

Listening To Grief **by W. Dow Edgerton**



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Dedication:

This book is dedicated to the community of Chicago Theological Seminary, where it has been my great joy to serve these many years. –W. Dow Edgerton

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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Grief's Dimensions.....	1
Chapter Two: Grief's Experience.....	14
Chapter Three: Grief's Relationships.....	43
Chapter Four: Grief's Drama.....	67
Chapter Five: Grief's Consolation.....	85
Epilogue.....	107

Chapter One: Grief's Dimensions

“Between grief and nothing, I will take grief.”
William Faulkner, “Wild Palms,” *If I Forget Thee Jerusalem*

“I can't know what you know
unless you tell me
There are gashes in our understandings
of this world”

Adrienne Rich, “For Memory” in *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*

This is a book about trying to understand grief by listening. However we finally respond to the loss that another has suffered, I believe it should be born of a listening that first of all seeks to *hear*. Not to *explain* grief as such (although there are explanations that can and will help us understand), but to attend, to seek to understand, and to respond more fully, more fittingly, and more faithfully to the grief that is coming to expression in a particular person.

Grief, however, can present itself in so many different ways, and can touch on virtually everything in the world, seen and unseen, that was or is or is to come. Grief can express itself through feelings that seem utter contradictions. Love that sounds like fear, pain that sounds like joy, doubt that sounds like faith and faith that sounds like doubt, no that sounds like yes and yes that sounds like no, curses that sound like prayers, and prayers that sound like earthquakes. Grief can be enacted publicly and privately, individually and communally in an uncountable number of ways. It comes to expression in stories, dramas, songs and poems, and whatever other ways there are that we seek to make life and death known. In the face of this, a listener can simply be overwhelmed in the way that both a breaking wave and a slow surge can flood us out. This is no less true of listening to one's own grief and seeking to hear. Our own grief is speaking and telling us something about ourselves and the world in which we live. How can we listen?

This is a book about grief in response to death. There are other sources of grief, to be sure, and some kinds of bereavement are undoubtedly more difficult and painful. We may, indeed, experience deep affinities between the many kinds of loss that befall us. Betrayal, abandonment, failure, violence, illness, aging, defeat, broken dreams, catastrophe, we grieve such losses, too, and may recognize how like one another they can be. Robert Burton (d. 1640) filled *Anatomy of Melancholy* with hundreds of pages of description and meditation upon the uncountable ways that suffering comes to us, and how vastly different causes can lead to the

same response, and the same cause can lead to vastly different responses, across the whole range of life. “Melancholy in this sense is the character of Mortality,” he observed.¹ Closed away in his rooms at Oxford University’s Christ Church, with books as his window into the human heart (including his own), he wrote as a response to his own melancholy, to turn it toward some possible good even if it could never be outlived.

Death, however, presents particular challenges that call for a distinct consideration, as the loss of those close to us may “challenge a first place” in what Burton called the “Labyrinth” of melancholy’s causes.² And of course, those other losses may be part of what a particular person must face in his or her particular death grief. And it is with the *particular* that we are concerned here. The particular person who speaks, who listens, the particular loss, and the particular ways it comes to expression. There is a time to join grief to grief. There is a time to recognize and name how our losses echo in the losses of others and perhaps find comfort or even consolation in this infinite community of grief. The first task, however, is to honor the particular by listening and seeking to understand.

The lines from Adrienne Rich reflect a truth. The other person is a mystery. Who that person is, what she knows, what he has seen, how the other person has fashioned a mind-map and heart-map of the world: if we want to know they will have to tell us. Perhaps they even will need to tell it in order to know it themselves. “How do I know what I think till I hear what I say?” goes the old adage. We could re-write the line to say, “I can’t know what *I* know unless I tell you,” even if that telling is in a silent speech heard by no one but me.

“There are gashes in our understandings of this world.” Another important truth. Augustine suggested, in fact, that any understanding of the other person requires a kind of divine intervention. The reality of one person speaking, another listening and understanding is impossibly fraught with obstacles, beginning with the most basic questions of perception. Seeing and understanding the world, perceiving and understanding ourselves, putting thoughts and feelings into words, communicating them to others through language – including voice, body, signs, and all the others ways we seek to express ourselves – every step of the way has pitfalls, detours, gaps, obstacles. On the other side the challenges are just as great: grasping the sense of the expressions themselves, going beyond them to particular meanings that a particular person is trying to share, bringing (or suspending) one’s own thoughts and feelings to bear to “translate” into the ways the hearer understands, relating this to the world and how things are – how can anyone be sure that they have understood and that what they have understood is true? So Augustine argued in *De Magistro (On the Teacher)* that if communication really were to happen it would require a kind of divine intervention, the Inner Teacher, who finally understands both the speaker and hearer and can bring this fraught sharing to pass.

Gashes in our understandings of this world. Gashes: a wound word. Not empty spaces, blank places on the map, omissions, any of which might be benign enough, unimportant enough, but *gashes* (which are never unimportant or benign): cuts that are deep and long, through the surface down into muscle, perhaps even deeper. Our understandings of the world – mine, yours, mine *and* yours, the understandings we (and who are “we”?) share, recognized and unrecognized – are wounded. How have they come to be that way? Pick the kind of explanation you would prefer: philosophical, religious, theological, psychological, physiological, cultural – the list of categories could be longer – any and all of them offer answers to the question. Perhaps more immediately, I am simply a finite human being, with a limited ability to understand and an

unlimited ability to fill the world from my own wounds and fears. However it has come to pass, at the moment of one person speaking and another listening the fact of wounded understanding is what matters, and how we will, nevertheless, despite all the reasons that get in our way, try to understand.

If these challenges beset us in even ordinary talk, how much more do they beset us in speaking and listening and understanding one another in our grief? Or perhaps our ordinary talk is more shaped by grief than we recognize: "... *in any one town, anywhere, there is grief enough to freeze the blood* (Frederick Buechner)."³ Walk down the street on an ordinary block and every house is haunted.

I have come to find it most helpful to think about grief not only as an emotion or set of emotions (although grief is full of emotion), not only as a process or path (although there are many processes and paths it may forge or follow), but even more importantly as a *relationship*, one that has been *irreversibly affected by the death of the other*. This may sound odd, I know, and awkward, and it will take the rest of the book to explain why I find this a helpful way to consider grief. I don't mean that grief is *about* a relationship (although that can be true enough), or that it affects and is affected by our relationships (which is also true), but that it *is* a kind of relationship itself that must include the death of another.

The first help of this re-framing for me is that it is open to the complexity and diversity of what people express in their grief. I had grown accustomed to thinking about grief as a certain kind of emotion or group of emotions, dominated say, by sadness or yearning for someone who has died. Yet if we listen closely we find that the range of grief's emotions is as wide and varied and conflicted as the horizon of human feeling itself.

Beyond that, we find that grief is by no means restricted to the realm of emotions, however broadly or narrowly drawn. It takes place within and responds to a widening circle of other relationships, communities, patterns of life, ideas, views of the world and of the cosmos itself. This is true of the more commonly understood kinds of relationship – friendship, family, marriage, schoolmates, co-workers, colleagues, neighborhood, etc. But it also takes place within a greater architecture of the world and even the cosmos. Every relationship has a broader relational context, a web or fabric or design within which it takes on distinctive meaning, and so does the relationship of grief. Every relationship is enacted through particular behaviors, as is the relationship of grief. Every relationship has a story and performs a drama, as does the relationship of grief. Relationship shapes and is shaped by all these in death no less than in life.

Secondly, understanding grief as a relationship fits more closely with the reality that grief grows and changes through time (as other relationships do, for good and/or ill) and indeed may never be finished. The death of my father, for example, the fact that he is dead, will accompany me the rest of my life. Yet my grief at the time of his passing, my grief as I experience it now, and my grief as I approach my own death are not the same. Indeed, in all of these times grief has been complex and contradictory. At different times it has entailed sadness, to be sure, regret for things done and undone, wonderment, a sense of absence, but also happy memory, laughter, appreciation, gratitude, presence. Although these moments are not the same, they are all aspects of my growing and changing grief relationship to my father.

Clinical approaches to grieving in recent years have recognized something that various cultures and religious perspectives have long incorporated, albeit in very different ways. Death is not necessarily the end of our relationship to those who have died; it does, however, require of us a *different* relationship, no less complex than with the living. And just as our living relationships have a history, grow, and change, so do our relationships with those who have died.

A third way in which the re-framing of grief as a relationship is helpful for me is that it offers a way to understand experiences of grief that *don't* grow and change, or grow and change in ways that lead to greater pain and difficulty. Burton's account of melancholy draws upon classical insights that a temporary *disposition* (which overtakes everyone) may become a *habit* (that is, a way of living), and finally a *disease*.⁴ This is no less true of relationships than of an individual's emotions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Much of the clinical history of grief has been concerned with distinguishing between so-called normal grieving and complex, complicated, or pathological grieving. Freud's classic "Mourning and Melancholia" set the tone for psychological investigation, and important variations on this understandably focused attention on those persons for whom grieving was in some way profoundly problematic, pathological. Many clinicians and theoreticians turned their attention therapeutically to grief as a manifestation of relationship. This included not only relationship with the one who had died, but with the mourner's capacity for relationship back deep into infancy. Freud, for example, famously described a process of de-cathexis and re-cathexis, withdrawing emotional energy from one "object" and re-investing it in another. John Bowlby offered the image of attachment and re-attachment to describe how children form (and re-form) a secure (enough) sense of world and self in the face of a fundamental anxiety. Whether the language of investment or attachment or some other similar term is used, the realm of *relationship* as key to grieving, and in the face of troubled (stuck?) grief it is to the nature of the relationship that their attention turned.

Relationships get caught up in certain moments or configurations, both positive and negative, and come to a halt as that particular experience becomes the decisive point of reference. A marriage for example, that fixes upon the first rush of breathless infatuation, and expects that this will (and must be) the way things always are, is likely a marriage that will not endure. For the sake of the relationship, the relationship must change.

Painful moments in a relationship can work in the same way. Sometimes the greater pain of grief comes from not from sadness over a death, but anger, resentment, or guilt over harm that was done (especially when unacknowledged or unresolved). An abusive parent dies, let's say, never having acknowledged (or even recognized) the harm. The surviving offspring may find the death even more difficult than the loss of a kind and loving parent, and grieve even more deeply, faced still with a relationship that does not go away because of death. It is very much alive in memory and imagination, very much alive in how they live their lives and relate to each other, very much alive in how they see the world. The path of their grief will have everything to do with what that relationship becomes.

Recent grief studies have attended more closely to experiences of those whose grief did *not* become clinically unhealthy. It is understandable that clinicians would concentrate on suffering that was most marked and difficult, most in need of help, but this can lead to a picture of grief that is tilted toward a narrower rather than broader range of experiences and responses to

bereavement. As George Bonanno observes, however, the norm is “resilience,” a capacity to continue to move and grow in the face of loss. “What is most intriguing about resilience is not how prevalent it is; rather, it is that we are consistently surprised by it.”⁵ His explanation for this surprise, in part, is cultural and historical. Grief and mourning take place within a myriad of practices, frameworks, histories, symbols systems, cultural and social networks, not a universal psychic or emotional space. Resilience is a testimony to the importance of these aspects of life in how people experience and live out their bereavement, grief, and mourning.

Beyond the new insights of clinicians, however, is a remarkable profusion of grief literature. We can find grief depicted in the oldest layers of ancient literature, such as epics, funerary inscriptions, prayers, blessings, wisdom, and myth. Every form of human expression, from the most humble to the most refined has been turned to the service of expressing grief. Recent years have seen a profusion of memoirs, poetry, film, drama, fiction, testimonials and more. Approaching grief as a relationship makes it easier to draw these frameworks into our understanding of its variety and complexity. It also makes it easier to hear a living conversation that reaches across millennia of human experience and expression. We are not the first to grieve, not the first to seek comfort and consolation, not the first to try to understand and respond.

Speaking and Meaning

Why speak about loss and grief? Perhaps simply to have something, instead of nothing, to say. Death has come, and we must respond. “The weight of this sad time we must obey. Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say,” declares the bereaved King Lear (5.5.322-23). The *weight*, the gravity, the grief makes a demand, requires some kind of reply. A word, a sigh, a gesture of the head, a lowering of the eyes, more extravagantly perhaps, a sob, a howl both eloquent and inarticulate. One person says “good-bye,” another says “I’ll call mother,” another says, “at last,” another begins to recite “if God is for us, who can be against us?” Something instead of nothing to say, even if the saying doesn’t happen in words: a hand draws down over the sightless eyes, a kiss on the forehead, standing as the sheet is pulled up, wrapping arms around your own body as if to hold it together, a commanding look of silence to tell the others to speak only by keeping silence themselves. Death has come, and we must respond, if for no other reason than to demonstrate that one is still alive.

In time the speaking will become more complex. It will take on a shape and vocabulary, perhaps in accordance with a particular tradition, perhaps in *defiance* of one; perhaps one that is original, personal and particular, or one that repeats the lyrics of a popular song. The speaking may take up a kind of argument about death or life or both, perhaps about the way of the world, or duty, or justice, or love, or tell stories great and small, or bring forward poetry, myths, ancient hymns, testimonies, wisdom.

The speaking will go beyond speaking to perform rites, rituals, ceremonies, memorials, liturgies, celebrations, dramas, with processions, chanting, singing, offerings, mementos, shrines, wakes, eating, drinking, visitations, assemblies, reunions. The bodies of the dead, if we have them, will be washed, anointed, embalmed, wrapped, viewed, burned, buried in the earth, a cave, a tomb, a mausoleum, a family plot, at sea, a church yard, a military cemetery, a place

consecrated or not, marked or not, decorated or not, tended or not, and visited or not as time goes by.

Then as time continues, speaking continues: for periods of mourning, anniversaries, holy days, in journals, letters, memoirs, in more stories, poems, songs, blogs, on web-postings, YouTube, in conversations, late-night ramblings, parties, counseling, toasts, prayers, elegies. Some of it will be sad, some fearful, happy, angry, worried, longing, relieved, grateful, resentful, forgiving – and it will be no less complex and fraught than the web of relationships, experiences, histories, fears and hopes in which it takes place.

Why all this speaking grief? The most important reason may be that that if we don't find ways to bring loss and grief to expression much of our life and its meaning, perhaps the parts that most need expression and meaning, will be silenced and hidden, even from us. Loss and grief make a special demand *for* meaning and a special demand *upon* meaning. It is because of loss and grief that the need for meaning arises most urgently, for loss and grief are what test meaning most severely and it is in the face of loss and grief that meaning (or its absence) matters most. By putting grief into these expressions we come to know ourselves, remember, testify, reach out or respond to others, frame the story of our lives, the world, even the cosmos, test our ideas and experiences against others, to do what we believe is right, what we believe is true, to live the way we believe we should live.

Why should we *listen* to grief? Some won't or don't, or at least not for long. They will speak instead of listening (for they, too, need something to say in the face of death). "Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers," wrote C.S. Lewis after the death of his wife.⁶ He felt like he was an embarrassment to everyone he met. They didn't know what to say so said silly things or avoided him all together. He knew that for some he represented their own futures that they could not bear to face, a "death's head," as he put it. Even the earnest and well-meant enquiry, "How are you doing?" can feel like an intrusion and demand. It is a little surprising that we don't hear more often the reply, "How do you *think* I'm doing? Why do you even ask such a question?" The reply may not often be voiced, but it is often felt and thought. Truth be told, a comforter may be responding more to his or her own discomfiture (including, of course, the genuine desire to offer help and consolation). The comforter may be seeking comfort, too, by speaking instead of listening. "Griefspeak" is what one widower called the kind of things that others sometimes said to him. They would offer sweet, well-meaning words that persuaded him they did not understand at all. "I know exactly how you feel," or "I feel your pain." "It's a strange thing," he wrote, in a letter to his dead wife, "how that innocent, well-meant remark can sometimes make me want to rise up and say, 'No, you don't, no, you don't at all.'" ⁷ We hear echoed again and again - whether from spouse, child, parent, friend, lover – this sense of being bereaved of the dead but also of the living: bereaved of understanding, set apart, alien.

Why *listen* to grief? Because we don't know. Because there are gashes in our understandings of this world. Because if we don't listen something of great importance may never be heard into speech (to recall the late Nelle Morton, herself dead these twenty-five years). Because this person speaking grief is the human face and voice of the grieving God. Because Christ went down to the hell of grief and grief of hell. Because if we do not grieve with those who grieve we cannot rejoice with those who rejoice. Because if we do not listen we will not know how to attend, to mourn, to comfort, to console (and even if such a thing is possible at all), or simply keep faith.

In some ways we listen to grief for the sake of other griefs we bear. Perhaps this human voice of the grieving God is saying a word to us, for our sakes, too. The grief at hand is not the only one we face, not the only death and loss that has or will bereave us, including our own. “Remember that thou art dust, and to dust you shall return,” says the Ash Wednesday liturgy. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” says the minister at the graveside; “Ashes, ashes, we all fall down,” says the nursery rhyme.

Speaking grief and listening change places. The listeners becomes speakers, the speakers becomes listeners, and on and on. At any given moment the same person can be both, attending one’s own grief *and* another’s, attending one’s own grief *through* another’s, attending another’s grief through one’s own.

Four-Dimensional Grief

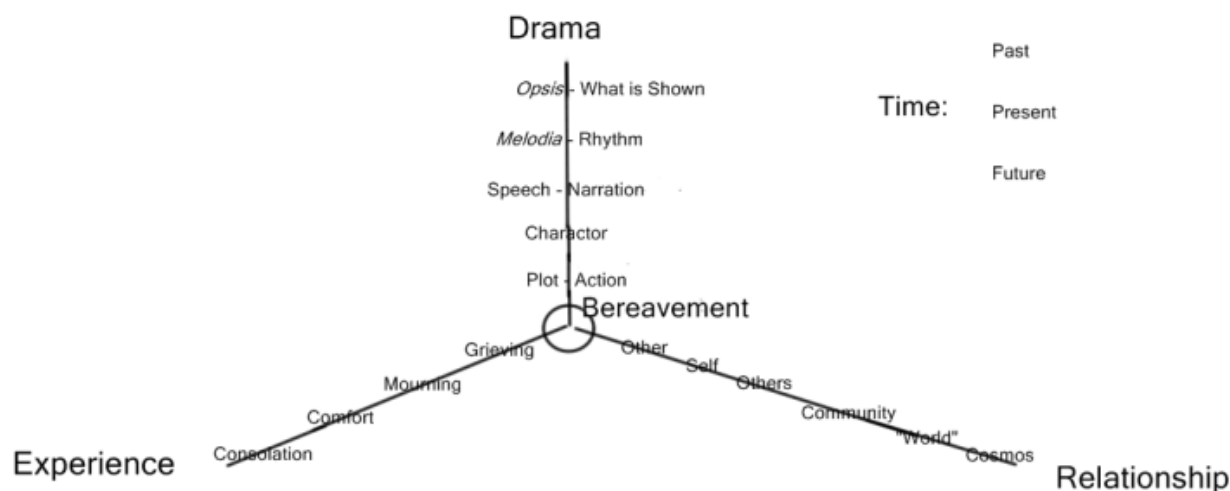
Here is a dilemma: To recognize the complexity of grief, on one hand, is a good thing. It allows us to listen more attentively, to understand more particularly, and to respond more aptly. On another hand, however, complexity has the capacity to overwhelm and thwart listening, understanding, and responding. This is why theories and models of grief have been so eagerly received. They have helped us make sense of potentially overwhelming experiences and offer some kind of counsel and care. Yet those very theories and models can lead us to privilege their prior picture of grief over the actual experience at hand, and wrestle bereaved people into mourning clothes that do not fit them – that may, in fact, do them harm.

I wish to respond to the dilemma by offering a “heuristic framework.” A heuristic frame is basically an approach that allows a person to discover or learn something. It offers a way to pay attention to certain kinds of similarities and differences, themes, dynamics, shapes, to *notice* what a more narrowly focused or pre-scribed analysis might set aside. It approaches experience through a more inductive or exploratory process of listening and reflection in hopes that through this openness greater understanding will be possible, and through greater understanding, a more fitting response to those who grieve.

This heuristic framework is guided by some basic questions. What has been lost? How do we name the loss? How do we name what we experience because of that loss? What do we *do* in response to that loss? What help (if any) can there be?

In my own style of learning I find that drawing pictures helps me grasp relationships between ideas. The more complex a question, the more I need a way to see its parts and how they fit together, to try to see the question *whole*. The more complex the question the more I need to arrange and re-arrange its parts, draw lines of connection, gaps, oppositions. Argument may unfold in a line, but experience and understanding rarely do, so part of our heuristic frame is a way to identify key dimensions of the grief relationship, and see those dimensions together, in a shape. *Dimensions* are, indeed, an important feature of the frame.

In school we learned how to draw a box with height, breadth, and depth – three dimensions. Usually, you’d start with a corner point and three axes that travelled out from there, one to the right, one to the left, one vertically up or down. In geometry or math class you learned to describe a three-dimensional solid (like a box) and how to identify a particular point within it according to each of the three axes: so many millimeters along axis x, so many along y, so many along z. Each point had its unique spot and you needed all three of coordinates to place it. If you went on to some higher mathematics you learned to draw curves and other shapes by linking point to point, as if a point moved through time and you could trace its path, a fourth dimension (although that’s not what the math teacher called it).



Our heuristic frame is shaped in the same way: three dimensions (axes), plus the dimension of time. First, a quick sketch of the whole. The point where the axes begin (and meet) is *Bereavement*. For now, we will use that term to refer to the event of loss that death has brought. The loss that bereavement entails, however, cannot be simply characterized as death. Death is the presenting *cause* of the loss, but to understand *what* has been lost through death - the bereavement - and therefore to what grief is responding, we turn to the four dimensions.

To the left is the axis of *Experience* [Chapter 2, *Grief's Experience*]. This encompasses the personal thoughts, feelings, and body responses of *grieving*, the outward and public behaviors of *mourning*, the occasions (or absence) of *comfort*, and the possibility (or impossibility) of *consolation*.

To the right is the axis of *Relationship* [Chapter 3, *Grief's Relationships*]. This encompasses the whole range of relationships - from individual to the cosmos - within which bereavement takes place, and which themselves powerfully shape the nature of grief.

The third, vertical axis is *Grief's Drama* [Chapter 4, *Grief's Drama*]. This refers to how grief is told and performed, its *poesis*. *Poesis* derives from a Greek word that means “to make”

or “to create” and a “poetics” describes how something is made. Perhaps the most famous use of the term is Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which explores the making of tragic drama. He considered the role of *plot, character, narration, speech, action*, and other aspects of theater in the performance and reception of tragedy – how it affects the audience. His ancient insights into tragedy, in fact, have much to offer as we seek to listen more closely to how grief is expressed and enacted in our own experience.

The fourth axis is *Time*. It has no chapter of its own, because all three of the other axes relate to the past, the present, and the future, sometimes in very different ways. One person’s grief may focus most strongly upon the past, yearning, for example, for something that can never be repeated or filled with remorse for something that cannot be undone. Another person’s grief may focus most strongly upon the future, fearful or hopeful of what life will be. Yet another person’s grief may focus most strongly upon the present, an experience of absence or loneliness that marks the unbearably slow passage of a day. Beyond the matter of special concern for a particular dimension of time, however, is the way past, present, and future can shift, mingle, and change places. Indeed, in both waking and sleeping, grief’s experience of time can defy every clock and calendar, every convention of “now” and “then.” Perhaps it is even because of grief that we feel the greatest urgency toward a poesis of past, present, and future. The shaping of time is a central element of the shaping of grief.

Two Dynamics

With this brief overview in mind, two dynamics of our framework are essential to keep in mind. First, each axis is a set of relationships, not a process or sequence, and all the aspects of the axis are influencing one another. Second, all the axes are influencing each other. The first dynamic first.

Along the axis of *Experience* grieving, mourning, comfort, and consolation are not a simple sequence, but dimensions of experience that intertwine. At the immediate and intimate level, grieving is experienced and expressed through feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations. This is, indeed, the first association we make, and the word *grieving* (rather than grief) is about something that we *do*. We grieve in our bodies, in the rhythms and syncopations of our own electrical, mechanical, and chemical engineering that deny sleep or won’t let us stop yawning, that make food taste like poison or like it is the only thing that will save us, that one day urge us to flee, the next to fight, and the next to freeze. Burton noted physical symptoms reported since ancient times, such as trembling, headaches, flushed skin, itching as if bitten by fleas, nausea, constipation, palpitations, weeping, laughing, sleeping, howling (1.3.1.1; 440f). A contemporary list of common physical symptoms sounds very similar (if less dramatic): lack of energy, stomach aches, chest pains & tightness, shortness of breath, nausea, disturbance of appetite and sleep.⁸

We grieve in our emotions and thoughts, too. Ancient and modern observers have noted common emotions in grieving such as sadness, anger, shame, guilt, fear. In such accounts the grieving mind, ancient and modern, is given to numbness, difficulty in concentration, memory loss, being all-absorbed or overwhelmed, uncertainty, inability to act, to name only some of the most commonly cited, with infinitely complex combinations and variations.⁹

Grieving in body, mind, and emotions, however, has everything to do with the ways that are available to us to enact it with others. *Mourning* practices, rites, ceremonies, rituals, enacted in places of worship, work, bars, sports fields, plazas, homes, memorial sites, internet sites and more are all part of the experience of grieving. So are experiences of *comfort*: moments of respite or relief in which the weight of grief lifts and instead of weeping there is laughter, calm instead of worry, presence instead of loneliness, and bereavement is for a time not the dominant reality.

Beyond this there may be experiences of *consolation*, a larger purpose, promise, or possibility that makes the loss something other than sheer loss. It may, for example, come through a religious vision, a mission accomplished, a gift to posterity, the sense a life well lived, but consolation offers something to the bereaved beyond their bereavement. It is also true, however, that in a particular grief there may be no consolation possible, or for particular grievers the very possibility of consolation is impossible. In the face of certain terrible losses, terrible whether because of scale or kind or both, the very idea of consolation may be unimaginable or intolerable. All of these, the nature of the bereavement, the emotions and embodied experience, the mourning behaviors, the experiences (or lack) of comfort, the possibility (or lack) or consolation are all affecting one another and shaping the particular experience of grief.

The bereaved person, for example, for whom there can be no consolation, whether because of the nature of particular loss or more general convictions, is bereaved differently than a person for whom consolation, however difficult, is a genuine possibility. A person whose bereavement and grief cannot be expressed and supported through public mourning is bereaved and grieves differently than a person who is supported in such ways. Once again, we can distinguish between these experiences, but cannot separate them.

Along the axis of *Relationship* we may distinguish between relationship to one who has died, to one's own self or identity, to others (such as family, friends, enemies), to a community of reference (like a church or town), a cultural identity, a place in the world (both physically and socially), a history or world-view, ultimately to the cosmos (perhaps constructed religiously, perhaps not). Although we can distinguish between them, they cannot be separated. These all affect the nature and meaning of the bereavement that has been suffered.

Consider, for example, the death of a young child. A parent is likely to experience that loss differently than a brother or sister. Grand-parents may be doubly bereaved by the loss of the grand-child and the pain of their own children, the parents. Class-mates, teachers, neighbors all may experience bereavement, but though it is the same child who has died, and they all share in bereavement, they have been bereaved differently.

This dimension of relationship extends to the parents' world of other relationships - fellow-parents, neighbors, the book club, the regulars at the coffee shop, whoever it might be who knows them and their loss. It is not unusual for bereaved parents to find it difficult to be around their child's friends or their own friends' children. It is also not unusual for those parent-friends to themselves feel suddenly uncomfortable and draw back, unsure how to respond. Grief groups for those who have lost children have been so important precisely because of how isolated bereaved parents can feel, how weary with the strain of strained relationships, how hungry to be with people to whom they don't have to *explain* what they are experiencing.

The relational dimension certainly includes the parents' relationship to each other and to their own individual identities. Am I still the mother of my child who has died? If I am not the father I was, who am I? Who is this other person, who grieves so differently? Why doesn't he understand? How can he keep doing those things he always did? Why does she seem so angry with me, as if this death were my fault? Why does she press me to talk when talking is the hardest thing of all for me right now? Alternately, bereaved parents may find in one another a strength and courage they had never seen before, a care and commitment, a maturity of love that makes it possible to bear the unbearable.

The dimension of *Relationship* widens to include the bereaved's place in and understanding of the world. Sometimes, especially in the face of such a traumatic loss, the world becomes a strange and alien place. What kind of world is it where such a thing can happen? I thought that the world was different, but now I see what it really is. An elderly neighbor of ours, grieving the sudden death of his adult son, one day looked up from his back-yard chair with an expression of puzzlement on his face: "I don't recognize the world anymore." Or positively, the world might reveal unsuspected aspects: I had no idea there were so many caring people, even strangers, so many willing to reach out, so many people of wisdom and compassion hidden in plain sight all around me.

Ultimately, the axis of *Relationship* extends to ultimacy, the cosmos, to God. Perhaps it is in an experience of the cosmos as ultimately uncaring, meaningless, indifferent, a void. Perhaps it is in an experience of meaning that surpasses loss, a presence, a ultimate union beyond death, an ultimate justice and love. And this affects the parent's experience of bereavement, too. Change the relationship and these layers of relationship – other, self, others, world, cosmos, and the nature and scope of the bereavement changes. And all of these aspects of the dimension of *Relationship* affect each other.

A similar dynamic applies to the axis of *Drama*. This includes the words, the stories – plots, characters, conflicts, settings, narrators, and the rest – the dramatizations, rituals, poetry and songs, through which grief is *constructed and performed*. Constructed? Yes, especially in the older sense of *poesis* (from which we get the word poetry). It means to build or make, and grief is distinctly shaped in just such a way. Performed? Yes, especially in the sense of being dramatically embodied. In all those places of mourning we suggested previously people are acting out a drama, sometimes knowingly and intentionally, sometimes not, but enacting a drama (or multiple dramas) nonetheless.

What is the story of life and death that can be told? Who are the characters, what are they like? What is the plot struggle? Through what rhythms and melodies and what rituals and pilgrimages will grief be expressed whether in church, at the bar, or along the roadside? We have all seen how the experience of bereavement drives toward such *poesis* and how the experience of grief is powerfully affected by which dramas are performed. Among those who grieve and mourn the struggle for a *story* to tell and a *drama* in which to act can become a terrible conflict and new source of bereavement, or may be the very thing that makes comfort and consolation possible.

Along the axis of *Time*, past, present and future all are affecting one another, as well. All of the other dimensions - relationship, experience, expression - are "tensed." That is, they relate to past, present, and future, but quite possibly with very different emphases and very different

concerns. For one person the most urgent question may be that of the past, for another the present, for another the future.

In a loss, how is this a bereavement *of* the past? What is the value and meaning of the past in the light of this loss? This present, which is suddenly so different from the one for which I had prepared, how can I live here? The future I have imagined, worked for, lived toward, is that gone, too? What will take its place? Whether the future holds hope or not, for example, whether the past can be celebrated or not, whether the present can be borne, even rejoiced, or must be avoided by any means necessary, the three tenses are constantly flowing into each other and shaping grief. Distinguish between them, yes; separate them, no.

The second dynamic is that all of the dimensions are always affecting *each other*. The dimension of *Relationship* is affected by the dimension of *Experience*, for example, in how grief can be mourned (or not) in the valued traditions of the community. A bereaved person who is estranged from her community of tradition (a relational dimension) may find that the mourning practices she knows best are either denied her or no longer acceptable to her. On another hand, the mourning practices may become a means of reconciliation and re-entry to a damaged relationship. This itself is affected by how the community narrates and enacts its identity and beliefs in the face of this death, the dimension of *Drama*.

Can the story be re-told and re-enacted in such a way that it is a story of inclusion and embrace? This *Drama* is affected by the dimension of *Time*, the past, present and future that may or must (or must not) be told. To return to our example of the abusive parent, can the truth about the abusive past be told? Must those who suffered it keep silent? How does such acknowledged and unnamed suffering affect the other relationships within the family? How does *naming* what happened in the past affect those relationships in the present and future? The poesis of the past in this instance is clearly affected by different aspects of *Relationship* to the family and the future (*Time*). Perhaps it raises ultimate questions of justice and forgiveness in the cosmos, which in turn shape the *Experience* of mourning, comfort, and consolation, which in turn affects the *Drama* and on and on.

So, four dimensions (axes): *Experience*, *Relationship*, *Drama*, and *Time*. Two dynamics: first, each axis is a set of relationships, not a process or sequence, and all the aspects of the axis are influencing one another; second, all of the dimensions (axes) are always affecting *each other*. All of these dimensions meet and configure themselves around *Bereavement*, giving the particular loss its particular identity, and being drawn by the loss into a distinctive pattern with each other. The four dimensions may be pushing, pulling, twining, colliding, complementing, conflicting, supporting and more, but they are always shaping grief together.

There is a final chapter, “Grief’s Consolation.” Although we will consider consolation in the discussion of “Grief’s Experience” we return to it at the end, to give the question of consolation its own particular space. Just as bereavement stands at the intersection of grief’s experience, relationships, and drama, consolation can do the same. If it is from the perspective of bereavement that we must first approach grief, it is finally from the perspective of consolation that we must also see.

The goal of these reflections, as we said at the beginning of this introduction, is to help us to attend, to seek to understand, and to respond more fully, more fittingly, and more faithfully to the grief that is coming to expression around us and within us. It grows from a great hope for what can become of grief's experience and those who grieve, including the hope for comfort and even consolation. But it returns again and again to a loyalty to those who grieve, and a desire to keep faith with them, wherever their grief may lead.

That is what this book is about.

Chapter Two: Grief's Experience

“One day of grief is an hundred years.” – Robert Burton¹⁰

Bereavement, grieving, mourning, comfort, and consolation can be distinguished but not separated. It is better to understand them, not as a sequence or set of stages through which one marches with a steady step and measured pace, but rather as a constellation of experiences always affecting one another: flowing back and forth, alternating, oscillating, shifting in weight and gravity, waxing and waning in intensity, ebbing and flowing, likely changing over time.

The experience of *bereavement* has everything to do how we grieve (or believe we are supposed to grieve), the ways of expressing that grief through *mourning* that are offered or denied us by the world in which we live, the presence or absence of *comfort* in acute moments of hard, sharp sorrow and seeming ages of dull, endless ache, and the possibility or impossibility of *consolation* that might even equal or exceed the experience of loss. This constellation of *experiences*, as we have said, also affects and is affected by the realm of grief's *relationships* in which we live (from relationship with the one who has died to relationship with the cosmos), and the ways in which we express and enact grief's *drama* both individually and together. In all this, we shape and reshape (or are shaped and reshaped by) the past, the present, and the future.

In this chapter we will consider ways in which the experiences and paths of grief have been described, drawing upon classical wisdom and medicine, the testimony of those who grieve, and modern grief theory. We begin, however, at the level of words themselves.

Grief's Lexicon

When a person knows a word well and has used it easily for a long time, it can lose depth. This is the common fate of so much of ordinary life and language, to be absorbed in repetition. Then some intrusion of experience, expression, or reflection calls our attention to something that we have walked past every day and it begins to deepen and change, perhaps even to become strange; it requires us to attend, to see it in its relations and effect, to name our own relationship to it. Then it may be best to set aside for a while what I suppose I already know and ask again from the beginning, as if my own language were foreign to me and everything were still to be learned.

The origin of *grief* itself reaches back through English and French to the Latin *gravare*, to burden, from *gravis*, heavy.¹¹ The implication is straightforward: grief is a heavy load pressing down upon a person. In older usage it was applied to many different kinds of loss, misfortune, or affliction. Thus Samuel Johnson's dictionary defines “grieve” as “to be in pain for something past, to mourn; to sorrow, as for the death of friends.”¹² Webster's 1828 edition gives the example, “We experience grief when we lose a friend.” The 1913 edition offers this citation as its example: “The mother was so afflicted at the loss of a fine boy...that she died for grief of it.” The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definitions of grief do not specify a connection to death, interestingly enough, but to “deep or violent sorrow, caused by loss or trouble.” A recent edition of *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* defines grief as

“keen mental suffering over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret.”¹³ It also suggests a distinction between grief and mourning, in which mourning is an outward manifestation of sorrow, “either with or without sincerity,” while grief implies “deep mental suffering often endured along and in silence, but revealed by one’s aspect: *to grieve over the loss (or death) of a friend*.”¹⁴ The current edition of *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (MWCD) offers the principal sense, “a deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement.”

Let us take this last and dwell on it a little while. Distress comes from *distrain*, which means to force or compel, to confine, bind, or hold captive (OED). *Distress*, in turn, signifies pain or suffering of body or mind (MWCD), with the implication that it is caused by some kind of force, some *distraint*. To call the distress deep signals that it is powerfully felt, far beneath the surface of things. To call it poignant signals that it is piercing (as in the French *poignant*, from *poindre*, to prick or sting), “painfully affecting the feelings : PIERCING.”

