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Abstract:

An exploration into how our current understanding of grief and grieving in practical theology can be transformed when viewed through the lens of suffering. This article will utilise a comparative discussion of contemporary literature in the fields of thanatology, psychology and practical theology, contextualising key themes which emerge from the research with autoethnographic reflective observations of my own experience of grief following the traumatic and unexpected loss of a friend to a road traffic accident. It is hoped that the themes explored through these reflective passages will inform a re-reading of grief from a phenomenological perspective, which pays attention to the lived experience of suffering and highlights the embodied nature of grief. In considering grief as a form of suffering, this discussion aims to provide a space in which we may develop a more holistic approach to our treatment of grief in current discourse.

Key words: Bereavement; Grief; Suffering; Embodiment; Practical Theology.

Current Paradigms of Grief

Grief, bereavement, and suffering are fundamental experiences in every person's life. We may dread their coming, but we expect them nonetheless. They remain, however, problematic notions to define. What do we mean when we speak of grief, how does this differ from bereavement, and how and in what way do we experience this as suffering?

This article will seek to explore the relationship between grief and the experience of suffering, and suggest that grief is itself a form of suffering which is lived, embodied, and currently neglected in the way in which practical theology responds to grieving. By exploring the issue of grief related suffering through auto-ethnographic reflective writing, I intend to highlight the ways in which grief is felt and experienced and discuss how these experiences are currently attended to in contemporary grief literature.

Todd Du Bose (1997) in his psychological study of grief describes bereavement as the *event* of loss, the moment or time in which our relationship is separated from the living to the gone.

Grief then, he furthers, is the *emotional response* elicited by the event of loss. The period of grieving is considered to be the “*working through*” of the emotions associated with painful loss or bereavement (1997; p368). What is curiously absent in many current paradigms of grief, however, is its relationship to suffering, both emotional and physical.

The sensations of suffering experienced during this period, whilst inextricable to our lived experience of grieving, is a subject which has been given little attention in both clinical study and theological enquiry relating to the grief experience. There can be seen to be a tendency in theology to offer binary definitions of grief and suffering; “life through death, joy through pain, and most important, redemption through suffering” (Wallace, 2016; p111).

Such narratives are often uncritically adopted and used in practical theology and pastoral care to offer metaphors through which we may understand and begin to process the emotions and experiences involved in the process of grieving (Wallace, 2016; pxv). Cynthia Wallace highlights the problematic nature of relying on theodicy too readily when attending to grief, and observes that the;

...danger that attends these ethical models of redemptive suffering is their forgetfulness: of specific vulnerable others and also of the history of redemptive suffering in Western culture and its myriad religious and gendered connotations-and implications (2016; p10).¹

In an age in which we are increasingly secularised, and in which our encounters with pastoral ministry is more and more limited to situations of extreme circumstances, pastoral care is often only sought in the immediate period after a significant loss, and oftentimes more so for practical assistance in terms of funeral planning and participation in funeral rites. For some, pastoral counselling has become an ad hoc response at the critical hour of action. If this is the only engagement with pastoral counselling requested by the bereaved, then this support can often be withdrawn before the emotions of grief have really begun to surface at all (Mitchell et al, 1983; p139). In this limited timeframe, finding an appropriate balance of care and support is particularly challenging, and practitioners may find themselves relying on “band aid” approaches to grief.

¹ Whilst it is important to highlight the relationship between theodicy and grief suffering as an important element in the grief conversation, examining the dynamics of this would explore a separate element of grief than is the focus of this article. As such, I have chosen to touch only briefly upon this in later pages, as the trajectory of my argument concerns a shift away from this model towards a more phenomenological approach to grief suffering as a lived experience.

Norma Autten asserts that;

In offering what help we can at such a time we must remember that those who mourn need understanding of their feelings far more than ready made solutions to their problems. To “comfort” really means “to strengthen”, “to make strong.” Mistakenly, it is often understood as a soothing or lulling into forgetfulness (1967; p55).

Significantly within practical theology there has been a long-term movement in grief counselling and grief therapy towards an adoption of traditional psychoanalytical paradigms of grief. Influenced by the works of John Bowlby (1960) and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969), “stage” or “process” models of grieving have been commonly used to delineate the trajectory of emotions an individual may experience in working through the event of bereavement or painful loss (Flatt, 1987; p183). In identifying patterns of emotions experienced similarly by those who have experienced painful loss, these “stages” of feeling have become familiar guidelines and tools for practitioners in constructing appropriate support responses.

John Bowlby’s (1960) theory of loss was grounded in his work on attachment theory, in which he posits that it is the separation itself that results in the feelings of painful loss. Bowlby believed this “split” evokes the separation anxiety which is developed in early infancy and manifests itself as grief. Bowlby’s method of modelling grief was four-fold and encompassed; shock and numbness, yearning and searching, despair and disorganisation, reorganisation and recovery (1998; p85). He asserted that grief is “an experience which can endanger physical and mental health, both in the short term and the long”(1960).

Kübler-Ross has taught us that grieving is a process of stages, each to be worked through, and re-worked through until it is something that is manageable and easily carried (2005; p11). This notion of “process” is a common reoccurrence in grief literature and pastoral care (Flatt, 1987 and Lloyd, 1996) and demarcates grieving into a temporal situational which occurs after death, and before our return to everyday life.

Limitations of Current Paradigms

It is interesting to note however that both Bowlby and Kübler-Ross’s work on process stages were primarily designed as observations on other social issues- namely, the psychological effects of a terminal diagnosis and the separation of a child from its mother, respectively. Whilst both drew parallels in the patterns of emotions observed in their work to the similar emotions individuals experienced in processing bereavement, neither offered their theory as a

catch all method in grief counselling. And yet, these models have been enthusiastically adopted by both clinical professions and in pastoral care as tools for supporting the grieving process. Melissa Kelley, in her work on contemporary grief and pastoral care in ministry, observes that;

It is no exaggeration to say that [the] Kübler- Ross Stage paradigm of dying has taken on a life of its own and has become deeply embedded not only in the field of thanatology but in culture more broadly (2010; p46).

Whilst the stage theory model is still widely culturally accepted as “western²” model of grieving, and continues to underpin many psychoanalytical and pastoral methods in administering to the bereaved, it has of recent years been subject to criticism for its “prescriptive, rather than descriptive, emphasis” (Kelly, 2010; p47). In describing grief in a temporal, developmental process, the Kübler-Ross model arguably neglects the intricacies of the human relationship which has been severed, and what this disruption means to the person experiencing the loss.

Deborah Van Duesen Hunsinger, in her interdisciplinary reflections on pastoral counselling (1995), has observed that there has been a propensity in pastoral care to adopt either a psychoanalytical or a theological model, in dealing with matters relating to grief. Whilst more empathetic “listening ear” approaches in psychology which advocate “entering the perceptual world of the individual and being at home in it” are now more readily applied to challenges of personal crisis (Rodgers, 1975; p4). Van Duesen Hunsinger observes that there remains a tendency to “default” to process models of care in which the caring professional remains distanced from the individual’s grief situation.

