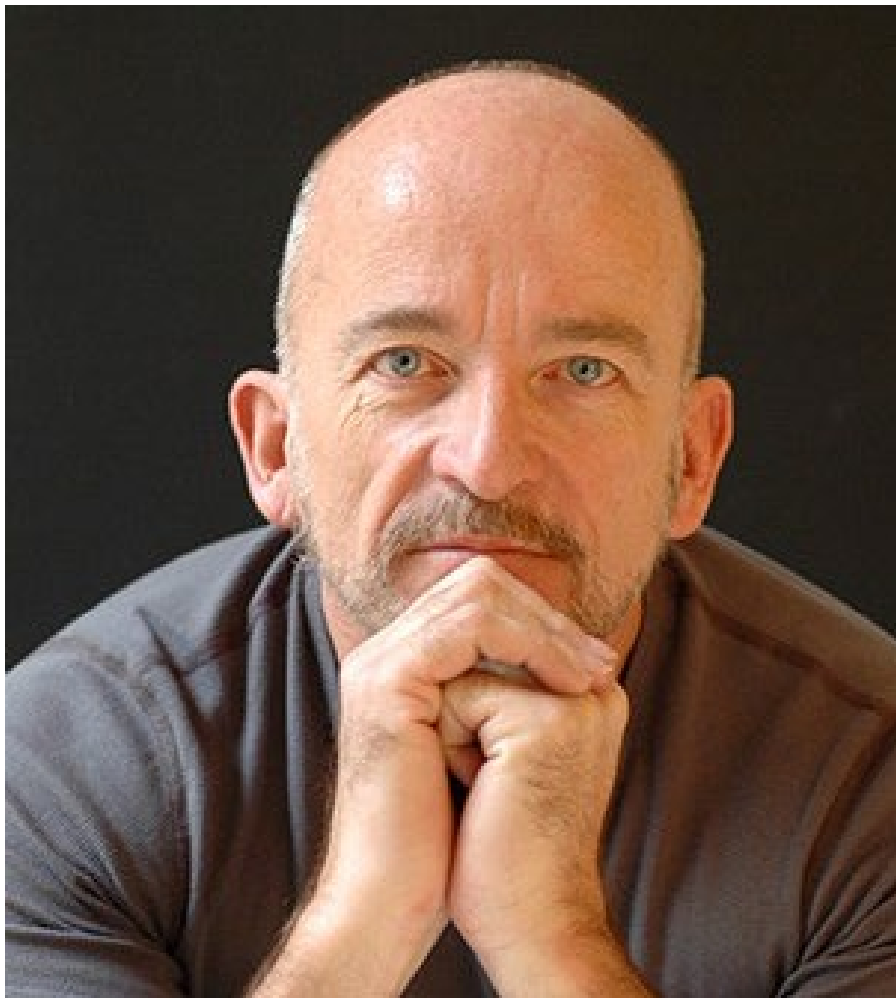


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So what: Pulling meaning from life's losses An interview with Mark Doty

So what: Pulling meaning from life's losses

An interview with Mark Doty

Poet and memoirist Mark Doty was heaved into the world of health care in 1989 when his partner, Wally Roberts, tested positive for HIV. At the time, the diagnosis was a death sentence; there were no treatments for this new disease called

AIDS, and, like many gay couples at the time, Doty and Roberts dug in to weather the inevitable storm.

It was writing about these experiences that Doty credits with helping to ground him during Wally's final days as well as pulling him out of the oceanic turmoil of grief and loss after Wally died. While reluctant to be considered a spokesperson for the AIDS movement or the gay community, the work that emerged out of that personal crisis has inspired readers from all across the spectrum.

Doty has won numerous awards, including the National Book Award for Poetry in 2008. He is also the first American poet to win the T.S. Eliot Prize, Britain's most prestigious award for poetry.

He currently lives in New York City and teaches at Rutgers University. During the fall 2017 semester, while he served as the UVA Creative Writing Program's Kapnick Distinguished Writer-in-Residence, *Hospital Drive* had the opportunity to sit and chat with him about grief, loss, and the redemptive powers of writing.

HD: Your work deals with topics of compassion and the working through of loss and trauma and illness. Help us understand, if you will, something about how you feel about the role of creative writing in helping us as human beings come to terms with these challenges.

MD: In about 1978, I was teaching composition at a community college in Des Moines, Iowa, and I noticed that the students in my expository writing classes who were most invested—those who really understood that the writing process was useful to them as human beings, who weren't doing this just for a grade, who realized something important happened to them when they wrote—the students who most demonstrated this were the nurses.

