

Belief and Bereavement: The Notion of “Attachment” and the Grief Work Hypothesis

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Abstract

Death and bereavement are both unavoidable points along the imaginary of life, as we navigate lives that are punctuated by a seeming infinite number of events, including the eventuality of death. For some individuals, religion appears to provide the theoretical and theological frameworks that constitute the multiple socially and culturally determined narratives through which one can make sense of the eventuality of death and loss. This sense-making often entails reconstructing and reassembling the grasp of the loss in a way that reaffirms core theological beliefs about the self and world, and the world beyond.

This paper is a theoretical engagement with the widely held conviction that religion and religious beliefs offer reflective tools for accepting and coping with the death of a loved one and brings a critical gaze to the notion of “attachment” and “continuing bonds” within the context of the “Grief work” hypothesis. “Grief work Theory” puts forward a model for “detachment” and severing ties and bonds with the deceased to aid the process of coping with loss and grief, and suggests that this severing is essential for the process of healing, restoration and return to normality for the bereaved. However, the paper engages with the view that religious frameworks

and “death specific beliefs” offer a form of ‘attachment’ or ‘continuing relationship’ that is healthy and beneficial rather than pathological, and is more in accordance with insights from later grief research and ‘Continuing bonds Theory’. By peeling back the theoretical wrappings around the notion of attachment, more specifically within grief and death counselling, the paper attempts to lay bare a theological re-understanding and re-contextualisation of ‘attachment’ in the context of grief and bereavement, and bereavement counselling.

Introduction

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

Rengetsu

You are there,
And I am not...
Where are you?
I know that not...

By a daughter left behind

Of all the phenomena that are unknowable and impenetrable to us as scholars, even more so than religious and mystical experiences, is the singular phenomenon of death. This is for the simple reason that while mystical experiences are by their very nature ineffable and outside the phenomenological grasp of the scholar, and beyond the slippery semiosis of language and words, here at least the individual, as the “experiencer of the experience,” is present for us to observe, to ask questions of, and to draw conclusions from the constructed narratives they offer. However, “death” appropriates entirely and completely to itself, the one held confined in its grip. It is the one thing that is utterly unavailable to the rest of us, until we are in its unremitting fatal clutch ourselves.

It is thus an age old adage, rendered no less fictitious by its sustained use; that death is the singular absolute certainty that one can have of life.¹ Hence death and its shadow companion, bereavement, are both unavoidable stops along the continuum of life. Since death is such a ubiquitous event that affects everyone at some point or other, it goes without saying that critical research into this aspect of “life,” is of immense value. While the deceased is the one directly affected, the ones who are left behind are not left untouched and often squat at the borderlands of pain and heartache,

and for a significant minority, the unrelenting pain of complicated grief and post loss trauma manifest in pathologies of depression and protracted post loss anguish. The significance of post-bereavement “meaning-making” and restoration has thus much to contribute to the fabric of both clinical and social science research as a whole.

In the past, religious experience and the bereaved’s theological interpretive frameworks have been largely marginalised in counselling literature and practice, except by practitioners and pastoral counsellors who may themselves self identify as adhering to some form of religion or spirituality. Thus while there is a substantial amount of work in what has been termed “death studies,” spanning the spectrum of socio-cultural and psychological and clinical issues across death, dying and bereavement, such as burial and funerary rituals, counselling, and grief-work, studies across the disciplines of psychology, anthropology and sociology have only more recently turned to religion and spirituality in the context of death and dying. Perhaps social science (Egbert and Coeling 2004; Wilkum and MacGeorge 2010; Burke et al 2011) and clinical research (Harrison et al 2001; Yi et al 2006; Hill and Pargement 2008; Shi et al 2010) are beginning to catch up with what has been considered conventional wisdom; that religious beliefs allow the bereaved (in a sense), to attempt to assimilate the loss-experience into their pre-loss beliefs and self narratives (see Park and Folkman 1997). This assimilation often entails reconstructing and reassembling the comprehension and grasp of the loss in a way that reaffirms core theological beliefs about the self and world, and the world beyond, conceived in several religious traditions, as an “afterlife.”

