



Contemporary Issues **DISCUSSION** **DEATH AND GRIEF**

In the spring of 1846, Nancy Dorsey of Piqua, Ohio, sent a letter to her sister vividly describing the death of her infant daughter and her struggle to come to terms with her loss. *A transcription and scan of the original letter follow this page.*

**All are welcome to a panel discussion of this emotional letter,
the universal experiences of death and grief, and healing after a loss.**

Join in the conversation together with grief counselors, historians, and local community members. Peer counselors from GrieveWell, a local nonprofit that supports people in grief, will be on hand as we explore these topics and the emotions they raise.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 20 12-1:30pm
VIRTUAL MEETING

Please register online (myumi.ch/Lqoje) or call 734-649-3370.



Coordinated by the U-M William L. Clements Library
with generous support from Frank & Judy Wilhelme.
Presented in collaboration with the U-M Eisenberg Institute
for Historical Studies and GrieveWell of Ann Arbor.



Contemporary Issues Discussion Series

Death and Grief

October 20, 2021

Virtual Zoom Meeting

The William L. Clements Library collects and preserves primary source materials for the study of American history, makes them available for research, and supports the investigation of our nation's past.

The letter transcribed below comes from our Women's History Collection, which is comprised of individual letters, documents, and other handwritten items related to women, predominantly from the 19th and early 20th century. Nancy McCorkle Dorsey was around 28 or 29 years old when she wrote this letter to her sister Mary Jane McDonald. She updated Mary on her health, the health of her mother, and their sister's recent motherhood. She also vividly described the death of her 0-3 month-old daughter Lucretia and her struggle with grief. The passages reflecting on her loss begin near the end of page two of the letter.

Note: In the following transcription, punctuation and capitalization have been revised to assist the reader. Images of the original letter follow the transcription.

Nancy Dorsey's letter to her sister, Mary Jane McDonald; Piqua, Ohio, March 1846:

[Page 1]

Piqua March 1846

My dear sister

For the last three weeks I have intended writing to you, every day something would prevent. Untill all this last week, I have been unable by a very obstinate pain in my breast & side, or rather soreness in my breast. I have worn a tartar plaister¹ for the last 4 days & nights, which has relieved the soreness in some measure but not entirely. I will have to have a blister² applied to my side to-morrow, unless it is better in the morning. I think my side was strained or injured last Sunday week by lifting little Mary.³ I felt very sick with acute pain for some time but it passed off[f] thro' the day & I forgot all

¹ Medicinal tartar spread on a bandage and applied to the skin.

² Topical medicine applied to the skin to raise blisters, possibly with the intent of reducing inflammation.

³ Mary Louise Dorsey was Nancy's 2-3 year-old daughter.

about it untill a few days ago. On Monday morning about 4 o'clock I awakened with severe pain & every symptom of Pleurisy⁴ for which the Doct treated me with entire success, for I was well enough to go at 10 o'clock to hear Dr Rice preach. But it returned next morning as bad as ever & has continued so every day, about the same time in the morning. It is discouraging but I hope it will [not] return again so severely as the tartar has made my breast very sore which ought to draw the pain away. I am very anxious to get better on Sarah's⁵ account as she is looking every day to be sick and is so distressed about my not being able to be with her. Mother⁶ has been sick to[o], taken with what I expect will likely be her death, something like an apoplectic fit.⁷ She became nearly blind & was so for nearly two hours. Every minute she thought it would pass off but finally her feet hands & almost her whole body became cold & her head very hot. She sent for Godwin⁸ who fortunately was in the house. He went & bled her⁹ as soon as he could get her into bed with mustard to her feet & ice to her head.

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It was some time before she could see very well. He kept her in bed all day, giving her active medicine. She soon got better but has not yet recovered. Her

⁴ Sharp, stabbing chest pain, especially when breathing.

⁵ Nancy's sister, Sarah.

⁶ Nancy's mother, Margaret McCorkle.

⁷ A sudden neurological malady; "apoplectic fit" may refer to a stroke.

