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My Mother's Body: A story of grieving, remembering and touch *An Autoethnographical Story*

"As educators, as researchers, we are often taught to not pay attention to our emotions, except to control them and keep them out of our teaching and out of our research. I do the opposite. I invite the emotions into teaching and into research. I believe that we need to listen to our emotions, that we need to pay attention to what they are saying to us, what they are showing us, what they are teaching us. I said during the defense of my doctoral research that the emotions can guide our living and that I believe they can also guide our research. Rather than keep them out I want to invite them in."

J. J. Guiney Yallop from an article by Day, L. and Guiney Yallop, J. J. (forthcoming), "Researching, teaching and learning through poetry: A shared journey".

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Dr. John J. Guiney Yallop is a parent, a partner, and a poet. Dr. Guiney Yallop's research includes poetic inquiry, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and performative social science. He uses these methodologies to explore identities, communities, and emotional landscapes. His writing has appeared in literary and scholarly journals. He has presented his work at national and international conferences. Dr. Guiney Yallop is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Acadia University. He lives in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, with his partner, Gary, their daughter, Brittany, and their cats.

When my mother was dying, she went on a trip, unplanned and uncharted – time-travelling through her life – packing and unpacking parts of herself along the way, returning after each stage of the journey as a retouched postcard with a message scrambled for us, her children and grandchildren, to decipher. Eventually her body became the souvenir of how she loved us.

My mother died of Alzheimer's disease in the morning of April 23, 2005. She took her last breath with my youngest brother and his spouse by her side. It was as it should be. I was in a hotel room only minutes away from the nursing home where my mother lay dying, preparing breakfast for my daughter and two of her cousins – my youngest brother's daughters. When the call came that my mother's death was imminent, I tried to balance my desire to be by her side when she took her last breath with my respect for the three young girls who were finishing their breakfast. I did not want to give them the impression that death was a frenetic truncating of life, but a natural progression. It was as it should be. I told the girls that they could finish their breakfast, but that we had to leave soon. My mother died before I arrived at the nursing home. It was as it should be. At least, that is what I tell

myself.

When I went up to the room which the staff at the nursing home had prepared for my mother to spend her last days in with her family members by her bedside – I looked at my mother’s body laying there in the bed, life so soon having left it. This was the body through which I had entered the world, where my own life had begun. This was the body which had carried me, wrapped in a blanket, on my journey home from the hospital where I was born, sitting on a slide pulled by a horse through a Newfoundland snowstorm because the ploughs could not get down into our small outport community to clear the snow from the one road that ran down into it. This was the body that had held me before I learned to walk, the body that had tucked me in at night, the body that had put homemade poultices on my infected wounds, the body that had picked lice from my hair and had boiled my underwear and bed sheets to kill the fleas that had infested our beds, the body that had sometimes gone without food so that I could eat. This was the body I had seen grow smaller as I grew older. This was my mother’s body. My mother was dead.

With my daughter I went to the bed where my mother’s body lay.

“Can we touch her?” my daughter asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Is she dead?”

“Yes, she’s dead.”

“Can she hear us?”

“I don’t know, but you can certainly say something to her if you wish.”

“Good-bye, New Grandma. I love you,” my daughter said as she put her hand on my mother’s forehead and rubbed it across her cheek.

“New Grandma” was the name my daughter had given to my mother when my partner and I first travelled with her, shortly after the adoption and before her fifth birthday, to Newfoundland to meet my mother and other members of our daughter’s new and forever family. At the time, my mother was in the late stages of Alzheimer’s and living in the nursing home where she would spend her last days. She was confined to her bed or to a large wheelchair with a tray where her meals were served and from which she was fed. We visited New Grandma each day, sometimes two times a day. We tried to plan our visits around mealtimes. Our daughter, a child my partner and I were, ourselves, just beginning to get to know, moved us with her remarkable capacity for compassion. She wanted to help feed my mother. As she slowly lifted the spoonfuls of food to my mother’s mouth, she also stroked my mother’s arm and looked deeply into her eyes. My mother’s eyes were fixed on my daughter and would only occasionally move to gaze at me or at my partner. As well as stroking my mother’s arm as she spoke softly, my daughter put her hand to my mother’s cheeks and she gently brushed back my mother’s hair with her fingers. She even played with my mother’s toes after performing a dance in front of the large wheelchair; a performance for her New Grandma. Neither my partner nor I knew for

sure what communication was taking place between my mother and our daughter, but we knew that touch, touching each other, was important to them both. My mother, through her body, seemed to be receiving the love my daughter was pouring over her. Our daughter was receiving the gift of giving. It was as it should be.

Just over a year later, my daughter leaned in over the bed and kissed my mother's body, the body of her New Grandma. And then I followed her lead. I kissed my mother's body and said, "Good-bye, Mom. I love you."

My daughter, not yet six years old, was teaching me how to grieve. In fact, it was my daughter who had led me back to Newfoundland to be at my mother's side before she died. Caught in the vortex of trying to balance work demands and family responsibilities, I thought that I could wait until my mother died and then travel to Newfoundland for the funeral. I had, I told myself, already grieved my mother's absence from my life as Alzheimer's consumed more and more of her. But when I told my daughter that New Grandma was going to die soon, she immediately said, "We have to go and say 'Good-bye.'" And so we went. Although work initially continued to pull, I resisted and turned fully to my daughter's needs, which I was beginning to realize were also my own, and for two days before my mother's death, when we were not at the hotel room, my daughter and I were at the nursing home saying 'Good-bye.' It was as it should be.