Bereavement, in turn, is “the state or fact of being bereaved; *esp* by the death of a loved one.” It is derived from the Middle English word *bereven*, meaning to rob, and older forms that mean to despoil, strip, deprive. Bereavement, then, is an experience of loss by or as if by robbery, despoliation, stripping, deprivation. There is a clear stamp of violence to it, and of something done to us against our will. Other powerful experiences of loss can leave us with the sense of being *bereaved*. Broken friendship, injury or illness, job or home loss, financial ruin, violence, natural disaster, abuse or betrayal, and other such occurrences can be experienced as bereavement, too (hence “by or as if by bereavement”).

The response to bereavement is sometimes called *mourning*, meaning to feel or express sorrow, or to “show customary signs of grief for a death.” It is “The action of feeling or expressing sorrow, grief, or regret (OED),” with particular reference to the death of a person. Its root verb, *mourn*, includes to be anxious or worried, to yearn or long, to lament.

In search of a common terminology a number of contemporary writers propose that *bereavement* be used to refer to loss, *grief* to the emotional, physical, and cognitive response to that loss, and *mourning* to the outward practices by which grief is expressed and performed. As a way of keeping some discussions straight for purposes of reflection this is a useful thing, so long as it doesn’t force those meanings onto the words of others who may be saying something different, or artificially limit what our words are trying to tell us.

If grief is a deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement then its descriptions will be as particular as the experiences of bereavement in which it begins and as different as the persons, places, and times in which it unfolds. The more profound and complex is the bereavement, the more profound and complex the grief, and therefore, the more profound and complex the relationship between the inward reality and the outward expression in mourning. Words and acts, we have said, are not transcriptions, but translations and transformations.

Consider this entry from *Soule’s Dictionary of English Synonyms*¹⁵:

Grief, *n.* 1. Sorrow, regret, affliction, distress, suffering, tribulation, woe, dole, sadness, bitterness, anguish, misery, agony, heartache, heartbreak, heavy heart, bleeding heart, broken heart.

2. Trial, grievance, cause of sorrow, sorrow, affliction, distress, woe.

3. Mishap, disaster, failure.

In one sense, we have here a bare listing of words: no explanation or definition, no discussion of the shades of meaning that distinguish one word from another, no examples of usage. In another sense, however, the listing is anything but bare; each word expresses both a similar and different sense, challenging us to sort among them to discover what we mean. In what way is the grief I feel a matter of “sorrow”, and in what way a matter of “regret”? How is it an “affliction” and how a “distress”? Am I beset by “suffering” or by “tribulation”? And that string of words that all include the heart – all of them make sense and could be true, but the aching heart is different from the broken one, and the heavy heart different from the heart that is bleeding, as different as a bruise is from a fracture, and a weight from a wound. Each of the words is charged with a quality of pain, and each one names it distinctly.

Bitterness, for example, suggests a kind of anger that takes hold and becomes a way of seeing the world, with a sense of accusation, let’s say, or reproach. It carries a sense of having been wronged that, rather than motivating someone to take constructive action leads to a constant return to the injury and contemplation of it. Resentment, animosity, cynicism, all are marks of, or analogies for, bitterness.

Anguish denotes “extreme pain, distress, or anxiety (MWCD),” but traces back to Old English *enge*, and the Latin *angustus*, which mean narrow. The family of words includes the Latin *angere* (to strangle), the Old Norse *angr* (grief), and a word from Middle English we know well: *anger*. The OED offers this for anguish: “Excruciating or oppressive bodily pain or suffering, such as the sufferer writhes under,” and “Severe mental suffering, excruciating or oppressive grief or distress.” *Excruciating*, of course, comes from *crucify*. Etymology isn’t the point, but rather a pointer toward experience. In grief a person may experience the sense of being hemmed in, confined, strangled, bound, trapped, and suffer it as extreme, even crucifying pain; that is, grief can be anguish.

Agony is similar in some ways, but importantly different, too. The similarity is in the connection to “intense pain of mind or body (MWCD)”. The same dictionary uses “extreme” for one quality of pain (anguish), and “intense” for the other (agony). While both adjectives are used in the definition of each other and might be used interchangeably, there can also be shades of distinction. *Extreme* suggests a quality of degree, as in *utmost*, or *maximum*, and a quality of departure from some center, norm, or fit proportion. *Intense* suggests a quality of concentration, sharpening, deepening.

Agony, however, is rooted in a Greek word *agonia* that means struggle. There is a gathering, an opponent, a confrontation, a contest, triumph or defeat, a prize to be won or lost. An *agonist* is someone engaged in such a struggle, and in ancient Greek theater we have the *protagonist*, one who appears as a central (or first appearing) actor in a drama. The grieving person who says, “I feel like I’m in a fight for my life or my mind,” who feels thrust out on a stage alone before an audience, thrust forward into the center of a drama, may be speaking of just such *agony*.

Misery speaks of suffering and distress, too, but has its first sense in suffering brought about by lack or want. This carries into connections with poverty, hunger, life degraded and robbed of vitality, energy, and dignity. *Wretchedness* is also used as a description of misery. There is a particularly physical coloration to the word. To speak of grief as misery brings forward the condition into which loss has thrown someone and how it is shaped by the absence of something necessary for health and well-being.

Some of the words in Soule's list seem old-fashioned, like figurines on a shelf at an antique store. "Dole" is scarcely heard as a term for grief anymore; its sense as something given out or rationed may be more familiar, but dole as in "dolor," dolorous" or "doleful" sounds archaic. Christian tradition speaks of the "Via Dolorosa," the route that Jesus walked to his crucifixion, carrying his burden as long as he could. "Mater dolorosa" is a term applied to Mary, mother of the crucified Jesus grieving her son, and so in what usage we still make of it dolorous has a special connection to a grief that is at once physical, maternal, spiritual, agonizing, perhaps divine.

Woe may also sound old-fashioned to some, and is probably more familiar now as a term of parody. To refer to one's pain as woe suggests self-dramatization, melodrama: a collapsed hand sweeps grandly upward to the brow, "I swoon, I faint; Oh, woe is me!" A small fictional town in Minnesota is named Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve," a gently humorous way to indicate a place that has been passed by, a bit down at the heels, and existing at the margins of the "important" world.¹⁶ Yet the synonyms for "woebegone" include meanings that are anything but archaic. *Disconsolate, dispirited, dejected, depressed, and downcast* (WNDS): without comfort, and perhaps even the possibility of comfort or consolation in the face of loss; empty of spirit, vitality, energy, courage, or strength to face what is at hand. Can it be, as Webster's *New Dictionary of Synonyms* says, that *dejected* "implies greater prostration of the spirits than either *downcast* or *dispirited* with sudden but often temporary loss of hope, courage, or vigor..."? Who can say if the one who is dejected knows that the prostration (as in being unable to stand, knocked down, flat on the ground) may only be temporary? Perhaps not knowing is what leaves one *depressed*, as in pressed down, weighed down, "sinking under a weight or a burden too great to be borne..."

From Soule's again:

Grieve, *v. t.* Afflict, pain, hurt, distress, sadden, discomfort, aggrieve, oppress, agonize, wound the feelings of, make sorrowful.

The *v* stands for verb, an action, something done. The *t* stands for transitive, meaning an action that "takes or contains a direct object," grammar-speak for something that is carried out upon something else: the hammer pounds the nail; the loss grieves me.

Afflict is the first of the list. Its trail leads back to the Latin *affligere*, to cast down, which in turn comes from *ad+fligere*, to strike. The modern sense seems a direct continuation, meaning to harm in such a way as to cause continued suffering. A passing injury or healed wound is not an affliction, a debilitating injury or a wound that festers and spreads is. A person that bereavement grieves may be afflicted by what has happened, struck, and cast down in a way that goes on and

on. “It came like a sudden punch out of nowhere, and then another and another while I was still down. Now I just feel like everything is broken inside; it hurts even to breathe.”

Oppress also occurs in the list, a word we may know best from the social and political sphere. Follow Soule’s once again and here is what you find:

Oppress, *v. t.* 1. Load, burden, weigh heavily upon, bear hard upon.

2. Overburden, crush, overwhelm, overpower, tyrannize over, subdue.

Again we find the images of great weight, but now the explicit dimension of power comes forward. To be aggrieved, to suffer grief in this sense is to be forced into a contest of power, and on the defeated side. A struggle has been lost, but even losing is not the end of it. Whatever the vanquishing power was, it is not content to triumph and depart but rather stays, occupies, and persists in asserting its ability to control the present and future, as well. Once again the vocabulary speaks of force, violence, and control, the work of a tyrant: “an absolute ruler unrestrained by law or constitution: a usurper of sovereignty (MWCD).” Oppression speaks of a loss that has left one subjugated by an illegitimate authority to and from which there is no appeal, and in the face of which one’s own power is crushed.

Webster’s *Synonyms* suggests *torment* and *torture* as analogous words for oppression. Both are rooted in a word that means to twist, and both are touched with cruelty and horror. Both words signal an intention to inflict pain that is both physical and mental, and that has a distinctly personal quality. One is tortured by a torturer, tormented by a tormentor. To be aggrieved in such a sense means experiencing your pain as the work and desire of someone or something set over and against you with an ultimate purpose of causing pain, perhaps even mockingly, so that the humiliation is all the greater.

By contrast, *discomfort* may seem an oddly mild term to modern ears. In common usage as a noun it can mean something as small as the twinge in the shoulder brought on by the rain or a growl of indigestion. By implication, to discomfort would mean nothing more than making someone uncomfortable. This is a far cry from the older meaning: to dismay. The word *comfort* comes from the Latin verb *confortare*, which means to strengthen greatly; in English usage it means “to give strength and hope.” As a noun comfort signifies strengthening aid, solace, consolation. The Heidelberg Catechism’s first question asks, “What is your sole comfort in life and in death?” Such a formulation implies that something called “comfort” could make all the difference in living and dying. To *discomfort*, then, is a serious matter, and signifies the taking away of strength, hope, solace and consolation. To *discomfort* has a special implication for meaning itself. It suggests the taking away of whatever meanings provide strength, hope, and the rest. From being mild, odd, and archaic, *discomfort* reveals a terrible dimension of how bereavement grieves us.

Grieve, *v. i.* Sorrow, mourn, lament, suffer, bewail, feel regret, be sad, be heavy-hearted, be in pain of mind, be anguished.

The *i* stands for *intransitive*, meaning no direct object, grammar-speak for an action that is complete within itself: I, you, he/she/it, we, you, they grieve. Now the grieving is every bit one's own, we are the subjects of our own verbs, active voice. It is not something we have or we feel; it is something we are or do. And what do we *do* when we grieve? Notice how many of the synonyms include "be" and speak of a condition that is simply a state of being: sad, regretful, heavy-hearted, anguished. Although it may seem too much to enquire a little more closely behind "be" it is the things we know best that may offer surprising insight. The first meaning of the verb entered is noteworthy: "to equal in meaning : have the same connotation as : SYMBOLIZE <God *is* love>..." (MWCD). A striking choice of example. To say "I am sad" in this sense is to say that "I" is equal in meaning to "sad" in the same way as (the scripture says) "God" is equal in meaning to "love." I = pain of mind; I = anguish; I = a heavy heart.

Notice also this usage of the verb now offers behaviors we can see and hear: mourn, lament, bewail. One could readily name other verbs to specify what people do when they lament or bewail - cry, moan, fume, roar, rage, sob, gasp, shut down, clam up, go cold, weep. Many of the other words are about an internal state or feeling but these include public, communal and even formal behaviors. As a noun *lament* comes very directly from the Latin, *lamentum*, wailing, weeping, lamentation. It includes such things as a song of grief, elegy, or dirge accompanying burial. The element of intensity of feeling is also stressed: to express profound grief, to mourn passionately (OED).

Deplore is another synonym for *grieve*. Deplore "implies keen and profound regret especially for what is regarded as irreparable, calamitous, or destructive of something good or worth keeping."¹⁷ It describes a particular condition of grief, an attitude toward a loss of something deeply valued that is broken beyond repair. A *calamitous* loss is one that especially grave, that produces "lasting distress and suffering."¹⁸ To *deplore* particularly signals the loss of *the good that cannot be replaced*. What makes an event calamitous is this kind of shattering destruction, world-breaking for those upon whom it falls. "Keen and profound regret" is a bit distanced as a way of saying it; better, perhaps, would be to speak of a regret that is "sharp and deep," as in the kind of pang one likens to the stab of a knife. To my own ears, *deplore* carries the sense of anger, abhorrence, detestation, or revulsion at what has happened. Something that is deplorable stands apart from or outside the good, the moral. In that case, to deplore has a quality of offense and outrage. And *regret*? Sorrow for something that can't be undone: no repair, no replacement, no remedy. Once again, the theme of powerlessness: there is, indeed, a sorrow over things that can be fixed, including our own wrongdoing that may (blessedly) be capable of being set right again. That is sorrow of a different kind.

Then there are Soule's adjectives to consider:

Grievous, *a.* 1. Distressing, afflictive, afflicting, sorrowful, heavy, burdensome, oppressive, painful, sad, deplorable, lamentable, hard to bear.

2. Hurtful, injurious, baneful, noxious, troublesome, mischievous, detrimental, destructive, calamitous.

3. Atrocious, heinous, flagitious, outrageous, intense, severe, intolerable, dreadful, gross, iniquitous, flagrant, aggravated.

An adjective is a word attached to a noun or pronoun to describe it, or in Webster's more precise terms, to "indicate its quality or extent." When grief is transformed into an adjective it means the quality or extent of grief can be applied to any number of other nouns (or if we use the form *grievously*, an adverb, to any number of other verbs, adverbs, or adjectives). In the same way, whatever those words are to which grief is joined become joined to grief as well; they affect each other. "We walked a painful path," and a path becomes pain, and pain become a path; "we breathed oppressive air," and even the air around becomes an agent of grief. "We kissed sorrowfully," "we loved sadly": see what has become of love and a kiss at the hands of grief?

The list of synonyms for *grievous* begins with terms we have already considered in different forms. Then it goes on, however, to include new words that turn back to tell us something more about grief. *Baneful* is another of the antique sounding words the dictionary calls archaic or obsolete. Bane is more familiar in plant names than conversation: wolfsbane, fleabane, baneberry. You will sometimes hear it in ordinary speech like "That is the bane of my existence!" This usually implies something that is a constant irritant, a thorn in the side. *Bane* may be quaint or obsolete, but its meanings are not: murderer, slayer, poison, death, destruction, woe, source of harm or ruin, curse. To be *baneful* is to possess these properties; to act *banefully* is to act in these ways. Applied to bereavement and grief, then, it names a loss as murderous, deadly, poisonous, ruinous, and the visiting of a curse. It tells us that not only can there be a loss to death, loss itself can be a cause of death.

Atrocious is another word that popular usage has weakened. It is frequently used to describe something in bad taste, for example, "those drapes are simply atrocious," or "the service at the restaurant was atrocious." This is very different from Webster's "extremely wicked, brutal, or cruel," and "murderous, appalling, terrible, horrifying." *Atrocity* may have resisted diminishment of meaning more successfully, and is more commonly heard to refer to events or situations which are, indeed, atrocious, particularly in war. The link between *grievous* and *atrocious* suggests at least two different relationships. On one hand, atrocity (a kind of bereavement) is a cause of grief; we grieve an atrocity. On another hand, grief itself can have the "quality or extent" of atrocity. We can experience our grief as brutal or cruel, dealing with us wickedly, appallingly. *Heinous* has a similar and somewhat simpler sense, coming from a French word that means "hate." That sense carries into English usage as something "hatefully or shockingly evil (Webster)," as in a *heinous* crime.

Dreadful is also worth pondering a while. C.S. Lewis observed after the death of his wife that no one had ever told him that the physical feeling of grief was so like the physical feeling of fear.¹⁹ He insisted that he was not actually afraid, but his body acted as if he were. Perhaps his body was acknowledging something his mind could not yet name about the days ahead. Had he known what his grief would be like, he might well have been afraid. Dread is a feeling of great fear or apprehension in the face of something that is to come, which is one of the commonest expressions a deeply grieving person makes, "I don't know how I can go on. How can I live?"

An experience of bereavement can transform the future into a threat to be feared, a set of possibilities to be dreaded.

Others of Soule's list have implications of shame, evil, villainy, excess: *flagitious*, *iniquitous*, *flagrant*. These may not be qualities one readily associates with grief, and so their appearance as synonyms for grievous may seem to represent a different kind of usage. Yet we find repeatedly that bereavement is experienced as the result of an act this is shameful, evil, villainous, or excessive. The language of lament may sometimes include just such an accusation. As an adjective, grievous carries the particular tenor that describes whatever it is attached to as somehow *like* the pain of grief.

The word *pain* itself has appeared several times in our brief discussion. Let us recall its own root in Latin and Greek words for payment, penalty, punishment (hence the term penal). Similarly, *suffer* is one of the most common terms we meet, both on its own (as in "she suffers in her grief") and in combination (as in "she suffers an affliction"). It is rooted in the Latin *sufferer*, to bear (again the sense of weight). "To submit to or be forced to endure..." offers Webster's, "undergo, experience...to endure death, pain, or distress...to sustain loss or damage." Both terms are at the same time simple and common, as well as intricately connected to a vast range of the other words we have been considering.

We could extend the lexicon to include other words suggested by other sources. *Roget's Thesaurus*, for example, lists only sorrow, grieving, and woe under the entry for grief, but directs the reader to SADNESS. In the distinctive system of organization of Roget's a core concept is identified and then a range of variations are subsumed within it. SADNESS comprises more than one hundred-fifty terms among its various forms, all of which, while by no means restricted to grief, are terms that could plausibly be used to describe it. Included in the synonyms for *sorrowful* we find "sorrow-burdened, sorrow-laden, sorrow-worn: grief-stricken, grief-laden, aggrieved, grieved; sick-at-heart-, heartsick, heartsore, heart-stricken, heavy-hearted, sore-at-heart..." The images of burden, strickeness, weariness, and pain at the core all come forward strongly. The reader is further directed to consult DEJECTION, GLOOM, HOPELESSNESS, REGRET, WEEPING.

Oftentimes, a word is defined through its difference from other words. The contrast between two words invites understanding of each of each in relation to the other. For *grief* Webster's *Synonyms* offers the contrasting words *comfort*, *solace*, and *consolation*. *Comfort* is characterized as a "homelier, more intimate word." One offers comfort by somehow diminishing pain and distress, and (or) by increasing hope, strength (Latin: *confortare*). Note the temporal direction of hope (future) and the temporal implication of strength (present). *Solace* may suggest relief from distress emotions. Not healing from grief itself, let us say, but a partial and temporary easing of feelings of loneliness, for example, or anxiety. *Consolation* is characterized as more formal, and less about communication and more about something that mitigates or diminishes the suffering.

From Soule's once again:

"**Comfort** *v.t.* Solace, console, cheer, gladden, encourage, inspirit, enliven, animate, revive, refresh, invigorate, relieve, strengthen."

Each of the words implies some kind of change, even if only temporary. Each of them suggests the shadow shape of some potential aspect of grief, therefore, as (for example) from being discouraged to encouraged, from dispirited to spirited, lifeless to lively, inanimate to animated. For *comfort* the OED offers “to soothe in grief or trouble; to relieve of mental distress; to console, solace (the ordinary current sense).” *Solace*: “To cheer, comfort, console; to cheer, recreate.” Console contains solace within it and solace consoles. For *console* OED offers: “To comfort in mental distress or depression; to alleviate the sorrow of anyone; to free from the sense of misery.” Interestingly enough, the examples of early usage in the entry comment upon a *lack* of consolation: “...empty heads console with empty sounds,” and “I am but poorly qualified at present to console you upon the great loss you have sustained.” Both examples comment upon the inability of another person to comfort or alleviate the sorrow. The first suggests a general cluelessness as to what is really happening, what is needed, and what is possible – which unfortunately does not prevent the “comforter” from speaking. The second suggests a recognition that the bereaved person’s loss exceeds the speaker’s capacity to understand, at least for the present, as if to say the future may hold the possibility of experience and wisdom, in the absence of which silence is better than speaking.

Ordinary usage frequently speaks of the consolation of religion or taking solace in religion. Indeed, when religion is brought to bear upon grief it is usually, in my experience, as an attempt to offer an experience of relief (even if only briefly) or a framework of meaning (even if not an explanation of loss). As we contemplate the depth and breadth of the language of grief, this invites us to consider how (and if) religion does such a thing.

Grieving Mind, Grieving Body

The grief lexicon is about language, but the language is about experience, and experience can comprise every aspect of who we are. We grieve with our bodies and our minds; this is ancient knowledge. We are grieved *in* our bodies and minds, and we are grieved *by* our bodies and minds; this, too, is ancient knowledge. The distinction has to do with causes and effects. There are, indeed, those nearly infinite causes of loss that surround us, and the ways in which death can rob us are as numerous as the bits and pieces from which we have built our worlds. But grief’s causes can also be found within, the ancients observed, in our organs and blood and brains, in the humors and vapors and bile that rise up within us, in the thoughts, fantasies, and fears that possess us. Whatever the causes, however, grief visits us in our most personal, distinctive, and intimate dimensions of body and mind.

Burton notes, “Arculanus...will have these symptoms to be infinite, as indeed they are, varying according to the parties, ‘for scarce is there one of a thousand that dotes [grieves] alike.’”²⁰ In some the signs in the body are wasting away, a hollow-eyed stare, a cast-down expression, they can’t eat, and when they do they are griped in belly and bowels, their appearance runs to ruin, they are dizzy and light-headed, can’t seem to find their bearings, can’t sleep through the night, and when sleep does come it is interrupted by terrible and frightening dreams; foul breath and belching as if full of putrefaction, trembling, palsy, cold sweat, palpitations of the heart, eruptions of the skin, scratching as if bitten by fleas, headache, fatigue, stuttering, tripping in speech; furtive eyes casting about in fear, easily startled, dull, restless, unable to concentrate or go about the affairs of the day, weeping, sobbing, blushing, fainting. The list could be longer, Burton notes, and needs no special cases to demonstrate: “...they are too frequent in all places, I meet them still as I go...I need not seek far to describe them.”²¹

Then there are signs in the mind. If the bodily symptoms of grief (and melancholy in general, for Burton) reach from head to foot, the principal effects on the mind are fear and sorrow. Classical observation found many variations, of course, and contradictory expressions such as seeming fearlessness and hilarity. Fear and sorrow themselves come to expression in many variations, too, but they "...are the most assured signs, inseparable companions, and characters of melancholy; of present melancholy and habituated..."²² Grief pains the mind so that desire for life itself is lost (Burton repeatedly pointed to suicide as a last resort for melancholy), "extinguisheth all delights, it causeth deep sighs and groans, tears, exclamations... howling, roaring, many bitter pangs...)."²³ It brings hallucinations, mental collapse, immobilization, indecision. One person cannot bear to leave the house for fear, another cannot bear to stay; one person fears everyone is watching, another that they have become invisible; one cannot bear the light, another cannot bear darkness; one fears to sleep because of nightmares, another fears to be awake because of the pain; one fears the past, another the present, another the future. Burton confesses himself reluctant even to elucidate the many ways fear can overtake a person, because some suffering reader may discover a fear that had not yet been entertained and be afflicted in a new way.

Sorrow's symptoms are no less complex:

"fretting, chafing, sighing, grieving, complaining, finding faults, repining, grudging, weeping...vexing themselves, disquieted in mind, with restless unquiet thoughts, discontent, either for their own [or others'] affairs; things past, present, or to come, the remembrance of some disgrace, loss, injury, abuse, etc. troubles them now being idle afresh, as if it were new done...they are soon tired with all things...they declare life not worth living, discontent, disquieted...they complain, weep, lament, and think they lead a most miserable life...a perpetual agony."²⁴

Sorrow makes some of those who suffer it passionate in their feelings and thoughts, insistent, absorbed, even driven, as in a frenzy or rage, as if action might somehow reverse the work of time and undo what has left them undone. Some grief makes one vulnerable to others, easily deceived into trust or swayed by professions of love, only to be taken advantage of and bereaved afresh. Some are troubled in grief by past events that haunt and torment them, and if they have been "misused, derided, disgraced, chidden, etc." they withdraw to avoid others and absorb themselves with their ill-use, whether in shame, resentment, or both. They seek out solitary places, deserts, back lanes, gardens, wherever they can be alone, eat alone, live alone. At its worst, grief leads to the deepest pit of melancholy: "a plague of the soul, the cramp and convulsion of the soul, an epitome of hell; and if there be a hell upon earth, it is to be in a melancholy [person's] heart. *For that deep torture may be call'd as hell / When more is felt than one hath power to tell.*"²⁵

A contemporary eye might look through these symptoms and assign clinical names and diagnoses, which is what Burton and his predecessors were doing in their own ways. They were nothing if not observers, close observers, and if they got the particulars of their science wrong, they understood the notions of multiple causation, the inter-dependence of mind and body, the importance of situations, events, relationships, friendship, skilled care, and compassion. They also understood that any of these symptoms and experiences might overtake a person for a season and that all of us are vulnerable to them because we are mortal humans, and in time and with proper attention the suffering abates. And they understood that in some instances, the suffering deepens instead, and becomes all-consuming, even to the point of taking a person's life:

death because of death. Burton urged the importance of helping the suffering to *understand* more about what they were experiencing, and to understand that they were not cursed or bewitched or forsaken by God but suffering from natural causes around us and within us, suffering the pains of human vulnerability and mortality, suffering as others have suffered and with others who suffer, worthy of compassion and care (1.3.3. p. 419).²⁶

Melancholy, depression, personality disorder, complicated grief, trauma, post-traumatic stress – such contemporary categories familiar to us from the realms of medicine and psychology are modern in their nomenclature but ancient in our knowledge of what it means to be human and to be bereaved. And if there are remedies or palliatives, if we can point to systems in our bodies and constellations in our minds, switches that might be turned on or off, chemicals that might be introduced or removed or blocked, explorations of memories and dreams, assessments and reflections upon our thoughts, counsel, companionship, faith, they do not diminish the mystery and fearful power that grief’s experience can wield.

Grieving With Those Who Grieve

Wise guides can tell us something of what experiences of grief have been and might be. Shock, numbness, confusion, disorientation, disbelief, futility, anger, rage, sadness, fear, loneliness, emptiness, listlessness, meaninglessness, yearning, searching, regret, shame, guilt, conflict, contradiction – all these certainly can be part of it as we have seen. So can relief, release, gratitude, appreciation, connection, relationship, support, hope, forgiveness, reconciliation, comfort, consolation. And they can be all jumbled together, too, jostling, displacing, and succeeding one another in turns that cannot be foreseen.

In some ways this knowledge helps. Isn’t it enough to be bereaved and grieving without also fearing that you are somehow crazy or deficient? That you are doing it *wrong*? To be aware that such experiences are not distortions of grief but what it *is* can itself be a kind of comfort. It can also offer a way to speak about what is happening, to name the changes in our bodies, minds, and worlds in a language that others can understand, at least to the extent that we ever understand what words mean.

To the extent that...this is an important caution. To understand the words someone says is not necessarily the same as understanding the meaning of the person who says them, and to say words that others can understand is not necessarily to say what you mean. “Nouns, verbs, do not exist for what I feel,” wrote John Berryman.²⁷ On one hand, all of those words are only signs pointing toward experience we can’t foresee, even when we know it is coming, and none of them tell us what that experience will be like *as our own experience*. On another hand, none of them substitute for the particular story and the particular telling of grief that only the grieving can disclose. And on yet another hand, no telling is finally adequate, either. Disclosure in one way is veiling in another. Understanding, or even bare recognition, lies along a way that may or may not have any reliable markers or maps.

For this reason some griever become explorers themselves. They have gone behind the usual vocabulary, seeking help from those who have had similar losses, searching for a kind of knowledge about what they were experiencing, understanding from those who really could understand, and wisdom about how to live in the face of loss. Call the search a journey, as many have, or perhaps even better call it a pilgrimage, which captures something of the dedication and depth of the search. Organizations such as “The Compassionate Friends,” “Alive Alone,” “Baby

Steps,” “GriefNet,” “Survivors of Suicide,” and many others provide such connections and resources. Whether virtual or actual they have offered hospitality, we could say, to those who must undertake the pilgrimage in their particular way. Surely, every pilgrim, even on the same road, travels a singular path.

One such explorer is Ann Finkbeiner whose son, T.C., was killed in a freak train accident as he returned to college after Christmas break; he was eighteen years old. She was very aware of the difficulty and complexity of what she was experiencing, aware that her experience of loss affected her across the whole horizon of her life, and aware that she was changing through these experiences. For a while it was only through metaphors that she could express what was happening: a fish out of water, flopping and gasping, who upon asking “where’s the water?” was asked in return “what’s water?” Another metaphor: “...my life was a story I had been writing and now I knew the story was out of my hands. If it was even a story at all, it was not me writing it.”

These and other metaphors made a kind of sense individually, she said, but they didn’t add up to anything coherent, just fragments that didn’t hold together. But she also noticed something else. About four years after the death of her son, she was better – not healed, not “over it,” but in less pain, more able to connect with her work and world, more interested in living. She was still as attached to her son as she had been, but it was *different*.

By vocation she was a science writer, interpreting complex fields for general readers, and so she turned to the tools of her trade for help. She read the psychiatric, psychological, and sociological research on grief, but didn’t really find what she was looking for, especially concerning the long-term effects of the loss of a child upon a parent. She also discovered the increasing literature that called into the question such distinctions as “normal” and “pathological” grief and the very idea of recovery (an idea of which she was skeptical, too). So she took a further step: talking to bereaved parents themselves, those whose children had been dead five years or more. The selection method wasn’t scientific: an invitation sent out to members of local network of Compassionate Friends. Thirty people responded. She asked them such questions as these: Has your marriage changed? Your relationship with your other children? Are you more distant or closer to other people? Guilt or self-blame? Has your feeling about God changed? What is most satisfying to you? Do you still feel pain? When? Do you have a way of making sense of the death? Basically, she said, she was asking about the effects of the child’s death on the parents’ inward and outward world of relationships.²⁸

Two learnings stood out with particular clarity. The first was that the death of a child is profoundly disorienting; the second was that letting go of a child is impossible (we will return to these in “Grief’s Relationships”). Disorienting: the maps and the world no longer fit, the compass doesn’t work, the street signs spin aimlessly, directions can’t be trusted. The grief experiences of the bereaved parents she talked to had all been profoundly world-shaking, and although the life worlds that had been shaken were very different and the life worlds that had been rebuilt were very different, too, all had suffered an earthquake, and all had to rebuild in its aftermath. “In fact, nothing in this new world makes sense at all; the minor insanity isn’t in the parents, it’s in the world. In such insanity, you are dumbstruck and stupid.”²⁹

Letting go of a child is impossible, this was the second learning: as impossible as living without blood, air, or electrical impulses along the nerves. The continuing bonds were as different and distinctive as the bonds were in life, complex, conflicted, changing. Even after years, most found themselves still faced with a kind of contradiction. On one hand they wanted to hold on in some way to the *person* who had died, and on another hand to let go of the *pain*. One mother who had lost two children had one of them appear to her in a dream: “Teddy asked

me to let him go: ‘Mom, I’m fine, let me go, let us go.’ That was letting go of the pain. That wasn’t letting go of *them*. I don’t know how you can hold onto something that you’re constantly in pain about. But I can see how you can hold onto something that you treasure and love...I wonder if at each stage of your grief holding on doesn’t change.”³⁰

Suzanne Redfern and Susan Gilbert are two mothers whose children also had died. Susan’s daughter Amanda was killed in a traffic accident at age eighteen. Suzanne’s daughter Mimi died of breast cancer at age thirty-two. Both women were extensively involved in peer grief counseling and support networks and realized how important the experience was of having someone else to talk to who had shared similar losses. They also realized how difficult it could be for bereaved parents to find such support, so they reached out to others who were part of their network and asked them if they would be willing to talk about their grief so that it could be offered even more broadly. The method, once again, was not scientific: someone knew someone, who knew someone, who knew someone. In the end, to their surprise, they found they had gathered a diverse group that ranged in age from their thirties to their eighties, “White, Hispanic, Asian, and African American, Jew, agnostic, Buddhist, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant. Farmer, corporate executive, scientist, musician, accountant, physician, teacher, social-worker, and cattle-woman.” The children had died from illness, accident, street violence, domestic violence, terrorism, and they ranged in age from an unborn child to a woman of fifty-two.³¹

Drawing upon their own experience in grieving and accompanying others, they asked questions that seemed to them especially important. “During the first days and weeks after your loss, how did you survive?” “What do you say when you’re asked, ‘How many children do you have?’” They asked about traditions, anniversaries, and memorials, responses to other children, marriage and friendship. They asked about spirituality and religion, about despair and thoughts of suicide, about support, and counseling. How often do you weep? Do you experience joy? What has changed in your life? In how you see yourself? They asked questions about emotions and thoughts: anger, bitterness, blame, guilt, forgiveness. Do you still experience a relationship with your child? A sense of presence? Has this changed over time? What one true thing would you share with a newly bereaved parent?

Respondents were asked to take on two or three questions, the ones they thought were most important. Most, however, replied to eight or ten; two answered every question. My hunch is that they reflected upon all of them and chose the ones to which they could give the most articulate response. They also replied in many different ways: brief, terse, reflective, analytical, conversational, lyrical. Some also were interviewed; they preferred to reply (or expand upon a reply) in actual conversation.

The questions themselves have the feel of experience to them, the kind of questions that one sufferer can ask another, standing ready to speak for themselves, too, when that is called for. Every question is fraught with back-story, story upon story that testifies to realities of a grief struggle as it was lived out. Even so, and as challenging as the questions might be, they cannot equal the challenge of the answers.

Take, for example, the questions about anger: What feelings of anger, bitterness, or blame do you hold toward another person or toward God/fate as a result of your child’s death? Have you felt the need to forgive anyone for your child’s death? The father of a girl who died of cancer at age twelve talked about his anger at himself for being unable to save her. The fact that she suffered from a rare and aggressive cancer that had required radiation, limb salvage (amputation), and chemotherapy, the fact that the doctors and care workers had done all they

could, the fact that they fought against the disease three years and kept faith with their child – these facts did not change the most important fact: that he was her father and he could not save her. If only he had been more vigilant, more aggressive, had demanded more: “If only, if only, if only. Anger burned my soul like a fire burns a forest.”³² He felt anger toward himself for his failure, which he found harder to forgive than the failure of others. Over a period of six years he struggled with this, and it was only through a sense of continuing relationship with Lainie, his dead daughter, from whom he sensed the permission to release the question of his guilt, that he was able to let it go and look toward the future, in which he believed they would be together again.

A mother whose son had been killed in a street shooting talked about anger – toward the man who had killed him, the drugs and violence in her community, and the authorities who failed or were unable to act: “I waged anger for a while – I waged anger for years.” She described encountering the killer on her own street, recognizing him, following him, confronting him at the very park where her son had been killed, described the man walking toward, looking at her, her looking at *him*: “I’ll never forget the look on his face, but then I didn’t care about death or dying at that time, I was so angry...” She described years of frustration, community involvement, United Mothers Against Drugs, police involvement. “Anger? Yes, a lot of anger, and for years...I still have anger when I think about. They still haven’t done anything.”

The father of a twenty-one year old son who committed suicide spoke of his anger toward his son. What would he like to say to his son? “First, I would tell him how much I loved and missed him! But then I would tell him this: that I cannot conceive or understand the depths of despair that would lead him to do this selfish, uncaring act; all the wonderful things that he and his family missed; how much pain and anguish he caused; how angry I still am...All this [lifetime’s] love and care and effort and hope and dreams are *rejected* by one [I] loved so much.”

A mother whose son died in his crib of Sudden Unexplained Death in Childhood at age two-and-a-half years said simply. “I don’t know what I’m mad at, but I’m still mad.”

In all four of these examples people spoke about anger, but the shape and texture, the thoughts and feelings of each is very different. In one sense they are all, indeed, depictions of anger, but in another sense each experience is so distinct that to call them by the same name seems somehow wrong. The father angry with himself spoke of a consuming fire, but it was himself that was being consumed. The mother who spoke of waging anger used a term we commonly use for war, and in her description of confrontation and interminable struggle “waging anger” seems an especially precise choice of words. The man who spoke of his son’s suicide was bereaved both *of* his son and *by* his son. He felt the pain of losing his son and all that might have been had his son lived, but he also felt the pain of being rejected himself, all his life and love rejected by the suicide. The anger and the love were utterly inextricable. The woman who lost her child, without warning and without reason, was left without anyone or anything upon which she could focus her anger. The anger was just *there*.

In all four instances the path of the anger, where it leads, whether or not it should be or can be -- What? Resolved, transformed, deepened, released, repented, outlived? – the path is difficult and complex. And it is interwoven with all the answers spoken and unspoken to the other questions they had been invited to consider, and whatever questions they had *not* been asked that still rang inside them. If all four sat together in a room they could acknowledge how deep anger was for each of them, yet each would leave the room with a very different path of anger to follow.

