

The Heart of the Village

By Hannah Grace



A close up of the grief altar during the grief healing retreat at Summer Lake, 2023

I am standing in front of the grief altar, overlooking the vast sky above the plains of Summer Lake. It is Tuesday afternoon and I am here with about 35 people who I only met Sunday evening. At this point in our retreat, I remember just a few of the names, and I have only talked with some people personally so far. Still, a lot of the faces start looking familiar from the classes we have taken together in the last two days and the meals we have shared.

Even though the newness of our bond as a group is tangible, the safety that was established as Lara Lwin Treadaway introduced us to the grief ritual that we are about to descend into, makes me feel held standing among these friendly strangers. Lara gave us a lot of reassurance that grief can express itself in any form. Stillness, numbness, tears, wailing... all are welcome and true, and each of our processes will be our individual expression of grief, unique and perfect in its own timing.

The rhythm of the drum envelops us as we sing the ancient Dagara song Lara taught us a few minutes prior. The song will guide us through the entire ritual. Doubt is creeping up in my

mind how the original three-day ritual could be condensed into a two-hour meaningful and deep experience. But it sounds like we Westerners need to enter the world of grief in homeopathic doses because we have been so cut off from letting the cleansing power of expressing our grief and sorrow in community be part of being alive.

Lara spreads ashes around the altar to create a sacred container for our ritual. As the ashes move through the air and settle on the ground around the altar, I let my doubts settle as well and they become part of my grief process. As I focus on the sounds of the drum and the melancholy of the song, the first person starts walking toward the grief altar. They are followed by a second person who will sit at their back holding space for them, available for touch, support, and reassurance if needed.

The light of the afternoon changes as the sun moves behind the clouds that are creating a majestic backdrop to our sweet altar. The song and the drum hold us in a sacred container as more people and their guardians slowly make their way to the altar. They sit in front of the items and grief bundles that we have placed there the day leading up to the ritual. The people who are sitting in front of the altar start to cry and weep and mourn, and the sorrow that each of us has been holding in our hearts and bodies pours out into the sacred space, carried by the ancient song and the steady rhythm of the drum. Each person has their guardian person sitting behind them, witnessing them in their grief, and some of the guardians are providing the support and holding that the grieving person requests.

Even though I see that every person has someone following them to the altar, when I eventually feel drawn forward and start slowly walking towards one of the pillows, I wonder if there is really someone behind me. I decide not to check and to let the uncertainty be part of my grief because it fits so well with the story of my life. I find a place to sit close to my grief bundle that I had collected the day before. It contains a huge tumbleweed and a thorny branch. As I take in the twisted turns of the branches, the sorrow of my life, and the twists and turns it took, start welling up from within my body and heart. The sounds of the grieving people who are sitting with me at the altar are weaving a fabric of a deep knowing of the pain of human existence. I move through many waves of tears and sounds till I eventually arrive on a shore of stillness. A place where the beautiful pearl that formed around all the suffering I experienced is shining in its pure innocence.

After being in the stillness for a while I decide to stand up, and as I turn around I am greeted by the person who was indeed sitting behind me holding space. We hug and then I start walking back towards the group of people that are ready and waiting to welcome me back. We

all embrace as they continue to sing the song. Slowly, I join back in the melody as I stand amongst our group with a more steady stance. We eventually turn back to face the altar together. As I stand there I watch people walking towards the altar, being followed by their support person, as others return from their journey and are welcomed back into the group by several of us.

I somehow never manage to be the one who follows someone to the altar. I feel a tinge of guilt about that, but magically the timing somehow never works out. Having worked the last six months on not being such a caretaker in my life, it seems fitting that I don't take that role here.

As we carry on singing and the drum keeps the rhythm, the movement of people to and from the altar gradually wanes. Only one woman remains sitting with her guardian, joined by a second woman with one pillow between them. I feel drawn to that place between them and make my way to the altar a second time. I don't fully know why. I don't feel any feelings of grief left in me at this moment. This time my guardian decides to touch my shoulder as I arrive at the altar. The unexpected touch startles me a bit, but it also brings a smile to my face that the second time around I got the assurance that someone is behind me holding me in my process.

Soon after I sit down on the pillow, the two women beside me start wailing loudly in their emotional releases. As I sit between their loud moans I enter a frozen place inside of myself. A place from my early childhood where I was caught between my parents screaming and fighting. I let myself sink into the numb helplessness and utter loneliness that I felt in my tiny body back then. I am not sure how long I sat there, but eventually, I realize that both women are gone and that I am the only one left at the altar. I become acutely aware of the group of people singing behind me, and I get up and turn around. My guardian embraces me, and as I start to look around I am confronted with all the lovely and welcoming faces of the entire group gazing back at me, singing to me and to the frozen child in me who is feeling completely overwhelmed. Lara welcomes me with open arms, motioning for me to join the group. But all I can do is shake my head and cry. She somehow understands that I am unable to move and comes towards me, gesturing for the whole group to come with her and to surround me in a gentle embrace, welcoming me back into their circle and lovingly picking me up from the place where I've been frozen between my screaming parents since childhood.

All their faces are so full of sweetness and compassion, and I can feel the hearts of the people so open after having been cleansed in front of the altar from some of the burdens they were

carrying. For the first time in my life, I can feel how it is to be surrounded by a tribe - to have the knowing that I belong. To not just have two parents who are split apart in an endless war, but to have a whole community to support and welcome me.

Everyone is still singing the ancient song that has carried us through the entire ritual. I eventually find my voice to join back into the melody. We all grab our grief bundles from the altar, along with the bowl of water that absorbed all our tears, and we walk away from the altar towards the hot springs. We stop there to unite the waters back to their source, thanking the water for holding space for our sorrow. From there we head over to the fire pit where we let go of our grief bundles. The flames transform the bundles of our grief and sorrow into ashes that fertilize the grounds of our cleansed hearts.

Two days later, I realize that the moment where I stood frozen in front of all these people and Lara led everyone to pick me up and welcome me back into the group, has healed another deep scar that was part of my twisted life branches. Twenty years earlier I had been part of a cult and entered that same frozen place at the end of a group therapy session. The cult leader did not deal with my frozenness compassionately and ended up violently and physically removing me from his house where the group had been gathered. All the people that had participated in the group therapy session were still in the parking lot watching him pulling and pushing me, trying to get me to go into a car. Nobody interfered and everybody just ended up driving off, leaving me lying alone on the parking lot asphalt. Feeling the contrast of Lara spreading her loving wings of compassion around my frozen self, leading the group to embrace me, intuitively sensing that belonging was what was needed to melt the frozenness, brought another layer of deep gratitude and also grieving to my heart. It will take a while to fully integrate and absorb that new seed that was planted in my being as my frozen child self was embraced and welcomed back by the heart of a whole village.