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'Relearning the world': Finding a space to grieve with Lewis, Didion and Woolf

Abstract:

When my Dad said, *You're going to get some very bad news here, so you have to prepare yourself*, I began to understand the word grief. For most of the 20th century, grief was categorised by stage models and binaries, and described as a process that eventually ends. Philosopher Thomas Attig, however, contributes to a "new wave" of grief theory that dismisses these interpretations as reductive. He describes grief as a process of 'relearning the world of our experience'. As I go about doing just that, 'relearning the world' without my mother in it, I rely on Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Virginia Woolf's life and work, and CS Lewis's *A Grief Observed* to show me the way. I find a common thread in the feeling of being pushed to the social margins when grieving. I ask, where is the space for grief, if—as Philippe Ariès has suggested—Western culture subscribes to a 'social obligation' to strive for happiness? With the help of these three writers from three different eras, I learn that grief does not, in fact, end; and suggest that, as grieving writers, we may have access to a culturally accepted space for grief that the general population does not.

Biographical note:

Since completing her Honours Degree in Communications (Professional Writing) at the University of Canberra in 2004, Brooke Davis has worked as an editor, travel writer, reviewer and freelance writer, and has run Creative Writing workshops for high school students. She has had short fiction published and has won the Allen and Unwin Prize for Prose Fiction, the Verandah Prose Prize and the University Medal for Outstanding Academic Achievement. Currently, she works as a sessional tutor in Literary and Cultural Studies at Curtin University of Technology in WA while she completes her Doctorate of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) at the same university.

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The first dead body I saw was my mother's. This wasn't as dramatic as it sounds—I was at the place where you expected to see dead bodies, and I knew it was going to happen—but it was dramatic enough for me. She was in a pine coffin, eyes closed, white satin framing her body and climbing her skin. I remember thinking her wrinkles were missing. It was a small room, her coffin propped up in the middle, flowers strategically placed in all corners of the room. Someone else's make-up and her shirt buttoned right up to her neck and her downturned lips (I'd never seen her lips do that). Her body devoid of all the lumps and folds and lines I'd known. The mood lighting also; how it all formed some sort of grotesque retail display.

That word: *grief*. It is a word I have never needed until I did, and then it was not enough. It had always felt so far away from me—all black veils and drawn curtains and hushed tones—and the word just sank, vaguely and without effort, into a part of the universe I was uninterested in. And when it did catapult itself into my life, I spent days looking at it, willing myself to understand it like the inner workings of a clock. It began to appear in my head, sometimes startlingly against the black; other times deep in the shadows of everything.

It is a word that has been forced on me, but it is a word that I have chosen to bring closer to me. Robert Neimeyer (2002: 2) says that, for most of the 20th century in Western culture, bereavement was understood 'as a process of 'letting go' of one's attachment to the deceased person, "moving on" with one's life, and gradually "recovering" from the depression occasioned by the loss so as to permit a return to "normal" behaviour'. Here, grief is an experience that you endure, and then it ends. As the literature on loss grew, he says, 'this modern conceptualisation of grief was gradually expanded to detail...both "complicated" and "uncomplicated" bereavement, and the presumed stages through which it would be "resolved" (2002: 2). These stages, or stage models as they are commonly referred to in the literature—this idea that grief could be universally experienced and could unfold in a specific sequence of phases—was made especially popular in the 1970s by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's (2003: 9) work on death and dying. She described Denial and Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance as the emotions one experienced when diagnosed with a terminal illness. Models like this 'began to dominate the Western cultural perspective on bereavement' (Hagman 2002: 16) because, Neimeyer says, they were 'associated with recovery' from grief, or closure on grief, offering 'an apparently authoritative road map through the turbulent emotional terrain' of grief (Neimeyer, 2002: 2-3).

It makes sense to me, to want to classify grief in this neat way, because don't we like order—isn't that why we get so much pleasure out of narrative? These stage models remind me of a narrative arc—beginning, middle, end; act one, act two, act three; set-up, confrontation, resolution. We do like to put labels on things, to shelve them in easily accessible containers, to put them in handy little books priced \$19.95. It's about comfort. More specifically, perhaps, it's about control. But as we move further into the 21st century, we start to see a backlash towards this neatness of the experience of grief; a group of people who begin to contribute to a 'new wave', one that embraces the disorder of grief. The philosopher Thomas Attig (2002: 33) is one such contributor, who says, 'Grieving is nearly always complicated—"nearly" because sometimes we grieve moderately for someone who was not particularly close...nearly

“always” because, ordinarily, grieving involves nothing less than relearning the world of our experience’.