These voices of bereaved parents might find echoes in those who have suffered other kinds of bereavement – of a parent, sister, brother, spouse, lover, friend, let us say - but those losses will have their own special meaning and weight. Even when we can recognize the grieving feelings and thoughts as having a namable name (angry or sad or numb or despairing, or afraid...) the words and the experiences are not simply the same. Only the one who is grieving can tell us about his or her particular grief, and it is only through attending more closely to hear that particular grief that one *may* be able to understand more what challenges, temptations, dangers, and possibilities that grief presents.

A Country Without a Map?

“I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history... There is something new to be chronicled every day. Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape. As I’ve already noted, not every bend does. Sometimes the surprise is the opposite one; you are presented with exactly the same sort of county you thought you have left behind miles ago.”³³

These are reflections of C.S. Lewis in the fourth and final chapter of his memoir *A Grief Observed*, written following the death of his wife Helen Joy Davidman (“H.”) from cancer. The journal had been held back for several years, then finally published because it might be of help to others, but even then under a pseudonym for fear that its contents would be shocking. He had had four empty manuscript books on hand when he began his chronicle; this was the last notebook, so it would be the last chapter – not because there would be nothing else to say, but because he had come to realize that without this seemingly arbitrary limit, the writing of his grief would never end.

His purpose had been on one hand to prevent his own total collapse by putting his thoughts and experiences into words – surely the defense of a thinker and writer. Filling the pages of the manuscript books had done some good in that regard, he acknowledged. But in another regard he had thought that by observing his own grief, by becoming the object of his own thinking, he would gain greater understanding (perhaps even mastery) of something that could be *defined*. In this regard, he had discovered he was wrong. There would be no map forthcoming, with fixed markers, roads, coordinates – perhaps most importantly with no clear routes by which to cross. Instead there could only be a *history*, a *histoire* or story of what he had experienced, a story from which and for which he could predict the next chapter neither for himself, nor for his dead wife “H.” nor for the God of his faith.

What he could testify to, however, was the experience, and his descriptions have become something like touchstones: how grief feels like fear; how he felt as if he were drunk or concussed; searing stabs of memory; his sense of becoming an embarrassment, a leper, and a death’s head to his acquaintances; alienation from his own body; his vulnerability to and impatience with his own feelings; his disappointed hope that thinking might lead him out; his anger at the platitudes, however well-meant, by which others tried to comfort and console him; his distrust of his own faith which had suddenly seemed to be of such little help. Perhaps most difficult for Lewis was his anger at God: not that he would cease to believe, but *what* he might come to believe. “The conclusion I dread is not ‘So there’s no God after all,’ but ‘So this is what God’s really like. Deceive yourself no longer.’”³⁴ The journal is by turns raw, reflective, angry,

puzzled, focused, distracted, ironic, sarcastic, hopeful, wistful, resigned, protesting, full of wonder at what still might be possible for the future of their love, yet concluding, “We cannot understand. The best is perhaps what we understand least.”³⁵

What is most important about Lewis’s journal is not that his experience is typical, but that it was told at all. It is the story of *his* grief and no one else’s. It showed a person who was willing to try to tell the truth of his experience and follow wherever it led, first of all in the privacy of a journal, later under a pseudonym, and finally under his own name. It spoke of love, fear, anger, sex, faith, loneliness, despair, a sense of betrayal by God, doubts, seeming craziness and so much more, in a time and culture that was still dominated by codes of mourning that held such things to be private, perhaps even shameful, especially among the members of the cultural and religious elite. The inward experiences of loss could be frightening, indeed, both to the bereaved and those around them, and the dividing line between the normal country of sorrow and what lay farther beyond in a more dangerous country of madness, melancholy, despair, or depression was unclear. There was no map, Lewis discovered, and on the ground itself, the borders were not marked.

The exploration of one’s own grief has taken many forms: journals, memoirs, elegies, mourning poems, songs, essays, sermons, eulogies, prayers, laments, memorials, letters to and from the dead, defenses of and arguments with the dead, photo and video montages, drawing and painting, scrapbooks, websites, to name only the most common examples. Such expressions of grief and mourning have a long history, some of which remains in the realm of the personal and private, intended only for the griever themselves, and some of which has been offered to all who care to receive it. The community of the bereaved is not limited by time or place, and an ancient voice can sometimes speak with more immediacy and intimacy than the voice of your next door neighbor. In the most compelling public examples the authors or creators have brought their gifts and skills for self-examination, expression, and communication to bear upon their own experience and presented something that persuades us, “this is true, this is real,” that allows us to enter through empathy and imagination into some dimension, some fragment of their experience. Their losses are not necessarily more grievous, nor their insights necessarily deeper or more compelling, but they journeyed in the country of grief, explored it, and brought (or sent) back a report, or a story, or a sign.

We could call these expressions collectively “arts of grief and mourning,” not to remove them to a special aesthetic realm but to distinguish them from concerns of symptomology, classification, quantification, prognosis, or treatment. Others may bring critical reflection to bear upon such arts and ask what we see when we view them together, and what we learn from that. Such criticism is valuable, too, but depends first of all, upon the value of the works themselves.

Different forms of expression offer different approaches to the arts of grief and mourning. Take memoir and journal, for example. In memoir I tell the story of some aspect of my life and reflect upon it. It is about memory recalled and reconfigured at some distance of time. A journal is somewhat different. In a journal I set down my thoughts and feelings as a diarist might copy out the day’s events (the word *jour* means “day”), perhaps prompting memories of other days or commenting on other days’ entries, of course, but recording more or less contemporaneously. One may edit and revise later (perhaps “improve!”), but the covenant a journal writer makes with a reader (including the journal writer herself) is to a kind of “journalism,” a chronicle of things while they are close to hand. Memoir may draw upon the materials of a journal, but it has a more overarching narrative quality, with more deliberate dimensions of reminiscence, synthesis, and reflection. Journal has a chronology, you could say, memoir has a plot.

If memoir is a way of trying to see things in relationship, to plot memory, and the journal is a way to record experience so as to be remembered, in between are the fragments and slivers of experience, reflections, musings that make up so much of how we think and speak in grief. This space between is often explored through poetry, story, and song. A moment is recollected, held up to the light, tended, plumbed, explored, and molded into some expressive shape. Whatever that expressive shape might be, however, memory is serious work, and where it leads is unpredictable.

Marcel Proust wrote a great series of novels known collectively as *Remembrance of Things Past* (or *In Search of Lost Time – A la recherche du temps perdu*). Early on he describes the experience of a spoonful of cake and herb tea, and the feeling that their taste and smell was awakening something deep within him, something of himself, something like a potion or a message. He tried repeatedly, taste after taste, to bring whatever it was into awareness: “But how? What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day.”³⁶ He became increasingly convinced that it was memory that was trying to speak and the spoon of cake and tea was the threshold, but however the memory might flood or recede it remained tantalizingly beyond his reach. Then it stopped.

...who can say whether it will ever rise again? Ten times over I must essay the task, must lean down over the abyss. And each time the cowardice that deters us from every difficult task, every important enterprise, has urged me to leave the thing alone, to drink my tea and to think merely of the worries of to-day and my hopes for to-morrow, which can be brooded over painlessly.

And suddenly the memory revealed itself.³⁷

In contrast to the gentle, ordinary substance of cake and tea is placed the images of abyss, cowardice, difficult work as demanding as any difficult and important work, and the temptation to pull back and let it all go. Strikingly, the worries and hopes of today and tomorrow are waved aside as no more than painless brooding in contrast to leaning over the abyss of memory. Even more strikingly, Proust’s narrator has already sensed that the as yet unnamable memories have everything to do with joy as well as pain. Perhaps that is why they prompt cowardice. We can remember joy in such a way as to suffer all the more in the present. This is, indeed, a hard choice: to remember and suffer memory (painful and joyful), or to turn away from both and sever the past from the present and future. Sometimes, indeed, it is a joy to speak of the pain of the past, and painful to speak of the joy. This is one reason memoir, especially grief memoir, is difficult.

Memories insist upon their own order and time. Try as one might to keep them orderly and obedient, they can arrive without invitation or permission. Try as one might to call them back, they can withdraw into themselves, and leave behind only a bare account or script. And they can come with a vividness and richness that makes the actual day at hand seem like nothing more than marks in an appointment book. Years trade places with no warning. You step away from a Thanksgiving Dinner table and suddenly you are nine years old again. You look out the window of the bus, and it is your wedding day fifty years before.

The unpredictability is because memories, like dreams, obey their own hidden laws. They cluster around things as ordinary as spoons and cake, an old cap, a brooch, tulips, a badly focused photograph. They can be awakened by the aroma of bread baking, the reek of trash cans in the heat, singed hair, a sudden clap of noise, a dark smear on the pavement. The beeping back-up signal of a truck can return a person to the monitor sounds of an emergency room. An ad for medicine in the paper recalls the unpronounceable syllables of the drugs that finally failed. The crack of a bat sounds like the crack of a bone. The telephone, every time it rings, recalls one unforgettable call. How often has a bereaved person seen in the face of a stranger the face of the one who has died – not seen a face *like*, but the very face?

Meghan O'Rourke wrote about the yearning that was released by a cut-class sugar bowl: "In the weeks after my mother's death, I experienced an acute nostalgia. This longing for a lost time was so intense I thought it might split me in two, like a tree hit by lightning. I was – as the expression goes – flooded by memories. It was a submersion in the past that threatened to overwhelm any 'rational' experience of the present, water coming up around my branches, rising higher."³⁸ The flood was made up of seemingly trivial things, like a cut glass sugar bowl on the kitchen table, with a metal lid that didn't quite fit. As a child Meghan had kept opening and closing the lid until her mother said to her in exasperation *Enough with the sugar bowl*. After her mother's death that was the voice she yearned to hear.

Joan Didion wrote about shoes. Her husband John had died suddenly, of a heart attack one evening just before supper. Her book *The Year of Magical Thinking* tells the story of what happened the next year of her grief and mourning (including what would be the fatal illness of her daughter). The title itself is telling. By magical thinking Didion meant the irrational but real idea that *if only* she might act or not act in a certain way the story could be undone, John would be alive again. The idea was not really at the surface; it lay beneath motives and actions that seemed in some ways to make no sense, and in other ways made complete sense. If there was any chance she could somehow bring him back, then certainly she must do it. It began the first night after his death. She had insisted on spending that night alone, because (she realized later) that although she knew John was dead, maybe it was still reversible. "I needed to be alone so that he could come back. This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking."³⁹

Two months later she felt the time had come to give his clothes away, as she had done after the deaths of her mother and father. A few things were held back because they held special associations, but most of the clothing - sneakers, shorts, Brooks Brothers shirts - was put in bags to be donated to the church. When she went into his study where he had kept his shoes, she was brought up short. "I stopped at the door of the room. I could not give away the rest of his shoes. I stood there for a moment, then realized why: he would need his shoes if he was to return. The recognition of the thought by no means eradicated the thought."⁴⁰

A woman whose father had died receives a letter from her mother, who is cleaning out his workshop and needs her advice. She has found cartons and suitcases full of ice grips for shoes he had made out of inner tube and scrap metal, his special project down through the years. He had given them away at every hand: family, friends, neighbors, strangers at the door. They had seemed to her gifts by which he was really asking others to receive him. Mother has found more, "More than we can ever use. / What shall I do?" The daughter's mind and memory bring forward images of cold and ice, snows, her father going door to door with his gifts, her own empty house. "And I write back: Mother, please / Save everything."⁴¹

A man grieves his mother dead at eighty, in a poem simply entitled “Grief.” He recalls the difficult and intimate details of her dying, tumors spreading through her lungs, liver, blood, bladder. He recalls the rise and fall of hopes, remissions and returns, the well-known vocabulary of treatments and symptoms, nausea, loss of weight, hair, confusion. He names the fact of her departure: she is gone, wholly.

Then he turns to what he is experiencing and asks, “Is this grief?” What follows is a litany/recitation/index/catalogue of pain: tears; a wish to die himself; pain for what she had suffered, pain for the suffering of his daughter and son, his wife whose own mother’s death was brought back so vividly; pain for all those who know they are dying. Sleeplessness, restlessness, fatigue, distraction, impatience: he asks, “...is this what grief is, is this pain enough?” He studies his own face in the mirror, searching for evidence of anguish. Mustn’t something so powerful inside him be outwardly visible? He recalls his mother, dying but still putting on her make-up, and feels grief for whatever those images were in her mind that led to believe that her face must be transformed by rouge, shadow, lip-stick, and then grieves for the faces of other women so compelled to hide their souls behind masks, and finally for the faces of all human beings who search their faces for a truth they can never find. He sees his own grieving face beneath hers, and yearns for it to be only temporary, like make-up that can be wiped away, like a mask that can be set aside. Finally, he speaks of grief that extends to the earth itself: “Grief for the earth, accepting the grief of the flesh and the grief of our grieving forever.”⁴²

A young father, whose premature infant son died after only twenty-eight hours, of whom they could know almost nothing except that scant day he lived in a collapsible isolette, writes “We assume / you did not know we loved you.”⁴³ A woman recalls her unborn child, lost in a bloody miscarriage early in her pregnancy, grieved but never mourned because of a new pregnancy that began soon after. Never mourned, but not forgotten and remaining still to be addressed, whose brief appearance was important as a message or a sign: “...All wrapped in / purple it floated away, like a messenger / put to death for bearing bad news.”⁴⁴

A man grieving the death of his wife, Kate, writes her letters every day for the first year of his life without her. One day he picks up the car from being serviced, and the manager says he’s all “ready to hit the road.” But she had always been the one to drive, and “The only problem is there’s no place I care to go without you behind the wheel.” Where could he go that he wouldn’t remember her? “An island paradise called Amnesia, a place completely free of grief. Wouldn’t it be nice to go there? Then I wouldn’t remember...” And the next day, after taking a break from “the daily run of condolences” he writes to her, “It’s a strange thing how such well-meant expressions of sympathy can become the source of unintended pain, keeping one’s grief as green as a rainforest.”⁴⁵

This is grief’s experience, too: the grown children of a woman who has died and been cremated, bring her box of ashes back to her house overnight, awaiting interment in the cemetery in the morning. They treat the box as they had treated her, even putting her on her bed for the night. Early the next morning her eldest son picked her up and carried her one last time down to the beach, the boathouse, the marsh pond, the garage, the basement, the house, the sofa – even the bathroom, an inflexible part of her routine! – which had left them all crying with laughter. When the time came to go to the cemetery, the others waited in the car, both watching and trying not to see them, the aging boy with his mother’s ashes on his arm. He tucked the box in close to his body and walked one last time with her down to the Sound, and finally through her English

garden, "...nodding and bowing in succession / to the zinnias, the marigolds, the roses, / the hollyhocks, bowing and bowing / ... / thanking and thanking."⁴⁶

The special gift that such testimony offers is two-fold. It is the naming of another person's experience, a sharing of grief that invites us to know what they know with them. It is also an invitation to recognize what may be happening in those who have not yet named and shared their own experience, including ourselves. The expression of another's grief, even a stranger's, can open up the books of our own memory, and invite us not only to listen, but to speak.

Theories of Grieving

In the West, the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th included a growing movement to understand the human spirit and mind in a way that paralleled what the sciences were doing in the physical world. The so-called "human sciences" sought to discover the appropriate frameworks, goals and methods for studying humanity, and fields such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology underwent revolutions. Other changes were underway, as well, as religious, cultural, and political earthquakes were moving the ground beneath people's feet. Understandings of grief were affected by these same forces. The emergent field of psychology sought to go behind thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to the workings of the mind that brought them forward, seeking both an understanding of *what* we do and of explanation of *why*. This included both the workings of the "normal" or "healthy" mind and of the mind that suffered and was greatly disturbed.

Since that time medicine and psychology have given considerable attention to grief, seeking to understand more about why we grieve as we do, what we actually do when we grieve, why sometimes it runs one way, sometimes another. This has led, unfortunately, to depictions of grief in popular imagination (and among some care-givers) that proceed by set stages and schedules. Perhaps most influential in the popular mind was the transfer of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's work on how people respond to their own impending death (and also the impending death of others) onto grief experiences of those who were bereaved. The grieving process was charted onto a stage map of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance and grief experiences were translated accordingly. While some bereaved people may, indeed, undergo just such a progression of grief experience, the scheme was simply too simple and neat, based upon too few people, and applied much too broadly (Kubler-Ross acknowledged this herself near the end of her life in *On Grief and Grieving*, 2005).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, many grieving people found help in understanding what was happening to them in their grief.

Theorists and clinicians have faced reciprocal challenges. Clinical observers may be tempted to make too great a generalization from what they have seen, even (or especially) when their data is substantial. Theorists may be tempted to impose their particular interpretive frames upon too broad a range of experiences, some of which may be better explained by other theories, or for which there may not yet be a helpful theory at all. The distinction between *normal* and *normative* can be difficult to recognize. The *normal* tends to offer a range of experiences that are common, shared by a wide variety of people, ordinary; the *normative* presents a standard or model, deviation from which represents, well, deviation. Distinctions between grief that is normal, complicated, disordered, prolonged, pathological (or other such qualifiers) can mean both too much and too little, can magnify and muffle, distort and diminish. Although some variations of grief models have been crudely and uncritically (even if well-meaningly) applied,

there is tremendous value in discerning shapes and patterns of grief experience, especially when we recognize that their best use is not to fit someone into a pre-determined mold but to see more clearly both what makes a person's grief peculiarly their own and what joins them to the community of those who grieve.

Freud and his theoretical descendants depicted grief as a normal and necessary response to significant loss (symbolic or actual). Mourning was a kind of work, through which the emotional energy that the bereaved had invested in the deceased was gradually withdrawn and redirected elsewhere in the bereaved person's world. (Investment is a kind of economic metaphor that reflected the idea of limited goods that one added, subtracted, and moved around through emotional transactions). Mourning was no small struggle, for it pitted the bereaved's memory and desire against the reality of loss. Normal mourning "involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life," Freud noted, yet despite the enormity of these dislocations "it never occurs to us to regard it as pathological..."⁴⁸ Time was necessary, perhaps much time, and work, perhaps much work.

The features of mourning and melancholia were seen as substantially the same, but with an important extra dimension that marked the latter. Both included a deep and painful sense of dejection, loss of interest in the outside world of things, ideas, affairs, and people, diminished capacity for love, and an absorption in the thoughts and feelings about the one who had died. Melancholy, however, exceeded this normal mourning and included terrible self-reproaches and condemnation, guilt, expectations of punishment (as in Burton's fear and sadness).

The mourning struggle is joined in the conflict between attachment to the one who has died and the reality that the deceased is no longer there. On one hand, reality-testing discloses the absence and demands that the attachments be withdrawn and that energy be focused in another direction. On the other hand, the attachment itself strongly resists any such thing, and clings all the more strongly, as if by holding onto the feelings I can somehow counter or deny the loss. This opposition can, indeed, be so strong as to be hallucinatory – this is well within the *normal*.

In time, however, reality will normally win out. This is by no means passive and automatic, and certainly not sudden. The demands of reality are resisted like the delaying action of a retreat, great energy is expended, and the psychic presence of the loved one is prolonged. Freud's brief description sounds exhausting: "Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-catheted, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it."⁴⁹ The emphasis of "each single one" could hardly be more daunting. The work of mourning requires bringing to awareness all that has been lost, not abstractly but concretely. Every memory by which the bereaved is bound to the dead must be engaged and even intensified in its bond, and every memory must confront the reality of the death. Every expectation that a person had in relationship to the dead must be engaged in the same way. Mourning, finally, requires that there be "nothing about the loss that is unconscious."⁵⁰ Freud wondered with puzzlement why this work that is so difficult and painful is taken as a matter of course, but when it is complete, "the ego becomes free and uninhibited again." That is, reality wins out and the person is freed to move into new possibilities and investment of energy. How this actually happens, however, Freud acknowledged was a mystery. "The 'work of mourning' is an intimate process, which cannot stand any interference," Freud wrote to a grieving friend.⁵¹

Mourning was important work, so important that it must not be interfered with, and to thwart or refuse such work put the bereaved person's health at risk. One of the factors that made mourning work much more challenging – and could lead to pathology (melancholia or

depression) - was the complexity of the relationship being mourned. When it was conflicted, crossed, ambivalent – marked by anger, hurt, guilt, fear – then this made mourning (which is difficult in the best of circumstances) even more difficult. Whereas feelings of love could be readily available to consciousness (indeed, could scarcely be confined), feelings toward the other of anger, hurt, disappointment, guilt, and fear might well be repressed and unacknowledged, privately or publicly, that is, unconscious. With the deceased available only in the psyche of the mourner (an *identification*, in Freud's terms), and in effect still speaking, those feelings turned against the mourner her or himself – hence the anger, self-reproach, condemnation, expectations of punishment, and fear. In a kind of mirror to the work of mourning (hyper-cathexis, release, reattachment) the melancholic must engage “each single struggle of ambivalence” consciously, becoming free of the internalized other “by disparaging, denigrating it, and even as it were killing it.”⁵²

Later in his work, Freud modified his views. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923) he reframed his model of the human psyche into the (now familiar) topography of ego, id and super-ego and how they relate to each other (and the world). The process of identification and mourning was much more centrally connected to “the form taken by the ego and it makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its ‘character’.”⁵³ Rather than releasing both the “object” (the real person in our discussion) and the identification (the internal image and representation of that person), the identification became the *means* of releasing the object, its substitution. He had come to believe that “the character of the ego [is] a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and that it contains the history of those object choices.”⁵⁴ That is, from earliest experience onward our selves have been shaped by identification, loss, and mourning and we bear those losses by carrying them within us. We bear them by bearing them. The implication is that we are what we mourn and how we mourn, and the work of mourning continues throughout life.

In April of 1929 Freud received a letter from a colleague, Ludwig Binswanger. He found much of it puzzling because the writing became more illegible as the letter progressed. He had been ready to write back a humorous reply, returning the letter to be rewritten, but his sister-in-law stepped in and deciphered the shaking hand. Binswanger was sharing his own bereavement with Freud, the loss of his child. Freud replied the next day, the thirty-sixth birthday of his own daughter Sophie, who had died nine years before. “Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.”⁵⁵

One line of thinking that developed from Freud's model focuses upon the idea of equilibrium or balance. Bereavement upsets a person's external and internal stability and grief is a natural and adaptive human response to get things back in balance. Bereavement is a shock, perhaps even a traumatic one. This can lead to an immediate reaction of panic, disbelief, bewilderment, shutting down, going on auto-pilot, or other responses that serve to protect the bereaved from the immediate full realization of what has happened. George Pollack characterized this shock as the beginning of the “Acute State” of bereavement.⁵⁶

The growing recognition of what has happened leads to what he called “grief,” intense pain, despair, and sorrow. Pollack explained the pain in two different ways: “swelling” and “avulsion.” Both have to do with the ego (in the Freudian sense) and the energy connected to the deceased. “Swelling” refers to emotional energy that builds up within and cannot be discharged:

I have feelings for the person who has died, but that person is no longer there so the feelings cannot be directed to them as before, causing me pain. “Avulsion” is a word with a root meaning to tear off. It means a forcible separation, as of a body part torn away by accident or surgery. “When the police came with the news, I felt like my heart was cut right out of my chest.” Psychic avulsion refers to the pain of loss (as if a dismemberment) which causes a person to withdraw, basically to “stop the bleeding” and save what can be saved.

The final stage of the acute state is “separation.” This corresponds to the idea of successfully withdrawing the energy from the deceased – letting go, as people say. To the extent that one is able to do this it is possible to progress to what comes next. To the extent one is unable to separate, the pain of the grief continues.

The next period in the movement toward equilibrium Pollack termed “Chronic,” a movement of reparation. Adaptation to the new reality is the goal, and that requires dealing with the multiple dimensions of change, that death has brought. All of those altered aspects of life – home, school, finances, social networks, work, daily patterns and habits – must be brought into a new equilibrium externally and internally, and especially internally. That is, the adaptation is practical, to be sure, but also emotional; if the altered aspects of life are making me reel and fall within, I am hardly likely to balance them in the world around me. The terms “chronic” and “reparation” are telling. Reparation in common usage (and first definition) means making repair and keeping in repair. Something has been damaged, and it needs to be fixed and kept up, not just fixed. Making amends is a second definition, which also may apply. We often find new resolve and sense of mission growing out of grief, serving as a kind of penance, comfort or even consolation. Chronic means something that is ongoing, continuing. Imagine someone walking a tightrope: there are constant minute adjustments being made, shifts of weight, footholds, counterbalancing. To stand perfectly still is impossible, and even to try means falling. Movement is necessary, and movement requires dynamic equilibrium that must be re-discovered with every step. Chronic normally means a condition that doesn’t get better or worse, but just goes on. In one sense that is true here, too, in that equilibrium is always the task in the face of changing realities. And another bereavement, surely, lies ahead.

A different (but related) approach to understanding grief’s relationships grew from the work of John Bowlby and what is known as “attachment theory.” Attachment theory developed from the study of children separated from their mothers by war. Bowlby identified a distinct and unvarying pattern of protest, despair and yearning, and detachment in the children, which he saw as corresponding to separation anxiety (protest), grief (despair and yearning), and defense (detachment).⁵⁷ Later clinical work sought a way to understand under more normal conditions how child-mother bonds were established, how they manifested themselves, and what happened when they were disrupted through separation.

Emotional attachment is a foundational human task in establishing a sense of safety and security. From childhood through adulthood the particular patterns of attachment may change, and a person’s capacity for developing inward resources for safety and security may grow (or not), but bereavement that threatens or destroys one’s sense of being safe and secure *enough* is a crisis.

Bowlby framed a four phase experiential process in bereavement.⁵⁸ The first stage is *Numbing*. This is the shock that comes when what has happened threatens us beyond our capacity to understand. A singular event can be so massive in its implications that we shut down and shut out whatever cannot be handled [assimilated]. The second stage is *Yearning and Searching*. As the reality of what has happened comes to greater and greater awareness, we feel

the loss more and more, long for the one who is gone, and try to restore the broken bond. Severing a bond that has figured strongly in one's sense of security provokes anxiety and fear (separation anxiety is Bowlby's term), intensifying the urgency of the search. The search is fruitless, however, and leads the bereaved farther and farther into failure and frustration, and into the inescapable reality of the loss. The third phase is *Disorganization and Despair*. When the secure foundations of a person's world have been shattered, when the ties that bind are broken, the world comes undone like a picture turned into a puzzle whose pieces don't fit. Despair, although it represents the loss of hope of restoring what has been lost, is necessary. As long as the bereaved believes the past can somehow be restored, as long as his or her effort is turned in that direction, the necessary work of the next phase, *Reorganization*, cannot begin. Disorganization, despair, and reorganization cannot finally be separated from each other, and there are no clear markers and boundaries between them. It is necessarily provisional and experimental work, trying to find out what will hold and how much it will hold, re-cutting and re-fitting the puzzle pieces, perhaps even reimagining the picture that they make.

Framing grief as either like an illness or injury, or as a kind of illness or injury (a *psychobiological* approach) can help us interpret what is happening. If it is, indeed, something innately human that involves all of our physical and psychic systems, that places grief within a larger set of functionally biological responses. Many kinds of illness and injury are dealt with through immunological and reparative processes. We notice the symptoms, fever for example, but they are frequently part of the body's defense. We may close a wound with stitches and use antibiotics to control infection, but the body itself does the healing. Sometimes, however, the body's defenses are overwhelmed, and sometimes the usual medicines don't work. Interpreting grief in a psychobiological model re-frames its experiences as part of an adaptive, healing, and survival process. It is "naturalized" or "normalized" and therefore nothing to be ashamed of or denied. A person with a broken arm is not deemed psychologically or spiritually deficient because the bones need to be set and require time to mend and then needs physical therapy to restore the strength that was lost. Similarly, when the injury does not heal and becomes complicated additional responses may be needed. And part of those further responses, certainly, includes learning more about *why* the injury is not healing, what it is about that particular injury that makes healing more difficult. In such a frame, grief is not an illness or a wound, but a response to an injurious bereavement that is part of how our psychobiological system seeks to restore its integrity.

Approaches to understanding grief through attachment theory may be seen as *psychobiological*, but they are also *psychosocial*. Forming attachments is, as we have noted, foundational to establishing a life world that is secure enough; the kinds of attachments we form affect the shape and trustworthiness of that life world; the ways those attachments have functioned in our life affect our responses to loss, and the task of establishing or re-establishing a new identity in a reshaped life world. Colin Murray Parkes drew heavily upon Bowlby's work, and added this important dimension of the psychosocial world. Numbness in the face of loss, searching and pining, depression in the face of its inevitable failure have a biological foundation, but they also have everything to do with the loss of one's assumptive world – that is, the world constructed in our minds. "Our assumptive world is our most valuable piece of mental equipment; without it we are literally lost."⁵⁹ *Literally lost*: we don't know where we are and what to do about it. This means that grief can bring a distinctly cognitive disruption that is global in its effects, and requires a cognitive rebuilding of the same magnitude.

What has been called grief work, Parkes observes, may be better seen as *transition work*.⁶⁰ This entails a discovery and re-examination of those stories, symbols, and assumptions (explicit and implicit) that have founded the assumptive world, discerning what holds and what must be changed. If work consists of tasks, then the first task of transition work is a cognitive recognition and explanation of the loss. The former may be easier than the latter. The fact of death, the fact of absence, the fact of the empty place at the table has an unavoidable reality. The matter of explanation may be more difficult, and even more grievous in its cognitive challenge. At one level explanation may mean the cancer spread, the heart gave out, the car crossed the center line, the bomb exploded. In light of these, death makes a certain kind of sense; disease, age, accidents, war: we are vulnerable flesh and blood. At another level explanation may seek an answer to the question “why,” which confronts the assumptive world more dramatically, encompassing questions of responsibility and guilt, justice, purpose, meaning, reaching all the way to ultimate questions of God and cosmos.

The second task in the transition to a new assumptive world is emotional acceptance of the loss. What might this mean? If the first emotional response to loss is pain, then acceptance means being increasingly able to acknowledge the loss and recall the one who has died with diminishing pain. This doesn’t mean that I am “ok” with the loss or that the loss itself is “ok” or that my world is “ok” or that the ways of the world are “ok.” There are certainly painful memories that remain painful because time cannot be reversed and undone – but this is true of all relationships, not only grief. In grief, however, even positive memories can be a source of pain. I am faced with an awful contradiction. I want to remember the person I loved, indeed, I can’t help *but* remember, but to do so leads me back into my bereavement afresh, re-opens the wound. Yet forgetting is not an option either, because I don’t really forget. Burying memories no more removes them from my mind than burying a body removes it from memory. The path of this second task, therefore, is through memory and its inevitable pain (this is similar to Freud’s hypercathexis). There is also good reason to believe that it is never “complete.” The classic Harvard Bereavement Study (1963) indicated that while the intensity of grief subsided sharply during the first year after loss, change after that was slow.⁶¹ These tasks, it seems, like so much other work, do not simply stay “done.”

Through cognitive recognition, and emotional acceptance of loss, acknowledging, honoring, and expressing pain, I prepare myself for the third task, reconstruction and assumption of a new identity. This requires a kind of coping that is exploratory, incremental, provisional, iterative, full of trial and error, oscillation, detours. It is, once again, as global as my assumptive world, including everything from taking charge of my own finances to my understanding of who God is and isn’t. This, too, is painful and vulnerable to fresh bereavement, and each new bereavement can be a reminder of what was lost before, returning us to the work that we had done, but must do again and differently.

Another three phase framework for grief experience is found in the work of Therese Rando. The direction of the movement is familiar, the language a little different, and the description of the tasks suggests particular emphases. Once again, there is no stop-watch running, no clearly defined rooms that one leaves and enters, but something more akin to a developmental process. Rando offers the terms, *avoidance, confrontation, and accommodation*.⁶² Avoidance is analogous to physical shock, numbing. It is protective, defensive, autonomic, like the flight part of fight or flight. The term itself suggests an active aspect, too, as when we cross the street when we see trouble coming, something we *do* and not something completely out of our control. Confrontation is another active kind of word, and suggests images of turning to face

something, marshaling strength, coming to terms, the fight part of fight or flight. This is a period of flux, oscillation, steps forward and back, negotiation, swings of emotion, anger and sadness. But it is also a period through which glimpses of ordinary life (or what might become ordinary life) begin to break through: a once normal task that seemed impossible for a time becomes possible again; a small pleasure recalls the possibility of pleasure again; a moment of laughter comes by surprise; a memento brings a smile instead of tears. In this period the question emerges of what the relationship between the past and the future will be. The past is past; the future cannot be its repetition. But what can it be? This period begins and moves toward the third phase, accommodation. Accommodation is a striking term. On one hand it can mean something like adaptation or supplying a need, but it comes from a Latin word that means to make fit or suitable, and its meaning includes making room, lodgings, a place to live. In relation to grief it can mean finding a way to live with both the reality of the death of the other, and at the same time keeping that relationship alive in a new life world.

William Worden framed bereavement's challenges in four categories: first, to accept the reality of the loss; second, to work through the pain of grief; third, to adjust to the new environment after the loss; fourth, to emotionally relocate the deceased or other changed condition and move on with life.⁶³ The first three closely correspond to Bowlby and Parkes, but the fourth, as with Rando, makes explicit the question of continuing bonds with the one who has died. Worden acknowledges that recognition and acceptance of reality and coming to terms with a new life world do not necessarily mean the end of the relational bond, but rather its transformation. If grief work is transition work, then the relationship can also be understood as undergoing transition, too. He raises the question of what that relationship will be – emotional relocation – so that the new life world that must be constructed can indeed be constructed, but still have a place for the one who has died. If the difficult prior work of cognitive and emotional acceptance has not been done one is left with loss and a broken world, and a relationship with the deceased that is fixed upon the past. If that work has been done, and to the extent it has been done (*always to the extent that*) a new relationship in a new life world is possible. In this sense, this fourth task is about the future of our relationship with the one who has died. This approach to framing grief experience relates to the theme of continued bonds, and the practices of mourning that foster connection rather than separation, as we will consider in “Grief’s Relationships.”

The theme of continuing bonds with the dead leads us toward approaches to grief that focus upon the social world of the bereaved and how that is constructed.⁶⁴ It is not only doctors and psychologists who can help us listen more closely to the experience of grief. Those lenses that are so helpful in giving us insight into how our bodies and minds react to loss can also lead us to conclusions about the universality and “ahistoricity” of human experience that obscure other important dimensions of what the grieving person is experiencing.

The boundaries between inner experience of bereavement and grief and the outer expressions of mourning are not easily marked, nor are the boundaries between the personal and the social and the cultural and historical. Grief’s experiences are powerfully affected by the historical, social, cultural, and religious realms in which we live and are bereaved. Distinguishing between grief (and those thoughts and feelings, etc.) and mourning is provisional at best, and a bereaved person who finds that the mourning ways of his or her time and place either do not provide fitting ways to express grief or worse – deny, suppress and distort it – is bereaved differently than one who finds support, affirmation, comfort, and even consolation through them.

Listening to grief of others also takes place within the social world. We hear through filters, static, clamor, and inevitably translate what we hear into our own frames of expectation, experience and understanding. This is no different from any other human communication, but the intensity and complexity of expressing and understanding grief makes it so much more difficult. The challenge is to recognize how my constructed world of meaning affects my hearing and understanding of the grieving person. “Thus there can be no ‘formula’ for grief since how people grieve cannot be separated from the way they live the particularity of their individual lives.”⁶⁵ This perspective has led researchers away from a more limited focus upon “symptomology” of “grief reactions” to attend to the broader ways in which bereaved people express meaning and understanding, especially as they tell the story of their experience within their life worlds.

One British researcher, Christine Valentine, sought to listen closely to the way individuals narrated their grief experiences, and the cultural connections and disconnections between them. She was guided in particular by questions about meaning: How do bereaved individuals make sense of their loss? In what ways do they draw upon cultural resources to do so? What does this tell us about how people treat their dead in contemporary society? In what ways is bereavement a private or shared experience? How is it incorporated into or separated from day to day life? In what ways do people try to separate and move on, and in what ways do they seek to maintain connection and relationship? How do age, gender, and ethnicity seem to affect people’s responses?⁶⁶

The researcher’s guiding questions, however, were not the questions she *asked*. Rather, she used an open-ended interview method that invited people to tell her about their bereavement, starting wherever they thought best. Promptings were usually unnecessary, and were limited to something like “tell me about the person who died and what happened,” or “how did this have an impact on you?” or an invitation to more detail. Interviews lasted one to two hours, following whatever path the story-teller chose to take. The scale of the study was small – twenty-five people – so clearly the conclusions could only be modest at best and a different group might well yield a very different set of responses. Nevertheless, what Valentine found will likely not come as a surprise to many.

