

Do You Still Wear a Black Dress to a Zoom Funeral?

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A black dress is usually a safe bet for a funeral, but at a Zoom funeral, nobody will see any more than the top half of my body. I could wear a black top with sweatpants, and nobody would know. As tempting as that option was, I ripped the tags off the black wrap dress I purchased during the pandemic (in a flight of late-night shopping). I had no occasion to wear it until now. Maybe some part of my brain knew I would need it. I tied a bow in the front, brushed out my curls, put on a strand of pearls from my father, applied lipstick, and swiped on water-proof mascara. This felt very different from my usual Zoom attire. It felt more like a costume than funeral attire.

Three days earlier, my mom called me over FaceTime and told me that my grandfather had passed away. As he was 95, I knew that one day this call would come, but I never thought it would be in this way. For the briefest of moments, I let myself consider making the trip to New Jersey for the funeral, but logically, I knew that it was an impossible trip. It would be too dangerous to fly or drive to New Jersey, even with the utmost caution. Family members could not be put at risk for the trip. It was nice to daydream.

So, I stayed put. I never imagined that I would mourn the loss of my grandfather from my apartment in Miami, while my family stood graveside in New Jersey. I never imagined that I would not be able to hug my dad, as his father was lowered into the ground and laid to rest. I would not be able to say goodbye in person. It knocked the air out of me.

Zoom was for classes, meetings, happy hours, and catching up with friends. Not for mourning loss and funerals, but 2020 taught us that anything is possible. In June, I drove my brother through his high school graduation. I started medical school during a pandemic. It started with six weeks of public health boot camp entirely over Zoom, where the constant point of discussion was the importance of public health in the time of a pandemic.

My first-year medical school orientation was mostly virtual with one special afternoon in person, where I was presented with a precious gift of personal protective equipment. I made friends in a new city in small gatherings with masks 6 feet apart. I am yet to set foot in a lecture hall. In my public health courses, I have learned about the epidemiology of COVID, social distancing, the science behind mask-wearing, the dissemination of health information through the media, and data points measured in lives lost and ventilators used. But this very clinical academic perspective does not encompass the human experience during COVID, the influence on medical students, as both professionals in training and people with their own families and lives outside of their profession.

Instead of what I imagine a normal funeral looks like, I sat in a Zoom call with few faces other than my brother away at college with a blurred view of the gravesite where a small group gathered in masks. I listened to the story of my grandfather's life and thought about the hours we spent taking photos of our family cats together, dinners of homemade spaghetti and meatballs at their kitchen table, and the moment I called him when I got accepted to medical school. I smiled thinking about his sharp wit and kind heart. Instead of looking at my brother next to me and giggling at the jokes made in eulogies, I looked into a Zoom screen with nobody but my cat nearby, sitting at the desk where I take my medical school exams. I cried as I listened to my dad describe his close relationship with his father, and how he felt "like he had been around so long he could never be gone." I wanted nothing more than for him to see my face supporting him, but the camera angle didn't allow that. Just like that, the meeting ended, and I was booted out of the Zoom, like any other Zoom meeting but also not like any other Zoom meeting at all.

Mourning during a pandemic, in an era of physical distancing, is an experience which I heard about in the news but feels much more real now. More than the loss of my 95-year-old grandfather, I felt the pain of not being able to experience this event live in New Jersey. I remember those who have died, both from COVID and other causes, whose lives were also mourned in this way.

"Should I have flown home to New Jersey?" As a medical student, I recognize the importance of evidence-based decision-making. It is easy on paper to look at other

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people and say no you shouldn't travel, but the human heart wants different things. I wanted to travel. I want to allow others to travel for these events, but I know that we cannot.

Two months later, I finally ventured home to New Jersey for Thanksgiving. I got my COVID test before departure, wore an N95 mask on the plane and in the airport, isolated from family, wore a mask around my family, and got a second COVID test a week later. My experience of mourning and making challenging decisions for the safety of others has increased my sympathy for those who have lost loved ones during this pandemic.

At the start of 2020, I couldn't have imagined putting on my black dress and pearls for my grandfather's funeral. I also couldn't have imagined it would be for a funeral 1000 miles away, but here I sat preparing for a funeral over Zoom. Life is

unpredictable, or as we have often said during this pandemic—unprecedented.

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