

A Life Worth Living: Examined and Unexamined Grief

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In the *Apology*, Socrates declares “the unexamined life is not worth living” (p. 12). This remark demonstrates that only in aiming to critically reflect on and comprehend a life can a life have any significance. The same principle can apply to grief: Only examined grief holds significance for the person who is experiencing it. For the purpose of this essay, I define grief as the natural response to loss. While grief is normal, Northcott and Wilson (2008) suggest that grieving individuals can express “various emotions, including intense sorrow, anguish, depression, bitterness, anger, rage, regret, self-blame, guilt, loneliness, pessimism, hopelessness, despair, confusion, emptiness and numbness” (p.175). Although grief is a painful experience, I will argue against the idea that the faster a person stops grieving the death of a loved one and gets on with life, the better life will be for the person. This mindset of hastening grief and allowing grief to be unexamined is detrimental to the natural grieving process, as grief becomes denied and forsaken. In this paper, I will engage in examples from various cultures and grieving processes that allow grief to unravel instinctively for a person. This essay will demonstrate how the process of grief is a naturally occurring process, which allows bereaved individuals to prepare for change, and how grieving can be a potentially transformative experience.

In order to describe grief from a therapeutically healthy perspective, I will first characterize contemporary Western values regarding grief and bereavement. Contemporary Western society applies social pressure on bereaved individuals to grieve via a particular archetypal method, and this one-size-fits-all approach is highly problematic. Research by Harris (2009) conveys that an individual’s need to “work through” grief in a hastening manner can be prevalent in capitalistic societies that define human worth in values such as productivity, functionality, stoicism, and being in control (p.247). This mindset is unsettling as human beings are dynamic creatures with interpersonal needs. For instance, bereaved individuals possess vast

emotional requirements that can become suppressed in a society that values productivity over personal growth and wellness. This can lead to disenfranchised grief; grief that is not acknowledged, recognized or validated by society. As a result, bereaved individuals can become imperceptible to society while they undergo time allotment for grief. Harris (2009) states that “grief therapy and support is often focused upon the “un-doing” of these oppressive social norms, which ironically cause prolonged suffering in grieving individuals by preventing the potentially adaptive aspects of the grief process to unfold naturally without hindrance” (p.248). Western society can make the difficult transition of loss even more strenuous as bereaved individuals cannot thoroughly express themselves and their needs are often misunderstood.

Other cultures do not place the same time constraints on the grieving process. For instance, Mexican culture serves as an illustration of a society, which acknowledges grief without depositing restrictions on the grieving process. The Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos) is a Mexican cultural tradition, which honours the deceased. Schechter (2009) describes it thus: “a multiday festival that traces its origins to pre-Columbian times, Dia de los Muertos is equal parts commemoration and carnival: both a loving remembrance of departed family and friends and a mocking defiance of death itself” (p.271). Bereaved participants in the Day of the Dead ceremony accomplish a variety of tasks such as: (i) assembling tributes to the deceased in the form of food or drink, (ii) washing tombstones, (iii) praying, (iv) conversing with others and (v) participating in folk art, vigils and music. The ceremony takes place annually on November 1 to November 2, and the entire community coalesces in this communal remembrance.

An additional cultural instance of this type of acceptance towards loss is within some Native American communities. Many Native American cultures establishes within its spiritual

beliefs that there are ceremonies and traditions, which regulate dead spirits, and in-doing-so, these actions and beliefs aid with bereavement. Doka and Tucci (2009) suggest that “rather than disconnecting, American Indians continue to have relationships with the dead. Some loved ones are perceived as still caring for and protecting those left behind” (p.109). These enriching relationships with the deceased in both cultures indicate that grief can be supported by a society without an individual’s needs and expressions of grief being stigmatizing or dehumanizing. These cultural artifacts establish how grieving is accomplished in a diverse approach, and is a lifelong experience.

The concept of grieving as a process that is unbounded by time and inherently unique for each individual is spiritually and emotionally advantageous. This sentiment removes an unrealistic pressure that grief is “completed” in a finite time, and that there is a “correct” way to grieve. According to Schechter (2009), theoretical models can attempt to explain the grieving process while still allowing grief to be varied for distinctive individuals (p.219). There are specific theories that provide a structure and lens to view grief while still allowing for a great deal of variation include the dual process model, meaning reconstruction, and continuing bonds (Corr & Corr, 2013).

Research by Stroebe and Schut (2010) conveys that one method for grieving is the dual process model, which exhibits a give-and-take synergy between two sets of interdependent measures for experiencing grief: A loss-oriented and restoration-oriented process. This dynamic model establishes that the loss-oriented process engages with the encroachment of grief into the bereaved individual’s life, and on the aspects of grief that cause disruption and angst. Supplementing this, the restoration-oriented process encompasses an adjustment for a life of change, and allows bereaved individuals to participate in unfamiliar situations or divert attention

from the loss itself. Corr and Corr (2013) state that “this model emphasizes the effort coping requires of bereaved persons, the potentially active nature of mourning, and the complexity of the processes involved” (p.230). The dual process model effectively demonstrates how bereaved individuals can move between two distinctive polarities throughout the grieving process. A feasible example of the dual process model could be a bereaved mother, who, would grieve laboriously at the loss of a child, yet could find determination to continue to live, and parent her other children. This model of grief validates rather than disenfranchises the individual, and dismisses the notion that healthy grieving happens on a short timeline. Additionally, this model demonstrates that grief and bereavement are an active process, and may need to continue through everyday life.