Religious beliefs about death and an afterlife are in turn an intrinsic part of many religious worldviews. Such core metaphysical beliefs form the adhesive “glue” that holds together the features and offers the discernible face of a particular religion. These beliefs assemble the unique defining features that distinguish one religion from the next. Yet, however similar or dissimilar the various faces of the different religions and their interpretive frameworks may be, they are claimed (see Walsh 2002; Wortman and Park 2008) as being able to offer solace and constructs of meaning within the contexts of stress and distress, and especially in the context of death and bereavement. And although death and loss can offer challenges that may threaten to undermine ones sense of relationship to God and to ones wider religious community (see Burke et al 2011), there is a growing (albeit small) body of scientific and clinically based research that suggests connections between religion and both mental and physical health during periods of mourning and loss.

This paper takes its cue from Benmore and Park (2004) in accepting the

bereaved's phenomenological reality and experience of pain and suffering, and argues that religious, death specific beliefs are important psychological phenomena in their own right, and so deserving of critical scrutiny. The paper is a theoretical engagement with the widely held idea that religious, death specific beliefs offer tools for accepting and coping with the death of a loved one, and are thus seen as vital avenues of research for understanding how some people comprehend and cope with grief and bereavement. It is also in a sense, an exploratory theoretical engagement with how bereavement theories and models of grief work may benefit from incorporating insights from the bereaved's repertoire of death specific beliefs. It is critical that we challenge how we conceptualize the experience of grief and the process of mourning, as this informs how we assess those experiencing difficulties in adjusting to their loss, as this in turn guides grief therapy approaches. My aim here is to contribute to a conversation around probing a theoretical framework that attempts to grasp the nature of coping with bereavement that includes religious afterlife beliefs and narratives (of the bereaved).

There are currently studies that focus on the indices of various indicators and resources offered by religious doctrine and the surrounding faith community to the bereaved, as well as studies attempting to (both quantitatively and qualitatively) measure the adherents' use of these resources. However, literature on grief-specific religious coping, with studies using measurements of grief symptom severity alongside measurements of religious coping, is as yet poorly represented in the scientific literature (Wortmann and Park 2008). Given this, the paper attempts to contribute to a narrower thread in the wider intellectual conversation on religion and grief, death and bereavement coping and counselling (see Benmore and Park 2004; Weaver et al 2006; Peres et al 2007) by more specifically probing the Grief Work hypothesis which maps out a model for coping during bereavement by severing ties and attachment to the deceased.

Much of the literature in death and bereavement, or grief counselling, appears to me, to be fundamentally flawed and implicated in a crisis of sorts, as its locus lies in an overly medicalised approach that misses the wood for the trees, so to say. In a bid to assist the bereaved move away from pain, there is has been an overly clinical prescription for closure and resolution, often spelled out as detaching and "moving on." All of this, I feel, elides the "person" and may well dishonour *both* the bereaved, as well as the deceased. This paper's conceptual point of departure is that grief and bereavement counselling speak to issues of *both* separation and relatedness, while early grief work therapy only acknowledges the former, for example separation and needing to emotionally disengage from the deceased. This skewed approach needs to be problematised as we bring into critical focus,

later constructivist models of bereavement theories that attempt to move away from such ideas of detachment. The notions of “detachment” and “attachment” allow us to probe alternate understandings of these concepts within religious frameworks that speak to continuing the relationship with the deceased in a way that the loved one is meaningfully reintegrated within the bereaved’s self narrative and identity. While the paper is largely a theoretical engagement, it draws from salient clinical studies in psychology and counselling as well as empirical studies in anthropology and sociology.

Grief

Grieving refers to the psychological component of bereavement, the intense and often overwhelming feelings and yearning evoked by a significant loss, and experienced by the bereaved (Madison 2005: 348). In many, if not most instances, what the bereaved yearns for above all else is for the continuing presence of the loved one. In the face of the eventuality and factuality of their bereavement (they would have wished their loved ones never to have died), is their incredible deep yearning for some sense of the *continuing* and *continued* presence of those they have lost. However, it is only within a religious framework and a death specific belief in an afterlife that such a possibility can “make sense.” For how can *one who is no longer*, who breathes no more and smiles no more, be *here*, be *somewhere* for the bereaved to feel, to see, to hear again, except within the particular theological understandings of the world that religious frameworks offer? Religion appears to comfort the adherent with understandings that transcends materialism, and offers the assurance of the continued existence of the “person” beyond seemingly finite clinical death. In the words of Greg Madison (2005: 342), bereavement brings to the fore “a linked confrontation of two fundamental existential givens; death and relatedness.”