That morning, after my mother's death, sitting outside the nursing home in the car I had rented we called my partner on our cell phone. Speaking first, our daughter said, "Papa, it's a very sad day. My New Grandma died." They cried together for awhile, and then my daughter passed the phone to me. My parents had loved my partner, and he had loved them. We had decided that he would stay in Ontario and take care of our home and our pets while our daughter and I flew to Newfoundland to say good-bye to Mom from all three of us. More than a decade earlier, he had also stayed home while I went to say good-bye to my father from both of us. Now, once again, in this moment, our love for each other allowed my partner and I to touch with words and with silence. Language, over distance, became our embrace. Later that night, back at our hotel room, my daughter put down the book she was reading and began to cry. "Daddy, I'm feeling sad," she said, "because my New Grandma died and now I don't have a New Grandma anymore." I held her in my arms. We held each other. In words and in tears we expressed to each other the loss we were both feeling. As I write this, the grief continues; my eyes fill with more tears, tears that will never really stop.

After my mother first moved into the nursing home, whenever I would visit from Ontario I would bring a bottle of red wine. This was a way of connecting with her, of connecting her with me, with her memories of me. In the past, whenever I travelled back to Newfoundland for a visit, my mother would have her rare glass of red wine, something she indulged in only with me. Eventually, as the Alzheimer's progressed, she could no longer hold a glass, and so I stopped bringing the red wine. When my partner and I visited her in the nursing home, we always brought strawberries. My mother, who was by then spoon-fed all of her meals, would reach for the fresh red fruit and, clasping it in her *good* hand, bring it to her lips. Food was the last pleasure that she seemed to consciously connect with in life – food, and the sights and sounds of young children – sights and sounds that also nourished her.

By the time my daughter met my mother for the first time, Mom's capacity to reach for a strawberry had disappeared, but her mouth opened to receive the soft food my daughter offered on a spoon. As I

looked at my daughter, so uninhibited about touching my mother, I wondered about my own hesitancy to touch my mother's body over the years. The desire to touch was there and I had made small connections with my mother's hands and arms, and I would kiss her forehead or her cheek good-bye whenever we parted, but touching my mother's body with the intensity of a warm embrace had come to seem something like an intrusion, a demand for too much. I recalled that as I had grown older my mother had begun to shrink away from the affection I would show through touch. I had learned to respect her boundaries without, at least I hoped, withdrawing the affection I felt for her. Still, I wondered why a woman who lived through her body, who loved the smell and taste of food, who worked her hands into the dough she kneaded for bread and whose hands wrung clothes dry and stroked her cats and dogs, a woman who enjoyed the colour of flowers and the feel of a breeze on her face or cool water on her feet, who listened to music with a smile – why did she seem so wary of affection expressed through the body in touch or in words? I reflected back to the beginning of my life. My birth made Mom the mother of six children, all under the age of ten years. Perhaps the demands on her body, demands from meeting the needs of six young children, and then of another one a few years later, children who depended on her for their survival, made her cautious about how her body's energy was used. Physical affection was not considered a necessity, at least not after a certain age.

Looking at my daughter touching my mother's body I also recalled the progression of my mother's Alzheimer's, and how I had dealt with it. As my mother was invaded by this disease, I tried, through my writing, to come to grips with her illness, and the effects it was having on me and on our family. I wrote about my mother, and about my father who had died of lung cancer several years before my mother's Alzheimer's became evident. I wrote about how my parents had shown their love for me throughout the time I had with them, a love shown often through actions and almost never in words. My writing led me to understanding, to acceptance, and to healing. In writing about my mother I would compare her body to the landscape that had surrounded me in my childhood, the landscape of the island of my birth, the island that held me like my mother held me, the island whose shores were entered, formed and transformed by the Atlantic Ocean, an ocean that moves in me, that forms and transforms me every time I write. The shoreline of Newfoundland is where I return, in body whenever I can, or at other times at least in spirit, to reflect, to write, to write my life – its present, its past, and its future. My mother's body gave me life, remembered my past, and could foretell my future. Both Newfoundland and my mother's body held me, both nourished me (and continue to nourish me), and yet both were (and still are) mysteries to me. But both also invite me to know them, to try to understand what they can tell me about myself and, more importantly, about how to relate that self to others. Newfoundland and my mother's body taught me about the depths and the boundaries of self and of relating, and about how to explore those depths and how, respectfully and with dignity, to cross those boundaries; they also taught me about grieving, about remembering, and about what touch would come to mean to me; lessons I am still learning.

The last time I touched my mother's body we were at the funeral home. My daughter, wondering about my family's conversations with each other and with her, again with her comfort and curiosity, invited me to examine and articulate my own beliefs and my own choices. "What did they mean when they said that New Grandma is in heaven with your dad?" my daughter asked me.

"That's their belief," I explained. "It was also New Grandma's belief. It isn't my belief. I believe that New Grandma is in my heart. I also believe that she's with my dad because I believe he's in my

heart, too.” Wanting to ensure that she felt free to construct her own beliefs and make her own choices, I added, “*You* can choose to believe whatever you want.”

Looking away for a moment, my daughter then looked back at me and said, “I believe that she’s in heaven *and* she’s in my heart.”

The last time I saw my mother’s body it was wrapped in a box and suspended over the open arms of the earth. Since then, whether sitting at my mother’s grave, or crouched beside the blue spruce tree my partner planted in our backyard in Brampton, Ontario, in memory of my mother, or swimming in the salty waters on the west coast of Newfoundland for a holiday visit to Gros Morne, or walking along the edge of the tide that now comes in and out of my new home in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, I touch again my mother’s body. The metaphor is my reality. And one day she will take me back, back into her arms, back into body. One day, perhaps, I will learn what Newfoundland and my mother’s body were, and still are, trying to teach me. One day, perhaps, I will learn what my daughter, at the age of five years, seemed to already know. It is as it should be. At least, that is what I am telling myself.

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