



My Weekend at Sad Camp

After my mother's death, I signed up for a grief retreat in the forests of California. It upended everything I knew about mourning—and healing. By Maité Snauwaert

FOR MOST OF MY ADULT LIFE, my mother and I were estranged. She was difficult, prone to anger and often declined to answer the phone for weeks or months at a time. Twenty years ago, when I offered to introduce her to my husband, she replied with a one-word email: “NO.” The last time I saw her was in May of 2022. My sister and I—she in Paris, me travelling in Berlin—had spent a week trying to reach her. Finally, we hopped on a train to the small town in France where our mother lived to make sure she was okay. The visit felt tense and suffocating, as if the confinement of the pandemic had made her home smaller, or me into a giant.

When my mother died the following year, I felt both angry and numb. There would be no holding hands, no final peace. Thankfully, my siblings and I had each other. The four of us gathered to deal with the funeral and the house, since our mother had left no instructions. When I returned home to Edmonton, I threw myself into work, my usual coping mechanism. I’m a professor of literature at the University of Alberta, and I made myself busier than ever, even as I complained that I wasn’t able to pause and grieve. In truth, I didn’t know how to fit the enormity of the loss into the normal frame of reality. Ironically, my research involves examining grief: I was about to publish a new book about mourning memoirs. Still, I felt poorly equipped to deal with loss firsthand. My mother and I had spent years with almost no contact—but she was still a number I could reach. Now her absence was complete. In this new loneliness, I just wanted someone to make me soup.

In June of 2023, I received a newsletter advertising a “conscious grieving retreat,” to be held that September in a small town in Northern California called Mill Valley. It felt fated: my husband and I had vacationed in the very same town the previous summer and, along with programming details, the newsletter included a testimonial from another Albertan. It would be a four-day reprieve that was also relevant to my work, a chance to get an up-close look at what’s known as an “offering” in the burgeoning end-of-life industry. It would also give me a chance to grieve. The price for all that revelation was steep, though—the retreat cost US\$2,400. (My fee was paid by my

faculty, for professional development.)

Northern California’s culture of health and wellness, alongside the entrepreneurial influence of Silicon Valley, have made it a hub for this growing market: a loose constellation of startups, entrepreneurs, therapists and artists aiming to grapple with death in ways that are more productive (and more profitable). Its offerings run from the prosaic (coaching, legal advice) to the mystical (experimental medicines, curated rituals). I was introduced to this niche in 2018 at a festival called Reimagine End of Life, hosted by a Bay Area design firm called Ideo. Its chief creative officer, Paul Bennett, had lost his father years before, which got him thinking about the looming wave of mortality among baby boomers and their parents, as well as how the end-of-life industry was poised to grow.

Grief camps for youth are relatively common. Camp Erin has locations in Ontario and the U.S.; Nova Scotia has Brigadoon Village; and in British Columbia, there is Camp Kerry, which was so overbooked last year it turned away as many kids as

that completely reorganizes our reality. It requires not silence, but witnessing. That’s what the Mill Valley retreat was all about.

Upon landing at San Francisco International Airport, I met up with two fellow participants to share the 50-minute cab ride to the venue, Ralston White Retreat. One of them was the most upbeat bereaved person I’ve ever met—she instantly coined our destination “Sad Camp.” The other was the only man in attendance. As we entered the facility, up a hill among the redwoods, the afternoon was all California golden light slanted across the spacious rooms. At check-in, however, everyone was tense and unsure: averted eyes, scared faces, cold smiles, people who seemed to have shrivelled on the way there, suddenly uncertain that this was a good idea. Some made secret pledges to leave if it got too hard.

There was a famous athlete and a stay-at-home mom; a lawyer and a nurse; a writer and a clinical counsellor. A TV journalist whose loss dated back 25 years was there to understand “the long arc of grief.” Every kind of loss was represented: mothers,

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it accepted. The California retreat, however, was different, designed for adults by Claire Bidwell Smith, a therapist who has become a major figure in the new business of mourning. When she was 14 years old, both of her parents were diagnosed with cancer—her mother died when she was 18, her father when she was 25. She has since authored books, hosted podcasts, given lectures and posted about grief to her nearly 36,000 Instagram followers.