For religion offers the assurance that as mortal beings, one shares in immortality, and a life that transcends existential bounds. Within the normative theological mappings of religions and their belief structures, are the exegetical understandings of the person as beyond mere corporeal body and beyond the materialism of blood, muscle and sinew. As Thurston and Hagedorn put it, a powerful reason why individuals turn to religious beliefs and practices in a bid to cope with grief and the loss of the loved one “is because these practices provide them with a means to stay *connected* to the person they had lost” (2009: 4; emphasis my own). Conversely the study by Walsh et al (2002: 1553) concluded through their 14 month-long empirical research that the absence of religious (or spiritual) beliefs may even be considered a risk factor in hindering or delaying the grief resolution process.²

In a similar but much wider and more recent review of 73 empirical studies, Wortman and Park (2008) concluded that religion served as a powerful way of coping and attending to the existential questions, pain and trauma and intense grief that often accompany the death of a loved one. Perhaps these conclusions can be contextualised within Madison's (2005: 338) reminder that the old English term, *reave* or *bereafiani* has become our modern word "bereavement" and that the archaic definition included the exegetics of "to be robbed" or "deprived of something valuable," and with which one has to cope. The deprivation that the bereaved has to cope with is of course the loved one, robbed from the land of the living. "Religious coping" in turn was defined by Wortmann and Park (2008: 717) as "a dimension of religion/spirituality that refers to the use of religious/spiritual activities and beliefs to deal with stressful events."

Grief and Religious Coping

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself', as a product of the historical processes to date which has deposited you in an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. The first thing to do is to make such an inventory.

Antonio Gramsci

Greg Madison (2005: 343) tells us, rightly so, that bereavement counselling, like most specialisations in counselling, is "heavily imbued with a medical, 'treatment', approach to people." A cue from Antonio Gramsci forces a look at *what* and *who* we have become within this medicalised treatment approach, in the context of grief and bereavement counselling. The earliest entry in such an inventory of "grief counselling" compels us to turn in the direction of the seminal figure of the psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud, often spoken of as the father of psychoanalysis. Freud was the first to publish what later came to be known as a "bereavement theory" (1957 [1917]). Freud defined grief as an experience that under usual circumstances follows a normal course, but which could, under particular circumstances, lead to severe psychological consequences, if the bereaved did not "emotionally detach" from the deceased. Freud maintained that healthy recovery required the severing of emotional bonds with the deceased and returning to optimal pre-loss functioning. Thus the successful outcome of grief, or the "resolution" of the grief process, according to Freud, was a kind of freeing or emancipation from emotional bondage to the deceased (see Moyle-Wright and Hogan 2008: 356).

Freud (1957 [1917]) argued that the psychological purpose of grief was to withdraw emotional energy from the deceased, which he referred to as “cathexis” and then to become detached from the loved one. This was what he termed as “decathexis.” He believed the bereaved person had to work through his/her grief by reviewing thoughts and memories of the deceased, a process he termed as “hypercathexis.” By this process, rather painful as it was meant to be, the bereaved can, according to Freud, achieve detachment from the loved one and the bereaved’s bonds with the deceased are said to become looser, and are eventually severed. Of course Freud did not offer us the most (theologically) gratifying rationale for religion itself, painting religion in pathological terms and viewing it as a pseudo important item in the psychical inventory of a civilisation. Yet this manner of understanding “attachment” (in seemingly pathological terms) became a popular lens through which to understand grief for later theorists working in theory and clinical practice.

