THE MOST ORDINARY OF DEATHS: MADELEINE L'ENGLE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL EXAMINATION OF THE DEATH OF HER MOTHER

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Madeleine L'Engle is foremost a writer. For over fifty years, she has written in a wide range of styles including science fiction, poetry, prose, plays, religious devotionals, collegiate journals, and autobiography. L'Engle's descriptive and personal narratives effectively reach across the generations, constantly shifting audiences from children to women, and from the Episcopalian community to academia. Her necessity to write amidst and about all seasons in life led to the composition of an autobiography based on her journals about the process of watching her mother die from atherosclerosis at age ninety-two. *The Summer of the Great Grandmother* is an extremely revealing and reflective autobiography, a poetic and gentle retelling of how L'Engle approached the final summer of her mother's life in 1974. She composes her autobiography by retelling family stories in non-linear fashion that revisit her childhood and adult experiences with her mother and other family members in order to discover her place in the family tree. L'Engle thoughtfully constructs layers of cross-connected experiences to demystify the moment of her mother's death using the strength of her Christian faith, the act of naming as self-identification in the larger family tree, the use of objects and her family's tradition of storytelling to reexamine the course of her mother's life, and the process of writing as catharsis. Through the sequence of self-exploration, L'Engle connects herself to the larger universe using the physical death of her mother to contextualize and better understand the meaning of her own life.

L'Engle sees herself as a woman viewing "death as the most ordinary thing in the world" and that "the most ordinary of deaths is the death of a parent" (29). Throughout her memoir, she is searching for her place in the world at large, but also in context to how she fits within the wonderful peculiarities of her own family: she is a soul searcher looking for the meaning of life as it relates to death. L'Engle hypothesizes that "there is symbolic meaning to being with a person you love all the way through to the end; there is validity in waiting while the coffin is let down into the open grave, in honoring someone's mortal frame all the way" (240). In helping her mother approach death, she seeks to memorialize her in a way that allows memory to transcend remembrance until it is manifested in a tangible quality that

resonates in her own life. L'Engle candidly writes that her "memory of Mother, which is the fullest memory of anybody living, is only fragmentary. . . I want to believe. . . that no atom of creation is ever forgotten by [God]; always is; cared for; developing; loved" (235). She is a writer on a quest to find her place in the cosmos, to incite personal growth, to memorialize her ancestors, and to know and believe that she is loved by God. In doing so, L'Engle reaches out to people universally. Although her autobiography is foremost told as a daughter's story with many anecdotes from her own family stories and the practice of her Christian faith, L'Engle seeks to reach "people of all kinds, colors, ages" in order to discover herself more fully (239).

The fact that L'Engle shares her first name, Madeleine, with many other women in her family, enables her to look back throughout the family history in ways that connect her to dead relatives. Herein, she anticipates her own mother's view on mortality: "Perhaps the great-grandmother [L'Engle's mother] is as much afraid of the violence of a new birth as she is of the act of dying" (73). Following birth we are all *named*, while following resurrection, in the Christian faith, comes renaming. The earthly act of naming with its identifying nature and personalization often has its roots in genealogy. For L'Engle, *naming* as a means for connection to the larger familial whole functions as a way to create closeness to her mother. She recalls, "Mother's name, like mine, came from her maternal great-grandmother" (165) and the name Madeline was shared and passed through "four-generations" (4). Inheriting the name *Madeleine* created a strong sense of family connection in L'Engle because the string of pre-*Madeleines*, including her mother, supported the younger, living *Madeleines* in an ever growing, ever dependant constellation of daughters, mothers and grandmothers. The impending death of her mother forces L'Engle to connect the living *Madeleines:* To this she writes, "There is a chill and empty feeling within me; nevertheless, there is something that impels me to put my arms around the Madeleine who is ninety and the Madeleine who has just turned three, and say, 'Don't be afraid. It's all right'" (73). L'Engle connects this further by pondering, "How many people have been born, lived rich, loving lives, laughed and wept, been part of creation, and are now forgotten, unremembered by anybody walking the earth today?" (235). The act of naming helps to lay bare the fear of being forgotten by creating an inter-connectedness between generations past and future.

The death of her mother prompts L'Engle to review both of their lives by first looking at old family photos and then recording family stories passed down for generations by word of mouth, and thereby, inadvertently elevating her mother's legacy. L'Engle also examines her association to her mother and extended family in context to her name and how it relates to her legacy. The maternal grandmother, for whom she was named, "probably had the strongest influence in [L'Engle's mother's] life. . . and spoke most often of Mado when she was depressed because Mado, even in recollection, brought the gift of laughter" (164-165). Similarly, Karen Kranz and Judith Daniluk suggest that most women see the "importance of keeping their mothers' legacies alive in their lives and the lives of their children" (16). This act of preserving one's legacy forces mothers and daughters to draw closer and know each other intimately.