People spoke about their bereavement and grief experiences in a wide range of “vocabularies” drawn from different quarters of their social worlds. They drew upon elements of popular culture (stories and songs, for example), conventional wisdom and sayings, medical and psychological language, religion and spirituality, emotional and rational language, traditional, modern, and post-modern perspectives – each person in a distinctive way that mirrored their sense of identity, the identity of the one who had died, and their relationship in the past and present. They told stories of loss and rediscovery that tended to blend into one another in a paradoxical play of absence and presence, in which each evoked the other. They talked about formal acts and occasions of memory – viewing the body, the funeral or memorial service, tending a grave or visiting a memorial site – and informal experiences of everyday life in which things and places and events prompted memory, absence, and presence. They talked about how they had come to define the dead and their relationship more clearly, to recognize qualities and characteristics (in both themselves and the dead) more clearly, but also to see complexities, contradictions, and ambiguities in their experience as it unfolded through time: “Thus bad and good, loss and recovery, absence and presence, defeat and triumph were juxtaposed to produce highly ambivalent and contingent narratives.”⁶⁷ That is, the bereavement narratives moved away from standard or idealized scripts toward accounts that were more realistic, complicated,

nuanced, contradictory – as living experience is. And they talked about how talking about these things with someone else was a meaningful part of their experience, too.

It may sound like a tautology to say that people make sense by making sense, but it really isn't. The sense isn't simply given (or taken over whole and intact and unmodified); it is, indeed, *made*, built, put together (*poesis* again), and the *making* is part of the *sense*. The interviewees were not, I believe, simply reporting what they had already realized, but were recognizing (in some instances for the first time) the sense they were making as they were making it. The presence and interest of the listener, the openness of the questions, the desire to be intelligible and understood, the occasion to enact their own identity and testify to the shape of their world – all of these entered into the sense-making. Even if the sense made was ambiguous, paradoxical, and ambivalent, it was *their* sense.

When speaking of the work of making sense, it is important to recognize *traumatic* loss as an experience that radically undoes the sense we have made before and our very capacity for making sense in the present and future out of what is left. We will consider this more fully in the next chapter, “Grief’s Relationships,” because it concerns ways in which traumatic loss breaks down one’s assumptive world – that is, how we think the world around us works and our relationship to it. For now let it be enough to say that a significant aspect of what makes a loss traumatic is that it somehow unmakes the world of those who have suffered it.

There are other frameworks, models, and processes through which clinicians and theorists have sought to describe grief’s experiences, but these major approaches, for all their differences of emphasis, show many points of connection. Not only do they connect to each other, they show deep continuities with the clouds of witness that Robert Burton summoned up. Perhaps that is because, despite their different starting points, these approaches must all to come to terms with the lived experience of those who grieve. And it seems that the more deeply one enquires into that experience we find – paradoxically – both greater particularity and difference, and greater commonality and shared experience. No theory is adequate to these things, and every theory needs help from another in the face of grief’s experience.

Theories of psyche and culture, models, case studies, memoirs, journals, poem, stories, sayings, and the rest are all shaping and being shaped by grief’s experience. What is most important to learn from such things is not how one is more adequate than another, but to see how each of them brings forward something important about what grief is, how we experience it, what helps and hinders us as we grieve, and what grief might become.

There is tremendous value in discerning shapes and patterns of grief experience, especially when we recognize that their best use is not to fit someone into a pre-determined mold but to see more clearly both what makes a person’s grief peculiarly their own and what joins them to the community of those who grieve. The value is both for those who grieve and those who care for them. For those (we) who grieve it is the value of understanding more of what is happening to us so we can attend more fully to what only we can do, seek help and support when we need it, and to recognize how even in this most personal experience we are joined to others. For those (we) who care for the grieving it is the value of understanding more so that we can attend more fully to what is actually happening and respond more fittingly and faithfully to the actual person.

After all his decades of clinical and theoretical work, Colin Murray Parkes wrote, “In my own practice I adopt an eclectic method, using whatever methods seem appropriate to the particular problems I meet,”⁶⁸ What a wonderful and humble acknowledgement. He concludes his work *Love and Loss* with words that have an ecstatic quality.

Order alternates with chaos as the music of life progresses and the whole move towards some kind of resolution that, in great music, is always unexpected, subtle and deeply moving. The greatest music, like the greatest drama, is the saddest, and its greatness stems from the emergence of meaning out of discord, loss and pain. The sublime in music, as in life, reflects the human search for meaning, the grasping at eternity, the transcendence of the littleness of I.⁶⁹

Chapter Three: Grief's Relationships

“If parting of friends, absence alone, can work such violent effects, what shall death do, when they must eternally be separated, never in this world to meet again? This is so grievous a torment...”

-Robert Burton⁷⁰

“People die; relationships don’t.”⁷¹ So a son, a therapist, wrote in a letter to his mother who had committed suicide thirty years before. “I miss you and I still love you.” Grief is a relationship that has been irreversibly affected by the death of the other. How that relationship is affected, however, is a complicated matter, as complicated as whatever the intricate textures and histories of our relationships might be. Relationship is no less complicated in the face of death than in life, but it is differently complicated. The idea that people die but relationships don’t can be good news, or bad, or both. Relationships may bind us together, but that may be an imprisonment or even torment. If death can mean loss for some, it can mean release for others. But the death that brought release in one way still has left behind a relationship that demands attention, and that, too, is grief.

How does relationship continue after death? Theories diverge, cultures diverge, religions diverge, experiences diverge. They give different accounts of what happens when death comes, what becomes of the dead (and of those who will be dead themselves one day), what our duties are and how we should respond. This includes, quite prominently, what should become of the bond of relationship between the living and the dead. How different can such accounts be? As great as the difference between severing bonds and nurturing them, seeking to leave the dead behind and seeking to bring them with us, encouraging the dead to depart and inviting them to stay, building a shrine and throwing everything away, trying to forget and trying to remember, going ahead together and moving on alone or with others. We can readily find theories, cultures, religions, and experiences encouraging us in all these ways.⁷² The way we preserve a face, remember a name, perform ceremonies, the duties of thought and feeling, the practices of mourning, the kinds of comfort and consolation we offer and accept, the words we use, the drama of grief in all its parts, these are all predicated upon the *relationships* in which we have been bereaved.

Not only can we find these all of these possibilities around us, we can find them *within* us as well. We each live at complicated and often contradictory intersections of ideas, feelings, beliefs, and practices. Some are deeply seated, some as changeable as our clothes; some claim us with the authority of tradition, some with the allure of novelty; some represent what we want to leave behind but can’t, some what we wished we could do but don’t; some seek to persuade us through a claim of truth, some through a vision of beauty, of what is and what we want to be. On an ordinary day this catalogue of ideas, feelings, beliefs, and practices can go unnoticed, as unremarkable as flipping through dozens of channels on the television or browsing through a random search on the internet. When death comes near, however, the search is different. Grief

confronts us with the question of relationship in ways that demand responses. What *was* this relationship? What *will be* this relationship tomorrow? What *is* this relationship now?

The relationship question is not only about particular and personal relationship with one who has died; grief lives within a whole web of relationships that comprises family, friends, community, culture, world, and even the cosmos. When I am bereaved I am faced with the challenge of living with the living, the challenge of *our* relationships in their richness, contrariness, help, pain, and possibility. These relationships are part of grief, too, and they shape and affect one another in powerful ways (as they also affect and are affected by what I have called Grief's Drama, Grief's Experience, and Grief's Time). How do *we* (whoever *we* may be) talk about death and the dead? How do *we* express what we think and feel? How do we tell *our* stories, construct and enact *our* dramas? Who have we been to one another? What friendships, estrangements, good and bad memories, conflicts, trust? Bereavement is rarely simple and singular even for an individual, and within the complexities of a relational world the same death may mean any number of different bereavements, and therefore any number of different griefs. Relationship is not only individual, but also social.

C.S. Lewis observed that grief needs not a map but a history, as we saw. His point was that grief is dynamic and unfolding, not a state but experiences that move, shift, and change (and his grief memoir offered an account of his own history and journey). But grief needs multiple maps as well as multiple histories, although in different senses than Lewis meant. It needs maps because it is not always and everywhere the same, and it needs histories because, like death itself, grief and mourning have been variously understood, practiced, and expressed through time. This is especially true of the question of grief's relationships.

It has been argued that relationship to the dead is foundational to what it means to be human. The etymology of the word "human" is rooted in "humus" or earth. That we are made from earth is image as old as Genesis, and repeated in Jewish and Christian liturgies for the burial of the dead as we return and commit the body to the ground. But the relationship between the human and the humus reaches across many ages and cultures. "Let me put forward a premise here," writes Robert Pogue Harrison, "to the effect that humanity is not a species (*Homo sapiens* is a species); it is a way of being mortal and relating to the dead. To be human means above all to bury."⁷³ Through vast reaches of history human identity and sense of place have been powerfully related to where we bury our dead. Houses, altars, shrines, villages, cities, places of worship, graveyards, sepulchers, battlefields, monuments, all these have served to transform *space* into *place* and *people* in a *people*. As humans are increasingly displaced from their dead relations, they are also increasingly displaced from the earth itself and alienated from it. At the same time they are undergoing multiple crises of identity and belonging. This is not only a contemporary phenomenon, to be sure (although the rate has accelerated), but as the alienation increases it seems to change our relationships to everything around us, as the increasing despoliation of earth and species, and the increasing "disposability and dispensability" of vast numbers of other human beings demonstrates.

What does our relationship with the earth tell us about our relationship with the dead (and vice versa)? How does our relationship with the dead affect our relationship with the living? Does alienation from the dead make it easier to kill the living? Does this represent an end to a distinctly "human" way of being? Or does it signal a transformation into different forms of continued relationship with the dead and their claims upon us? These may be questions that are

too comprehensive to answer from our particular moment of history. “Meanwhile, we find ourselves in a situation where each of us must choose an allegiance – either to the posthuman, the virtual, and the synthetic, or to the earth, the real, and the dead in their human densities.”⁷⁴

Grief, clearly, has everything to do with our relationship with the dead. But there is much human wisdom that argues that grief affects and is affected by the entirety of our life world. When Robert Burton wrote his *Anatomy of Melancholy* he could cast his eye over the counsel of centuries, drawing upon religion, philosophy, the arts and sciences. As a species of melancholy, indeed as a chief example of it, grief had its particular causes, but its symptoms and remedies were in many ways the same as for others, for (as we noted in Chapter One) melancholy is the character of mortality itself.

To a modern mind the breadth of ancient counsel might be surprisingly contemporary in its holistic view. Grief, it was recognized, affected every aspect of human life and relationship, inward and outward, and every aspect of life had something to contribute to the remedy of it. The specific counsel of all those centuries, of course, was contested and conflicted, and the science was of a very different kind than our own (do cabbages really cause black humors in the brain?), but the intricacy and breadth (indeed, the mystery) of the relational web was not in question. Everything from the food we eat, the air we breathe, the sights before our eyes, the thoughts we think, to the people and events that surround us, the music we hear, the stories we tell, the dreams and visions of our sleeping minds, our religious convictions, and the hand of God works together. The ancients and not so ancients, therefore, affirmed the importance of diet, exercise, self-knowledge, rational insight, redirection of energies and affections, consolatory thoughts and images, religious faith and practice, re-framing of ideas, the counsel of knowledgeable caregivers, talking cures, faithful friends to whom one could pour out one’s pain without fear, the changes wrought by the passage of time - all of these (all of which can be found in contemporary advice) were recognized as having important parts to play in grieving and its alleviation. It is our very relationality that makes us vulnerable to bereavement and grief, and it is through relationality that whatever healing, comfort, and consolation can be are possible.

Relationship and the One Who Has Died

How do we name a relationship? There are terms that are formally descriptive, such as within a family: spouse, partner, husband, wife, daughter, son, sister, brother, father, mother, grandparent, grandchild, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, cousin. There are other relationships beyond the official family that comprise our complex relational fabric: friend, lover, neighbor, colleague, co-worker, employer, employee, one’s minister, doctor, patient, teacher, student, parishioner. There are more distant relationships, too, as with public figures – a president, a favorite musician, an athlete, a movie star, someone in the news with whom I identify (Princess Diana, Dale Earnhardt, Whitney Houston, Trayvon Martin). There are even more distant relationships that may not have so clear a category, such as a child killed by an airstrike or a bomb in a marketplace, killed by “ours” or “theirs,” perhaps related to us as “ally” or “enemy.” Pictures and accounts of the deaths of strangers are even more familiar than the death of those close at hand, if for no other reason than their sheer number. Some occasion nothing more than a shake of the head, yet some we grieve as our own.

The formal bonds or general categories of relationship, however, do not tell us about the particular physical, emotional, or spiritual connection and what has become of it in death. They may shape us in our formal and public responses and duties, they may prescribe particular forms of mourning that one's social world expects, they may even release us from expectations of response beyond a shaking of the head, turning of the page, or a comment in a chat room. But the sense of bereavement can go far beyond in terms of intensity of feeling, complexity, and even contradiction. Love, guilt, anger, disappointment, resentment, fear, confusion, connection, longing, loneliness – the whole range of emotional possibilities flow from this first dimension of the relational world, the relationship between one who has died and one who is bereaved by that death.

The whole range of emotional possibilities flow from this first dimension of the relational world. This is worth lingering over a while. When we think of grief's experience primarily through one particular lens – the death of someone we love – then it makes sense to focus upon experiences such as yearning or searching, and to see grief as a matter of love. “The pain of grief is the price we pay for love,” as the saying goes. The saying has great truth to it, as its appearance in so many places testifies. To speak of grief is to show the shadow shape of love, the empty place around which grief gathers. If I have been bereaved, if I am in pain, this is a wisdom voice saying that this, too, is love. The pain, therefore, is not to be wondered at but recognized for what it is. The only way to avoid grief would be to avoid love itself. It is akin to saying that death is the price we pay for life.

But the saying can also lead us astray. Just as “pain” is related to “penalty” and “price” is related to “payment” and “worth” it suggests that love requires (or even inflicts) suffering, and its worth is somehow measured by how much we suffer. Grief is figured as “payback,” our punishment for love, a punishment for which we must also pay the bill. Moreover, it suggests that love is measured by pain, a proposition that would do great harm in living relationships. Perhaps it can also do great harm in grief relationships, too.

The saying also obscures the reality that we grieve not only in loving relationships, but in others that are more complicated and conflicted. *How* we grieve those may be very different, of course. Sometimes grief is defined in such a way that it only refers to the intense pining or yearning that we may experience in loss, and other thoughts and feelings are considered to be another matter (not unimportant, just not grief).⁷⁵ This limitation has the virtue of sharpening the focus of what grief means, but restricts the focus too severely, I believe, and excludes from grief what may be even more difficult experiences that confront us.

Grief is not reserved for loving relationships alone, and the experiences of grief are no less painful or difficult when the relationship has been painful or difficult. The pain and difficulty may indeed have much to do with the ways in which we have loved and been loved, even from the time we were children: how we formed bonds with our parents, how we came to understand ourselves and those around us, how we shaped from the small world around us an image of the great world beyond our direct knowledge, these all affect how we experience bereavement and, therefore, how we grieve.⁷⁶ But there are other dimensions of relationship that affect grief, too.

A man's beloved mother dies, a good death in the fullness of time. The son's grief is deep, but not conflicted. They had a good relationship, with no unfinished business left behind, and a wealth of rich memories for which he is grateful. He is sad after her death, as he knew he

would be, and that sadness hurts, but he has many stories and tokens that recall her to memory and make her present to him. He realizes, however, that his father will die soon, too – a much different relationship with a long history of conflict, hard memories, and resentment. He confesses this to a friend, “I wonder if I will grieve him at all.” His friend replies, “That’s the grief that may be the hardest.” Why? Because his father’s death will seal the bereavement of that relationship through all those years. He will miss his mother in the future because of love, but he had long missed his father already because of love denied, and that old bereavement is what will go with him into the future.

A woman suffers the death of her lover, another woman, a love they felt they could not acknowledge to their families or publicly, and which their church and community could never bless in marriage. She is as bereaved as any loving spouse, as in pain and need of care, as in need of community and support. In the death of her beloved she has lost the truest and most honest relationship in her world, but who understands this? Where can she turn? She has been bereaved not only of her beloved, but also suffers anew the bereavement of her world of relationships in which they could not be accepted.

A mother suffers the death of her son. She speaks of two things she learned through the years following. “One is that a child’s death is disorienting.” That is, it changes the world around you and confounds your deepest instincts of how things are supposed to work, including your own mind. “The other thing I learned is that letting go of a child is impossible.”⁷⁷ Five, fifteen, twenty, thirty years, and still there is grief. It may and does change (as she found echoed by others who suffered such loss), it may subside and return in unexpected ways, it may be turned toward new possibilities of life, but it is never not grief. “A person never gets over being a parent. Parental bereavement is also a permanent condition.”⁷⁸

A soldier dies in combat. The parents are bereaved of their child, and feel the anguish that parents feel. They also feel the particular anguish that comes from the terms of their relationship with their child. Was this the rebellious one, who no discipline at home could control, who left home as soon as he could and found a new family in the Army? Was this the obedient one, following the family tradition? Was this the quiet one, who never shared what was happening inside? Was this the talkative one who was always sharing dreams and plans and excitement? The other squad members are also bereaved, but their anguish is different. The sergeant who gave him his final order, the buddy who was looking the wrong way, the driver who didn’t get there in time to evacuate him, each of them has a different relationship to the person who died, and therefore experiences a different bereavement and grief.

Not only does a relationship have a particular stamp, but it can have many facets – and not only many facets, but a significance that can extend to the farthest horizon.

It’s like I’ve lost so many roles. I’ve lost the role of a father, the role of a friend. And my dad was like a brother, so I’ve lost the role of a brother. I feel like I’ve lost so many different roles – like I feel as though I’ve lost about six different people all in one person.⁷⁹

Well, my aunt represented something to me which was I suppose, a part of the family, which was a small rural community and in a sense when she went that was kind of an end of an era for me, the end of that connection.⁸⁰

He was my North, my South, my East and West...

I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.⁸¹

One griever feels the loss not of one person but six because that was the kind of relationship they had. Another, through an aunt's death, feels bereaved of all that she connected to, a family, a country town, an era. Another feels the whole compass has come unmoored and he had made a crucial mistake about how things are. For all three, it was one person who had died, but they grieved relationships that reached far beyond.

In all these fragments of grief we can see that the bereavement death brought has *everything* to do with the particular relationship with the one who has died, but also, and inextricably, with a whole world of other relationships. *Everything* does not mean *only*; having *everything* to do with a particular relationship does not mean having *only* to do with that relationship. It may be the starting point and even the ending point, but bereavement affects and is affected by the whole web of relationship into which it is inextricably woven.

Grieving Relationship

The importance of the nature of the relationship between those who grieve and those who have died, and what becomes of that relationship, has long been a central theme in seeking to understand the psychology of grief. We return now to some of those key understandings.

Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* proposed a theory of mourning's origins, how it proceeds successfully, and how it can go wrong and descend into a chronic condition, what we think of a pathological depression. In this theory, the painful experience of loss results from the deep emotional energy a person has invested in a loved one (cathexis). When death comes, that energy remains but it no longer has its object (focus), and we experience yearning, pining, dislocation, anger – resistance, that is to say, to this involuntary bereavement. This is normal, enormously disruptive, and painful, and can quite absorb even greater energy and leave us profoundly incapacitated. In time, however, the psyche comes to accept the reality of the loss, withdraws the emotional energy from the one who has died, and re-invests it elsewhere (Freud's terms for this process were cathexis, hypercathexis, decathexis and recathexis). This may entail a natural process or one guided by a therapist, but the outcome is what we might call today "moving on," or "getting on with life," or "a new will to live." In melancholia, however, the energy stays fixed on its lost object, and since that object is no longer available in the world, the energy turns inward on the mourner, detaching one from the world instead of re-attaching, and spiraling into depression.

The goal of successful mourning (or therapy) in this theory, therefore, is a gradual breaking of the relational bond with the dead in order to free up energy for the world of the living.⁸² Freud's theory and his own experiences of loss and grief, however, clashed. In the face of important deaths he reported himself unable to find a way to maintain connection (religious

options seemed closed to him) or to transfer those connections to something or someone else. He found that his own grief was not a work that could be completed.⁸³

Freud's theory developed numerous variations, but the theme of disengagement and re-engagement as the goal of grief dominated Western psychology in the 20th century.⁸⁴ Psychoanalytic theory used terms like "identification" and "introjection" to talk in contrasting ways about the sense of continued relationship with the dead. Identification meant the psychic process of incorporating aspects of the deceased into one's own self, maintaining connection through qualities that lived on in bereaved. Through identification yearning becomes increasingly freed from dependence upon the deceased other, increasingly independent and able to re-invest in new ways. "Fifteen years after your death, you still reach through my hands whenever I saw a board or stroke a horse or plant a tree," wrote Scott Russell Sanders to his father.⁸⁵ The "psychic process" may be a bit more embodied than the term sounds. We find the dead looking back to us in our own faces and recognize them, notice a familiar cadence in our own voices, find familiar sayings rise unbidden to our tongues, feelings, opinions, habits, all as if they were our own. And they are, but "our" really is plural: we share them with the dead. It is more than recollection, but a deeper kind of memory, an *anamnesis*, a re-membering re-performance such as happens in some liturgies.

Introjection, on the other hand, meant holding a kind of frozen, unchanging representation of the dead, inaccessible to reflection and understanding. The relationship with the dead remains as frozen as the image, as does the person who grieves. The father who could never be pleased still can't be pleased and continues to scowl, and the child, although sixty years old, still feels the burn of failure and disapproval every day. The daughter who committed suicide remains angry and accusing, and her mother can see her face and hear her voice at every turn.

Later psychoanalytic theory included a notion of "remembrance formation," which was neither identification (absorbing the dead into oneself as oneself) nor introjection (maintaining the dead unchanged and unintegrated in oneself). Remembrance formation sought to recall and recognize the deceased not as an idealization or fantasy but as he or she really was experienced – to hold on to and explore the real person, as it were, making the process of identification more reflective, deliberate, and an expression of the conscious self of which the grieving person was (more or less) in control.⁸⁶ Russell Scott Sanders, who felt his father reaching through his own hands could also say, "Because you scared me when you got mad, my temper isn't as hot as yours..." He could recognize the price the whole family paid for his father's drinking, and face the uncomfortable truth about his own drives: "Having come to the age of hard questions, I wonder now more than ever what drove you to drink... Now I am sure there was a hunger in you, because I am aware of my own dark craving."⁸⁷

Attachment theory, as we saw, focused upon how children form bonds, especially with their mothers, and what happened when those bonds were disrupted. John Bowlby identified a four-fold pattern of protest, despair, yearning, and detachment, and posited that the ways in which children experienced early attachments (and their loss) set important patterns for how future relational attachments and losses would be negotiated. One of Bowlby's researchers, Mary Ainsworth, proposed a set of categories to describe attachments, distinguishing between those that were *secure* and those that were *insecure* (as characterized by the mother's attachment pattern to the child). The latter were subdivided into Anxious/Ambivalent, Avoidant, and Disorganized/Disoriented.⁸⁸ Those children whose mothers formed secure attachments were able

to tolerate brief separations from their mothers without marked distress, and respond quickly and warmly when mother returned. Those children whose mothers had anxious/ambivalent attachments showed great distress during separation and clung and cried when mother returned. Those whose mothers had avoidant attachments (rejecting expression of feelings, demonstrations of closeness) responded to both separation and reunion with apparent indifference. Those whose mothers had disorganized/disoriented attachments responded to separations and reunion in unpredictable and contradictory ways, such as seeming indifference during absence and anger at reunion, or agitation and anger during separation and seeming indifference at reunion.⁸⁹

As attachment theory continued to develop as an approach to understanding grief, it explored how the ways we form attachments in childhood affect (but not necessarily determine) the ways in which we grieve losses later in life. It also supposed a framework in which the goal of grieving is not to *maintain* attachments, but to form new and more secure ones in the face of loss. Colin Murray Parkes saw grief as an innate human instinct, like nest-building in birds. When we lose someone we *search* for them and keep the image of them before us before us because it increases the chances that we will actually find them again. We don't find them, however, but rather we increase our frustration at the loss, and eventually turn from attachment to those who have died to build new attachments.⁹⁰ And new attachments must be built because they are what give us a safe place in the world, or at least as safe a place as the world can be when people die and leave us behind.⁹¹

Grief researchers, however, kept finding that attachment need not be simply an either/or equation in which one relationship must be subtracted before another can be added. Some people were quite able to maintain a sense of relationship with one who had died and still form new supportive and caring relationships, especially when the prior relationship had been strong and satisfying. Even after years of bereavement these relationships continued to offer a sense of comfort and direction in the ongoing tasks of living.⁹² “Memorializing, remembering, knowing the person who has died, and allowing them to influence the present are active processes that seem to continue throughout the survivor’s entire life.”⁹³ Some research, in fact, found a direct relationship between a bereaved person’s comfort and ease with images of the deceased and the ability to cope with loss. Not only that, it was found that inner representations of the dead did not necessarily become frozen introjections, but could grow and change as life did. Just as relationships with the living can grow and change, so can relationships with the dead.⁹⁴ Furthermore, research noted that the ways of relating to the dead were affected by family and social and cultural relationships, just as they are with the living. A woman who feels embarrassed to talk about her relationship to her dead mother for fear of being thought crazy by family and neighbors is in a very different situation than one who goes to the cemetery, along with everyone else who has loved ones buried there, to celebrate and feast with the deceased on the Day of the Dead.

One outcome of this has been to open up new (or re-open old) possibilities for understanding grief relationships with those who have died. “We cannot look at bereavement as a psychological state that ends and from which one recovers...We propose that rather than emphasizing letting go the emphasis should be on negotiating and renegotiating the meaning of the loss over time.”⁹⁵ Meaning, construction, imagination, talk, rituals, stories, poesis, dramatization...these are all ways that our ancestors grieved, and strangely enough we may find that they are helping us to learn once again ways that we might grieve, too.

Relationship With Oneself

To be bereaved of another person can mean to be bereaved of oneself. If our identities are shaped in relationship and through relationship, then the death of someone close calls into question one's own identity. A father whose daughter dies asks, "Am I still her father? How? What does it mean to be her father now?" A wife whose husband of fifty years dies, whose days and nights, waking and sleeping, through all those years were shaped by their *oneness in twoness*, awakens alone. She asks, "Who am I now? I can't be *her* anymore without *him*; what *I* will I be?" A woman who lost her mother says, "I have this last year felt completely anchorless, you know. Just like I have to find my bearings all over again. I have to you know find where I'm ok all over again."⁹⁶ Then there is the sense of losing one's capacity to think, feel, speak, remember, plan, or more extremely, losing one's sanity: another kind of bereavement of oneself. "Nouns, verbs, do not exist for what I feel," wrote John Berryman.⁹⁷

Feelings of guilt, regret, shame, and anger with oneself that can be such difficult aspects of grief are related to this question of one's own identity. The mother whose daughter died of the drug overdose asks, "Why wasn't I able to see what was happening? Why wasn't I able to stop it?" She had been a good mother, one to whom her children could turn, but this daughter turned to drugs, not to her. Had she really been the mother she thought she was? Was that wishful thinking, or worse, a lie? The bereaved husband, aware now that there is no more possibility to make things right in the relationship, or at least better, confronts the question, "Why did I treat her the way I did? What was, what *is*, wrong with me?"

Another expression of being bereaved of oneself is the sense of having had part of you cut out. A mother bereaved of her teenage son drew an arc that started at her head and ended at her knees and said "His death was cut out of *here*."⁹⁸ Another woman, whose seventeen year old son had been killed in a traffic accident, spoke of feeling inside "like ground-up hamburger meat. I was suicidal for three months or more, had it all planned..."⁹⁹ Alive on the outside, dead on the inside, and fixed on finishing the job. One griever wrote, "Your name was the thread connecting my life; now I am fragments on a tailor's floor."¹⁰⁰

C.S Lewis wrote an entry in his grief journal, "Did you ever know, dear, how much you took away from me when you left? You have stripped me even of my past, even of the things we never shared."¹⁰¹ That is, when he attempted to recall who he was and where he had found joy before he and his wife had met, those occasions and places seemed to him insipid, and even frightening as a possibility. His identity as an intellectual and Christian theologian led him further into pain; thinking led him to terrible thoughts just as emotion led him to terrible feelings: "If my house had collapsed at one blow, that was because it was a house of cards... The faith was not faith but imagination."¹⁰² He did not publish his journals for years after his wife's death, and then only because he wondered if in their honesty they might be helpful to someone suffering as he did. Even then he shared it first only under a pseudonym.

"We know, and must face it honestly, that life for us can never be the same again," wrote Daphne du Maurier in a memoir following the death of her husband.¹⁰³ Life changes in an instant, as Joan Didion warned - which is to say that *my* life changes and can't be changed back;

it is as irreversible as the past, as death. Through the death of someone who was so much a part of my own identity, I am bereaved of me.

A young woman's mother dies of cancer at age fifty-two. "Nothing prepared me for the loss of my mother. Even knowing that she would die did not prepare me...Waking up in a world without her is like waking up in a world without the sky: unimaginable...I feel robbed of twenty years with her I'd always imagined having."¹⁰⁴ Such bereavement of one's own self comes to expression in ordinary phrases like, "when she died, the best part of me died, too," and "I feel so lost," and "What will happen to me?" One's identity in all three tenses – past, present, and future – has become undone, unmoored, and unforeseeable: *un-*.

Bereavement of one's identity is not only an internal loss (although that is real and awful enough); it can also take a very material shape. Death can mean family disintegration, loss of home, financial stability, and social status, changes in vocation, and other such markers of who we are. The way a person spends her days, her schedule, the loss of familiar routines and places, the often unrecognized patterns through which a day to day identity has been lived out, these can change in an instant. That, too, is part of "life will never be the same," leaving a person feeling robbed of those tangible, physical ways of being who she is.

If we think in terms of tragic drama such changes are examples of great *reversals of fortune* that mark the sudden change from one plot to another (or the twisting of the plot). Indeed, to be bereaved of oneself can mean to have the story I thought I was living suddenly change, to be bereaved of the story through which I had an identity and a place. This change may work out its permutations throughout the entire relational web, but the central character is the bereaved – howsoever bereaved of other, others, community, world, or meaning – whose loss signifies the loss of who they were, and are, and will be.

Relationship With Others

Bereavement happens to not only to *me* but to *us*. Who counts as *us*, to be sure, can be very different from one group to another. Kinship, family, friendship, ties of solidarity, community, culture, can all be established in many ways. "Family" may or may not mean people who are related by ancestry, marriage, or blood. Indeed, those who have no socially sanctioned claim to grief can experience even greater loss than those whose claim is assumed. However kinship is counted, we can be bereaved as kin, within a near circle of relations. Within the near circle is also where we grieve as individuals. We are *each* bereaved, and that loss has particular meanings even among those who have suffered common loss. We are affected by how the others among us grieve, how we have grieved in the past, how our families have grieved, how our community grieves.

"Shockwave" is an image for the effect of loss within a system, as are "aftershock," "reverberation," and "shaking the foundations," vivid images all.¹⁰⁵ A shockwave is a force that spreads out from an impact, an explosion, an earthquake. A shockwave travels by transmitting its force to something else, which transmits that force in turn, on and on, sometimes dissipating, sometimes growing. An earth plate slips on the ocean floor, the force is transmitted to the water,

the water builds to a wave, the wave surges ashore carrying everything before it. A shockwave can travel through the air, through water, through the ground, reaching out in every direction. It can travel as sound, as heat, as vibration so powerful that even the surface of the ground seems to flow like water, as if rocks were turned to liquid once again, and of course, as a literal ocean wave that can travel thousands of miles with devastating impact. A shockwave can shake the foundations of buildings, knocking everything off the walls, sending pictures, plates, books, lamps crashing to the floor. A shockwave can demolish a house, a school, an office tower, a city, and leave behind destruction beyond calculation. Even when the visible damage is small, it can create hidden cracks and weaknesses that grow with time until another shock comes, even a small one, and everything falls. And then there are aftershocks.

The image is apt for the effects of bereavement in the world of relationships because it reflects the ways people are connected and interdependent. It reflects how the death of one person can affect directly but differently all those in relationship to it. It reflects the way that the death of one person can affect another, whose grief affects another, whose grief affects another, until even those seemingly removed from the initial loss find reverberations have reached them, too. Like the old proverbial rhyme, “For want of a nail a shoe was lost...” it connects one loss to another to another, nail to shoe to horse to rider to message to battle, and finally to the fall of the kingdom itself. The image also reflects how damage can be invisible and cumulative, at work where no one can see, weakening supports that at a later time in response to what seemed a minor shock, give way. As an image of destruction, shockwave also suggests the work or rebuilding that comes later, and how difficult and complex (and perhaps impossible), it can be.

It is, of course, not only by the ways of grief that we are affected, but by the ordinary ways in which we live together: authority, power, responsibility, irresponsibility, who is the “designated worrier,” the caregiver, the fixer, the clown, the silent sufferer, the long sufferer, the one whose suffering must be central, the one who never speaks, the one who never listens. In the face of death these roles that we play in the family can become even more pronounced, as if by insisting more emphatically upon how things have been we can stave off the change that everyone knows this death must mean. A systems perspective would say that systems function to preserve their organizing principles and the greater the threat to the system the greater the resistance to change is likely to be.

A chief aspect of how we live together is communication, so patterns of communication are very much a part of our relationships and how we respond to death among us. What people say to one another in the face of bereavement can help us feel connected or alone or both. The widower Carl Klaus recounted maddening encounters with “Griefspeak,” those well-meant but thoughtless things people said to him that left him feeling alienated and even more bereft. C.S. Lewis similarly recounted others’ words and signs that made him feel like an embarrassment, a leper, a death’s head.

The sense of estrangement in loss is especially poignant in those who have lost children and those who have survived the suicide of someone close. The bereaved parents may well lose the support of and even access to the world of families and children in which they had lived. Other parents almost instinctively draw back, not because they can’t imagine the loss but because they can, and can’t bear the thought. It is ironic that the greater a person’s capacity to empathize, the more frightening it becomes, and the greater the understandable human response to flee from what is frightening. To speak from such a frightening place would require going to a place where

the worst has happened and finding words that can be said there. Surely, we who become tongue-tied or repeat something we don't mean or even understand know what we have done, and feel our own sense of shame for it: another reason to say nothing, or only what tradition or convention has given us to say, or to stay away entirely. In the face of another person's unbearable loss and grief one may feel both the responsibility to speak and the impossibility, the profound contradiction. If our own capacity to put loss and sympathy into words is defeated, and yet our sense of responsibility to those who are bereaved cannot be set aside, what are we to do? This is a point at which realities of grieving and the realities of mourning confront one another in our relationships.

Death, one family therapist observes, is the chief taboo that blocks and distorts communication, within a person, between family members, and even with professional caregivers.¹⁰⁶ Whether or not it is chief, death is hard enough to talk about both before it comes and after, both for those who are dying and those who survive. There was a time in the not too distant past (and perhaps it is not past) when physicians themselves were reluctant to speak with those who were dying about that important fact, and families entered into the conspiracy of silence or distortion willingly. A woman dying of cancer, who *knew* she had cancer and that she was dying, was met with "No" whenever she would ask her doctor and family. "What does it mean? It means that they are either liars or I am crazy, and I know I am not crazy...This is the loneliest life in the world...I can't talk to anyone...I am cut off from everyone...I wish I could die soon and not have to pretend any longer."¹⁰⁷

But, as the therapist continues, the opportunity to speak about death can be the event that opens up a relational world that has been closed. Again and again he found that in the face of death people "were eager to talk to an unbiased listener who did not have to correct their way of thinking."¹⁰⁸ A noteworthy choice of words: "unbiased" and "correct." Perhaps it means a listener who had no reason to prefer denial or distortion to the truth. Perhaps it means a listener who was not cast in the family drama and conflict with a determined role to play. Perhaps it means a listener who does not want to persuade the dying person in this way or that, but whose first role is to open communication.

It may seem strange to say, but sometimes a person fears talking about death more than death itself. Death is unavoidable; talking about it is very avoidable, indeed. Whatever "unbiased" means, the presence of a listener can become the opportunity for talking, and talking can become the opportunity for telling the truth, and telling the truth can become the opportunity for meaning-making, and meaning-making can open up (at least a little) the closed relational world.

Clergy sometimes can play the role of the unbiased listener, but they too are often part of the system that closes down communication. Clergy are "interested," with expectations coming from every direction, seeking to serve very different parts of a family and community with very different needs. As a cleric I have my own roles and needs, too, including a need to be needed and helpful. I come as a representative of a larger community and tradition, and with a theological framework to which I have another kind of responsibility, perhaps the epitome of what "correct" means. In my concern to offer comfort, consolation, and guidance, I can fail to listen to the questions and answers that are already there, and overwrite them with a drama to which I feel a greater responsibility. The irony is that even a word that could be helpful at the

right time can be harmful or simply empty when offered at the wrong time in the wrong way. Discernment requires wisdom.

In the face of this difficulty and contradiction, some relationships communicate in more closed ways. Perhaps because they suppose it is just part of their identity: our people communicate in this way. Perhaps because no one has ever seen any other way: we don't have any practice in talking about things. Perhaps because the power relationships among us discourage or block communication: whatever I say, he's always right and I'm always wrong. Perhaps because there are subjects that are too scary. Perhaps because we don't know what will happen if we talk about *that*. Perhaps because we fear the others will become too upset or angry or sad. Perhaps I will be rejected if I say what I think and feel. Perhaps if I say what I think and feel I will no longer be safe. Perhaps if I say what I think and feel I will have to face it myself. Whatever the reasons are, some relationships are more closed in their communication, and in the face of loss become even more closed still.