‘Relearning the world’ began for me at the Ho Chi Minh airport in Vietnam, when my Dad’s voice said over the phone: *Now you’re going to get some very bad news here, so you have to prepare yourself.* It was my Dad’s voice, but it wasn’t my Dad, because he wasn’t supposed to say those kinds of things to me, and his voice had never sounded like that, like it was unravelling. And then the blur that followed: the lady at the check-in counter who said, so very bluntly, *What is the matter with you?* And my discovery that, despite all my best efforts and expectations, I couldn’t say, *I just found out my Mum died*, without crying. The man sitting next to me on the plane who said, *Have a cold do you?* The CNN ad that kept appearing on the screen, *By the time this plane lands, the world will be a different place.* The little boy who gave his Mum hell on the plane ride, and how much it startled me to realise that from now on I will notice mothers and their children. The circle of family that I fell into when I arrived at Melbourne airport; how seeing them made it suddenly very real. The front page of the newspaper with a picture of my Mum’s car and that horrifying white sheet next to it. Waking up that first morning without Mum and having to remember, again. The physicality of it, how my body was very much involved in this, how it was not just something of the mind. Having breakfast every morning with my brothers on the verandah of my mother’s house, taking time to share our dreams or nightmares, to cry, to laugh, to be silent together; I believe this is what saved me. Writing messages to Mum in the sand at the beach with my brothers on her birthday. We wrote them in really big letters, out of some sort of hope or instinct. How I constantly felt like someone else was speaking out of my mouth. How the funeral came and went, and the flowers stopped coming, the casseroles stopped appearing, and no one visited anymore, and the quietness of it all was so loud.

In the beginning my grief made the world a television screen. It came upon me suddenly, this feeling that I was outside of everything and looking in; that I was somehow invisible to the people in the television. It gave me a most curious feeling of infallibility, coupled with an utter vulnerability. The glass eventually—shattered? Smashed? Broke? There was nothing that dramatic, that clear; nothing that metaphorically neat. It was more like a fading away; a barely perceptible slinking back onto the other side of the screen.

I began to notice other things too. There were things I could do, and couldn’t do. There wasn’t anyone who specifically informed me of these social limitations, it was just instinct. I wasn’t supposed to cry in the middle of the supermarket. I wasn’t supposed to say that my Mum had *died* or was *dead*; I had to use skeletal phrases like *passed away* or *gone*. I wasn’t supposed to enjoy driving around in the car Mum died in. I loved, and still love, how close she was when I drove it. I had to park Mum’s car at least two blocks away whenever I was visiting friends and family, because, as a family friend informed me, *People don’t want to see the dent.* The anger that rose in me at this; I wanted to scream, *But I’m her daughter, and if I have to see this dent written on everything that’s ever existed and will exist, then so do all of you.* I wasn’t supposed to request a copy of the autopsy, and pore over it. I wasn’t supposed to ask to talk to the police about what happened. When the police officer showed me the

statement from the man who had tried to save my Mum, and photos of the scene of the accident, he said, with a kind of wide-eyed breathlessness, *I haven't included the other photos*. I realised two things at this point: that photos of my Mum, dead, existed somewhere; and that this man was frightened I would ask to see them. I could see all these Not-Supposed-To's on the faces of people around me; people who were overwhelmingly kind and supportive, but who told me with a flicker of their eyes that there were things I simply could not do.

It was at this point that I endeavoured to get answers in the only way I knew how. I wanted to know that other people had blazed the trail before me. I longed for the shared experience. I dismissed the psychoanalytical books, the sociological, the psychological, the self-help (I would, of course, dissect them all in detail later) and made a beeline for the area in which I felt most comfortable: the books from people who I knew could write. There were three writers in particular whom I relied on at this time, and it is these three writers from three different time periods—Virginia Woolf, C. S. Lewis and Joan Didion—from whom I have learnt and continue to learn so very much.