“Grief work” likewise in the early models, came to refer to the cognitive process of *attending to or confronting* the reality of a loss through death and working toward detachment, and detaching from the deceased (Stroebe 1992). The next wave of grief researchers including Parkes (1970; 1996) and Worden (1991), built upon the intellectual ancestry of the earlier grief theorists’ work and empirically derived new conceptualizations of the grieving experience and the need to break bonds and disengage with the deceased person in order to invest in a new life, spelling out that the last phase of mourning was to emotionally “relocate” the deceased and for the bereaved to move on with life. This “relocation” or severing of attachment and bonds was especially seen as helpful for those individuals in clinical therapy, who suffered from the diagnosable condition referred to as “complicated grief.”³ However, the discovery through empirical qualitative work with different categories of bereaved of their (need for the) “ongoing attachment to the deceased,” characterized by the “bereaved individuals’ ongoing relationship to the deceased,” was considered groundbreaking for grief researchers (Moyle-Wright and Hogan 2008: 352). Through qualitative research with bereaved siblings and parentally bereaved children and adolescents, the continuing bonds theory gained acceptance among grief researchers (2008: 352). There is at this juncture, a sense that clinical research somewhat catches up with religious (conventional) wisdom in declaring that the death of a loved one does not mean that the relationship has ended. The shift in bereavement theory posits that, in working with people who are bereaved, one can help them “let go” and “keep hold” at the same time (Stroebe et al 1992). The goal of grief then, according to the thrust of this later trajectory of thinking, is not severing the bond with the

deceased, but integrating them into the bereaved's life in a "new way," that still makes sense to them.

Incorporating Religious Beliefs into Bereavement Models

Historically, the study of bereavement has been focused on the psychology of grief as an individual, mostly internal experience (Packman et al 2006: 818). Robert Neimeyer (2006) argues that a new generation of theories in grief work is needed as we moved beyond the assumptions that mourning is wholly private, what Packman refers to as "internal and individual," and he makes the additional point that we need to shed the illusion that bereavement follows an unmistakably ordered and sequential process of emotional change for the bereaved. The emphasis in therapy has thus been on the pathological aspects of grief and has advocated for emotional detachment or "letting go" to achieve closure. Packman puts it well in his analogy when he states that such views were "reinforced by the medical model that compared grief to a wound that eventually heals, perhaps leaving some scar tissue; and once it has healed, the wound is forgotten" (Packman et al 2006:8 18). As Doughty and her colleagues share, (Doughty et al 2011) fortunately there is a more recent shift to recognizing the complex and highly individualized nature of the bereavement process. Thus, emphasis needs to be increasingly placed (within bereavement models) on the understanding that there are a variety of healthy responses to loss. From this perspective it becomes imperative for grief counsellors to conceptualize their clients from a socio-cultural and intra-personal perspective. While there has been something of a shift "from emotional disengagement and detachment" to working through the loss by "relearning the world in a way that helps one accommodate and live with the loss" (Packman et al 2006: 819), such approaches are, however, still largely bereft of religio-cultural narratives and beliefs that are able to potentially contribute to models of grief, coping and meaning making.

For Neimeyer, meaning making or reconstruction within the (unpredictably) unfolding process of mourning, is moreover central to the healing process, where the understanding is that one's assumptive world is radically disrupted by a major loss. This in turn demands making psychosocial readjustments to one's assumptive world, but one hastens to add, without turning a blind eye to the complexity and individuality of the grieving experience, which often includes death specific narratives and beliefs. Scholars (see Walsh et al 2002; Mantala-Bozos 2003; Matthews and Marwit 2006) and grief and bereavement theories stress the need to re-establish and re-construct meaning using psychological, social, cultural, emotional and cognitive resources. However, outside of individuals from pastoral and

faith community contexts, there is very little mention of religious resources (within specific grief counselling literature and practice) that can be tapped for re-constructing and re-establishing meaning for the bereaved. The noted exception to this is the work by clinical psychologists Ethan Benmore and Crystal Park, whose paper entitled “Death Specific Religious Beliefs and Bereavement: Belief in Afterlife and Attachment” (2004) looks specifically at how death specific belief in an “afterlife” helps in the grieving and coping process during bereavement, for particular categories of bereaved. They conclude that death specific beliefs (like that of the afterlife) are important determinants in the coping process in the adjustment to pre-loss functioning for a significant number of individuals, and stress that these are legitimate aspects for future research.