In their article, "Gone But Not Forgotten: The Meaning and Experience of Mother-Loss for Midlife Daughters," Kranz and Daniluk report on a study about "how women in midlife experience and meaningfully construct the recent death of their mothers" within a 2-5 year period post-mortem (1). They found that "many of the daughters (in their study) reflected on how often they tried to define themselves as being different from their mothers. However, after their mothers were no longer part of their lives, they found themselves striving to integrate aspects of their mothers into their own identities," thus resulting in a self-constructed maternal legacy (12). Legacies provide a way to pass on a piece of ourselves to the future generations and also impart genealogical family wisdom and anecdotes. L'Engle speaks of the "fourth generation [of Madeleines]" in the sense that her name is connected both backwards to her mother and grandmother, forwards to her granddaughter, and perhaps even to her unborn great-grandchildren (4). This creates a unique and particularly rooted connection between name and legacy.

L'Engle approaches her mother's mortality by using objects and storytelling iconically in order to carry out what Irene Quenzler Brown terms as *mourning practices.* Brown believes that the process of grief "can be a good one only if we have our own survival routines. Each one of us must manage to find a time of solitude and privacy" (46). However, societal dictates often try to force inappropriate or generic *mourning practices* upon us. In their article, "The Social Context of Grief Among Adult Daughters Who Have Lost a Parent," Jennifer Klapper, Sidney Moss, Miriam Moss and Robert L. Rubinstein describe the *transition* of losing a mother as

being socially motivated. They discuss the way that social trends affect the "transition and expression" of grief and how the "socio-culture milieu" influences our responses when grieving (31). We are taught that grief must follow all things "proper" in order to be conquered. Far too often, individuals use the mass society to inform the ways that they process their personal losses (Klapper, et al 30-31).

For L'Engle, societal influences are not as impacting as are familial and faith traditions in the formation of her *mourning practice.* By using self-writing as an integral part of the mourning process, she is enabled to anticipate, accept, process and reexamine the death of her mother by looking at how her mother faced death. Recalling the pleasure her "well-read" mother took in memorizing and retelling stories "ranging from Plato and the Bible to romantic novelists" helps L'Engle begin to accept her mother's impending and eventual death because she understands that her mother has lived a personally satisfying life (187). L'Engle analytically describes her mother's "Bible, some yellowed letters, a few pieces of once beautiful furniture… the mystery of ousia which helps me to see a little more clearly through the dimness of human understanding" (181). These mementos became the key objects that help ground L'Engle's beliefs and values because they function as iconic and symbolic thereof.

In her essay, "Death, Friendship, and Female Identity During New England's Second Great Awakening," Brown frames and uses the term *mourning practices* to discuss the ways that 19th century women approached the loss of a loved one through the study of Mary Hawes, the daughter of a missionary. Hawes uses the date on a pin to separate her "childhood, maidenhood, and family of origin" in a way that acts both as catalyst for time and emotion (368). The pin as object also serves as an intermediary for the grieving process while Hawes deals with the death of four of her siblings. In Hawes' case, the object becomes the connection that memorializes the dead. Thus, the object enables her to construct a unique and suitable *mourning practice.* In L'Engle's case, she states that the act of reexamining "family portraits meant a great deal to me, not as an aide to ancestor worship, but as beacons to guide me" (196). By looking at iconic reminders of the dead, L'Engle, like Hawes, memorializes her mother in context to her place in the larger family using iconic objects.

In seeking to demystify her mother through an authentic and honest assessment of how her mother shapes her own identity through her claim that "the

most ordinary of deaths is the death of a parent," L'Engle merges the experiences of death and self-searching into a type of myth or canonization of her mother (29). This form of maternal assessment could be likened to what Kranz and Daniluk term as a *life review*, and which they describe as being "the need [for daughters] to rework their understanding of their relationships with their mothers after their deaths" (15). They describe the subtle ways that women construct ideals about what motherhood should represent and "their belief that death occurs for meaningful reasons" (8). In this vein, L'Engle believes that part of life's meaning is that "we are supposed to share all of life with each other, dying and decay as well as feasting and fun," and herein she demystifies her mother by viewing her realistically, honestly, and wholly (28).

