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Religion and Spirituality in Adjusting to Bereavement *Grief as Burden, Grief as Gift*

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Both religion-spirituality and death play central roles in the human experience (Wuthnow, Christiano, & Kuzlowski, 1980). Accordingly, religious traditions and academic disciplines such as theology and philosophy have long featured death as a central theme, and have long considered ways to deal with the burden of grief, which is an unavoidable aspect of existence. *Grief* refers to the deep sorrow following significant losses, the experience of mourning. This burden is the psychological weight experienced by the loss of a loved one, the loss of identity or status, the loss of relationship, the loss of place or thing, and the loss of capacity. These are the five great territories of grief (Halifax, 2008).

Grief can be an underlying mental process that flavors a life continuously or an experience that one passes through and is resolved in a positive manner, bringing about a greater sense of humanness, compassion, and wisdom. Grief is a multivalenced experience that can include shock, denial, numbness, anger, longing, yearning, searching, disorganization, despair, and potential reorganization. The burden of the loss can be carried over a lifetime or laid down. Grief can be seen as a natural human process giving rise to one's basic humanity, yet it can also be a potential trap, a no-exit, a source of chronic suffering.

Grief, of course, is a profound and often complex response for those who have been left behind by the dying. Survivors are often broken apart by the knowledge that they cannot bring back that which has been lost. The sense of irrevocability leaves them often helpless and sad, sometimes cognitively impaired, and sometimes socially withdrawn. And then there is the taste of grief in the landscape of Western culture, which is conditioned to possess and not let go; and yet beings and things are inevitably lost as we live our lives in this all-too-transient world. All

human beings face loss, moment by moment; there is nothing that we can fully possess forever, even our own minds.

Often we associate grief only with the experience of loss that family members and friends go through upon the death of a loved one. But grief touches others as well. For example, dying people also can grieve before they die. They can grieve in anticipation of their death for all they will seem to lose and what they have lost by being ill. Such losses can include that of control, identity, wellness, healthy appearance (loss of hair, for example), energy, psychosocial engagement, and relationships, finally touching on the future loss of life. Anticipatory grief is a fairly normal response to upcoming loss and death, and the symptoms that one experiences in mourning are parallel to the symptoms of anticipatory grief, including a dying person feeling shock, denial, profound sorrow, withdrawal from the world, depression, anger, alienation, and physical and mental pain.

The resolution of grief is important. If grief is not been sufficiently attended to after the loss of a loved one, it may remain unresolved for a long period of time. For example, family and friends of the deceased can become consumed by the busyness of the business that happens right after someone dies. This is one of the great problems that one faces in the Western way of dying: that business is so much a part of the experience of dying and death. Survivors often face a complex situation on the material level in the after-death phase. They find themselves looking for a funeral home, letting friends and family know that a death has happened, and creating a funeral service. Unraveling health insurance, taxes, and the last will and testament also takes time and energy at this stage. Later there is cleaning up, dividing and giving away the deceased's property, and other seemingly endless chores of closure. Resorting to the business and busyness of death can be a way for survivors to avoid or be taken away from the depth of their own loss.

Bereavement is universally recognized as a critical life experience with which humans must grapple, as is its potential for strong positive and negative implications that reverberate throughout the lives of those who remain behind. Religious and spiritual answers are universally applied to the problems presented by bereavement (Wuthnow et al., 2010). Curiously, however, relatively little social science research has addressed the role of religion or spirituality in adjusting to the death of a loved one. This lack of empirical attention may reflect a reluctance of mainstream social scientists to examine metaphysical constructs (Paloutzian & Park, 2005). In the remainder of this chapter, we review empirical research and theoretical perspectives on religion and spirituality in the context of bereavement and then illustrate these linkages with examples from Christian and Buddhist traditions. The chapter concludes with a Buddhist practice offered as a means to work with grief.

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EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY, AND ADJUSTMENT TO BEREAVEMENT

In spite of the tremendous advances in science and technology and a cultural thrust toward secularity, religion and spirituality continue to thrive throughout the world and there is little evidence of its abatement (Park, Edmondson, & Hale-Smith, in

press). For example, in a recent nationwide poll in the United States, 56% of adults said that religion is *very important* to them, and an additional 25% said it is *some-what important* to them; 63% reported being a member of a church or synagogue, whereas 42% reported having attended services there in the past week, numbers that are consistent with, and even somewhat higher than, those in polls from earlier decades (Gallup, 2009). The pervasive presence of religion and spirituality over time and place is likely due, at least in part, to the provision of meaning that they provide, particularly in times of high stress (Park et al., in press; Wuthnow et al., 1980). Recent years have seen a renewed empirical interest in religiousness and spirituality (Paloutzian & Park, 2005), such that academic disciplines seem to be finally acknowledging the influence of religion and spirituality that is well established in the broader culture.

