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Two Livestreamed Funerals, a Cancelled Wedding, and the Saving Grace of Poetry

If you're in Brisbane, COVID-19 is the harbinger of livestreamed funerals and cancelled wedding plans and the rise of the people poets. If you're in Papua New Guinea, it's escalating rapidly, and waiting for vaccine doses from Australia, and asking for more medics. Papua New Guinea is the beloved homeland of my mother, and it's never had that strong a health system. COVID-19 landing has laid bare its weaknesses.

With the closing of borders, limiting travel, or limited numbers within a funeral when lockdown happens, livestreamed funerals have become a thing either families organise, or funeral homes offer. I have attended two livestreamed funerals. We attempted to attend three but ended up missing that of my dear cancer-ridden father-in-law due to technical difficulties (a fried and overheated laptop left in the car by his eldest son in grief). It was videoed and sent to us later.

The first was the funeral of an old and revered friend of the family in Tasmania, inaccessible due to travel restrictions. He taught me art as a child and was like an uncle. They began the funeral with no sound, just filming people arriving and doing the usual respects to the family of the deceased and signing the condolence book. This meant conversations could be private. Those of us online left greetings. No one was speaking to us though; although we could conceivably chat to each other, most chose not to. When the service began the sound began. A funeral celebrant welcomed all of us attending in person and virtually. I saw my mother, father, and brother, sitting at the front with the rest of the family. My mother was wearing markers of her Papua New Guinea background, in her heritage and dress. What I didn't see but later heard about was my mother doing a Papua New Guinean dance I think at the graveside to honour our friend, who had taught high school for some years in PNG with his wife.

I couldn't give any comfort to the family or friends, but only join in online tributes, which flowed everywhere online both before, during and after the funeral. So many of our family's friends were there, and it was moving to hear my art teacher's abridged but still very full life story, which he had written himself based on family history. He had known he was dying from a severe illness for some time, and it hit me he would never see first hand the world resolve the pandemic.

The second funeral I was able to attend by livestream was a suicide, although not necessarily pandemic induced. Her moving tribute was written by one brother and read by the other. It honestly but lovingly reflected a vibrant person who loved sunflowers and was caring to family and friends, who never recovered fully from two major loss events in her life. She loved to give sparkles in cards and sing 80s music loudly. Both funerals featured moving slide shows compiled by family.

There are challenges of a livestreamed funeral such as balancing the need for some privacy to grieve for the people in attendance by not miking everything up, and connecting

to the family and friends physically distant. For close family who can't be present, it can feel dislocating to not hear the side conversations, or have people come up to greet you, and only adds to your grief. For those grieving in their lounge room because they cannot fly there due to border closures, they don't feel the closeness of those united in grief. Mind you they don't have to worry about physically distancing at the funeral or worry about what to dress in—black or colours. No one is going to see you.

Weddings! My partner and I were to go to a wedding, on a boat on the Brisbane River, of one of his workmates. I haven't been to one of these in ages, and it was a pleasant surprise to be a plus one to such an elegant event, but then COVID. Now this wedding, like so many others hit by lockdowns, was postponed, then went low key and it wasn't livestreamed. Some people chose to livestream their weddings, especially large and gregarious families, or simply share photographs after the event knowing those closest to them would understand. Bindi Irwin and her beau last year married before the last big lockdown, exclaiming, love wins! (Can you believe it? Now they have their first child and COVID-19 is still not over!) Weddings don't need to be large heavily populated elegant events, they can be small, intimate, and like funerals livestreamed. Strangely intimate, but even more public. And maybe include poets. Truth be known, having a good reason to limit the wedding guest list means couples can include the most essential people first and feel less pressure. For large gregarious families, looking forward to a vibrant coming together of family and friends, though, a live streamed wedding can't ever fully cut it!

The rise of the online people's poet—yes, it's a thing and it's something I personally want to remember. Pandemic poetry. Anthologies of poems and stories in response to the pandemic, zoomed open mikes held wherever people can access the internet! I took to Instagram, decided to put up some poetry spoken word performances about learning to breathe through the stress of lockdowns and the threat of COVID. I sent it to some stressed-out teacher friends. To my surprise Queensland Poetry Festival people were listening, and I soon found myself recording work for "Panacea Poets," one of their projects which included over 40 poets.

Recently the Brisbane Square library had *Volta*, its first public poetry festival reading in a year. It was packed! They do have a reasonable crowd, but this was the capacity of the room under COVID instructions, with a waiting list, and they moved from their usual room into a larger one with the kind flexibility of the library. People were immensely keen to have the in-person vibrations of the human voice reading poetry, not just the Instagram and YouTube performances, as well as see each other.

Zoom is not all bad. We attended a memorial for my father-in-law, who with his family went to live in Tonga for a few years. People from all over the globe who once lived in Tonga, or were presently there, and who remembered him, connected, and told stories. A tribute from the funeral was read. The realisation that we are all one world was palpable this time, more so than in the recorded funeral. The tears finally flowed, and we were able to say goodbye; even with the physical distancing, we felt a spiritual closeness.

And this brings me back to Papua New Guinea, where the fate of the poets must be far from people's minds. Cry My Mother's Beloved Country. And Cry My Beloved World, where people might look upon us Brisbanites as so spoiled, that a livestreamed funeral, missed wedding and poetry could be something we will mostly remember, whilst for them it will be ambulances roaring down the streets and people coming out to clap the health workers valiantly fighting in the days before a vaccine was even on the horizon, or struggling to survive in a Papua New Guinea village or city, with intermittent reliable news on how to deal with a pandemic and too few doctors.