

Grief and Loss: Reflections Along the Journey to Healing

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Abstract: The grieving process is fraught with emotions that ebb and flow as one attempts to face the challenges and obstacles associated with grief. This paper examines the lived experiences of an academician, who diligently searched for opportunities to use grief experiences as mechanisms for transformation and education. A re-examination of the stage theory of grief offers a perspective on how one traverses the unexplored passages of grief. This paper examines a personal account of loss and grief, and moves into contextualizing the parallels that exist between grief and the change process that happens as one learns from a traumatic life event.

Keywords: grief theory, grief, change process, reflection

Do normal stages of grieving really exist? I do not know. What I am keenly aware of is that my grief is real and it fostered an altered reality in my world.

Introduction

I awoke to a faint knock at my front door to find a close relative standing there in tears. With trembling lips and a stammering tongue, she uttered words that I will never forget. "Your sister passed away about an hour ago," she said. Instantly, I screamed and ran for the closet...my safe space. Amid the clothes, shoes and various other worldly belongings, I collapsed under a wave of emotions. I yelled and screamed, remembering in an instant all of the things I said to my sister. I screamed even harder, because of all of the things I never told her. As the emotions continued to take root, the thought of her children being motherless in this ostensibly cruel world hit me like a freight train. In my mind, death had come too early for a seemingly, healthy 37-year old former track star and mother of three beautiful children. Dealing with death was not on my to-do list for that day. Yet there I was, reeling from the blow of that miserable news so early in the morning.

My plans for that day were thrown off by the news. On that day, I had plans to meet my class for the first meeting of the spring semester. I was prepared to discuss the syllabus, the learning projects for the semester, our group dynamics, and most importantly the secrets to success in our learning community. This news left me shaken to the core and exhausted. I was emotionally wrecked within a matter of minutes. Physical exhaustion settled in afterwards, because of all of the things I knew I would have to do...plan a funeral, clean my home, and prepare food. The list continued to mount in my mind. I was spiritually drained, because I had failed to feed my

spirit. Yet, as I processed all that was going on in my mind and body, my analytical other pushed me into a place of resolve. I knew I would find a way to embrace the new reality life handed me that day.

What happens when life happens? The best-laid plans can be thwarted by traumatic life events. I resolved that a good teacher seizes every opportunity to learn from and impart knowledge to students, even during the most inopportune times. After several days, I returned to the classroom with a determination to use this experience as a tool to teach undergraduate social work students about dealing with the challenges that life hands you. Nevertheless, while these intentions were honest, actualizing my goals was not as easy as it seemed.

The beginning of life marks a pivotal moment of our human existence. Understanding this precious journey of life may cause some individuals to stumble. For those who are profoundly aware of the gift of life, the challenge becomes equally distressing when a life comes to an end. This reflective narrative uncovers the complexities of grief and loss combined with the external forces that created a definitive shift in my understanding of life in my world and imparting knowledge about resilience to undergraduate social work students. Essentially, this essay lays bare the truth about my experiences of loss, grief, and healing as an African-American female academician.

In the first portion of this narrative, I analyze my grief experience through the lens of Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' model-the Five Stages of Grief. While this model has been challenged, reformed and reconfigured (Maciejewski, Zhang, Block & Prigerson, 2007; Wortman, 2007), the original template outlined in Kubler-Ross' seminal piece, *On Death and Dying*, offers a more accurate depiction of my personal journey through grief. Kubler-Ross (1969) identified five stages

of grief to include: 1) shock and disbelief/denial; 2) anger; 3) bargaining; 4) depression; 5) acceptance. Although Kubler-Ross fashioned this model to focus on the emotions and actions of terminally ill patients on a journey of dying (Kubler-Ross, 1969), scholars and practitioners have used this framework as a model for understanding grief after loss. In my linear approach to thinking and doing, this model was most useful for me to draw upon my experiences in grieving and healing. Additionally, I examine my experience using a lens of meaning making and the establishment of continuing bonds with my deceased loved-one. To that end, this essay takes the reader on that passage. It is a journey of understanding my emotions and actions connected to the loss of my baby sister. As I uncover my experiences through reflection, it is my intent to illuminate the parallel complexities of thinking back and moving forward, simultaneously. Drawing on theoretical elements that focus on reconstructing meaning, I also examine my journey to healing from this perspective. In the final portion of this narrative, I situate this journey of grief into the context of my role as a professional and an educator. Using the 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standard, I examine the usefulness of my personal experience in my space as teacher and a learner.

