

# Retirement: The Prequel

— or —

## Dead Therapist Walking

BY CHRISTINE MACDONALD, LCSW



This piece was presented at a brunch hosted by the NYSSCSW's Met Chapter on April 7, 2019. Christine MacDonald is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist in private practice in New York City with a concentration in treating trauma. She also holds an MFA in creative writing and a BFA in theatre.

### *The Body*

I am getting to the office later and later. I cross the street at Columbus Circle. If it's early enough in the day, I will meet a horse turning the corner, heading to Central Park on his way to work. If I'm lucky, I will be in the crosswalk just as the horse is turning onto 8th Avenue from 58th Street and I can loudly croon Good morning, Gorgeous! to his long and lovely face. But the numbers have started to count down on the crosswalk sign: 17,16,15 . . . They are speeding up, faster every second. My reverie with the carriage horse is interrupted by my panic that I will not get across in time. On this same crosswalk 30 years ago, when I had just moved to New York City, the fancy backpack I had scored at a sample sale in the garment district came undone at the top and fell upside down, spilling its contents onto the middle of the street. It was a bright, spring, Sunday morning; traffic was light. As I stopped mid-crosswalk and stooped to pick up my things, the light turned green. Then red again. The cars, all the cars, not just the ones being blocked, patiently waited for this young woman to gather her belongings, hurriedly, nervously, embarrassed, fumbling, while the world stopped and gave her the time she needed.

It was morning on a Saturday. I was in my forties and I was in no hurry to get anywhere. A feeling that seems irretrievable to me now. The light in the bathroom at that time of the morning, at that time of the year, streamed in and bounced off the black and white subway tiles in my little Harlem apartment. I was putting on my make-up in the mirror, applying my lip liner, stretching my lips out

into a half-smile when I noticed my liner gliding over a series of vertical lines emanating from the borders of my mouth. I stretched into a wide smile and they evened out. I pursed my lips and they became deeply creviced. I stood there for a while, letting the knowledge that I was going to age sink in and that this was the beginning of something I was not ready to grasp.

I wish I could say that I surrendered to that knowledge, bowed to it, took its hand and readied myself for the long series of bodily changes I would experience in the next two and a half decades, but instead, I did not go gently into that good night. I raged. I ran, literally, every day, rain, sleet or snow for three to five miles. I ran in races, keeping a very low New York Road Runners membership number active for many years past my runner's expiration date. Little did I know or even care that my slowing down, my hobbling across 8th Avenue today, with my knees screaming in pain, had had a lot to do with my age-defying running habit. The best laid plans of mice and women . . . Maybe genetics is to blame for my hands not working anymore, my iPhone not recognizing the grooves on my fingertips because they are worn so thin, my fingers aching to hold the pen to write my notes. Or maybe it's just age.

I don't need my knees, my hands, my fingertips to keep working. I sit and I listen. I still have my hearing. My memory is challenged, but I take those painful notes and I remember feelings more sharply than words. I have to get up out of my chair to buzz a patient in and my getting up is slower, as is my shutting the door to begin a session. But should that keep me from continuing doing work that I still love?

### *How Do You Know You're Ready?*

Anne Power writes in her inspiring book about retirement, "In summer, when the windows are open, our cat has the pleasure of choosing when he comes and goes, but the route by which he makes his exit is audacious. As the house has a basement, the ground floor windows open onto a deep drop and the cat needs to jump across



the area and pass through railings before landing safely on the pavement. He must gauge his trajectory to a very precise angle. The clearance between the railings is very slight and to miss would mean a fearful fall down the sheer cliff of the basement wall. Even for a cat, this undertaking requires special concentration and he seems to prefer to jump when no one is around. He is 12 years old. As each summer comes and the windows are left open, I wonder if he will again make use of this route, and a small part of me worries about him attempting the jump and having a horrible accident. How will my cat know when he can no longer risk this leap? When his body is less agile, his eye less sure and his coordination less reliable, will he then have the sense to wait for us to open the front door? Another part of me trusts that it will be easy for him to give up this dangerous jumping because he does not have an ego to manage or a sense of loss or sacrifice. So he will not face the dilemma that many psychotherapists report in relation to retirement."

It was easy for me. My husband has been retired for a few years now. Forced retirement. He was in upper management in a tech industry and they could higher three young people for his salary, so off with his head. Happens a lot. Can't prove a thing. Eerily, it happened to my own father at the very same age. He's been patient, my husband. He gradually adjusted, allowing the stress to leave his body and his soul. He has done well at enjoying himself. He actually found more meaningful work in training to and taking care of Alzheimer patients. I've never seen him so relaxed and fulfilled. But he misses me. We'll be moving this July.

