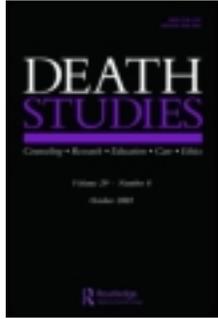


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A Social Constructionist Account of Grief: Loss and the Narration of Meaning

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A Social Constructionist Account of Grief: Loss and the Narration of Meaning

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In contrast to dominant Western conceptions of bereavement in largely intrapsychic terms, the authors argue that grief or mourning is not primarily an interior process, but rather one that is intricately social, as the bereaved commonly seek meaning in this unsought transition in not only personal and familial, but also broader community and even cultural spheres. The authors therefore advocate a social constructionist model of grieving in which the narrative processes by which meanings are found, appropriated, or assembled occur at least as fully between people as within them. In this view, mourning is a situated interpretive and communicative activity charged with establishing the meaning of the deceased's life and death, as well as the postdeath status of the bereaved within the broader community concerned with the loss. They describe this multilevel phenomenon drawing first on psychological research on individual self-narratives that organize life experience into plot structures that display some level of consistency over time, whose viability is then negotiated in the intimate interpersonal domain of family and close associates. Second, they explore public communication, including eulogies, grief accounts in popular literature, and elegies. All of these discourses construct the identity of the deceased as he or she was, and as she or he is now in the individual and communal continuing bonds with the deceased. Finally, they consider different cultural contexts to see how expressions of grief are policed to ensure their coherence with the prevailing social and political order. That is, the meanings people find through the situated interpretive and communicative activity that is grieving must either be congruent with the meanings that undergird the larger context or represent an active form of resistance against them.

A DOUBLE LOSS

As he approached retirement after a long and successful career in engineering, Brad¹ counted himself a lucky

man: Although he had known his share of challenges and adversities, he felt blessed in the things that counted, as he enjoyed good health, financial security, a strong marriage, and a lifetime of accomplishments, many of which were gratifyingly tangible in the architecture of buildings he had helped design and construct. Most of all, Brad was proud of his children, who as adults themselves had extended the family by bringing into the world three precious grandchildren with whom he cherished the growing leisure time that was becoming available to him.

¹Like all client names in this chapter, those in this case study are altered to protect the identity of the family, and the details of the case are redacted to respect their confidentiality.

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Then, one cold November afternoon, all this changed in a heartbeat with a ring of his cell phone. As Brad listened with incredulity and mounting alarm, the nearly hysterical voice of his daughter-in-law shared the news that the fishing boat of her husband David had been found, capsized, on an immense lake a few hours from their home, although neither he nor their 8-year-old son, Corey, who had joined him for a father-son weekend, had been found. Immediately Brad made plans to fly to his son's city, and with his daughter-in-law, drove to the lake to meet with police and the park rangers who found the abandoned campsite and boat following a sudden and violent storm. A wide search ensued, with the only evidence of David and Corey's whereabouts being the boy's baseball cap that had washed up on the lake's distant shore. It was not until the lake had frozen for the winter and thawed in the spring that the remains of the man and boy were discovered, six weeks and three nautical miles apart. Both times, Brad, striving mightily to maintain his dignity, was present for the identification of the bodies.

That much of the story could have been followed in the local papers. The story that unfolded in the private venue of psychotherapy broadened and deepened the public account. The storm that took the lives of David and Corey likewise ended the life Brad had known up to that time, as he struggled mightily to wrap his heart and mind around the enormity of the loss. Psychologically, he grieved for the broken bonds with his living son and grandson, as he and his wife alternated between seeking comfort and understanding from one another, and avoiding such intimate conversation out of fear of triggering their own and their partner's pain. Likewise, as a religious man, Brad contended with the image of a universe and a God made suddenly more random or cruel than he had imagined, precipitating a spiritual struggle that distanced him from his once-important church community. And practically he was forced to rewrite the hoped-for script of his life in a changed family and a changed landscape of purposive action.

Joining with his therapist in sifting through the rubble of the world he knew, Brad gradually reconstructed his sense of connection to David and Corey in memory, story, and activity, ultimately engaging his wife, his church community, and a much wider social world in a meaningful quest: to press the park service to post warning signs about hazardous weather, alongside boards that offered the free loan of life jackets in every size, from toddler to adult. Each of the signs, erected on the anniversary of the fateful accident, carried a photographic image of a proud David and beaming Corey, holding up a large bass beneath the striking title, "*Kids Don't Float!*" The brief story accompanying the illustration honored their lives and deaths, and served, Brad hoped, as an object lesson for other families. As he

adopted the reluctant role of spokesman for boating safety in countless school, civic, and media events, Brad began to perform a changed life story, one that did not so much assuage his grief as draw upon it to restore a life of meaning that had been devastated by the loss.

GRIEF IN CONTEXT

Human beings, as both Buddhists and psychologists remind us, are wired for attachment in a world of impermanence. With the many unwelcome losses of life—of people, places, projects, and possessions in seemingly endless succession, we are called on to reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss, at every level from the simple habit structures of our daily lives, through our identities in a social world, to our personal and collective cosmologies, whether secular or spiritual (Neimeyer, 2001). Far from being a private and dispassionate cognitive process, contending with the meaning of the loss and the meaning of our lives in the wake of it is typically deeply emotional, intricately social, and inevitably constructed and sometimes contested in broader linguistic and cultural contexts. That is, although grief and mourning may be universal and biological, both the story of the death itself and our changed relationship to the deceased are personally narrated, socially shared, and expressed in compliance with or contradiction to widely varying communal rules.

