

Yesterday it was 60° and sunny, today it is snowing.

“You want to know how I know Dad is here?” I shout up to Ryan through the fat flakes.

“How?”

“This weather is MISERABLE and we’re still out boating!”

He laughs - we position our boats to round the bend of whitewater.

“When I die I want some of me on every river,” he says. “That way I know my friends will always come see me.”

On the left bank of the Lochsa River, a few oar strokes above Split Creek rapid, there’s a granite overhang dripping with chartreuse moss and dark green ferns. Five years ago, Ryan and I scattered some of my dad’s ashes in this grotto. Scattered is too delicate a word. We plonked an entire Ziploc (bag and all) into the small eddy that forms where the granite indents into the cedar-lined bank. Oops. Our hands were cold. It might’ve been snowing that day too. It was a funny moment on a sad day. [This is what I do with the sad though, I turn it in my hands like that ziploc bag until I can find the spark of laughter. I’m scared you’ll pity me. It’s something I’m working on.]

I drive by the grotto often and try to boat into it’s overhang as much as I can. It’s an unchanging corner of rock that I hold my own changing emotions to like I hold up my drysuit to the light to look for holes before the spring boating season.

It’s hard to track grief through your early twenties because everything is changing and there is little normalcy to test your heart against. My dad died when I was twenty. Yet even before his cancer diagnosis, my family was already changing. We were preparing for my brother to graduate high school, my mom’s retirement, and my move into the adult world. I was choosing a college major, changing that major, falling in and out of love with graduate students and ideas of graduate schools and post-college river guiding. What they tell you: losing a parent changes your life. What they don’t tell you: all your life is changing in your early twenties.

When my dad was first diagnosed with a brain tumor, I used counseling resources at the Tamarack Grief Resource Center. It was a responsible step for a responsible kid - if I was going to try to balance school and my four-hours-away family, I could approach it like I approached my chemistry tests, right? If I went to a grief counselor once a week I could check that box: “dealing with losing Dad”. Check.

What they don’t tell you but TGRC knew: grief is not a to-do item in a day planner.

I counseled, I grappled, I discussed and I learned. Then I graduated college and did what college students do: figured I was ready for the world and had it all figured out.

Three years later, I found myself at a fishing access site near Missoula, snot nosed and sobbing. It was one of those sunshine dazed autumn Montana days but I couldn’t feel further from the weather. I had messed up what should’ve been a solid relationship with a kind boyfriend. I had a job lined up following my river guiding season but the thought of starting it made me want to drive fast down the highway in the opposite direction. I was back in Missoula, a community I had loved, but had few close friends still in town. I was exhausted from a season of multi day guiding and exhausted by the prospect of starting everything over, again.

And suddenly I wasn't just crying for my broken relationship or lackluster autumn job. I was wrecked because my mom had remarried that summer, because I never called my younger brother anymore, because I wanted so badly for my dad to hold me in a hug the way he had when I was seventeen and my heart had first been broken by a boy. People say, when you can speak of a deceased parent with compassion and joy, that you are strong. But they didn't see was that my "strength" and pride were breaking me. I had thought that because I had experienced the ultimate grief before twenty, nothing could hurt me again.

I called Tamarack Grief Resource Center and because my pride wouldn't let my heart show, calmly explained that I was just "feeling a bit lost and missing many people and figuring that maybe it wasn't direct grief but I felt unable to make any decisions and sad and I just wanted someone who already knew the story, who I already trusted." I said it was no rush and waited a couple weeks for that first appointment. The visit penciled into my day planner kept me getting up each morning and moving forward into rebuilding my world. If I didn't feel like I had a grip on my life today, I at least knew I would after that session.

And this time, as I sat on that comfy couch and wrapped my hands around hot mugs of tea and rambled about honoring my dad through my work and my indecision in my career and the men I dated, I wasn't trying to fill any check box. I knew I might be on that couch year after year - because losing a parent you love is not a box made of pen on a lined page.

Losing someone you love is a huge, gaping, recirculating hole-wave on the Lochsa River. You don't boat into that wave knowing you'll be okay. You boat into it with your personal flotation device and well made oars in your hands. You trust the person you are boating with to help you if you get stuck. You approach that hydraulic of grief fearfully but with the understanding that if you can push through the whitewater you might arrive in the still place by that rocky grotto. You might end up where you feel the presence of the person you miss most. And just because you have reached the still place once doesn't mean you are able to skip the waves next time.

Rivers make easy metaphors. What I am saying is that Tamarack Grief Resource Center is one of my pieces of safety equipment. That I could call a counselor who remembered my story helped pull me from that grief hydraulic far more swiftly than I could swim out alone. I'm saying that creating a consistent and reliable home for a grief resource center is important in communities like ours. Missoula is full of seemingly strong, independent, adventurous and brave people. We figure that because we throw ourselves into adventure sports we are brave enough to face grief. But that's like saying because you can row class IV whitewater you are also qualified to ski the moguls at Snowbowl. Both take bravery, but also an entirely different set of gear and athletic skills.

When I am eighty years old, I hope to still be rowing into snowflakes and the green waves of the Lochsa River to say hello to the family and friends that rest there. But as brave and wild of an old woman as I might be, I'll likely also need that couch. I'll need that listening ear and that mug of hot tea. I believe in Tamarack and believe in their services that often follow community members from their childhood and beyond. Like my flotation device, Tamarack helps me believe that if I'm knocked into the water, my head will emerge above the surface. Tamarack helps me both row into the waves and appreciate the stillness of the pools below.

On a river guide budget, I donate all I can to Tamarack's relocation. I hope you will too.