One result of this increased research focus on religiousness and spirituality is the emerging consensus that religion and spirituality comprise myriad dimensions (Wortmann & Park, 2008). For bereavement research, this recognition of the complexity of religiousness and spirituality is important because it allows researchers to delve much more deeply into these phenomena, producing a much more nuanced body of literature. However, it also means that researchers must strive to look beyond simplistic assessments such as service attendance or denomination, taking into account religious and spiritual aspects such as relationships with God and congregation, religious emotions and attachments, views of God, experiences of the transcendent, beliefs, commitment, meaning, and many others. For example, a bereaved individual's denomination may inform the impact of the loss and his or her way of grieving with it, but so might many other aspects of his or her religious and spiritual life (Wortmann & Park, 2008).

At present, the body of empirical literature addressing religious and spiritual influences on psychological adjustment following bereavement must be interpreted with caution because nearly all of the studies on this topic suffer serious methodological limitations. For example, many studies that have attempted to determine how religiousness or spirituality influence adjustment to loss of a loved one assessed both religious or spiritual variables and adjustment variables at the same time. Findings from studies using such cross-sectional designs cannot determine whether there is a causal relationship and, if so, its direction. If a positive association is found between religion and grief, it may mean that those who are suffering more turn more to their faith to help them through, or that something about religion or a particular type of religion leads people to suffer more, or that some underlying third variable (e.g., personality) is influencing measures of both religiousness and grief. All of these interpretations of cross-sectional correlational findings are plausible, but none is conclusive. In addition, most studies have not included a control group of individuals who are not bereaved. Thus, it is unknowable whether any links found between aspects of religion-spirituality and adjustment to bereavement are specific to the context of bereavement or simply reflections of the relationship between religion-spirituality and well-being found in the population at large (Stroebe, 2004).

With these caveats, what conclusions can we draw from extant empirical studies? Three recent systematic reviews (Becker et al., 2007; Hays & Hendrix, 2008;

Wortmann & Park, 2008) have usefully aggregated the literature on these linkages. The majority of the studies reviewed reported generally positive relationships between religion-spirituality and some aspects of adjustment to bereavement, particularly if observed over time. For example, in a study of bereaved elderly adults, most of whom had lost a spouse, higher levels of religious coping were related to more functional disability at baseline (Pearce et al., 2002). However, at follow-up, higher use of religious coping was associated with improved physical health, whereas lower use of religious coping was associated with decreased health status, even controlling for other explanatory variables such as age, health, and health-promoting behaviors.

All three reviews noted that although studies often reported some positive relations between religion or spirituality and some indicator of well-being, they typically failed to find consistent effects. For example, studies often report a favorable relationship for one dimension of religion-spirituality but not for others or for one aspect of adjustment but not for others (e.g., Park & Cohen, 1993). Thus, the reviews were remarkably consistent in concluding that the studies do not provide conclusive evidence regarding relations between religion-spirituality and adjustment in bereavement. For example, Hays and Hendrix (2008) noted, “[C]onclusions concerning the role of religion in coping with bereavement remain elusive because study designs generally lack rigor” (p. 341), and Becker et al. (2007) concluded that “no statistically significant findings could be reported in the studies. Most studies reported positive effects of spiritual or religious beliefs on bereavement. However, there is a lack of evidence because of weaknesses in design and methodological flaws” (p. 215). All three reviews noted the difficulties and complexities in conducting this research and ended with calls for better research designs to more definitively address these critical questions.

THEORETICAL MODELS OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY: ADJUSTMENT TO LOSS

People often report that their religion or spirituality was helpful or even essential for getting through and recovering from their grief (see Wortmann & Park, 2008, for a review) in spite of the lack of solid empirical evidence that this is so. Indeed, there are strong theoretical rationales for positing that religion and spirituality can strongly impact the process of grieving. For many individuals, religion or spirituality underlies their general approach to life and forms the system of meaning through which they experience and understand the world and operate on a daily basis, making the universe seem benign, safe, just, coherent, and, ultimately, controllable (Park et al., in press). Clearly, when facing highly stressful experiences such as the death of a loved one, this meaning system will influence their responses to it.