Our goal in this article will be to reflect on the construction of meaning at multiple levels. We will argue that the meaning of mourning is sought, given voice, supported socially, contested, and in some cases even imposed within the specific cultural frames within which the bereaved orient to the "grief work" they undertake. We begin by sketching a social constructionist model of grief as a situated interpretive and communicative activity,² a perspective that is at variance with Western cultural and professional assumptions that consider grief primarily as a private and intrapsychic process. First, we will review psychological research on the quest for significance in loss at an individual and family level, and then progress to a consideration of more public grief accounts, eulogies, and elegies, before nesting this

²By "situated," we mean to emphasize that mourning is a function of a given social, historical and cultural context; by "interpretive," we draw attention to the meaning-making processes it entails; by "communicative," we stress the essential embeddedness of such processes in written, spoken, and nonverbally performed exchanges with others; and by "activity," we underscore that grieving and mourning are active verbs, not merely states to be endured. In sum, "the work of grief," in our view, involves reaffirmation or reconstruction of a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss, at social as well as individual levels, in a specific cultural and historical frame.

“effort after meaning” (Bartlett, 1932) in the broader societal contexts within which it is negotiated.

GRIEF AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Studies of bereavement in medicine and the social sciences inform us that grieving is an encompassing process, one that can be observed at levels ranging from the biological through the personal and interpersonal to more broadly social levels of discourse (Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, & Stroebe, 2008), even if psychology is often given pride of place in this multidisciplinary matrix. Likewise, the characteristically human processes of narration as a form of meaning-making occur at these same levels, and it is therefore not surprising that mourning and meaning are intricately braided (Neimeyer, 2006). Here we will argue that mourning, in both its private and public moments, draws heavily on narrative processes to establish the meaning of the deceased’s life and death, as well as the post-mortem status of the bereaved within the broader community concerned with the loss.

Such narrative activity can be observed on the most neurophysiologic of levels. The human penchant for “storying” events, to organize temporal experience in terms of plot structures with meaningful beginnings, middles, and ends, appears to be anchored in brain structures that subserve the processing of episodic memories, consolidating them ultimately into larger autobiographical memories that are subject to dynamic reconstruction over time (Rubin & Greenberg, 2003). In a fascinating application of neuroimaging technologies, researchers conducted functional magnetic resonance imaging scans of the brains of grieving subjects, as the latter were stimulated with pictures of their loved ones and words excerpted from their own narratives of their loss (e.g., “cancer,” “despair”). Cuing subjects in this way produced heightened activation of the seats of autobiographical memory and emotion (Gundel, O’Conner, Littrell, Fort, & Lane, 2003). Thus, even neurologically, human beings seem primed to respond to reminders of the disruption of a security-enhancing attachment bond (Bowlby, 1980) with an attempt at making sense of it in storied terms.

Efforts to interpret the loss within a viable narrative frame are of course central to the work of grief therapy, where survivors, like Brad in the opening case study, wrestle to make sense of what has befallen them and their loved ones. Such attempts to process the loss are typically deeply emotional, whether driven forward by unremitting anguish in the wake of tragedy, or accompanied by subtler positive emotion when a death is viewed as expected and “appropriate.” Moreover,

meaning is as commonly negotiated between people as within them, as the bereaved seek validation of their accounts of the significance of the loss from friends, family, coworkers, and sometimes bereavement professionals. Whether by sharing stories regarding the deceased, disclosing dreams of the lost other, attempting to narrate their inner landscape of feeling or seeking spiritual significance in a striking coincidence, people strive to reassert order and significance in a world made disorderly by loss (Nadeau, 1997). Psychologically, narration of a personal loss may also serve larger social agendas, as reflected in Brad’s drawing on the story of his own family’s tragedy to provide a cautionary tale to others, on both signage and stage to promote boating safety.

Qualitative research on such joint activity at a family level reveals its dialectical, dialogical, and dynamic character, as members contend with conflicting impulses to engage the loss and each other in a way that is comforting rather than overwhelming (Hooghe, Rober, & Neimeyer, 2011). For example, one fine-grained study of a couple mourning the death of an infant daughter demonstrated their careful coordination of communication in an effort to remain close to their daughter without breaking through the “crust” of distance required to protect them from being engulfed in unspeakable sadness (Hooghe, Neimeyer, & Rober, 2012). Given the primacy of family systems in the meaning-making process (Nadeau, 1997), a narrative perspective holds great promise in understanding the processes by which family members conserve or construct a sense of resilience following a shared loss (Hooghe & Neimeyer, 2012).

Whether attempts to make sense of the narrative of the loss and find some redemptive benefit in it play out in the minds of mourners or in the conversational spaces between them, a good deal of research has documented its role in predicting adaptation in bereavement. For example, parents’ sense-making regarding the death of their child, alternately undertaken in spiritual, secular, or practical terms, predicts five to 15 times the amount of intensity in grief symptomatology than do length of time since the loss (ranging from a few weeks to many years) and cause of death (whether natural or violent) (Keesee, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2008). Further study of the thematic underpinnings of these grief narratives demonstrates that those involving making sense of the death as being “God’s will” and the potentially more secular belief that the child was no longer suffering were associated with less distressing grief symptomatology, as were benefit-finding themes suggesting enhanced spirituality and changed priorities in life (Lichtenthal, Currier, Neimeyer, & Keesee, 2010). Thus, the ability to scaffold a story that renders the loss comprehensible, and in some sense partially compensated by the life learning

it entails, are associated with more adaptive courses of grieving, with the specific thematic structures anchoring such narratives varying as a function the nature of the loss. Parents who lost their children violently, to suicide, homicide and fatal accident, described the imperfection of the world and brevity of life, but also appreciation for the preciousness of that life, more frequently than did parents who lost a child to natural causes, who in turn were more likely to find benefit in the loss in terms of personal growth (Lichtenthal, Neimeyer, Currier, Roberts, & Jordan, 2013). Accordingly, our research group has constructed detailed coding systems for winnowing out these and dozens of other themes in the grief accounts of people suffering a great range of losses, augmenting quantitative studies of the amount of meaning made with a closer analysis of its content (Gillies, Neimeyer, & Milman, 2014).