Back in 1996, eight years prior to the work by Benmore and Park (2004), Klass’ essay “Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief” (1996) also turned its back on Freud and decades of bereavement theorising and argued that bonds do not need to be broken in order to “complete” the grieving process. This period thus heralded a paradigmatic shift towards understanding that “letting go” of the deceased, what in both clinical terms and popular understanding we refer to as “achieving closure,” may be less helpful than recognising the importance of continuing bonds and of “attachment.” This is because grief is not, of course, a passive process, nor a series of predictive and predictable stages that “happens” to the bereaved and which necessarily culminates in “letting go” and “achieving closure” for the bereaved.

According to Steffen and Coyles (2010), by recognising the importance of “attachment” and the need for “continuing bonds,” we can help those who are bereaved, to become empowered in their mourning. They point out that, in grief counselling, the bereaved may need to reconnect with the deceased, and address some “unfinished business” or emotional ambiguity in the relationship as well as making adjustments to their new social status. All of this, in turn brings us back to the notion of “continuing bonds” and to the concept of “attachment.”

For me the “Continuing bonds” theory gives us a foot in the door of counselling practice by allowing us to recast the imperatives of this theory within theological and religious understandings. We can perhaps gain a clearer understanding of what I mean by this by proceeding through the insights of two qualitative studies, Smith (2002) and Steffen and Coyles (2010), which seek to gather rich ethnographic narratives from bereaved individuals. The Steffen and Coyles (2010: 7) large qualitative study, gives us empirical insight into how bereaved participants’ “presence sensing” (seeing, hearing or feeling the deceased) gave validation for the ongoing existence of the deceased in “both identical and changed ways, and the benefits arising from

this for the bereaved.” Their data drew back the heavy curtain on a number of salient themes. Three particular themes that surfaced in the Steffen and Coyle study that I consider of especial importance to the discussion in this paper are: (1) the deceased is not completely lost; (2) there is confirmation of the continuing bond; and (3) the renewed belief in death as temporary separation.

Steffen and Coyle found that the emotional benefits reported meant “the bereaved could focus on the deceased in a way that was not associated with negative effect, restless ‘searching behaviour’ and an inability to turn attention to other activities” (2010: 7), all of which is classic grieving behaviour and which is often painfully debilitating. They also point out that the “majority of participants viewed the experience as a temporary sign of a more permanent bond with the deceased” (2010: 18) and described “sense-of-presence experiences as allowing them to maintain their identity in relation to the deceased’s” (2010: 20).

The earlier Smith article worked with a smaller ethnographic sample of 30 African American, middle aged daughters. This qualitative study found that daughters use their beliefs to move through states of grief that allowed them to “prepare, relinquish control, accept death” (2002: 309), and most importantly for our discussion, *maintain a connection to their loved ones beyond death*. Important themes identified in this study include the belief in an afterlife and the reunification of family members there. Smith’s findings suggest that religious beliefs provide a means for adult daughters to cope with the tasks of living in the present, yet maintain a tie with their deceased mother that serves to enhance their religious beliefs and to find meaning in their daily living.

In both of these qualitative studies there is an overarching spinal theme of maintaining a connection to the loved one beyond death, emphasised in the Steffen and Coyle study through what emerges as powerful “presence sensing” events of the loved (deceased) ones. In both studies are the strong motifs of attachment and connection experienced as a confirmation of the bond and relationship, with a profound acknowledgement that the deceased was not completely lost and the understanding that death was merely a temporary separation. Building narratives based on healthy perspectives *that include any theological frameworks that the bereaved possess* as the Steffen and Coyle and Smith studies reveal, may facilitate the integration of traumatic loss events into “a new cognitive synthesis, thus working to decrease post-traumatic symptoms” (Peres et al 2007: 343). Given the potential effects of “religious beliefs on coping with traumatic events, the study of the role of religious beliefs in fostering resilience” (2007: 343) and meaning making, becomes increasingly vital in the context of grief and bereavement. Thus

increasingly for me, it makes sense that models of grief therapy work articulate from a constructivist perspective that is cognisant of the fluid, inter-subjectivity of the bereaved. Neimeyer (2001) points out that grief is primarily an intersubjective meaning-making process that is accomplished by constructing narratives. Klass and Goss (2003) build on this perspective by adding that if one were to apply constructivism to cross-cultural studies it becomes apparent that “grief occurs within a series of nested narratives” (2003: 789). They go on to say that each “level of social system maintains narratives: individual narratives, family narratives, community narratives, subculture narratives, and cultural meta-narratives” (2003: 789).