Even if we did not have theorists and therapists to describe these realities, we have generations of ordinary experience and testimony. Robert Frost's poem "Home Burial" is an achingly accurate picture of a husband and wife unable to communicate after the death of their child (whether daughter or son is never said). Their child is buried in "the little graveyard where [the husband's] people are," the mound he dug visible from the upstairs window from which she continually gazes. Even when he realizes what she is looking at, even when he tries to reach out his arm to her, they clash and quarrel: he, saying the wrong things, she unable to speak, he trying to understand, she certain he cannot, he frustrated and angry, she frustrated and angry, both feeling that they don't recognize the other, both feeling that even being man and woman has come between them and made things worse, neither knowing what to do. The poem ends with her fleeing the house again to be with someone who understands. She says, "You – oh, you think the talk is all. I must go - / Somewhere out of this house. How can I make you –"¹⁰⁹

The poem never says to whom she goes, or where. The house itself is part of what she flees. His family's house, his family's graveyard, his family's land, his own dead child, buried in the grave dug by his tools in his hands, his, his, his. Her grief, however, is *hers*. How can she grieve the way she feels she must when everything is *his*? Beyond that, however, is what she has bitterly perceived to be the way things are in the world. "...The nearest friends can go / With anyone to death, comes so far short / They might as well not try to go at all." Talk is only a pretense of understanding; before the grave is even closed people's minds have turned back to the things of life and living they understand. Such talk only makes things worse. No, talk is not all, but it is, nevertheless, a great deal; the kind of talk matters.

At the same time, however, death and bereavement are experiences in which the question of the dramatic "script" of a relational world comes forward in the clearest way (we will return to this in "Grief's Drama"). If relational systems have hidden principles and work by unwritten rules, even more they have stories through which those principles rules are rehearsed and repeated, then enacted and re-enacted. Here too, some scripts are authorized, some unauthorized, some secret and forbidden, and some hidden. And the scripts may well conflict. "Although scripts come from the past, and are enacted in the present, they are above all for the future."¹¹⁰

At the death of his elderly mother, one man was thrown back into scripts that reached back to his early childhood. After the death of his own father, her first husband, his mother had

re-married. The son distrusted the new husband - and it turned out, rightly so. The relationship with her new husband soured, and she had endured decades of infidelity and lies (divorce being deemed a great disgrace for their time and place), and the shame that inevitably accompanies the open secrets of a small community. Her son had been powerless to intervene, either as a child or a man. At the time of her death her unfaithful husband stepped theatrically to the foreground, loudly proclaiming his love and loss. At the funeral itself he strode down the aisle, staggering in grief, moaning, calling her name. Her son sat frozen and furious, humiliated by all the years of deceit, ashamed that he had not been able to make things different, unable to raise his head, unclench his hands, or say any of the words of the service. At the time for the eulogy, his son, her grandson, went to the lectern to speak for the family. As soon as he began, saying her name and date of birth, the man began to sob. For the rest of the service he sobbed, wracked, shaking in the pew.

We have spoken thus far of the close-in relational world of family, friends, and near acquaintances, but the circle can be drawn more widely. Beyond the family lies the community, including the religious community. What is the story of relationships there? Is it a story of respect, recognition, honor, appreciation? Is it a story of disapproval, indifference, shame, rejection? Is it a story of outward appearances and inward realities that conflict? Is it a story of belonging or alienation? These all foster different dimensions of bereavement, grief, and mourning, and offer different possibilities of comfort and consolation.

Among the most stark instances of this is when the larger community is somehow implicated in the bereavement. The poet Stephen Dunn, a college professor, wrote a poem on the death of a colleague. She had taught theater at their college, and died at fifty, “The problem in the liver,” as he put it. The school held a memorial, and people talked about her knowledge, her gifts as a teacher, her cats. More ominously, no one spoke about how awful she had looked the last few months and of avoiding her at parties. Then one of her students went up to the stage. He said she was a drunk and had often come to class reeking of alcohol. Yes, she was a great teacher despite it, and yes, he loved, “but [he] thought someone should say / what everyone knew / because she didn’t die by accident.”¹¹¹

Not by accident; and not without help, if only the help of silence and avoidance. Everyone knew it, but no one was saying it. The poem comes to an end with the end of the memorial, but we can be sure the questions did not come to an end. “Everyone was crying,” and though the poem doesn’t say it, many of us have only to turn to our own experience to know why. They were crying because the teacher had died, surely, but they were also crying because of the recognition of their own role in her death. Whatever you want to call it – politeness, minding your own business, waiting until the right time, not wanting to judge, avoidance, failure of nerve, enabling – some cried because they had been bereaved of a view of themselves that had died with her.

Small town gossip goads someone into resentment that one terrible day turns into murder. This happened in a town where I once lived. A neighborhood struggles to understand how its own children could beat another child to death. This happened in the city where I live. Bullying and scapegoating lead to despair and suicide. This has happened in the town where you live.

Some relationships, however, communicate in more open ways.¹¹² We may hear less about them, perhaps for the same reasons that we hear more about conflicted or troubled grief.

They are surely part of that phenomenon of resiliency of which Bonnano spoke.¹¹³ Some relationships share their thoughts and feelings, likes and dislikes, fears and hopes. When there is conflict, they try to sort it out and come to some kind of resolution. When there is misunderstanding, they try to correct it and find ways to communicate better in the future. Where there is pain, they tell one another about it, listen to one another, and try to respond together. They inevitably get things wrong – sometimes very wrong - because they are human. Their experience and wisdom and ways of acting may not be adequate to what befalls them on a given day, and their thoughts, feeling, likes, dislikes, fears, hopes, talking, listening and understanding, are inadequate to what they face, but they try to make things better together, even if that means change.

We also hear of compassion and communication that reaches out from such a deep place of understanding. One mother bereaved of two young children found herself compelled to flee the company of those who tried to cheer or distract her, or offer her consolations for what could not be consoled. She described seeing her friend coming down the walk to meet her, “like a glorious angel,” embracing her, *seeing her*. “‘Tell me about Deirdre and Patrick....’ She never said, ‘Cease to grieve,’ but she grieved with me, and for the first time since their death, I felt I was not alone.”¹¹⁴ As that still grieving son bereaved by his mother’s suicide wrote to her many years later, “Everyone carries a unique experience of loss and grief and that is what we have in common. When I am in church, in the company of kneeling bodies and bowed heads, I can become a part of the community of grief. I am less alone.”¹¹⁵ A woman, a social worker who had lost her sister to suicide, after reeling through a dizzying emotional spiral of her own found strength in a community of other African American women who had suffered loss: “This community stressed the value of telling our stories and witnessing the stories of other sisters. Most importantly, I was told that there was enough time and support for all of us who were in pain and that no one would have to remain silent in her own pain while caring for others. This was revolutionary healing work offered by and for black women.”¹¹⁶

Grief literature, ancient and modern, whether of the testimonial or technical kind, repeatedly affirms the healing possibilities of communication that a relational world holds, especially when those who grieve care for one another, and care enough to risk difficult, painful, and fraught communication. At the risk of seeming to make simple something that is not simple at all, the comfort and consolation that may come through the relational world depend, first of all, upon listening more and more deeply to those who grieve and speak.

Between the possibility of destruction *of* a relational world and the possibility of healing *through* a relational world lies a vast middle ground in which we are able simply to endure – another hour, another day, another month, another year. And perhaps something more: neither destroyed nor healed but alive, grieving, mourning, comforting and being comforted, consoling and being consoled, discovering and enacting a grief drama, within a relational world.

It is the best thing in the world, as Seneca therefore adviseth in such a case,
 “to get a trusty friend, to whom we may freely and sincerely pour out our secrets;
 nothing so delighteth and easeth the mind, as when we have a prepared bosom, to

which our secrets may descend, of whose conscience we are assured as our own, whose speech may ease our succourless estate, counsel relieve, mirth expel our mourning...¹¹⁷

Relationship with the World and Cosmos

Bereavement and grief affect and are affected by the relational world in which we live, move, and have our being. This extends to include the greatest scope that we can think, imagine, hope for, believe. Death can call these into question, and those beliefs may themselves be shaken and fall. The image of a shockwave is, indeed, vivid and fitting to evoke the complex realities of our relational world, reaching all the way to what the bereaved may hold most dear and true: the very beliefs through which people understand themselves, their world, and ultimate reality.

Sometimes the “world” means the world as we know it and how things are, the terms of life and existence. This includes the social, cultural, and political realms within which we live, knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly. “World” can also mean something beyond what we see and know, that encompasses what we know, perhaps setting the terms and laws that govern us, perhaps contradicting, refuting, or overturning the smaller world of experience, perhaps transforming and saving it. We could call this “cosmos.” The term comes from the Greek *kosmos*, which originally meant something like the ordered universe, in its wholeness, harmony, and intelligibility. At its most comprehensive, our understanding of the cosmos encompasses all that was and is and is to come, beginning and end. To speak of the world as cosmos is to attribute meaning, principles, first and final causes, purpose, values, goals - and to suppose that they can be known, at least in part, and that earthly life can be shaped accordingly. To violate the cosmos constitutes folly, crime, or sin; to run afoul of the cosmos unwittingly constitutes tragedy or bad luck; to be unaware of cosmos constitutes ignorance; to live in harmony with the cosmos constitutes wisdom and justice. The cosmos may be constructed and depicted through philosophical reflection, theology, religious faith, personal imagination, observation, rituals, myths, stories, law and custom, music, dance, architecture – basically any and all of the ways human beings try to come to terms with life and death.

“Much that is within us and that in part makes us who we are no longer fits in a world irrevocably changed by death.”¹¹⁸ This is an important dimension of traumatic experience; when a shock is so great that it destroys a person’s assumptive world, that world-destruction is a bereavement even greater than the death that caused it.¹¹⁹ The world itself can suddenly become a malevolent place that means me harm. The world itself can suddenly become arbitrary, absurd, random, empty of meaning, and even the possibility of meaning. I, myself, can suddenly become inconsequential, powerless, worthless.¹²⁰ Some argue that discovering and constructing a life-world that is benevolent enough, meaningful enough, and in which one is worthy enough is foundational to our identities as human beings. And if my world has been transformed so radically, then what *is* this place I live, and who *are* these people around me, and who am *I* anymore? Is there *anything* that can be trusted? As my teacher Perry LeFevre insisted, “Trust is *the* religious question. Is there anything, finally, that will not betray us?”

In some ways, terms of the assumptive world are specific and particular: the course a life story was supposed to take, the way a relationship was supposed to be, the place I lived in and

thought I knew, the people I lived with and thought I knew. Death can bereave us of the markers and mileposts by which we have kept track of where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going in the world. In some ways, however, the frame is global or cosmic; then the question is no longer where one is going in the world, but what the world itself is, and whether there is anything beyond the world we experience. “One of the most significant tasks in grief is to reconstruct faith or philosophical systems, now challenged by loss.”¹²¹ Before the task of reconstruction, however, is the reality of devastation.

When the whole shape of the world is called into question by a loss, this may properly be called *traumatic*. The word has been used in many ways and with many variations during the last century or so. During the last few decades the question of traumatic loss has reached across fields of medicine, psychology, biology, culture, philosophy, politics, religion, theology and more to try to understand the effects of such experiences as war, combat, concentration camps, prison, terrorist attacks, kidnapping, sexual assault, incest, abuse, torture, and neighborhood violence. Not all trauma is the result of death and not all deaths are traumatic, but trauma discloses something important about how loss can affect us, especially when the loss undercuts the foundations we thought we had beneath our feet.

When one’s assumptive world is broken, everything within that world is affected. Judith Herman’s classic treatment, *Trauma and Recovery*, suggests this scope in her description of primary symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The seventh of seven has to do with what happens to the systems of meaning that had held a person: loss of sustaining faith and a sense of hopelessness and despair. Although this is at the macro level, it reaches down to include our ability to trust and relate to others, our capacity for intimacy and to protect ourselves and those around us, an urge toward withdrawal and isolation or frantic searching for safety. Trauma reaches further, into our perceptions of ourselves, feelings such shame, guilt, helplessness, paralysis, alienation, unworthiness. It reaches deeper still into the workings of our minds, memory, imagination, thinking, naming, expressing ourselves.¹²² Everything from the laws of the universe to how a person gets the groceries is called into question.

Traumatic loss overwhelms, and floods the self with negative assumptions, assumptions deviant from the protective norm of the Good. The utter nameless horror at the heart of traumatic experience, which defies and calls out for naming and containment, is re-presented in loss of assumptive world values and safety by the specific assumptions that are lost. Traumatization is an exposure of the self in which the self fragments, loses its protective illusions and value, and hides in unnamable shame. In the loss of assumptive world protections, the self disintegrates in shame.¹²³

As the term “world” implies, to lose this is to lose everything, including oneself. Note how wrenching the terms and dislocations are in that paragraph—overwhelming loss of the Good, the visiting of horror, shame, exposure, loss of ability to name experience, fragmentation, disintegration: “All is lost. Traumatic loss of safety is loss of all. ‘All is lost’ expresses an awareness of annihilation plus a sense that the ‘all’ is of the greatest worth. ‘All is lost’ means that hope is lost, that there is no future.”¹²⁴ Trauma means catastrophe.

This is an inherently spiritual crisis, so it is hardly to be wondered that people seeking to find their way in the face of such catastrophe might turn to spiritual and religious resources for help. “People who experience intense trauma often undergo a deep moral crisis, and it may take years, or even a lifetime, to reconstitute a solid foundation of values and beliefs.”¹²⁵ The nature of the response is affected by many factors of personal and family identity, culture and tradition, society and politics, religious perspectives and practices. The attempt to re-establish a world may take paths as different as active emotional and intellectual searching are from meditative detachment and release, as different as re-inventing individual identity is from re-connecting to communal solidarity through shared ritual, as different as rejection of the past and return to the past.

This implies something that can pass unnoticed. The shattering of world assumptions through terrible bereavement that leads to such great suffering can also lead beyond that suffering to positive transformation. The very idea of experience itself suggests loss. The assumptive world of the child cannot stand in the face of everything a child faces even in the ordinary process of maturing. Worlds break down, and must break down, in order to become larger and more capable of making sense of what we encounter; this is a life-long process of breaking down, breaking open, and rebuilding. The saying “sadder but wiser,” captures this succinctly. Paul Tillich observed how flimsily made life-worlds can be, unable to withstand a serious blow (“The Depths of Existence”), when they are shallow and do not connect to the depths of existence. C.S. Lewis’s “house of cards” testifies to the same truth. Like the house built on sand, the floods come and the house falls (Matthew 7.26f). The painful destruction of an assumptive world is also a disclosure, and presents a demand.

There is a powerful temptation to deny how badly shaken one has been, precisely because the loss has been so awful, so unthinkable. To acknowledge such a thing, to follow the loss into its depths is, indeed, terrifying and may not be possible, even after many years. Isn’t it bad enough to have been bereaved of someone? What benefit is there to be bereaved of everything? The loss of the world may never be spoken, and I may continue to live seemingly as I had, but it is known, and it is still lost, and I live in a world I no longer believe.

There is also a powerful temptation to live among the ruins. Part of traumatic loss is that it does not stay in the past, but intrudes again and again, waking or sleeping, and forces its way into the present and future. If memory can be a necessary part of facing loss and rebuilding a world, it can also be a re-traumatization that keeps the wound new and thwarts healing. Simply to affirm and privilege memory can be as naïve and harmful as simply encouraging someone to forget and move on. There is a constant tension, flow, and reciprocity between memory and forgetfulness that makes both possible. An unimpeded flood of memory makes it as impossible to tell the story as does the complete blockage. I need to be able to forget in order to retell the story; I need to be able to retell the story in order to forget and leave behind what needs to be left behind.¹²⁶

The same is true of the relationship between meaning and absurdity. To force terrible, arbitrary, and absurd losses into a framework of meaning can make meaning itself absurd and unbelievable. The bereaved parent of a dead child who is told “God wanted another angel,” may either conclude that the person is lying (and the statement is meaningless) or God is a thieving monster. On another hand, a response that does not deny the terrible, arbitrary, and absurd can offer the possibility of a path back to meaning that does not require denial of the truth of loss.

In similar ways, trust is not always to be preferred over distrust, and disclosure is not always to be preferred over silence. In the face of traumatic loss, these stand in tension with one another and must be discerned, discovered, and deliberated anew. Telling is not always and only helpful, silence is not only and always unhealthy. Trust is not always and only called for, and distrust is not always and only wrong. If there is one thing that is needed for care of those who have suffered traumatic loss, it is relationships that are safe *enough*, trustworthy *enough*, strong *enough* to bear and bear with those whose life-worlds have been shattered and who must re-build them as best they can.

The world-foundations, however, may also stand and withstand the loss. If a world can be shaken to its foundation in grief, it can also be the foundation that holds, even if it is transformed, and become a source of comfort, consolation, and healing to those who have been bereaved.¹²⁷ Because we are appropriately concerned for those whose experience of loss is devastating, we can miss other dimensions of traumatic loss. One pair of researchers put it in a way that seems shocking: “[It must also be acknowledged] that traumatic suffering has both positive and negative effects, is subject to change over time, and is profoundly influenced by social context.”¹²⁸ They note that epidemiological studies have found that the proportion of persons who experience traumatic events who develop posttraumatic stress syndrome is approximately 20%. If there are some who are devastated by their experience and spiral farther into it, there are others who move in another direction, and grow into a greater sense of identity, competence, solidarity, empathy, and tenderness.

One may argue, of course, that such persons are by definition not traumatized (or that the research is wrong), or instead take encouragement that the end of a person’s assumptive world does not have to mean the end of all *possible* assumptive worlds. Notice that a person’s relationship to traumatic loss can *change over time*. This is consistent with our discussion of grief as a relationship that grows and changes over time, just as relationships with the living. If a negative effect of trauma is its ability to re-inscribe the past, overwriting the present and the future, there can also be a positive overwriting, in which the present and the future make possible a different relationship to the past.

Notice also that social context has a great deal to do with the possibility of positive outcomes. If loss within my relational world has the power to undo my understanding of the world itself, that same relational world can have the power to re-build my understanding. The relational world is not a sequence of scale from small to large, but an ecology of interdependence in which its members are always affecting one another. It is in this direction that the possibilities of comfort and consolation lie.

Questioning the Cosmos

“Oh, that I knew where I might find [God], that I might come even to [God’s] seat! I would lay my case before [God] and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what [God] would answer me, and understand what [God] would say to me”

Job 23.3-5.

The relational world, as we have said, is set within our relationship to the cosmos, including the question of whether there is such a thing as order, harmony, and meaning, whether we can know it in part or in full, and whether such knowledge helps us in our living, grieving, and dying. It is within and in relationship to cosmos that lives and deaths find their distinctive meaning, significance and possibility (or lack thereof), which can also mean that within and in relationship to cosmos is where bereavement and grief find the same.

Whatever else death does, in the living it evokes questions about death itself and its significance for how we understand the cosmos and ourselves within it. In the face of the question of death we respond with whatever means of understanding we have at hand. We tell stories, sing songs, write treatises, argue, theologize, philosophize, preach, pray, accuse, lament - whatever means we have at hand.

Death, as such, is never seen. We see life, and all the signs that signal life to us; then we see them stop. The voice stops, the breath stops, the motion stops, the warmth ebbs, no more response can be seen. “The grass withers, and the flower fades...” as the scriptures say, and as is often read when we bury our dead – testimony to the fact that whatever death is it happens to everything that lives. “Death comes,” we may say, but what we see is not something that has arrived but evidence that something has departed.

In the realm of experience death means the end of life and whatever it is we understand life to be. If death and life are both mysteries, life at least is a mystery that shows and hides itself, frustrates and plays, wounds and heals, calls and answers, kills and saves. Death stands at the limit or boundary of what we know in life and as life. Confucius is famously reported to have said that “While we do not know life, how can we know about death?”¹²⁹ If life is all that we know, and it is only by living *that* we know, how is it possible to speak of death at all?

Although scientific understanding may consider death in terms that can be explained entirely within the organic processes of life, a more ancient human response has been to view death as something that didn't *have* to be. It appears to be a universal cultural phenomenon that the reality of death requires some sort of account.¹³⁰ “All religions concur that death demands discussion.”¹³¹ Confucius may have pleaded inability to answer the question, but he did not dismiss it. If he was right about our inability to understand death within the terms of existence and reflection, human beings have nevertheless turned to resources of religion, science, philosophy, mythology, and imagination in order to say *something* about a question that does not go away. Again and again that something takes the form of a story.¹³²

In some instances, the story leads to something as bare and stark as the will of God or gods. [In a scientific mode it might go by the name of “physics” or the “laws of the universe.”] It is because of a divine decision (or the irreversible terms of cosmogony), one to which there is no appeal, and for which no explanation is owed human-kind. Death is simply a fact. The story in such instances is not so much about the coming of death, but about the human struggle to deal with it. The central character may be a grieving old woman searching for an answer, a great hero bereft of a beloved friend, or a model of virtue and innocence to whom, surely, *someone* owes an answer. The search may scour the world, cross over or descend to some “other place”, even lead to a hearing before some ultimate arbiter, but what we will find is finally a “No.” We may respond to that “no” in very different ways. We can accept mutely, if sadly. We can acknowledge death as simply the way things are, in resignation. We can take it as a condition of life and seek

wisdom in the face of it. We can lament and protest – whether to the divine or mythical author of death or anyone else who will listen – with no expectation that the fundamental fact will change. We can turn our gaze in the other direction, toward some compensation or restoration, whether for person, community, tribe, nation, species, world, or cosmos. Yet such accounts of death are less the story of how the fact came to be, and more the story of what we do now that we know.

Another group of accounts, very different, sees death as something that does have a story of its own, one that may affect even the gods. Such stories begin with a divine death, or the death of some kind of ancient mythological forbear, the first of our kind from whom our essential identity is drawn. Death began there, such stories say, and set the pattern for what human life, too, must be. The first death may be traced to a quarrel, a theft, a negotiation, a battle, perhaps over matters purely between the beginning-beings, perhaps even over matters that concerned the making of humans and what our life would be like. However a particular story unfolds, the underlying theme is something like this: the death we face is the outworking of the conflict of the most powerful, now repeated as the pattern that determines human existence, or all of life itself. As it was for them, it is and will be for us. However different we may be from those beginning-beings, in this we are joined: we die.

If power is implicated in such accounts of death, other accounts point to treachery or carelessness, divine or human. Gods trick, lie, deceive – one another and the rest of us, too. They enroll unreliable messengers who dawdle, or misspeak, or deliver their words to the wrong party or in a way no one can grasp. Some human beings misunderstand, perhaps, or get distracted, or trust someone who should not have been trusted. The key, however, is that the world is not a trustworthy place. Messages are not trustworthy, even (or especially) those that purport to be from the gods. And who can finally tell if it really was God's message at all? The divine message, gift, or intention is thwarted, diverted, or destroyed, and therefore human life is thwarted, diverted, or destroyed. As it is with our messages, so it is with life itself.

Such stories shade into accounts in which the chief responsibility for death lies with human beings, whether because of simple and unremarkable shortcomings, bad choices, or guilt. The shortcomings may be as commonplace as becoming sleepy, frustrated, or forgetful, or a family quarrel that gets out of hand. The bad choices may seem relatively arbitrary – guessing the wrong hand, rejecting a gift because it wasn't recognized for what it was, or opening a package out of simple curiosity. Or they may tend toward some kind of folly, short-sightedness, or character failure: someone chooses the wrong box or bundle, for example, because it seems bigger or fancier, only to find that the small and plain package contained life. Because I rejected the small, my life will become short; because I chose the gaudy and insubstantial, that will become the means of my death. The mistake or misstep is so ordinary, so familiar, so human, that it would seem all but impossible to have avoided, and indeed recurs day after day, as if to say death didn't *have* to be, but how could it *not* be? Even the ordinary choices of a day are reminders of our vulnerability to death (or our mortality).

Then there are the accounts that place the responsibility for death with a more severe reckoning of human disobedience, guilt, or sin. There may be a transgression of law, relationship, or boundary; there may be an offense of ingratitude, inhospitality, or unbelief; there may be some kind of sexual transgression – perhaps linked to sexuality itself, or to a powerful code of conduct (such as the prohibition of incest); there may be transgression of proper human limits by pride or greed (trying to steal what is proper to the gods or to become *as* gods). In a particularly

symmetrical or reciprocal mode, killing is itself the cause of death. Death had been an unrealized possibility, let's say, until human beings were the first to kill – a sacred animal, plant, or other person - and by this wrong that destroyed the continuity of one life, the continuity of all life is undone. Such accounts go beyond human fallibility to fault, guilt, responsibility. Death becomes figured under the sign of punishment or retributive justice, perhaps, tragic consequence, or evil and suffering.

There are also accounts that acknowledge death as something that we desire *because* of the pain and suffering of life. Without death, human life reaches its pinnacle of strength and vitality but never its limit of decline. Age, hunger, illness, infirmity, weariness, can be imagined as the dimensions of life that make death welcome. They are not the means of death, but the motives that make humans ask for death and release. Death comes because we want it to come, and comes as a friend.

Sometimes, death is accounted for within the great economy of life writ large. Life gives way to life, life is transformed *for* life and *into* life, and death is the means by which it happens. The sap rises in the tree, the tree puts forth its leaves, the leaves send nourishment back, then fail, fall, decay, and nourish the ground. The tree fails, falls, and decays in its own time, too. So do the animals and insects and microbes, fed, feeding upon, fed upon, from the smallest to the greatest. Even planets, stars, and galaxies obey this universal law of transformation, the story goes, although the time frame may be billions of years. The very elements that constitute my body were born in the heat of dying stars.¹³³ “The principle of impermanence is often used as a means of calming yourself or others when disaster, suffering, or loss occurs. It can be more or less consoling,” says a Buddhist teacher, as might a physicist.¹³⁴ More or less.

It is the way of stories to co-exist with one another. Telling one story does not preclude telling another, and indeed, it is not hard to see in ancient traditional stories motifs that are (perhaps shockingly) contemporary: that death is just the way things are, that it is the result of forces beyond our comprehension or control, that death cheats or betrays us, that it insinuates itself into life through the most innocuous of splinters, ordinary life, stupid mistakes, bad judgment, moral failure, and/or a human guilt so profound it threatens everything. And that even what is most unwelcome can become what is most welcome.

To say that stories co-exist with one another is also to recognize *where* they co-exist: not only among us but within us. Although there may be authoritative accounts of death within a particular religion or culture, human beings trade stories no less than beads, butter, and bullion. In contemporary life the speed of the story trade is measured in micro-seconds, and individuals carry within them a story DNA no less complicated than their genome - perhaps even more complicated, in fact, because it can change much more quickly. Multiple frameworks of meaning leave their traces within each of us, and when death comes we find ourselves at different times and places, in different company, in the face of different needs, turning now in one direction, now in another, and another, and another. Perhaps we aware of the contradictions, perhaps not, but the need for meaning can exceed the need for consistency, and meaning matters.

A more difficult question than the stories we tell, however, is about the stories we *trust*. It is one thing to turn to this story or that because it is a good story, charming or elegant, hopeful, perhaps comforting for a while, or least offers me (or us) something to say instead of nothing. In the face of grievous loss, however, in the face of bereavement that has the power to pull down

the world around me, something more may be at stake. In the face of this death, to what do I trust my life? And if I trust my life to it, what sort of life will that be?

Christian theology places the question of death at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. It draws upon Hebrew and Christian scriptures, refracted through centuries of tradition, cultural imagination, reflection, and experience. In the face of death, it offers an account of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Last Things, and in different ways commends some vision of faith, hope, love, and wisdom, born in and borne up by a community of worship, discipleship, struggle, and witness. Within this broad, broad stream are any number of variations, some in stark contrast and opposition to each other.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that within particular communities and individuals these contrasts and oppositions can be found. Nor should it be surprising that multiple traditions and perspectives can be found within and among us. Having any number of answers to the problem of death, however, does not put an end to the questions. And in the face of actual death, the bereaved must ask their *own* questions, and listen for what response rings true, truer, and truest to them in their grief.

In the face of lives, deaths, bereavements, and griefs what do I think, imagine, hope, believe?

- That the terms of the cosmos are finally just, despite all the evidence to the contrary, and that justice beyond my imagination is what awaits us?
- That the appearances of the world are an illusion masking the transience of all things, and that to cling to those appearances is the source of suffering, even endless suffering, that separates us from the true essence of the cosmos?
- That the cosmos is a strict and inescapable accounting of right and wrong that will determine what becomes of the living and the dead in all eternity?
- That whatever order there is surrounding us, it is the kind that determines the speed of light, the decay of radioactive particles, the twining strands of DNA, but not the meaning and value of life and lives?
- That the cosmos is neither inherently good nor bad, just nor unjust, right nor wrong; it does not accuse, and it does not forgive; there is no court, no judge, no verdict, no appeal, no reversal?
- That meaning, significance, and possibility are illusions, perhaps useful (or not), perhaps comforting (or not), perhaps consoling (or not)?
- That birth, life, and death are finally arbitrary and we must simply face that fact and find comfort without reliance upon ultimate meaning?
- That the cosmos is ultimately trustworthy?
- That the cosmos is loving? Merciful? Mindful of our well-being?
- That death and separation are not final, and there will be an ultimate reunion?
- That the cosmos itself suffers in us, through us, and with us?
- That God governs the cosmos according to God's holy and just will?
- That suffering will be transcended, transformed, and redeemed?

These are, of course, only some of the ways we try to name the ultimate framework of life, death, bereavement, and grief. Volumes have been written for, against, and about them all, and they have been explored in philosophy, theology, rituals, myths, stories, music, dance, art, and all those other means we mentioned. We find them in scriptures, in arguments, in poems, in songs, in dramas. Go to the art museum, peer into an Egyptian tomb, unroll a prayer scroll – yes, and open a comic book, turn on the radio, listen more closely to the radio, download a video – all around us such questions about the cosmos may be heard. Such perspectives speak to our minds, hearts, spirits, imaginations. They join us with others and divide us, too. They flow back and forth with all the other aspects of the relational world that we have discussed – other, self, others, community, world - they form our experiences of bereavement, mourning, comfort and consolation, and they take dramatic shape in the grief dramas we enact.

My own beliefs center upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a story that Christian faith places at the core of a drama that begins with the creation of the world and culminates in a new heaven and new earth. It is within this drama that I find my most profound comfort in life and death. This is a complex drama, to be sure, with stories within stories, and transformed in myriad ways into virtually every kind of human art and reckoning. It is full of conflicts and contradictions that cannot be reconciled, and always will exceed my capacity for understanding.

My testimony, my profession of this drama, takes place amid a wealth and welter of other possibilities both around me and within me, themselves full of conflict and contradiction, taking myriad shapes and transformed into their own kinds of art and reckoning. In this, I suspect I am like many others, losing and finding, receiving and giving, pushing and pulling, thinking and imagining, cobbling rough huts out of sticks while dreaming of palaces, digging in the ground, looking to the clouds, sitting silent, singing old songs, and singing past the songs that I know or anyone ever knew, to where the song itself does the singing.

To speak of how we tell and enact our testimonies, whatever they may be, we turn to “Grief’s Drama.”

Chapter Four: Grief's Drama

Life-Drama, Death-Drama, Grief-Drama

Life is drama. Even more than stories we tell, life is drama we enact. That is, we are *doing* something: following our desires, facing or fleeing our fears, making friends and enemies, loving, hating, working, searching, caring, birthing, parenting, becoming ill, becoming a hero or a coward or neither or both, being bereaved by the death of others, dying ourselves. If *life-drama* is a term we can use to indicate something vital about how we experience and enact our lives, then *grief-drama* is a term we can use to indicate something vital about how we enact our grief within that life.

When death comes, the drama of life is especially visible and audible: the drama of our “natality” and mortality, of the life of the one who has died, and of the lives of those who survive.¹³⁵ The plot of the story we have been enacting has come to a decisive moment, the stage is set, the characters are in their places, and now we must decide what we will do and how we will do it. How will we tell the story of what has happened? Where will we begin? How will we present the roles of others and ourselves? How will we speak and sing and gesture? What signs and symbols will we show? What scenes will we perform?

Sometimes, especially in retrospect, we see it as *a* drama, with a central plot and cast of characters, and scene after scene moving toward its culmination, coming clear in the end, whether that is in the death at hand or beyond. Sometimes it seems to be a series of dramas however loosely or tightly bound together by places, times, events, people. Sometimes, although the dramas don't add up, it feels as if they might, if only we could grasp the telling thread.

Sometimes the telling thread is simply oneself: I was there, and there, and then, and then, a witness to my own life. And sometimes that telling thread stretches back and back or out and out to join dramas of family, community, an epoch, a history, even the cosmos. This is certainly true for Christian understanding. What we call the history of salvation is first of all a *drama* of salvation stretching from Creation to the Holy City, as is attested in the solemn celebrations of the liturgical calendar. The Story is the story of The Drama.

Drama here means something more inclusive than the dramatizations we see in theater, films, pageants, rituals, worship, music videos and so on. Some of those dramatizations may have no purpose beyond entertainment and distraction, a way to set aside for a time the puzzling dramas of my own life that are so resistant to sense. They can be, however, one of the chief ways people try to discern their own dramas and meanings, glimpsing their own stories and selves through what is enacted in front of them. Yes, the dramatic world may be fantastic; yes the characters may be donkeys or gods, cartoon creatures or mythic beasts; yes, they may have qualities and virtues beyond the powers of the people I know; still, we try them on in our imaginations to see how they fit.

We place ourselves within the drama's world, relate to or even identify with characters, try to understand their motives and desires, strengths and weaknesses, their possibilities and limitations, the choices they make and what happens. We weigh all this against our own

character, motives, and desires – perhaps even discover them in doing so; we assess how like and unlike their strengths and weaknesses are to our own; we consider how like and unlike the world they inhabit is to ours, and whether by following a path like theirs we might come to a similar place on our own paths.

The relationship between the dramas we see and the ones we live is ancient, as ancient as teaching, dancing, hunting, praying, birthing children, fighting enemies, making peace with enemies, burying our dead, mourning. Critical reflection on such a relationship goes back at least as far as Aristotle in the West, and has prompted countless variations on the themes of “art imitates life” and “life imitates art” and how religion flows between both. For this reason we turn to a foundational expression of the relationship between life-drama and grief-drama: ancient Greek tragedy. There were and are other approaches to enacting grief, as we will consider a little later, and the ancient arguments were formed in response to many sensibilities and conventions that no longer reflect contemporary views and ways. But the ancient Greeks were bereaved no less than we, and they sought to express their grief no less than we, and they bequeathed us questions that are no less important to us than they were to them. I believe that by reflecting upon such ancient dramatic tragedy we can see something important about the ways in which we construct and perform our own grief-dramas.

Tragic Drama

Aristotle considered an odd question: What is the pleasure proper to tragedy?¹³⁶ He was thinking about tragic drama, especially as it was performed at great festivals at the Sanctuary and Theater of Dionysus in Athens (4th – 5th century b.c.e.). The origins of tragedy were unclear even by the time Aristotle wrote, but deep connections to religious rituals were certainly included. Tragedy presented dramatizations drawn from the great traditions of epic poetry and mythology, and although the principal characters and their stories could be very different, they were all caught in forces beyond them and within them: fate, history, the will of the gods, family, war, politics, deceptions, and the faults and limitations of others and themselves, and they were bound together by suffering and grief. This is what the audiences came to see.

To understand something, Aristotle insisted, you have to grasp its origins, causes, effects and goals: where it comes from, how it works, what it does, and why people would come to such a thing. Drama, of course, is not a fact of physics or mechanism of nature. It includes people – authors, actors, audiences - and is *about* people, tragic, suffering, and grieving people, and is *for* people, themselves subject to tragedy, suffering, and grief. Tragic drama enacts the suffering of someone who is neither a god, nor a person of perfect virtue, nor a villain deserving of whatever rough justice comes along. The tragic protagonist was a human being both noble and flawed, living out consequences of decisions and actions (their own and others), and suffering grievously. Innocence (but not perfection.) and the iron determination of events – fate, necessity, the will of the gods - collided in tragedy.

It can be difficult to keep Aristotle’s particular frame of reference in mind and how he means his words. In ordinary use today the word “tragedy” extends to a broad range of experiences from a single life to the lives of millions – the capricious path of a tornado that kills the innocent and spares the guilty, the child sleeping at home killed by the stray shot of strangers, the tsunami that obliterates everything, chattel slavery, war and holocaust, plague. Those ordinary meanings keep pushing forward and taking the place of Aristotle’s more narrow use.

In Aristotle's eyes tragedy is a drama of intelligibility in the face of particular characters suffering. The characters have everything to do with us, the audience, and the drama of our own suffering and search for intelligibility, meaning and understanding. Tragedy enacts the drama of meaning itself, we could say, when the need for meaning is greatest. In the face of such events we grieving survivors may (or may not) seek intelligibility, meaning, or understanding somehow *inscribed (or inscribable) in the events themselves*.

