



## To the Edge of Existence: Living through Grief

Graeme T. Clark

Graduate Student

Department of Educational Psychology

University of Alberta

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*As a doctoral candidate in educational psychology, I am currently immersed in a hermeneutic investigation of problematic mourning. I am also involved in a research project tentatively entitled: "Becoming Empowered: A Study of Counselor Development." My interest in human science inquiry first grew out of discrepancies I experienced as an undergraduate. Traditional scientific research in psychology seemed to lose the person and the person's experience and context. The findings of traditional research were difficult to match with my personal development and with the real life problems I encountered in counseling.*

*In my current work as a clinical and counselling psychologist in private practice, I have particular interest in grief and bereavement, health psychology, adult children of dysfunctional families, individual psychotherapy and clinical assessment. My work has been much influenced by humanistic and existential streams in the human growth movement, and more recently by narrative approaches such as that of the Australian systemic therapist, Michael White.*

We usually know death from a distance. Death is an unfortunate event that happens to others. When death strikes someone unrelated to us, we may feel a passing sense of loss or upset for their misfortune. But we also feel a sense of relief, thankfulness that no one we know was involved. We reflect on our good fortune, and our lives remain essentially untouched.

We can ignore death at a distance. Even when we are more directly invited to consider the relation of death to our own life, as in this epitaph (Bertman, 1979), we can smile and remain aloof:

Remember Man, As You Pass By  
As You are now So Once was I  
As I am now So must You be  
Prepare for Death & follow me. (p. 149)

In the course of everyday life, we are not inclined to consider seriously the possibility of life ending. We may show momentary concern when headline news stories highlight events that threaten or tragically destroy human life, but most of us live so as to ignore the reality of death while taking life for granted. We can watch dozens of people die each week on prime time television, with little notice. The characters are cartoon people, of no immediate consequence to our life. We do not identify with them and thus we maintain our indifference. We are not forced to ponder

our own inevitable future. It is curious, however, that while we keep our distance from death, we are also never too far removed. Our distant awareness shows itself subtly, perhaps through the way we follow the lifesaving developments of modern medicine or through the manner in which we monitor roughage or cholesterol in our diet. We seldom examine the deeper wellspring of these concerns.

### **When Death Enters Our Life**

Whereas death from a distance invites us to ponder its significance at our own leisure, and can be ignored if we like, bereavement in our own life issues a less gentle invitation. The death of someone close to us is confrontive, shocking, and even violent. We do not believe it has happened. It is like a bad dream, one that *must* be a dream and *cannot* be true. This is so even if we have been expecting the person's death. Uncle Art may have been ill for many months or indeed years, and have fought a long and courageous battle. Although his death may be the last event we would wish for, we might also pray for an end to his suffering so he can finally "rest in peace." Yet at the moment of death, we are shocked. His stillness is so unbelievably absolute. It is nearly impossible to avoid the reality that Uncle Art has died, that the person as we know him no longer exists. We now "knew" him. And our grief demands full-bodied attention. We are incapacitated and numbed, stricken with grief.

### **The View From Outside**

Our direct personal experience of bereavement stands in contrast to the outsider's perspective. After a loss, bereaved persons often find themselves consoled with some version of "time will heal all wounds." Intended as an expression of sympathetic reassurance and perhaps of hope, this condolence is more often experienced as a shallow cliché. While the expression is based on the truth that most people do recover from the death of a loved one over the passage of time, it also belittles the pain and "nitty gritty" struggle of living through grief. Time, so easily offered as solace by the well-meaning outsider, is no simple prescription for healing the pain of loss.

The outsider's distance from our pain also leads to an impatience with the process required of our healing. Relatives tire of listening to my voice of woe. I should be over that already and getting on with my life. I dwell too much in sad and melancholy memory. Isn't my preoccupation morbid, as well as tiring and distasteful? Looking more closely, however, we see that to attend to and truly witness another's pain is to open oneself to being touched by that same pain. The necessity of sharing pain keeps the outsider at a distance.

