



How a Cemetery Saved My Soul

by Kathleen Davies

Cemeteries are my living symbol. Ironic, I know. Though not entirely. You see, I associate the death symbolism of cemeteries with my ill-fated career in the so-called Sacred Groves of Academe. At the same time, as truly sacred places, cemeteries helped me to survive and recover from the ordeal.

I'm talking about Victorian Garden Cemeteries. Beautiful park-like landscapes designed to evoke the sacred and cultivate the soul. One of those special landscapes that, as Jean Shinoda Bolen so beautifully puts it, "affect us like dreams or poems or music, that move us out of our everyday reality into a deeper archetypal realm."



It all started mere weeks after I defended my dissertation when I moved into an apartment down the street from a cemetery. My friend Jane pointed it out.

“You live near Rose Hill,” she said, with all the bright-eyed ghoulishness of a seasoned taphophile. (Yes, there is actually a term for cemetery enthusiasts.)

“Rose Hill?”

“The cemetery. Don’t you remember how I used to walk there at night? ... You might want to check it out.”

This was my Call to Adventure. And while I was reluctant to hang out there at night with God knew who or what lurking behind the gravestones, I soon began walking in Rose Hill with my dog, Mandy, on a regular basis.

I didn’t think of finishing my PhD as a “little death,” as Gail Sheehy calls those transitions between major life passages. But I felt it. I had loved being a graduate student at Indiana University and living in Bloomington, such a wonderful college town. But now that period was over, and soon enough, I’d have to leave it all behind for a job wherever the fickle Fates cared to fling me. And so walking through Rose Hill Cemetery during this liminal time seemed apropos.

The cemetery wasn’t the only memento mori to pop up that August. There was also a skeleton dancing on the window. A decal of the Grateful Dead logo, complete with roses. Later I discovered the image had been swiped from Edward Fitzgerald’s edition of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. But at the time, it reminded me of my first years of grad school when my boyfriend played his Grateful Dead album so often it became a soundtrack to our lives. Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.

That January, I had an interview at a branch campus in a Rust Belt town in Northwestern Ohio.

“Tell me about Beantown,” I asked the department chair. The campus being on the outskirts, I hadn’t yet seen it.

“According to an article in *Newsweek*, it’s gritty,” he replied. “I’m afraid that’s apt.”

Gritty? Oh boy.

After my interviews that day, I thought I’d better check it out. What I saw as I drove through Beantown made my heart sink. It was a dreary, postindustrial wasteland. “Gritty” was woefully accurate. I couldn’t imagine living there.

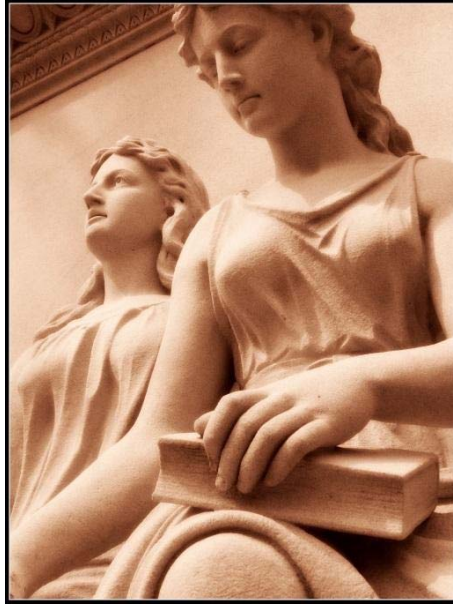
Looking at the map, I noticed a large cemetery in the south of town and decided to head toward it.

Even at a glance, I could see that Woodlawn was more elegant than Rose Hill. This was the Victorian Garden Cemetery I would fall in love with. It had a large stone gateway with double archways, trees galore, and in contrast to the flat terrain surrounding the grounds, gently rolling hills, which were blanketed with snow that winter day. It was clear to me that Woodlawn Cemetery was the best place in town.

“*Thank God!*” I said out loud in the car. *Thank God there’s one spot of beauty in this godforsaken hellhole.*

I got the job, of course, and soon after Mandy and I moved to Beantown that August, we ventured into Woodlawn for the first time. Now awash in green, it was even more beautiful in summer.

When we drove through the archway of the big stone gate, I could feel a shift inside—not just psychological, mind you, but physical, with a *zzzzpt!* running through the core of my body. I had crossed the threshold from the profane world of noisy, everyday goings on into a quiet sanctuary, a sacred “other” space where one could get in touch with more soulful things. I was being initiated into what Bolen calls the Motherworld.