The Journey

Denial

Denying the loss of my sister came in the most austere way. Because I was not there when she took her last breath, I surmised that the doctors had gotten it wrong. I convinced myself that we would receive a telephone call with a retraction claiming that the medical professionals had made a blunder. The conversation would go like this, Maam, I want to apologize for causing you such pain earlier this morning with that terrible news that your sister passed away. Actually, we made a mistake in communicating that information. Your sister is, in fact, alive and she's resting comfortably in her room. Again, I want to say how terribly sorry I am that we messed up. Do you have any questions? I further deduced that this notion of death that interrupted our lives and the mistake that they made would be the topic of conversation at our next family get-together. I waited for several hours, but the call never came. I finally accepted the reality that I

would never receive such a call. The reality of losing a sibling was foreign to me.

Anger

Honestly, I was angry! But, I did not know why or with whom. I was mad because I had lost Mom and Dad, and now my baby sister. I was angry because I tried so hard to build a relationship with her, but it never really seemed to take root. I was mad because she always acted mad. I was angry because we never really had a chance to deal with the whys and hows...the fundamental issues that plagued our relationship. I was angry because she left and did not tell me she was leaving. I was just mad!!! I recalled when we were children how she use to be the ultimate tomboy, and I was more of the homemaker type. I always felt that our disconnection stemmed from not having anything in common, other than a shared bloodline. I also felt that this disconnect was further exacerbated by the way people adored her and shunned me.

Now, my adult mind understood that we never really dealt with the blows that these issues landed on our relationship. Nonetheless, I still love her, and she will always be my sister, even though she is not on this side with us. I once heard a person say that having a sister is like having a built-in, best friend. How I wish that were our story! The more I think about being angry, the more I realized that my anger was really about me and my decision to accept that state of our relationship. I am angry with myself for not doing more to fix our brokenness.

With each passing day, I did not know whether I would encounter something or someone who would trigger a thought that lead to more thoughts. I had no answer for how it worked...no prescriptive approach to understanding how it worked for others. I soon realized that there were balms that help heal the hurt. Those comforts came in the form of time and tears.

In that moment, the moment where grief found me stricken with a sense of abysmal doom, there was a point where it felt like this thing called grief would take on a life of its own; it felt as if it would last forever. So thick was the hurt and murky the pain, it seemed as if that place would become my permanent place of residence and it ruled me with an iron fist. But then, like a sudden and unexpected snowstorm, a ray of hope revealed itself. Hope that came like a flood to cast away

all hurt for the moment was the balm that lifted me from the desperate place of hurt. This thing called hope came with time, and it manifested itself in such a way that it almost felt elusive. With time, healing began, and through time peaceful waters emerged.

The tears came suddenly, as suddenly as the news of her death. Honestly, in the moment that the devastating news was delivered to me, I felt as though the wind got knocked out of me with the sheer force of a battering ram. All I could do was reach for air that seemed to be gone. When I finally recovered from the initial blow, I felt a stinging sensation welling up and the tears flowed...a little at first. In the days leading up to the funeral, I put on an armor of steel. Displaying strength was what I had been taught to do. I realized that being strong for others left no time for personal tears...not even in the quiet and stillness of night. Real tears did not flow until I stood at the threshold of the sanctuary on the day we buried our sister. As I moved closer to the front of the funeral procession, my feet felt as though there were two bricks strapped to them. A gentle nudge from our youngest sibling ushered in a flood of tears like no other. As I stood there sobbing profusely, I was stricken with a sense of shame. I was too ashamed to be so vulnerable with even my closest relatives. I was too ashamed to allow my tears to reveal the truth, the truth that I was not made of steel, and that tears were a part of me.

In time, the truth about those tears became a clearer revelation to me. My tears became a river of healing, and like a river, they flowed, regardless. Just as water finds its way around a rock in the riverbed, so did my tears find their way around all of the stuff I tried to use to block them. No matter how much I poured myself into my work or how engaged I became in any given project, the tears found their way out. Sometimes, they came in the midst of a certain task, and sometimes for no apparent reason at all. I remember one instance quite vividly.

Bargaining

While brief, bargaining is marked by an effort to postpone, push aside or negotiate the inevitable. After receiving the news of my sisters passing, there was no time to bargain for more time or negotiate for another chance. The reality of not having this option pricked my heart. In past experiences of losing a

loved one, I attempted to bargain...to beg for reprieve...to ask for one sliver of time with that individual that I held so dear. Not this time. The news came so suddenly; there was hardly time to process the conversation I had with my sister some six hours before she passed. If the chance were open to bargain, I would have done so. My plea would have been to have a few more days with my sister so that we could have a difficult conversation concerning our relationship. It always bothered me that my sister and I were not very close. I held a deep yearning to really understand why our relationship manifested negatively. For many years, I reasoned that it was because she just did not understand me. I reasoned that it was because I was incredibly different from her and everyone else. If I had the chance to bargain, I would have asked for the time, space and courage to delve into a conversation about this topic.

