Joe Wiinikka-Lydon, Emory University

Wiinikka-Lydon is a doctoral student at Emory University's Graduate Division of Religion with a focus on religion, ethics, and society. He is also a member of Emory's religion, conflict, and peace program, and will be coeditor of the next issue of Practical Matters*, which will also focus on religion, conflict, and peace. Wiinikka-Lydon has published materials on the role of religion during the war in Bosnia-Hercegovina in the 1990s. In addition to the above, his current interests include religious and comparative ethics, sociology of morality, religious practices, theory of religion, and social theory.*

A few months after I graduated from college, my father died. He passed away in our south New Jersey home on the front porch, which was narrow and made of concrete. It led to a short walk of white gravel outlining a front yard that, year after year, my mother would curse at for taking in her grass seed and spitting back nothing but moss. Our Pine Barrens soil was poor and atavistic, a remnant from the time when the southern part of the state lay under the Atlantic, back when dinosaurs still walked the earth. Five years after my mother died, my father — tired from battling that ungrateful yard — sat down for a break on the porch and never woke up. He died as he had lived, tired but not entirely unhappy, asleep on a chair after a day of hard work.

I learned of his death in Nanyuki, in central Kenya, where I taught at an American junior high school. The school's director told me that I had an important, long-distance message, so I drove the hour into town with one other teacher. We stopped at a store with one of only a handful of phones within an hour's drive of the school. Before I knew it, the owner, a British expatriate, walked over to my colleague and said, "Mr. Lydon's father died. He needs to go home right away." She did not know that I was Mr. Lydon. Instead, she thought I was Mr. Landon, another tall, wide, brown-haired American who taught at the school. After settling the confusion, I sat down at her desk, where they left me alone to speak with my brother, who told me how my father had died just a few days before.

As I listened, an image came to my mind. It was a random, spontaneous image, but one that will always be meaningful to me. I imagined the brown and tan of central Kenya spreading out, and beyond the distant hills, a sunset. Listening to my brother, and seeing that sunset in my mind's Technicolor, I felt that my father and I were connected beyond the daily troubles that had recently torn at our relationship. My life was a part of his, and as I traveled through the world, so did he, though he never had the chance to do so while alive. Far from being tragic, I experienced awareness of my father's death as a profound connection — both to him and the world around me.

This did not last. I did not know it, but my brother and sister-in-law had spent the last few days trying to contact me. (I gave my contact information to my father only.) I returned home, and they were resentful. My father, a loving man with a great heart, had never been able to live a life within his means, and the responsibility he had not taken for his own finances now ended up in the hands of his children. I imagine my brother and his wife felt angered, frustrated, and betrayed, not only at my father, but at me for being so far away. When I returned, both homeless and jobless, they decided I should take over the work they had struggled with over the previous few days. We sold the house, cleaned up tens of thousands of dollars' worth of heating oil leaks in our yard, and paid off my father's many creditors. In a haze of culture shock, funeral arrangements, and the anger and pain of my brother, I could not keep that earlier feeling of profound connection alive, as I tried to start a new life with no home and half my family gone. I even know the day it disappeared, when, a few weeks after my father's death, I watched a firm empty the contents of the house I grew up in and auction them off on our front lawn — a lawn still full of moss, and only a foot or so from where my dad had died. Within a few short weeks, the world, newly affirmed as the occasion of wondrous connection, withered to a flat plane of indifferent, painful alienation. It would take many years to come back from this loss.

What does this experience have to do with the academic study of religion? I wanted to share my story because I have found that, for some of my students, as well as for me, religion departments and divinity schools are locations not just of study but of trauma and even healing. They are not just research centers but also laboratories for meaning making, drawing in not just the curious but also the wounded, both students and teachers, in search of a place to make sense of their experiences.

An academic department of any sort is, at the very least, an ambivalent place to try and find healing. Ours is a critical endeavor, and those coming in search of self-knowledge and emotional healing can be stunned by the sometimes overly cool and critical approach to the traditions we study. There is danger, then, that some of our students who come in search of meaning will find, instead, further alienation.

The critical, probing orientation of our broad field is necessary, but our disciplines — focused on

religion — will continue to draw in those with a deep personal need to make sense of profound and sometimes traumatic experiences. The subjects we study strike a human chord that, say, tort reform does not. The study of religion, then, is not only an interdisciplinary method; it is the location of some of the very dynamics, including meaning making and healing practices that we study.

Perhaps this shows a limitation of our culture, pointing out a need for missing spaces or institutions that religious studies is inappropriately called on to fill. Maybe this is part of what it means to be a secular society. Or is it possible we need to expand our definition of “study,” and so push at the boundaries of what it means to be a location and practice of what we call the academic?

I can only conclude at this point in my career that our very human subject will always attract those who demand that we address their deeply human needs. This makes me want to take great care, not only with my scholarship, but also with my teaching, as I keep an eye out for those students, like myself, for whom what is gained and what is lost during their coursework cannot be measured by just a grade. For them, religious studies can either be a source of healing — helping them integrate and reflect on their experiences — or harm, where analysis and critique without subsequent affirmation can further alienate them from an already painful world. This is not an argument for the teacher to be a therapist. It is, however, a hope that the humanities and human sciences can become even more human. All of this is what makes the study of religion, for me at least, such an amazing, challenging, and necessary endeavor.