Bidwell Smith believes that the way our society manages grief is fundamentally broken. In the West, most of us either mourn alone, strictly with those closest to us or not at all, burying our uncomfortable feelings. We treat grief as private and taboo and respond to it with silence—which Bidwell Smith would say is the opposite of what we need. Death is a massive life upheaval

fathers, siblings, spouses, friends, young children and adult children. Some had died suddenly or ambiguously, by suicide, murder, illness or drowning. Some last year and some decades ago. Most participants were middle-aged women, though a few were younger. It was easy to spot the grieving mothers, their eyes swollen even after years. Guilt had become part of their motherhood, though they were no less mothers than before—fiercer even, having carried their children through death.

That evening, at the first sharing circle, Bidwell Smith—the retreat’s lead facilitator—asked us for one word to describe how we felt. “Anxious” was the most frequent, but also “nervous” and “angry.” I said “oppressed,” as if grief was another demand I couldn’t fit into my schedule. Hearing others’ stories was a lot to take in, but by

the second circle the next morning, the general sentiment had shifted: this was harder than we thought, but easier than what we'd been going through alone.

From there, the rhythm was set: large gatherings alternating with smaller group sessions, on mother, father, spouse and child loss, respectively. There were writing sessions with prompts to journal about grief and suggestions for rituals to memorialize our person. There were movement-oriented sessions, including tapping (a somatic technique to reduce anxiety) and Saturday morning yoga. During one session, the instructor asked us to locate our grief within our body, which immediately produced long, deep, cathartic tears from me—a reminder that loss is felt physically. All the workshops were punctuated by generous meals. Each day, I went for early-morning walks in the forest, where, embraced by the enormous redwood branches, it was easy to feel a spiritual connection to something greater than myself—and to my mother.

Yet the real luxury was not in the beautiful décor, the scenery, the comforts of the house or the food. What made the retreat truly valuable was the acceptance. I hadn't expected that my main teachers would be 25 strangers, arriving with their own heart-wrenching experiences. They were a lively, generous, articulate bunch who got it, because they were going through the same thing. It was like AA for the bereaved, and I understood the power of the group. Through their compounding losses, the shared stories demonstrated that grief is not an extreme event, but a net that catches everything already fragile in your life.

On our last evening, we shared pictures of our lost ones. I showed everyone the photo my family chose for my mother's tombstone, one of the few in which she looks radiant. My mother was unpredictable, but she could also be warm and mischievous and, at times, she defended us fiercely against the world. I told a story about how she covered for me and my



GOOD GRIEF Snauwaert (above) believes the Mill Valley retreat—which she likens to “AA for the bereaved”—could be a healthier, more humane model of grieving for Westerners going forward

best friend with my friend's mom when the two of us wanted to go out dancing on Saturday nights. Everybody laughed.

The setting was secular, but a strange peace came down with the evening. I felt shame at not having been present for my mother's death. Yet the group met me with compassion when I told my story, not judgement. My grief wasn't mirrored—so unique is each loss—but it was reciprocated.

Before going to the retreat, I had thought grief was about time. After, I understood that it's about space. Those four days created room to share, to let the air flow in. You don't move past grief, but through it. It starts with a physical space, then becomes a space you carry within yourself. It was one we all brought home.

As baby boomers age and Canada's mortality rate rises, I believe there's a chance for the ideas incubated in these kinds of exclusive spaces to be rolled out more broadly. Founded in the spring of 2020, at

the height of the pandemic, the Canadian Grief Alliance—a coalition of more than 150 national and provincial associations—has called for a “national grief strategy” to address what it saw as the next global health emergency. It anticipated the wave of deaths during COVID-19, how feelings of loss would be made more complex by social distancing and being deprived of grieving rituals. The strategy has now received \$1 million in federal funding, which makes me hopeful that a change is afoot in how we grapple with grief, and that the kind of communal care envisioned by professionals like Bidwell Smith may grow more prevalent.

More than a year after the retreat, some friendships forged there have remained steadfast: for a while, we had monthly check-ins on Zoom; now, we email and text. However untimely and enduring our losses—and however ill-prepared we were for it—we don't have to face them alone. ■