

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Considering the Lyrical Essay

Risa Denenberg · Wednesday, June 16th, 2021

I woke up this morning thinking about something.

I wonder what it was. I had the sense it was important enough to try to remember, to write down for further exploration. Likely it had something to do with aging and dying—that’s pretty typical for me—and I know there was a dreamlike metaphor involved. Seemingly worth remembering.

Yes, my memory is wavering. My mom died at age eighty-two, and I see how close my seventy-one years are to the edges of my expectations. Now someone is probably thinking, “but, you could live to be one hundred.” Which, frankly, is not how I hope things will go.

As a nurse practitioner, I love taking care of elderly seniors—sometimes called the “old-old” (as opposed to the “young-old”)—people in their late eighties and nineties. But no matter how many women are playing tennis in their eighties (and that would be pickleball out here on the west coast), I’ve been privy to what a real slog it is to get old. So many of the elderly I see in clinic live in overgrown houses that bulge with possessions; have stairs and acreage; have had any number of falls with trips to the emergency room and numerous scans and tests without much revelation other than “normal for age”; have children who are far away or never born (and not infrequently estranged); and if a couple, one will have dementia and the other is a full time caregiver with chronic medical problems of their own.

But why was I thinking about my mom?

I do remember this thought: “Maybe I should be writing lyrical essays.” It seems like a thing I hadn’t noticed was a thing until recently.

Excuse me for a moment while I google “lyrical essay.”

I guess I’ll need to purchase a few books first and read a lyrical essay or two. I’d be happy for any recommendations. Which brings up what I’ve spent the last week trying to undo: purchases, accumulations, holding on to things. I have eight tightly-crowded bookcases in a small house, possible not unlike many who might be reading this, but are you old yet? Do you wake up like I do, thinking about—and this is very much my reality—how I don’t want my son to have a mess to sort through when I die. I look around and wonder how, after stripping down to bare needs, and moving from East to West coast 13 years ago (and how is that possible?) I’ve managed to accumulate so many books. Not to mention—sheepishly—clothes, shoes, hair products, canned foods, house plants, pens, cats, cat paraphernalia.

My mom's death conferred upon me one of my two devastating experiences in "taking down a house." I'm not sure if there is an accurate term for this act, but there should be, and probably is, in another language. Having done this chore for my mom and for my best friend who died of AIDS at age thirty-seven (another lingering topic), I often warn people that this act is possibly the most emotionally fraught task they will face following a death.

I was also thinking about an interview I am working on with a(nother) lesbian who is many years estranged from her family of origin. A sad reminder that biologic families may prove hostile to our choices. This is why so many queer folks have chosen families instead. And probably why so many of my elderly patients haven't spoken to their own children in years. Which takes me to the days I spent emptying my friend's apartment, crying while making piles of what to keep, what to give away, what to throw out, and grabbing his journals so his parents wouldn't get hold of them. My first poetry chapbook reveals what was in those journals. I'm wishy-washy, but think I will probably destroy my own journals—they are so consumed with despair and fury—which record the worst parts of a life while leaving no record of the parts that include joy and pleasure.

Maybe I was wondering if people might think that, since I'm on a mission to get rid of things, to tidy up my living space, I might be depressed, even considering suicide. They would not be entirely wrong; I've had a difficult few months. But the thing is, after this pandemic year, which we all have faced in our various ways, I am so looking forward to seeing my East Coast family and friends in August, and spending a week at the beach house in Cape May, New Jersey, where emerging versions of my family have vacationed every summer for close to 30 years, until this last one. We have a new baby joining us this year. I remember how my mother loved the beach right up to her last year alive. And how she lived to see her first great grand boy before she died.



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