Interestingly, a stage process paradigm of grief was developed in the 1940’s by American Psychologist Erich Lindemann, who observed an extensive range of “stages” in the trajectory of individual emotion. His work also detailed observation on the somatic sensations experienced in grieving, and documented the physical suffering experienced as extensively as the emotional stages observed (1944). This attention to the phenomenology of suffering in painful loss has arguably been lost over the years that followed, or at the very least largely neglected in further studies.

² Since Kubler-Ross’s model, research is increasingly challenging the eurocentrism of traditional grief paradigms, in favour of models which more sensitively account for cultural differences in grieving and coping processes (Stroebe and Schut, 1999).

It is increasingly being recognised that viewing grief as a staged process can be limiting at best, and damaging at worst, in successfully supporting the bereaved individual. In her last published volume on this subject, Kübler-Ross herself noted;

The Stages have evolved since their introduction, and they have been very misunderstood for the last few decades. They were never meant to tuck messy emotions into neat packages (2005; p27).

Much has been offered in the study of grief in terms of the impact to relationships, social participation and its potential impact on faith (Zylla, 2012; p4). However, the implications of suffering (both embodied and psychological) following bereavement (or what may be defined more broadly as painful loss) on our experience of grieving, have been largely absent from theological inquiry. Increasingly, scholars in other disciplines are turning their attention to the phenomenology of suffering, and the importance of developing a dialogue in which we may articulate suffering as lived, embodied experience. Elaine Graham, in an essay exploring the ethical implications of embodied personal narratives, describes the importance of developing such an awareness;

To place the body at the centre of moral and social theorizing reflects a conviction on the part of many scholars that the human body serves as the surface upon which the most controversial and pressing dilemmas of the day are made flesh (1999; P254).

Authors approaching this topic from a feminist perspective, such as Cynthia Wallace (2016) and Carol Gilligan (1996) are making strides in exploring the dynamics of suffering, which highlight the importance of recognising the significance of the grieving body. Whilst the gendered dynamics at play on the grieving body certainly influence how that body itself is perceived and experienced during the grieving period; we must arguably first draw attention to the question of why the body, any body, is so curiously absent from the grief conversation.³

³ The issue of embodiment is bound up with the gendered, racial and cultural significance of the body. An embodied experience will doubtless be one which is strongly influenced by these factors, however these influences are too diverse and complex to be explored adequately within the scope of this article.

Similarly, the gendered dynamics of grieving is a significant area of further study. Whilst Stroebe and Schut challenge current research paradigms as representing “a female model” of grieving (1999), this question requires exploration of issues such as the gendered acceptability of emotional expression, and heteronormative constructions of “gendered” social roles which may not adequately represent the experience of LGBTQ individuals.

Philip Zylla, a professor in Pastoral Theology (2012), explores the embodied experience of grieving through an interrogation of suffering, both physical and mental. He identifies that in current models of care, there is the absence of a “language which adequately reflects the situation of suffering,” and proposes a reengagement of suffering into the dialogue of pastoral care (2012; p47).

The usefulness of such a reengagement has significant implications on how practical theology may employ a heuristic approach to suffering to inform the way we understand and support the process of grieving. A phenomenological study (a study which explores lived experience) into the embodied nature of suffering in relation to the grief experience has largely been missing in practical theology and has arguably obscured suffering from our dialogue with grief. Du Bose highlights the significance of developing such an approach in asking;

I continued to wonder why the body is so affected by the experience of loss, and how the body affects the life-world as it changes in this process. In other words, what is the nature of the grieving body? Moreover, I am more aware of how the body extends beyond my skin, beyond my private body (1997, p368).

The event of painful loss is often the starting point of the suffering which occurs through the process of grieving, yet we have left ourselves scant language to articulate this form of pain. I intend to question our treatment of grief as a process, by re-framing grief in the context of suffering. If we are to view grief as a form of suffering, of pain, what then does grief begin to look like? What happens to our concept of grieving if we are to view it as a lived, embodied feeling, something that is felt and enacted as opposed to “worked through”?

In the passages which follow, I will explore particular aspects of grief through the reflective lens of my own experience of bereavement. In recent research autoethnography has proved to be a significantly useful tool in exploring complex issues of lived experience and is receiving increasing attention within practical theology as a valuable method of research (Graham, 2005; Holman-Jones, 2005; Walton, 2014). Heather Walton observes that “...there may be times when we take brave decisions to share experiences that are painful to us, because their telling may be of benefit to others” (2014; pxxix).

Through my own reflective “tellings” which will follow, I will introduce key themes in the literature and attempt to identify certain aspects of the grieving process; what they might mean to the bereaved individual, how they are currently addressed in contemporary grief models, and the limitations of such models in providing a comprehensive approach to dealing

with the care of the bereaved in the hopes of proving a more nuanced understanding of the experience of grieving. I will further argue that the current models used may be developed by a more inclusive awareness of suffering as part of the grief paradigm.

Grief as Separation

Soaked through, hours standing in disbelieving vigil by the white sheet lying on the rain soaked tarmac, as if by our very combined presence we could will him to stand.

Frozen. Stuck in that space between before and the unknown of what would come after. Of course we knew what would follow...arrangements would be made, flowers would be bought. Goodbyes would be said. But what about after?

Grief is very much like those hours spent staring at that prone shape under the sheet. Cold, unyielding. Grey. Slow. Immersive. In those moments, the prospect of "after" seems unfathomable.

I am now living in the "after." The loss was sudden and unexpected. A friend, taken far too young and far too soon. Having lost my mother a year earlier, grief was not an unfamiliar companion for me. I was still living with the quiet burden of it, a leaden weight in my pocket reminding me at all times that there was a heaviness to my heart which showed little sign of lightening. My mother's loss had become a dull but constant ache...perhaps akin to the phantom pain spoken of by those with lost limbs. It lived there in the space that used to hold something precious.

My slow and quiet grief was interrupted, abruptly, violently, sharply by this unexpected and traumatic further loss. I had been slowly treading water, now I was immersed, submerged in a grief that was unanticipated and uninvited. This grief was disorientating, visceral, disbelieving. Bereavement, as we have learned from Du Bose (1997), is a "splitting" in the relationship between oneself and the deceased. DuBose articulates this sensation well in his phenomenology of grief;

Bereavement comes from a linguistic lineage that means "to be shorn off" or "torn up" ... The experience is one in which something or someone has been suddenly ripped from one's life-world (1997; p368).

This notion of separation is important, as it points to a schism between the healthy emotions experienced before painful loss, and the suffering experienced thereafter. Our connection to

our loved one has been severed, and with it, often our ability to verbalise the painful emotions caused by such a separation. By its juxtaposition to us, the living, death physically separates us from those whom we are grieving. By our very living, we see ourselves in opposition to the process of death and grieving. This opposition, and a reluctance to face the realities of death and dying can make it difficult for the bereaved person to process such an event, and can be experienced as a very real and physical sensation of loss. Zylla argues that "...the anguish of psychological suffering is a severe experience of trauma to the human heart" (2012; p60).

The use of the word "trauma" here is significant, as it highlights both the physical and psychological damage often felt in the immediate days or weeks following a painful loss. Jerome Frederick argues that there is evidence of a pathology of bereavement, in which the heightened stress associated with loss can be seen to increase the adrenocorticotrophic hormones which inhibit successful prevention of inflammation and suppress the immune system, leading to increased susceptibility to disease and heightened mortality rates amongst recently bereaved individuals (1971; 72). In viewing the event of painful loss or bereavement as an experience of trauma, we may arguably be better placed to expand our perception of grief as an emotional disturbance, to one of an experience of anguish so acute it also affects the physical body.