⁸ Nancy's husband, Godwin Dorsey, a physician.

⁹ Bleeding was a medical procedure used from antiquity through the 19th century, in which physicians attempted to cure ailments by removing blood to balance the body's "humors" (yellow and black bile, phlegm, and blood).

head did not feel right. Her neck has been well blistered & she lives very low, nothing but crackers & hot water or very weak tea. It is reducing her to about half her size & will be the only way to keep those fits from returning. Godwin says if she had went a half hour longer she would have had a real apoplectic fit. It alarmed us all when we found how bad she was. Sarah had gone home to stay untill she was over her confinement.¹⁰ She is now grieving because she had moved, for you know Mother will always be on the move when any thing like that is going on the excitement or if Sarah should not get along well will be very injurious to her. Mother would have her home on her own account, as she was not able or willing to be with her or do much for her in an other person's house—besides, their family was so large, if Sally [i.e. Sarah] had been housekeeping it would have been different, poor thing she laments all the time that such is not the case, as her & John would both feel better in their own house. He dont feel at home at Mother's nor she at his Father's. How I wish it was over, it seems I could bear it better if it was myself. She does not know what she has to bear. But if we have such excruciating bodily ←— Death and grief passage begins agony in bearing a little mortal into this world, it is far greater anguish, to see the little immortal take its never-returning flight, to see its little spirit striving to be gone, to see the stretching limb

¹⁰ The following sentences are confusing, but they appear to regard Sarah and her husband John moving between their parents' households during Sarah's "confinement" (the period immediately preceding and during childbirth, and postpartum recovery).

the heaving heart, the faint cry, Oh sister sister
it is agony such as you have never yet been called
to bear. It seems as if my heart will burst when

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its dying hours in all their freshness return to my
mind.¹¹ As its illness was severe & short, its last
moments were dreadful. Oh how much it suffered is known
only to God, but it was a long contest. It was from 4 o'clock
untill after six in the agonies of death, every breath
it drew I prayed may be the last. Its little arms
were often thrown over its head, while every feature
would be distorted untill we would think its
little frame would be torn in pieces, & untill
the last breath, it sent out a feeble cry, what a
struggle. It seemed to me angels were hovering
oe'r it, waiting & witnessing the scene, waiting to
carry the pure soul to God who gave it. You cannot
imagine what I felt, that in a moment more
my precious babe who was so dear to my heart,
so sweet, so interesting would soon know more
than all the learned, the great, good, or wise
it left here on earth, nevermore to feel a pang
or shed a tear. It made me feel how selfish,
how wicked it was to wish to keep it here, when
Jesus loved it as well as I, & could be far more
tender, far more kind. But as he wept at the tomb
of his friends, so does he allow us to weep for the loved
& the lost—not lost, but gone to await our coming.

¹¹ Nancy's loss was very recent; she wrote this letter within 0-3 months after the birth and death of her daughter Lucretia Walker Dorsey.

But Mary, how desolate seems my room, my bed, my
arms, my heart. It almost overcomes my better
feelings sometimes. I long to press again those sweet lips,
to inhale her sweet breath & to see her little outstretched
arms & sparkling eyes. When I had left her for a while
she was exceedingly attached to me for two months before her death
& was not contented with any one else except her father
& of course she was in my arms almost constantly. You will judge
how much I feel the void. But I do desire to feel that God
in his righteous judgment has done all things well, & only
may I be prepared by His Holy Spirit for an entrance

[Page 4]

into that blessed abode where she is now forever
praising God is all I desire. Sometimes I have thought
that this present sickness may be the beginning of
my last sickness on earth—we never know how any
illness will end. I do desire to feel that I love my Savior
more & more & have the witness of the Spirit witnessing unto
my spirit that I am a child of God. Oh sister will you
not pray that I may have brighter evidence a more confident
hope that I am indeed brought from death unto life?
I am afraid sometimes that I have not true religion,
that the hypocrite's part will be mine. That Christ will
at last cast me off. You always seem so calm & firm
in your faith & views, have you ever any doubts or fears?
Often I think perhaps my Father in Heaven has given
me as much as he sees fit, perhaps I am longing for
what would make me to[o] confident or make me
trust in my own strength too much. All I do at
such times is to pray Lord I believe help thou my unbelief.

