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Chapter 5

The Paradox of Loss and the Relationship Between Self and Other

It appears that although there may be a *development* of grief-ful responses and of the relationship with the deceased, rather than proceeding in an orderly stage fashion, this development is fluid and "messy" and may not have a precise endpoint, if it ends at all. In this chapter, I begin to construct a theory to explain this alinear process, arguing that it is founded on our earliest negotiations with presence and loss, our responses to the existential, and paradoxical, givens of reality, as well as on the regeneration of emotional and memorial experience caused by a dynamic, ongoing dialogue between self and environment.

The oscillating movements of grief can best be understood in terms of a dialogical (Hermans et al., 1992), intersubjective (see Beebe, 1995; Beebe & Lachman, 1988, 1994; Stolorow, 1995), and multileveled (Modell, 1993) self emerging out of our earliest negotiations with and the paradoxical interplay between self and other, absence and presence, material and symbolic reality. The existential givens which forcefully confront the griever, of death, time, being and non-being, are, in addition, paradoxical. Added to and transforming this paradoxical reality are the creative remembrance or reconstruction of time and regenerative nature of emotional experience (Lazarus, 1991). As neither time nor experience stops, the bereaved must renegotiate loss of the beloved other in terms of new changes, both internal and external.

Further, loss is (re)experienced and (re)negotiated both on conscious and more tacit levels. In the following I develop these areas of focus, demonstrating that they are critical to the development of a reaction which itself is not straightforward but paradoxical.

THE PARADOX OF LOSS

--You asked for the difference between life and death.

Safe in your non-death,

you exposed yourself to an answer....

you were handed,

like a black rose, the paradox--

(From "Black Rose" by Brenda Hillman, 1992, p. 47)

Perhaps one of the most obvious reasons that the world seems "inhuman" and the griever feels "mad," as Tittensor (1984) implies, is the paradoxical fact of death itself, starkly emphasizing *both* being and not being. Existentially, death is a paradox because it is a contradiction of life and yet part of it, something we can be aware of, yet which ultimately means the end of awareness. At the same time death raises the issues of materiality and nonmateriality.

"[T]hough the *physicality* of death destroys us, the *idea* of death saves us," Yalom (1980, p. 40) states; we are metaphysically and existentially "saved" by the idea of death as it enhances our mindfulness of being and awareness of life.

In grief, the existential awareness of death reverberates along with a similar awareness that the other is both irrevocably absent and present. In loss, the physical relationship with the other must be relinquished, but the meaning of that relationship is preserved and even continues to develop. There is a paradoxical sense that what we think of as "the self" (or perhaps "soul" would be an apter term), and hence the other, are both continuous and coterminous with consciousness. Along with this, there is the contradictory possibility that time is both eternal and finite. While we recreate the dead within ourselves, at the same time we experience their loss. As they continue to shape and influence our lives, in many ways we feel their lack.

Grief experience also often includes a paradoxical set of responses: Belief and disbelief, denial and acceptance, yearning and despair, disintegration and reintegration of self and world. Further, there is often a tension, oscillation, or recursive kind of movement between various degrees of belief and disbelief, desire and absence, yearning and despair, pain and relief, aspects of grief that are seemingly contradictory but which paradoxically make each other possible. In traditional grief models, some sort of resolution of these paradoxes is valued and perhaps for this reason expected. In the model proposed here, such resolution is not expected and, further, does not seem realistic in light of a possibly ongoing and dynamic interplay between a "multi-leveled" (Modell, 1993) or dialogical self (Hermans et al., 1992) and a paradoxical reality, and as I will illustrate, it is this notion of self that is most congruent with an understanding of grief and the paradoxes of loss and death.

Modell (1993) represents the self as a paradox reflecting a paradoxical world and a multileveled self. To a great extent this view of paradox rests on Winnicott's (1958) idea that to

be alone requires internalization of a nurturing presence. Freud's (see 1914/1959, 1917/1957, 1923/1961) position with regard to loss and mourning has similarities: In order to mourn, the lost person must be internalized. Of equal relevance is the complementary position that in order to establish a presence, an absence or loss must occur. As Kohut (1966) states, internalization is "enhanced by object loss" (p. 432). Loss is involved with the ability to function metaphorically, to live symbolically as metaphors are by definition used to "stand for," or "stand *in* for," something else. In the process of creating metaphors, our appreciation and our apperception of the original object of the metaphor, and what this object "stood for," changes. We therefore live in a kind of paradoxical "double state" (Grotstein, 1995) in which original and extended or constructed meanings blend.

Further, while one aspect of the paradox seems to originate in a dialogical or "multi-leveled" (Modell, 1993) self where the double state of converging internal and external reality, absence and presence, real and imaginary, coexist from infancy, another aspect of these paradoxes has to do with the reality of death and our mortality, the enduringness of our loss and our awareness of it even as we continue to live. Death, both of ourselves and of others dear to us, is the apparently *final* in a series of temporal indications alerting us to ongoing change, loss as well as gain, including how we remember the past and what has been lost, and our experience of the discrepancy between what is and what was. The paradoxes that we begin life with thus become particularly pronounced when we face death and loss.