The association between meaning-making and adaptive outcomes in bereavement is not limited to studies of bereaved parents. One study of several hundred people who lost significant others to a range of violent deaths (accident, suicide, and homicide) as well as natural death (e.g., cancer, emphysema, heart failure) found that sense-making predicted more favorable accommodation of loss overall, and that it did so with such accuracy that it essentially accounted for all of the difference between violent and natural causes of death (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006).³ Numerous other studies support this argument. For example, a large sample of adults who were better able to “make sense” of their loss reported fewer symptoms of complicated grief across the first 2 years of bereavement (Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2006). Moreover, whereas a struggle to find meaning in the loss predicts future levels of grief related distress, reports of sense-making in the early months of bereavement predict higher levels of well-being a full 18 to 48 months in the future (Coleman & Neimeyer, 2010). In another longitudinal study, mourners who were able to gradually integrate the experience into their meaning systems also reported fewer symptoms of complicated grief over time (Holland, Currier, Coleman, & Neimeyer, 2010). Finally, evidence supports the incremental validity of our measure of meaning integration following loss, as it makes a unique contribution to the prediction of mental and physical health outcomes even when demographic background of the mourner, his or her level of complicated grief, and

the circumstances of the death are taken into account (Holland, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2014).

As the prominence of religious themes in our research on bereaved parents suggests, inscribing loss in the context of a spiritual narrative or meaning system that gives our unique losses a universal significance plays an adaptive role for many people (Park, 2013). However, evidence also indicates that many people struggle greatly with their faith and faith community in the wake of loss, especially when that loss is tragic. For example, our research on African American homicide survivors, nearly all of whom endorse a Christian view of God as omniscient, omnipotent, and compassionate, has documented that a substantial minority report a prolonged spiritual crisis in the aftermath of their loved one’s murder, one marked by a sense of alienation from and anger with both God and their spiritual communities (Burke, Neimeyer, McDevitt-Murphy, Ippolito, & Roberts, 2011). Moreover, this “negative religious coping” is associated with more complicated, intense, and prolonged grief, both with this population and in samples that are more broadly based in ethnicity and cause of death (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014). In keeping with our conception of the centrality of sense making in bereavement, inability to integrate the loss into the mourner’s meaning system appears to mediate between the experience of spiritual struggle and complicated grief (Lichtenthal, Burke, & Neimeyer, 2011). For this reason, we have recently validated a measure of what we are terming *complicated spiritual grief*, whose component factors of Insecurity with God and Disruptions in Religious Practice predict complicated grief even after more general measures of “negative religious coping” are taken into account (Burke et al., 2014).⁴ Notably, challenges to spiritually inclined mourners in these studies play out in both the personal domain of the individual’s sense of connection to the divine and in the social world of their fellowship with the church community.

Viewing meaning making in bereavement in narrative terms implies that profound losses can challenge our *self-narrative* (Neimeyer, 2004), defined as “an overarching cognitive-affective-behavioral structure that organizes the ‘micro-narratives’ of everyday life into a ‘macro-narrative’ that consolidates our self-understanding, establishes our characteristic range of

³Further consideration of these results suggested that a defining feature of violent death bereavement was their *senselessness*, their having no justification, purpose, or explanation in the eyes of the bereaved. It seemed to be this assault on meaning, more than the grotesqueness, suddenness, or human agency implicated in these losses to suicide, homicide, or fatal accident that accounted for the intensity and complication of grief in the aftermath of such bereavement.

⁴Of course, we recognize that this measure, devised for use in the specific cultural context of American Protestantism, has its focus on the spiritual struggles of Christians who view their faith in terms of a personal relationship with a caring God. Just how adequately it can be applied to other monotheistic, Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Islam) remains to be tested, though there are surely spiritual frameworks (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism) that are organized along different lines, which deserve evaluation for their role in bereavement adaptation using other approaches.

emotions and goals, and guides our performance on the stage of the social world” (pp. 53–54). From this perspective, identity can be seen as a narrative achievement. That is, our sense of self is established through the stories that we tell about our lives, the stories that others tell about us, and the stories that we enact in their presence. It is this self-narrative that can be profoundly shaken by “seismic” life events such as the death of a loved one; and, important for our argument, narrating grief instigates the processes of reaffirmation, repair, or replacement of the basic plot and theme of the life story of the bereaved, which typically calls for witnessing and consensual validation by relevant others and social systems.

Characteristically, this narrative activity into which we are launched has two aspects. On the one hand, it entails a need to process the *event story* of the loss itself and its import for our lives, as we contend with questions about why it occurred and what it means for our lives going forward. On the other hand, it involves an attempt to access the *back story* of our relationship to the deceased, both to restore some sense of attachment security and reestablish a sense of continuity between the life we had and the life we face now (Neimeyer & Thompson, 2014). As the bereaved assimilate the event story into their existing self-narratives, perhaps by framing it in light of a robust spirituality or personal philosophy, or by revising their worldview to accommodate the death and its implications (Neimeyer, 2006), they restore a measure of coherence to a life story altered by loss. Likewise, as they access the back story of their relationship to their loved one, they tend to construct a durable continuing bond to the deceased in lieu of a final goodbye (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). In effect, the bereaved characteristically retain or reconstruct their sense of security, not by relinquishing but by reemphasizing attachment to the deceased. This capacity to access a sense of connection with the deceased in a way that is healing rather than hurtful seems to evolve over time, as a continuing bond is associated with more positive emotion after 2 years of bereavement than in the early months following the death (Field & Friedrichs, 2004).

Of course, different losses vary in their degree of challenge to survivors’ self-narratives, and not all bereaved people are equally susceptible to a crisis of meaning in the aftermath of loss. Traumatic and premature death is associated with a greater search for significance and with this, more intense and incapacitating grief symptoms (Currier et al., 2006). Preliminary evidence suggests that people who subscribe to less certain “world assumptions”—doubting whether the universe is meaningful, whether they themselves have worth, and whether they think they have a measure of control over relevant outcomes—may be more likely to struggle in

the aftermath of a loved one’s death, irrespective of the cause of death (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2009). For them, it is as if the loss provides still further evidence of life’s injustice and unpredictability, as well as their own helplessness in the face of fate. Likewise, mourners with more insecure histories of attachment, experiencing keen anxiety regarding the availability of others who can offer a “safe haven” for them in difficult times, are more prone to bereavement complications (Meier, Carr, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2013). Conversely, bereaved individuals who confront more normative losses, or who have more robust self-narratives capable of assimilating even objectively traumatic losses, seem to respond with resilience and resourcefulness, maintaining access to comforting memories of their loved one that provide a measure of consolation (Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse, 2004). Moreover, continuing bonds with the deceased seem to be maintained least painfully when the loss itself makes sense in spiritual, existential, or practical terms. In contrast, a strong connection to the memory of the deceased is associated with intense grief symptoms when the death of the attachment figure is viewed as an easily avoidable, unnecessary, or otherwise meaningless occurrence (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006).

