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Pendle Hill presentation on 3 December 2025

Plenna's Chair David Sunderland was Resident (Henry J. Cadbury) Scholar at Pendle Hill, Philadelphia, between September and December 2025. He drafted the book *The Punctuation of Loss* during this time.

In this presentation on YouTube (with these slides) on Wednesday 3 December 2025 he spoke about his experience and the book.

He also elaborated his experience in an earlier blog post.

AI summary of the session

Francis Kreimer (Director of Education at Pendle Hill) welcomes participants and expresses gratitude to the Friends Foundation for the Aging and to donors who help keep programming accessible. She reflects on Pendle Hill's 95th anniversary and how Zoom allows a "residential spirit" of learning to be shared globally. She explains the format: a short centering in worship, David Sunderland speaking for about 40 minutes, then Q&A.

David opens by thanking Francis and Pendle Hill, noting his time as Cadbury Scholar in residence since September and the joy of seeing both new and familiar faces from worship and community life. He frames his talk as three intersecting strands: (1) personal story, (2) Plenna—his nonprofit helping people plan for end-of-life, and (3) his new book, *The Punctuation of Loss*, which scales from individual grief to institutional and planetary loss.

He emphasizes metaphor and storytelling as essential for approaching death—the "great unknown." He tells an apocryphal WWI story of soldiers saved by a map that turned out to be of the wrong mountains, arguing that even an imperfect "map" can give direction and courage. He cites the value of multiple "lenses" to see more clearly, and shares Michael Hebb's "dark forest" metaphor: death is frightening when unfamiliar, but becomes more navigable with understanding.

David situates himself as a non-theist Quaker (comfortable with "God" language as a lens, but not supernatural claims). He notes Quaker practice's focus on questions rather than answers, and links that to AI: ask good questions and stay critical of responses. He sets aside assisted dying and near-death experiences as topics for another time, stressing an evidence-oriented approach.

He describes formative losses: 20 years working in the UN on HIV/AIDS (and experiencing

institutional “grief” amid declining funding and confidence), the shock and sadness of Brexit (he became French in 2019), his father’s death in 2018, and his divorce in 2024. These experiences helped catalyze Plenna, a secular, non-political nonprofit website (currently in English, planned expansion to multiple languages) featuring an end-of-life preparedness questionnaire (0–100 score) and practical resources (country signposts, “when I die” files, grief and suicide-related snapshots). He underscores that small amounts of planning can greatly ease burdens for families.

He then explains the origin of *The Punctuation of Loss*: attending a death education conference and encountering the question “Is death a full stop or a comma?” That sparked wide reading and, during his Pendle Hill residency, a rapid drafting of the manuscript in roughly four weeks. He praises Pendle Hill as both serene and deeply social, and shares reflections on the U.S.: despite political turmoil, civil society networks feel resilient and give him hope (including a meeting with George Lakey).

David outlines the book’s structure:

Part 1: individual death/loss and the punctuation metaphor, explored through lenses such as medicine, myth/religion, history, anthropology, philosophy, and literature (literature as a kind of “inoculation” by letting us rehearse loss through others’ eyes).

Part 2: collective losses—political upheaval, economic precarity/inequality, ecological grief (including anticipatory grief), postcolonial trauma across generations, and an institutional case study of the UN facing severe contraction and consequences for HIV responses. He returns repeatedly to preparedness as an ethical and practical through-line.

He presents punctuation as a flexible framework (not perfect, but generative): beyond full stops and commas, we can think in semicolons, exclamation points, etc., to interpret endings, continuities, disruptions, and transitions. In his “lessons” section, he argues for cycles rather than linear “growth-only” thinking, stronger death education, attention to both retrospective and anticipatory grief, and skepticism toward techno-immortality narratives. He highlights the importance of relationships and community as the true basis of resilience.

He closes with Quaker-inflected values: the “right kind” of silence (supportive, not taboo-sustaining), community as essential for mourning, equality (death as universal), integrity (truth-telling about taboo subjects), peace (rejecting violent metaphors and war), simplicity (clear communication), and stewardship across generations. He ends on the semicolon as his preferred symbol: life and death as linked clauses, looking back to ancestors and forward to descendants.

In Q&A:

- On when to begin inquiry into endings, David suggests: essentially any time, with age-appropriate language; he critiques “pornography of death” (shielding children from real death rituals while exposing them to constant fictional deaths).
- On Death Cafés, he supports them strongly as spaces that normalize conversation and help people share experiences.
- A participant shares a transformative grief experience that deepened his spiritual life; David affirms the ongoing influence of those who’ve died.
- Patti Nesbitt affirms David’s work, stressing peacemaking at end of life and the integrity of aligning Quaker peace values with practical planning (like wills).

- On death doulas, David notes they can be flexible supports for families; he refers people to Plenna’s snapshot on the topic.
- A grief ritual facilitator asks about non-markety language to invite participation; David mentions Francis Weller’s work on grief as a helpful primer.

Francis closes by thanking David and participants, encouraging continued learning with Pendle Hill.

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