I was also being initiated into Academe. In a few weeks, I would begin my first real job as an English professor. And I was anxious about it. Although my position was at the branch—“the Twig,” as locals called it—tenure would ultimately be determined by the English Department down on Main Campus over ninety miles away. This was something to be nervous about.

Walking in Woodlawn comforted me. Standing at the end of the entrance road was a moss-tinged statue of a woman with arms extended as if to welcome all who entered. The trees themselves—so many, and so many types!—seemed to embrace me. There were a few other statues—women mostly, which is what gave Woodlawn its feminine, even maternal character—and over twenty mausoleums, many with stained glass windows. And I found words of comfort. Carved into the top of the massive Brice mausoleum were encouraging words that seemed to counter the snarling lions’ heads atop the holding vault across the path, along with my fears.

LET NOT YOUR HEART BE TROUBLED
NEITHER LET IT BE AFRAID

The grounds were extensive compared to the cemeteries typical of most small cities and towns. More park than cemetery, I marveled (which is how I justified going there to those I told about it). There was even a small lake along the back, sphinxes guarding a mausoleum in the small Jewish section, a bridge passing over one path. By the time Mandy and I walked across it to head back to the car, I felt blessed beyond measure to have found this beautiful, numinous place.



Anyone who has endured it knows how grueling life on the tenure track can be. I was expected to produce a publishable, book-length manuscript of literary criticism—on women’s literature, in my case—in addition to teaching numerous literature courses, most for the first time, and serving on various committees. And remember, I had to prove myself worthy of tenure to two sets of colleagues—one at the Twig and the other on Main Campus, where I had to make myself known. Doing feminist criticism in the 1990s was extremely difficult to negotiate, especially with my colleagues who were fixated on postmodern theories. And of course, one also had to be adept at playing politics—not my forte. In fact, my second year, I had inadvertently managed to alienate a male colleague on Main Campus who ended up becoming departmental chair a year later. But the challenges go even deeper for women in Academe where, as Jane Roland Martin has shown, we often feel like strangers in a strange land. Despite inroads by women, Academe was (and still is) a patriarchal environment in which masculine values dominate and the feminine are devalued or simply misunderstood and ignored. On almost every level, masculine and feminine are out of balance.

Whereas I had once thought the Groves of Academe sacred, I now knew they were anything but. In fact, now they contained my Adversaries. Whereas Woodlawn was the true Sacred Grove. My refuge. A lush counter-landscape to the patriarchal world and spiritual sterility of Academe. In contrast to the sure rationalism of the Ivory Tower—the realm of the non-rational (a very different thing, as Rudolf Otto noted, from the irrational), the mysterious and unknowable. Against the purely secular—the numinous, the sacred, the holy. Against cool, detached intellect—effusive emotion, sentiment, melodrama. Against the deconstruction of transcendence, the promise of it instead.

Be that as it may, I still had to inhabit the inhospitable world of academia. And by year three, the florid epitaph of one old tombstone began to hit home.

In
 Memory of
 Mary Baker
 who died
 Aug. 2, 1838
 Aged 29 years, 6 mo.
 & 22 days

*

Her languishing head is at rest,
 Its achings and thinkings are o'er,
 This quiet immoveable breast
 Is heaved by affliction no more.

Poor afflicted Mary. I could relate to her despite our very different circumstances. *I* felt afflicted. I felt exhausted. I felt alienated. I felt *dead*.



One evening soon after I submitted my materials for the tenure review, Mandy and I were walking in Woodlawn when I had an epiphany. Mandy was off chasing a squirrel while I stood staring at a section of tombstones, thinking of all the sacrifices I had made for my career, when it hit me:

Oh my God, my life is a cemetery!

The revelation prompted a vow: *I'm going to write about this someday. Whether I get tenure or not. And I'm going to take photographs to accompany the chapters.* I would learn to

use my husband Ben's manual Nikon. Maybe I'd even learn darkroom technique so I could print and tone them myself.

Woodlawn Cemetery had become my Muse.

My plan was to write about the losses I'd suffered over the previous five and a half years, each chapter a tombstone in the cemetery of my life. But my Muse had other ideas. She wanted me to celebrate the positive force the cemetery had become in my life. How it had become a *living* symbol.

That October, I was denied tenure not by my Twig colleagues but by those on Main Campus. It was at this point that my odyssey—or *oddysey*, as I like to call it—truly began.

At first, I visited cemeteries near Beantown. Once Ben and I moved to Columbus, my treks expanded. While looking for another position, I was collecting unemployment for a quarter and so had extra time to take excursions out of town. Over the next few years, I visited over fifty cemeteries in Ohio and a few beyond. I was obsessed! Obsessed with finding Victorian Garden Cemeteries like Woodlawn and also statues—particularly women statues, which I photographed obsessively, often taking extreme close-ups of their faces. I couldn't get enough.

