

“The Remnants of a Lived Life”: Nancy Rappaport

By Kay Fowler, PhD, FT



In a quietly ringing voice, Dr. Nancy Rappaport, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, read from her 2009 memoir, *In her wake: A child psychiatrist explores the mystery of her mother's suicide*. The voice matched the intensity, the passion, and the eloquence of the words she has written about her long search to

assemble and interpret the puzzle pieces of her mother's life, her mother's suicide when Rappaport was four, and her own long grief journey. Rappaport's work offers a rich amalgam of insights for thanatologists. It vibrates with tension between the child longing for her lost mother (“... figuratively tugging on her apron strings pleading for something more,” p. 20), the keen-minded adult “detective” reconstructing her mother's story, and the scholar/researcher/practitioner seeking ways to understand and help the troubled adolescents that she treats in her practice. Describing a graveyard visit, Rappaport observes: “We study the remnants of a lived life and touch the dates carved deep in marble, the fading photos. We guess at their meanings and the lives behind them ... Sometimes we can knit together a story” (p. 211). Sifting through memories, testimony of survivors, her mother's writings, newspaper accounts, etc., Rappaport has tried “to create a meaningful narrative to understand what happened, recognizing that the truth is buried with the victim and that questions will always linger” (p. 7). She notes: “with each round of reworking the story has gotten more complicated and nuanced; nothing that happened was fair” (p. 281).

Isabel Amorous and I interviewed Dr. Rappaport after her reading where she told us: “Mother gave me a gift from the grave. It is delicious and I savor the eighteen years of delving.” Her memoir, she said, is about developing compassion and forgiveness and facing the human fallibility we all share. She also hopes it will “help break the silence and dispel the shame around suicide and encourage people to get help.” While the memoir discusses the frequent “intergenerational transmission” of suicide, Rappaport rejects its inevitability: “losing a parent this way is ... not a prophetic death sentence; it takes a lot of damage to lose the will to live” (p. 10).

Interwoven with her writing about her mother in her memoir, Rappaport offers information and research results on suicide risks (mental illness, impulsivity, substance use, a sense of helplessness), depression, and the complexity of determining appropriate medications and therapeutic techniques. “Therapy with teenagers calls for ingenuity, spontaneity, devotion, and the ability to recognize those moments when they abandon their defense and reveal something important. My job is to try to achieve a careful balance, staying curious and remaining patient” (p. 53). She stresses the power of constructing a narrative with her clients “as we build a raft together” (p. 5).

Rappaport told us that her memoir was “almost written in a fugue.” Rappaport recognized from the beginning that the journey would be

fraught especially in terms of her relationship with her father. Her mother's suicide had followed immediately on a fresh setback in an extended bitter custody battle. Rappaport added: “I didn't know what the outcome would be of this journey. There are times when you do what is important to you and you take risks.”

“Narrative is the alchemy of psychiatry” (p. 256), Rappaport writes in her memoir.

The image is evocative. Alchemy, at its core, concerns itself with two quests – the quest for immortality and the quest to transmute base metals into gold. Rappaport gestures with this metaphor to the way in which grief narratives embody the quest for meaning, value, understanding in pain and loss – or at least the capacity to live with ambiguity. “We may not avoid disaster but whether we are undone may be decided by how we tolerate the uncertainty and make meaning by degrees” (p. 194). Equally central is the yearning for immortality. Rappaport's memoir seeks “to resurrect” (p. 281) her mother for herself, for her children and – for her readers and perhaps even to claim a bit of immortality for herself. “I have always hoped that [my children] will come to see my search to understand my mother as a testament to enduring love, an inexplicable reminder to them that we are linked beyond death” (p. 211). As she had written earlier, “love lasts longer than death. I want love to be enough” (p. 194).



Nancy Rappaport

Reference

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About the Speaker

Nancy Rappaport, MD, is an assistant professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, an attending child and adolescent psychiatrist at Cambridge Health Alliance in Massachusetts and the author of the memoir, *In her wake* (www.InHerWake.com). E-mail: nrappaport@comcast.net.

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“To the Marrow”: Engaging With Nancy Rappaport

By Isabel Amorous, MA

I heard Nancy Rappaport speak in a radio interview about the guilt feelings of children who have lost a parent which can be so deep they “go to the marrow” (Rehm, 2009). Those words, spoken by someone who has lived them as well as understands them as a psychiatrist, reached straight to my own marrow. I lost my mother when I was the same age as Nancy, age four, not to suicide, but to alcoholism, drug addiction, and divorce. As a young child, I could not have realized that I was in the predicament of having become my mother’s caretaker as well as in the confusing position of not knowing that she would never be available to me as a mother.

At the time of Nancy’s interview I was working on my master’s thesis. Like Nancy’s book, my subject was exploring my own personal issues of grief and loss. As a death educator, I had chosen to do this in order to meet the ethical mandate to do so, as well as to meet the need for self-care as identified in my profession. Romanyshyn (2007) speaks of a person on this type of journey as a wounded researcher. This passage is exquisitely apropos to Nancy’s work:

In the shadows of history, in earshot of those unfinished tales, we live our lives and think our thoughts in the presence of a haunting absence. ... Claimed by a work through his or her complexes, the wounded researcher sees the work through the lens of those ancestors who linger with their still unanswered questions, the ancestors for whom the wounded researcher becomes a witness and a spokesperson (Romanyshyn, 2007, p. 65).

I quoted Nancy in my thesis in the context of examining young fictional heroines navigating grief and loss. One such heroine, Elphaba, from the novel *Wicked* (Maguire, 1995), inquires into her life as if “trying to see around the edges of a mirror” while hoping that beneath what she felt was an “unbreakable contract of guilt and blame there is always an older contract that may bind and release in a more salutary way. A more ancient precedent of ransom, that we may not always be tormented by our shame” (p. 383). I think that “older contract” is the love within us that fuels our passion to search for what is lost, to follow an inner calling for connection and wholeness.

Nancy spoke in the session about the importance of building a narrative, and later in our interview she emphasized that it is not a narrative of truth we construct, but of meaning. She illustrated this point when she talked about how she was wary of information she acquired from her father and others about the past, because it was not her own. Although Nancy’s story and my own are very different, they are strikingly similar in import – a life spent in “looking,” sleuthing clues from the barest of material artifacts, standing up to the ravages of guilt, doubt, and confusion, and cultivating the well-earned wisdom and freedom that is born of the necessity to write our own stories.



Left to right: Isabel Amorous, Nancy Rappaport, Kay Fowler

Nancy is a true heroine in her own life. She has wandered dark forests, mined compelling mysteries, faced fearsome challenges, and emerged to tell us her tale – a tale of determination, resilience, and love. Her courage has strengthened my own. It was a privilege to meet her, and I look forward to the tender riches I know I will find in savoring her book over the summer.

References

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