In sum, psychological science suggests that both grief and the narrative parsing and organization of experience are rooted in our biology and in our intimate lives as social animals, and are easily observable in the internal processing and social behavior of bereaved people. Moreover, studies suggest that the quest for meaning in the aftermath of perturbing loss animates both intrapersonal and interpersonal efforts to make sense of a troubling transition, and that individuals who undertake this search for significance successfully fare better and grieve in a less debilitating fashion than do those who find no satisfying answers to their anguished existential questions (C. G. Davis, Wohl, & Verberg, 2007). It is worth underscoring, however, that the individual interpretive activity associated with this quest for meaning in mourning does not occur solely in a subjective sphere, as if disconnected from the larger social world. As Brad’s case demonstrated, grief accounts may be parsed with family and other intimate associates, therapists, and spiritual leaders and may even constitute a form of *social action* with broader intentions and consequences than simply the management of troubling emotions or even honoring the deceased. Instead, personal narratives of loss are nested in cultural, political, and religious contexts and draw heavily on the discursive products of other bereaved individuals in the form of public accounts of loss, both spoken and written, which are characterized by their own tropes and themes. It is to these durable discourses we now turn.

THE DISCOURSES OF GRIEF: MEANING IN MOURNING

A social constructionist model of mourning must necessarily recognize not only the role of meaning, but also of communication and interaction with other human beings that convey meaning, as fundamental in coping with grief. An entire line of investigation (e.g., Dennis, 2008, 2009; Kunkel & Dennis, 2003; Kunkel, Dennis, & Garner, in press) has been devoted to examining the ways in which a variety of discourses of grief embody meaning making. These discourses of grief, whether spoken (e.g., eulogies), written (e.g., grief accounts in popular literature), or both (e.g., elegies), attest to the quest for meaning that better aligns beliefs and assumptions with experiences, especially unwelcome ones such as the loss of a loved one.

One way to think of the striving for meaning in bereavement considers the intersection of two categorical distinctions in meaning making: (a) searching for comprehensibility versus searching for significance and (b) assimilation versus accommodation (see Kunkel et al., in press). When a distressing situation, such as the death of a loved one, occurs, an individual's global meanings, such as beliefs and life goals/purposes, are relied upon for interpreting it. The distressing situations are appraised for meaning and any unresolved discrepancy between global and situational meanings creates dissonance and the drive to engage in further meaning-making efforts aimed at reducing this discrepancy (Park, 2010). Searching for comprehensibility regards matters of causality and reasons for occurrence of the distressing event, whereas searching for significance involves assessing the impacts and consequential values of the event. Assimilation is the reduction of discrepancy via alteration of situational appraised meaning to better align with global meanings, whereas accommodation is the evolution of global meanings to better incorporate situational ones (Park, 2010).

Interpretive qualitative analyses of data sets comprised of collections of eulogies, elegies, grief accounts, and other discourses of grief have revealed consistent patterns of meaning in mourning that indicate combinations of searching for comprehensibility and assimilation (i.e., sense making), searching for comprehensibility and accommodation (i.e., acceptance or resignation), searching for significance and assimilation (i.e., positive reappraisal), and searching for significance and accommodation (i.e., realignment of identity and relationships; Kunkel et al., in press). As those who grieve talk and write about their experiences, feelings, and expectations, these four realms of meaning making are expressed, often in the form of noted coping, appraisal, and mourning constructs such as problem-focused coping, positive reappraisal, and continuing bonds with the deceased.

Eulogies are the form of public address presented at funerals and memorial services whereby survivors and/or clergy seek often to remember and memorialize the decedent, to assist the audience of mourners with troubling affect and cognition, and also to soothe their own raw emotions by expressing them (Kunkel & Dennis, 2003). Elegies are forms of poetry that regard love, longing, and mourning but that have most widely been recognized as focusing on the dead, death, and dying. They often are composed with sorrowful lamentation, idealization of the deceased, and representations of both mourners' melancholic emotions and struggles to accept new lonelier existences (Dennis, 2009). Grief accounts have been identified as "written and published tales of fiction or non-fiction that prominently feature grief, its meanings, and its inevitable mystery" that highlight the "struggles to accept, understand, assimilate, overcome, manage, or cope with grief" as well as "the perceptions, messages, strategies, and activities employed towards these purposes" (Dennis, 2008, p. 802). They include memoirs such as Joan Didion's (2005) *The Year of Magical Thinking* and novels such as Lolly Winston's (2004) debut smash, *Good Grief: A Novel*.

Sense-making, the combination of searching for comprehensibility and assimilation, is evident in Anne Bradstreet's elegy, *In Memory of My Dear Grandchild, Anne Bradstreet, Who Deceased June 20, 1669, Being Three Years and Seven Months Old* (2001). Bradstreet acknowledged that, in retrospect, it only makes sense that we lose even that which we love when it is not immortal,

I knew she was but as a withering flower,
That's here today, perhaps gone in an hour,
Like as a bubble, or the brittle glass,
Or like a shadow turning as it was.
More fool then I to look on that was lent
As if mine own, when thus impermanent. (Bradstreet, 2001, p. 263)

In his grief account, *A Grief Observed*, which focuses on the loss of his wife, "H.," C. S. Lewis also acknowledged that loss of those who lived can be viewed in a sensible larger perspective of mortality, "If H. is not, then she never was. I mistook a cloud of atoms for a person. There aren't, and never were, any people. Death only reveals the vacuity that was always there. What we call the living are simply those who have not yet been unmasked" (C. S. Lewis, 1961, p. 28).