## Denial

I had told my final patient of my retirement in a year. I felt relieved.

Of course, I then set about redecorating my office. I had only been there for 18 years. I went to Ikea and bought four down-filled decorative pillows, two bright gold in color and two cream with gold dots. The gold picked up the colors in the Cezanne print. I moved the couch so it was centered under it. I bought an area rug, gold tones with red and green accents and a sweet, little lamp with a crinkled paper shade and a pull chain. I took two cream pillows from my own home stash to fortify the therapist's chair and to brighten the black depths of its presence. After an extensive search in the neighborhood, since it was Spring and all the dried flowers had been replaced with living blooms, I found some eucalyptus in its natural, muted blue-green and in a dyed dark red and some long, brown, curly twig-like branches to replace the silk flowers in their vase. I swapped the plastic bouquet picture with

a large framed print of Matisse's oranges in a bowl that hung in the waiting room. It hung long on the narrow wall opposite me, on 30-lb. hooks I got at the hardware store.

It all looked so warm and welcoming. (Sigh.)

## Wounded Healers

If we are lucky, open, malleable, we come to grips with our past through our own analysis. We for-give, understand, place ourselves in the context of the trauma of our own families of origin.

"You kids are like a millstone around my neck." Said with tortured grief. My mother could have been a contender. She hated being a mother. Babies, toddlers, young children. Teens. Young adults. Problems with which she could not cope. Let alone the sex she had to have to conceive of them. You wouldn't know it, though, with all the flirting she did with every man who wasn't my father. The piano tuner, the milkman, the butcher. She was young and beautiful, so they were flattered and responded. The milkman's truck would be parked outside of our house a bit longer than any other house. I would come upstairs and find them sitting at the kitchen table having coffee together. Maybe that's all it was. Maybe she was lonely.

I came to understand that my mother's behavior was as a result of her own violent and incestuous home. Her older sister, her only protector, escaped to the convent at the age of 16, leaving my mother, then six, to fend off her drunken brothers and father by herself. Her mother, a fellow victim in her own right, did not or could not protect her.

We come to this profession as "wounded healers." It was my job to navigate my mother's mood swings. To protect, if I could, my siblings in their fear and confusion. To "mother" them in her absence as a mother.

## 3/04/18 Journal

I don't mind staying in now. We currently live on the top floor of a Brooklyn brownstone. It's four flights up if you count the steep front stairs to the front door. It's become a challenge to get up-stairs. It's become a challenge to get downstairs. So I don't mind staying in now. I hope I will be better about going out when the harbor is a five-minute walk from our 1,700 square foot coop on the ground floor of an 1800s church in Gloucester, Massachusetts. No stairs. The beach is a ten-minute bike ride. My husband says that my acceptance is making me feel better about this move. I think partly, maybe, but if trying not to judge myself for who and where I am is acceptance, then I agree with him. It must be grace because it's not me



thinking that I look ok or that looking old is ok and that I'm not as invisible as I feel these days in this city. I'm fat now. Once I don't have to work, I will go swimming every day. The Y has an Olympic size pool and the last time I visited, I shared it with one other woman. It's one block away. I'd like to go paddle boarding in the ocean, once I've regained my confidence in my physical self. Karen, a college friend there, is in a rowing club. Maybe I could join that. It would feel so good to be in shape again and for no reason other than health and happiness.

## *Fears: The Future*

I'm frightened of the future. I don't know how people do much of what they do. Leave home, create families, let them go, work, grow old. Riding a horse is easier. I guess once I could say I don't know how people get married. Maybe other people say they don't know how anyone could ride a horse. And yet I got to do both. Getting older, I hope, is just a phase. I hope I get to do a lot more. We got married so late in life, we still have lots of fun like newlyweds. On a good day.

## *Intimacy*

However, one of my fears is spending more time with my husband. Yes, we have fun, but both of us have been workaholics. The time we spend/have spent together has been in short bursts, week-ends, vacations, hours before and after work. We have known each other as middle-aged people and beyond. Both of us have had full lives independent of one another. When I'm afraid, I think a lot, do a lot of "what ifs" to prepare myself for disasters. When he is afraid, he gets controlling, bossy, pushy even. It clashes with my disaster survival planning. We tried planning to have our new place painted before we moved up. My husband announced that we needed to decide the colors and buy the paint within a week. He gave me a week and couldn't understand why that was unreasonable.