But sister do pray for me as you pray for your own soul.
My paper is out & I am not half done. But I
have written in much pain tartar is very severe.

[Page Margins]:

The children all send their love to yours. Give mine & Godwins
to your husband. We recd. his kind & affectionate letter. Write soon.

If I get better I will write again soon, as soon as Sarah
is confined in particular. Your affectionate sister Nancy

Dear Mary I feel much better this morning. I wrote this letter on
Sunday, for I felt so very bad that it was not unlikely I should
have been confined to my bed, so I could not keep from writing.

Dr Rice's preaching was blessed by the Spirit to the awakening
of number[s] to their sins—nearly all the Young family,
the old man A[] & all the girls, Elliot's two daughters & many
others. They still continue to hold meeting[s].

Great numbers have been converted in the
Methodist Church W. Leawell, Mrs Hart Collin & John,
Jordon, Matilda, Mitchell & many more. Mary Dayton
was baptized in our Church on Sunday last.

Mother is better.

[Address]:

Mrs Mary Jane McDonald
Care of Rev D. K. McDonald
Cincinnati
Ohio

1946

For the last three weeks I have intended writing to you, every day something would prevent, untill all this last week, I have been unable by a very obstinate pain in my breast & side, or rather soreness in my breast, I have worn a tincture plaster for the last 4 days & nights, which has relieved the soreness in some measure but not entirely, I will have to have a blister applied to my side to-morrow, unless it is better in the morning I think my side was strained or injured last Sunday ^{work} by lifting little Mary I felt very sick with acute pain for sometime but it passed off this' the day & I forgot all about it untill a few days ago. on Monday morning about 4 o'clock I awakened with severe pain & every symptom of Pleurisy for which Dr Doct treated me with entire success, for I was well enough to go at 10 o'clock to hear Dr Rice preach but it returned next morning as bad as ever & has continued so every day, about the same time in the morning it is discouraging but I hope it will return again so severely as the tincture has made my breast very sore which ought to draw the pain away. I am very anxious to get better on Sarah's account as she is looking every day to be sick and is so distressed about my not being able to be with her Mother has been sick to take with what I expect will likely be her death something like an apoplectic fit she became nearly blind & was so for nearly two hours every minute she thought it would pass off but finally her feet hands & almost her whole body became cold & her head very hot she sent for Father who fortunately was in the house he went & bled her as soon as he could & got her into bed with mustard to her feet & ice to her head

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 the heaving breast, the faint cry, Oh sister sister
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 how wicked it was to wish to keep it here, when
 Jesus loved it as well as I, & could be far more
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 in his righteous judgment has done all things well, & only
 may I be prepared by his Holy Spirit for an entrance

to your husband we are all his friends & affectionate friends
 The children all love the love to you & your mother & to be
 into that blessed abode where she is now forever
 praising God is all I desire, sometimes I have thought
 that this present sickness may be the beginning of
 my last sickness on earth we never know how any
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Amos
 Nancy Dorsey
 Sister
 Mary Jane McDonald
 Care of Rev. S. K. McDonald
 Cincinnati
 Ohio

Do not lose

Mr. S. K. McDonald

I am afraid sometimes that I have not true religion
 that the hypocrite's part will be mine that Christ will
 at last cast me off, you always seem so calm & firm
 in your faith & views, have you ever any doubts or fears
 often I think perhaps my Father in Heaven has given
 me as much as he sees fit, perhaps I am longing for
 what would make me too confident or make me
 trust in my own strength too much, all I do at
 such times is to pray Lord I believe help thou my unbelief
 but sister do pray for me as you pray for your own soul
 my paper is out & I am not half done, but I
 have written in much pain & the ink is very scarce