



*Mary Delany and some very good grief*

By Laurel Moffatt

Grief is something sadly universal to human life, and in our present moment, it's all too insistent in making itself known. Many are grieving these days: Illness. Loss of friends, lovers, family members. The loss of time. The rumbles of war. The question is never whether grief will ever arrive in our life, the question is what to do with it when it does.

As something of an answer, I'd like to tell you about one woman and her grief, and what was created from it.

[18th c harpsichord music - George Frideric Handel, *Keyboard Suite No. 2 (set 1) F Major, HWV 427: IV. Allegro* - allow it to intro and then fade into background for the next paragraph]

Mary Delany (nee Granville) was born in 1700 to an upper class family in England. Her life spanned the 18th century. She knew Handel and Hogarth, she was friends with Jonathan Swift and was for a time, a love interest of Lord Baltimore.



However, her acquaintance with the glitterati of her age did not remove her from suffering, nor from the hardships particular to women of her era.

*[wedding vows - 1662 prayer book - Dearly beloved...to have and to hold]*

When she was far too young her family married her off to an unkind man far too old.

*[sound of writing a letter - scratch of quill on paper]*

She describes her state later in life in a letter to her friend, the Duchess of Portland that she 'was married with great pomp...[and] lost, not life indeed, but ... lost all that makes life desirable – joy and peace of mind.' It was a kind of grief.

And then, early one morning, *[sound of curtains being drawn on curtain rods]* she awoke to discover that her husband of seven years had died in his sleep right next to her. She was 24 years old.

Her life was emotionally-fraught while her husband lived, and financially-strained once he died. She'd been married off by her family for money, only to find once he'd died, he'd left it all to a relative, leaving nothing to her besides a meagre pension.



Despite the financial straits she found herself in, the death of this husband did not send her into mourning, but in a way, released her from it. This death was not the occasion of her transformative grief. Her deepest grief was to come, in time.

For almost 20 years she lived a vibrant life as what you call, a merry widow. She was a prolific letter writer, writing six volumes of letters, many of them to her sister, Anne. From them we learn about:

18th-century society and life,  
her interest in botany, gardening and a range of handicrafts,  
her faith in God,  
her devotion to her friends and family,  
her introduction in her 30s to Swift's close friend, Dean Patrick Delany,  
his proposal of marriage (it's a beautiful one, by the way),  
her acceptance,  
her marriage to him at the age of 42 and her move with him to Ireland,  
the joy that that marriage was to her,  
the illness and untimely death of her sister,  
the financial difficulty that she and the Dean found themselves in,  
and finally, the death of her dearest friend, her husband.



Her two closest relationships were with her younger sister, Anne and her second husband, Patrick.

If you have a sister, you might find yourself wishing you could be as close to your sister as Mary was hers. And it's impossible not to admire, maybe even desire for yourself the kind of friendship she had with her second husband.

*[harpichord music fading into an echo or feeling far away]*

Grief is an emotion of deep sorrow felt because of great loss. It is the flipside of love once you lose it. It's only natural then, that she would feel so deeply the loss of those dearest to her.

Scientists who study grief know that it is an emotion not just experienced in our minds, but also in our bodies. It is an absence that makes its presence felt. So much that we feel it in our bones. In the tightness of our jaws and chest. We carry our grief with us. And some of us can carry it for a very long time. Grief can cause the brain to flood our cardiovascular and immune systems with stress hormones. This can affect the beat of our hearts, the way we take breath into our lungs, even the steadiness of our hand as we hold a pen and attempt to write.



Molly Peacock, the poet and biographer of Mary Delany, observed this change in Mary Delaney's handwriting after the death of her husband, how shaky the writing was, how rushed and haphazard it had become.

The letters reveal “the physical fact of her mourning, the tactile evidence of degeneration of nerves, coordination, poise, perspective, life-force.” (p 294)

According to grief counsellors, the best way to deal with grief is not to ignore it or push it away, but let it stay, give it room, let it speak for itself. This current medical advice echoes the advice of Malcolm to Macduff in Shakespeare's

*Macbeth*:

[to] Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak  
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.

In other words, a good grief is an expressed grief. But if we do give it words, what might it say? What did it say to Mary Delany?

Four years after her husband's death, the twice-widowed Mary Delany went to visit her friend the Duchess Dowager of Portland. She was 72 years old, and had been grieving for a number of years.

During this visit, a stay that lasted months, while recovering from an infection, Mary Delany noticed something on the periphery of her grief, [*Handel*,



*Chaconne in G Minor, HWV 486 - a version that isn't too fast at the beginning*  
the colour of a geranium petal as it lay on an ebony table.

There was some paper laying to hand in a similar shade. As were her scissors. She took up the scissors and the paper, [*sound of snipping paper - small cuts, not long cuts - along with the harpsichord music*] and made a cut. And another. And another.

And then, through the arrangement of fragments of paper, [*sound of small pieces of paper on paper*] Mary Delany assembled a portrait of a scarlet geranium, and a red lobelia, each made of countless shards of cut paper laid and fixed on a cotton rag background steeped in black ink.

In doing so, she “invented a new way of imitating flowers”, as she says in a letter to her niece. This is an understatement. What she invented was an entirely new form of art.

But Mary Delany also created this: an example of looking at things, of seeing them, but perceiving them in an awe-filled way. She had written to her sister years before, “I hope it is not only the beauty and variety [of the natural world] that delights me; as it is impossible to consider their wonderful construction of form and colour, from the largest to the most minute, without admiration and adoration of the great author of nature.”



When she looked at a flower, really looked, she saw two things at once. She had a kind of double-vision, clearer than physical sight. She saw both the plant, and the one who had made the plant. And I think she had this way of seeing double in both her art and her grief.

Over ten years, in the last years of her life, as her eyesight continued to wane, Mary Delany completed almost 1000 portraits of flowers. 985 to be exact. Each portrait is made up of countless slips of paper that she coloured and cut by hand. Each one a symbol of the fragmentation of the self, of the spirit, that grief can cause, then gathered into an elegant whole. It is a staggering work, one applauded by botanists of both her time, and ours. The number of hours it must have taken her is almost unthinkable in our current age of distraction, and all of them between the ages of 72 and 82. In her introduction to her great life's work the way she saw things is on view, how it was her habit:

"To view with awe the great Creative power  
That shines confess'd in the minutest flower;  
With wonder to pursue the glorious line,  
And gratefully adore the Hand Divine!"  
(p. 341)

This was not craft as distraction, or art for its own sake. It was art as an expression of wonder, of grief, of love, and of thankfulness to God. Mary Delany knew grief, she felt it in her body and expressed it honestly with her



pen, and she managed to hold thankfulness to God in her hands at the same time. And in doing so, she created a work of incredible beauty.

Her flower portraits are still praised, still marvelled over and I can't help but wonder if it's not just the beauty of them, or the ingenuity of their construction, but also her grief and her gratefulness to God, that shines through and draws us to them.

It's enough to give a person hope, to see what she made of it all.

Mary Delany

14 May 1700 - 15 April 1788

Links:

Mary Delany

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/people-behind-collection/mary-delany>

Online collection of the Mary Delany's flowers

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG24891>

Molly Peacock, *The Paper Garden: Mrs Delany [Begins her Life's Work at 72]*

<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/paper-garden-9781608196975/>

Small Wonders Podcast - Season 1 - Episode 6



What do you say to the sufferer? David Brooks

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/09/opinion/sufferer-stranger-pain.html?searchResultPosition=28>

How to grieve well - Advent

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/05/opinion/christmas-advent-pandemic.html?searchResultPosition=30>