How we straddle and cope with these paradoxes seems to begin very early on, along with the development of a relational, embodied self, and a cognition (perhaps meager, at first) of

metaphor, or of one thing (a memory or mental representation) standing for something, or someone, else. Both the dialogical nature of self (Hermans et al., 1992; Modell, 1993) and the notion of object constancy and related ideas explain how it is that we can recognize a dead person is gone and in some sense "relinquish" her or him, yet also maintain both the person and the relationship. The relationship between self and other seems to exist internally, externally in the "real world," and between those two worlds in some sort of co-constructive or negotiated process. Further, as the experience of loss is involved in awareness of our ultimate existential aloneness and extinction, it is also intertwined with the presumption of intersubjectivity--the dialogue with the other, and the absence of that dialogue. Relationship is experienced both as a presence and an absence in self such that, as Webster's (1984, p. 836) indicates, "to lose" represents not only the actual object or person lost, but a state of *being* lost.

After losing both her parents in the same year, Anne Sexton (1977) writes in a letter to W.D. Snodgrass, "The trouble with everyone just up and dying like that is that there are no faces left to throw your emotions at: love or hate. What do you do with the emotion? It's still there, though *they* are gone" (p. 81). The paradox of death and loss is that *something* is "still there, though *they* are gone." And that something seems to be this co-constituted, reconstructed, imaginal and real relationship which is both self and other. As Derrida (1986) writes in *Memoires for Paul de Man*,

Everything remains "in me" or "in us," "between us," upon the death of the other
. . . . All we seem to have left is memory. . . . The "me" or the "us" of which we speak
then arise and are delimited in the way that they are only through this experience of the

other, and of the other as other who can die. . . . This terrible solitude which is mine or ours at the death of the other is what constitutes that relationship to self which we call "me," "us," "between us," "subjectivity," "intersubjectivity," "memory." (pp. 32-33)

In exploring "impossible mourning" (p. 6), Derrida explicates his recognition that the other "within" us is not the other who existed physically in life, *nor*, however, is this other a narcissistic fantasy extension of "self." Death brings the possibility of an intersubjective knowledge that is neither founded in the real or the imaginary, but somewhere between. In line with Winnicott's (1958) premise that the capacity to be alone arises because someone else is symbolically present, Derrida states the "specular reflection" of ourselves and the other "does not appear *before* this *possibility* of mourning" (p. 29).

None of the views outlined in Chapter 2 concerning what is generative in grief are sufficient to explain grief and how the lost other affects the self, including the existential implications of death, the paradoxical nature of death and grief, and the interplay between loss and reconstruction. As grief is necessarily concerned with the lost other and how this loss affects the self, any theory of grief must deal with the nature of the self-other relationship. How the relationship between self and other is constructed helps to explain the paradoxical nature of grief and its temporal variations, as well as how "secondary" losses may coalesce with primary loss, thereby affecting a griever's ongoing experience and ability to cope. In this section I will argue that a dialogical or intersubjective self, loss, and the capacity to live metaphorically, are inextricably interwoven. I will connect this to the experience of grief as itself relational, dialogical and inherently paradoxical.

THE SELF-OTHER

As indicated in Chapter 2, there is some argument as to whether "secondary losses," such as changes in role and status, and other deprivations (e.g., loss of income, loss of sex partner, loss of companion, loneliness, etc.) are more significant to grief than the loss of the person him or herself. As Parkes (1987) indicates, it may be difficult to identify and disentangle all the various types of deprivations and losses resulting from a death. It is the primary loss of the beloved, Parkes argues, that overshadows all others, but adds that *this* reaction eventually fades, giving way to deprivation. Averill (1968), in contrast, argues that it is the social disruption caused by loss of roles that is primary, and that the loss of the person engenders grief only on a "superficial level" (p. 724).

I suggested earlier that Averill's concept of role could be expanded to include roles that are based not merely on functionality or blood/kin ties, but as aspects of relationship that "shore up the self" (Kohut, 1984), and that instead of looking at any one aspect of the loss as a discrete contributor, loss of the object, in the form of the person and the relationship, and loss of role coalesce. Averill seems to acknowledge the contiguity of loss of the person and loss of the role in his admission that the griever's loss of self-esteem is a significant factor alongside role loss. Further, Kohut's (1971; 1977; 1984) concept of "selfobject" illustrates how relationships with responsive others come to shore up ourselves, affecting how we view ourselves and our being in the world, explaining why when a significant loved other dies, our entire selfobject matrix might change.

A continuity between the construction of self and the construction of other in relationship is implied in a variety of perspectives (e.g., Buber, 1965; Cushman, 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; James, 1890/1950; Hermans et al., 1992; Kohut, 1984; May, 1983; Modell, 1993; Yalom, 1980). This suggests not only a contiguity between the role of the griever vis-a-vis the deceased and the griever's relationship with the deceased, but between all that can be called the griever's selfobject or self-other world. What Parkes (1987) refers to as deprivation (the "absence of those essential 'supplies' previously provided by the lost person"; "the psychological equivalents of food and drink," p. 29) is not so very different from the "psychological oxygen" Kohut (1984) refers to, without which, Kohut contends, we could not psychologically survive. Further, the existential recognition of death of the loved one assaults the griever with a specific kind of shock or horror, which as Tittensor (1984) describes, appears "inhuman," paralleling the ultimate existential catastrophe described above and James' (1890/1950) and Kohut's (1984) illustration of "nonhuman" environments.

Therefore, how we view our losses, and what they represent to us, may indicate just what in the self or other is effaced or obliterated. Neither a focus exclusively on the "roles" or deprivations of the griever, the lost person, or the view of self as autonomous seemingly favored by prevailing grief theory do justice to the continuity and co-construction of self and other in the relationship between griever and deceased, nor to the other's existential significance. What kind of self, or selves, makes sense for the experience of the griever, explaining the possibility of an ongoing relationship with the deceased and possibly recursive experience of grief? Such a "self" may be construed both as a product of construction and deconstruction, as well as inferences made about early development and our existential sense of relation and embodiment.

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