Multiple Losses: Adjustment to a new reality.

I'm acutely aware of her gaze on me. She is looking over my bedraggled appearance, the haunted expression I am failing to hide in my eyes. She is waiting for me to say something, do something, and I am angry about it.

I'll go, I said. People will need to be fed, there will be tea that will need to be brewed. There would be comfort found in the bottom of a mug. I would find some small comfort and provide it for us. And yet there I was, standing in front of the poor check out assistant, furious that she was expecting me to engage in life. To make small talk, to exchange money and pleasantries. I felt raw, exposed...outraged that everyone around me was having an ordinary day, and expected me to participate in this ordinariness. People tell you that life goes on, but they don't tell you that it does so so immediately and unrelentingly.

In days or weeks following the event of loss, it is usually difficult to navigate one's way through the daily routines within which we must participate. It is as though one reality is superimposed on top of another...we can see the world around us as we did before, but right

underneath the surface is the knowledge that this world is not the same. Stroebe and Schut (1999) suggest that there is a “multiplicity” of sufferings associated with loss of a loved one, for example financial stresses and assumption of new roles or tasks formerly occupied by the deceased, which can cause considerable, if not equal, disruption to the daily life and emotional well-being of the mourner (1999; 202). Attempting to re-locate oneself in the world following a bereavement is a challenging undertaking, as our habits and routines can often seem meaningless, pointless even, in the face of such emotional disruption. In recognition of the challenges provoked by such multiple losses, Stroebe and Schut theorise a “dual process model” of grieving which attempts to move beyond the linear staged process model in which bereavement is the singular stressor; towards a model which allows for an “oscillation” between loss-orientation and restoration (1999; p212). Within this paradigm, “loss” is not defined by the bereavement but rather denotes the process of confronting the multiple losses associated with one’s previous reality; similarly, “restoration” is not defined as the satisfactory resolution of grief, but rather as a dynamic process of coping with the challenges of each “loss” (1999; 214). This model is particularly useful in recognising the complexity of loss, its impact to daily life, and our ability to process and adapt to the often overwhelming life changes associated with loss.

Search for Meaning

One of the fundamental impulses in seeking pastoral support in the period following a painful loss is arguably to attempt to somehow find meaning in the loss. Kelley contends that;

If we had to capture in one word what has become perhaps the essential feature of the contemporary grief field, I would choose the word meaning (2010; p71).

In the days following his death, and in countless since, we have all agonised over the “why” of this particular painful loss. Why that day, why that road. Why was it to be him, when it could have been any of us. This primal urge to question has traditionally fallen into the hands of religion to address. Religiosity has long been relied upon to provide answers where we can find none. Kelley furthers that;

meaning, including theological meaning, helps to create order, sense and purpose out of experiences and events that could otherwise seem random, nonsensical, disordered and chaotic (2010; p75).

In the absence of a suitable language of suffering, there is a tendency in theology to rely on theodicy to explain suffering, particularly those which focus on the redemptive quality of the experience. The temptation to find meaning in suffering is certainly a heady one. This is especially problematic when considering grief, as redemptive theodicy may arguably be felt to be at odds with our sense of emotional responsibility to those we have lost. If we are to find a redemptive aspect to our grief, does this mean that we are in some way to find gratitude in their passing?

Mitchell and Anderson suggest that ministering to the bereaved is so challenging precisely because questions about grief are so intertwined with questions about faith. They argue that as Christians we grieve differently, and moreover *should* grieve differently “precisely because our faith is grounded in the promise of a presence from whom we cannot be separated” (1983; p102). In *Roots of Sorrow* Phillip Zylla, explores the implications of theological interpretations of suffering. He affirms that; “Faith itself is tested at the root by the ongoing situation that seems to indicate Gods absence” (2012; p4).

Suffering, then, when considered as a crisis in personal faith, may almost present as an altogether different problem to be faced. In addressing suffering in terms of theodicy, it becomes inextricably linked to a challenge of faith. Zylla observes three main tendencies of theodicy relating to suffering; to explain (sense making) or “surface answers”, to avoid or deny, and to defend God (2012; p26). He cautions against using individual examples of suffering to make such generalisations regarding suffering at societal level. In such reductionist readings of suffering, particularly those which rely on redemptive interpretations, he suggests there is a danger in oversimplifying the experience of suffering, which can be potentially harmful to the person experiencing it (2012; p27).

There is a great temptation to use explanatory meanings to understand and articulate the suffering experienced during grieving, however this treads a dangerous path. Heather Walton, a British, feminist practical theologian furthers that;

Theologians have perhaps been too ready to use theodicy to bridge the gaps and fissures in human experience in order to enable us to supply a happy ending to all our stories (2014; P186).

Such prescriptions, while perhaps useful in attempting to address a crisis of faith, arguably neglect the lived experience of grief as a psychological, emotional and physical disruption to daily living. We may oversimplify the meaning and context of our grief situation to such a

degree that we no longer understand it as “our” pain; that it is not felt and experienced but rather translated into a bump in the road of our faith journey.

In the suffering experienced in grieving, the visceral need to find the why in our loss is a particularly challenging aspect of suffering. Following the explanatory prescriptions given may prove comforting in the short term, but they neglect the complexity of our emotion, of our loss, of the person we are grieving themselves. The person can become lost in our quest to find meaning in our loss. And so we ask, what meaning can be read into suffering when it doesn't have an emancipatory, liberatory outcome?

Suffering

“The paramedic says he died instantly,” the police officer at the line of tape offers awkwardly, apologetically. “He wouldn't have known. Wouldn't have suffered.”

We exchanged grim glances, his guard of honour lining the taped barricade. It went unspoken. We knew. All riders, we all knew the fleeting moment before correcting an error that meant the difference between making it home, or never again. That slide after a spill of oil on the road, the taking of a corner too tight, an overtake misjudged. Your body flushes, cold to hot in terror as time slows down and you brace for if, and how badly, you are going to get hurt. The exhilarating relief once that moment passes, and you've made it, is one we've also all shared. The shake of the head and the jovial promise of “never again!” to your comrade alongside you.

He never got that moment. He knew he was leaving us, of that we were sure. And that was a suffering almost too much to bear.

We are often told when someone passes that they did not suffer, or that their suffering has come to an end. The notion of suffering is firmly ascribed to the deceased, we are comforted with the idea that with death comes release from the bonds of suffering. But what then of the living? Kristine Rankka, in her feminist analysis of the value of suffering observes that,

One suffers partially, at least, because one is aware that overwhelming pain may be never-ending and that one may not be able to do anything to alleviate it, accompanied by the fear that there is no hope for anything better (1998; p28).

In our shared silence, his fellow riders shared our inability to contemplate this suffering, both ours and his. Suffering, like grief, is an inherently problematic notion to unpick, and perhaps

more problematic to vocalise. Suffering, both mentally and physically, is often accompanied by a loss of language, an inability to express our pain in the way that it is felt. Jamie Mayerfield, in his interrogation into the morality of suffering, suggests that the word itself;

comes to designate, in our minds, only a faint copy or superficial image of the real thing, but having forgotten what the original is, we mistake it for the copy (1990; 101).