But the question of how a person "gets over" the death of a loved one remains. While folk psychology initially highlights the healing power of time but miscalculates the subsequent need for time, social scientists favor notions of going through "stages" or "phases" of grief, and of

completing the necessary tasks of grieving by way of “grief work” (see Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987, and Worden, 1982). Some scientists, attempting to provide an even fuller understanding of grief, have suggested that the social support we either have available or perceive as available will assist us in recovering from loss. Although attractive to scientists and helping professionals, notions such as “phases,” “grief work” and “perceived social support” capture little of the lived reality of grief. In essence, are not these ideas simply more elaborate versions of the prescription that time will heal? Like that prescription, they offer an outsider’s view, based on the dominant cultural specifications of the bereavement experience. While trying to explain grief as a universal process, these conceptions fail to convey its essential humanness, as it is lived in relation to other people, through one’s body, through one’s social and physical world, and through one’s sense of time.

To work more effectively in counseling those who struggle with grief, it is necessary to deepen our understanding of the lived experience by moving beyond the outsider’s view, into the inside. We must replace our expert attitude with humility, showing an openness to explore our own losses. Initially, we can say that through grief we come to know not only the death of the other, but also his or her significance in our lives. But how does one really live through so-called grief work? What is the essence of grief as we live it in the everyday world of human experience? And when we recover or heal during bereavement, what does this mean? How do we construct a new reality, with renewed meaning, from the ashes of our loss? These questions are large and complex, worthy of much exploration. To begin, we might focus on some of the ways in which grief presents itself, and then explore further some of the essential constituents of grief.

### Grief Presents Itself

The origins of the word *bereave* reside in the Old English, *reafian*, meaning to rob or take away by force (Skeat, 1910). At the moment of bereavement we have been robbed of our loved one. Even in a peaceful death the departure is not gentle for those left behind. “My father, who was *right there* just a few minutes ago, is so *completely gone*.” People who die have “passed away,” taking with them the last opportunity for direct contact. All their memories, the recollections that only they could have expressed, their voice and gestures, their laughter and spirit, all are replaced with silence and stillness. Time seems to stop. In bereavement we experience a forcefulness, an undeniable power that is beyond our control. “It was as if the door slammed shut. There was just no way of going back.” The finality of this event is initially incomprehensible, but as the demands of life impinge and we are engaged again in the everyday march of time, the loss we have experienced sinks in. We begin to discover the breadth and depth of our deprivation. In this process, the emotional suffering we experience is grief.

Grief comes to us in many ways. It may strike and overwhelm us, or it may seem to unfold as our own life continues through time. Often the reality of a loss is too much to comprehend at once. As our struggle with grief begins, we are numbed and express our disbelief that the person could really be dead. If the loss has been sudden and unexpected, or if there is no evidence (such as a body) to confirm the concreteness of the event, this unreality may continue. But as the shock of death wears thin, the presence of our loved one is everywhere. Our everyday world is dominated by an almost palpable absence.

The person's absence seems to be everywhere. I listen for footsteps and innocently prepare tea for two. It is confusing—is he really gone, is he really here somewhere, or is he just away on a trip?

His absence (or is it presence?) is pervasive. It is there on the other side of the bed and in the dry toothbrush standing next to my own. It is there in the empty shoes at the back door and in the closet full of clothes. It is there in the empty place at my table, at every meal. It is in the emptiness that descends on the house. He is absent, yet he dominates my awareness. And I ache for him. I am driven about by the emptiness, but where is there any reprieve? The absence follows me everywhere. *This* was the route we took to work. *That* is where we often walked the dog. *I remember when ...* Curiously, I may even be drawn to these places of painful recollection.

Such are the ways in which we dwell in our grief. One woman, grieving the death of her daughter, returned to the last place her daughter had lived. A line from a Walt Whitman poem came to her: "Is there a single, final farewell?" She realized there was not, "not for her, not yet. There would be many returns here, and each return would mean another farewell" (Man, 1987, p. 299).

At first, there is little relief from the intensity of grief. When some distraction does draw us away, so that the person's absence is forgotten for a time, the world opens up in living color again. It is a gentle shock, a pleasant surprise, a lightness we had forgotten existed, to step outside of our grief for a time.

But reprieves are short-lived. Grief comes and goes as dependably as the tide, only not as predictably. It follows us grocery shopping, descending on us at unexpected times in unexpected places, like the cookie aisle, where I absently reach for her favorite ginger snaps.

Even the most innocent and unlikely items become endowed with new meaning as we find within them memories of the person who is gone.