Depression

In the days and weeks following my sisters passing, I pushed depression aside. There was no time to retreat into my emotions and withdraw from those around me. My role as the rock for my family precluded a chance to sink into despair. Depression finally came after two months of grieving her loss. At first, there were psychosomatic issues that seemed all-too familiar, having grieved the loss of my parents off and on for the previous twelve years. Then, came the periods in time where I did not and would not venture into the company of others. I simply did not have the strength or desire to do it. I just wanted to be left alone to immerse myself in my thoughts and emotions about my sister and her absence. I was okay with feeling sorry for myself, and not trying to focus on the promise that everything would be alright. It was not all right, I was not all right, and I was okay with that. There was a surreal feeling of being okay in my broken, sad state. I have vivid memories of ruminations about my sisters final moments on Earth. I wondered if she called out to anyone or if she faded away peacefully. I wondered if she sought comfort in seeing familiar faces. These thoughts sent me into a deeper depression, because of all of the unknown variables that I could not and did not know. For me, bouts of depression impacted personal relationships with those around me. I simply wanted to be left alone, but, in their infinite wisdom, those who knew me best and loved me most would not allow me to slip away into the darkness of depression.

Acceptance

To say the least, my truth about acceptance in this journey is awkwardly unique. The truth is that there are still days where I find myself revisiting many of the stages of grief. I have learned that there is often no real reason why I am caught in such tailspin. There is usually a mitigating factor that explains these visits to the other places where grief takes an individual. However, the stage of acceptance has become a welcome peace for me on most days. Acceptance was fostered in as quickly as the news of my sisters passing, and it brought with it respite and a deeper understanding of the relationship between my sister and I. It happened one day as I was going through some of my sisters belongings. I stumbled up on her journal. At first, I felt like I was invading her privacy, but there was something about the cover of this manuscript that compelled me to read it. As I combed through her thoughts, I learned that we had something in common. The girl with the beautiful smile and the spit-fire personality, the one who was a stand-out athlete and beauty queen, the girl who won the hearts of most everyone she met...that girl, my sister, also struggled. My sister penned a snippet of her reality when she wrote:

I'm 26-years old, and in the beginning, since I was old enough to remember, I've been a pretty little black girl. At first it was just another thing I heard. I admit though, it did get me through the years of thinking the being dark skinned was a curse and the all the light skinned girls were looked upon as goddesses.

In her journal, she talked at length about the disconnection between the two of us. In that moment, I realized that part of my struggle in accepting her death was steeped in issues surrounding our relationships. All of the unspoken and unexplained matters that had long plagued our relationship were catalysts for fostering anger, denial and depression. With this newfound understanding of our struggle, a veil of heaviness was lifted from me. The window of opportunity to understand her side of the story had passed. At this juncture, I had options. I could remain stuck in my grief or find a way to make sense of the nuggets of introspection that she had left behind in her writings.

Reconstructing Meaning

In a matter of weeks, I began to reframe my thoughts about my sisters death and her life. I embraced this new knowledge that she, just as I, had known the challenges of our relationship. Reading my sisters journal was effective catharsis for me, because I was able to get a glimpse of our relationship from her perspective. Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) explain that an important element of meaning making rests in the ability of the bereaved to identify as a survivor, while making sense of the loss or finding benefit in the experience of grieving the loss of someone. After reading several entries from my sisters journal, I reflected on the last year of our time together. Even as she battled a number of chronic illnesses, I now realize that she understood the severity of her ailments and she knew that her health would rapidly decline over a short time. While she did not openly share this with me, there was evidence of reconciliatory behavior that indicated regret for past hurts and misunderstandings. I have come to believe that she too wrestled with the state of our relationship, and that she also had a desire to mend the brokenness between us. Ultimately, this knowledge helped bring about a measure of acceptance and a healthy dose of peace.