Even if we are to find a way to give voice to our suffering, he asks, will the language we are able to use ever be able to accurately reflect the feeling of our pain?

Mayerfield acknowledges that while some suffering can lead to redemptive experience, or moral regeneration, this is a merely a product of suffering, rather than the process itself. He cautions against neglecting the importance of reading suffering as exactly what it is: painful, inexplicable, evil even. He posits that, “Perhaps the overall package is worth having; perhaps the knowledge and virtue are worth their cost in suffering. But the suffering is a cost” (1990; p86). He argues for a shift away from reading suffering as potentially life-enhancing or redemptive, to recognising suffering as a phenomenological experience in its own right, one which has no particular meaning or purpose other than to be felt and experienced, until it abates.

Mayerfield’s theory of suffering is perhaps a controversial one, particularly in terms of its theological implications, as it implies the answer to the question of meaning is simply that there is no answer, other than the moral imperative to pay suffering its due attention when it arises. However, it is useful in drawing attention to the complex realities of how suffering is really felt and lived; how we feel when we are in the midst of the experience of suffering, and how these sensations disrupt our daily living and relationships. In neglecting the actuality of painful emotions and suffering in our grief responses, we are arguably ignoring the symptoms of the problem at the very same moment in which we are attempting to alleviate them.

Lived Experience: Phenomenology of Grief

The strangest of things will trigger it. The mention of a place, the smell of wet grass and petrol. Sometimes a sound, the wail of a siren. Sometimes it will come without precursor, unbidden and unwelcome. And then your breath will catch in your chest, and you will remember. The sensation of panic, shock which has now turned to anger. A hollowness that sits heavy in the pit of your stomach. The day that had been normal turns a different colour.

A little less bright, the colours more muted. It's a little piece of sadness that you carry around, but it smells of him still so you keep it with you.

In the weeks and months that follow a painful loss, the sensations of sound, touch and smell can be crucial in evoking memories, both painful and comforting. Sensory experiences are crucial to the act of remembrance, and remembrance is an important step in processing our pain. If we are to similarly acknowledge the sensations engendered by grief; fatigue, numbness, acute pain, sleeplessness...all can be seen to describe the physical condition of suffering. Suffering, then, could be described as the lived embodiment of the grieving process. In utilising such language in the narration of grieving, we would arguably be better placed to articulate a situation of extreme suffering; of the physical, mental and emotional pain which can impede the daily life of the mourner.

Elaine Scarry (1985) writes extensively on the relationship between pain and language. She suggests that an over-reliance on euphemism or metaphor in describing painful sensations (or an avoidance of language altogether) could in fact diminish a person's ability to alleviate their pain, as it misrepresents their pain as something less than how it is really felt (1985; p17). Zylla also contends that;

the tendency to leave out parts of the experience of suffering or to abridge the full experience of suffering can weaken our understanding of what is really happening in a situation (2012; p87).

If we are to develop a theology which offers appropriate support to grief situations, we must also understand the phenomenology of suffering evoked by bereavement. A phenomenological approach to the lived experience of grief, the act of grieving and the subjective impact grief has on the individual is crucial to developing a narrative of "grief pain." Scarry suggests that "the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain" (1985; p9).

Our task then is to attempt to identify meaningful language with which to assert and make visible this form of suffering, and in such a way that it allows others to bear witness to it, and the individual themselves to attempt to exorcise it.

Restoration and Adaptation

Time has passed. The days of the calendar have been checked off swiftly...one day at a time seems to last an eternity, but rolled together they have turned into months in the blink of an

eye. We are collected together back at the scene, but it is different now. The rain has gone, the day has turned to night. The grass has grown over the marks left etched in the ground, the photographs and notes taped to the post have weathered and curled.

We are different. Our eyes have a hollowness they didn't have before, there are lines that betray the nights spent restless and haunted. In the aftermath of the accident we were disorientated, disbelieving, displaced. As we have returned to our ordinary lives, for some, the potency of grief has ebbed. It is like the post, it is always there, a marker to our shared loss and our remembrance, but the days have also weathered it. We are now able to bear this place, to smile at the things which remind us of him and laugh at the memories they evoke. We feel linked, connected by a day that is burned into our lives like scorched earth. It is an unusual closeness, and at times, an uncomfortable one. So much has been shared...so much endured side by side that the words now are unspoken, instinctively heard. And so we gather again at this spot, assembled together to stand watch for him once more.

Grief is often described as something which we carry with us. I would suggest it is the suffering that is carried, the pain of the loss with which we live, which we struggle to give voice to, and which we hope will lessen, week by week and year by year. People may speak of grief as a cross to bear, and it is, but we neglect to remember that the image of the cross has itself traditionally represented suffering. It is a visual reminder that to suffer is to be human, and one cannot experience painful loss without the accompaniment of suffering. Mitchell and Henderson suggest that, "if it is human to suffer, then the principal theological question is not Why do we suffer? But Who suffers with us?" (1983; p169).

I have argued that grief is an embodied and dialogical experience. We feel it, we speak it, although we often struggle to give it voice. It is this challenge in giving voice which highlights the importance of interrogating a theology of grief and suffering. If we are to allow grief to speak, it will almost certainly be using the language of suffering. Numbness...shock, anguish, rage. The overwhelming fatigue and the loss of appetite, the feeling of rootlessness and displacement. I would suggest that we must first pay attention to how such language is used in the event of painful loss, and what this really says about the experience of grief as one of intense physical and emotional suffering. Heather Walton observes that;

It is now frequently claimed that the work of storytelling lies at the heart of the healing encounter between those who suffer and those who seek to meet this suffering with the resources of faith (2014; P164).

In my experience of grief, the task of meaning making can often be too large a burden to bear, too big an undertaking. Language, however, can be a useful form of meaning making, when no meaning can be found. The reflective passages observing my own experience are intended to highlight particular elements of embodied grief currently neglected in practical theology, however, they have also been an important instrument in allowing me to express my own suffering, to give voice to a lived experience of pain that I would otherwise have struggled to articulate. Mitchell and Henderson counsel that, “Grief expressed is not grief heard unless someone is listening” (1983; p118.)

The ability to hear another’s pain, to allow it to become visible, without judgment and without prescription is arguably the principal element in providing effective pastoral support (Mitchell and Henderson, 1983; Rodgers, 1975). Carl Rodgers argues that such empathic listening is a critical, fundamental tool in effective counselling;

When a person is perceptively understood, he finds himself coming in closer touch with a wider range of his experiences (1971; p7).

Grief and suffering are not separate entities but two sides of the same coin. In adopting an interdisciplinary approach which pays attention not only to the psychological processes at work, the individual’s faith beliefs and how they influence such processes; but also to the phenomenological experience of how an individual experiences and is affected by grief, we may begin to offer a more comprehensive model of care and a deeper understanding of grief as form of suffering. We may begin to have a conversation with grief that attends to suffering, and asks exactly how suffering feels, as we live it.

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Glory in Suffering? A reflection on finding meaning in grief through an interrogation into the phenomenology of suffering.