I was so impressed by the level of urgency and investment in their work, and I thought it had to do with living every day in conditions which, for most of us, would be a crisis, being up against the limits of mortality, of human frailty, and how intense those moments are for their patients and families, and for their fellow professionals who were working with them.

That told me something about the uses of writing, that for people who are in that kind of position, first of all they are able to write with a real sense of necessity, which communicates

itself to the reader. Their writing really did something important for them, too. It gave them a place to concretize their thoughts, to put it on paper, and to shape it more clearly. I think the more we articulate what we feel and what we think, the more real we become to ourselves.

I'm sure you've seen the recent research about creative writing and healing and how people who write poems or fiction or journal entries about their illness and their process of being treated get better faster. This is a remarkable thing. This suggests a way that the mind, the intelligence, the will, the heart are all involved in our healing as much as the more purely physiological processes. I think that's really exciting. This research didn't surprise me at all, but it was wonderful to have those feelings validated.

I had subjects of the body and its frailties and its ability to heal or not forced upon me when the AIDS epidemic began to enter into my life. In 1989, my partner [Wally Roberts] tested positive for HIV, and this changed our lives radically.

It was a few years before he got sick, which was a real blessing for us, to have this time together. We at least could make plans about how to organize our lives in different ways, and we made it possible for him to have a few really good years before he was too sick to do very much.

We moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, a very welcoming place for couples and people who were ill. The town was an artist colony for a hundred years, so there was a gay and lesbian population. But it had been very hard hit by the epidemic, and they had really organized to take care of people. This was crucial for us.

For me, it felt as if the sword that is always over our heads had come that much lower. We all know we're going to die, but we don't usually think about that being next week. We sort of hold that off in some imaginary future. For us, it was still unknown, but it became so much more real.

So during the time when Wally wasn't sick yet and I didn't have to worry so much about taking care of him, I had this strange kind of leisure to think about this question and how it is that we negotiate internally with the fact of anticipated loss. If you know that the person you love most in the world is not going to be around much longer, how do you accept that? Can you love the world? Can you continue your life? Can you enjoy being in the world, if you have that sort of abyss facing you?

So my poems really changed. Up to that point, I had been more interested in memory, in thinking about my family, how I came to be the person I am. All of that fell away. Now I wanted to talk about adult life, our experience in the present, and this struggle to find a position in which you could stand in relationship to impending loss.

Then when Wally got sick—he had a viral brain infection which was untreatable—when he got sick my work changed again. I didn't have the leisure to finish anything. My old habit was to begin a poem and work with it until it was done. Well, I couldn't do that. The living room had become his room, with a hospital bed and dogs and cats and things he loved. It was really quite a wonderful scene. He was very happy there.

My study was next door, but I couldn't really leave him very long. So I would sit in the corner of his room, and I would write. But I couldn't finish anything. I'd write a few lines, and I'd do something with him... So after about six months of this, I had written versions of most of the poems that would be in my book *Atlantis*, but none of them were done. It was a very new process to be working on many things at once and not finishing anything.

I was very grateful to have this work to do. I needed to give form to what I felt. And just as I was describing in the experience of those nurses, for me writing about watching these transformations, about anticipating grief, thinking about what it means for us—What does that do to love when it is compromised in this way?—it was a lifesaver to be able to write. And after his death, it was even more so.

HD: How was it a lifesaver?

MD: Because it was a way to focus. My response to the stress of Wally's illness was to focus very much on what he needed to do and for me to disappear. It was all about taking care of him. Writing was the one thing that was paying attention to myself. It reminded me that I was here, that I had an inner life, that I wasn't dying. It gave me a sense of connectedness in that I anticipated an audience for that work, even if only one person read it, or even if it was just spoken to whoever that invisible being is that we talk to when we write alone. There was an implicit connection to that.

HD: It sounds like writing was an anchor for you.

MD: It was very much an anchor. Basically what I was doing was

writing something between a journal entry and an essay...just watching what was happening and trying to get it on paper, and that was enormously useful.

One thing you can have power over when you can have power over nothing else is language. You can shape words that reflect who you are, and by doing so you feel like you at least have some agency: I've made some mark I have something solid in this very shifting fluid landscape.

After his death, writing was lifesaving in a very different way, because then I just felt at sea.

New grief is oceanic. You can't separate one thing from anything else. I didn't know what I wanted. I didn't know what to do. I had been spending 24 hours a day taking care of somebody, and suddenly I didn't have to that do anymore. But I had dogs to walk. I had to feed myself. I had to go buy a new coat. But it was hard to do those things.