I remember using the very last of our peanut butter. Living in my new apartment, alone and on my own, finishing the last little bit of peanut butter which had been *ours*, I was completely caught off guard by the devastation. Our life together was there, in that everyday peanut butter jar ... our

## *University of Alberta*

early morning breakfasts, struggling off to work, the shared hardships of many years. In the emptiness of the jar, our life together was drawing to a painful, wrenching close. The pain of giving in to the emptiness of the jar wrenched in my chest, tearing my heart and taking my breath away. I wept, overcome with the finality of sharing no more.

This moment is one of many experienced by a 32-year-old man following the death of his wife. Such painful moments in relation to physical objects are typical of the pangs of grief any of us might feel following the loss of a loved one or of someone very significant to us. Grief is lived through our connections to the physical world.

Often we cling tightly to personal keepsakes that hold particular meaning with respect to the person we have lost. A small bottle of perfume or cologne may concentrate the whole of our memories, extending back through time to that first barn dance where we met so many years ago. The keepsake may hold no significance to any other person, but what single article could possibly be of more value to ourselves? It keeps our memories alive and is a lifeline to our past, providing security in a time of confusion and upheaval. Such a keepsake is an anchor we can trust when all else is changing.

One mother learned painfully of this truth. She writes:

One week after Priscilla's death I was in her room throwing away all her personal possessions. I wish someone then had stopped me! I felt that if I rid my life of her personal belongings, I could go on and finish my grieving in an orderly fashion. I had heard of families creating "monuments" for their children and I was determined not to allow that to happen to us ... My God! How stupid can one person be! I literally threw away all my memories! I had no idea how important those little things would become in the months ahead. (Knapp, 1986, p. 135)

In a multitude of ways, the physical world in which we have known and lived with the person reveals the extent of our loss. The subtle shades of meaning that were present in the ways we knew the person become apparent. Through our relationship with the physical world, we come to grief and our grief comes to us.

Even if we have divested ourselves of keepsakes, grief will come to us through images and memories.

I still see in my mind the picture of my wife with her oxygen mask on, struggling to stay alive. It's like it is burned into my head, a picture that is there constantly. I can block it out at times but it just keeps popping up. I realize now it is part of the unfinished business, and there is no way I can erase that.

Such images return unbidden, and can concentrate within them painful memories of actions left undone. To the elderly man dominated by the vision above, it represents his sense of helplessness and inadequacy at the critical moment of his wife's death. He feels robbed of the opportunity to

say a meaningful goodbye to her and perceives no way of making up for his failure.

The meaning of our loss emerges through our experiences over time. Although the intensity of grief may gradually decrease, particular times associated with the person who has died will very readily return us to grief. Around the anniversary of her death, I again become intensely aware of her absence. I place a heartfelt "in memoriam" with the newspaper, and am drawn to reflect upon the events of long ago. It seems as if family and holiday celebrations can never be the same again. If it was our child who died, grief returns to us forcefully on the day she would have started school, had she lived. It returns on her graduation day, by virtue of her absence. If it was our father who died, we are reminded of his absence at our wedding. We feel sadness that he never knew the woman who is now so central to our life, and sadness that she will never know him.

### **The Physiognomy of Grief**

In the daily newspaper, we find a photograph of an elderly mother placing a rose on the coffin of her son ("Mourns loss," 1989). He was killed in an airplane crash, along with his wife and children. Her face is contorted with pain, and we can almost see it quiver as she struggles to hold back the weeping that pushes upward from her chest. Everyone is dressed in black, and we can imagine how subdued they feel and act. They walk slowly and heavily as if carrying great weights on their shoulders. They speak quietly, whispering in subdued tones. The mood is somber and dark. We can imagine that relatives and old friends who have not been together in ages are gathered around the graveside. The mother is supported by a man at her side, holding her arm as she bends forward with the rose. She struggles to hold herself together. In the act of placing the rose at the head of the coffin, she is honoring her son. It is a gift given from her heart. In a moment, as the casket is lowered into the ground, she may be overtaken with a searing, tearing pain, as if a part of her is being wrenched away.

