

Paper Mache for 10-2-26 by David Read

My daughter recently spent two weeks in the U.K. on a personal genealogy research project. Her mother's side of the family has deep connections up and down the country, especially in Scotland. Towards the end of her journey, she attended an inaugural event called "The Sondering" which took place on a farm in England's Lake District. Can I tell you how much I love learning about new things and new words from my children who are far wiser than I could ever hope to be?

So, what does sondering mean anyway? It is the act of experiencing "sonder," the profound realization that every random stranger is living a life as vivid and complex as your own. It's the awareness that other people all have their own complex set of feelings and experiences. It has to do with thinking about or observing the inner worlds and intricate lives of passersby. It has been used as both a noun and a verb, although opinions are mixed on its usage.

I've written before about festivals both locally and globally celebrating music, food, film and just about every kind of art. But a festival devoted to the universal truth that is death? That caught my attention when my daughter told me about her plans to attend as a coda for her trip. The Sondering took place September 18–21 and was billed by its organizers as "a festival for mortals," which, last I checked, includes all of us. Through music, theater, art, conversation and time outdoors, it invited people to talk about death, dying and grief. Its larger purpose was to help them think about how to live.

Sisters Sophia and Camilla Minden created the festival. Their idea grew partly from Camilla's experience with cancer as a young adult, when the possibility of dying became frighteningly immediate. They wondered why something everyone faces can be so difficult to discuss, and whether the arts might make those conversations easier to begin. The setting mattered. With a planned capacity of about 300, The Sondering was designed as an intimate gathering rather than a huge spectacle. The program ranged from live music and theater to creative workshops and guided swimming in Rydal Water. Festivalgoers could sing together in the cathedral-like Rydal Cave. They were also invited to help weave a willow coffin, fill it with messages of remembrance and carry it along a historic route once used for funeral processions.

That last activity might sound unsettling. Yet people have long turned to songs, stories, handmade objects and shared rituals when ordinary words are inadequate. A funeral procession is one example. So is a family gathering around a favorite photograph, or a song that suddenly brings someone back to us. The festival made room for laughter and dancing, too. As we all know all too well, grief seldom arrives as one tidy emotion. We can miss someone terribly and still smile at their memory. We can be afraid of death and grateful for a beautiful afternoon. An arts festival can hold those feelings together without demanding that anyone resolve them.

I wasn't there, and I can't tell you what each participant took home, but I admire the question behind The Sondering: What happens when a community makes space to face something difficult together? For my daughter, the experience was quite profound as she continues to grieve over the loss of her mother and various unresolved issues in their relationship. Here in Yuba and Sutter Counties, we often see the arts help people share experiences they might otherwise carry alone. A play, poem, painting or song can open a door. The Sondering chose one of the hardest doors to open and invited everyone to walk through it together.