Lewis goes on to attribute the loss to the will of God, as

God no sooner saw two of His creatures happy than He stopped it (None of that here!). As if He were like the Hostess at the sherry-party who separates two guests the moment they show signs of having got into a real

conversation... Or it could be that the marriage had “reached its proper perfection.” This had become what it had in it to be. Therefore of course it would not be prolonged. As if God said, “Good; you have mastered that exercise. I am very pleased with it. And now you are ready to go on to the next.” (C. S. Lewis, 1961, pp. 48–49)

Appeals to the wonder of nature are a common theme of elegy that also provides a sense in which life must be considered real yet limited. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Adonais*, an elegy for the death of poet John Keats, includes,

Afar the melancholy thunder moaned,
Pale Ocean in unquiet slumber lay.
And the winds flew round, sobbing in their dismay.
Lost Echo sits amid the voiceless mountains,
And feeds her grief with his remembered lay,
And will no more reply to winds or fountains,
Or amorous birds perched on the young green spray,
Or herdsman’s horn, or bell at closing day...
(Shelley, 2001, pp. 164–165)

When the search for comprehensibility, or reasons why the loss has transpired, yields no measureable progress, accommodation of global beliefs may take the form of acceptance of, or even resignation to, the lack of understanding.

Outright inability to comprehend is acknowledged in Alan Zweibel’s eulogy for comedienne Gilda Radner: “I don’t know why God makes people and then takes them back while they’re still having fun with the life he gave them in the first place” (Zweibel, 2003, p. 93). Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren eulogized John F. Kennedy with, “We are saddened; we are stunned; we are perplexed... What moved some misguided wretch to do this horrible deed may never be known to us” (Warren, 2003, p. 300).

Some, like Lewis, chalk it up to an incomprehensible inevitability:

What chokes every prayer and every hope is the memory of all the prayers H. and I offered and all the false hopes we had. Not hopes raised merely by our own wishful thinking, hopes encouraged, even forced upon us, by false diagnoses, by X-ray photographs, by strange remissions, by one temporary recovery that might have been ranked as a miracle. Step by step we were led up the garden path. Time after time, when He seemed most gracious He was really preparing the next torture. (C. S. Lewis, 1961, p. 30)

Grief accounts also often feature a restorative dimension wherein mourners, for lack of the ability to comprehend and come to grips with the death of loved ones, imagine, or even pursue, a route that might undo their

loss (Dennis, 2008) and a world(view) where this is possible. This is the entire basis of the rationalist Didion’s (2005) year of magical thinking, an era in which she tries to forestall the actual heart attack and passing of her husband, John Dunne. The fictional 9-year-old Oskar Schell, protagonist of Jonathan Safran Foer’s (2005) *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, essentially fails to find the meaning of a key found in the closet of his father, Thomas, who perished in the collapse of a World Trade Center tower on 9/11/2001. The final 15 pages of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* are a reverse chronology timeline of pictures that feature a body, perhaps his father’s, rising up to, rather than falling from, the tower; this is the embodiment of Oskar’s flipbook effect reversing the order of events that led to Thomas’ demise.

The discourses of grief also provide evidence that mourners assimilate the meaning of the actual tragic events as a result of their searching for the significance of their losses; frequently this takes the form of positive reappraisal wherein some benefit within the greater deficit is identified and located. In the collection of grief accounts called *Chicken Soup for the Grieving Soul* (2003), Katie Kroot and Heather Black related in “Joseph’s Living Legacy” the value to Kroot of a letter that “shares the outcome of your generosity” and attests to the newfound health of two women who live now with the kidneys, and of two children who received the heart valves, donated from the body of Kroot’s son, Joseph. Kroot wrote of the comfort in knowing that her son did not die in vain but instead improved or saved the lives of seven other human beings (Kroot & Black, 2003, pp. 37–38).

Pericles’ *Funeral Oration* for fallen warriors transcends their termination with a grander, larger context:

What their eyes showed plainly must be done they trusted their own valor to accomplish, thinking it more glorious to defend themselves and die in the attempt than to yield and live. From the reproach of cowardice, indeed, they fled, but presented their bodies to the shock of battle; when, insensible of fear, but triumphing in hope, in the doubtful charge they instantly dropped—and thus discharged the duty which brave men owed their country. (Pericles, 1997, p. 169)

In Victor Hugo’s eulogy for Voltaire, the positive qualities in the life of the latter are appreciated above and beyond his having been vanquished by death:

Voltaire conquered. Voltaire waged the splendid kind of warfare, the war of one against all; that is to say, the grand warfare. The war of thought against matter, the war of reason against prejudice, the war of the just against the unjust, the war for the oppressed against the oppressor, the war of goodness, the war of kindness. He had the tenderness of a woman and the wrath of a

hero. He was a great mind and an immense heart.
(Hugo, 1997, pp. 185–186)

Helen Keller remarked that the hardships of her life and the loss of her friend, Mark Twain, are overshadowed by the experience of having enjoyed him: “Sometimes I have complained in my heart because so many pleasures of human experience have been withheld from me, but when I recollect the treasure of friendship that has been bestowed upon me, I withdraw all charges against life” (Keller, 1997, p. 286). Even death itself can be re-evaluated as more tolerable, such as George Harrison’s when presented by Eric Idle as “He passed away here in L.A. with beauty and dignity surrounded by people he loved” (Idle, 2003, p. 220).

The search for significance in meaning of the loss of loved ones may also result in the accommodation of global beliefs and worldviews. Many of these involve recognition of new life conditions and/or roles for the bereaved; others pertain to the understanding and experiencing of newly transformed relationships with the deceased. Adlai Stevenson’s eulogy for Eleanor Roosevelt bemoaned, “Today we weep for ourselves. We are lonelier; someone has gone from one’s own life who was like the certainty of refuge” (Stevenson, 1997, p. 104).