The enactment of unintelligibility or chaos in abhorrent events would *not* be what Aristotle means by tragedy; that would need a different word, and a different theater (or music, film, literature, philosophy, theology...) than what he had at hand (or what he wanted: what is the purpose of purposelessness?). While his particular reference is limiting in relation to the actual events we grieve, it is worth noticing just how much of what we do in the face of loss is in search of some way to make *sense* of things. We could say it this way: we seek to take what threatens us with unintelligibility and chaos and to transform it into tragedy, a drama of loss and meaning.

Aristotle saw art as a transformation and imitation of life; his technical term was *mimesis*. The artist (in this case the dramatic poet) offers us life transformed into and by art. In well-crafted *mimesis* we see something beyond the bare facts of experience. The historian (in Aristotle's view) has the responsibility to tell us what happened. The poet speaks to us about the forces, laws, powers, probabilities, possibilities within which we live, not in the formulations of philosophers but in the *mimesis* of human beings acting in life. That is, tragic drama enacts the possibility of meaning.¹³⁷ An actual event that one witnesses may cause abhorrence or revulsion, may appear as utterly senseless or random, yet that same event transformed into dramatic art becomes something more, and yes, something that brings a kind of pleasure, albeit of a stern and demanding kind.¹³⁸

Part of that pleasure is in the beauty and craft of the art, its words, actions, rhythms and music, characters, staging, and plot (especially the plot). I once watched a pair of high school students present a dramatic poem about the violent deaths of friends. The deaths were real and terrible, the poets' pain was real and terrible, there was terrible reality in their words, gestures, and the rhythms of their voices. The audience was mostly young people who were witnesses to their own violent losses, too, and their responses flowed onto the stage and into the poem to become part of the performance. And it was beautiful. It was beautiful precisely because all that craft led us into a shared experience of feeling, meaning, recognition, insight, communion. Aristotle would have understood. "The occurrence of such an event [as presented in the tragedy], we feel, is not without meaning..."¹³⁹ He joins meaning to understanding to wonder. In our wonder we seek meaning through understanding, and understanding evokes wonder in us.¹⁴⁰ Through the drama of those students' poetry we glimpsed something important and true about the world and ourselves. If the beautiful words and the rest do *not* lead us to this experience of meaning, understanding, wonder, the art fails as art. It may succeed as entertainment, but fails us in our greater need. Finally (in the way Aristotle meant it), it is by leading us to the experience of meaning that beauty, through an experience that joins heart and mind, achieves its highest end in a meeting of the good, the beautiful, and the true here. To speak of this is to speak of *pleasure*.

What then is the pleasure proper to tragic drama? The poet should provide pleasure from the *katharsis* of pity and fear through *mimesis* of pitiable and fearful events.¹⁴¹ Now, the history of argument about what Aristotle meant by *katharsis* is eloquent testimony to the fact that it isn't

clear. He didn't define what he meant by it in the *Poetics*, so investigators have reached out to other of his works (*Rhetoric*, and *Politics*, in particular) to supply insight, and to how the word was used more broadly in its ancient context. Although the arguments have often insisted upon sharp differences among the possible meanings, it may be better to see them as complementary dimensions of a complex experience.¹⁴²

In modern times *katharsis* (usually spelled with "c") has taken on, at least in common parlance, a primarily psychological meaning. It refers to release of emotions, especially painful ones that have been held back (repressed). The idea is that unacknowledged, unexpressed emotions can have damaging effects in our lives (mental, emotional, and physical), distorting our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Ancient usage was broader.

In one sense, *katharsis* meant purgation. It was a medical term that could refer to the techniques, tools, and medicines used by doctors, and also to effects: the discharge from a wound, vomiting, coughing, diarrhea, eruptions of the skin, secretions, sloughing, cleansing. Aristotle himself in a number of places used the term to refer to menstruation (perhaps, in fact, the most frequent use of the term in his work as a whole).¹⁴³ Causes *and* effects. Ancient usage extended to the healing of body and soul, and *katharsis* could apply to both. Medicinal treatment could be used to heal the body, and according to the Pythagoreans, music could be used to heal the soul.

A second sense of the word is purification or cleansing. This came principally from the religious realm. *Katharsis* was used to mean the purification of places, things, or people for religious ceremonies. Consecrate a place, bless an offering, wash a supplicant and you were engaged in *katharsis*. Such purification could be in some ways like purgation, the removal of something that impeded or compromised purity. It could also be a kind of transformation, making something or someone somehow suitable to enter the sacred place, be offered as a gift, receive holy knowledge, to participate in the mysteries. Water can be used to wash away dirt from a wound, and also to wash away sin from a soul. "The prototype of tragedy is religious ritual; the prototype of catharsis is the theophany, or joyous sense of rebirth and communion that follows the sacrifice and rebirth of the god."¹⁴⁴ Sometimes *katharsis* is the cause and sometimes the effect; purification is what makes entry into ritual possible, and the ritual is finally what purifies.

A third sense of the word is clarification.¹⁴⁵ *Katharsis* as clarification refers to insight, comprehension, learning, meaning. It reaches past the particular *mimesis* to grasp deep causes, laws, principles, truth. It links the seeming accidents of actual life to deeper necessity that has become manifest through the *mimesis*: not bare experience (the particular), not the formulations of philosophy (the universal), but the universal manifest in the particular through dramatic *mimesis*. Learning, coherence, perception, insight, epiphany, a vision of the truth, participation, communion, renewal – these are all reflections or facets of clarification.

Theology calls such a search for meaning in the face of evil and suffering *theodicy*. It joins the Greek words for God (*theos*) and justice (*dikē*). At a fundamental level theodicy wrestles with questions of if and how one can speak of God's love, power, and justice in light of the pain that is written into all of life, great and small. The search for understanding, however, is by no means limited to the explicitly religious sphere, and indeed, the many ways in which such a hunger for meaning is expressed, even by the same person, is eloquent testimony to this.

Pity and fear? In what way could pity and fear be kathartic? “Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves...” as Aristotle wrote elsewhere.¹⁴⁶ Pity is “aroused by someone who undeservedly falls into misfortune, and fear is evoked by our recognition that it is someone like ourselves...”¹⁴⁷ The suffering that is enacted before me implies me, implicates me, infers the ways of my own world. In tragic drama there is, indeed, a moment of recognition on the stage and in the audience both. We are in this together, the characters, the actors, the audience, and even those who are not there, because this most personal tragedy, in which a person is most particularly who he or she is, is how things are.

Purgation, purification, clarification. If *katharsis* can be cause and effect both, so can pity and fear. If in one way these emotions call to be released, in another way they call to be transformed – purified and offered, not rejected – and in yet another way to be both understood and the cause of understanding. It is possible to think of them together, as aspects of a single complex experience in which something painful and harmful is released or drawn out of us, in which something painful and harmful (or we who have been harmed and suffer) is transformed and cleansed for a holy purpose, and in which we see beyond the sheer fact of pain and suffering into a depth, a shared experience of meaning: *katharsis*. The young poets and their audience wept, raged, pleaded, demanded, confessed their powerlessness, demonstrated their power, confessed their incapacity to understand, demonstrated their understanding, and more. As *katharsis* their poem was both a means and a result. Grief was released from an unbearable imprisonment, it was transformed into an offering, and it opened up into an experience of understanding and communion, a three-fold *katharsis*.

Not long ago my wife and I attended a performance of Joan Didion’s grief memoir of her husband’s death and daughter’s fatal illness, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, transformed into a one woman stage play. We had both read the book, and in recent years both of us had experienced the death of our fathers and widowing of our mothers. I do not know the motivations of all the others who were there, but the audience seemed to have many who were, say, fifty years old and older, some in couples, some in small groups, some alone. It is not hard to imagine that their reasons for being there had something to do with the losses they had known already or faced in the future not too far ahead. The play opens with the actress addressing the audience: “This happened on December 30, 2003. That may seem a while ago but it won’t when it happens to you. And it will happen to you. The details will be different, but it will happen to you. That’s what I’m here to tell you.”¹⁴⁸

She began the story with the event of her husband’s sudden death at home one evening in the ordinary moments between tossing a salad and putting it on the table: “Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.” The drama reached back through years and places and forward into events that were still unfolding and incomplete when the book was written, including the massive brain bleed that nearly killed her daughter, and an acute pancreatitis and septic shock that finally did kill her not long after: bereaved of spouse and daughter both in nineteen months. Life changes fast. Backwards and forwards the grief drama went, recalling events, remembering conversations, disagreements, promises, misunderstandings, asking questions, searching for wisdom, or comfort, or meaning, perhaps above all else trying to tell the truth about her grief “Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it...Nor can we know ahead of the fact...the unending absence that

follows, the void, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.”¹⁴⁹

In the end she comes to take a kind of comfort (placed in quotes: “comfort”) in words from Episcopal liturgy: *as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end...* She omits the final *Amen*. This is the way things are, she says. The world will change, but continue, as the earth itself does, as water and tides do. We have to feel the change and go with the change, she says. There is nothing else we can do.

So we, the audience, regardless of the particular reasons that brought us there, were witnessing an event of grief itself, a performance of grief itself, and the character who spoke to us insisted that whether we knew it yet or not, this was our story, too. She presented herself as us. The world she described, she insisted, is our world, too. The inference from her own life, her past, is our future, as she had warned from the very beginning: foretelling, foreknowledge, foregone conclusion, foreboding, presentiment, foresight, forethought.¹⁵⁰ To feel compassion toward her or refuse it was to do the same to each other and ourselves. To recognize the fearfulness of her loss or harden oneself against it was to do the same to each other and ourselves. Even if one’s own grasp of meaning in the end is different, even if there is a different comfort or consolation possible, it must be great enough and true enough to hold the “pitiable and fearful events” that had been performed in our presence. *Katharsis*.

How Tragic Drama Works

Drama helps us understand the *poesis* of grief by attending more closely to what we do when we enact our grief. In the centuries since Aristotle drama has changed in many ways, to be sure, but in other ways we find deep continuities, the most important reason for which may be that we still suffer and grieve, still seek to express it, and still search for meaning.

One way of attending more closely to grief drama is to consider the elements from which it is constructed. Ancient tragedy is unfamiliar to many, and some of its conventions are stumbling blocks to a modern audience. Those conventions, however, even if they are somewhat unfamiliar, are good to ponder – and perhaps not so unfamiliar after all.

First, the space itself: outdoors (adjacent to the Sanctuary of Dionysus in Athens, for example), an arc-shaped amphitheater, built into the side of a hill, with the audience looking down upon the “orchestra” and stage. The orchestra was a circle, sometimes with an altar in its center. This was the place where the chorus spoke, sang, danced. Opposite the audience, behind (from the audience’s side) the orchestra, was a low stage set in front of a *skene* (from which we get the word “scene”) or stage building with a prominent central door. The stage was the place where the individual actors performed. The stage building could be used to represent whatever inside space was needed: a house, a palace, a cave, and so on. Above the building was a walkway, a place for gods to appear, and from which they could be transported by mechanical cranes down into the midst of the action. To the sides of the arena were other walkways for actors and chorus to enter and leave.¹⁵¹

Individual characters were played by a limited number of actors (as few as three) who played multiple roles, changing masks to move from character to character. The word for mask, *prosopon* literally means “face.” In Latin the word for mask is *persona*, from which derives the

meaning of “personality” and “personae,” faces of ourselves that we show to the outside world. Whatever the reasons for the ancient convention (and the reasons appear to be lost in antiquity), and whatever “suspension of disbelief” was practiced by the audience, the small ensemble that enacted a tragedy embodied a human truth: we take up contradictory roles, and speak from behind multiple masks in our grief dramas.

The chorus, although it had been as large as fifty strong earlier, diminished in number to twelve or fifteen members. Their role, through speech, song, and dance was to comment upon the action, respond, sometimes offer narration, sometimes to represent a particular group within the drama (such as captive Trojan women in Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*). The chorus was itself a kind of audience, witnesses to the drama, witnesses to the audience, to the characters, to the gods themselves or whoever would listen. The chorus played a complex role, as we shall consider a little later.

Plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle (staging), all brought into harmonious balance and proportion, these are the dramatic elements Aristotle identified.¹⁵² We could expand the list slightly to give a more explicit account of other important aspects, including setting, narration, and audience (all of which are in fact pre-supposed in Aristotle’s account). We might also weigh various elements differently than he did, or notice how particular grief dramas do so, but the elements show strong similarity down the years. Open a book on the elements of contemporary drama and the list will look much the same. Each has a distinctive role to play and contributes to the whole.

Plot was assigned the most important position in ancient tragic drama. It was the emplotment of pitiable and fearful *events* that led most powerfully to *katharsis*, in Aristotle’s view. Plot is about actions, what happened, who did what and why, and what happened because of that. Plot, however, is not the same as chronology. Chronology is the order in which things happen, plot is the order in which they are *selected, presented and connected* so that we can experience their relationship to each other (and ourselves). In that sense, a plot begins at the end, because it is the end that discloses the final meaning of all that has gone before. The beginning is the beginning of *this*, the middle is the middle of *this*, the twists and turns, reversals, and recognitions are the road to *this* end, this culmination, this revelation.

A contemporary dramatist, David Mamet, observed “We dramatize an incident by taking events and reordering them, elongating them, compressing them, so that we understand their personal meaning to us – to us as the protagonist of the individual drama we understand our life to be.”¹⁵³ Mamet makes explicit the connection between the drama of the play and of the person witnessing it; plot matters to the drama because plot matters to our lives. “It is difficult, finally, *not* to see our lives as a play with ourselves the hero- and that struggle is the great task of religion, of which drama used to be a part before the Fall.”¹⁵⁴

It is through the actions of the plot, the struggle (*agon*), that a person shows us who she is (character), tells us what and why she chooses and rejects (thought), expresses herself in her distinctive way (diction), and to which the speeches, music, and dancing of the chorus (melody) respond, and the staging of the movements (spectacle) presents to our eyes. To return to Mamet, “That which the hero requires *is* the play... Every incident either impedes or aids the hero/heroine in the quest for the single goal,” that is, the plot.¹⁵⁵

The centrality of plot in drama, rather than character, has often been disputed, and there are many famous examples of drama (and other literature) that support such a view. It is not necessary, I believe, to insist on any of those arguments, but rather to listen to them and ask how they might help us attend more closely to the grief-drama before us. One grief-drama will be center around a plot, another around characters, another around a setting and situation, another around ideas, words, or music and rituals performed.

One could ask, isn't who we are, our identity and relationships, a more powerful concern, especially in grief? Isn't it because of who people are and how we are related to them that we grieve their death? The answer in a particular grief-drama may well be yes, as we considered in "Grief's Relationships." But notice how we respond to death by telling the story of the life-drama, telling the story through telling the *essential* stories, trying to place them in the right order (not just the order in which they happened) trying to tell what we believe is the *real* story that shows the drama of who someone was and who we are, that is, to reveal the plot of a life and death.

A plot, of course, is not only about a protagonist, the central character. There must also be antagonists with whom one struggles. In ancient tragedy the ultimate antagonist was the gods, or perhaps better, destiny, the way things are.¹⁵⁶ There are more immediate agents taking the form of flesh and blood enemies or events but they themselves are as much caught in the press of destiny as the protagonist. They also reveal themselves through their actions, thoughts, and speech, and the chorus sings of them, too, because the fierceness and nobility of the struggle has everything to do with the nature of the foes who must be met. So the plot links the great question at the heart of the character to the great opposing powers (within and without) through the presentation of the dramatic action. There are other characters, too, including the chorus, helping, hindering, witnessing, drawing back, rushing forward, doing all the things that family members, neighbors, fellow sufferers, friends, foes, and strangers do.

A newspaper reports the death of a young soldier in war. The family and friends are interviewed, a spouse or lover, a high school coach, perhaps, a minister, a fellow soldier. All of them tell the story of the same soldier, but from a particular angle. It may be essentially the same chronology, and may be essentially the same plot, or the plots may be quite different. One tells the story of a family tradition of service, another of a desire to fight evil and protect the nation from enemies, another tells of a young person struggling to find an identity, purpose and community, another of someone trying to turn a corner and go in a new direction, another of someone looking for a way to pay for college, or escape a dead end, or see the world, or grow up.

Think of the different places, times, and audiences where plot will be presented and what difference it makes: a memorial service at church, the evening news, a plaque dedication at the high school, over beers at the corner tavern where the bereaved father stops after work, at the convenience store where the soldier worked summers before graduating from high school, signing up, and shipping out, in private conversation among friends who stayed behind and went to school, in the private pages of a fiancé's diary. One is a plot of a love that couldn't hold the beloved home, one about choices and paths, one about evenings hanging out behind the store talking about what the future could be, one about soldier parents and soldier sons and daughters, one about recognizing and honoring the high purposes to which even the young are called, one about Baptism, the Table, and eternal life.

Public Plots, Private Plots

Some of these are public plots, the kind we present when the reporter calls, or at the funeral, or on the memorial web-site. Such plots can become even more public as they are transformed in newspapers, sermons, commentaries, op-eds, blogs, social media, political speeches. The line between private and public is rarely clear in life or in death, and this is no less true of grief dramas. The story of the death of an intimate friend can capture the attention of those who never knew her; the story of the death of a stranger can seem closer than of my next door neighbor. The reasons for this are understandable, if unpredictable.¹⁵⁷ The kind of death, the identity of those involved, the poignancy of the bereavement, the prominence or symbolic importance of the people or the events, the scope and degree of the suffering, all contribute to making the seemingly private public – and therefore require a public plot. And these factors that press a grief drama into the public world can make it all the more difficult for those most closely bereaved to attend to their own private grief drama.

Public plots are sometimes sanctioned, authorized, or ceremonial plots, ones that take their shape from a story known and valued, that connect to a larger story to provide comfort or consolation. The plot of the young soldier's life may take its place alongside and within a story of patriotic sacrifice, for example, as in the words of one my own family members, Nathan Hale, hung by the British as a spy at age twenty-one during the Revolutionary War: "I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country." A statue of Hale, wrists bound behind him, stands in front of the *Chicago Tribune* building in the city where I live. On a Civil War memorial in a small town not far from where I live, the names of all those from the county who died in the war – and there were very many - are recorded. On one side of the monument is inscribed the words, "Union Restored," and on another, "Slavery Abolished." In four words a plot is presented that joins the lives and deaths of all those names, surely very different from one another, into a public plot for the bereaved and those who came after, which, at least publicly, made meaning out of the deaths. So, the death of young soldier may take its place alongside the sanctioned story of patriotic heroism and sacrifice. The larger story of nation, freedom, a cause, receives and shelters the soldier's story – receiving and sheltering the grief of survivors, as well.

A public plot, however, can also be a dissenting story. The protests of Cindy Sheehan after the combat death of her son Casey in the Iraq War were televised around the world. One public plot told it as the story of a soldier who had re-enlisted to return to war with his unit, an altar server at Palm Sunday Mass the morning of his death on a volunteer rescue mission, awarded a Bronze Star, V for Valor, posthumously, honored for his faith and sacrifice. His mother, however, came to insist that there was another story that had to be told, a larger plot. She demanded to speak to President Bush who she held responsible. "I'm gonna say, 'And you tell me, what the noble cause is that my son died for.' And if he even starts to say freedom and democracy, I'm gonna say, bullshit. You tell me the truth. You tell me that my son died for oil. You tell me that my son died to make your friends rich...You tell me that, you don't tell me my son died for freedom and democracy."¹⁵⁸

A public plot may also serve as a defense of the dead, especially if the death itself has some kind of stigma or question attached to it. A local paper recently told the story of a young man convicted of supplying heroin to a woman friend who overdosed and died. The story of his conviction inevitably called forth the story of her death and life. The family pleaded urgently for her to be remembered not because of how she died, but as a Girl Scout, a poet and musician, a

loyal and loving daughter and sister who always stood up for others, even the friend who in the end gave her the fatal drug. The family had not only been bereaved of a young woman, they were also threatened with bereavement of who they knew her to be, and their own identity. In place of a plot dominated by whatever failures had led to the fatal drug use, they offered a plot that was sanctioned by deep values of the community, and asked others to see their daughter as part of *that* community of meaning. To shape the plot of her life, of course, shapes the plot of theirs, too. “I am emotionally shaken and mentally worn out thinking with so many ifs, and what I could have done differently.”¹⁵⁹ Be involved in the lives of your children, she solemnly advised, as if to say, “See and understand; this could happen to you.” Tragedy within tragedy.

In yet another way, sanctioned or authorized plots can seek to affirm the justice of a particular death, as of someone who deserved to die. Aristotle would not have considered the just death of a guilty person to be fitting material for tragic drama, as we have seen. Retribution or vengeance, however, can be a powerful dimension of a grief drama and the search for meaning. We know the scene well: after the execution of a murderer, the bereaved family of the murder victim may speak of “closure,” meaning that an unresolved part of the story has come to an end. An innocent life was taken and cannot be replaced, but the life of the guilty has been taken in return, so now the story can continue in a new way. We have done what we can do. Greater justice than this, they may say, depends upon God. Now the plot moves on from the human sphere to the divine.

The family of the murderer, however, may plead for a different and dissenting emplotment of the executed, and offer a story that portrays the murderer as something other than a monster. Even if execution was the (lawful, perhaps inevitable) end, they may say, this person was more than that terrible deed, and this death, too, is indeed a tragedy that includes a murderer’s innocence except for one awful moment. Greater justice than this, they may also say, depends upon God. Now their plot, too, moves on from the human sphere to the divine where the two very different stories converge.

Whether sanctioned or dissenting, public plots demonstrate how publicly important it is to approach the demand for meaning through dramatic *poesis*. A single death can demand that we give account of the whole life drama we believe we are leading.

Some plots are much more private, the kind we share within the family or circle of friends, or perhaps only within ourselves. We may offer (or accept) from those around us a public plot for any number of reasons, and yet tell within the circle of intimacy a different story. The person others knew will be presented publicly as others knew him, for their sake as well as ours, but there is something more that must be acknowledged.

In some instances this is simply because what was most important to the close circle of relations is no one else’s business. It is personal, private, made up of experiences that to anyone outside would have no significance, unintelligible, or misunderstood. After the death of his mother, the French literary theorist and critic Roland Barthes described finding in a box of her things an old, faded sepia print photograph. “There I was, alone in the apartment where she had died, looking at these pictures of my mother, one by one, under the lamp, gradually moving back in time with her, looking for the truth of the face I had loved. And I found it.”¹⁶⁰ It showed her and her brother, she five, he seven, standing together in a conservatory for plants, or Winter Garden as it was called. In this photograph he could see the truth he was looking for, which

would take “an infinite series of adjectives to express,” that represented the depths of grief he felt at her death. The photograph provoked so much for him, but *for him*. Unlike other photographs that he had analyzed (in the very same book), this one was not reproduced. As he explained in parentheses, as if in an aside to the reader: “(I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’...)”¹⁶¹ Here, whatever the plot of his mother’s life is to a public world, it is eclipsed in importance by the stories known only to the family. Perhaps it is also eclipsed by the dimension of Character, too, as we shall consider shortly.

A plot may be private because the bereaved feel that they aren’t understood by those who have not suffered their kind of loss. Many grief groups have grown because of just this reality. Parents who have lost children, for example, often find the sanctioned public grief plots to be appallingly insensitive, even if well-intended. “You can always have another one.” “God needed an angel.” “She is in a better place.” These commonplace responses are experienced by many bereaved parents as anything but supportive, comforting, or consoling; quite the opposite: isolating, painful, outrageous. Suzanne Redfern and Susan Gilbert, two mothers bereaved of two daughters wrote about it this way: “The simple fact that our children had died made us different from all other parents, in our own eyes but especially in theirs...When friends or strangers tried to empathize with us, they couldn’t help imagining that unthinkable circumstance [for themselves].” The fear that their bereavement provoked in others, the incomprehension they met in those around them, and the feelings they experienced within themselves – rage, despair, isolation, crushing sadness, and more – created a powerful need to turn away from noise and jargon toward the company of those who could bear to hear and tell the truth of their pain. They found relief from their loneliness, “in the company of others who have lived the loss.”¹⁶²

In other instances the private plot is kept private because it is too painful to share, discloses too much of the pain of others, and perhaps creates further pain by undermining the public plot and exposing the bereaved to the gaze and judgment of others. Abuses, infidelity, hypocrisy, shame, secrets of a most awful kind are part of some grief dramas, and within the circle of intimacy can make the greatest demand for meaning. Can the truth be acknowledged here, even if nowhere else? Can it be told? What would it sound like? How many other stories would have to be plotted out, re-plotted? Secrets, after all, are often not really secrets; they are known but not spoken about because to speak about them would threaten to unravel the fabric that had held *something* together, at least, even it was false. Sometimes, a lie may be preferable to chaos: better an untrue story than a story that undoes all the others. Sometimes, the appearances are all a person or a family has left. Maybe a time will come when *katharsis* is possible, but not now.

This suggests not only the story/plot of conflicts but the conflict of stories/plots. The sanctioned plot, public or private, is threatened by the dissenting plot, a counter story that reshuffles everything. Indeed, that is a conflict that can divide families, friends, towns, nations, epochs, because they too are implicated. Our survivors’ plot, survivors’ mission, the meaning drama that begins with a particular death may become, indeed, the principal enactment of grief. As a grief drama it is about us and our relationships with one another no less than with the ones who have died.

Comedy, Romance, Irony

We have been speaking of grief plots that fall within the range of tragic drama, including those with special dimensions of trauma to them. Because it is so often the *pain* of grief that drives us to understand it better, this makes sense. But it is important to recognize that the grief drama can have other shapes as well. Whatever a drama can be, so can a grief drama.

Classical theater distinguished between tragic and comic plots, and through the centuries that has been nuanced and elaborated. Northrup Frye proposed a typology that distinguished (in addition to the tragic we have been considering) between plots that were *comedic, romantic, and ironic*.¹⁶³

The comic (which doesn't necessarily include humor) tells a story of overcoming. There is desire that is somehow being thwarted by an obstacle (especially one that represents a certain order or power such as family, society, class, etc.). There is a struggle, twists and turns, but finally the obstacle is overcome and the desire is realized. Not only does the protagonist achieve her desire, in doing so she overturns or otherwise transforms the obstructing order releasing others (perhaps including the obstructers themselves), resulting in a new community formed around the new possibilities that have opened up.¹⁶⁴

The romantic (which doesn't necessarily include a love story), tells a story of a quest, a wish-fulfillment dream.¹⁶⁵ It has great adventure at its heart, noble and ennobling. A quest can even be a way of life itself, the real story being the journey not the outcome. It may come to its culmination in a death-struggle (*pathos* in classical terms) in which the hero is finally recognized or disclosed (to the audience and perhaps herself) in her true identity. Even if the outcome of the pathos is the hero's death the victory has been achieved, the dream fulfilled. The romance can shade more toward the mythic or the realistic, depending upon the hero and the quest, but it clearly reflects the dynamic of great, even cosmic, struggles between forces such as life and death, good and evil, love and hate, freedom and bondage.

The ironic (which doesn't necessarily include irony) tells a story of life in a world that is not ideal but actual, a world, indeed, in which the ideal is a myth told to keep us from seeing the true terms of existence.¹⁶⁶ Irony seeks to disclose things as they are, and us as we are, in bondage, frustration, absurdity. Sometimes that is a plot of discovery, too, in which the hero finds that what she thought was true is false, and her task is to discover and come to terms with what is really at hand. Such stories may culminate in a kind of wisdom (sadder but wiser), or resignation (what else can one do?), or protest (of the myth or the world), or cynicism (if there is finally nothing, then everything is permitted), to name a few prominent examples, but not a re-idealization or re-mythification (which would turn back toward comedy or romance). The lost world cannot be recovered. The future cannot return to a past that never was. If there is a virtue in irony, it is honesty and courage to face the truth. Tragedy, as we have already seen, carries something of the ironic within it, especially in its concern to disclose things as they are. It differs, however, in its drive toward a three-fold *katharsis* in purgation, purification, and clarification. It affirms, as we have said, the reality and possibility of meaning, however stern or difficult its terms.

Although it might sound surprising at first, a grief drama can certainly have a comic plot. For mortal beings death is not an option; it is a part of every mortal story that is told whole. Even if death is the culmination of the story, and even if we are bereaved and grieve, the drama may be comic. My own father's death, although it included a difficult decline and diminishment of

powers before the end, was a dignified conclusion to a life of compassion, service, and love. As a story of overcoming his own challenges and struggles (including the murder of his own father), achieving a distinguished career as a physician and surgeon, creating an institution to serve those who fell between the cracks of healthcare, beloved by patients, colleagues, and family, his was indeed a comic drama that culminated in a good death. As a pastor many of the parishioners I buried, though their lives were inevitably complex and full of struggles, had persevered, and in the end they believed they had done what was most important for them to do. Even if that goal was not the original one, and even if the goals they achieved were not grand, they had overcome and in doing so came to a comic wisdom in which they *knew* they had overcome.

We meet the romantic plot whenever a particular grief drama is gathered into a greater quest. In the case of the young soldier it was, let us say, a noble quest for freedom in which the soldier falls but does so courageously and for a higher purpose. In the case of my father, it was a Jewish-Christian story of healing and redemption. In both instances, the death that ends the protagonist's life is not the end of the story, but a *testimony* to the person's relationship to the story. Those who tell the story testify to it as well, with an implicit covenant that as we testify to the story, the story will speak for us, too. If we give ourselves to the story, the story will be loyal to us and we will share whatever the future of that story may hold. There is something inherently religious in this even when the religious is explicitly denied. Certainly, however, overarching religious stories of the cosmos and its meaning offer such a plot when they speak of resurrection, redemption, reunion, transformation, ultimate healing and justice, eternal life, a holy city, the death of death and hell's destruction.

The ironic plot comes in quite contrasting variations. Wisdom, resignation, protest, cynicism, as we observed, can all be outcomes of death and grief in an ironic world. It can be a testimony to meaninglessness, but also a testimony to virtue and courage. There may not be a great story to tell, a great quest to fulfill, a great reversal at the End, a great wager that comes through against all odds. In its place, however, there can be an affirmation of what is and what can be even in a world absent such possibilities, and especially an affirmation of those who lived in such a way that they created (as distinct from invented) meaning where there was none. The cynic and the sage can live in the same world, with only those illusions that are inevitable for partial and incomplete creatures, *but they live differently*. The person who resigns and the person who protests and resists can live in the same world, but they live differently.

Tragic, Comic, Romantic, Ironic, these are ways of thinking about the plots that our grief dramas present and enact, not a taxonomy but lenses to help our eyes focus and attend to the particular drama at hand. They can combine in endless variation, especially as plots intertwine joining story to story, drama to drama, from the single life to the life of the cosmos. Any of them may be true enough, and all of them may be strands capable of being twined into single cord, but what will the cord be called? What is *the* story in which the threads and events find their meaning? What strength does that meaning have? How much weight can it hold?

Characters

In classical drama, as we have seen, plot was of first importance, but character was the next most vital element, and how a character was depicted and presented made all the difference in the *katharsis* the drama offered. Neither the character who was god-like and perfect in virtue nor the one who was wicked and monstrous, Aristotle thought, elicited the sense of connection

and identification necessary for dramatic *katharsis*. In later days we have seen what counts as god-like or monstrous undergo great change. Stories in which we discover gods to be monsters (and vice versa), monsters to be human, and ordinary humans to be monsters or gods have made things rather more complicated – because the reality of experience is complicated. In the end, however, this may testify to the ancient recognition that truth and illusion can be hard to separate, or virtue and vice, strength and weakness.

Skip ahead twenty-five hundred years and we find a writing coach observing, “In my fiction workshops, writers turn in many more ‘perfect’ characters than imperfect ones. This is neither surprising nor illogical. They want readers to love their characters...The only surprising thing about this narrative strategy is that it will – without exception – fail.” It fails for the very reason Aristotle named, the character becomes unbelievable, and if unbelievable then impossible to relate to as someone like enough to us to care about. Believability requires vulnerability, inconsistency, flaws: “This is of the utmost importance.”¹⁶⁷

This is true of ordinary life, too. It has become increasingly difficult to persuade people that a real person can be truthfully told into a stable, consistent identity, at least not without simplifying distortions that undermine the truth value of what we say. Some even ask if the notion of personal identity itself is a myth, or at least a fiction. Whether or not that is the case, a character is *constructed* no less in life than in literature. Our memory of one another attaches to incidents we can recount, things we can hold, images we can see (even if only in the mind’s eye), sounds and smells and tastes and textures that unlock closed rooms and take us there even if we do not want to go. Fragments are arranged and rearranged, sifted and sorted, putting a photograph next to a handkerchief, next to a letter, next to a favorite recipe, next to a brooch, next to a Bible, next to a briefcase, next to a pair of gardening gloves. Each fragment has meaning, and if you change them around the meanings change.

Stories are the same. They come forward seemingly of their own volition, never in parade formation, but swarming and swirling, leaping and bounding, shouldering and shoving. Decades are bridged in the blink of an eye; time reverses, spools out at light speed, or stands so still that a memory of five seconds weighs as much as half a life. That’s how memory is, and that’s how characters are. Experience is *stories* before it is *the story*, which may never arrive. Between the ideal and the actual, between the impossible to believe and the impossible to name, is the character we construct, the *poesis* of a person.

In a grief drama this tension between the impossible to believe and impossible to name has particular poignancy for both the bereaved and those who attend to them. Storytelling is a way to “make a memory,” out of the fragments of memories.¹⁶⁸ In this case we could say “make a character.” There is an understandable desire to order those fragments into a coherent whole, as if by constructing a character we can re-author a life. At the same time the stories themselves offer sometimes subtle and sometimes strenuous resistance to one another’s company, defying weaving or resolution into a harmonious character. The desire for such harmony itself can be part of the drama, especially where lives have been marked by conflict and contradiction. What could not be achieved in life may be achieved in telling, but at a cost. The harmonized ceremonial public character and the fragmented, flawed private character collide.

To some degree, surely, this has been known by everyone who has ever been bereaved. And to some degree, the contradiction has been accepted, perhaps even seen as a necessary

aspect of mourning, even when it adds to the sense of bereavement and grief, as we considered in “Grief’s Relationships” and “Grief’s Experience.” For now let it be enough to note this: The public and private characters we construct affect one another, sometimes helpfully, sometimes harmfully, sometimes both. This is certainly true as they affect our relationships, for example, from the intimate to the ultimate, through which we might find ourselves within or outside of a community of support. It is also true in the experiences of bereavement, grief, mourning, comfort, and consolation, through which we might find ourselves more deeply bereaved or more richly healed.

Chorus

In classical tragedy the Chorus played a role as a character no less than individual actors. Through speaking, singing, and dancing they responded to what was happening, commented, warned, admonished, grieved, lamented, perhaps even declared to the audience the meaning of what was taking place in front of them. Modern audiences can find this difficult to understand, unless, that is, the audience has spent a lot of time in a church where the choir is a principal leader and respondent to worship, or listened to talk radio, or read the commentary and comments on a news website.

The Chorus reaches back to the ancient roots of drama in ritual, which spans many cultures.¹⁶⁹ Funerary rites certainly had prominent place for such a role. In contexts where funerary rites have become increasingly detached from practices of communal worship, increasingly displaced into desacralized (or pseudo-sacralized) funeral “homes” and the role of those in attendance relegated increasingly to the status of observers, this connection has become much weaker. There are still places, however, especially in the African-American church and the Orthodox Church where participation of the choir/Chorus is essential.¹⁷⁰ Interestingly enough, a modern production of Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* was reframed as *The Gospel at Colonus* and the Chorus was transformed into a Gospel choir, doing just what such a choir might do in church.¹⁷¹

One function of the chorus was to present a voice of communal wisdom.¹⁷² As participants or witnesses to the suffering and grief of individuals, they spoke together in a common voice. In doing so they represented something at the heart of ancient Greek culture. Group choral training in speaking, singing and dancing was an important part of the education of youth, males and females, who performed in civic and religious festivals. Adults continued this and competed in large groups in the same way. Plato saw this as so essential to the individual and community that he coined a phrase that basically meant “no chorus, no culture.”¹⁷³ Religious and political identity entwined. In this sense, when the audience saw and heard the chorus, they were looking in a mirror. The reflections in this mirror could be flawed and incomplete, too, as the other characters were, as the society was. The chorus could get things wrong, misunderstand, show the audience things about themselves they didn’t want to see. For good and ill, the chorus brought into the drama the voice of the cultural, religious, and political values of the community.

A second function of the chorus was to connect, or serve as a hinge within and between acts.¹⁷⁴ Their performance looked back to what had just happened and forward to what was to come. They didn’t only comment, but enacted the making of connections, modeled in a way what the audience was invited to do. In this way they were very much part of the drama itself, because the drama is not only about pitiable and fearful events but also about what we do in the

face of them. Making meaning is part of the action, the larger action in which everyone in the theater was involved.

