

Not even death can cease this thing called love

An autoethnographic account of disenfranchised grief and mourning



“Love empowers us to live fully and die well. Death becomes, then, not an end of life but a part of living”, p. 197.



Hooks (2000)

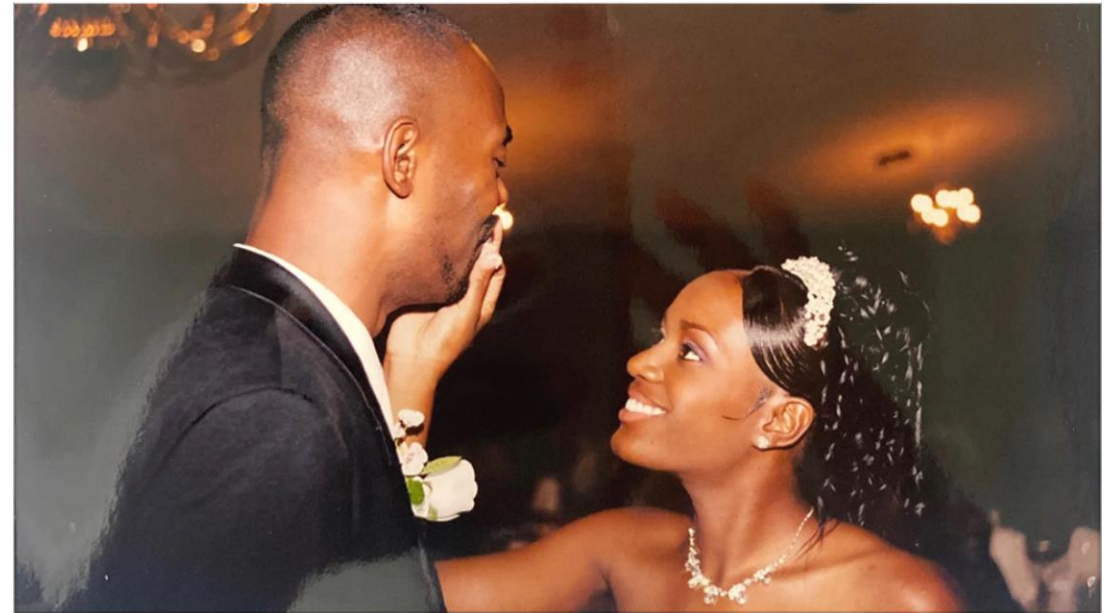
Abstract

This autoethnographic presentation describes the experience of love dismantling the bars of disenfranchised grief through memories of love and loss. Doka (1989) define disenfranchised grief as “grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (p. 84). I draw on Attig's (2001, 2004) concept of grief as constructive work, “grieving is about both experiencing and reacting to loss and actively responding to it. Grieving is about both suffering and resilience, experiencing the devastation and hurt and reaching through them to affirm life” (p. 209). Using writing as a method of inquiry to generate a series of narrative and poetic vignettes from journal entries and memory data about love and loss collected over 5 years. I applied Richardson & St. Pierre's (2005), creative analytical procedures (CAP) and subjectivity to re-present experiences that illustrate disenfranchisement critically and reflexively and use memories to break free. The use of CAP allows writers to “learn about the topics and about themselves that which was unknowable and unimaginable using conventional analytical procedures, metaphors, and writing formats” (p. 963). Simply put, to allow one's grief to matter by laying the foundation of one's sidelining and pain through CAP. In so doing, I ask: 1) how does one become disenfranchised when “we” are no longer “we” or when “we” becomes ‘I’? 2) how is disenfranchised grief experienced in my personal encounters with love and loss? and 3) what does it mean to matter in times of marginalized bereavement?



Grief as productive work (Attig, 2001)

- Journaling as a revolt against attempts to silence and erase significance, thus illuminating grief through **writing over one hundred thirty journal entries.**
- Analyzing journal entries using theories
 - **Mattering**
 - **Disenfranchised Grief**
 - **Disenfranchised Mourning**
- **Pushing back against "empathic failures"** (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002; Zaki & Cikara 2015)
 - "cases in which an individual could conceivably feel empathy but does not because of salient social and psychological factors" (p. 471).



“Love knows no shame. To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending”, p.200.

Key Words

Disenfranchised grief

(Doka 1989; Attig 2001, 2002)

Disenfranchised Mourning

(Corr 2002)

Creative Analytical Procedures (CAP)

(Richardson & St. Pierre 2005)

Empathic failures

(Neimeyer & Jordan 2002; Zaki & Cikara 2015)

Mattering

Rosenberg & McCullough 1981; Schieman, S., & Taylor, J. 2001)



Is this the meaning of disenfranchised grief?