Kranz and Daniluk would respond to L'Engle's direct examination of her mother's life by explaining this as part of a "process of stepping back and widening the lens [in order to reflect] on the nature of her relationship with her mother and her role within this relationship" (8). In order to lay bare the aspects of her own personality, L'Engle must also demystify her role as daughter and woman in order to "recreate meaning in [her own] life" (Kranz and Daniluk 11). Using this approach, Kranz and Daniluk's research found that the death of a mother can be considered as a "gift in opening the door for her to embrace the spiritual aspects of life" (11). L'Engle does just this: She relies on her faith as she reexamines the meaning and direction of her life in the expressive form of writing as self-examination.

The storing and examination of memories becomes an important part of L'Engle's process for letting her mother slide from tangible, living person into a place of gentle remembrance, and how her faith intercedes in accepting her mother's death. Analyzing memory acts as a key in the process of letting her mother go, and she writes, "When I needed memory of that summer for my story, my subconscious mind, with a porcupine-like flick, flipped it up out of the water for me. And I'm still young enough… that an enormous underwater treasure trove is available to me" (90). L'Engle realizes that her role as a daughter mourning her mother's death, while at a reasonably young age, affords her the ability to tap into the past in order to retell it to her contemporaries and to record it for the future.

During their study, Kranz and Daniluk found that seventy-one percent of their respondents "found comfort in their memories of their mothers and in their belief that they would be together again in the future" (3). Like L'Engle, the women in their study recognized the importance of looking back at the lives of their mothers in order

to gain solace in the aftermath of realizing that, for the first time in their lives, their mother is not a living, breathing part of their world. On this thought, L'Engle writes a faith-based observation that "only death will give me back my mother" (225). What remains in the world after a person dies are the memories of how they lived their life. The responsibility of preserving a mother's memory falls on the surviving daughter who retells recollections of her mother while hoping for a day of spiritual reunion, and L'Engle's belief that death will ultimately act as a conduit for reunion with her loved ones (Kranz and Daniluk 3). L'Engle further concurs with Kranz and Daniluk in their assessment that if the final moment of life is a good one, women who "know that their mother died peacefully without fearfully anticipating her own death helped assuage their sense of loss" (8). In the moment that L'Engle discovered that her mother died she was told, "Grandmother was alive, and then she was dead. I'm not sure how I knew. I just knew. There was none of the pain she had feared" (227). In this, L'Engle is comforted. She visually memorializes the final moment of her mother's life as a good and peaceful one which reads as a nearly indiscernible and gentle transition from one place to another.

Throughout her autobiography, L'Engle weaves recollections of domestic acts, her strong Christian faith, and the ways that her family communicates to paint an incredibly vivid picture of her religious practices and family structure. For instance, she often reflects on how prayer and psalm reading was an integral part at her parents' dinner table during her growing up years. She draws on this familial tradition during her mother's funeral by noting that the "words of the burial service are familiar to me, are part of my roots" (240). In a sense, she is acting in response to what Brown describes as a spiritual *feminine missionary personality*. Brown, in her article, suggests that Mary Hawes taps into this aspect of personality through the faith example provided by her father and "[the] need to examine the meaning of death, whether it signified a final end, a temporary separation, or transcendence for families in the past. Understanding the place of death in the life cycle illuminates not only individual lives and families, but also reveals the interaction between family and society" (368). For L'Engle, the role of family faith traditions, when worked in concert with everyday domestic acts such as eating a meal, sets up a life-long tradition of seeing the importance of simple, almost mystical practices that she draws on at the time of her mother's death. She describes it thus: "This time out of time in the absolute familiarity of the living room is healing and redemptive for me… the

mystery by which I live" (233). Places create memories and people occupy the heart. In this sense, the deeply rooted faith practices of L'Engle's family construct a present tabernacle of refuge and a hope for eventual reunion with her mother.

For L'Engle, the self-revelation and examination of her grief in the present while writing her autobiography and how it relates to her past act as a catharsis. A prolific writer, L'Engle ritually relies on creative writing whenever she wants to contextualize or understand an emotional response to her mother's slow demise. This often manifests itself in spontaneous acts of composing poetry. L'Engle recalls writing "three poems to help push [her] through" the visceral days immediately following her mother's death (240).

According to Annabelle Fersch, one of the essential aspects of autobiographical writing is that the reader becomes "enmeshed in the present of the narrative past . . . for it is only then that the reader can become aware that the narrator is recording the past as [she] perceives it in the present" (69). Thereby, the self-writer must reactivate the re-telling of her own past in order to allow the process of writing to function as something transcendent of the truth of *now*. Throughout the final summer of her mother's life, L'Engle writes her way through the grueling process of watching her mother die ever using a genuine, incisive and intuitive pen. To illustrate this point, she recalls, "I wrote the next day, I know I've left out all kinds of important things. . . and besides we're terribly tired still, emotionally and mentally" (57). Writing about the important things of the truth of now, specifically the death of her mother and her reaction to it, enable L'Engle to be kind to herself during a time of extreme physical and emotional exhaustion.