The woman's face contorted with pain bears witness to the reluctant and difficult struggle with which we relinquish direct connection to our loved one. Pain reflects the deeply threatening quality of bereavement. The language we use to describe our pain is metaphoric for the power and forcefulness with which we experience this disruption in our lives. The pain is deep, cutting through to the bone as the everyday, taken-for-granted structure of our world is severed. Whatever way grief may come to us from these early moments on, whether by way of the concrete world, through our images and memories, or through events in time, we experience and describe our pain in a profound physical way. As the initial numbness and shock subsides, we are overcome with wrenching pain, throbbing heartache, or even complete physical collapse. A loved one has been torn from our midst. We long for their return. We feel broken, with

the ruins of our world around us. We are drained, flat, lifeless, devastated, emptied of all vitality and meaning.

Or perhaps our bodily being is energized, emotionally pumped by the threat accompanying our loss. The anxious, shaky foreboding in our gut may portend a fear that we cannot carry on and endure alone. We might develop physical symptoms like those of our loved one, unknowingly fearful that we may be next. Perhaps we are nagged or even racked with guilt over some failure on our part in the lost relationship; or fired with anger and rage over abandonment or over the negligence of others. We wrestle with our pain, struggling to remove ourselves and to gain relief, but pain often overwhelms us in spite of these efforts. Our control of emotion is overpowered, and we are cast into new and perhaps strange depths of feeling and experience.

In the violence and pain of grief, there lurks a danger of breaking. Life as it has been is broken. Our human connection with another, our most elemental bond, is severed. If we have not faced death before, our sense of innocence may be broken. And even if our innocence of death is long lost, our sense of safety in the world may be shattered. At the funeral, there is often concern that someone will “fall apart.” Thus the bereaved mother is supported by a person at her side. True to our cultural pattern of grieving, she struggles to contain her emotions and to keep on functioning. In other situations, we overhear people comment that someone is “holding together well.” When a child dies, even if the child is an adult, the parents’ “hopes and dreams are shattered.” We say that in time, they will begin to “pick up the pieces.” Is our greatest fear, perhaps, that someone’s spirit will be too fragile, and that they will forever languish in despair of their loss? Is this fear of breaking, of losing control, the motive behind our struggle to allow ourselves to experience the fullness of grief?

The depth of this fear can be terrifying. The impact of grief descends on us, overwhelmingly. We are paralyzed as it strikes and threatens to pull us under. We find we have little sense of control over these feelings. To surrender to their power is to enter the unknown, even if the experience is not entirely new to us. At a public level, we might fear making a scene or embarrassing others, but more importantly, deep inside, we fear falling apart and losing ourselves completely. Our own existence is jeopardized. “Can I go on? How will I go on? Do I want to go on? Is life now worth living?”

The questions boiling up so forcefully reflect the gravity of the situation. The funeral is an event steeped in grief. The meaning of the word grief derives from the Latin *gravis* meaning heavy, grave (Skeat, 1910). In contrast to the lightness and levity of humor or of play, grief is serious and weighty. The word is used rather loosely, as in the grieving process, to refer to all feelings and experiences associated with bereavement. However, the essence of grief itself is heaviness. Thus at the funeral we

see somber colors and slow movement. Bollnow (1989, p. 67) notes that at these times, "one steps out of the world of everyday life and into the solemn world of the ceremonial mood." Voices are kept low out of respect for the dignity and importance of the occasion. The end of a life is marked with reflection on the accomplishments therein, and on the mystery and gift of life as a whole. The funeral ceremony brings us into direct contact with the edge of existence, death on one side and life on the other. It provides a continuing link, not only in the connecting of one life to the lives of others, but also in the connecting of our knowledge of death to the vitality of life.

In the gathering of community at a funeral, the essential connectedness of our lives is revealed. While we have been robbed of relatedness and are threatened with brokenness, through coming together to remember and honor the person who has died, we affirm the vitality of our bonds with others. We support the bereaved mother, bringing our presence and perhaps gifts of food and practical help to sustain and comfort her. There is solace in community, in the mere presence of others connected to the death. There is solace in withstanding the power and violence of grief together. As the legacy of a lifetime is made explicit through the eulogy, we grasp both the spoken and unspoken bonds that support and connect us in our daily existence.

Although the funeral marks the end of toil and perhaps of suffering for the deceased person, it also announces publicly the beginning of a different toil for the survivors. Lindemann (1944) coined the term "grief work," presumably because grief demands such effort of us. It is a weight we must bear. Life becomes heavy and colorless, as even those activities we have enjoyed for years become burdensome. Small things require great effort. Time crawls and we resist the demands of the outside world. We push ourselves forward, doing only what we have to. We go through the motions, barely sustaining ourselves.