- Being denied the right to participate in the cultural practice of funeralizing the dead
- The opportunity to be of comfort and to be comforted – the right to mourn and be socially supported
- Enduring the most hurtful parts of death and dying while striving to find wholeness to replace the feelings of emptiness –
- To go forward with new norms and a new way of living without ever really saying goodbye
- The disregard of being former spouses, a co-parent, an end-of-life caregiver, or a friend
- The prevention of publicly mourning loss – alienated and muted



It all seems so surreal, like I exist in a daze.

I searched for your death certificate today – your name appeared.

It is official! You died; you are dead, deceased at 9:04 pm on August 11th.

The thought chokes me.

I cannot believe you are gone.

I cannot believe you are gone, as if death is a place, not a state of being.

My reaction even surprises me: the emptiness, the sorrow, the disbelief.

I was there. I witnessed your decline.

I saw your skeletal as the weight came off.

I heard the cough.

I noticed your swollen feet, legs, and fingers.

I was up with you when the pain would not let you sleep.

I listened intently to all your final conversations.

I saw the sadness imprinted on your face when the doctors said they could not treat your condition.

I put on the bravest face.

I held back all my emotions.

Is this why this is so surreal?

I cried in the tub.

I cried in the shower.

I cried while cleaning the kitchen.

I cried while you slept.

Each day, I said goodbye a little at a time.

I examined your corpse.

I rested my hand on your stiff leg.

Yet it all seems surreal.

But I know you died; I watched you until I no longer could.

(Journal entry, 2018)

What does it mean to matter?

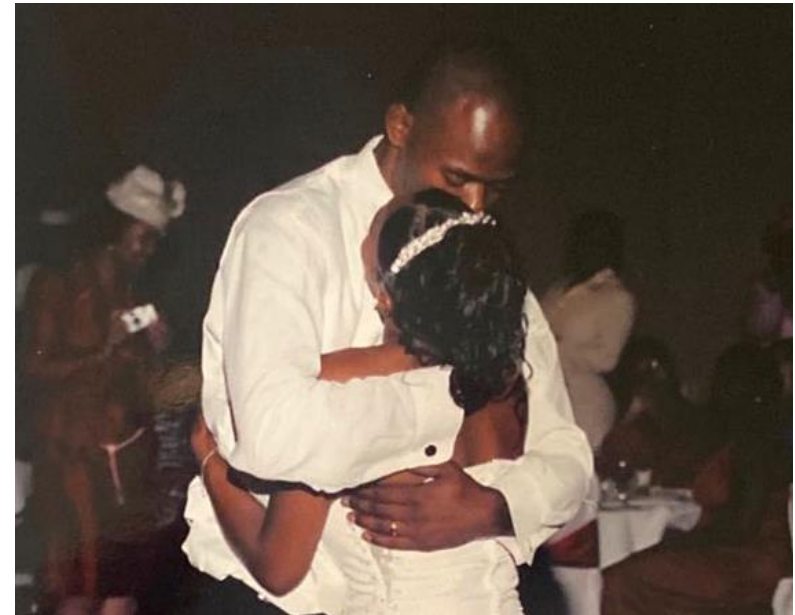
“I remember him inquiring about what I thought he should do, what I knew but was not saying, and if there was anything I wanted him to stop doing. He also spoke of us, particularly our marriage, the love, and the anguish derived from it. He articulated how he grew to love me and the hurt he endured because we dissolved our marriage. He expressed what he needed then and now; for me to be here for him. I paid close attention to his eyes, how his body shifted during the complex parts, and how he bit his fingernails as he recalled our life together and co-parenting. I felt despondent and helpless at that moment. I realized that maybe he would die. The only thing I could do was be there. And so, I was. When he finished speaking, I offered my apologies. I apologized for my immaturity, for being impatient, and for being unforgiving.”



(Journal entry, 2018)

This is mattering!

“We chose each other for a while as partners, husband and wife, but forever as friends and parents. I am grateful. No one else is better suited to be our son's father. No one has yet to love me more. Upon his prognosis, he put himself aside to wish me a happy birthday. One early morning, he watched me as I tried to rest, lifting me to his chest and comforting my broken soul. Even Stage IV Cancer did not stop him from being the man he was and showing concern for others and me. Cancer did not beat him; it did not break his spirit. As we were safe in his heart, so was my grief and agony.”



Writing as a method of inquiry

I now know...

- I highlighted my bereavement and mattering through writings
- I am a more compassionate, forgiving, and empathic person
- The ability of love to transcend space and time
- Writing somewhat freed me, it has been a continuous struggle to openly and socially acknowledge or validate my misery
- There is no revolting against grief, disenfranchised or otherwise. It is the memories, the remembering that I live with disenfranchised grief, and our love transcends

“Love is the only force that allows us to hold one another close beyond the grave. That is why knowing how to love each other is also a way of knowing how to die”, p. 202.



“Remembering is potentially one of the most powerfully constructive aspects of grieving. Remembering connects mourners with some of the best of life. It is itself an expression of their enduring love for those they mourn. And it enables them still to feel the warmth of the deceased's love for them” (pp. 212-213).



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