Glory in Suffering? A reflection on finding meaning in grief through an interrogation into the phenomenology of suffering.

Abstract:

An exploration into how our current understanding of grief and grieving in practical theology can be transformed when viewed through the lens of suffering. This article will utilise a comparative discussion of contemporary literature in the fields of thanatology, psychology and practical theology, contextualising key themes which emerge from the research with autoethnographic reflective observations of my own experience of grief following the traumatic and unexpected loss of a friend to a road traffic accident. It is hoped that the themes explored through these reflective passages will inform a re-reading of grief from a phenomenological perspective, which pays attention to the lived experience of suffering and highlights the embodied nature of grief. In considering grief as a form of suffering, this discussion aims to provide a space in which we may develop a more holistic approach to our treatment of grief in current discourse.

Key words: Bereavement; Grief; Suffering; Embodiment; Practical Theology.

Current Paradigms of Grief

Grief, bereavement, and suffering are fundamental experiences in every person's life. We may dread their coming, but we expect them nonetheless. They remain, however, problematic notions to define. What do we mean when we speak of grief, how does this differ from bereavement, and how and in what way do we experience this as suffering?

This article will seek to explore the relationship between grief and the experience of suffering, and suggest that grief is itself a form of suffering which is lived, embodied, and currently neglected in the way in which practical theology responds to grieving. By exploring the issue of grief related suffering through auto-ethnographic reflective writing, I intend to highlight the ways in which grief is felt and experienced and discuss how these experiences are currently attended to in contemporary grief literature.

Todd Du Bose (1997) in his psychological study of grief describes bereavement as the *event* of loss, the moment or time in which our relationship is separated from the living to the gone.

Grief then, he furthers, is the *emotional response* elicited by the event of loss. The period of grieving is considered to be the “*working through*” of the emotions associated with painful loss or bereavement (1997; p368). What is curiously absent in many current paradigms of grief, however, is its relationship to suffering, both emotional and physical.

The sensations of suffering experienced during this period, whilst inextricable to our lived experience of grieving, is a subject which has been given little attention in both clinical study and theological enquiry relating to the grief experience. There can be seen to be a tendency in theology to offer binary definitions of grief and suffering; “life through death, joy through pain, and most important, redemption through suffering” (Wallace, 2016; p111).

Such narratives are often uncritically adopted and used in practical theology and pastoral care to offer metaphors through which we may understand and begin to process the emotions and experiences involved in the process of grieving (Wallace, 2016; pxv). Cynthia Wallace highlights the problematic nature of relying on theodicy too readily when attending to grief, and observes that the;

...danger that attends these ethical models of redemptive suffering is their forgetfulness: of specific vulnerable others and also of the history of redemptive suffering in Western culture and its myriad religious and gendered connotations-and implications (2016; p10).¹

In an age in which we are increasingly secularised, and in which our encounters with pastoral ministry is more and more limited to situations of extreme circumstances, pastoral care is often only sought in the immediate period after a significant loss, and oftentimes more so for practical assistance in terms of funeral planning and participation in funeral rites. For some, pastoral counselling has become an ad hoc response at the critical hour of action. If this is the only engagement with pastoral counselling requested by the bereaved, then this support can often be withdrawn before the emotions of grief have really begun to surface at all (Mitchell et al, 1983; p139). In this limited timeframe, finding an appropriate balance of care and support is particularly challenging, and practitioners may find themselves relying on “band aid” approaches to grief.

¹ Whilst it is important to highlight the relationship between theodicy and grief suffering as an important element in the grief conversation, examining the dynamics of this would explore a separate element of grief than is the focus of this article. As such, I have chosen to touch only briefly upon this in later pages, as the trajectory of my argument concerns a shift away from this model towards a more phenomenological approach to grief suffering as a lived experience.

Norma Autten asserts that;

In offering what help we can at such a time we must remember that those who mourn need understanding of their feelings far more than ready made solutions to their problems. To “comfort” really means “to strengthen”, “to make strong.” Mistakenly, it is often understood as a soothing or lulling into forgetfulness (1967; p55).

Significantly within practical theology there has been a long-term movement in grief counselling and grief therapy towards an adoption of traditional psychoanalytical paradigms of grief. Influenced by the works of John Bowlby (1960) and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969), “stage” or “process” models of grieving have been commonly used to delineate the trajectory of emotions an individual may experience in working through the event of bereavement or painful loss (Flatt, 1987; p183). In identifying patterns of emotions experienced similarly by those who have experienced painful loss, these “stages” of feeling have become familiar guidelines and tools for practitioners in constructing appropriate support responses.

John Bowlby’s (1960) theory of loss was grounded in his work on attachment theory, in which he posits that it is the separation itself that results in the feelings of painful loss. Bowlby believed this “split” evokes the separation anxiety which is developed in early infancy and manifests itself as grief. Bowlby’s method of modelling grief was four-fold and encompassed; shock and numbness, yearning and searching, despair and disorganisation, reorganisation and recovery (1998; p85). He asserted that grief is “an experience which can endanger physical and mental health, both in the short term and the long”(1960).

Kübler-Ross has taught us that grieving is a process of stages, each to be worked through, and re-worked through until it is something that is manageable and easily carried (2005; p11). This notion of “process” is a common reoccurrence in grief literature and pastoral care (Flatt, 1987 and Lloyd, 1996) and demarcates grieving into a temporal situational which occurs after death, and before our return to everyday life.

Limitations of Current Paradigms

It is interesting to note however that both Bowlby and Kübler-Ross’s work on process stages were primarily designed as observations on other social issues- namely, the psychological effects of a terminal diagnosis and the separation of a child from its mother, respectively. Whilst both drew parallels in the patterns of emotions observed in their work to the similar emotions individuals experienced in processing bereavement, neither offered their theory as a

catch all method in grief counselling. And yet, these models have been enthusiastically adopted by both clinical professions and in pastoral care as tools for supporting the grieving process. Melissa Kelley, in her work on contemporary grief and pastoral care in ministry, observes that;

It is no exaggeration to say that [the] Kübler- Ross Stage paradigm of dying has taken on a life of its own and has become deeply embedded not only in the field of thanatology but in culture more broadly (2010; p46).

Whilst the stage theory model is still widely culturally accepted as “western²” model of grieving, and continues to underpin many psychoanalytical and pastoral methods in administering to the bereaved, it has of recent years been subject to criticism for its “prescriptive, rather than descriptive, emphasis” (Kelly, 2010; p47). In describing grief in a temporal, developmental process, the Kübler-Ross model arguably neglects the intricacies of the human relationship which has been severed, and what this disruption means to the person experiencing the loss.

Deborah Van Duesen Hunsinger, in her interdisciplinary reflections on pastoral counselling (1995), has observed that there has been a propensity in pastoral care to adopt either a psychoanalytical or a theological model, in dealing with matters relating to grief. Whilst more empathetic “listening ear” approaches in psychology which advocate “entering the perceptual world of the individual and being at home in it” are now more readily applied to challenges of personal crisis (Rodgers, 1975; p4). Van Duesen Hunsinger observes that there remains a tendency to “default” to process models of care in which the caring professional remains distanced from the individual’s grief situation.