It was three weeks after he died, and I still couldn't read, and I couldn't write, my concentration was oceanic, then coming back together. But I'd gotten an invitation to write something for a book called *Wrestling with the Angels*, which is an anthology of essays by various people about gay men and religion. And I started thinking, if I could write that essay, this is where I'd start. If I had a sentence in my head, maybe I should just try it. So I'd write the sentence, and then that led to another, and there was this wonderful feeling like, oh, I remember how to do this! So that became the beginning of *Heaven's Coast*, which is a memoir about Wally's illness and a brief time after. It's a kind of swirly, meditative, nonlinear book that wants to enact that first year of grief when you're so sideswiped.

HD: It sounds like that book sort of reflects the process that was happening inside for you. It's nonlinear, it's sort of amorphous, it's about you, it's about the world, it's about religion...

MD: Right. And the tone really varies. It grieves for that relationship. It rages about the impotence that I felt and that the medical setting had toward the epidemic at that point. There are static moments of remembering that relationship and falling in love again, which I think often happens to people who are widowed. When we're coupled with somebody, there we are together in the everyday, and you can't always see the strengths of that person or the luster of that relationship. And from the point of view of loss, I could see that it behaves much

more like a lyric poem than it does like a conventional memoir.

HD: You talked about the research people are doing now about how writing affects the writer and how they can use that to overcome trauma. And they talk about how writing can help tie up the ends, to create a context or story.

MD: Yes. Create a container, or a vessel.

HD: It sounds like that's what you experienced in writing about that time in your life.

MD: I did. And one of the things that makes that helpful to the maker is that, as writing like that moves from being your journal—that thing that you make for yourself—and you start shaping it for the reader, it becomes less and less your own contained object. It starts out as something that you make for you, and it becomes something that you give away.

I had this idea, when I was working on the book, that this could be useful to people. Because there are not a lot of books that I know of that speak from the raw unbroken position of grief. They talk about the psychological perspective—these are the stages you go through—or from the spiritual perspective of letting go and healing. But just to be down right miserable and broken by it...I really wanted to read that book. So I had to write it.

What struck me about it when the book came out was just how hungry people were for it. The book was published in 1996, and this was just after the new medications had changed the whole landscape, and the caregivers were taking this huge sigh of relief and then were completely numb. We had just been through such a war zone for years, and suddenly it was okay to just set down the weight. And who were we then? And where were we?

One of the stops on the book tour was at the San Francisco book fair. I read from the book and spoke, and I stepped down and there was this line...hundreds of people holding up the book and most of them crying. To see these faces! How much people needed that kind of statement! That was a really an extraordinary moment, and it taught me something that I was just beginning to get, of just how much people make use of literature to live. It's not an ornament to our leisure or a decoration on the bare structure of life. It is really *essential* for people, and sometimes it actually makes it possible to move forward.

The letters were amazing also. They were all basically the same. They would say thank you, you said exactly what I felt, but I couldn't say it myself. And my story is a little different from yours and here it is. And the stories ranged from losing loved ones or relatives to HIV to parents who lost kids in a motorcycle accident or to people who were divorced or, amazingly, a guy who had been exiled from his homeland, and then the country dissolved politically, and there was no home to go back to. And to think that these different kinds of losses could be mirrored for people is something that is really remarkable. It spoke to this thing that we think literature theoretically can't do, which is to bridge that gap between different kinds of experience. It's very moving to me.

HD: So your work is quite intimate and detailed and descriptive, but you also pull back and have a more global perspective.

MD: It seems to me that, paradoxically, one of the places that compassion and caring for others comes from is distance. When we can stand back and look at our common condition as struggling human beings or uncertain persons or people without guidebooks, it's possible to feel great empathy and fellow feeling. Sometimes, when you're in the thick of something, that's when it's hardest to gain a perspective that allows you to be compassionate for others.

I imagine in the hospital wards, people who are in the trenches there, who have their political struggles or problems with their coworkers or supervisors and who have hard jobs and have families at home and struggles and pressures, it's harder for them to stand back and really see the value and drama of what they're doing. It's the distance that allows us to look at that.

HD: And it's the writing that helps us to gain the distance?

MD: Absolutely! And you can't start from that point. At least I think for most of us, the process of moving from the specific to the general is more native to us, rather than the other way around. I think for most of us, the evidence of the moment, if we think about it, look at it, that is what takes us to the broader point of view.

This is the training of the poet, too. If I begin to write a poem describing these scissors sitting on the desk, there's this interesting shape, and I can think about what it looks like and the texture, and I can try to make it real to you. But at some point I have to say, why am I talking about this. Just describing it is not going to be interesting. It's the "so what" factor that

pushes the writer to say... and this makes me think about how things are separated or cleaved or cut apart. So it's a practice of looking at objects around related experience and trying to stand back from it and say what do I have to say about that? What does it mean?

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