

# This Thing that Happens



## How to remove grief

BY LESLIE HSU OH  
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

*Does death take pity on us too...  
It doesn't take pity on us either,  
this thing that happens.*

### That's how it is.

I imagine that Tlingit orator Jessie Dalton lulled her audience with these lines, like a mother would to a sleeping child, in the same way that I received them 43 years later at a *ḵoo.éex'* or memorial potlatch, long after Dalton had passed away. Each word settles its weight upon a grief I thought I had let go.

Dalton's intention was ambitious. In 1968, as *Naa Tláa* (clan mother) of the *T'akdeintaan* (Sea Pigeon Clan) from the *Yéil Kudei Hít Taan* (Raven Nest House), she delivered the keynote speech for the *Widow's Cry*, a ceremony to remove grief of the hosts of Jim Marks's *ḵoo.éex'*.

Through metaphor and simile, she removed grief through the animation of *at.óow* (owned or purchased thing). She called attention to a Tern Blanket, an *at.óow* of the Hoonah *T'akdeintaan*.

According to American Book Award winners Richard and Nora Dauenhauer, who translated and analyzed Dalton's speech in "Classics of Tlingit Oral Literature, Volume 2, *Haa Twunáagu Yís*, for Healing Our Spirit: Tlingit Oratory," Dalton "develops the image of the blanket poetically, returning to the image of the terns at the rookery. In this passage, Jessie Dalton alludes to down, an important symbol of peace in Tlingit and other Northwest Coast Tlingit cultures."

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Then  
they would let their down fall  
like snow  
over the person who is feeling grief.  
That's when their down  
isn't felt.  
That's when  
I feel it's as if your fathers' sisters are flying  
back to their nests  
with your grief.

Dalton invokes both the living and the departed to remove her listeners' sorrow and grief. Her words act like a "supportive wedge, which keeps those in grief from falling into danger or harm: in Tlingit, *ax'aax wujixeeni yáx yatee du yoo x'atáangi*, 'His words are as if they have fallen between two things,' 'between' refers to the space between death and the person who is in grief, between the grieving survivor and the abyss of his or her grief itself. The image is of oratory being inserted like a beam being put into place and securing a structure."

The Dauenhauers explain that "prolonged grieving for the dead is taboo. The traditional belief is that if sadness lingers over the death of a relative, especially that of matrilineal kin, it will invite the death of another matrilineal kin. It is said that the cries of a relative endanger the life breath (*daséigu*) of the living. The breath of a family member may flow with the tears.

"By crying, the breath of a family member is weakened, thus making him or her vulnerable to death and the spirit world. For this reason, the performance of the *Gáax*, the cry for the departed, is important to all, because it formally marks the end of mourning, of crying, and of the period of grief."

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### A Big Stomach that Always Wants to be Filled

Defined as the pain of losing someone or something, the natural process by which a loss is healed, grief is something that a few of our societies avoid. Harold Schechter observes in "The Whole Death Catalog" that by the mid-1990s death had become an unmentionable subject in Western society. To speak of death or grief openly are considered taboo.

I discovered this at the age of 19, when my 17-year-old brother was diagnosed with cancer. He died the following year, in 1993. A week after his death, the doctors found the same cancer in my mother's liver. I lost her a year later.

Friends preferred that I grieved privately. My relatives told me not to cry, to be strong. "Better not to talk about the bad stuff," they would say, a concept that Harold Napoleon defines in "*Yuuyaraq*: The Way of the Human Being" as *nallunguaq*. "Young people are advised by Elders to *nallunguarluku*, 'to pretend it didn't happen.' They had a lot to pretend not to know. After all, it was not only that their loved ones had died (in the 1900 influenza outbreak that killed whole families and wiped out whole villages), they also had seen their world collapse.

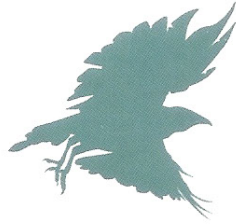
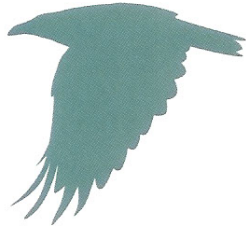
"They rarely showed their sorrows, fears, heartbreak, anger or grief ... They almost lost everything: their cultures, their languages, their spiritual beliefs, their songs, their dances, their feasts, their lands, their independence, their pride — all their inheritances. ... Without knowing it, the survivors began to deal with the difficulties of life by trying to ignore them, by denying them, by not talking about them. This is the way they raised their children and their children raised us the same way. Holding things in has become a trait among our families and our people. The results have been tragic."

Ilarion Merculieff, an *Unangax* of the Pribilof Islands who ran talking circles with me for the Alaska Native Science Commission, echoed these observations.