Although writing is birthed as an interior activity, very personal, and often isolating from others, L'Engle believes that "a story should be something like the earth, a blazing fire at the core, but cool and green on the outside" (137). However, the expression of grief is not always best experienced when "cool and green." It must often become as raw as a "blazing fire." Fersch suggests the importance of achieving an authentic writing "style" and deconstructs the importance of form and the writing voice in her article "V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* and the Art of Re-reading." She suggests that the writer must "assign to a reader only two common characteristics: the ability to sympathize with a character and to get caught up in a story. . . There is a common ground upon which the text can pre-structure the reader's response" (69). This concept easily relates to L'Engle's use of writing as catharsis in that she desires

her reflections and examinations about the loss of her mother to connect to others. Throughout *The Summer of the Great Grandmother*, she maintains a careful balance between sharing eloquent and specific emotional self-revelation with an identifiable style that allows the reader to join in her grief process. In this, L'Engle's catharsis through writing comes from sharing and re-telling the reader about the effects of her mother's death in ways that encourage a shared feminine experience of losing one's mother.

Writing not only functions as a catharsis for L'Engle's grief, but also as a tool to recall her mother. In this vein, she cites the ancient Hebrew belief that the "ultimate hell consisted in being forgotten, erased from the memory of family and tribe, from the memory of God" (234-35). People want to know that their life lessons will be remembered once they have physically died, because the notion of being forgotten and erased from the world is a frightening prospect which elicits a need to preserve our ancestors' stories in the hopes that ours will likewise be preserved by future generations. However, in order to memorialize an individual, it is important have known the deceased intimately and thoroughly.

In their article, "Lifelong Legacy of Early Maternal Loss: A Woman's Group," Cynthia Pill and Judith L. Zabin discuss the ways that women who lost their mothers at a young age were unable to express their grief and desperately looked for ways to construct a picture of their mother or *primary identification object* in spite of a lack of tangible memories. Pill and Zabin suggest that the women in their study group "postponed" the experience of grief because they had so few actual memories that their personal identities were fragmented. Such is not the fate of L'Engle who moved in close relationship to her mother for more fifty years.

Unlike the subjects in Pill and Zabin's article, who were in their formative years when facing the impact of their mother's death, L'Engle's deep sorrow over losing her mother is not triggered by what she calls "transitional moments in life," but rather the loss of her mother when she was a mature woman fits like a pearl on a much larger strand of life experiences (181). The solitary event of her mother's death is not the trigger that causes L'Engle to write a memorial of her mother, but the accumulated wealth of experiences gained through fifty years of knowing her. By reflecting on a half century of shared experiences, she uses autobiographical writing as a preliminary tool in memorializing her mother in order to avoid allowing her mother's life and how it relates to her to become "a tale told by an idiot; forgotten;

annihilated" (235). The need for L'Engle to speak about, and thereby preserve, her mother amidst a time of suffering is not an uncommon reaction amongst women: Suffering is often the only agent that leads women to speak. However, suffering does not lead to an unbridling of L'Engle's speaking-self, but enrichment thereof.

Already a prolific, published author at the time of her mother's death, L'Engle leans on her pre-knowledge of using writing as a means for self-expression and as a coping mechanism for suffering during the time leading up to her mother's death. Furthermore, she relates that even "the psalmist cries out his anguish" (234) and that "the words which come out help to assure me that there may be God, after all" (240-41). In this, she allows her own suffering, and the specific act of writing in response, to shift the trauma of losing a parent into a realm that results in self-actualization, increased reliance on her faith in God, and a more vulnerable speaking self.

Madeleine L'Engle believes that each person has the unavoidable and tremendous ability to cause "ripple effects" in the lives of people around us, and even to those we have never met. By sharing the common story of her mother's death in a poetic and vulnerable way, she imparts her written voice abroad both geographically and for future readers. Her Christian faith inspires her to honor and value the context of her own life as it relates to future *Madeleines* and how it is anchored to the past as known through her mother. *The Summer of the Great Grandmother* is a profound autobiography that chronicles L'Engle's journey of losing her mother and the hope of their eventual spiritual reunion in a way that elicits a very detailed *life review* for both mother and daughter. Ultimately, the *ripple effects* of L'Engle's autobiography tell us that the voices of daughters must continue to be spoken and shared because mothers will continue to die, and through the process of dealing with this *most ordinary of deaths*, daughters must continue to seek out the true voices of their souls.

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