Elegies such as Edna St. Vincent Millay’s *Memorial to D.C.*, often indicate new despairing lives without the deceased present in them:

But your voice . . . never the rushing
Of a river underground,
Not the rising of the wind,
In the trees before the rain,
Not the woodcock’s watery call,
Not the note the white-throat utters,
Not the feet of children pushing
Yellow leaves along the gutters
In the blue and bitter fall,
Shall content my musing mind
For the beauty of that sound
That in no new way at all
Ever will be heard again. (Millay, 2001, p. 286)

Wretched emotion also is determined to be part of one’s new existence in grief accounts such as “The Wisdom of a Child” when a new widower notes, “In the following days, loneliness and pain gave way to guilt, anger and eventually, self-pity” (Catton, 2003, p. 76) or when C.S. Lewis opened *A Grief Observed* with the sentence, “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing” (Lewis, 1961, p. 3).

Eulogists sometimes engage in forecasting and promoting action to take within the new reality as when

Ossie Davis urged those mourning Malcolm X to smile when others cast aspersions on him (O. Davis, 1997). Abraham Lincoln’s eulogy for soldiers killed at Gettysburg also engages in problem-focused coping with, “It is for us the living, rather, to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain . . . that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth” (Lincoln, 1997, p. 172).

Another manifestation of accommodating one’s world and worldview comes with the realignment of relationships with the deceased. It is common, across the genres of grief-related discourse, to find affirmation of the once real existence of the decedent and also attempts to continue, and perhaps transform, the bonds of attachment with him or her even in his or her physical absence. For instance of the former, in his eulogy for James Baldwin, William Styron recalled, “Night after night, Jimmy and I talked, drinking whiskey through the hours until the chill dawn, and I understood I was in the company of as marvelous an intelligence as I was ever likely to encounter. His voice, lilting and silky, became husky as he chain-smoked Marlboros” (Styron, 1997, p. 162). William Allen White wrote both the obituary in his newspaper, *The Emporia Gazette*, and a eulogy for his 16-year-old daughter, Mary. In the latter he recounted her horse-riding skills, early reading of Twain and Dickens, and love for drawing (White, 1997, pp. 253–255).

Attempts to keep vital the relationship with the dead are prominent among the genres. John Culkin closed his eulogy for Marshall McLuhan, “We have been friends together. But it is a new year and a new time, and we are together in a new way. The family goes on; the friends go on; the ideas go on; the work goes on; Marshall goes on. For such as him, there is no death” (Culkin, 2003, p. 195).

In the grief account comprised by Mitch Albom’s (2006) novella, *For One More Day*, the tale is told of Charley who, after a failed suicide attempt, visits his childhood home to find that his long-ago perished mother is living there and is ready to re-establish their relationship. Indeed, the entire plot of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) is centered on Oskar’s quest to find the meaning of the mysterious key left behind by Thomas. This is absolutely not just a quest for comprehensibility regarding the details of his father’s last minutes at the World Trade Center, but also a continuation of the relationship between father and son; a favorite tradition of theirs was the scavenger hunt style missions that Thomas often crafted for Oskar in locations such as Central Park.

As we narrate to one another our experiences of grief and mourning, we assist with searches for meaning both about the causes and the values of our losses and we resolve these quests with construction of meaning about both the losses and the worlds in which they occur. Such meaning making, narration, and interaction are all embedded in, and either reflect or reject, particular societal, cultural, and era-bound environs and norms.

DOMINANT NARRATIVES AND THE POLICING OF GRIEF: A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

As noted earlier, in this article we argue the case that both public and private mourning are situated interpretive and communicative activities. That is, the meanings of the life and death of the deceased, and the meanings of the continuing bond within the community of mourners are interactive meaning-making processes, not merely individual psychological phenomena, as the radical individualism of contemporary capitalist consumer culture would have it. If grief were only an individual matter, it would seem that the interpretive process would have few limitations placed on it. After all, the meaning of life and death would be just what individuals make of it. The present individualism, however, is deceptive. Individuals grieve and continue their bond with the deceased under the watchful eyes of their family and neighbors as well as those who hold religious and political power.

Laura Smart (1993) found that even though they were restrained from openly expressing the thoughts and emotions of grief, there is evidence that Calvinist parents in the 17th through the middle of the 18th century in England and the American colonies experienced grief after a child died much as contemporary bereaved parents do. She reported, however, that “Material from surviving diaries and letters is written tersely, and God’s will is invoked. Puritan parents felt little or no control over the child’s death, but often seem to have been compelled to write that they must submit themselves to God’s design” (p. 54).

The Puritan parents felt compelled because they had internalized the grief narrative of the religion into which they had been born or to which they had converted. The Puritans had an investment, as do all cultures, in regulating the mourning of their members, subtly or overtly, implicitly or explicitly. In the terminology of narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990), individuals are subjected to and sometimes subjugated by a dominant narrative of grief, which constructs their identity as bereaved people, and which regulates their proper performance of their role as mourners, in ways that may correspond or clash with their personal predilections.

Although the Puritan parents had different demands on them, the dynamics were no different than those experienced by Confederate war widows in the American South. Elder (2012) described how the political narrative of the Confederacy was supported by the ideal that young war widows selflessly transferred their monogamous love for their dead husband to the cause for which they died. “Condolence letters urged widows to remember both the husband and the cause that put him in an early grave” (p. 7). By connecting their continuing bond with the deathless ideal of the Confederacy, the widows were told their husbands would live forever. Elder traced the many ways the widows accepted, chafed under, and exploited their politically assigned grief narrative that could be at variance with their individual sense of selfhood and with the meanings they made of their husbands’ deaths.

Simply stated, society polices bereavement. It controls and instructs the bereaved how to think, feel, and behave. As Walter (1999) noted, “All societies have rules for how the emotions of grief are to be displayed and handled” (p. 120). Those who do not conform to social expectations are labeled aberrant. Puritan parents who did not publically testify that they accepted the death as within God’s plan would have paid a price in their congregation for their lack of faith. The young Confederate widows who were interested in romantic relationships with men were being unfaithful to their dead husbands and to the Confederate cause. In contemporary psychotherapeutic culture, aberrant grief is pathological, a term that can be applied to those who are seen as grieving too much (prolonged or chronic grief), at the wrong time (delayed grief), or not grieving at all (absent grief). In other times and other cultures the labels would be different.