I also read about anything relating to death, grief, and loss, spirituality and melancholia. I was undergoing a Dark Night of the Soul, and this was my homeopathic medicine. As Robert Burton wrote in his mighty tome on the subject, "Melancholy can be overcome only by melancholy."



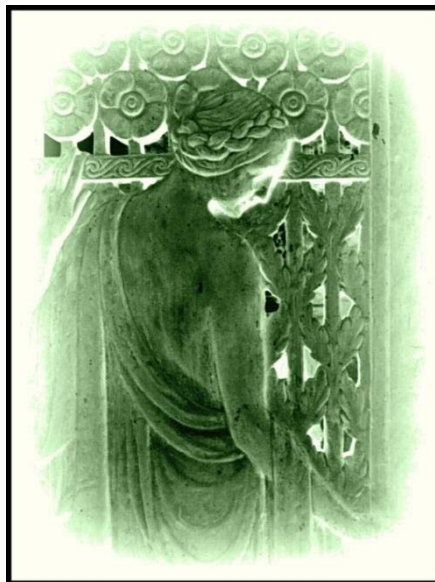
What was I searching for? It seemed like a spiritual mission. My obsession with the female statues reflected my hunger for the sacred feminine, which was so sorely lacking in academia and the culture at large. Finding it in Victorian cemeteries somehow made sense. And since grief is conventionally personified as female (also apropos!), the cemetery statues also reflected the deep sadness I felt about the denigration of women in patriarchy and my own frozen grief. (For some reason, I rarely wept over the denial.) And I was making my descent to the Underworld both literally into the cemetery as a concrete place and figuratively into the

Underworld of my subconscious.

My fixation on images is also made sense. After years of being immersed in words, which Leonard Shlain associates with the development of patriarchy, I had turned to the sustenance of image, the language of prehistoric goddess worship.



But of course, I was writing about my odyssey, which proved to be another form of circumambulation. What did the cemetery mean to me *personally*? Why was I *obsessed*? These were the questions my living symbol now begged me to answer. And answering them was my quest.



I stood looking out the back door, once again trying to understand what had eluded me.

What is it? What is it that I've forgotten to unbury?

I felt like I was beating my head against a wall. I needed to find answers so I could finish the book, forgetting that I most needed the answers for my own spiritual growth.

That afternoon, I had said to Ben, "I just don't understand why I'm so obsessed with cemeteries. Woodlawn in particular."

"I think Woodlawn represents all that you lost in Beantown," he said. "Beantown was the last place where you had stability. You had a good job that you loved. Colleagues and friends. You made a decent salary. You had status. And Woodlawn was the place you were most attached to there."

"Yeah, I suppose so," I'd replied.

I knew there was more to it. Something more personal than a job. More fundamental.

Mulling over my frustration that evening, I started crying, then hyperventilating. The more I gulped for air, the more agitated I became. Before I knew it, I was having a panic attack.

After it passed, Ben gently suggested I lighten up.

"It seems to me, you're putting a lot of pressure on yourself," he said. "You need to rest. I thought that's why you took the summer off from teaching. You should do *nothing* for the next two weeks."

He was right. I was putting tremendous pressure on myself. I might as well have still been on the tenure track. I felt I had to prove myself—to my former colleagues, to my family, especially my father, to myself. In fact, it seemed I'd felt I had to prove myself my whole life. But what I really craved was unconditional acceptance. Suddenly I remembered that the first chapter I'd drafted was "The Buried Child," the strange title seeming to bubble up from nowhere. Maybe what I needed most of all was self-acceptance.



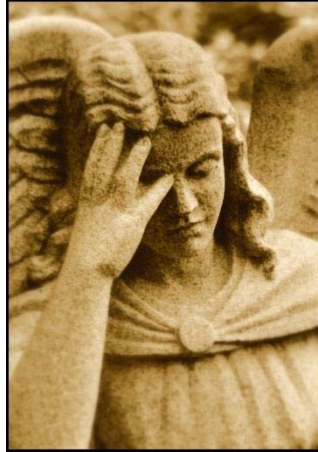
I wasn't able to do nothing, as Ben had prescribed, but I did manage to put aside my writing and read instead. I discovered Maureen Murdock's *The Heroine's Journey*, which proved invaluable. According to Murdock, the connection for women between death and male-dominant professions such as academia is not all that unusual. Women who have dedicated their lives to succeeding in male-dominant professions often reach a point of such profound disillusionment and personal loss that they must undergo a psychic death and, enacting the myth of Demeter and Persephone, descend to the Underworld of their subconscious in order to recover the sacred feminine and reclaim themselves. During this process, they may dream of cemeteries and other emblems of death. Wasn't this something like what I had been through? It was as if my subconscious had been turned inside out.

