

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE: DIGITAL STORYTELLING FOR HEALING

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Columbia University School of the Arts' Digital Storytelling Lab, in collaboration with Columbia's Department of Narrative Medicine, developed *Where There's Smoke*, a story and grief ritual that mixes interactive documentary, immersive theatre and online collaboration to invite healthcare providers and others into resonant conversations about life, loss and memory, and to imagine how stories can be used to create empathetic healing spaces.

When Robert Weiler was diagnosed with terminal colon cancer, the complexity of healthcare and ensuing grief for the family, led his son Lance, a storytelling pioneer, to realize that a straightforward story wasn't enough to explain and explore the experience, so he created *Where There's Smoke*.

Where There's Smoke premiered in 2019 at the Tribeca Film Festival where it was hailed as an "absolute can't miss" (Backstage). However, when COVID-19 submerged the world in loss, uncertainty, and isolation, Lance reimagined the piece as an online experience. He also combined the piece with protocols of Narrative Medicine as provided by faculty, Deborah Starr.

The piece traces a heartbreaking journey through end-of-life care and grief, embracing grief as nonlinear and immersive, grief as an escape room with no escape. Participants sift through artwork, videos, and conversations and are provided with immersive moments for individuals, pairs and groups to have opportunities for self-discovery, unexpected intimacy, and ensuing healing. This is a personal yet universally relevant narrative, which gradually reveals itself to be something more...the possibility of immersive storytelling to create space for empathetic healing, grieving, and connecting. ■