To grieve is also to dwell in reminiscence and memories. Often we do so in the presence of others. It is partly through our conversations with family and friends, and sometimes with people we hardly know, that we "make sense" of the death of a loved one. As we tell our story, we do our reckoning with the legacy bequeathed to us. It is through sitting with others, recalling the good times and the bad, that we shape our changing relationship with the other and move through grief. By dwelling here, exploring the meanings of our loss, our self-reflection is deepened. We define and discover ourselves in the context of our attachment to the other and to the legacy we have been left.

Usually, we know when we are ready to share. We sense with whom it will be appropriate to surrender and "have a good cry." Often we feel freer with another person who has also known loss. "I sensed that she would understand my deeper and more vulnerable feelings, from the inside, and be less inclined to judge me." In contrast, we avoid those who

try to cheer us or take us away from our grief with shallow platitudes. Friends who truly understand can open a space for us where we are able to explore and create new meanings. We are invited to bring memories of the past into the present, suffusing them with life. As we surrender to feelings previously held in abeyance, and find ourselves accepted, struggle gives way to increasing peace. Shared recollections allow us to appreciate and honor the other, as we begin to transform our relationship to the person we have lost in the light of his or her absence.

When my father died, I talked at length with a particular friend, and reminisced with my sister and mother over a long period of time. We remembered his love of nature and recalled collecting rocks and Indian arrowheads, searching for mushrooms, and watching birds for hours on end in order to discover the whereabouts of their nests. It was also a comfort, albeit painful, to visit the cemetery where he was buried, as it overlooked the woods where he had roamed as a younger man. It was an appropriate place to lay him to rest. In reminiscing and in remembering, I realized the extent to which my love of those activities lay in having done these things for years with my father. I felt a closeness to him in that regard, and found that the memories affirmed those aspects of myself. The presence of family and friends, who simply listened, encouraged, and sanctioned such talk, was both deeply affirming and deeply comforting.

Because we may feel that people will not understand, we sometimes keep others from witnessing our grief. We often feel set apart and isolated. We either avoid people completely or push them away in spite of their concern. One father writes "I know I drove people away at the very times I needed them most" (Knapp, 1986, p. 132). Ironically, it may be that the one person we would normally turn to in our distress is at the center of our grief. A widower lamented, "that person who was close enough that I could just spill it out, to get it out of my system ... there just wasn't anybody."

Our friends may mean well and even approach us through their awkwardness, but their presence with us only emphasizes our differences:

Going out with our married friends, I was the only single one. Every time I went out, something would happen to remind me of happier times when my wife and I were together. I just felt really awkward being with them because they didn't really know what to say or how to comfort me. They were trying to be as helpful as they could, and were very gracious and kind, but that wasn't what I really needed.

While others may be essential to our healing, deeply meaningful moments are often experienced alone. Two years after the death of her childhood friend, one woman writes:

The tears I shed for her flow most freely and I am most conscious of the loss of her when I write about her. When I cry for her my eyes sting and fill with tears that spill over. This happens anywhere, but especially if I am writing about her. It has happened publicly and privately. The crying does not last more than five or ten minutes. Then the anxious, melancholy feeling which preceded the crying is replaced by feelings of pensive resignation and of being “spent” and sort of cleansed.

Expressing oneself privately on paper safeguards personal vulnerabilities from the possible censure of others, yet allows for honoring memories and feelings. Expressing thoughts and feelings on paper puts them at a distance outside oneself. We can recognize where we stand and say to ourselves, “yes, that’s how I feel, that’s how I remember her, and this is how it is important to me.” As we “let go” through self-expression, we also crystallize the significance of experiences for ourselves.

While our community of family and friends provides strength and support, there may be times when no consolation can be found or even imagined. Ultimately, even against the backdrop of our connectedness, it seems we are essentially alone with our grief.

We have noted that the depth of grief involves remembering and honoring those who have been and who remain significant to us. Through these actions, we discover ourselves more fully. Although we may seek privacy and even isolation while in the time of bereavement, grief unites us with those who can share in the honoring and remembering while allowing us the fullness of our feelings. Through such sharing, we are affirmed in community, affirmed in life, and affirmed in ourselves. In honoring past experiences with the deceased, we clarify to ourselves and to others who we are and what is important and meaningful to us in our existence.