Interestingly, a stage process paradigm of grief was developed in the 1940’s by American Psychologist Erich Lindemann, who observed an extensive range of “stages” in the trajectory of individual emotion. His work also detailed observation on the somatic sensations experienced in grieving, and documented the physical suffering experienced as extensively as the emotional stages observed (1944). This attention to the phenomenology of suffering in painful loss has arguably been lost over the years that followed, or at the very least largely neglected in further studies.

² Since Kubler-Ross’s model, research is increasingly challenging the eurocentrism of traditional grief paradigms, in favour of models which more sensitively account for cultural differences in grieving and coping processes (Stroebe and Schut, 1999).

It is increasingly being recognised that viewing grief as a staged process can be limiting at best, and damaging at worst, in successfully supporting the bereaved individual. In her last published volume on this subject, Kübler-Ross herself noted;

The Stages have evolved since their introduction, and they have been very misunderstood for the last few decades. They were never meant to tuck messy emotions into neat packages (2005; p27).

Much has been offered in the study of grief in terms of the impact to relationships, social participation and its potential impact on faith (Zylla, 2012; p4). However, the implications of suffering (both embodied and psychological) following bereavement (or what may be defined more broadly as painful loss) on our experience of grieving, have been largely absent from theological inquiry. Increasingly, scholars in other disciplines are turning their attention to the phenomenology of suffering, and the importance of developing a dialogue in which we may articulate suffering as lived, embodied experience. Elaine Graham, in an essay exploring the ethical implications of embodied personal narratives, describes the importance of developing such an awareness;

To place the body at the centre of moral and social theorizing reflects a conviction on the part of many scholars that the human body serves as the surface upon which the most controversial and pressing dilemmas of the day are made flesh (1999; P254).

Authors approaching this topic from a feminist perspective, such as Cynthia Wallace (2016) and Carol Gilligan (1996) are making strides in exploring the dynamics of suffering, which highlight the importance of recognising the significance of the grieving body. Whilst the gendered dynamics at play on the grieving body certainly influence how that body itself is perceived and experienced during the grieving period; we must arguably first draw attention to the question of why the body, any body, is so curiously absent from the grief conversation.³

³ The issue of embodiment is bound up with the gendered, racial and cultural significance of the body. An embodied experience will doubtless be one which is strongly influenced by these factors, however these influences are too diverse and complex to be explored adequately within the scope of this article.

Similarly, the gendered dynamics of grieving is a significant area of further study. Whilst Stroebe and Schut challenge current research paradigms as representing “a female model” of grieving (1999), this question requires exploration of issues such as the gendered acceptability of emotional expression, and heteronormative constructions of “gendered” social roles which may not adequately represent the experience of LGBTQ individuals.

Philip Zylla, a professor in Pastoral Theology (2012), explores the embodied experience of grieving through an interrogation of suffering, both physical and mental. He identifies that in current models of care, there is the absence of a “language which adequately reflects the situation of suffering,” and proposes a reengagement of suffering into the dialogue of pastoral care (2012; p47).

The usefulness of such a reengagement has significant implications on how practical theology may employ a heuristic approach to suffering to inform the way we understand and support the process of grieving. A phenomenological study (a study which explores lived experience) into the embodied nature of suffering in relation to the grief experience has largely been missing in practical theology and has arguably obscured suffering from our dialogue with grief. Du Bose highlights the significance of developing such an approach in asking;

I continued to wonder why the body is so affected by the experience of loss, and how the body affects the life-world as it changes in this process. In other words, what is the nature of the grieving body? Moreover, I am more aware of how the body extends beyond my skin, beyond my private body (1997, p368).

The event of painful loss is often the starting point of the suffering which occurs through the process of grieving, yet we have left ourselves scant language to articulate this form of pain. I intend to question our treatment of grief as a process, by re-framing grief in the context of suffering. If we are to view grief as a form of suffering, of pain, what then does grief begin to look like? What happens to our concept of grieving if we are to view it as a lived, embodied feeling, something that is felt and enacted as opposed to “worked through”?

In the passages which follow, I will explore particular aspects of grief through the reflective lens of my own experience of bereavement. In recent research autoethnography has proved to be a significantly useful tool in exploring complex issues of lived experience and is receiving increasing attention within practical theology as a valuable method of research (Graham, 2005; Holman-Jones, 2005; Walton, 2014). Heather Walton observes that “...there may be times when we take brave decisions to share experiences that are painful to us, because their telling may be of benefit to others” (2014; pxxix).

Through my own reflective “tellings” which will follow, I will introduce key themes in the literature and attempt to identify certain aspects of the grieving process; what they might mean to the bereaved individual, how they are currently addressed in contemporary grief models, and the limitations of such models in providing a comprehensive approach to dealing

with the care of the bereaved in the hopes of proving a more nuanced understanding of the experience of grieving. I will further argue that the current models used may be developed by a more inclusive awareness of suffering as part of the grief paradigm.

Grief as Separation

Soaked through, hours standing in disbelieving vigil by the white sheet lying on the rain soaked tarmac, as if by our very combined presence we could will him to stand.

Frozen. Stuck in that space between before and the unknown of what would come after. Of course we knew what would follow...arrangements would be made, flowers would be bought. Goodbyes would be said. But what about after?

Grief is very much like those hours spent staring at that prone shape under the sheet. Cold, unyielding. Grey. Slow. Immersive. In those moments, the prospect of "after" seems unfathomable.

I am now living in the "after." The loss was sudden and unexpected. A friend, taken far too young and far too soon. Having lost my mother a year earlier, grief was not an unfamiliar companion for me. I was still living with the quiet burden of it, a leaden weight in my pocket reminding me at all times that there was a heaviness to my heart which showed little sign of lightening. My mother's loss had become a dull but constant ache...perhaps akin to the phantom pain spoken of by those with lost limbs. It lived there in the space that used to hold something precious.

My slow and quiet grief was interrupted, abruptly, violently, sharply by this unexpected and traumatic further loss. I had been slowly treading water, now I was immersed, submerged in a grief that was unanticipated and uninvited. This grief was disorientating, visceral, disbelieving. Bereavement, as we have learned from Du Bose (1997), is a "splitting" in the relationship between oneself and the deceased. DuBose articulates this sensation well in his phenomenology of grief;

Bereavement comes from a linguistic lineage that means "to be shorn off" or "torn up" ... The experience is one in which something or someone has been suddenly ripped from one's life-world (1997; p368).

This notion of separation is important, as it points to a schism between the healthy emotions experienced before painful loss, and the suffering experienced thereafter. Our connection to

our loved one has been severed, and with it, often our ability to verbalise the painful emotions caused by such a separation. By its juxtaposition to us, the living, death physically separates us from those whom we are grieving. By our very living, we see ourselves in opposition to the process of death and grieving. This opposition, and a reluctance to face the realities of death and dying can make it difficult for the bereaved person to process such an event, and can be experienced as a very real and physical sensation of loss. Zylla argues that "...the anguish of psychological suffering is a severe experience of trauma to the human heart" (2012; p60).

