

Grief and Loss: Reflections Along the Journey to Healing

Kenya Yonawa McKinley

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

A Caterpillar Morphs Into a Butterfly

Stephanie Lyu Rhee

Abstract: Teaching connotes more than disseminating knowledge. Teaching opens up students' habitual cocoons and exposes them to new ideas and ways of thinking so that students are encouraged to question and challenge their established assumptions, knowledge, values, and/or beliefs. I believe such metamorphosis can occur in our students and, as a teacher, I can be the essential and integral part of such a transforming process. However, metamorphosis can also be a two-way process between teacher and student. This paper is also about my own journey of awakening.

Keywords: teaching, students' learning, transformation, social work

“Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over, it became a butterfly.” Such a spectacular metamorphosis points me to a challenging question: Can teaching engender such a metamorphosis in our students? Preoccupied with such question in my mind, I embarked on my academic career in the Fall of 2014 as a freshly minted Ph.D. but a seasoned social work practitioner. I naively believed that I would be able to provide students with substantial opportunities for new ideas and ways of thinking so that students would be able to eat away those opportunities, challenge their own assumptions, values, and/or beliefs, and open their habitual cocoons. I firmly believed such metamorphosis could occur in our students and, as a teacher, I can be the essential and integral part of such a transformational process. I assumed that my undergraduate students would be eager to learn, and I would be able to quench their thirst for learning with innovative teaching methodologies. I was also eager to enhance their self-efficacy and expand their worldviews. I believed that regardless of students' background, they deserve high quality education, and I would not compromise my standard of excellence in order to be popular. I assumed that grades are a mere reflection of their industriousness and performance thereof, and I would be understanding but challenging in my way to transform my students from caterpillars into butterflies.

I knew in order to accomplish all my objectives and meet my own expectations, I needed to engage my students in my classroom. So, the first thing I did was to try to turn my classroom into an active learning environment where students are encouraged and motivated to participate. I implemented an active learning technique called the team-based learning developed by Larry Michaelsen (see

Michaelsen, Knight, & Fink, 2002). This shift to active learning has been a huge transition for me as well since I grew up in the culture of passive learning that mainly focuses on didactic “lecture flowing like a heavy downpour into a storm drain” (Royse, 2001, p. 66). I have, however, always felt that didactic learning can stifle students' curiosity and critical thinking ability and further prevent students from being exposed to different paradigms. I strongly felt that the team-based learning technique would motivate students toward more effective learning.

The team-based learning can help students develop teamwork skills and personal commitment that are essential for social work practice. Students can be divided into small teams, and students in each team have the opportunity to express, exchange, and share their ideas and feelings. In the team-based learning, students learn to be accountable and responsible for their own behaviors and actions. One of the major features of the team-based learning is that students come to class prepared and motivated so that they are expected to take a test before getting any lectures.

I assumed that students would welcome the opportunity to demonstrate their learning and also enjoy exchanging and sharing their ideas as well as being accountable for their own actions. I soon realized that it was a false assumption on my part. When I asked students to take a test before getting lectures, some students voiced their concerns over their grades. However, I ignored their concerns thinking that they were not used to this new way of doing things and would eventually come around to this new method, especially if their performances in class improve. I was eager and enthusiastic, and never suspected that my assumptions, values, and beliefs might be wrong. I charged forward-that is until one cold Thursday evening class.

It was a dark rainy Thursday evening—a type of day where you might expect students missing their class, but despite the temptations, a majority of students showed up in my class. However, students looked very inert and exhausted after a long day at work or at school. The lackluster florescent lights in the classroom seemed to further drain the last ounce of energy from students.

Immediately after I introduced the agenda to the class, I asked students to close their textbooks and notes and take their individual test on the assigned reading for 20 minutes. Heavy sounds of students' sighs swept across the otherwise hushed classroom. Despite this, once each student received the test, I kept telling myself that students must have been well adjusted to the so-called team-based learning approach since it has been a few weeks since the semester started. Twenty minutes finally passed and students handed in their tests.

I said, "Everyone knows the routine by now." Reminding students that they all should know the next step, I nevertheless asked students to get together in their assigned team. I handed out a copy of the same test they took individually to each team. Students rapidly converged in their teams to work on their task at hand. Their discussion suddenly reenergized the room, and I couldn't help thinking that students were actually enjoying the team-based learning. I also found myself engulfed in the warm and gratifying feeling that my innovation was finally working. I was patting myself on my back as an innovative teacher who was successful in motivating my students to learn for themselves.

Then the bottom dropped. When I reconvened the class after the activity, one of the students exclaimed, "I am not learning anything out of this group thing...I am a single mom, working hard every day...no time to study the textbook but I have been an A student...I paid expensive tuition for getting no lecture...I don't see anything good about this course..." Her sudden outburst and the emotionally charged words completely caught me off guard. I could not remember her spiteful speech word for word, but I could still vividly recall her resentful stare and defiant posture. A female student who had struck me as quiet, soft-spoken, and reserved, instantly transformed herself into an unyielding rebellious student. To make the situation

worse, two other students, claiming to be her close friends, stood up and took her side. They looked overly strident and indignant. The climax of their defiance happened when they grabbed their backpacks and walked out of the classroom immediately after their outburst even before the conclusion of the class.

For a moment, I was speechless. Every student was looking around and trying to gauge my reaction to this sudden incident. It was not clear to me whether the majority of my students agreed with these mutinous students or not. Regardless, I was highly offended by their unprofessional conducts and their lack of consideration and respect for faculty. It took me a few days to recover from this incident. My confidence was shaken, and I started to doubt myself as a teacher. I kept wondering what I did wrong. Why did they act the way they did? What would the rest of the class think of me as their professor? Did I make the right choice to be a teacher? I was on an emotional roller coaster, but eventually I realized that what was important was for me to learn from this incident, not to fall victim to the situation at hand. So, I started to reflect about what happened in my class leading up to the incident.