Published in 1961, C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* consists of notes from a journal he kept while grieving for the loss of his wife. It reads like a grief chart of sorts, plotting the process of his grief over an unspecified period of time in an emotional, honest and lyrical account. From Lewis, I quickly learnt that this Television-Screen Grief and Not-Supposed-To Grief—this feeling of being disconnected, of being on the margins, of being marginalised more specifically—is not unusual in the bereaved. The title itself, *A Grief Observed*, suggests a different version of this Television-Screen Grief, as if he is outside of his own grief, and bearing witness to it. He writes of an 'invisible blanket between the world and me' (1961: 5), that eventually lifts without a 'sudden, striking, and emotional transition', but rather 'like the warming of a room or the coming of daylight' (1961: 52). Lewis also writes about the unexpected feeling of being marginalised, socially, by his grief.

An odd by-product of my loss is that I'm aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet. At work, at the club, in the street, I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether they'll 'say something about it' or not. I hate if they do, and if they don't. (1961: 11)

And later, 'Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers' (1961: 11). Poet and theorist Sandra Gilbert, author of *Wrongful Death* (1997), a memoir detailing the death of her husband in a botched operation, writes of her delight in stumbling across this passage by Lewis, as she, too, felt a 'mystifying oppression' (2007: xx), a 'persistent, barely conscious feeling that...in [her] sorrow [she] represented a serious social problem to everyone except [her] circle of intimates' (2007: xix). This 'set of social and intellectual commandments "forbidding mourning"', Gilbert says, was the driving force in her desire to write about it, 'to assert [her] grief, to name and claim [her] sorrow' (2007, p. xx).

The most intriguing thing about this is the gap that begins to appear between that written on the page and that in the social realm. Gilbert talks of a 'new, multifaceted attention to death and bereavement' (2007: xxi) taking place across fiction and non-

fiction—and it is certainly my experience that there is no shortage of books on the subject of grief. Yet, there is still this ‘persistent, barely conscious feeling’ experienced by the bereaved that they ‘ought to be isolated in special settlements’. Contemporary Western culture does not appear to have difficulty in digesting mediated representations of grief, but it is when you *are* the representation of grief in a social setting that the expression of grief becomes problematic. I can write it, but I cannot speak it. This brings new meaning to Ariès’ (1974: 94) claim that, in contemporary Western culture, there is a ‘social obligation’ not to be sad, and to only be happy; perhaps this ‘obligation’ does not apply to the written word. Perhaps, as writers, we have access to a cultural space that the general population does not.

Joan Didion also writes about this ‘set of social and intellectual commandments’ in *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), a memoir that describes the year in which her daughter fell severely ill and her husband died of a heart attack (Didion’s daughter would also die after the book was published; Didion, however, refused to revise the book). When she arrives at the funeral home to prepare for her husband’s funeral, she is ‘so determined to avoid any inappropriate response (tears, anger, helpless laughter at the Oz-like hush) that [she] had shut down all response’ (2005: 18). It would be considered culturally and socially appropriate to cry within these walls of the funeral home—it would even be something the staff might expect—but Didion is so unsure of her new position within the culture, and so acutely aware of these ‘commandments’, that she is reluctant to let herself react at all. Later, when Didion turns to books to dissect her newfound experience of grieving—because ‘in time of trouble, [she] had been trained since childhood, read, learn...go to the literature,’ (2005: 44)—she finds a scientific book that documents the most frequent immediate responses to death: ‘“Subjectively,”’ she quotes, ‘“survivors may feel like they are wrapped in a cocoon or blanket; to others they may look as though they are holding up well.”’ (2005: 46). She refers to a comment that a paramedic had made about her at the time of her husband’s death: ‘Here, then, we had the “pretty cool customer” effect’ (2005: 46).

Didion’s memoir exemplifies this ‘cool customer effect’, in its analytically distant and emotionally restrained writing style, and in the way the work often reads like a literature review. It is obvious that Didion has read widely on grief, hospitals, memories, autopsies, and death. Like me, was she interested in those that had blazed the trail before her? Or is there something more to this: the idea of information as control? Didion is also careful to note dates, days and times for every movement, thought and gesture. This is in contrast to Lewis’s version, where we are very much lost and floundering in the temporal sense, not unlike the feeling of grief itself. Why does Didion see this to be important? Perhaps if she can assign a narrative arc to her experience, she can create some sort of order out of this unsettling disorder.