Religious and spiritual perspectives provide many resources for understanding and coping with loss. Many traditions provide perspectives on death, such as viewing loss as illusory rather than real or as a necessary step toward a more glorious future. Several predominant religious belief systems hold out possibilities for

everlasting life and for reunification with the lost loved one after one's own death (Greeley & Hout, 1999). Beliefs in a soul that is separate from and persists after the death of the physical body also allows for the possibility of remaining in contact with the deceased (Benore & Park, 2004), a commonly reported experience in the United States (Klugman, 2006).

In addition, religious and spiritual traditions offer a panoply of coping resources for dealing with death. These resources include social support from pastors and fellow congregants, and many rites and rituals to assist mourners through the process of grieving. For example, all religious traditions prescribe specific prayers, behaviors, and funeral ceremonies to deal with death, which comfort mourners and give them a sense of structure and a sense of belonging to a broader community (Wuthnow et al., 1980). Through these resources, individuals may find solace and comfort and, over time, work through their grief in ways that allow them to find peace and acceptance and to return to their normal daily lives (Halifax, 2008). Of course, normal life is forever changed with the loss of a loved one, and people often carry a lingering sense of sadness and longing for the lost person (Stroebe, Abakoumkin, & Stroebe, 2010).

Importantly, mitigating negative outcomes is not the only possibility represented by religious and spiritual approaches to bereavement. In fact, many religious and spiritual traditions hold that the suffering experienced through bereavement can be an impetus for transformative spiritual experience. Such a perspective holds that to deny grief is to rob one of the heavy stones that will eventually be the ballast for the two great accumulations of wisdom and compassion. Indeed, grief is a vital part of our very human life, an experience that can open compassion, and an important phase of maturation giving depth and humility to life; it can be regarded as a gift. Grief can ruin or mature us. Like the mother who bathed her dead baby in her breast milk, grief can remind us not to hold on too tightly as it teaches us tenderness and patience with our own suffering. Many bereaved individuals report extensive personal growth following bereavement, including increased appreciation for life, enhanced spirituality, and closer interpersonal relationships, and religious and spiritual pathways are a common pathway to this transformative growth (Park, 2005).

CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON BEREAVEMENT

Christianity comprises an array of denominations that vary widely in many ways, including their views of God and human nature as well as their views of death and the possibilities of life after death. Thus, generalizations about Christian perspectives on bereavement can only approximate any particular strain of Christianity. Nonetheless, most Christians hold the pursuit of eternal life as central, and see human existence as a prelude to this everlasting life (Engelhardt & Iltis, 2005; Greeley & Hout, 1999). According to the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted in the United States, nearly all Christians believe in an afterlife consisting of union with God, peace and tranquility, and reunion with loved ones (Greeley & Hout, 1999).

Christian beliefs generally provide comfort for the bereaved (Wortmann & Park, 2008). For example, in a qualitative study of adult daughters describing the loss of their mothers, one participant stated,

The body goes away but the spirit lives on, you know. I often picture her [mother] in my mind because you will meet your loved ones again. I said, "Oh God, she's with her mother, her father, my sister, her brothers and her sisters." If I live right, I'll meet them there too. At death, you know, you're going on to a better place. (Quoted in Smith, 2002, p. 317)

However, Exline (2003) noted that the GSS revealed that beliefs in hell as well as in heaven were common among Christians; she speculated that, particularly for those who are bereaved, the specific content of afterlife beliefs may influence their impact on the process of bereavement. For example, depending on the specific features of the deceased's life and death, concerns may arise about the loved one being in danger of going to hell. Exline gave the example of a bereaved Catholic who was concerned that her sister, who had committed suicide, might be eternally damned.

BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON BEREAVEMENT

Buddhism emphasizes that death is an unavoidable and natural part of life, and focuses on how the principles of compassion and respect for all living beings can be carried out in all contexts, including bereavement (Keown, 2005). Buddhists explicitly acknowledge the impermanence of the world and the nonreality of the individual ego, positing that suffering is caused by attachments to particular people or objects that are fleeting or illusory. Insights into the Buddhist approach to loss can be gleaned from some of the stories of the first nuns of Gautama Buddha, 2,500 years ago. These accounts are rendered by Susan Murcott (2006) in *The First Buddhist Women*.