Students learn best when they are engaged. No matter how fundamental and essential knowledge teachers can offer, and no matter how innovative a teaching method can be, students may not appreciate them if they are not interested in the first place. So the student-centered learning is an important concept to remember as in 'start where the client is' is an important principle to social work practice. I realized that students' behaviors and perceptions are socially and culturally constructed since they are shaped by their own past educational and social experience. I kept repeating to myself the following questions: What if students have been molded by an educational system where teaching is a didactic way of transmitting knowledge to students; what if students were conditioned to be passive learners in the classroom rather than active learners; what if students grew up in a grade-conscious culture in which grades are the only way to reflect their accomplishments?

While reflecting on these questions, I began to realize that outer layers of my students' cocoons had been so heavily coated with the culture of passive learning that my innovative teaching method did not even make a dent in their cocoons. How foolish I was in thinking

that it would be strong enough to peel them off for a change. Their negative reactions toward my new teaching method were natural—people tend to resist something that is not familiar, or they do not want to experience discomfort due to change. I finally stumbled onto a very painful awakening that the incident was an SOS distress signal from students. The fatal mistake I realized was that I did not start the process with where my students were. Despite their various and different faces, ages, gender, races, ethnicities, classes, and personal and educational backgrounds, I only saw one common denominator: the outcome of deeper learning. My students might have perceived me as a teacher with a tunnel vision that ignored all the contextual and relational aspects involved in students' learning. The principle of 'start where students are' should have been a crucial lesson in implementing this new pedagogical method for me.

Gallup published a study where college graduates were more engaged in work and successful in life if they made a connection with their professors on the campus who cared about them, encouraged them to seek their hopes and dreams, and stimulated their learning (Ray & Kafka, 2014). The importance of affective learning emphasizing relational qualities such as caring, fostering connection, and helpfulness is not new in social work education (Rodriguez-Keyes, Schneider, & Keenan, 2013). However, building connection requires the concept of acceptance, which is one of the fundamental components of the connectedness. Each student brings his/her unique personality, personal and educational background and experience, levels of interest and motivation, and learning style. Not all undergraduate students belong to a so-called 'normative' category comprising young high school graduates with full time status. Some students are non-traditional and work full time or multiple part-time jobs. Child care and/or family care are another addition to their multiple responsibilities. Time to study is a luxury that my students might not have. They are all aware that a college diploma is a time-consuming but worthy goal for them for their future career success, so they may view a college as an instrumental means to future career rather than as a pursuit of pure truth and deeper learning. As such, they might perceive good grades and performance as an essential path to graduation. Without understanding students' motivation for learning, we

as teachers cannot expect for learning to take place in a meaningful way. I now realize that I failed to become aware of such motivation when I implemented the new teaching methodology. As a teacher from a relatively old and different generation, I was perhaps blinded by my own idealistic expectation and/or excitement for teaching innovation.

This unforgettable incident of my first semester led to my personal awakening and transformation. I reexamined my values, beliefs, and assumptions about teaching and realized that I was unaware of crucial factors affecting students' learning, including their cultures, their levels of interest and motivation, their personal and educational background and experiences, their learning styles, as well as the community where they grew up. I did not give much thought to those considerations when I was teaching.

After a week-long disheartening and reflective nights and days, I faced the inevitable reality that I should go back to face my students directly. It was about time for me to show how ready I would be to embrace them no matter how resistant they are. Feeling nervous but calm, I entered the classroom with a renewed conviction and invigoration. The classroom was so quiet that at first I thought I entered an empty room. All students showed up in class on time, looking very inquisitive as if they were eager to watch the final episode of a popular soap opera. The student of the incident was sitting on her usual chair, as if she were blessed with amnesia. I started to draw a small sail boat on the blackboard, and while I was doing that, I felt my students' puzzled and stealthy eyes back of my head. I then acknowledged that our boat drifted a bit in high winds, but "after a storm comes a calm," so we now have to come all together to sail forward to reach our final destination at the end of the semester. I continued to deliver my concession speech, saying that after I reconsidered the complex and abstract concepts of the course content as well as students' higher levels of anxiety associated with grades, I decided to tweak the team-based learning method. Starting that day, students received my lecture first and took a review test individually and in a group, which made them become less anxious about grades and more eager to learn. My potentially disastrous event turned into a blessing in disguise since it allowed me to learn from my mistakes and also helped my students to learn more as a result.

Since the incident, I have been making extra efforts to understand where my students are coming from, meet them at where they are initially, and build relationships to get connected with them during the semester. To enhance students' learning, I have modified my pedagogy from a team-based learning to a group-based learning so that students have been assigned to many different groups throughout the semester and be given more opportunities to interact with other classmates and exchange their diverse ideas and thoughts. I have also tried to improve my teaching by seeking advice and guidance from experienced faculty members who have applied active learning pedagogies, reading teaching guidebooks, and seeking students' feedback on my teaching frequently.

Looking back on my own journey, I realized that I was a victim of my own hubris-assuming that there is only one best teaching method for students' learning. My personal realization is that teaching and learning requires continual personal change. Good teaching is a complex process that involves not only knowledge and skills but also interaction and relationship between students and teachers. My journey is an ongoing balancing act between teaching and learning; however, I am learning that I

need to open up my own cocoon before opening up others'.

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About the Author: Stephanie Lyu Rhee, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Social Work, University of Wisconsin Green Bay (rhees@uwgb.edu).