Neimeyer suggests counsellors employ narrative strategies with bereaved clients searching for meaning following a loss, pointing out that narrative therapy posits we organize our lives by the stories we tell ourselves and others. Herein is the potential power of death specific beliefs and of ideas of a connection that transcends death. I am not, of course, claiming that this is anything new for the religious adherent. For many, however, (notwithstanding a strong sense of belief in “afterlife”), the reconstruction of a self narrative and meaning-making cannot be done on their own. These individuals turn to therapy and counselling. It is here where the use of narratives, and more especially narratives that incorporate core “death” and afterlife beliefs can be of immense help to the bereaved. The argument is that incorporating such perspectives of religious narratives has much to offer a more relevant grief and bereavement model. This does not mean that clinical grief counselling becomes pastoral counselling. Both of these counselling modalities necessarily operate in different “spaces.” While pastoral counsellors may be in the perfect position to offer empathetic care and counselling to the congregation in a religious diction that the adherent/bereaved may well be completely familiar with, the pastoral counsellor is not necessarily trained to deal with potentially dangerous pathologies that may be present in individuals that suffer from complicated grief. Nor are they in a position to diagnose and prescribe medical interventions. These individuals would necessarily need specialised and clinically trained counsellors. However, surrendering their well-being to the assistance of clinical counsellors and psychologists should not equate to a denial of their core religious beliefs, some of which could well assist in the restoration and meaning-making process itself. The way forward then, put simply, is for a constructivist bereavement coping model that incorporates their sense of connection, *or need for* connection or attachment with the deceased, rather than “detaching” or “severing bonds” from the deceased (see Stroebe et al 2005). While the individual may understand this connection in religious terms, the clinical counsellor can choose to see the connection as a form

of healthy “attachment” within the context of the “continuing bonds” theory.

Attachment, Detachment and Non Attachment

Attachment theory has been well developed by the psychoanalyst Bowlby (1959) and further developed by Ainsworth (1968), most especially in the context of the attachment of a child to a significant elder figure. According to Shear et al (2005: 362), an attachment theory view of a successful outcome of bereavement hinges on the need to reconcile the conflicting experiences of love and loss and places “experiential avoidance” at the centre of the adaptive process by which these conflicting realities are ultimately combined. There is thus, according to this theory, both a sense of ongoing connection to the deceased as well as an awareness of the painful reality that they are gone and are no longer. Bowlby (1998) suggests that the two sides of the bereavement dilemma are gradually integrated during a process of oscillation between processing and excluding private grief experiences.

“Attachment” within a religious framework, I suggest, has the similar goal of an ongoing and continuing connection. However, this attachment is without the “experiential avoidance,” but asks instead for a full acceptance that the loved one is no longer materially and empirically available to us. This kind of attachment is also not an unhealthy grasping kind of parasitic attachment, what the Buddhist would refer to as *taṇhā*. *Taṇhā* is defined as the craving or desire to hold onto pleasurable experiences, and to be divorced from painful or unpleasant experiences, which in this instance would be death and the separation from the loved one.

The notion of “attachment” is complex within religious frameworks such as Buddhism and Hinduism. “Attachment” has a negative connotation in both early Hindu as well as Buddhist writings. Attachment (Sanskrit *raga*) is defined as a mental affliction that distorts the cognition of its object by exaggerating its admirable qualities. Attachments to others, even to life itself, according to this view is seen as grasping or clinging to an illusion of a reified self or some “thing,” which is thought to cause suffering. Sahdra and his colleagues point out that this view of “attachment,” as clinging and grasping, equates with Western psychology’s concept of “anxious attachment” or insecure clinging (Sahdra et al 2010: 116). When people are attached in this sense their sense of well-being is contingent, that is, dependent, on a particular state of affairs. Phenomenologically they feel stuck or fixated on ideas, images or objects and experience pressure to acquire, hold, avoid or change. Within Hindu and Buddhist thought, non attachment is what the individual is meant to strive for, to all things within this world, to life itself,