"Eighty percent of the Aleut people were wiped out within 80 years of Russian arrival. Stories still exist about the horrors Aleuts faced during their holocaust. A group of women and young girls jumped en masse off a cliff on Umnak Island, refusing to be the sex slaves of the Russians. Two Russians bet how many Aleuts a musket ball could kill with a single shot. Aleut men were lined back to back and shot point blank. The answer was nine.

"In order to survive, survivors had to numb out so that they wouldn't remember the horrors of what they experienced. And when they numb out, the Elders say that you disconnect from your body. When you do that it's like creating a big stomach that always wants to be filled but can never be filled so you develop addictive patterns, a strategy to escape the present moment. I think we live in an addictive society where we don't acknowledge our own emotions and feelings. We just function mentally or logically so we can get away from trauma or whatever else we've experienced in our lives."





### Removing or Releasing Grief

*Kuuyux*, Merculieff's traditional name means "extension, like an arm extending from the body, a bridge bringing ancient knowledge to modern times." The name was given to him by the last Aleut medicine man. Only one person receives this name in a lifetime. When he speaks, I can see why he earned it.

One of the first to introduce me to the idea of releasing grief, Merculieff is generous with sharing traditional knowledge that he has learned from his Elders. You would never know from his goofy smile and warm brown eyes that he ever experienced any grief, but this man has attended more than 200 funerals and survived a difficult year of losses, where his traditional mentor died on New Year's day, his wife left him the next month, he lost his job, his furnace broke down in the winter, his pipes froze, and a storm ripped off part of his roof.

On long walks on the tundra after our talking circles were completed and the weather had grounded us in a village, Merculieff taught me how his Elders handled death. "My mother, Stefanida, told me that Aleuts would cry when a person is born and celebrate when a person died. This is because Aleuts understood that to be born into the body from spirit means to experience the suffering and heaviness of the human body. Death is understood to be a reverse birthing process, a release into the spirit world where one is again free beyond imagination and limitations. It is a great way to understand and accept death."

The month before his mother died, every member of the community brought the family food and asked for her forgiveness and she asked for theirs. She was graceful in death as she was in life, comforting others who tried to comfort her. All that needed to be said was said, something that I denied my mother, insisting that she be positive and not talk about dying.

For three days following his mother's death, family members took turns caring for her body. After the burial, food and memories about his mother were shared at a potluck. Russian Orthodox Church services and

prayers continued for 40 days. On the 40th day, a service was held where she died. At the end of the service, the doors were flung open "to say we release you" and signify the end to the period of grieving.

Nicole Johnston (*likituk*), chair of World Eskimo Olympics and land manager of White Mountain Corp., recently cared for and buried her ailing grandmother, brother and father (Charlie Johnson, who held many critical positions such as executive director of Nanuuq Commission). She says that she can't think of any grieving traditions that have not been heavily infiltrated by Christianity in the Seward Peninsula area. That's another reason why it's so difficult to talk about this topic.

Richard Dauenhauer says that there was not only a deliberate attempt to destroy traditional culture, but Christianity and secularism eroded much of the grieving traditions of indigenous cultures. "For SE Alaska, potlatching was discouraged by the churches and government, so that the ritual and vehicle for the removal of grief and for healing was removed, creating yet another source of grief."

The potluck held in Nome shortly after her father died helped Johnston release grief. Everybody shared food and stories about her dad, laughing about the way he smiled his way through any difficulty and remembering the lessons he taught.

Relieved of caretaking duties for the first time since 2004, Johnston says with tears pooling in her eyes: "You have to keep in mind that you are making life better for them (the dying). Allow them to enjoy what life they have left. Stay positive. Set your emotions on the backburner so you can provide for them what they need. It's not just for them and yourself, it's for the rest of the family. You have to ask for help if you need it."

Whether your grief comes from the loss of a loved one or a thing, traditional knowledge teaches that grief "needs to come out." Merculieff explains that "tears are a way to purify the body from the energy of grief. If you are not letting grief out, that grief is energy physically anchored in the body that becomes like a stagnant and toxic pool. For example, if you close your heart emotionally, which is a muscle, eventually you damage your heart. Rage or holding emotions inside burns a hole in your body creating ulcers or cancers.

"The Elders say you can't offer the world what you don't have. You are a disconnected person working on a community problem. You

are handicapped. You have to heal yourself, through the pain. There is no shortcut. You need to get present. One thing trauma and grief does is it causes us to live in the past. Grief, anger, rage, remorse and jealousy. We stuff it all down. So we become a society that doesn't live in the present moment. The present moment is the only place that you can get back in touch with your body. If you're numb, go to a place where you can start moving those feelings, get in touch with these feelings with other people who may understand or know these ways."

One way to do this is to join support groups or grieving counseling offered online or locally. For example, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) sponsors several programs for those who have lost loved ones to cancer, such as support groups and Beading for a Cause, a quilt made up of beaded squares contributed from around the state. For those who are not living in Anchorage, you can join ANTHC's support groups by video conferencing at your village clinic.