To enter back into life again, a bereaved individual must discover or formulate significance in one’s life. Research on the grieving process of meaning making and reconstruction is covered by Neimeyer et al. (2009) who establishes that “viewing these challenges through a constructivist lens brings into sharp focus the struggle to meaningfully integrate the loss into the survivor’s life narrative, in a way that establishes a thread of consistency and significance in the midst of a turbulent transition” (p.10). Meaning reconstruction as the result of loss is a crucial task for bereaved individuals, and is an adaptive process. The opportunity to reconstruct purpose can be accomplished in a variety of ways, and will be unique for each bereaved individual. Corr and Corr (2013) suggest that a practical example of meaning reconstruction could include finding and encouraging grappling with the deeper existential issues that arise after a significant loss through spirituality, religion, and/or philosophy. The meaning making model demonstrates how grief is a uniquely distinguished process, emphasizing the essential human need to find or create meaning in the midst of painful

and life-altering losses. While searching for and creating meaning is a very human need, how each individual defines, describes, and constructs new meanings after a loss is highly individualized. A bereaved person must not be restricted to a specific amount of time for grief, as human beings can potentially continue to search for and construct meaning after a loss throughout their lifespan; constructed meaning can provide new directions, purpose, and energy to return back to life over time.

After experiencing a loss, bereaved individuals can continue the pursuit for meaning by continuing to cultivate a relationship with the deceased. This aspect of the grieving process is known as continuing bonds. Continuing bonds offers freedom to the bereaved to live fulfilling lives without entirely surrendering what they have lost (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). This process illustrates how death can be the cessation of life, while simultaneously granting the bereaved individual an opportunity to sustain a relationship with the deceased. Adequate instances of continuing bonds can be demonstrated in cultural celebrations. For example, according to Schetcher (2009), Day of the Dead consists of deceased loved ones “whose souls will come home for a few brief hours to enjoy the pleasures they once knew in life” (p. 272). It is apparent how the bereaved honour their loved ones through meaningful traditions, and the relationship continues beyond death; this belief is echoed by many spiritual notions from American-Indian communities. Moreover, it is apparent how in Japanese culture maintain ties and a relationship to one’s deceased relatives is considered normal and common. This cross-cultural experience is inclusive to the phenomena of extraordinary experiences in this category of grieving. Beischel et al. (2014) suggests that “Spontaneous and induced experiences of after-death communication (ADC) have been shown to be beneficial in the resolution of grief by demonstrating these continued bonds” (p.169). These experiences benefit the bereaved as they

provide recognition of the loss, and grant an extraordinary experience filled with connection to and love of a deceased friend or family member. These same experiences are completely dismissed by most people in Western cultures because anything not based on concrete facts and evidence is considered suspect and even a sham.

These processes of grieving exhibit a dynamic and progressive opportunity for bereaved individuals to cope with loss, while also acquiring information on how to enter back into life even with sorrow still present. These grieving processes are an essential period of growth. It is imperative that bereaved individuals are able to acknowledge that loss cannot be controlled. The acceptance of releasing control has great potential to support people who are vulnerable because of their loss, as it can allow these individuals to consider the possibility of emotional, psychological, or spiritual growth from the experience. Ultimately, loss is an inevitable fate that all humans will experience. As such, being able to acknowledge grief in the way that an individual needs it to happen, and in the timing that is needed for the grief to unfold, is an essential component of how we acknowledge one of the deepest aspects of our humanity.

Contemporary Western society hinders the instinctive grieving process by popularizing the consumer-driven notion that grieving faster and leaving grief unexamined is equivalent to a better life. However, this understanding of grief is misguided, as suppressing grief can create more stress and deplete one's energy in ways that compound the effects of grief. There are examples of cultures that do not place such conditions upon grief; these communities allow grief to be integrated into cultural rituals and communal celebrations, allowing bereavement to unfold naturally over time by incorporating the dead into meaningful ceremonies and traditions. Allowing grief to unfold naturally, with support instead of pressure to suppress allows the grieving process to be a potentially transformative experience, and continuing bonds can occur

naturally for bereaved individuals to continue in life with a sense of their loved one's presence in a meaningful way. Ultimately, grief is a painful and heartbreaking experience. However, it is this same pain that can be transformative and provide opportunities for growth and deepening.

Interfering with a process that is adaptive and that expresses our deepest human need to grapple with suffering is dehumanizing and has the potential to cause a great deal of harm. For this reason, I argue that grief is important. It is just as important, however, that individuals be allowed to examine and experience grief in the way that is congruent and consists with their needs, values, and situations. Allowing grief to unfold in this way offers the potential for the transformative aspects of the grieving process.

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