There was a third function the chorus sometimes played, however, that was much more challenging. They could represent the voices of the stranger, the outsider, even the threatening Other to the community. They could represent the voice of those who had no sanctioned authority and had been wronged by the very society their audience represented. Indeed, in the surviving tragedies, “The majority of the plays have as a chorus a group of slaves, or women, or foreigners, or the old (and decrepit) – that is, figures who are marginalized or excluded from the institutions of authority in the ancient Greek world.”¹⁷⁵

Think of these functions in the context of a contemporary church (in general) and in funeral and memorial services (in particular). The choir is the church singing to the church. They lead the congregation in the hymns and sacred songs that symbolize who they are and what they believe. They perform values, feelings, culture, and meaning in moments when those values, feelings, culture and meaning need to be presented and affirmed. They evoke or tell the great story that holds things together, especially the community. The choir leads the congregation through the drama of the worship, punctuating, connecting, celebrating what has just happened, moving forward to what happens next, and very often being given the last word. The choir can bring music from a time and place that challenges the congregation, and even incorporate forms that are upsetting of the very tradition they represent. All of these are roles the Chorus/choir can and does play in particular performances of our grief dramas.

In the poetry performance described earlier, the two young poets sometimes played the role of themselves, speaking in their individual voices of memories, friends, fearful events, loss. But then they would come together to speak in unison, becoming their own Chorus, as it were, stepping back to call out in a voice that was greater than their own, the voice of a community and generation, speaking for the audience and their grief, challenging with the voice of outsiders (young, black, male) the way things are, gathering up the audience into the Chorus, too, as they responded with movement of their bodies and the snapping of their fingers. Characters, Chorus, and audience, joined by the plot of pitiable and fearful events, expressed in the thoughts, vocabulary, and musical rhythms of the community, played on a stark and empty stage with only the two microphones for props: tragic drama.

What is Said, Sung, and Shown

Within the drama of grief we express ourselves in many ways, including those that have a formal quality: epitaph, elegy, eulogy, memoir, poetry, journals, testimony, letters of condolence, laments, prophecies, prayers (we will return to this in the chapter “Grief’s Consolation.” Each angle of approach offers different possibilities and makes different demands, but they also shift and mingle because grief does not confine itself willingly to one way of speaking. An elegy becomes a prayer, a journal becomes a memoir, a eulogy becomes a testimony, a lament becomes a prophecy, an epitaph becomes a poem, and on and on. The means of expression a person chooses are as complex and varied as the nature of bereavement, the relational worlds of the living and dead, personal and communal mourning ways, the press of time past, present, and future, and whatever ultimate horizon (if any) to which a bereaved person looks.

However much such expressions are about the dead, they are also about the living who make them. In grief drama we who grieve are principal characters. Whatever the struggles of the dead through which they showed us who they were, grief is the struggle of the living who survive and through which we demonstrate who we are. In some ways, we could even say that *through* such expressions we create and enact (perform) an identity. That is, whoever we may have been, whatever character we may have possessed, grief-drama authors its authors, us, as it unfolds.

This suggests both a drama of discovery and revelation: discovery in the sense of finding something that was lost or unknown, revelation in the sense of showing something that was hidden. Returning to Joan Didion, “Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it...Nor can we know ahead of the fact...” Since we do not know what it is beforehand, we cannot know how we will respond, and to that extent we will only know ourselves in the grieving. In the face of grief we discover and show who we are through what we choose and reject, through the ways we speak about the dead and to the living, even the very words that we select. Even when we say nothing about ourselves, we are speaking who we are. In grief-drama our relationship with the dead, our identity, and theirs are inextricably intertwined. How they are told tells us; how we are told by our telling tells them.

Like grief plots, some of these expressions are public, some private, some both. A widower writes letters to his deceased wife through the first year following her death. What began as a way to make it from one day to the next, however, became in time something to be shared with others in hopes that it might somehow help them in their grief, too. A young mother writes a memoir of her son’s deceased father so he will know the man he never had a chance to meet. A mother who lost a daughter at birth composes a poem for her and about her, her angel whose presence she once felt within her and still feels around her. At a memorial service for a suicide, a family member speaks for the family, sharing with those gathered what only a family could know, and thereby inviting them all to enter more closely into their grief. At that same service, a preacher puts the mystery of the deceased’s decision to die within a larger story of a life in God that never ends. On a reviewing stand in a town square, the names of the military veterans who lost their lives in service are read, colors are presented by an honor guard of old men in their uniforms from past wars, and a salute is fired. A man looks around him on an April morning one month after his mother’s death, and in the sky, the weather, the returning birds, the garden flowers – all things to which she had taught him to attend – he recognizes “Were it not for the way you taught me to look / at the world, to see the life at play in everything, / I would have to be lonely forever.”¹⁷⁶

The final element of tragic theater Aristotle named is *Opsis*, often translated as spectacle or staging. In a more literal vein we might say what is shown, or *what is offered to be seen*. In the theater this would include the sets and movements of the actors. In church this would include the sanctuary and all its symbols, processions, candles, blessings. In someone’s living room it might mean photographs and mementos, at a roadside shrine a mound of stuffed animals, plastic flowers, and messages of love and farewell. When a person has died one of the most challenging and important tasks is the determining what will become of all the tokens of that person’s life that have been left behind. In a way it is a ritual like the laying out of the body, preparing it for burial. The closets, shelves, boxes, old letters, tea cups, and the rest can seem as have a kind of

sacramental weight, a weight you can't know until you hold it in your hand. What will be done with them? To whom will they be shown?

Although Aristotle thought this was the least important in leading an audience to *katharsis*, I'm not so sure. I remember attending a funeral Mass for a friend who had died much too soon, leaving a wife and young daughter of thirteen. When the time for the Eucharist came, I saw his daughter, alone, walking slowly down the aisle toward the priest and the altar – and the casket holding her father's body – carrying the Eucharistic elements to be consecrated. She carried the elements that were to be transformed into the Body of Christ toward the body of her father, awaiting its own transformation. Slowly, unsteadily, shaking, and yet with determination she walked down the long center aisle, surrounded by the grieving and mourning community. I remember nothing of what happened before that moment in the Mass, and nothing of what happened after. I do remember, however, my own face suddenly drenched with tears and I can see her still.

Like the photograph in the Winter Garden, like the flower bed on an April morning, like the young man carrying his mother's ashes on one last walk through the garden, like the baseball cap placed on the communion table, like the shaving mug and brush, like the taste of red cake, like the smell of perfume, like the stuffed bear, like the Bible bookmarked for the last time, like...like...like... Like all those fragments from which we construct the dead and ourselves *what is given to be seen* is not minor at all. It can speak to us with a power beyond voices, evoke memory with a power beyond stories, summon feelings beyond any talk of feelings, cleanse us beyond the power of any ceremony, and foster understanding beyond the power of any explanation

From Drama To Consolation

Grief has a dramatic shape, just as life does, and the grief dramas we enact in the middle of life are testimonies to what we understand to be the greater drama within which our lives are enacted. In the middle we confront and are confronted by the beginning and the end, and perform what we understand to be our relationship to both. We construct plots, create characters, choose what we think is right and reject what we think is wrong, represent ourselves and others, our thoughts and reasons and motives, we bring forward the music that expresses more than we quite know how to say, we bring forward the signs and symbols, whether as large as a mountain or small as a mustard seed. We do it alone and together, privately and publicly, in scripts that are sometimes sanctified, sometimes scandalous.

We enact grief dramas in the face of death for the same reasons that we speak: at the barest level because we must say and do *something* and that something must somehow acknowledge and represent death and life, and what we do in response. In experiences of mourning we enact grief drama as part of the performance of consolation. For consolation has its own plot, characters, and the rest. Consolation has its own *poesis*, and to that we turn next.

Chapter Five: Grief's Consolation

“Talk to me about the truth of religion and I’ll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I’ll listen submissively. But don’t come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don’t understand.”

C.S. Lewis

“To be able to think of finitude and eternal life together is a goal toward which I have been slowly feeling my way.”

Dorothee Soelle

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”

Psalm 23

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as those do that have no hope.”

1 Thess. 4.13

“...and God, as promised, proves / to be mercy clothed in light.”

Jane Kenyon

“Love never ends.”

1Cor 13.8

Consolation may be the question that most deeply affects the ways grief unfolds. When we look at grief in one way, we can see bereavement standing at the intersection of grief's experience, relationships, drama, and time: the loss that binds them and weaves them together. When we look in a different way, the same could be true of consolation.

The question of consolation, however, leads inevitably to what is most difficult, painful, and unresolved. Set against our lesser losses this may not be immediately visible, for there consolation may appear as readily as an understanding smile on the face of a friend. But when the sense of bereavement deepens, such ready consolations may thin and fade as we set our losses and our consolations against one another. The question of consolation goes to what is at once most shared *and* most personal (and therefore to what can leave me most separated and

bereft), to what is most conceptual *and* most experiential (and therefore to what can be unimaginable and unknowable), to what is most thought, believed *and* felt (and therefore to what can be incomprehensible, untrusted, and insensible).

Consolation, therefore, may be grief's most difficult question, perhaps even its impossible question. The question of consolation in the face of death's loss, in fact, is akin to the question of forgiveness in the face of life's harm. Both are haunted by the specter of the worst that can happen. The unforgiveable and the inconsolable stand as witnesses to everything we say, and they interrupt us when our talk seems to be forgetful of the reality of suffering and loss. Forgiveness and consolation alike can confront us, paradoxically, with both a requirement of strictest accounting *and* of an utter freedom of response. They can require of us both the clearest of *whys* and *wherefores*, and insist upon the real possibility of a *nevertheless* that transcends every reason. In that sense both forgiveness and consolation are bound to contradiction and mystery.

The very possibility or impossibility of consolation (and what might be consoling about it) affects our *experience* of bereavement, the thoughts and feelings of grieving, the ways of mourning, and the relief of comfort. If I am bereaved in a world or life without any consolation that is a different loss than if consolation is or may be possible. It affects my thoughts, feelings, and body as I grieve. It affects the ways I mourn, how I speak and act, the rituals and ceremonies I perform. It affects how I may receive or take comfort – or refuse it – all because of the question of consolation.

The very possibility or impossibility of consolation, and what it might be, affects every aspect of grief's *relationships*, from the relationship to the dead, to ourselves, to those around us, the world, the cosmos and God (and whether one speaks of and to God at all, and how). Is consolation to be found, somehow, in relationship to the one who has died? Is it to be found in relationship to my own identity? Is it to be found in and through relationship to others? Is there, somehow, consolation to be found in the world we know? Does consolation lie, somehow, beyond the smoke and mirrors of ordinary life in a greater order, harmony, beauty, and justice? Does it lie with God? How we answer each of these has everything to do with all the rest.

The question of consolation stands as the ultimate horizon of *grief's drama*, the end that finally discloses the aim of the plot, the true identity of the characters, the meaning of the choices we have made, the ceremonies we enact, the songs we sing, the honesty or dishonesty with which we play our parts. Was there a goal or purpose in this life and death? How did we succeed or fail in it? What was the significance of how we lived or died? Who did we show ourselves to be? How shall we speak and sing about these things, and mark them in ceremony?

The question of consolation affects our relationship to *time*: how we turn toward the past, how we live in the present, and how we look toward the future. Is there consolation to be found in what has gone before? In memory? In what was accomplished? Is there consolation to be found in the time we have at hand, in the actual days we live? Is there consolation to be found in what will be, whether within the terms of the world we know or beyond it? And how, in turn, does that affect grief's experiences, relationships, and drama?

If consolation affects all of these dimensions, it is in turn also affected *by* them. Whether consolation is available to a bereaved person, and what kind of consolation it is, has everything

to do with those twining strands of experience, relationship, drama, and time. This, too, is part of the particularity of grief. We grieve in distinct times and places, histories, cultures and communities, belief systems, personal and family identities, combining and conflicting within us and around us, and we weigh our consolations in the same way.

When Robert Burton wrote *Anatomy of Melancholy* he could look about him and see ages in eclipse. The world horizon, as it appeared to some, was expanding at a rate that challenged imagination, thought, and faith alike. From his rooms in Oxford, Burton could look in one direction and see convulsions in the body politic, the arts, the great fracturing of the Western Church into Catholic and Protestant, the hypocrisy of institutions and offices, stratifications and rigidities of class, the critical (and sometimes scornful) self-confidence of reason freeing itself from ancient shackles of superstition, myth, and religion. He could look in another direction and see the mundane realities of farm, town, and parish, moving to their own rhythms, more determined by the changing of the seasons than the changing of ideas. He could look in still another direction and see a vast library of books purporting to bring the world within the scope of his mind, and offering a community of minds that was probably more real and alive to him than many of the actual people he might pass every day. And he could look into the passageways and rooms of his own mind, even more complicated, where at turn after turn he met his own melancholy. He thought and wrote, he acknowledged, for the sake of healing that dis-ease which permeated his life and dominated his thinking. That is, in the face of all those forces around him and within him, Burton sought consolation.

Two centuries later, the world still turning both quickly and slowly, Matthew Arnold, reflected upon what he, too, perceived to be the eclipse of a more ancient faith and sensibility by the shock of the new age of reason, science, industry, and modernity. In the midst of this change he wrote poignantly about an enduring need:

“The millions suffer still, and grieve, / And what can helpers heal / With old-world cures men half believe / For woes they wholly feel? // And yet men have such need for joy! / But joy whose grounds are true...”¹⁷⁷ In the face of suffering and grief, Arnold saw, the need for consolation was no less, but what had always been difficult, even with a more ancient faith and sensibility, had become more difficult still. He saw the modern person (and he wrote this in the first half of the 19th century) caught between worlds, truths, imaginations, faiths, hopes, believing fully neither the old nor the new, yet feeling fully the pain of life and death – and yearning for consolation.

If anything, this dilemma has grown greater. The last century has witnessed and documented such a monstrous scope and scale of global death – war, genocide, torture, neglected famine, treatable disease (the list could be longer), and joined to it the previously unimaginable, nearly instantaneous graphic representation of suffering and violent death streaming before our eyes. The same monstrous death meets us on street corners, playgrounds, movie theaters, homes, school campuses, and churches leaving no place of refuge. In the face of this, the very idea of consolation can appear as denial, wishful thinking, fantasy, cover-up, consent to injustice, mystification, even moral collusion with evil and death, something that *cannot*, indeed, *should not* be.

Although the scale of modern death has its special horror, human beings have been subject to annihilation since the beginning, whether by enemies, disease, or the workings of the

natural world. Burton's catalogue of ordinary threats to our existence, as we saw, depicted this vulnerability in unsparing (and yet still incomplete) vividness. And apart from the general vulnerability of life to death, there have always been the *particular* losses that have exceeded the bounds of any possible consolation. The very question of consolation can provoke collision between the way we say things are, the way we see things are, the way we hope they will be, and what the experience of bereavement reveals to us about the meanings and implications of those beliefs, hopes, and fears.

The *Poesis* of Consolation

Although consolation is fraught with contradictions, confusions, conflicts, and mystery, it nevertheless presents itself through certain recognizable dynamics, structures, vocabularies, forms, and rhetoric. It is founded upon root images and metaphors for exchange, counter-weight, or transformation (dynamics); it is built from various structured elements (sources, claims, conditions); it comes to a variety of expressions in our words and gestures (vocabularies); it appears in ways of speaking as different as a joke and a prayer (forms), and it seeks to persuade us through different appeals (rhetoric). We can speak of a *poesis* of consolation just as we do a *poesis* of grief.

In living expression these aspects of consolation are more often implicit than explicit, and all interwoven. They can be heard beneath the surface in how people speak, and seen moving in the background of images and stories. We catch their scent, sometimes elusive, sometimes overpowering, sometimes sharp, sometimes sweet. Most often, what we have are fragments and hints, perhaps contradictory, from which to try to understand the larger sense to which they point. How can we draw back a little and listen more closely to the language of consolation?

Consolation's Dynamics

The verb is to *console*: to soothe in distress or depression: alleviate the grief and raise the spirits: to alleviate grief or disappointment (Webster). *Comfort* is a synonym, with the sense of strengthening aid, support, assistance, succor, to relieve. *Encourage* can be another meaning, as can *gladden* or *cheer*. Webster's points back to *solace* (related to consolation), as applying "to any agency tending to relieve grief, pain, disappointment, chagrin, weariness, despondency," and to "allay, assuage, soothe <~ grief>" but notes that "comfort" may be "more intimate in its suggestions...[and] may connote relieving, soothing, and encouraging with cheer, hope, assurance extended with sympathetic kindness."

Consolation is the noun: "alleviation of distress or misery (as by sympathetic care or attention or by the soothing or mitigating effects of natural or psychological phenomena)." It can refer to a state, and also to an event, instance, or act. Thus, it can be something that is offered, given, taken, received, accepted, found (and the negative), as well as the event in which this occurs. That is, it can be the given and the giving, the finding and the found.

The dictionary definitions of consolation bring forward such terms as alleviate and relieve. Both have the sense of removing, lifting, or easing a burden or weight. To relieve means at its root to lift up, raise. To relieve is to "free from a burden, evil, pain, or distress : give ease, comfort, or consolation (Webster's);" this is its first assigned meaning. But the other meanings can also make sense in relation to grief: to release from a post, station, or duty; to take over

from; to set free from an obligation, restriction or condition; to remove or lessen the monotony of something by contrast or variety; to show something more clearly and prominently in distinction from its background or surroundings; to release pressure.

In the face of a particular death each of these could make particular sense. Someone who has kept faith with another through a long final illness, whose life has been commanded by the duties and necessities of care (even when those duties have been done without coercion, without complaint, and with great affection) may experience release and relief when death comes, that is, consolation. Or having done all one can do, to finally release the other (whether to the hands of God or simply to release them to release) in the knowledge that your duty has come to completion can be a relief and consolation. To reflect with someone about the reality and the meaning of what has happened, someone who can listen and perhaps even guide you to greater insight (think of purgation, purification, and clarification again), can be an experience of relief and consolation. To have someone open the curtains and windows, to walk with you down the block to the park, talking or not talking, to sit with you as you try to see what the world looks like *now*, now that death has come, this can be an experience of relief and consolation.

The dictionary also offers “assuage” and “soothe” as meanings of consolation. Assuage comes from a Latin root that means “sweet.” It means to lessen or mitigate, to ease the effects of something that is distressing or painful. Soothe is similar, and both carry a sense of physicality and immediacy, even touch. Intimacy, sympathy, kindness, immediacy, touch – consolation in this sense has gone beyond the realm of ideas, images, and metaphysics. It has become a matter of presence, embodied communication, relationship. We can recognize truth in a touch just as we can in words. We can also recognize an embrace that is false, a smile that is a mask. This is often what is most difficult for those who are grieving. They are keenly aware of the reality of their loss and pain, keenly aware of chaos that has come upon them and surrounds them, keenly aware of the *agon*, the struggle they are in; to be greeted with words, gestures, and touches that ring untrue is, well, grief upon grief. For just this reason, the *relief* of words, gestures, and touches that *are* true is consolation.

Consolation also has secondary meanings that seem odd at first, but may also reveal something of human reality. Webster’s notes it can mean a fine paid as a penalty for losing in certain card games, failing to take the right number of tricks. It can also mean “a contest (as a game, match, or race) held for those who have lost in the early stages of a tournament,” or a “consolation prize: a prize of relatively little value given to a runner up or loser.”

These last two may be uncomfortably close to what many bereaved persons feel they are being offered in actual experience. A well-meaning person says “At least you...” and proceeds to name some clearly inadequate alternative or “prize” as what you get in return for your loss. The effect is likely not comfort or help, assuagement or relief, or any of the other encouragements by which one’s spirits might be raised, but quite the opposite: increasing the sense of bereavement, the irreversibility of the past, the absence in the present, the pall cast over the future.

The dynamic of consolation, in common usage at least, is often linked to the image of compensation or exchange. One thing is taken away; in its place, either directly or indirectly, another is presented. Leaving aside crude and thoughtless ways this can be suggested... A friend dies, let us say, and the kindness of other friends awakens me to the reality of their friendship in a way I had not previously known. I lose my special friend, who cannot be replaced, but find a

web of friendship that provides experiences of comfort, even happiness, and a perspective on friendship itself that is richer both because of what has been lost and what has been found. I experience this as consolation. The process of decathexis and recathexis (and its variations) that we considered earlier may be seen in this way. I gradually draw back the emotional energy that was invested in the dead and reconnect to others, finding some measure of consolation in new relationships. What is sometimes called a “survivor’s mission” is another way we encounter this exchange. My friend has died, but I dedicate myself to a cause that she loved, or against the disease that killed her, or for those who suffer as she did. My beloved is lost to me, and in her stead are these others. I still love my dead friend, but I must find new ways of experiencing and expressing that love.

The exchange or compensation can be both actual and symbolic. A U.S. soldier is killed in Afghanistan. He is buried with military honors, and his family presented with a tightly folded flag. The government pays them a death benefit. His parents dedicate themselves to the rehabilitation of wounded returning veterans, and treat them as members of their own family, sons and daughters. The death benefit becomes the seed of a scholarship fund. The flag is prominently displayed on the living room mantel of their home.

An exchange has taken place that is both actual and symbolic. Their son is dead and cannot be replaced, yet they receive others who are somehow *like* their son and care for them. They receive the “benefit” and use it to benefit someone who could really benefit from it (which neither they nor their son can do). The flag is placed at the focal point of the family and public space of their home, a memorial that links them, their son, his death, and the nation. The wounded soldiers are real people, the government check is real, the flag is real, and they are all also symbols, complex symbols of an exchange of meaning and value, and of the dramatic action in which it takes place.

If grief is *weight* then consolation can be understood as *counter-weight*. Against the weight of loss, something else is posed. This is different than reversal or return, both of which suggest that the past can be repeated in the present or re-appear in the future. The weight has not vanished, it has not somehow suddenly become light. It is, however, no longer the only thing in the scale, the only force, the only power bearing down upon the bereaved. It may be ounces against pounds, pounds against tons, but it is not *nothing*. It is something, and pushing back. In time, perhaps, the counter-weight may grow, counter-balance, and even outweigh the loss, but the loss has not disappeared. It still pulls down on the scale, only there are other forces working in the other direction.

Here we can see that the dynamic of *consolation* entails *transformation*. The poetic and religious imagination is full of such transformation, with the dead symbolically changed into forces or faces of nature, into signs that appear in the sky, earth, or seasons, into precious objects or common objects (by metaphor and metonymy), into figures of myth or lore, into mysterious strangers who appear in times of special need, angels (both comforting and avenging), messengers, even into themselves perfected and unchanging (as they never could be in life), a pure voice, a pure face, a pure breath that arises in the stillest air, a pure and unmistakable figure seen at a distance as the light fails. Examples of this can be found going back thousands of years into our deepest mythology. And they can be found in familiar conversation and across popular culture.

In a now famous letter from the American Civil War, Major Sullivan Ballou of Rhode Island wrote to his wife Sarah shortly before the Battle of Bull Run. Recognizing that he might be killed in the days ahead he wrote to console her in advance. He told her that he believed strongly in their cause, and that they owed a debt to those who had suffered and died before them on behalf of the nation. If necessary he was willing “to lay down all my joys in this life to help maintain the Government and to pay that debt.” He then turned to his love for her, memories, hopes for them and children; he asked forgiveness for his faults; he spoke of the pain that he would feel in death as he would witness powerlessly their struggles and wait with sad patience until they could be reunited forever. Finally, he promised that if the dead can come back to earth, he would always be near, no matter what: “...always, always, and if there be a soft breeze upon your cheek, it will be my breath, as the cool air fans your throbbing temple, it shall be my spirit passing by.”¹⁷⁸ He was, indeed, killed in the battle that followed.

Exchange, compensation, counter-weight, and transformation can all be found in the few paragraphs of this poignant letter. He placed his story within a larger story of the national cause and that within a still larger cosmic story of the relationship between the dead and the living. He posed the images of debt and death, joy and life against one another, and ultimately sought to console her with images of invisible but real presence in their separation, and eternal reunion in the future. “Sarah, do not mourn me dead; think I am gone and wait for thee, for we shall meet again.”

The ideas of exchange, compensation, counter-weight, and transformation, however, can also be rejected, whether at the level of the cosmic, the political, or the personal. The twentieth century offered any number of examples of such rejection, especially in relationship to war and patriotism. Wilfred Owen, a soldier and poet in World War I, called the notion that to die for one’s country was sweet, “That old lie,” and posed against it vivid images of soldiers suffering and dying in the trenches. Every war of the last century (and perhaps every war that ever was) has had its counter-consolation or anti-consolation. Ordinary domestic death, quite apart from war’s horrors, has also been the scene of such rejection of consolation. Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote “Dirge Without Music” after the death of her husband. She could not and would not take comfort in memory, legacy, or images of transformation into something else, insisting “the best is lost:” “More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.” The wise, beautiful, tender, kind, witty, brave all go and become one “with the indiscriminate dust,” she insists. “I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.”¹⁷⁹

This was at the root of C.S. Lewis’s rejection of the consolations of religion in this chapter’s epigraph. He didn’t want to hear talk of memories, he wanted *her*. He didn’t want to hear that she was “with God” because that meant that she, like God, had become incomprehensible and unimaginable. He didn’t want to hear stories of reunions “‘on the further shore,’ pictured in entirely earthly terms,” for that was “all unscriptural, all out of bad hymns and lithographs. There’s not a word of it in the Bible. And it rings false. We *know* it couldn’t be like that.” And yet that was the very thing he wanted.¹⁸⁰

In Christian faith consolatory transformation is akin to the sacramental transformation of water, wine, and bread. Ordinary water from the tap becomes baptismal water, washing away sin; bread baked by the neighbor becomes Christ’s broken body; wine bottled in California becomes the blood of the new covenant; the people who an hour before may have been non-descript and

indistinguishable become the living Body of Christ. Leaving aside the metaphysics of what (if anything) *happens* to the water, bread, and wine, it is not finally *their* transformation that matters, but the transformation by them of those who have gathered. What the sacraments *do* matters more than what they *are*. “Your mystery has been placed on the Lord’s table, you receive your mystery,” Augustine proclaimed.¹⁸¹ He spoke of a sacrament as an outward and visible sign of an invisible grace. Whatever happens to the elements cannot be seen, just as whatever happens inwardly to those who receive it cannot be seen, but faith insists that the unseen can be even more real than the seen. So Calvin maintained that the believer receives the symbol and by faith, trusts and believes, and in *this* way receives the things symbolized.

In Christian faith the ultimate transformation (and consolation) is resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Paul sets aside speculations about how the body is raised and what kind of body it is as beside the point, disputes only for scoffers and sophists, or those who claim to know more than God has revealed. What matters, he urges, is the transformation of the perishable to the imperishable, mortal to immortal, the body of dust to the body of spirit, just as Christ was transformed in his resurrection (1 Corinthians 15: 35-49). 1 John echoes this: “Beloved, we are God’s children know; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when Jesus Christ appears we shall be like Christ, for we shall see Christ as Christ is (1 John 3.2).”¹⁸²

We shall return to specifically Christian treatments of this theme of transformation later. For now what is most important is to see that the theme of consolation as exchange shades into consolation by transformation, both of the dead and of the living. We might also notice how the two flow back and forth, change directions. If the dynamic of consolation moves toward transformation, that may be because transformation *precedes* consolation. That is, the possibility of transformation comes first, and the experience of consolation grows from it.

Consolation’s Structure

From where does consolation come? What does it offer? How does one receive or achieve it? These are questions of consolation’s structure: its *source(s)*, its *claims*, and its *conditions*.

The question of consolation’s sources can be asked like this:

- In what ways is it to be sought within the limits of nature, experience, history, and reason?
- In what ways is it to be sought beyond such limits in a distinctly metaphysical, spiritual, or religious source?
- In what ways is it to be sought in imaginative constructions of the world?

Consolation in *nature* finds its source in the ways life and death interweave in the natural or created world. Seed, germination, growth, plant, flower, seed again, death, decay, fertility, germination, and on it goes. Animals eat the plants, animals eat other animals, both return to the earth whether by digestion or death and it all starts again. Bernd Heinrich offers a lyrical description of a whale fall (the death of a whale in the ocean) and the way the ocean creatures transform the whale into a dazzling and breath-taking array of new life.¹⁸³ Human beings are part

of the same dispensation, being born, tending the plants and animals themselves, nourished by them, and finally returned to the same ground. Is this intricate process a source of human consolation?

Consolation can also draw upon the realm of human *experience*. We have the testimonies of those who grieve and where they have found consolation, as Burton so richly provided, and as we can find only a few clicks away on the Internet. In such sources as friendship, work, duty, family, accomplishments, beauty, time, those who have preceded us testify that consolation can be possible through means that are part of ordinary human experience. The sources may be as distant as a tomb inscription or as near as the neighbor who lost her spouse, but they draw upon the terms of ordinary experience to affirm what is possible.

Sometimes, consolation draws upon *history* as its source. An individual life and death is gathered up into a larger story that gives it special meaning. The loss is figured as a sacrifice for a greater good that endures and can be seen in time. We may not see it in our own lifetimes, but we can see the effect now of good that was done long before. As those who went before us acted, suffered, and died for the sake of a better life for those who followed, so consolation may be taken for the suffering and death that we know.

Consolation can find its source in *reason* and *wisdom*. If death is the way of all flesh, then why do we grieve so? If death is necessary so that life is not choked out by life, then why do we grieve so? If death is the end of suffering, why do we grieve so? If grieving changes nothing, and only makes us suffer more, why do we grieve so? If being dead is no different than before being born, why do we grieve so? One seeks consolation, therefore, in understanding the truth of our condition, a philosopher's (or perhaps a cynic's) consolation, although the philosopher in question may as well be the neighbor next to you as a university professor. Such sources of consolation can all be found *within* what we could call the limits of life as we know it.

Consolation may also draw upon sources that lie *beyond*, in what some would call the metaphysical, supernatural or divine. So Socrates, although speaking as a philosopher, argued for and affirmed a life of the soul that found death to be a release from the limitations and distortions of bodily life, offering freedom for unhindered contemplation of truth. So spiritual affirmations of life, death, and what happens next. So religious affirmations that depict possibilities that we have never seen within the world we know.

There also may be sources of consolation shown to us by neither nature, nor experience, nor history, nor reason, but by some special way of *knowing* or *revelation*. Religious traditions that have authoritative scriptures offer prominent examples of this, with which most of us are familiar, but traditions of revelation can be handed along mouth to ear for generations, and revelation may appear in ecstasy, prayer, and mystical experience, as well. In the West we sometimes call this the distinction between experience, reason and revelation, or nature and grace. Various traditions negotiate what kinds of authority different manifestations of revelation may have, of course, and that is a source of richness and dynamism as well as conflict. How do I weigh the authority of a dream against the authority of a prophet's vision, against the authority of a scripture?

Consolation can also have its sources in neither experience, nor reason, nor revelation but in the *imaginative construction of the world*. We construct geographies, myths, scenes of

heaven and hell, itineraries of souls. Sometimes they become intermingled with more “orthodox” consolations, and sometimes even overtake them. Dante’s depictions of the realm of the dead in the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, left a permanent stamp on Christian religious imagination, but it was hardly the first. Later, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* did the same. C. S. Lewis’s complaint about the kinds of consolation offered to him that purported to be Christian speaks to such imaginative constructions, which can be found very prominently in a wide range of religious literature and music and filling the racks of sympathy card shops. If to someone like C.S. Lewis these were objectionable, to others such imaginative constructions speak more immediately and powerfully to their loss and hope than the more stern-minded terms of “authorized” consolations.

Members of a high school football team imagine their dead teammate as the twelfth man in their huddle. A family imagines grandmother walking and talking in a garden with Jesus. Parents of a dead child crippled since birth imagine her whole and healthy and living a life in death she never did in earthly life, because that’s the way it should have been the first time. I may even tell a consoling story I know is not true simply because the very telling of it brings me consolation (or at least comfort) for as long as the story lasts.

What, if any, relationship is there between the consolations of experience, revelation, and imagination? In practice, the differences between these sources are often not easy to discern, except in the most rigorously presented declarations by which one names explicitly the limits and responsibilities within which consolation is to be found: purely analytic philosophy, for example, purely evidence based natural science, a purely revealed confessional theology, a purely fictional fantasy. Between these alternatives the possible combination of sources is capable of virtually infinite gradation and refinement. Indeed, as we listen to the ways in which consolation is expressed we can hear people drawing upon rich stores of thought, feeling, belief, and imagination from across the whole range of human endeavor. Even perspectives that would seem to be mutually exclusive can be found stitched together into a kind of quilt, pieced together like a mosaic, thrown together like the contents of an unsorted drawer, or most tellingly, hammered together like driftwood and scraps to make a shelter from the storm. We may also hear, however, an insistence that all such sources together offer too little in the face of death, that no matter the source, there can be no consolation. If there is to be shelter from the storm, some will say, it cannot be made of some idea of consolation.

The second feature of consolation’s structure is its *claims*. As Socrates approached his execution he urged his followers not to weep for him because his death would be a release from the limitations of embodied life into the sphere of pure thought, a philosopher’s dream; nevertheless, Socrates’s followers wept (*Phaedo*). As Jesus approached his execution, as the Gospel of John tells it, he consoled his disciples saying that he was going to prepare a place for them. A Roman philosopher famously urged his readers not to have fears for the dead (and for their own deaths) because death puts us beyond the reach of harm (something Job insisted as well), and to take one kind of consolation from this and another from the pleasures and satisfactions to be found in the life that remains. Calvin urged that in the face of grief (as with any suffering) Christians turn their meditation upon God’s faithfulness in the past, providential care in the present, and the promise of future life beyond comprehension. A contemporary philosopher makes an intricate and vigorous argument for the ways in which we survive our death through the actual transformative results of the good we have done.¹⁸⁴ Stand in the

reception line at a funeral and you will hear the bereaved urged to take consolation in memory (“You always have your memories; they can’t be taken away.”), in the present (“You still have your other children,” or “She is an angel looking down upon you right now.”), or in a future beyond their own death (“You will be together again in heaven.”). These are all examples, some hallowed, some humble, of how consolation presents very different kinds of claims concerning the dead, the living, the past, the present, and the future.

The third feature of the structure of consolation is its *conditions*, both for the dead and for the living. What, if anything, must the dead and the living do (whether in the past, present, or future) to receive or achieve consolation? When the ancient Egyptians depicted a scale in which the heart of the deceased was weighed against a feather to determine its justness (with the jackal-god Anubis standing by to devour the unrighteous), this spoke to a condition of consolation. When the Psalmist declared, “No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly (Psalm 84.11),” this spoke to a condition of consolation. When Jesus told the parable of a rich man in torment and a poor man resting in the bosom of Abraham in paradise, this spoke to a condition of consolation. When a Buddhist talks about compassion, karmic return and the movement toward ultimate release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, this speaks to conditions of consolation.

Whatever else religion does, it elucidates what happens when we die, what the duties of the living are, what (if any) consolation may be found, and under what conditions. This is not, however, the sole prerogative of religion and theism. We can find all around us consolations that present conditions of their own. If we endure through the good we have done, then we must do good in order to endure. If through our hard work, then we must work hard. If through the memory of the living, then we must be remembered. If through the life of our descendants, there must be descendants.

These conditions include some account of consolation’s relationship to death and life *as such* (what we could call a general consolation), and also to the *particular* death and life at hand. There may be, for example, an understanding of death itself, and life itself that includes everything and everyone that lives and dies. Take a perspective, let us say, that death is simply an end, neither good nor bad in itself, something that is more original and older than such notions as “good” or “bad,” something older than reason or religion, something intrinsic to the universe and how it works, something with which we simply have to come to terms. “This is the ways things are.”

Such a perspective could be considered by one person a great denial of meaning and consolation. To another it is the framework within which meaning and consolation must and can be found, both in the nature of life and death itself and in relationship to our own particular life and death. I may believe, for example, that death is part of the larger life of things by which the smaller is taken up into the greater, and the greater is itself dependent upon the smaller (which one person might affirm as a mystical chain of being, and another as the way of carbon based life forms). In a different vein, I may believe that nothing is lost to God because God holds the living and the dead alike, or that there is life after life (whether understood naturalistically or religiously) even if it is beyond our comprehension. Such beliefs can provide a *general* consolation at the level of cosmos. As it is with all, so it is with me and mine.

The conditions of consolation can also mean something that is *particular* to the bereavement at hand, the meaning of *this* death, *these* deaths. If I believe that the particular good someone has done will endure, for example, or that someone died bravely for a great cause, or that death means reunion with a loved one who has gone before, such consolation has everything to do with the special identity and history (the drama) of the life that has ended, and the special identity and history of those who survive. Consolation may be found both (or either) at the level of the general or the particular. But it may also be denied, refused, seem impossible or even simply meaningless to the same extent.

Talk of dynamics, structures, claims, and conditions of consolation may sound distant and cold, more analytical than humane. But if distance helps us to understand better the grief that is actually at hand, then it can indeed lead us closer as we respond. It can help us listen more deeply to what possibilities and impossibilities for consolation may be in the face of particular grief. It can help us recognize more fully what is being offered to and by those who have been bereaved, including what may indeed console, solace, comfort, and relieve and what may do exactly the opposite. That is, the architecture of consolation helps us to attend more fully to the actual ways in which consolation is expressed or experienced.

