

Jamie Anderson said, “Grief, I’ve learned, is really just love. It’s all the love you want to give, but cannot. All of that unspent love gathers in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in the hollow part of your chest. **Grief is just love with no place to go.**”

By sharing my words here, I try to give my love somewhere to go.

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The desert sun was hot- it pierced right through any sort of alternate reality that threatened to disturb us. There, nothing mattered except what was in front of us: the rock, the dancing silhouettes of the Joshua trees, the tangerine-to magenta-to violet sunset that exploded in the sky. That extraordinary sunset was the last day of ordinary as we knew it.



As soon as we got in the van and reconnected to cell service, our phones lit up to tell us that school is closing for the foreseeable future. We were silent most of the ride back to the campsite. Heading into spring break, it didn’t cross my mind that this would happen or even could happen. The next day, the desert flooded, plans changed, and ever so quickly, the lives that we have been building and cherishing for 3.75 years were plucked out from under us as our landscape shifted from sprawling desert to an empty, aching campus, to the homes we weren’t ready to return to.

I have been at once dreading and eagerly anticipating senior spring since the moment freshman year began. The closer it crept, the more I sensed just how much saying goodbye to this chapter of life was going to sting. Senior spring is meant to be the celebration, the harvest of 4 years of nonstop work on top of 12 years prior to that. It is the time when the intense academic pressures and the gloomy winter are forgotten, when picnics and frisbees fill the greening quad, when achievements are celebrated and growth is ritualized. Most importantly, it is the time to be in the presence of your friends and community for the last time. It is a cruel irony that we are

spending these months in the exact opposite way: socially as well as geographically isolated. At a time when all I want is to be with my friends, my very presence could be a threat to them.

Undeniably, the very best thing about college was the people: the close friends with whom I shared crazy times as well as mundane peace, the faces that made campus feel familiar and safe, the professors who believed in me and pushed me to grow. We all knew that one day all of this would end, and this dense and beautiful web of social networks would evaporate. More than anything- more than landing the right job or moving to the right city- I was scared of losing this web- what Marina Keegan, a personal hero of mine, so beautifully called “the opposite of loneliness.” It was common knowledge that the months after spring break would be the time carved out for this tragic yet necessary transition. We tried not to get too sentimental before the finish line, because we thought we would have the ceremonies and the specially designated “lasts” for that. Little did we know.

For the last three years, I watched friends walk across the stage in front of a quad full of thousands of people and thought to myself: soon, it’ll be my turn. I imagined the colors of May: the gentle green of the quad on the morning of commencement, pastel dresses, golden stoles, ebony robes, glittering beads of sweat on our brows. Flowers. Droplets of champagne catching in the sunlight. This beloved ceremony is beautiful and pompous, perhaps to make it easier to ascribe a sense of closure to an otherwise nebulous transition. The walk across the stage, the pat on the back, the flip of a tassel are all actions that we’ve been taught will send us off into the real world that we are supposedly prepared for, while gently laying to rest a very special time of our lives. Now, we don’t have that. We’re left scrambling to create closure without any of the necessary ingredients. Now, our grand finales and our inimitable friendships must exist within the confines of tiny squares on Zoom. This sense of loss over something so ceremoniously constructed calls into question: to what extent can connection be virtually simulated? Is closure merely symbolic? Do we need the ritual to feel closure?

As I’ve sat at home for the last month trying to process everything, I’ve learned that the creation of this closure is solitary, unstructured, and utterly confusing. The virtual ceremony on May 18th will indeed signify a commencement- of an uncharted and highly uncertain entry into a version of the “real world” that escapes all possible pre-meditations. Amidst all of this ambiguous loss and complex grief, it seems frivolous to mourn the sacrifice of a few months and some ceremonies at a time of almost unimaginable global disruption. It’s hard to think about celebration when so much is suddenly at risk: the health of loved ones, the job I had lined up, the exposed weakness of our leaders, and the cataclysmic shutdown of systems around us. We went from planning big dreams and 10 year visions, rehearsing our answers to the common interview question “*Where do you see yourself in 10 years?*” to taking it day by day. We were climbing ladders, now we’re blindly walking tightropes into a dense fog, hovering on the edges of uncertainty and just trying to catch our balance once again.

Because of this, we've had to give into the present moment in a much deeper way than many of us are used to. Suddenly we are all forced to sit in the discomfort with nowhere to go. My relationship with the present has widened and has become flavored with intimacy. It's frustrating that I have to seek out silver linings just to stay sane, but I'm trying to remember that our emotional capacities are vast and that the realities the present moment contains aren't mutually exclusive. We can honor our internal worlds that got flipped on their heads while remembering the larger picture. I can grieve the loss of seemingly trivial things such as my final (probably forever) dance performances, our last Nawab brunch and sunset hike on Pilot Mountain, and my first and last time camping on Davis Field-- while also grieving the situation we are all collectively enduring. We can at once be safe at home and stuck at home. We can practice solidarity in solitude. We can have breakthrough moments of joy while grieving. We can feel betrayed and yet seen, scared and nonetheless hopeful.

Perhaps the strength of the gratitude now collectively felt by my fellow seniors is greater knowing the loss we've felt, that somehow this disruption in our designated path has created a stronger sense of love than we might have felt sitting out in robes on a sunny morning in May. By being alone during the time that was supposed to be spent together, we are finally starting to wrap our heads around the beauty that we had for the last few years, and perhaps how much we took it for granted. In the words of Marina Keegan, our social webs "make us feel loved and safe and part of something even on our loneliest nights" -- and right now, this could not be more true. As I cozy up in front of my screen and collect Zoom friendship squares like stars in a jar, my heart swells with a special breed of gratitude.

So, class of 2020, let's remember that we're not just the class of COVID-19. The nearly four years that we got were an indescribable and irreplaceable blessing. Like my dear friend Natalie so perfectly put it, this is the final expression of years of learning how to embody both definitions of *Pro Humanitate*-- a sacrifice *for humanity* as well as a reminder of *that which makes us human*. This season of our lives has been exactly that: one of great sacrifice, great grief and gratitude, and a necessary return to our fragile humanness.