The use of the word "trauma" here is significant, as it highlights both the physical and psychological damage often felt in the immediate days or weeks following a painful loss. Jerome Frederick argues that there is evidence of a pathology of bereavement, in which the heightened stress associated with loss can be seen to increase the adrenocorticotrophic hormones which inhibit successful prevention of inflammation and suppress the immune system, leading to increased susceptibility to disease and heightened mortality rates amongst recently bereaved individuals (1971; 72). In viewing the event of painful loss or bereavement as an experience of trauma, we may arguably be better placed to expand our perception of grief as an emotional disturbance, to one of an experience of anguish so acute it also affects the physical body.

Multiple Losses: Adjustment to a new reality.

I'm acutely aware of her gaze on me. She is looking over my bedraggled appearance, the haunted expression I am failing to hide in my eyes. She is waiting for me to say something, do something, and I am angry about it.

I'll go, I said. People will need to be fed, there will be tea that will need to be brewed. There would be comfort found in the bottom of a mug. I would find some small comfort and provide it for us. And yet there I was, standing in front of the poor check out assistant, furious that she was expecting me to engage in life. To make small talk, to exchange money and pleasantries. I felt raw, exposed...outraged that everyone around me was having an ordinary day, and expected me to participate in this ordinariness. People tell you that life goes on, but they don't tell you that it does so so immediately and unrelentingly.

In days or weeks following the event of loss, it is usually difficult to navigate one's way through the daily routines within which we must participate. It is as though one reality is superimposed on top of another...we can see the world around us as we did before, but right

underneath the surface is the knowledge that this world is not the same. Stroebe and Schut (1999) suggest that there is a “multiplicity” of sufferings associated with loss of a loved one, for example financial stresses and assumption of new roles or tasks formerly occupied by the deceased, which can cause considerable, if not equal, disruption to the daily life and emotional well-being of the mourner (1999; 202). Attempting to re-locate oneself in the world following a bereavement is a challenging undertaking, as our habits and routines can often seem meaningless, pointless even, in the face of such emotional disruption. In recognition of the challenges provoked by such multiple losses, Stroebe and Schut theorise a “dual process model” of grieving which attempts to move beyond the linear staged process model in which bereavement is the singular stressor; towards a model which allows for an “oscillation” between loss-orientation and restoration (1999; p212). Within this paradigm, “loss” is not defined by the bereavement but rather denotes the process of confronting the multiple losses associated with one’s previous reality; similarly, “restoration” is not defined as the satisfactory resolution of grief, but rather as a dynamic process of coping with the challenges of each “loss” (1999; 214). This model is particularly useful in recognising the complexity of loss, its impact to daily life, and our ability to process and adapt to the often overwhelming life changes associated with loss.

Search for Meaning

One of the fundamental impulses in seeking pastoral support in the period following a painful loss is arguably to attempt to somehow find meaning in the loss. Kelley contends that;

If we had to capture in one word what has become perhaps the essential feature of the contemporary grief field, I would choose the word meaning (2010; p71).

In the days following his death, and in countless since, we have all agonised over the “why” of this particular painful loss. Why that day, why that road. Why was it to be him, when it could have been any of us. This primal urge to question has traditionally fallen into the hands of religion to address. Religiosity has long been relied upon to provide answers where we can find none. Kelley furthers that;

meaning, including theological meaning, helps to create order, sense and purpose out of experiences and events that could otherwise seem random, nonsensical, disordered and chaotic (2010; p75).

In the absence of a suitable language of suffering, there is a tendency in theology to rely on theodicy to explain suffering, particularly those which focus on the redemptive quality of the experience. The temptation to find meaning in suffering is certainly a heady one. This is especially problematic when considering grief, as redemptive theodicy may arguably be felt to be at odds with our sense of emotional responsibility to those we have lost. If we are to find a redemptive aspect to our grief, does this mean that we are in some way to find gratitude in their passing?

Mitchell and Anderson suggest that ministering to the bereaved is so challenging precisely because questions about grief are so intertwined with questions about faith. They argue that as Christians we grieve differently, and moreover *should* grieve differently “precisely because our faith is grounded in the promise of a presence from whom we cannot be separated” (1983; p102). In *Roots of Sorrow* Phillip Zylla, explores the implications of theological interpretations of suffering. He affirms that; “Faith itself is tested at the root by the ongoing situation that seems to indicate Gods absence” (2012; p4).

Suffering, then, when considered as a crisis in personal faith, may almost present as an altogether different problem to be faced. In addressing suffering in terms of theodicy, it becomes inextricably linked to a challenge of faith. Zylla observes three main tendencies of theodicy relating to suffering; to explain (sense making) or “surface answers”, to avoid or deny, and to defend God (2012; p26). He cautions against using individual examples of suffering to make such generalisations regarding suffering at societal level. In such reductionist readings of suffering, particularly those which rely on redemptive interpretations, he suggests there is a danger in oversimplifying the experience of suffering, which can be potentially harmful to the person experiencing it (2012; p27).

There is a great temptation to use explanatory meanings to understand and articulate the suffering experienced during grieving, however this treads a dangerous path. Heather Walton, a British, feminist practical theologian furthers that;

Theologians have perhaps been too ready to use theodicy to bridge the gaps and fissures in human experience in order to enable us to supply a happy ending to all our stories (2014; P186).

Such prescriptions, while perhaps useful in attempting to address a crisis of faith, arguably neglect the lived experience of grief as a psychological, emotional and physical disruption to daily living. We may oversimplify the meaning and context of our grief situation to such a

degree that we no longer understand it as “our” pain; that it is not felt and experienced but rather translated into a bump in the road of our faith journey.

In the suffering experienced in grieving, the visceral need to find the why in our loss is a particularly challenging aspect of suffering. Following the explanatory prescriptions given may prove comforting in the short term, but they neglect the complexity of our emotion, of our loss, of the person we are grieving themselves. The person can become lost in our quest to find meaning in our loss. And so we ask, what meaning can be read into suffering when it doesn't have an emancipatory, liberatory outcome?

Suffering

“The paramedic says he died instantly,” the police officer at the line of tape offers awkwardly, apologetically. “He wouldn't have known. Wouldn't have suffered.”

We exchanged grim glances, his guard of honour lining the taped barricade. It went unspoken. We knew. All riders, we all knew the fleeting moment before correcting an error that meant the difference between making it home, or never again. That slide after a spill of oil on the road, the taking of a corner too tight, an overtake misjudged. Your body flushes, cold to hot in terror as time slows down and you brace for if, and how badly, you are going to get hurt. The exhilarating relief once that moment passes, and you've made it, is one we've also all shared. The shake of the head and the jovial promise of “never again!” to your comrade alongside you.

He never got that moment. He knew he was leaving us, of that we were sure. And that was a suffering almost too much to bear.

We are often told when someone passes that they did not suffer, or that their suffering has come to an end. The notion of suffering is firmly ascribed to the deceased, we are comforted with the idea that with death comes release from the bonds of suffering. But what then of the living? Kristine Rankka, in her feminist analysis of the value of suffering observes that,

One suffers partially, at least, because one is aware that overwhelming pain may be never-ending and that one may not be able to do anything to alleviate it, accompanied by the fear that there is no hope for anything better (1998; p28).