Journey Onward

Through the journey of grief, the arduous process of healing seems elusive. While difficult as it may be, there is solace in knowing that, for me, healing emerges with the passing of time. The Council on Social Work Education 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards identifies a need to demonstrate ethical and professional behavior, as a primary competency of a professional social worker (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). A component behavior attached to this competency implores social workers to use reflection and self-regulation to manage personal values and maintain professionalism in practice situations (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). As an academician, teaching is my practice, and a major focus of my practice is to foster an environment that helps students understand the interconnections that exist between their personal and professional life, and to help them use this knowledge to inform their pathway to becoming a professional. I constantly implore my students to deal with latent issues that may impede their ability to establish rapport and guide clients through the change process. Goldblatt-Hyatt (2014) appropriately

cautions practitioners about the pitfalls of self-disclosure and the potential counter-productive influence on the client. However, Brew and Kottler (2017) posit that self-disclosure is useful for several reasons, including the need to demonstrate ways of dealing with difficult situations (p. 272). Similarly, they state that self-disclosure is useful when one needs to take yourself off the pedestal and make yourself appear more human (Brew and Kottler, 2017, p. 272). A safe measure of self-disclosure has proven to be an appropriate tool for teaching students about the balance of work and life that must exist when they enter the field of practice. During the semester of my devastating loss, there were two incidents where I openly discussed the general challenges that I faced in my grieving state.

As I journeyed through the grieving process, there was an occasion where I vividly remember that my emotions and feelings were overwhelming. Yet, I tried to move beyond this place, because I wanted to do what came natural to me and move to a place of normalcy. For me, that place is in the classroom engaged in teaching. Looking back, I realize that I returned to the classroom too soon, and that I had not developed a healthy coping mechanism when my emotions got the better of me. Only a week after burying my sister, I returned to the classroom. In one of my class sessions that I week, a flood of emotions overwhelmed me, and try as I might, nothing I did made them go away. During this particular class meeting, we engaged in a dynamic discussion about the experiences of women in the United States, and this discussion was followed by a short video. As the lights dimmed and the video started, I retreated to a seat behind the podium and sobbed silently. When the video ended and we re-convened the discussion, a student asked a very pointed question. She said, "What's wrong with you, Dr. M?", as she remarked about the noticeable traces of tears. I briefly shared that I had very recently suffered the loss of a close relative, and promptly dismissed class. To these students, the impenetrable Dr. must have looked like she was losing her mind. Giving voice to the personal struggle of grief and loss helped shed light on the fact that we all face various life challenges that shape our understanding and knowing in the world around us. In that moment, I became profoundly cognizant of how social workers can use a myriad of situations to help elevate their client's understanding about life and its unfolding issues.

Livsey (1999) highlights the importance of openness and vulnerability, to ourselves and to others within the teaching arena. For me, these elements open the doorway of inquiry and knowledge transfer through reflection and action, for the student and the teacher. In that moment, I learned that students need to see vulnerability is modeled, even in the classroom. Conversely, they have to learn how to appreciate and create boundaries between them and the clients they serve.

Months after my loss, I remember walking into the classroom with a plan to lecture about healthy family relationships; the conversation shifted in an instant when a student offered condolences. Initially, I was taken aback, because I was not prepared to acknowledge my recent loss. Since the class discussion centered on parental influences with regard to child development, we talked at length about the relationships that exist between siblings and between children and parents. As students began to recall their experiences as children, they asked about my childhood. During that class period, I experienced a healthy measure of self-disclosure, as I made correlations between parenting styles and varying relationships between sibling sets. Nods of affirmation were evident, as students silently reflected on their experiences as children. As I left class that day, I walked away knowing that my grief had not taken me to another emotional space as I openly discussed some of the dynamics of my family. While that day went well for me, there were others that were not as successful.

One outcome of this journey through grief is that I take a different approach to helping students understand this connectedness. I teach students that a good practitioner is committed to dealing with personal challenges within his/her life before embarking upon a quest to help clients confront their life challenges, thus my reason for giving them a glimpse into the pain that I suffered after the loss of my beloved sister. Goldsworthy (2005) theorizes that practitioners must explore applications of grief and loss theory beyond death and dying. In the swell of helping clients learn coping skills, practitioners have the knowledge and ability to help clients understand practical applications of grief and loss theory in reference to a number of issues they may face in life.

Conclusion

Passing on this course in life has made me keenly aware that the theories of grief and loss are inextricably linked, and are helpful for understanding the actions and reactions of those we serve. As I traveled on my path to healing, I learned to pay careful attention to people, places and things that represented triggers into grief. While I did all that I could to avoid them, many could not be skirted. It was in those moments when I realized that most everyone has his or her own story of grief and loss. Whether it is a loss of a loved one or loss of financial stability, the journey is real. The emotions can be raw, and resilience is also an option. Moving on from this place requires a strength and resolve that seems elusive at first, but these elements become more familiar with time. In the space where theory and practice collide and where the client meets the professional, there is hope borne out of the pain of change and a knowing that fosters healing.

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