Consolation's Forms

Form refers to the specific ways in which consolation is given shape: a story, a song, a saying, a ceremony, a testimony, an affirmation of faith, a scripture, a gesture, a bodily stance, a practice, a poem, a party, a thought, an insight, a wisdom teaching, a creed, a catechism, a joke, a toast, a sermon, a reading, a prayer, a prophecy, an apocalypse, a dream, a monument, a lesson, a bed of flowers, a stand of trees, a new relationship, a letting go, a holding on...Although we could add to the list, even selecting a few examples from these should be enough to demonstrate the point.

Forms operate by certain recognizable conventions (that's what makes them forms). When someone says, "Let us pray..." we naturally assume a prayer will follow, and we have certain expectations of prayer. We recognize that when someone says, "Did you hear the one about..." that some kind of joke is coming, and we have certain expectations of jokes, expectations that are quite different from prayer. When someone says, "I dreamt last night that we were talking together like we used to do in the kitchen..." or "he came to me in a dream, and smiled, and turned away and walked into the light..." we understand that this is different than saying, "I saw her in the store today; I know it was her, it couldn't have been anyone else..." or "I found a note in his desk that he wrote before he died; he told me not to be afraid..."

The force of such expectations can be very strong, both positively and negatively. To lead someone to believe that you have come to listen with sympathy then proceed to correct them for having the "wrong" feelings may be rightfully seen as betrayal of an implicit understanding of what sympathetic listening is. By the same token, someone who comes genuinely seeking counsel may be distressed to be greeted with funny stories about the person who has died. Yet on another occasion admonition and funny stories may be entirely appropriate and welcome.

Not only do different forms create different expectations, they relate us to one another in different ways. As we considered in “Grief’s Drama” different forms assign us to different roles, including roles of authority and power relations. In a funeral service at church, for example, a sung solo and a hymn – although both are songs – are not the same, even if it is the same song. The solo is sung *for* the community, the hymn is sung *by* the community. Even if the bereaved are not able to join in the singing, they are surrounded by it, and can hear, see, and feel the community.

My maternal grandmother died when I was a young college student and she was buried in her home town many miles from where we lived. At the funeral her home congregation sang, “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past.” The congregation itself sang in four part harmony, a thing I had never heard a congregation do before. I was taken aback by the sight and sound of these strangers (to me) singing so fervently and beautifully and I tried my best to sing with them. My parents sang, too (both good singers), and more than forty years later I can hear that congregation singing in my mind’s ear. I remember nothing of the scripture, the sermon, the prayers, just this harmony of strangers into which I was gathered as my grandmother was being gathered into God. What I remember is the performance of the form.

Ceremonial forms of consolation are not restricted to religious communities, certainly. Perhaps that is because other gatherings can include forms that are not deemed fitting in conventional religious ceremony but can be richly meaningful. Think of the form of the toast, for example. It usually takes place at a meal or other gathering at table, most notably celebrations, anniversaries, bestowal of honors. It also can happen at times of death, as with a wake or memorial. Normally, a person stands, holding a glass and inviting those gathered to fill their glasses for what is to come. The toast may include a memory of the person named, a characterization, an expression of gratitude, an appreciation. Then the speaker raises the glass, calls out the name, offers some final salute, commendation, or blessing and everyone drinks together (something very much like this does happen in religious ceremonies, too; think of the Passover Seder or Christian communion). Then another may stand, and another toast is offered, and another. The gathering is usually family and friends. It is equally at home at a kitchen table, a bar, a restaurant, a campfire. The language is personal, even intimate. The action is communal, and often includes visible and audible assent from those gathered. The tone may be gentle, humorous, determined, sad, rebellious, thoughtful, wise, foolish, loving, any of which may be exactly right for those who have gathered.

Words, signs, gestures, symbols, acts, and more can be forms in which consolation is offered and experienced. Friends and colleagues of a couple whose gay son has died, a son whose sexuality had been both a point of estrangement and reconciliation, plant a tree, marked by a plaque in memory of him, at a theological seminary. Grandchildren write letters about their deceased grandmother and read them aloud at the funeral. A quilt is stitched, each square embroidered with the name of a family member. Another quilt is stitched, embroidered with names of those who died from AIDS and is sent around the country. A mix-tape, a memorial web-site, a video, a photo-montage, a ballad... Such forms can carry very different dimensions of meaning, authority, and relationship, they can point to very different sources, claims, and conditions, testify to very different kinds of exchange, compensation, and transformation, and relieve, assuage, encourage and soothe in very different ways. And the forms matter. And all of

them may constitute consolation. And even in the face of all of them, consolation may not be possible.

The Rhetoric of Consolation

It is important to recognize that forms of consolation are also acts of persuasion that seek to move us toward some desired goal. That is, they are *rhetorical*. Sometimes the persuasion is quite explicit and *sounds* like persuasion. Friends seek to persuade a despairing young widower not to suppose that his life is over, too. A pastor seeks to persuade grieving parents that their daughter who killed herself was and is and will be loved by God. A President seeks to persuade a nation that their war dead did not die in vain. All of them bring forth evidence, reasons, and arguments that they hope will persuade the bereaved to think, feel, believe, and act in particular ways.

Sometimes, however, persuasion *doesn't* sound like persuasion and is all the more persuasive for just that reason. The friend who opens the curtains and walks with you down to the park may say nothing of friendship, consolation, and reasons for living, and yet persuades you of all three. A piece of music on the radio, set in a playlist by a stranger in a different city, knowing nothing of your loss, and thinking of other things entirely, speaks so directly and persuasively that it seems to have played specifically for you. The walk and the music are both full of evidence, reasons, and unspoken argument.

Persuasion takes place within a particular “rhetorical situation.” That means, first of all, that there is a question or problem. How (and by whom) the question or problem is named, of course, makes a great difference, as does the way in which the question is spoken aloud (or not spoken). Assumptions or presuppositions about what a bereaved person is experiencing, the nature of their bereavement, and what would be consoling can often be mistaken. The bereaved may be living out a very different drama within a very different set of relationships and with a very different concern than what is supposed by the person who seeks to offer consolation. The first question, therefore, is about how, why, and by whom the situation is named and understood, and for what reason.

In light of this situation, the second question is what counts as persuasive evidence? The word “evidence” may seem odd when speaking about consolation, perhaps because it reminds us of the courtroom. But its root meaning has to do with an outward sign, especially something visible, something that can be brought forward and shown. The demand for evidence is a way of saying, “Show me something that *matters*.”

I recall presiding at a funeral for a man many of whose friends were quite alienated from the church. Afterwards, one said “I almost didn’t come today because I was afraid that what you’d say would just make me mad. But finally I had to come for John’s sake, and take the chance.” I said, “It’s good that you came.” He only answered, “Yes,” and said nothing about what “yes” meant. He had feared the *rhetoric*. He feared that I would address a question he didn’t have, seek to persuade him of something he didn’t want or need to be persuaded of, based upon evidence and reasons that were irrelevant to him, for purposes he found suspect. Because of this he almost did not attend the funeral of his friend. Not because he did not have questions, but because he feared they would be discounted or ignored.

A young man whose father died of lung cancer - a father who never had smoked, a leader in the church, loving husband and parent, honest and respected business person - says to his pastor, "He did everything right, and I don't see that it changed his luck any. He's still dead." Would it have helped him to know that this was Job's question, or that the scriptures and Christian theology are full of this very question of why we suffer? In what he saw, in what he recognized as evidence that mattered, there was nothing that meaningfully connected his father's life and death or guided him persuasively toward how he might respond.

Another way of considering what matters is to ask what has *authority*. This recalls our discussion of consolation's sources. Scripture, religious teachings, testimonies, philosophy, wisdom, personal stories, experiences, movies, arguments, the ways of the natural world, poetry, song lyrics, children's stories, literature are all examples of what can count as persuasive *evidence* for a person because they all could have some kind of authority that is meaningful. Perhaps they may also, and in different ways, be deemed trustworthy.

The same person may find that different things are persuasive (and authoritative) in different contexts. In church I want to sing "Now Thank We All our God": "O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us...and keep us still in grace and guide us when perplexed, and free us from all ills in this world and the next." This final verse joins the singers and hearers (at least by its form) in prayer. The hymn calls to mind "countless gifts of love" that have accompanied us since birth, and God's providential care. Tradition says it was composed by a 17th century German pastor, Martin Rinkart, during the Thirty Years War. He ministered to his city as it suffered through the famine and plague of a terrible siege, he himself burying as many as fifty people a day. The hymn seeks to persuade its singers and hearers of the mercy and faithfulness of God even in the face of staggering loss.

The same people who sing "Now Thank We All Our God" in church, however, when they gather to drink a toast to their dead friend may choose to sing the traditional song "The Parting Glass": "...but since it falls unto my lot / that I should rise and you should not, / I gently rise and softly call, 'Goodnight, and joy be with you all.'" A leave-taking song sung at the end of a night's celebration becomes a leave-taking song sung to mark the end of a life. The singers take up the role of the one who is departing, reluctant to leave them, but who now must go: rising gently, calling softly, bidding them all joy: the consolation of a last word from their friend. Or perhaps the roles are reversed: they sing as themselves who must rise and leave their friend, and all those they have lost who can no longer rise and go with them: the consolation of a last word *to* their friends. The song seeks to persuade the singers and hearers to *sing*, first of all, to acknowledge that the parting time has come (as it will come to those who sing, too), and to receive and give blessing of joy.

Although a hymn or a parting song may not be what we normally think of as authoritative evidence, both *show* something. Both show what it looks and sounds like to acknowledge life and loss, to embrace the former all the more because of the latter, to join in the community of prayer and singing, and not to be afraid. Perhaps this persuasion lasts only a little longer than the song itself. Perhaps there are other songs that must be sung and others after that. Perhaps there can be no end of singing, because consolation may be a fragile thing that is always vulnerable to fresh loss. As another old hymn says it, "Yes, on through life's long path, Still chanting as we go, From youth to age, by night and day, In gladness and in woe, Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice give thanks and sing."

Consolation and the Court of Life

The persuasion of consolation takes place not in a court of law, but a court of life. Persuasion addresses our cognitive mind, but more besides. It also addresses our emotions and motivations, our imaginations, our deeply held values (especially about right and wrong). The rhetoric of consolation can succeed and fail at all of these levels. The same consolation can be genuinely helpful *and* unhelpful, meaningful *and* meaningless, relevant *and* irrelevant at the same time, but in different ways. The bereaved themselves are the ones who will judge.

Consolation can succeed or fail at the level of *reason and reasoned meaning*. For some, reason and reasoned meaning are what really make sense, the way in which genuine consolation in the genuine terms of embodied, historical life can be found. For them, metaphysical or religious claims cannot bear the test of truth. They may be beautiful poetry or a rich story set in a fantastic world, but their value in the face of actual loss is their beauty and the sense of community they foster, not their truth. A bereaved person may sing the lyrics of a song that in more straightforward talk he or she would never say. The song may, in fact, be meaningful, but not because it tells a truth one can affirm and defend in the clash of ideas. You have seen such a person, surely, sitting quietly at a funeral, doing what the others do, responding graciously to offers of sympathy and consolation, and yet with a distant look that tells you how things stand: this is not the kind of truth I trust; these are not the words I actually can live by; they finally just don't make sense.

The rhetoric of consolation can succeed or fail at the level of *imagination*. For some, the level of reason and meaning is too restrictive and thin in the face of actual loss, it encompasses too little of what we know and how we know. Consolation, therefore, must speak more richly and imaginatively if it is to be persuasive. Images of life after life, for example, and their significance for the life we know have been focal points for both religious traditions and popular culture. Heaven and hell, Paradise, sleep, a garden, a city, scenes of reunion and restoration, punishment and reward, can be found across the whole range of imaginative forms: sermons, children's books, frescoes, stained glass, science fiction, tabloid newspapers, romance novels, pop songs. In a famous rock and roll ballad, "Last Kiss," a teenage boy whose girlfriend died in a car crash in which he was driving asked, "Where, Oh where can my baby be? The Lord took her away from me. She's gone to heaven so I've got to be good, so I can see my baby when I leave, this world."¹⁸⁵

For some, such an imaginative construction is archaic fantasy, stuck in a three-story universe that lost its meaning centuries ago. For them the imaginative construction is not imaginative *enough*. It may be merely sentimental, maudlin. It may be a crude projection of cultural ideals that are suspect to begin with (eternal youth, wealth, leisure, power, revenge, sexual roles, social roles, etc.). It dreams too little of what might be, hopes too little, trusts too little in the complexity, mystery, and transformative power of life and death, or God's capacity to make all things new. In the face of the unknown country of death, of the unknown future for both the living and the dead, of the sometimes shattered world into which a death can propel us, and the need to imagine or think *something* (as opposed to nothing), what kinds of gifts might imagination offer? Ways to affirm life in the face of death, to honor the living and the dead, to celebrate the life we know and have known, to face the future with openness and confidence, and to go about the living of the ordinary days that are at hand. In such a case, *imagination* is another word for *hope*.

The rhetoric of consolation can succeed or fail at the level of *cultural expression and identity*. So much of a community's identity is enacted in what they do when they bury their dead. Clothing, food, family, neighbors, ceremonies, songs, expressions of condolence, recollections of shared history and struggles, the ancestors, the church, the cemetery, the burial plot, the very language that a community speaks, all have a persuasive force. To offer consolation in ways that ignore or overwrite such deep expressions of identity and culture, suggests that this consolation is not really meant for them and their dead but for someone else. By the opposite token, to reaffirm the identity and culture of the community of the bereaved may offer a consolation that no general argument, however eloquent, could. We have seen, however, that cultural expression and identity can be sources of great pain. The grieving who cannot mourn through the expressions and identity of a community, who have experienced a community as hurtful and oppressive, may find an offer of consolation that asserts that very identity to be even worse than unpersuasive. Must we sing the songs of our tormentors even now, even here? How can this be consolation?

The rhetoric of consolation can succeed and fail at the level of *religious belief*. This is a complex matter of imagination, thought and practice. By imagination I mean images, symbols, stories. By thought I mean doctrine, theology, ethics. By practice I mean the things individuals and communities do to express and demonstrate their distinctive religious identity and values, especially in patterns of life and worship. For some, the principal source of consolation in the face of death is, indeed, their religious identity and values. Whatever else is said and done, whatever the local customs might be, consolation means connecting their religious identity to their loss, and framing their own expressions of grief through their religious convictions, images, and practices.

Clearly, this places a special responsibility on those who live and move in multi-religious and theologically diverse contexts. How can we as caregivers, friends, neighbors, as simply fellow human beings offer support to others in such a crucial dimension of consolation? Even in seemingly homogeneous settings, more and more, families and even individuals are themselves walking embodiments of inter-religious life. The question of consolation and religious *beliefs* (in the plural) turns us back to our recognition of the complex relational web in which bereavement, grief, and mourning take place, and the multiple dramas through which the bereaved are interpreting what is happening.

In religious communities, a funeral or memorial service may be understood as an essential demonstration of their identity, containing and being a central instance of the rhetoric of consolation addressed to and by the bereaved and their community. In the funeral or memorial service the community essentially says, "This is who we are, what we believe, and what we do in the face of death." Consolation may fail at this level because it expresses their beliefs inadequately, unclearly, or confusedly, because it neglects the central symbols, images, and stories of the community, because it does not connect the community's practices to the one who has died and those who grieve and mourn. For others, however, for whom such religious identity is marginal, such expressions may be empty forms, utterly unpersuasive, things they do because they think it is expected of them, or they don't know what else to do, or for the sake of others, or, or, or...

At the most difficult level, the rhetoric of consolation must face the question of *justice and injustice*. The dynamic of exchange, compensation, and transformation is often drawn

forward (whether explicitly or implicitly) by the challenge to reconcile death in general and a particular death with claims of justice. To the extent this succeeds, consolation succeeds; to extent it fails, consolation fails. Justice may be expressed in terms of particular events and people, in terms of a greater weight of good over evil in the world, in terms of some real-world outcomes that lie beyond our own lives, or in terms of cosmic justice or last things. Of what kind of justice does a consolation seek to persuade us? What evidence does it show? What argument does it make? What does it promise? What does it ask us to do?

In Christian theology, as we noted, this is sometimes called the question of theodicy, a term that links Greek words for God and justice. As a theoretical problem it asks how we can affirm God's goodness, knowledge, and power in the face of evil, suffering, and death. As a theoretical problem it also can be all-encompassing, touching every aspect of faith from the creation of the world to its ultimate goal and consummation, and all that lies between. It can therefore be a problem that determines whether and in what way talk of God is intelligible and meaningful at all. We may most frequently hear it asked, however, in an urgent and personal way: Why did God let this happen? Where was God? What did we do to deserve this? Did God do this? Why does God hate me? Why not take me instead? How can God be real?

Classical Christian tradition sought to affirm and defend God's power, knowledge and goodness, to assure those who suffered that in the end this would be fully revealed, and to strengthen them for patience, endurance, faith, hope, and love. In such an account, suffering is part of a broken creation, not the way God made the world. Evil and death entered through humankind's sin and fall, itself a result of the free will with which God created us, and through this all of creation came into bondage, too, suffering and groaning as it awaits redemption. Nevertheless, God has not abandoned the world, but rather maintains its order and intelligibility through providential care, bringing forth good out of evil, even when we cannot see how this can be. Beyond this, God has acted in the special history of Israel and the Church to redeem humankind. In the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God has entered into human life to set free all those who have been held captive by death. As God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, God promises to raise those who belong to Christ, and gather them in a new creation in which there will be no crying, pain, or death anymore. Until that day, believers are urged to trust themselves to God in faith, hope in God's promises, and live in love, abiding in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, which can strengthen us for and in all things, especially in suffering, and console us in our bereavement.

There are, of course, many variations and expansions, arguments and nuances, but such an account of the consolation of the gospel would be recognizable to Christians going back twenty centuries. In what ways and for whom this account of justice is persuasive is a different question. We can hear versions of this account behind many of the voices we have encountered, and we can also hear voices of those who find it unpersuasive, skewed, irrelevant, wrong-headed, or even as contributing to people's suffering. The man who very nearly did not attend the funeral of his friend for fear of "consolation" he could not accept represents just such a voice.

Some of those responses, in fact, are voiced most strongly from within the Jewish and Christian traditions themselves: protests, laments, searing and searching cries for answers, demands for accountability, including for harm the rhetoric of consolation has done, for evasion of the complicity of the church in the structures of suffering and death. Calls for confrontation of the human sources of suffering and death rather than only taking care of the wounded after the

fact (and for the dead after they are already dead) have become stronger and stronger. This can be seen in much of the theological reflection that emerged from World War II, the Shoah/Holocaust, Black Theology, womanist and feminist theology, theologies of liberation, political, post-colonial, and post-Christian theologies across the world. We can hear voices of consolation turning away from the arguments and vocabularies of classical theism and asking more and more closely about what it means to tell a story in which response and responsibility toward human suffering, not acquitting God of guilt, is the first claim. Such voices are shifting the discussion of consolation from concerns for divine sovereignty, providence, knowledge, power, goodness, and final justice. They are re-centering it upon fellow-suffering, weakness, co-humanity, participation, compassion, accompaniment, justice-making, and resistance. Such consolation speaks of how God suffers with us and through us, how God comes to us in our weakness and shares life and death with us, how God wears a human face, speaks in human voice, welcomes us with human arms, and walks with us in paths of justice as we say “no” to death and “yes” to life.

Finally, when we consider the persuasion of consolation we come to the importance of the *relationship between the consoler and the consoled*. In ancient rhetoric this came under the heading of *ethos* (or character) and *pathos* (or emotion). *Ethos* referred to the character of the speaker as it was shown in the act of speaking itself. It had to do with certain virtues that were appropriate according to the situation – wisdom, perhaps, nobility of spirit, integrity, honesty, piety, courage, compassion – and that inclined the listener to listen and consider what was being said. The persuasion of *ethos* was essentially a kind of trustworthiness that one experienced in the communication. *Pathos* appealed to the deeply held emotional values and identity of the listener: not who the *speaker* was, but who the *listener* was. In a sense, it was like the appeal to character, only it was the *listener's* character, identity, indeed trustworthiness.

The rhetoric of consolation presents reasons and arguments, but does so in ways that are particular to the situation, the one who speaks, the one who hears, and the relationship between them. What kind of authority does that relationship hold? Is it the authority of religious office, such as priest or pastor? Is it the authority of knowledge, skill or profession, such as a teacher, counselor, or doctor? Is it the authority that comes from having been through other troubles together? Is it the authority of friendship? Is it the authority of anonymity, the authority of a stranger? Is it the authority that comes from suffering loss and grieving, too? Ultimately, authority is the question of trust. What kind of trust, and what degree of trust is there between us? Two people may say the same words, but because I trust one and not the other, I am persuaded by one and unpersuaded by the other.

The rhetoric of consolation includes the consolation we address to ourselves. In instance after instance we find that consolation is so *particular* to those who are bereaved that they must become consolers of themselves. The consolation that is offered by others may, indeed, be incorporated into my own consolation, may supply the very thing I cannot and could never find within myself, but it does not console until I make it my own, believe it, trust it. The need, the insistence upon making meaning that is genuinely meaningful takes shape in the whole range of expressions by which bereavement, grieving, and mourning are enacted. This insistence, I believe, is at the root of resistance to external consolation. In grief I resist (even if only inwardly) those offers of consolation that do not console, that are not fitting, and search for that to which I can say “yes.”

The fact that I must be my own consoler does not make things easier, of course. I may well have as many or more conflicting thoughts and feelings within me than between me and those who would console me. I may well find myself pulled in very different directions, none of which finally have the power to become a trustworthy center. From day to day, and sometimes hour to hour, one may come to the fore and another retreat to the background. One day I may believe that every consolation is a lie, another I may believe that love never ends. One day I may hate the very idea of consolation, another I may weep in gratitude for the ordinary consolation that makes it possible to go on. Grief's experience could be traced through this limping dance of contrasting and conflicting thoughts and feeling. Perhaps it will eventually emerge into some kind of coherence, what we could call "coming to terms" with my loss. That is, I find a way say what I think, feel, and believe that I actually think, feel, and believe.

This quality of consolation – that it must actually become one's own if it is to be consoling – may be an expression of the search for integrity for the bereaved. Death is true, loss is real, so true and real that they put the question to us of what is at least *equally* true and real. This question has the power to put in the balance...everything. Every consolation that rings false can threaten to confirm the fear that *nothing* is as true and real as bereavement. Every consolation that rings false presents a temptation to acquiesce, to repeat without believing, to grant another victory to death and loss: that they can force me into breaking faith with myself. Although it may sound paradoxical, the refusal of a consolation I do not believe can be a resistance to the ultimate claims of death and loss. I reject what I believe is false as a testimony to my hope in what I have not yet seen or heard. My "no" is for the sake of a "yes" that I still hope to say. To put this in the language of scripture, "for God alone my soul waits in silence; my hope is in God (Ps 62.5)."

Until such a time as consolation may come and stay, grief finds me turning and turning again, listening, receiving, weighing, sifting, sorting, arguing, searching for what I can affirm, that is, what I can truthfully say, even (and especially) when no one else is there. If there is to be consolation, it lies down this road.

In the preceding pages we have considered the question of consolation as a place where all the dimensions of grief converge and meet. Its possibility and meaning affect the experience of bereavement and how that loss is known and named. It constantly engages and shapes the grieving thoughts and feelings within us. It gives form and content to our outward mourning practices. It lends significance to experiences of comfort and what we find comforting. The question of consolation has everything to do with our web of relations: with the dead, with ourselves, with the nearer and farther circles of community, with what we understand the world to be, with the nature and meaning of the cosmos, and ultimately God. The question of consolation shapes the Story and the stories, the dramatic plot we enact, the character of our characters, the scenes we play, the speeches and songs, the signs and symbols we show one another. The question of consolation interrogates what we say about the past and its meaning, what we say about the future and what it holds, and how we face the present day, the only one we ever have at hand.

What Can Become of Grief?

What can become of grief and we who grieve? What comfort or even consolation can there be? In the face of all the obstacles, objections, challenges, and dangers that talk of consolation must confront, how can we speak of consolation with those who are bereaved?

No matter how much knowledge we have gathered before, no matter how much insight, wisdom, and understanding we have gained, in the face of each actual grieving person we still have everything to learn. That is why the word *listening* has been of first importance in these pages. If there is to be actual knowledge, insight, wisdom, and understanding in the face of particular grief, we must begin again at the beginning. We must begin again, that is, listening, with everything still to be learned. That we have walked down other paths, stumbled through other woods, stopped at the edge of other cliffs, that we have stood in other empty fields, been lost in other cities, heard other nightmares and dreams, can be of inestimable value. That we ourselves have been guided, taught, and held by others can be of profound help. And it is of greatest value and help when because of what has gone before we receive the courage to let it go and listen again with everything still to learn, hoping to respond to the grief at hand more fully, more fittingly, and more faithfully: to grieve and speak with those who grieve and speak.

What can become of grief and we who grieve? Can there be love again? Joy? Sanity? Peace? Continued relationship with the living and the dead? Can there be a day that is not lived in pain? Can grief be something *more* than pain and still be grief? Can grief, indeed, also be love, joy, sanity, peace, a source of wisdom, compassion? Can there be comfort? Can there be consolation?

If the testimony of those who grieve counts as evidence, the answer to such questions is, indeed, yes. The yes, however, may be difficult: a yes that may sound and feel again and again like no, a yes that may not be believed or believable if it does not confess why such a possibility can seem like a fantasy, a wish-dream, or a lie. It is a yes that, even for those who trust no religion, must be an article of faith in what cannot be seen in advance. It is the kind of yes that requires those who say it to commit themselves to those to whom they listen, with whom they seek to keep faith, and with whom they speak.

So between the contradictions and among the ambiguities and conflicts, the incongruities, and paradoxes, we listen to those who grieve and grieve with them, scandalously. We grieve as a kind of work, as a kind of healing, as a kind of recovery from a wound, as a kind of stewardship of love, energy, strength, as a search for balance and equilibrium, as a discipline of memory, by thinking hard and long, by examination and re-examination, as a navigation of uncharted territory, redrawing the maps as we go, accompanied and alone, helped and hindered, climbing and falling, slipping back and going forward once again, questioning meaning, making meaning, receiving meaning, meeting meaning, silent, talking, writing, weeping, singing, praying. Yes, blundering, fumbling, tripping, staggering, misstep after misstep, again and again, to go scandalously in faith, hope, and love into the dark where we cannot see, but where together we can nevertheless be seen, and known, welcomed, lifted up, spoken to, comforted, and yes, even consoled in ways we cannot think, understand, or imagine. Saying yes, and yes, and yes, scandalously.

Scandalously?

Here at the end I believe it is necessary to speak directly of my own particular understanding and affirmation, my own yes. I have come to see the question of consolation as a kind of *skandalon*, a Greek word that means scandal or stumbling block. The Bible presents testimonies of both wisdom and faith, and challenges both in terms that are more searing than any scoffer or unbeliever. “Why are you so far from helping me...(Ps 22.1)?” “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...(Isa 64.1)” “Has God forgotten to be gracious (Ps. 77.9)?” “Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow (Jer 20.18)?” “Why do you hide your face from me (Ps 88.14)?” “How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever (Ps 89.46)?” “...the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison (Job 6.4).” “My days are past, my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart (Job 17.11).” Jesus prays in agony in the garden, suffers in agony at the hands of soldiers, and dies in agony on the cross, praying “...remove this cup from me...(Mark 14.36)” and “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Mark 15.33)?”

And yet the Psalmist still will testify, “You have turned my mourning into dancing... (Psalm 30.11)” And the prophet speaks of a holy mountain where death is swallowed up forever and all the nations feast together... (Isaiah 25)” And John the Evangelist testifies to the words of Jesus, “I will not leave you orphaned, I will come to you...(John 14.18).” Paul speaks of the death of Jesus as a stumbling block, as an offense to both wisdom and religion that calls both into question and lays both bare, and in a great paradox proclaims it as a consolation for that very reason (1 Corinthians 1). This same apostle who insists that the *good* news preaches Christ *crucified* still hymns the new creation of heaven and earth and the unthinkable transformation of resurrection (Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 15). And John of the Revelation prophesies in ecstasy of a holy city where death and tears are no more (Rev 21).

Skandalon: the stumbling block that trips us up, upsets our balance, causes us even to fall.

Skandalon: the stumbling block that wakes us up, to look to where our feet are, and what caused us to stumble.

Skandalon: the stumbling block that turns things upside down, inside out, power into weakness, weakness into power, wisdom into folly, folly into wisdom.

Skandalon: the stumbling block that turns the power of death back upon itself for the sake of life, that allows us to think the unthinkable, imagine the unimaginable, believe what has never been seen.

To speak of consolation as a *skandalon* means to refuse the false consolations that seek to cover over the reality and pain of death, to go with those who grieve without pretending it is not hell, and without giving promises that are not ours to give, but which we may be able to hear together in the dark, where the voice and the name can be heard, even when, and perhaps even *because*, we cannot see (Isa 50). It is this image of the *skandalon* that accompanies me as I listen to grief. To bear with others’ grief, I believe, is to bear this scandal, to carry it with them, to be marked with the scandal, too, keeping faith with them in the face of utter contradiction, to hope against hope. Saying yes, and yes, and yes.

Epilogue

In Memory of Dr. W. Dow Edgerton, M.D.

1924-2009

My father died on the Third Sunday of Advent, 2009. He was a physician and surgeon, whose life's-work was dedicated to the care of women. With other leaders of the church and community he founded a center to provide healthcare of great quality and dignity to women regardless of their ability to pay. He served for more than thirty years as the clinical director for what is now named, in his honor, the Edgerton Women's Health Center. He was a long and faithful member of Edwards Congregational United Church of Christ, Davenport, Iowa. He was survived by his wife, my mother, Rose Marie Edgerton, his grandsons Peter and John, his great-granddaughter Eliza Cynthia, and now his great-grandson Asa Dow who looks back at us with his great-grandfather's eyes.

The canticle for the day of his death (and for his memorial) was drawn from Isaiah 35: "The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose...it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with praise and singing...The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall hear, the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy...As the ransomed return to the Lord, they shall come back singing unto Zion, with joy..."¹⁸⁶

This is the memorial I offered at the worship service in his memory.

Today we begin at the end. The culminating weeks of Dow Edgerton's life – the life of a husband, father, grandfather, great-grandfather, physician and surgeon, scholar, leader, advocate for women, friend, follower of Jesus, and more – the culminating weeks were a time of distillation. He was so happy to see grandsons Peter and John, their spouses Gabi and Heather, my wife Marcie. He relished the prospect of a soon-to-arrive great-grandchild: a boy, or a *girl* at last? Then the demands of illness concentrated his strength into ever more brief periods of waking, and attention in those moments to what was most important. In those last weeks he had delighted in the birth of his great-grand-*daughter* Eliza, gazed intently at pictures of her, only hours old, held in the arms of her mother and father. He saw one final time Peter and John, saw

almost every time he opened his eyes, Rose Marie, to whom he was husband for 64 years. Whenever he opened his eyes, with what small strength remained he always spoke of love. Sometimes with a conspiratorial wink and a wry tilt of his head (as if to say, “nothing to be afraid of here”). Sometimes with a smile and kiss of the air. Sometimes in a phrase or a couple of words, and sometimes only the single word itself: love.

The last afternoon of his life, with Rose Marie and Pastor Katherine Mulherne, he who could barely speak prayed the Lord’s Prayer, beginning to end, with perfect memory and a firm voice. Earlier that afternoon, as I was leaving I said, “I’ll see you later,” which was what I always said. Characteristically he would answer, “See you later.” That day he smiled and said, “Good-bye.” And still earlier that day he had opened his eyes, and said simply the word, “Wonderful.”

Wonderful. I don’t know all that he meant by that, but I suspect he meant *all*. All of it, from the end to the beginning and back to the end, all of it: wonderful.

There he is in an old photograph with his grandmother, Alma Jane Hale. They are posed on the porch of a house. Born in 1861, she had been mother of eight children. In one of the terrible measles epidemics at the end of the 19th century, she had fallen ill, swam for days in a nightmare fever, and awoke to learn that three of her children had been had been carried away by it. She bore three more, perhaps in sheer defiance of death, the very last being Kathryn (Hale), his mother, of whom he was the only child. Kathryn was widowed not even two months later. Alma Jane looked so severe and serious in the photo (and why wouldn’t she be?). When I asked him once if that was what she was like he seemed startled by the thought. “Oh, no,” he said, “she was very gentle and kind.” Wonderful.

In another photo, years later, a smartly dressed young couple smile at the camera. Dow and Rose Marie, on their honeymoon to the exotic destination of St. Louis, where they already lived, traveling across town to spend the day at the home of his Uncle Paul. Well, it was the war, and he was in medical school, and she was working at the hospital and it was all they could afford. Yet their expressions say, “Wonderful.”

In another photo he is at sea, a young Navy doctor on the bridge of a ship, learning to take a sun position with the sextant. In another he is clowning in an outlandish hat, knife in his teeth, climbing over the rail like a boarding pirate. He told the story sometimes of how they once lost a man overboard in the North Atlantic in foul weather. They lowered a boat away to try to get him back, taking the young doctor whose skills would be needed should they succeed. Within minutes, he said, he no longer knew where they were. In the wind and waves he couldn’t tell where they should look or where the ship was. But they *found* him, the lost sailor, hurt but alive. The young doctor did what only he could do, what he was needed for. But he knew that as the sailor needed him, the doctor needed those other seamen, and they all needed the chief at the helm, who could find the lost sailor and steer them all home to the circling ship.

Father loved to tell that story. I think that to him all of it was a story about medicine, and community, and how we need one another. Wonderful

Most of the photographs of Dow are ones he took, not ones taken of him. We have hundreds and hundreds of them, mostly Kodachrome and Ekatchrome slides. When mother and father traveled, as they so loved to do together, a camera was their constant companion. Turn out the lights, turn on the projector, and find yourself in Tahiti, Moorea, Bora-Bora, maybe Fiji, or the Trust Territories, Truk, Koror, Yap. Switch the carousel, and find yourself in Egypt at the temple of Karnak, Hatshepsut's temple, or the Valley of the Kings, Aswan, Abu Simbal, Luxor. Switch again and you are in Leningrad, Moscow, Bucharest, Budapest, sailing down the Rhine to Austria, strolling in a Viennese park. Switch again and who knows where you'll be. He does not appear in them, not in the usual sense, but in another way he appears in every one. Every one is a kind of testimony. Here is where I was, this is what I saw, this picture is what I made. Isn't it wonderful?

Then there are those images that are not recorded on any film, but in the mind's eye. There he is in the operating room, scrubbed and masked, but his eyes, his eyes, immediately recognizable by his eyes. There are his hands, his fingers *not* the long slender ones you might expect in so fine a surgeon, but short, supple, quick, strong. "The myth of surgeons with long, slender fingers," he said, "comes from surgeons with long slender fingers."

In the mind's eye, there he is at the cabin in Wisconsin, serenading the neighbor's heifers with his clarinet as they snuffled, curious, up to the fence. Taking movies of the grandsons pedaling the miniature John Deere tractor, one in the seat, the other sitting happy as a load of hay in the wagon. There he is with Peter on his back, clambering over ruins on Crete, or combing a Maui beach with John, searching for hermit crabs. There he is at home decanting a bottle of old Bordeaux at Christmas dinner, while others on the sideboard wait their turn to accompany the Roast Beef and Yorkshire Pudding he so loved, or beaming over the family table at Thanksgiving, honing the knife on the steel before surgical work on the holiday bird. In the later years, as the necessities of age changed so much, there are the images simply of his face lit with delight as he sees you coming through the door, "So *good* to see you," he'd say, or "Hello, friend," and you knew you had been seen. Then there he and mother would be standing at the door as you drove away, smiling and waving you out of sight.

Wonderful. All of it: the cost and joy, the celebration and sorrow that doctors know. The difficult work of being a physician, the interrupted sleep and endless concern for patients, the disciplines of mind, body and spirit, constant learning, the successes that meant a life saved, and the losses to which he was never reconciled, even when all that was humanly possible had been done. He would approve of our passage from Isaiah, about lame people walking, and hearing restored, and speech restored, and sight restored, and singing restored, and home restored, coming home with joy. He would approve; but would only want to go himself, I believe, if it would be in the company of all those others, all of us, together. All of us, all of it, all, redeemed.

Near the end, not even 24 hours remaining, Dr. Edgerton prayed with his wife Rose Marie, and his pastor, prayed in a firm and clear voice the prayer that he learned surely from his own grandmother Alma Jane, and his mother Kathryn. He said good-bye to his son. He spoke the word, Wonderful.

What is there to say in response to such a life, such a gift? He would want, I believe, for us not to speak *about* him, but rather to speak *with* him. To say, Yes, and Thanks. To speak of love, and love, and love again. From end to beginning and back to the end, and now to a new beginning. To say *wonderful*, wonderful, wonderful, oh, wonderful...

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