In our shared silence, his fellow riders shared our inability to contemplate this suffering, both ours and his. Suffering, like grief, is an inherently problematic notion to unpick, and perhaps

more problematic to vocalise. Suffering, both mentally and physically, is often accompanied by a loss of language, an inability to express our pain in the way that it is felt. Jamie Mayerfield, in his interrogation into the morality of suffering, suggests that the word itself;

comes to designate, in our minds, only a faint copy or superficial image of the real thing, but having forgotten what the original is, we mistake it for the copy (1990; 101).

Even if we are to find a way to give voice to our suffering, he asks, will the language we are able to use ever be able to accurately reflect the feeling of our pain?

Mayerfield acknowledges that while some suffering can lead to redemptive experience, or moral regeneration, this is a merely a product of suffering, rather than the process itself. He cautions against neglecting the importance of reading suffering as exactly what it is: painful, inexplicable, evil even. He posits that, “Perhaps the overall package is worth having; perhaps the knowledge and virtue are worth their cost in suffering. But the suffering is a cost” (1990; p86). He argues for a shift away from reading suffering as potentially life-enhancing or redemptive, to recognising suffering as a phenomenological experience in its own right, one which has no particular meaning or purpose other than to be felt and experienced, until it abates.

Mayerfield’s theory of suffering is perhaps a controversial one, particularly in terms of its theological implications, as it implies the answer to the question of meaning is simply that there is no answer, other than the moral imperative to pay suffering its due attention when it arises. However, it is useful in drawing attention to the complex realities of how suffering is really felt and lived; how we feel when we are in the midst of the experience of suffering, and how these sensations disrupt our daily living and relationships. In neglecting the actuality of painful emotions and suffering in our grief responses, we are arguably ignoring the symptoms of the problem at the very same moment in which we are attempting to alleviate them.

Lived Experience: Phenomenology of Grief

The strangest of things will trigger it. The mention of a place, the smell of wet grass and petrol. Sometimes a sound, the wail of a siren. Sometimes it will come without precursor, unbidden and unwelcome. And then your breath will catch in your chest, and you will remember. The sensation of panic, shock which has now turned to anger. A hollowness that sits heavy in the pit of your stomach. The day that had been normal turns a different colour.

A little less bright, the colours more muted. It's a little piece of sadness that you carry around, but it smells of him still so you keep it with you.

In the weeks and months that follow a painful loss, the sensations of sound, touch and smell can be crucial in evoking memories, both painful and comforting. Sensory experiences are crucial to the act of remembrance, and remembrance is an important step in processing our pain. If we are to similarly acknowledge the sensations engendered by grief; fatigue, numbness, acute pain, sleeplessness...all can be seen to describe the physical condition of suffering. Suffering, then, could be described as the lived embodiment of the grieving process. In utilising such language in the narration of grieving, we would arguably be better placed to articulate a situation of extreme suffering; of the physical, mental and emotional pain which can impede the daily life of the mourner.

Elaine Scarry (1985) writes extensively on the relationship between pain and language. She suggests that an over-reliance on euphemism or metaphor in describing painful sensations (or an avoidance of language altogether) could in fact diminish a person's ability to alleviate their pain, as it misrepresents their pain as something less than how it is really felt (1985; p17). Zylla also contends that;

the tendency to leave out parts of the experience of suffering or to abridge the full experience of suffering can weaken our understanding of what is really happening in a situation (2012; p87).

If we are to develop a theology which offers appropriate support to grief situations, we must also understand the phenomenology of suffering evoked by bereavement. A phenomenological approach to the lived experience of grief, the act of grieving and the subjective impact grief has on the individual is crucial to developing a narrative of "grief pain." Scarry suggests that "the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain" (1985; p9).

Our task then is to attempt to identify meaningful language with which to assert and make visible this form of suffering, and in such a way that it allows others to bear witness to it, and the individual themselves to attempt to exorcise it.

Restoration and Adaptation

Time has passed. The days of the calendar have been checked off swiftly...one day at a time seems to last an eternity, but rolled together they have turned into months in the blink of an

eye. We are collected together back at the scene, but it is different now. The rain has gone, the day has turned to night. The grass has grown over the marks left etched in the ground, the photographs and notes taped to the post have weathered and curled.

We are different. Our eyes have a hollowness they didn't have before, there are lines that betray the nights spent restless and haunted. In the aftermath of the accident we were disorientated, disbelieving, displaced. As we have returned to our ordinary lives, for some, the potency of grief has ebbed. It is like the post, it is always there, a marker to our shared loss and our remembrance, but the days have also weathered it. We are now able to bear this place, to smile at the things which remind us of him and laugh at the memories they evoke. We feel linked, connected by a day that is burned into our lives like scorched earth. It is an unusual closeness, and at times, an uncomfortable one. So much has been shared...so much endured side by side that the words now are unspoken, instinctively heard. And so we gather again at this spot, assembled together to stand watch for him once more.

Grief is often described as something which we carry with us. I would suggest it is the suffering that is carried, the pain of the loss with which we live, which we struggle to give voice to, and which we hope will lessen, week by week and year by year. People may speak of grief as a cross to bear, and it is, but we neglect to remember that the image of the cross has itself traditionally represented suffering. It is a visual reminder that to suffer is to be human, and one cannot experience painful loss without the accompaniment of suffering. Mitchell and Henderson suggest that, "if it is human to suffer, then the principal theological question is not Why do we suffer? But Who suffers with us?" (1983; p169).

I have argued that grief is an embodied and dialogical experience. We feel it, we speak it, although we often struggle to give it voice. It is this challenge in giving voice which highlights the importance of interrogating a theology of grief and suffering. If we are to allow grief to speak, it will almost certainly be using the language of suffering. Numbness...shock, anguish, rage. The overwhelming fatigue and the loss of appetite, the feeling of rootlessness and displacement. I would suggest that we must first pay attention to how such language is used in the event of painful loss, and what this really says about the experience of grief as one of intense physical and emotional suffering. Heather Walton observes that;

It is now frequently claimed that the work of storytelling lies at the heart of the healing encounter between those who suffer and those who seek to meet this suffering with the resources of faith (2014; P164).

In my experience of grief, the task of meaning making can often be too large a burden to bear, too big an undertaking. Language, however, can be a useful form of meaning making, when no meaning can be found. The reflective passages observing my own experience are intended to highlight particular elements of embodied grief currently neglected in practical theology, however, they have also been an important instrument in allowing me to express my own suffering, to give voice to a lived experience of pain that I would otherwise have struggled to articulate. Mitchell and Henderson counsel that, “Grief expressed is not grief heard unless someone is listening” (1983; p118.)

The ability to hear another’s pain, to allow it to become visible, without judgment and without prescription is arguably the principal element in providing effective pastoral support (Mitchell and Henderson, 1983; Rodgers, 1975). Carl Rodgers argues that such empathic listening is a critical, fundamental tool in effective counselling;

When a person is perceptively understood, he finds himself coming in closer touch with a wider range of his experiences (1971; p7).

Grief and suffering are not separate entities but two sides of the same coin. In adopting an interdisciplinary approach which pays attention not only to the psychological processes at work, the individual’s faith beliefs and how they influence such processes; but also to the phenomenological experience of how an individual experiences and is affected by grief, we may begin to offer a more comprehensive model of care and a deeper understanding of grief as form of suffering. We may begin to have a conversation with grief that attends to suffering, and asks exactly how suffering feels, as we live it.

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