### **The Call to Question and Reflect**

As we have seen, grief brings us to dwell in the memories we hold of a loved one. When we look beyond the most obvious expressions of grief, we see that it calls for questioning and reflection. We try to “make sense” of our loss. Questions such as “why?” and “how could this happen?” emerge almost immediately. These are continuing questions, issued at first with force and later in a more reflective sense.

I had lost my wife, my friend, my partner, and here I was, sort of adrift. I lost faith in just about anything and everything. I kept saying to myself, why did this happen to me? If anything, it should have been me and not my wife. She had never been ill before.

The everyday language of grief and bereavement emphasizes this search for meaning. We speak of “coming to terms with a death.” We say, “it just doesn’t make sense, it isn’t fair. I can’t understand it and I won’t accept it.” A core feature of grief and bereavement is the way our attention is called to meaning. Grief is at the nexus of human meaning.

In bringing us to the brink of nonexistence, it also brings us to the core of our living as human beings.

Grief is not a shallow experience; it is deep. Whereas a superficial event in our lives makes little or no difference, grief arouses our most powerful feelings and exerts a pervasive impact. Our most profound motivations and reasons for living are touched and challenged. The pain of grief is deep, cutting through the superficial cloak of everyday life. Grief brings us to the depth in ourselves, by taking us to the very edge of existence. Ultimately, our struggle with grief may bring us home to ourselves.

### **Losing the Other, Losing Oneself**

Probably we all fear the loss of ourselves in grief. Thus, in our Western culture, we try to avoid or contain the storm. We struggle to fight it off, perhaps by busying ourselves with work and other details, or simply by ignoring it.

But fear is not the only force leading us to turn away from grief. Grief is too draining, too weighty and consuming to dwell within indefinitely. We naturally seek distractions that provide distance and some chance for relief and renewal. And while our sense of loss may be immense, we are usually sustained by at least some glimmer of hope and steadiness from other areas of our life.

The periods of temporary relief we take during a bereavement are quite different from an effort to remove ourselves altogether from the experience. If the whole of our life was defined with respect to the other, we may feel compelled to avoid grief completely. "She was everything to me ... without her, I am nothing. I cannot go on." With the loss of the other, we sense we have also lost ourselves. To avoid this complete loss, we may try to sustain the broken connection in ways that deny the reality.

If our fear of losing ourselves is too great, we cling to outdated memories and possessions of the person who has left us, living "as if" our world has not changed. Our memories serve as the last line of defense against our own aloneness in the finality of a person's death. Memories are safe, familiar, and comfortable. They cannot readily be stolen from our grasp. To "let go" would mean to relinquish safety and to fully enter the unknown. Grief requires that we be capable of standing alone.

One elderly widow writes:

Ten long years since you left us,  
But we die only  
when those whom we loved forget us.  
You will be loved and remembered forever.

This woman seemed to keep her husband alive, almost as if he lived nearby. His presence remained. She idealized him and longed for the glory days of their life together. When she was not living in recollection of the way things used to be, she experienced a deep and forlorn sense of

loneliness. Certainly memories must be retained and honored, but this way of clinging to them kept her living in the past. Memories had become this woman's life. Perhaps she was thus able to stave off the helplessness she encountered in the face of death and aloneness, but her inability to stand alone and to dwell fully in grief prevented her from opening to new possibilities in life. She failed to keep her husband alive, and she lost herself in the bargain.

Such efforts to retain the past may unwittingly place our current life at the center of continuing grief. Our world shrinks as we avoid places, people, and activities that remind of us our loved one. However, since we seem unable to move ahead without acknowledging our changed circumstances, the heavy sadness of grief becomes a familiar companion. Life becomes living death. We come to live in our memories and feelings about the person who has died. Rather than gradually reorienting ourselves to the future, taking with us whatever has been valuable from the past, our everyday life returns to the past. We are dominated by our loss, unwilling or perhaps helpless to "let go" of our preoccupation. In this process, we miss the opportunity to explore our depth. As we stifle our flow of feelings, thoughts, and experiences, a part of us may die. We are heartbroken, dispirited, and have little interest or energy in generating new possibilities in life.