My process was/is to research and research more. Visit Benjamin Moore around the corner and shop, talk to the salespeople, get many brochures of paint colors and textures and then research what colors go with them. One way I relax is to peruse every catalogue that comes in the mail. Well, maybe not the Harry & David or the Florida oranges one, except right before the holidays. Or not the stationery ones. How often does one have to invest in stationery or be in tune with what's fashionable or trendy in envelopes and print types? Not for me, anyway. I keep my eyes on the clothing catalogues and definitely on Pottery

Barn, Room & Board, Restoration Hardware, CB2. I'm looking for a comfortable sleep sofa for our new guest bedroom, a new couch that is built a bit higher for those with bad knees. Catproof upholstery for our two boys. I laugh out loud when I imagine them careening down the long hallway connecting the front of the house to the back. Ha, ha.

The latest wall colors are white. Good. We have had our fun with caliente red walls and an herb garden green kitchen. The deeper research begins. The internet provides many details to consider: will the white walls be in a west or south facing room with access to sun? If so, the white may appear blue or pink and must be complimented accordingly. I could go on. I did in my research. I didn't with him. The conversation went:

Husband: So you can get those colors to me in a week?

Me: No.

Husband: What's the problem? You said we were going with white. How hard can it be? It's white.

Me: (Sigh! Gasp!) I don't think you will ever understand. I don't know if I can even live with you.

That is all I gave him because the chasm between us and how we do, see, feel, know things was so wide in that moment.

## *Loss*

"Grief is in two parts. The first is loss. The second is the remaking of life." —ANNE ROIPHE

## *My Patients*

I told Carolina. She kept a brave face. She deflected. "Oh, you know what I told my old psychiatrist when he retired, 'You can't do that to me!'" Then, in a howl, "You're too young to retire!"

It felt wrong, pretending we would be ok. She threatened to leave immediately, find someone new right away.

I was so sad. I will miss her so much. I will no longer be witness to her struggles, her triumphs. Her rages. Her fragile, I'm ok, whatever(s). I love her like I would have loved a daughter.

It was my first hit like this. She asked me how many patients I have. I kept it vague. Asked her why she was asking. She said she wondered how many times I would have to go through this conversation. Or, my fantasy, how many hearts am I going to break? How will this change who we are going forward? Through a year of the termination process. She wanted me to meet her dog, warning that the dog may not like me since it was so attached to her. Carolina.



Elizabeth Kubler Ross wrote: "The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to."

To whom is this referring? This works for both of us, me as her therapist. She as my patient. We are both suffering the loss. As we both did our work together. We co-created this experience.

I know her dog. I know her sister. Her best friend. I knew her mother and grieved with Carolina when she died. I have known her boyfriends and secretly I am rooting for the one she has now who seems to treat her with love, respect and kindness. Kudos to her. At last. I am losing all those who I know and have known are part of her. Her life. And I am losing the part of me that is part of her life. The part of my life that is her.

"I am less and will be less because I have lost this person," Sandra Beuchler writes. She writes about bearing witness to the everyday losses of our patients' lives. "This . . . awareness . . . is not only a burden. It can also be a tremendous inducement to savor every waking moment . . . It can enhance appreciation of the smaller and bigger miracles of life, the ordinary pleasures so easily taken for granted . . . Sadness is an emotion that potentially binds us together." I need to hold onto that right now. To understand that "[t]he sadness is doing its essential job, of binding me more firmly to life."

I keep singing break-up songs. I keep playing Kenny Rankin's version of Where Do You Start? over and over. Alexa obliges without protest. I don't have to run over to my turntable and reset the needle, risking a scratch, causing a phrase to repeat and repeat until I push the needle through the glitch. This is what I used to do when I was in college, playing break-up songs. And, mind you, it's not only the patient who regresses during/after termination; it's happening to me too. I'm reviewing everything, every choice that I've made, from choosing this profession, to my training, to my interventions, to my own analysis and to who am I and what did I think I was doing stumbling along with these people and helping them to know themselves and to know the experiences of work and love? Was I too crazy? Were my boundaries too loose? Too rigid? Has it been too wrong of me to care so much? Did I get enough supervision? Or the right kind?

My patient, Charlotte, planned to go shopping for her wedding dress. She planned to go alone. Without friends. Without her mother. Definitely without her mother. I offered to go with her. She was so happy. We made plans to meet at Kleinfeld's on Saturday, early afternoon. My group supervision was on Friday, the day before. I told the group of my plan as I began to feel uncomfortable

with it. My colleagues showed their best poker faces but, as we are all skilled at sensing the unsaid, I knew what was coming. And it came. *You can't do this. It is too outside the frame. Get a grip, woman. What do you think you're doing?* This is how I remember it. I'm sure it was addressed in gentle, clinical terms meant to lead me back to my senses and to avoid doing harm to my patient and to our relationship.

I didn't go. I called her and told her I had made a mistake in making the offer and that I had come to believe that it was not a good idea. She accepted my apology and sent me selfies in each wedding dress that she tried on. It took us years to process. We learned a lot.