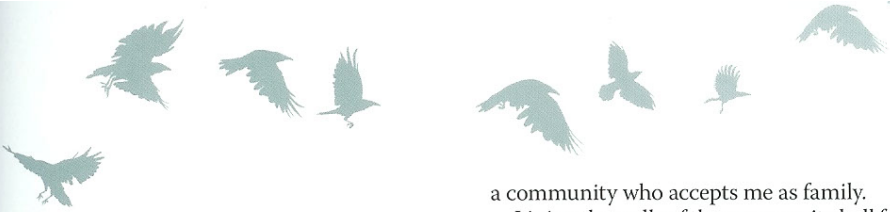
Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, known for introducing the five stages of dealing with death, reminds us not to forget about children. In "On Death and Dying," she says "few people feel comfortable talking to a child about death. Young children have different concepts of death, and they have to be taken into consideration in order to talk to them and to understand their communications .... If adults, who are upset already during this period, do not understand such children and reprimand or correct them, the children may hold inside their own way of grieving — which is often a root for later emotional disturbance."

Since 2007, Karen Morgan, whose mother is from Hooper Bay, coordinates Camp Coho, an annual day camp currently held at ANTHC for children 6-12 years of age from across the state who have lost someone to cancer. Morgan hopes that community partners will help them take the camp to the regional level. Children who have attended the camp say that they learned that it was OK to cry. They participate in healing circles and are paired with a Big Buddy.

Most importantly, Morgan says that the camp gives children a chance to meet others who are grieving. "You don't even have to talk. Just your presence there whether you say anything or not is a benefit to others who are attending. It's important to know that there is mutual support out there."

This year, Morgan, along with Barbara Franks originally from Hoonah, is offering





Camp Coho at ANTHC for children and families that have lost loved ones to suicide. Franks who survived the death of her father to a heart attack, her mother to cancer, her youngest son to suicide followed two days later by her husband's death to cancer says, "As I make my journey throughout Alaska, we are learning there are different kinds of grieving, for men and women, and I am glad it is being revealed. It is OK to cry, healing tears are good. One of the most difficult things I had to do in my life was to reach out for help because we were taught to be strong, in some places, to act like it did not happen.

"I call domestic violence and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol abuse suicide's cousins, because if they are not taken care of in their respective categories, they become a statistic of suicide. Society says we should not talk about suicide to our young people, but when they trust you enough to share, let them know it is 'OK' to talk about what they are experiencing in their lives."

Named after his grandfather Angluq, Stanley Tom, tribal administrator of Newtok renowned for his work in relocating his village, has had to counsel many in his community who are grieving the loss of their place of birth. Tom suggests releasing grief in Mother Nature: "Take it out as much as you can until you run out of it. Don't hold even that little bit."

When he was in eighth grade, Tom lost his mother to alcohol poisoning. No one taught him how to let go of grief and it took him years of "going haywire" before he learned how to go out into the tundra and cry it out.

Orville Huntington, the wildlife and parks director of the Tanana Chiefs Conference from Huslia, who lost his wife in a winter storm, also released his grief into nature. He is a man of few words. When he does speak, you must lean in to hear his gentle voice laced with the wisdom of his Elders. He says that "in any culture you can find peace in nature. For in nature you can feel the ancestors of every earthly life."

In addition, Huntington recommends that "if you are grieving the loss of someone who has died, then you must be respectful and do something to honor that person who you loved. There are many ways to do that, but the one way we do it is by accomplishing something good, like education."

Until I had a chance to attend my first *koo.éex'*, I could not fully understand what my mentors meant when they explained the importance of fully cathartic ceremonies where an entire community shares food and cries and dances and drums and lays down their grief.

These simple words, "It doesn't take pity on us either," deliver a powerful punch to the gut of my grief when heard in a room packed with

a community who accepts me as family.

Lining the walls of the community hall from ceiling to floor, each *Gan ka s'ix'i* or fire dish took months of preparation, carefully labeled with the name of a guest it was prepared for and a long list of departed ancestors and filled to the brim with items that represent the remembered. Prior to distribution, the names of the departed, including my mother's and brother's, are called out in a formula "\_\_\_\_ *x'éidei'*" or "to the mouth of \_\_\_\_" meaning that the spirit of the departed are fed. The grief I

held onto for nearly 20 years melts away with the gifting of these fire dishes.

I am overwhelmed by the care and wisdom behind each of these traditions designed by our ancestors to remove grief. Flushed with love from both the living and departed, I walk reluctantly out of the warm community hall, alone, with my eyes closed, hoping I can apply the valuable lessons I learned here. The skies embrace me with fresh rain tinged with glacier-chilled seawater from Yakutat Bay. ■

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