the possibilities and directions of care. They have shared their own losses with me, and held space for mine. They have gasped when I’ve made jokes, two weeks after my mum’s death, still ‘bereaved.’ They have carefully navigated whether they can speak to me about “frivolous things,” caveating that “this is really not a big deal, not compared to what you’re going through.” I’ve offered to them the possibility of holding multiple truths in the same embrace, the superficial and the weighty, the light and the dark.

All semester long, I insisted that feminism is not merely about a series of terrible stories of gendered violence, but also a register of care and vocabulary of joy. What, then, of joy? What is my responsibility—towards self and students—in narrating joy at a time of loss? In living,

teaching, and writing grief, I have resisted becoming a correspondent of gloom. What Wendy Brown calls “the logic of pain” (1993: 390) can subsume a subject, swallow her whole. Joy, too, can be an over-corrective. I did not narrate stories of moss and autumn bulbs in the classroom as a cheery footnote intended to make death more palatable. What I’m aiming for, in teaching IR as if people matter, is co-existence: noticing and narrating the persistence of life and the co-presence of loss, carrying these narratives into the professional stories I tell about living and dying, and allowing for the possibilities of care that emerge along the way.

Each story of a public self contains ellipses. I do not believe that telling a story from experience or teaching in the first-person requires a bearing of all wounds, nor do I think this kind of self-narration is equally available to all within the academy. For this reason, when we read texts, my students and I pay careful attention to how authors reveal and hide themselves, and to the ways these acts of self revelation or occlusion challenge our expectations about what academic voice, authority, and story can sound like.

I have arrived at my own philosophy of teaching with and about grief and joy through silences, chosen and imposed. There is therefore no prescription to this essay; there could never be, just as I could not prescribe grief or joy themselves. I turn to stories for different reasons than I turn to instruction manuals—and as a teacher, I sometimes have to offer both the unsettled circularity of a story and the clarity of a manual or toolkit. “What a time they have, these two, housed as they are in the same body.”

### **Works Cited**

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