I don't have children of my own. And as I stand at this brink of my new life, reviewing my old one, there's a part of me that wishes I had gone that day.

I go back to Kenny Rankin. I'm not going to sing to you. I know I'm not good at that! The song begins:

*Where do you start? How do you separate the present from the past?*

*How do you deal with all the things you thought would last? That didn't last . . .*

As I write this, just weeks before I will be presenting it and a few weeks more before I will be ending my practice, I have something I must do. Charlotte is overwhelmed with our ending. She wants me to visit her and her family on Long Island to see their new home. She is sending me daily pictures of her son who I have known since his birth, when I made home visits to his mother who was paralyzed with postpartum. She wants to visit me in my new town. She cries often during our last sessions.

I remember when my therapist would take the summer off and say, "Yes, it's time for me to take care of my own life for a bit." I wondered if I had exhausted her with mine. The seed she planted has grown into an old tree. I understand now what she meant. It is time for me to take care of my life. And somehow, I must convey to Charlotte that I must go take care of myself now. That she has the tools to take care of herself, too. That the "good" mother I have been for her she must be – as I've watched her be to her own son—for herself. I must believe that she will survive and thrive. It is a manifestation of my own healing to believe that. It will be ok. And maybe even good. And may-be even great.

**BUT I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS! WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME IF I LET HER GO? WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO HER? WILL I MEAN ANYTHING AT ALL WITHOUT BEING NEEDED?**

I asked my best friend, Oneida, how she did it. She has been retired for a few years now. She is not a psychotherapist. She was a college professor. I asked her if she feels



---

she has “gone stupid?” “Oh, yes,” she said, “you will miss your colleagues and the lively discussions that fueled your intellect. Yes, you will miss that very much. Haven’t you noticed? When we talk now, I talk about my garden and my dogs and my home improvement projects. It’ll be all right. You’ve worked hard and we still love each other and are still the best of friends.”

I look out at you all today. It is a lonely profession. We work in isolation. When I still have to re-mind my husband why I cannot return his texts, or call him back in a timely manner, about what I want for dinner, I say in my best robotic voice: “I am locked in a room, for nine hours a day, unable to text, email, or phone, using my free minutes to eat some nuts and/or go to the bathroom, sometimes both simultaneously.”

We have to work at staying connected. I will miss you all. I cannot say what, if anything, will re-place you. I will hold onto my friend’s words. We have worked hard and we still value each other and remain the best of colleagues. I hope we will know each other still.

## **Grief**

“You will lose someone you can’t live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn’t seal back up. And you come through. It’s like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly—that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp.” —ANNE LAMOTT

## **Meaning**

Ask a man to tell you about himself and he will say, Well, I’m a doctor, lawyer, postman, dog walker, actor . . . He will identify himself by his profession, his career, his work.

Ask a woman who she is and she will say, Well, I’m married, I’m a mother, I have two children, I come from a big family. She will identify herself by the relationships she keeps.

“Who am I?” I ask at this juncture. At this transition. This ending. This beginning. Whatever this is—this painful, overwhelming, breathless, exhilarating time. Who am I? Yes, the feminine in me identifies with the relationships I keep, have kept (I’m losing all sense of time and tense). And yet I identify with my work, which is all about connection and the dyad of the therapeutic relationship. How will I keep in touch with the world? Delight in the lingo, the slang, the movements of the young people who came to me for my “wisdom”?

Kenny Rankin sings some more:

*Where do you start? Do you allow yourself a little time to cry?*

*Or do you close your eyes and kiss it all goodbye?*

*I guess you try . . .*

## **Leaving New York**

I talked about my morning ritual of greeting the horses on my way to the office. It started my day with a deep breath and a moment of joy and peace. At 4:00 I would hear the clip clop of their steps returning to their stables after their day’s work. I would hear it from my office, high on the 16th floor. Their route home would be one block away on 55th Street. If I happened to be free, or waiting for a patient’s arrival, I would dash to the window to catch them fleeting by. Some tired from their work. Some prancing, head held high, excited to go home. They would cross Broadway in a flash, pulling their carriages, making it across before the light turned. Occasionally, if I had an hour free, I would go up to the carriage line on 59th Street where the horses would wait for their fares. Most would have their two front feet planted on the curb, trained that way to distribute their weight while waiting. I would ask a driver if I could pet his horse. Always, he was delighted, saying, Yes! Sure! I would stroke the horse’s face and place my hand on his long thick neck, absorbing his strength and aliveness.

Today, the horses are no longer allowed to wait on 59th Street. They have to wait inside the park. Eventually they will be stabled in the park. No longer trotting home through the neighborhood. It seems they are lost to me as well. I miss them already. 🐾