The intersection between the title of the book and her approach to the grieving experience is, however, perhaps the most revealing part of Didion’s memoir. Magical thinking refers to the ‘belief (especially characteristic of early childhood and of many mental illnesses) that thoughts, wishes, or special but causally irrelevant actions can cause or influence external events’ (OED, 2009). We see these moments of magical thinking peppered throughout her rational thoughts, such as the time she refuses to donate her husband’s clothing and organs because ‘how could he come back if they

took his organs, how could he come back if he had no shoes?' (2005: 41) Here is an irrational, unscientific and childlike idea coupled with an analytically detached style, the instinct to intellectualise, and the need to control. It was at this precise intersection that I learnt about the difficulty in labelling, controlling, or even defining grief; that grief, sometimes, cannot be intellectualised.

And so it comes that I am now writing my own grief, like Lewis and Didion, but in a fictional form. Virginia Woolf says that this is something she did in *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In 'A Sketch of the Past', a memoir by Woolf (Schulkind 1990: 90), she describes *To the Lighthouse* as an elegy for the mother she lost when she was just 13 years old. 'I did what psychoanalysts do for their patients,' she writes. 'I expressed some very long and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest.' But just how much did she 'lay to rest'? Literary critics, such as Mark Spilka in *Virginia Woolf's Quarrel With Grieving* (1980), have long claimed that Woolf's work and life was indicative of her constant state of pathological (or 'complicated') grieving, and that the quality of her life and work was diminished because of her inability to grieve in an 'uncomplicated' (or 'normal') way. Tammy Clewell, however, in 'A Consolation Refused: Virginia Woolf, the Great War, and Modernist Mourning' (2004: 198), says that this way of reading Woolf's fiction, 'as a case history of neurotic grief', has now ended. Critics now say that her unresolved grief was not the cause of her illness—that she was in fact an undiagnosed manic depressive—and that her work contributed to a 'positive reinvention of mourning' and a redefinition of the grieving process as an ongoing experience (2004: 198). 'Her textual practice of endless mourning,' Clewell writes, 'compels us to refuse consolation, sustain grief, and accept the responsibility of the difficult task of remembering' (2004: 199). Either way you look at it, her life and work demonstrate the sheer complexity of grief work (Attig's notion that 'all grief is nearly always complicated'), and that grief does not end. Most important of all, however, is that Woolf used the writing of fiction as a space to grieve.

That word: *grief*. In bringing it closer to me, I have found that there are many other ways to describe it. Relearning the world. Complicated. Uncomplicated. An invisible blanket. A television screen. A cocoon. Individual. Random. Shared. Never-never-ending.

Nearing the end of his memoir, Lewis (1961: 50) finds the word 'sorrow' to be appropriate when talking about the endlessness of his grief:

I thought I could describe a state; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history, and if I don't stop writing that history at some quite arbitrary point, there's no reason why I should ever stop. There is something new to be chronicled every day.

Grief is not neat like a narrative arc. It does not end; it is not "resolved". It does not follow a checklist of emotions from beginning to end. It is not one thing, or the other thing; it is lots of things. And to say that binaries and stage models are reductive approaches to the grief process is not new; there is, in fact, an entire body of theory devoted to this very notion. But the process of grief is new to me, and it is new to me every day. Every day I learn something about grief, from myself, from my writing,

from others, from everything around me. In Lewis's emotional and lyrical account, I learnt that he, too, felt socially marginalised; that he, too, felt disconnected from a world he once knew. In Didion's analytical, intellectual and emotionally restrained memoir I found a kindred spirit in the instinct and need that she had to intellectualise her situation. In the study of Woolf I began to understand grief as an ongoing experience—as such I was able to relieve myself of the pressure to “get over it”—and I learnt how the writing of fiction could be used as a space to grieve. From all three, I learnt about the complexity, individuality *and* universality of grief; that a feeling of marginalisation is actually the mainstream; that, perhaps, in a culture that puts limits on the spaces for grief, I am lucky to feel comfortable with the blank page.

As I go about 'relearning the world of [my] experience', driving my Mum's car around with the dent in the side, I will move back and forth and up and down and over and sideways through different stages of grief for as long as I'm allowed to be here. Just as Woolf, Lewis and Didion have done, I am beginning to understand that grief is now, simply, a part of everything I do, everything I say, everything I write. Everything I am.

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