In one story, Ubbiri, one of the first women Buddhists, was drowning in grief as a result of the death of her daughter. Through the help of the Buddha, she discovered truth from within the experience of her own suffering. Ubbiri came from a high family in Savatthi. She was beautiful as a child, and when she grew up she was given to the court of King Pasenadi of Kosala. One day she became pregnant by the king and gave birth to a daughter whom she named Jiva, which means "alive." Shortly after being born, however, Jiva died. Ubbiri, wounded by grief, went every day to the cremation ground and mourned her daughter. One day, when she arrived at the cremation ground, she discovered that a great crowd had gathered. The Buddha was traveling through the region, and he had paused to give teachings to local people. Ubbiri stopped for a little while to listen to the Buddha but soon left to go to the riverside and weep with despair. The Buddha, hearing her pain-filled keening, sought her out and asked why she was weeping. In agony she cried out that her daughter was dead. He then pointed to one place and another where the dead had been laid, and he said to her,

Mother, you cry out "O Jiva" in the woods.
Come to yourself, Ubbiri.
Eighty-four thousand daughters
All with the name "Jiva"

Have burned in the funeral fire.
For which one do you grieve?

Murcott (2006, p. 94)

Grieving is a landscape that is so varied and so vast that it can be discovered only through one's own most intimate experience. It touches the one who is dying, those around a dying person, and those who survive. No one escapes its touch, nor in the end should we. The river of grief pulses deep inside all human beings, hidden from view, but its presence informs one's life at every turn. It can drive a person into the numbing habits of escape from suffering or bring an individual face-to-face with his or her own humanity.

When the 18th-century Japanese Haiku master Issa lost his baby daughter, he wrote,

The dewdrop world
is the dewdrop world
and yet—and yet.

Issa (1994, p. 191)

Issa has not yet been released by the anguish of grief. But the hand is beginning to open. And like the transiency of his precious daughter's life, one hopes his grief also passed.

The Zen nun Rengetsu expresses the poignancy of loss and impermanence in this way:

The impermanence of this floating world
I feel over and over
It is hardest to be the one left behind.

Rengetsu (2005, p. 117)

Buddhism holds that grief can be a pathway for spiritual transformation. An old woman once told a caregiver that wisdom and compassion are not given to us; they can only be discovered. The experience of discovery means letting go of what one knows. When an individual moves through the transformation of the elements of loss and grief, he or she may discover the truth of the impermanence of everything in life and, of course, of this very life itself. This is one of the most profound discoveries to be made. In this way, grief and sorrow may teach gratitude for what one has been given, even the gift of suffering. From grief, one can learn to swim in the stream of universal sorrow. And in that stream, one may even find the gift of joy.

A BUDDHIST PRACTICE FOR TRANSFORMING GRIEF

This practice, based on the Buddhist practice of the Boundless Abodes, consists of phrases that can help us swim the waters of grief until grieving is transmuted

into compassion and equanimity (Halifax, 2008, p. 195). In this practice, we are guided again and again toward the arms of grief. Transformation comes when we are touched by loss, come to know it, and experience purification through being fully washed in its waters. When practicing these phrases, let the body settle; you can either sit or lie down. Remember why you are practicing; cultivate a tender heart. Then find the phrase or phrases appropriate to you, practice them with the breath, or let your attention rest gently with each phrase as you work with it.

- May I fully face life and death, loss and sorrow.
- May I be open to the pain of grief.
- May I find the inner resources to be present for my sorrow.
- May loving kindness sustain me.
- May I accept my sadness, knowing that I am not my sadness.
- May I accept my human limitations with compassion.
- May I accept my anger, fear, anxiety, and sorrow.
- May I forgive myself for not meeting my loved one's needs.
- May I forgive myself for mistakes made and things left undone.
- May sorrow show me the way to compassion.
- May I be open with others and myself about my experience of suffering and loss.
- May I receive the love and compassion of others.
- May I find peace and strength that I may use my resources to help others.
- May all those who grieve be released from their sorrow.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Although the empirical research has not (yet) convincingly demonstrated the helpfulness of religion in dealing with loss, most people will continue to turn to their religious or spiritual beliefs and practices for solace, comfort, and understanding in the midst of their bereavement. In this chapter, we have illustrated several different religious and spiritual approaches to coping with grief; there are many others. Through these different religious and spiritual pathways, grievors may find their way through their burdens and, perhaps, transform them into compassion and a deeper way of living.

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