and certainly to the loss of loved ones. Sahdra explains that when people are not attached their perceived sense of well-being is non contingent, that is, not dependent, on particular circumstances. “Phenomenologically, non attachment has the subjective quality of not being fixated on ideas, images, or sensory objects” (2010: 117). This kind of non attachment cuts to the core of non separateness or non duality. Although outside the immediate gaze of this paper, such a line of thinking brings us close to the edges of transpersonal psychology. Transpersonal psychology stands at the interface of psychology and spirituality (Davies 2000) and its core concept is that of non duality, the recognition that each part (for example, each person) is fundamentally and ultimately a part of the whole (for instance, the cosmos). This of course has radical implications for psychological systems founded on the premises of reductionism and separateness. However, one has to be cognisant and mindful that for many religious adherents there is a greater relational quality between themselves and their loved ones (and the ones they have lost) rather than an awareness of a non separation. The several empirical studies of “presence-sensing” of the deceased clearly reveal this (see Silverman and Klass 1996; Taylor 2005; Sanger 2009). For many bereaved their “sense of coherence” (Peres 2007: 346) lies with grief therapy models that recognise such a relational quality rather than models than speak to a total collapse of separateness or non duality between self and other (as in systems of Buddhist and Advaita Hinduism). For these bereaved individuals the continuing bonds theory that incorporates core beliefs around the sustained relationship with the deceased is best able to assist in the process of restoration and psychological health.

Conclusion

While early Western approaches to bereavement have emphasized emotional disengagement from the deceased, later grief work and bereavement theories speak to notions of “continuing bonds.” These later theories can potentially embrace and incorporate the phenomenological realities and theological framework(s) of the bereaved that speak to a more meaningful integration of the bereaved’s grief experience and their need for continued attachment and relationship with the deceased. Within such a model the bereaved is able to construct a story that places the lost loved one more fully and richly within their lives. According to such a model (see Niemeyer 2006), the purpose of grief becomes the construction of a durable biography that enables the living to integrate the deceased into their ongoing lives. The theory of “continuing bonds” maintains that the bereaved keep links with the deceased person and these continue over and through time. However, just as importantly, it

also does not mean that their experiences and religio-cultural narratives are elided, but are instead meaningfully incorporated into relevant models of grief work and counselling.⁴

Notes

- 1 There is a wonderful parable in the Buddhist tradition where a grief stricken mother cradles the dead body of her only child and heartbreakingly besieges all around for the child's (mortal) return. As a last resort she is pointed to a holy man, the Buddha, who listens compassionately to her unbearable pain and offers to help, but only on condition that she brings back to him a few seeds of mustard from the home of a family. However, Buddha adds, the seeds have to come from a home that has suffered no death. The woman rushes, stricken and desperate from house to house, unable to find a home unscathed, that death has discriminately spared. At this point, realising the impossibility of what she craves and desires, the woman returns to the Buddha, the acceptance of the inevitability of death allowing her to come to terms with her grief.
- 2 The author is aware that "religion" and "spirituality" are not synonymous. However, the paper does not engage in a critical discussion of the two conceptual terms. From an anthropological point of view, defining religion is notoriously elusive and "slippery," and would deserve a paper on its own. However, I have approached "religion" from an interpretivist and constructivist perspective, and the notion of "spirituality," is likewise fluidly understood. Both spirituality and religion appear to be concerned with some overlapping issues that transcend the corporeal and existential. However, one can understand spirituality to be different from religion in that it is not necessarily conceptually entangled with any one set of organised religious beliefs and doctrine, *identifiable with that particular religion*.
- 3 Complicated grief references prolonged and intense debilitating aspects of loss, compounded by depression and manic states. It is common when bereavement is in the contexts of sudden and violent death, with witnessing the protracted and painful terminal illness of a loved one, and when a personal sense of guilt and culpability is experienced.
- 4 The author is indebted to the anonymous reviewer who has pointed out the future research directions for the work in this area.

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