We see policing most clearly in two elements of grief: first in how grief’s emotions are expressed, and second in how continuing bonds with the dead are managed. Both were evident in a disapproving evaluation in response to an inquiry to an acquaintance about how her sister was doing since her husband had died a year earlier. “Well, she is not doing well. She just sits home and when I call, all she can talk about is how much she misses him, and how wonderful he was.” If the woman had been a Confederate war widow, the same facts would have been cited in a positive evaluation.

Cultural expectations of how emotions should be expressed are grounded in larger behavioral codes. Differences in gender roles appear to be consistent across cultures. In a review of anthropological reports, Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson (1976) concluded that “Where there are differences, women seem to cry, to attempt self-mutilation, and actually to self-mutilate more than men; men seem to show more anger and

aggression directed away from self" (p. 24). In traditional China, for example, the power relationship between male and female was acted out in the funeral. The male was *yang*, associated with the enduring aspects of the body, the bones. Female was *yin*, associated with the flesh, with decomposition, and thus with pollution. One of the purposes of the rituals was to remove the corpse's pollution from contact with the living and to reduce the corpse to the nonpolluting bones. Women wailed and lamented at funerals while the men sat silently. In some places, as they wailed and lamented, women let down their hair and dragged or brushed it over the coffin, seemingly taking the pollution on themselves. When the funeral was not within the immediate family, women were more likely than men to represent the family by attending the rituals (Martin, 1988).

Although the scripting of gender roles is the most obvious example of how emotional expressions are policed, national character may also be at stake (Walter, 1997). After the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, several media commentators were ambivalent that the stiff-upper-lip mode seemed to have been replaced by an un-British expressiveness. After the negotiations about funeral arrangements, the Windsor family followed the casket in stoic dignity showing almost none of the deeply conflicting feelings her death and the public's response must have evoked. On the other hand, Diana's admiring commoners, for whom she was their queen of hearts, wept and hugged openly (Biddle & Walter, 1998).

A second aspect of grief in which we see strong policing is in how the continuing bond that the living maintain with the dead is managed. Because bonds with the dead are managed within folk religion, we find a broad range of beliefs and activities in the interactions between the living and the dead. Although the Qur'an says specifically in S27:82 that the dead will not be able to hear, a variety of stories, nonetheless, seem to contradict this, most indicating that the dead hear very well although they are unable to speak. Smith and Haddad (1981) noted that in a Hadith Muhammad is reported to have said, "Whoever does not have faith does not have permission to speak to the dead." Usually the dead are aware of the activities of the living that "affect the circumstances of the deceased" (p. 51). The dead know whether the living miss them sufficiently and how well the living are carrying on the deceased's family and personal affairs. If the living are careless in those matters, they cause discomfort to the dead. The dead are aware of whether the body and the grave were prepared correctly, whether the grave is cared for, and whether visitors to the grave show proper respect.

Smith and Haddad (1981) recounted a story told by Al-Ghazali about a father who engaged a teacher for his sons. The teacher died. Six days later the sons were

at the teacher's grave discussing "the matter of God's command." A man came by selling figs, the boys bought some, and as they ate, they threw the stems on the grave. That night in a dream their father saw the dead man who said, "Your children took my grave for a garbage pile and talked about me, with words that are nothing but infidelity!" We do not know what the boys were saying about "God's command" in terms of this significant and apparently unexpected death, but clearly the teacher disapproved of their views. After the father reprimanded the boys they said to each other, "Glory be to God! He continues to bother us in the hereafter just as he did on earth" (p. 52).

Bonds to the dead can be an element in cultural child-rearing practices. In Japanese ancestor rituals, the photographs and tablets of the family dead are in the *Butsudan*, a Buddhist altar in the home. Plath (1964) quoted a textbook, written in the early 1960s, that assumes it is a common experience to be "dragged by dad or mom to the front of the household shelf and asked, 'Do you think you can give any excuse to the ancestors for doing that?' The shelf is associated with the household and with society, so that rebelling before it is like rebelling against the whole world" (p. 312). Of course, cultural ideas about the continuing role of the dead change. When we asked one of our Japanese students if her parents had sat her down in front of the *Butsudan* when she misbehaved, she said that it had happened to one of her friends, but "My parents are modern."

Over the 20th century, American and Western European popular and professional grief guidelines changed from continuing bonds, to breaking bonds, and then back to continuing bonds. In the Victorian period, elaborate mourning customs channeled the sentimental attachment between the living and the dead. The mass deaths in the First World War overwhelmed the Victorian rituals (Stroebe et al., 1992). As the war ended, grief began to be regarded as an individual interior process with few social customs to support it. The Western developed world adopted the idea articulated by Freud (1917/1961), that bonds to the dead served no healthy psychological purpose, so the living should sever them.

For most of the 20th century, then, both mental health professionals and lay people believed, as Walter (1996) described it, that "the purpose of grief is the reconstruction of an autonomous individual who in large measure leaves the deceased behind and forms new attachments" (p. 7). Pathological grief was, therefore, failing to relinquish the attachment to the deceased. If the bereaved had not successfully relinquished the attachment, then the goal of psychiatric intervention, Volkan (1985) said, was to help them to do so. Volkan and Showalter (1968) described

“re-grieving” psychotherapy in a case study of a 16-year-old girl whose mother had committed suicide.

Instead of talking with her about her mother as a dead person, her mother was referred to as an inanimate object consisting of degenerating anatomic structures such as skin, muscle, and bone. Such an attempt, after the phase of abreaction, serves to hasten the actual return to normal reality testing while paradoxically giving impetus to repression of some conflictual ideas expressed. As can be readily seen, this somewhat harsh technique does not provide for full emotional insight but rather serves to repress some instinctual demands. (p. 370)

Today, in the second decade of the 21st century, a psychologist or psychiatrist treating bereaved adolescents would be unlikely to subscribe to either the technique or to the theory that supported it. Most mental health professionals would now cite data from and about bereaved people that show that many, perhaps most, continue their bond with the deceased in a way that does not admit any diagnosis of pathology (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman 1996).