Even if the whole of our self-definition was not bound to the other, we may find ourselves shackled to grief. Most human relationships harbor a mixed legacy of blessings and curses. To attain a sense of peace and inner harmony following a death, the balance of accounts with respect to the other must be settled. I may have been indebted to her, in which case I am left with a balance of guilt or shame, and a sense of obligation. In this instance, I might feel unentitled, either to go on living myself or to grieve. I might also feel disempowered, having no obvious means of repaying my debt. I have let her down, betrayed her in a crucial way, but how can I repay her so that peace can be made with my grief? On the other hand, perhaps she was indebted, having failed me in some crucial way. Perhaps she spoke hard words that were never retracted, or worse, perhaps I was neglected or abused in my relationship with her. How can we heal wounds such as these, regaining or mending what was lost, now that all opportunity for direct contact is past? A vital part of ourselves is bound to the other by way of unsettled debt. Without balancing the accounts, how can we possibly reach forgiveness and peace?

### *I Keep of You*

And I scarce know which part may greater be,—

What I keep of you, or you rob from me. (Santayana, 1894/1979, p. 126)

What, then, does it mean to dwell fully in grief? Does it mean allowing ourselves to experience the fullness of all thoughts and emotions, including those aspects that cannot be voiced? Ultimately, does it mean facing

the essential aloneness of our existence and wrestling with our purpose and identity, however we may conceive of these?

Laying the body of our loved one to rest in the cemetery is just the beginning. But what comprises healing from grief? Is there some grief from which we never heal, grief that must stay with us? Do we ever really “let go”? For whom do we grieve? Primarily for ourselves, for the past we have known? Which part do I keep of you?

Although we are robbed of direct connection, we maintain our relationship with the other through our struggle to reposition them as a living memory in our ongoing life. As we discover the heritage of gifts and of less desirable blessings bestowed on us, we strive toward a peaceful reconciliation. Anderson stated that “death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship, which struggles on in the survivor’s mind for some resolution, which it never finds” (Bertman, 1979, p. 137).

In living through bereavement, one confronts all that one has done, might have done, or planned to do with another person, and therefore confronts all the activities and ways of being that one has lived out, failed to live out, and intended to live out. Many of these ways may be readily known and acknowledged, while others may only emerge in the future, or may have become so commonplace and accepted that they were forgotten, simply taken for granted. Relationship is a living mirror whereby we know ourselves. Bereavement shatters the mirror, but we continue to know and discover ourselves as we sort through the broken shards.

One moment we are on the stage of life, engaged in our usual manner with the characters of our personal cast, and then—I am on stage alone, without the usual means of knowing myself. Suddenly I am not supported in the most basic of ways. Where we were once welcome at a dinner party for six, I am now one half of the third couple and experience myself as the “fifth wheel.” I discover new meanings of the word friendship, and begin to question not only the depths of my own identity, but also the priorities of my life.

Through reminiscing and remembering, in returning time and time again to our grief, we honor our loved one. In so doing, we ultimately honor ourselves. By way of exploring the nooks and crannies of our grief, we discover ourselves in relation to the other. As we open to the fullness of grief, we open to the fullness of ourselves. Through our acts of acknowledging the other, whether for better or for worse, we are affirmed and so strengthen the vital basis from which we live. As we finish the remaining business of this past relationship, the relationship is transformed, and so too are we. What was once a living relationship evolves to become a living memory, a legacy with which we create the future.

We are touched with hope, as what we felt we had lost is transformed into renewed meaning and purpose. The future begins to fill with possibility. As our hope grows, the turmoil of grief recedes and an unexpected sense

of peace and calm may gradually prevail. It creeps in, hardly noticed. Surprisingly, in subtle ways, we find ourselves looking forward to whatever each day may bring and the future may hold.

To heal from grief implies that a sense of meaning is made of the loss, strengthening us as we move into the future. We do not simply forget the person, nor do we dwell indefinitely in our memories. We know the death of the other as we live through grief in our personal world. By bringing our memories of the other to life in the present, we transform our relationship to the person, coming home to ourselves in a deeper way. Our relation to life is more sharply defined. In the courage to face death and all that it brings to us through grief, we find courage to go on in life. The words of St. Augustine are borne out: "It is only in the face of death that one's self is born."

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