In yet another stunning synchronicity, Robert Johnson's memoir, *Balancing Heaven and Earth*, came in at the library. Having requested it months before, I'd forgotten about it.

Johnson's memoir introduced me to the technique of active imagination—a self-induced trance for dialoguing with dream figures and the subconscious, a means of traveling to the Underworld. Why not try it to help me understand my obsession with cemeteries?

I went upstairs, drew the blinds, and lay down on the bed, then closed my eyes and let the images come . . .

I find myself in the Mansfield Cemetery, walking down the entrance road toward the life-sized angel who stands before an enormous cross. But about halfway there, my attention is drawn to a different angel, one I have shot numerous times from various angles. She is a grieving angel, lost in contemplation, her bowed head propped up by fingertips on her forehead and a thumb against her cheek, a melodramatic gesture suggesting a grief too heavy to bear. She is one of my favorites, and I am tempted to go to her, but intuition tells me to continue on.



When I reach the angel who stands before the cross, I feel myself pulled to a tree some yards away. Under the tree, I start digging until I uncover three objects: a white death mask of a woman's face, eyes closed; a cage with a mouth in it, the lips parted, as if poised to speak; and a large black fountain pen, its tip enclosed with the cap.

I ask the mouth why she's encaged.

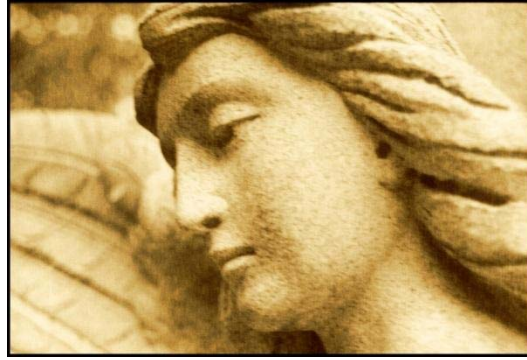
"Something happened in your childhood. I can't say what."

I am fascinated and stunned. Something happened . . . I can't say what? But I've been over this before. Nothing happened. Or at least I hadn't been abused as a child. And I've come to believe that knowing the origin of the wound is less important than healing. "Please remember," Jung said, "It is what you are that heals, not what you know."

I decide to start over.

Again, I am walking down the entrance road toward the angel who stands before the cross. Unlike the grieving angel, she has a calm demeanor. Her eyes look off into the distance, as though she can see the unseeable. Her commanding stature emanates strength and reliability, while her hand on her heart suggests compassion. She is the ideal guide.

When I reach her, I climb up to stand on the ledge in front of her, just as I have done before to get close-ups of her face, which I'd always thought reflected a desire to merge with her. Only this time, I do. I merge with her, become her.



My Angel Self lifts off the pedestal and moves through the air some feet above the path until I come to a nearby tree, which I sense is my destination. When my feet hit the ground, I know I'm supposed to dig here. I kneel on the ground near the tree and start scooping up the earth with my hands.

I move quickly, with urgency. I dig and dig until I unbury a four-year-old little girl, who is also me as a child. She is crying, both from relief that I have come for her at last and from the hurt she has suffered. Her tears break my heart, make me cry, too. I—the one imagining it—feel her pain.

“Why are you crying, Little Girl?” I ask her.

In between sobs, she tries to explain.

“They don’t want me—the real me—the excited me. I am too much for them. I have to hide, down myself, bury who I really am....”

I cradle her in my arms, stroke her head, and listen.



After we moved to Columbus, I never found a cemetery quite like Woodlawn to continue my circumambulations. But we ended up buying a house next to a lovely park where Mandy and I could walk daily.

One day I discovered that the enormous rock on the edge of the playground was actually a memorial honoring a little girl who died when only six. Connecting me to my own inner child,

whom I rescued in the cemetery of my mind, it felt like another synchronicity. And I thought of the medieval mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg's whimsical depiction of God, which she claimed to have channeled from the Divine:

*I am your playmate. I will lead the child within you
on a wonderful adventure that I have chosen for you.*

And I felt such gratitude for this peculiar odyssey that had been chosen for me and for all that I had gained from it: recovering my little girl and integrating her shadow; rejoining the masculine and feminine, along with thinking and feeling, severed in academia, making me more authentic and whole; connecting me to the numinous and sacred feminine; guiding me to explore symbolism, make art, write. What a wonderful adventure it had been.

Thank you, dear Friend. Thank you, my most special Playmate.

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