Contemporary psychological theories of continuing bonds, however, reflect the individualism of corporate capitalism in their focus on individuals and immediate nuclear families. The theories do not, for the most part, focus on bonds within the larger culture, for example, the continuing bonds between the citizens and warriors who died “in the service of our country.” The memory of the war dead is evoked to rally the population to action and ideals and to solidify individuals’ identities as belonging to the nation. The dynamics we see in the cultural response to the warrior’s death are also present in the grief after every death. That is, as we are arguing in this article, to resolve the sorrow and the sense of loss, individuals, families, communities, and cultures construct meanings by integrating the experience of grief with larger cultural and religious narratives.

The political question is, then, which collective—family, community, tribe, sect, nation—controls the meanings by which the dead are remembered (see Goss & Klass, 2005). When we look at long-term changes in religious grief narratives, Richard Horsley (2003), said, we can understand them best when we see the underlying advance or retreat in the arrangements of political power. When there is a sudden change in who holds political (and thus economic) power, loyalty to the family dead detracts from the individual’s allegiance to the new order. Mount (1992) said, “This new loyalty—to God or the Church, to the Nation, to the Party or ideology—awards maximum points to those who forsake all other ties” (p. 6). When power arrangements change, we often see continuing bonds with ancestors recast into narratives that more directly support those who now claim political and economic power.

The new narratives have different rules by which grief is policed. One familiar example can stand for the widespread pattern. In ancient Israel, the monotheism of the Exodus story finally overcame Baalism in the Deuteronomic reform under King Josiah (621 BCE). Before the reform, Lang and McDannell (1988) said, “to appeal to the dead meant basically to call upon lost relatives residing in Sheol to aid the living. From these dead relatives the living expected personal protection and, more importantly, numerous offspring” (pp. 3–5). Virtually all the tombs before Josiah that have been excavated by archeologists are family tombs, that is, the tombs contained both men and women and people of all ages. The primary criterion for being placed in the tomb was familial relationship. The biblical euphemisms for death, “he slept with his fathers” or “he was buried with his fathers,” seem to indicate that the body was put in a family tomb.

Under Josiah, family graves, where ancestor rituals were performed, were destroyed and the bones dumped on the altars of other gods. Communications with the dead were forbidden (Davies, 1999; also see Block-Smith, 1992). After the reforms, when Josiah died his servants “buried him in his own tomb” (II Kings 23:30 RSV).

Some scholars, anticipating a later Jewish and especially Christian idea, suggest individual burials reflect that people believed in resurrection. Individual graves, they think, preserve individual identity until a future life in which such identity will be continued. There is no evidence in the texts dating from Josiah’s time, however, that resurrection of the dead played any role in the reformers’ thinking. Rather the texts from during or after Josiah’s time prohibit the former funeral practice: “You shall not practice augury or witchcraft . . . You shall not make any cuttings in your flesh on account of the dead or tattoo any marks upon you” (Leviticus 19: 26–28 RSV). And they prohibit communication with the dead:

If a person turns to mediums and wizards, playing the harlot after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut them off from among his people. (Leviticus 20:6 RSV)

There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, any one who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord; and because of these abominable practices the Lord your God is driving them out before you. (Deuteronomy 18:9–12 RSV)

The Priestly purity codes adopted during and after the reform banned cults of the dead as they put a large ritual distance between them and the living (T. J. Lewis,

1989). Dead bodies would be henceforth polluted, so contact with them made a person ineligible to participate in the ritual life of the community. In the laws enacted under Josiah, then, any contact with the dead, whether it be in body or spirit, was forbidden. The new laws abolished or demoted religious rituals that were not centered on Yahweh who was enthroned in the temple at Jerusalem and in whose name Josiah reigned.

Although Josiah's reform was short-lived, the Israelites who went into the Babylonian Exile used it as a template as they reformulated their religion into book-based Judaism, thus setting the pattern for policing grief and continuing bonds with the dead that would be adopted in Christianity and Islam. Each time strict monotheism has gained political power, for example in the Protestant Reformation in Christianity or in the Wahhabi Reform in Islam, continuing bonds with the family dead have been repressed and the emotions of grief have been redirected to faith in God. When strict monotheism is the dominant cultural narrative, the dead are under God's care and those who mourn them should find their consolation in faith in God, not in their continuing bond with the dead.

CODA: THE NESTING OF NARRATIVES IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

Although death and loss are human universals, their meanings are clearly particular. In this chapter we have argued that the construction and reconstruction of the meaning of mourning is an urgent priority for many of the bereaved, as reflected in their personal attempts to grapple with the significance of the loss for their own life story. Meaning is also revealed in those more durable discourses that scaffold these individual sense-making efforts, in the form of eulogies for the dead, grief accounts in popular self-help writing, memorial and mutual support sites on the web, and also in elegiac treatments of losses both personal and of wide social import. However, the intense narrative activity that characterizes these "efforts after meaning" are themselves nested within overarching cultural narratives that construct death, loss, and the bereaved themselves, as well as the community or society of which they are a part, along certain lines, as are the very forms in which such meanings are couched and shared. When more is at stake than private consolation, the public voicing and performance of grief and its associated rituals are functionally scripted in a way that supports broader social systems and those who wield power within them.

Viewed in this frame, mourning involves much more than the private province of hearts and minds affected

by the severing of an attachment bond to a loved one, although it can be that, too. In our view, grieving is best understood as a frequently impassioned interpretive activity that strives to (a) find meaning in the death; (b) reaffirm or reconstruct a self-narrative perturbed by loss; (c) negotiate the shared transition with others in the family and community; (d) renegotiate, and typically retain, a continuing bond with the deceased in emotional, symbolic and memorial terms; (e) recruit support in these efforts by recourse to durable discursive resources of a more public kind, both in the oral and written traditions of a given time and place; and (f) conform to, or actively resist, the dominant cultural narratives that script the "proper" performance of grief in a manner coherent with the prevailing social order.

We acknowledge that this broadly social constructionist account of grieving as a situated interpretive and communicative activity is in its infancy, and contrasts with much thinking about grief as a private, inner, psychological process. We hope that other scholars and students of grief over loss will join us in extending, testing, and critiquing the outline of the approach we have articulated here.

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