

COMMENTARY

MOURNING AND ADAPTATION FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A PARENT IN CHILDHOOD

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My article is a very personal one. It is based on my recently published memoir, *City of One*, which tells a story of parental death in childhood. I will use this opportunity to interweave some of the conflicting viewpoints on childhood mourning, both from psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic writings, with my own experiences. My memoir touches on many of the themes that appear in the professional literature, and follows them from my earliest childhood memories through my life today.

My first exposure to death came when I was three years old and my father was fatally stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage caused by an undiagnosed brain tumor. My half-brother was five, and my mother was two months pregnant with my younger sister. My father had been the sole wage earner, and had left little money. My mother's parents moved in with us to help out with finances and child care. Two years later, my grandfather died suddenly, and shortly after that, my mother developed breast cancer. She underwent multiple surgeries and other disfiguring treatments, until she succumbed to lung metastases when I was eleven. Of the four adults who had raised me, now only my grandmother remained.

Throughout this entire series of events, my mother and I maintained a pact of silence. As a child, I believed this protected us, and that we would simply fall apart and stop functioning if we discussed our experiences with illness and death, however obvious their impact on our lives. I quote from the memoir.

I stared down her housedress as she bent over to bathe me. One breast moved with the motion of her scrubbing me. Where the other would have been, there was just a scar. Something frightening had happened; I just didn't know what. I could see the evidence—the bandages covering one part of her

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body and then another, the swollen arm—and I furtively examined the padded bras in her drawer. But I remained mystified.

As a child, I was preoccupied with things that disappeared, but my mother's breast was what I noticed most, its absence an inescapable reminder of what was no longer. This was an essential mystery, one I could not solve, and whose contemplation led only to a fear of what might disappear next.

My mother and I never talked about her missing breast. I don't know if I was scared to ask her, or if I sensed that talking didn't suit her and I was trying not to upset her. Once in a while, I got up the courage to ask about something. "Why is your arm all swollen up?" Mom said it was because of her operation, but I really didn't understand what a missing breast had to do with a swollen arm. Mom sort of joked about how she looked with two arms that didn't match. I loved both her arms, the fat one and the skinny one, but I couldn't help thinking that something had gone terribly wrong.

We didn't talk about my father, either. He had vanished with barely a trace when I was three. No picture of him existed in our house. No member of his family was present in our lives. For the brief time he was sick, I stayed with my Aunt Milly at a rented summer cottage. I was lost, wandering on an immense, beautifully manicured lawn, crying for my parents. I was all alone, but Aunt Milly found me. After that, Dad never showed up again, and Mom never spoke of him. (pp. 22–23)

Two years after my father's death, my grandfather died just as quickly when he hemorrhaged from a peptic ulcer. I began to worry that anyone could be next. But I had no communication with the adults around me, and I felt painfully alone. In the memoir, I describe it this way:

When I was five, Grandpa disappeared just as suddenly as Dad. Lots of grown-ups came by and sat in the living room while I wandered around the apartment, everyone ignoring me. He died of a bleeding ulcer in his stomach, they said. I imagined blood gushing into grandpa's stomach, but I wasn't sure why that would make someone die. I heard one of the visitors mention that before you die, you change color. That was a clue. I went into the bathroom and stood on the toilet seat so I could secretly stare into the mirror to check my color, fearing pink, or blue, or chartreuse. I was relieved to find myself the usual color, but for years after that I kept checking just to be certain. Surely children don't just disappear without warning, do they?

It seemed there was no one to talk to, so I went to my bedroom, and lay there, curled up on top of the covers, facing the wall, worrying about what happens to people after they die. The idea of life after death seemed horrible. Suppose it was as boring and disconnected as things were right this minute, except that I wouldn't be able to escape the feeling because I'd be dead, and of course there is no escape from being dead. No, it's better if there is no heaven, and everything just ends.

I was five years old, isolated from the adults in mourning around me. I felt painfully estranged, an inconsequential speck. As an adolescent, I was amazed to discover that the term “existential despair” was the label for this condition, and that my feelings were only peculiar in having started so young and persisted so long. (pp. 27–28)

Six months after my grandfather’s death, my mother developed breast cancer, which soon metastasized. Stoical and self contained, she did her best to behave as if everything was fine despite her obvious progressive disease. I followed her lead, creating an irreconcilable split between the mother who would continue forever and the one who was doomed to die like the family members before her. I quote again from the memoir:

Mom and I went on pretending everything was normal, no matter what changed around us, and no matter how sick she got. I went on believing my mother couldn’t disappear, that that could never happen. And I believed it couldn’t happen because it would have been impossible for me to go on without her. Just as I had the previous summer, I was spending three weeks at camp. She sent these two postcards to me.

July 6, 1956

I hope you are feeling fine and having an enjoyable time. We are all well. How do you like the girls in your bunk and your counselors?

July 11, 1956

I have three of your Weekly Readers. Do you want me to hold them for you or shall I mail them to you? I don’t suppose you have too much time for reading with all those activities going on. Lots of love and kisses xxxxxxxxxxxx from all of us. Mom

On August 29, Mom died.

I have spent a lifetime trying to gain perspective on these deaths and my responses to them, a project that has included an extensive reading of the literature on death and mourning. Virtually all of the descriptions of the psychology of bereavement have been written by psychoanalysts or derived from their work. Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” described healthy adult grieving as the slow but largely complete withdrawal of libido following the death of a loved object with the ultimate goal of freeing the mourner to use this energy for reattachment to the living. In Freud’s own words,

Each single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido’s attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of

reality that the object no longer exists; and the ego, confronted as it were with the question of whether it shall share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished. . . . When the work of mourning is completed, the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.

To a large extent, this description became the basis for our models of healthy adult mourning.

In a 1939 letter consoling a colleague about the death of his son, Freud presents a different version of mourning in speaking about the death of his own daughter Sophie.

Although we know that after such a loss the acute stage of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating the love which we do not want to relinquish.

A quiet debate still goes on about the extent to which healthy adult grieving involves successfully relinquishing attachments to important people who have died. By contrast, virtually all writers agree that children are not able to complete this task. In speaking about her work at a child guidance clinic, Martha Wolfenstein observes that “instead of decathecting a lost love object, which is what happens in mourning, children and adolescents tend to develop a hypercathexis of the lost object. . . . The child needs the continuing relation with the parent in order to advance in his development.” She further points out that “the parent is felt to be a part of the child or an irreplaceable possession without which he is incomplete.” Wolfenstein concludes that the completion of adolescence “constitutes the necessary developmental condition for being able to mourn.”

George Pollack, in describing three adult patients he treated who each lost a parent before the age of six offers this observation:

Throughout the years there had been a retention of the deceased parent in the form of a fantasy figure who was in heaven; to whom the patient could talk and tell whatever he or she wished; who never verbally or actively responded to the patient; and who was always all-seeing and omnipresent. . . . This retention of the object as a figure that can be spoken to and envisioned, and the denial of its demise, interferes with the work of mourning.

My own experience was much like that of Pollack’s patients. The difference between losing my father at age 3 and my mother at eleven

was vast, and here I'm going to focus only on my mother, with whom I created a continuing imaginary relationship. In this excerpt, I'm explaining the new arrangement to my sister:

"Who will tell Alexis?" I had asked my Aunt Milly the day she told me Mom died. She had answered with silence. And so I waited.

"I'll do it," I finally announced. I'd better do it sometime soon. Alexis was seven years old and four grades behind me, but I was afraid she'd hear about it from one of my classmates.

"Have you heard of heaven?" I asked Alexis, paraphrasing Milly's words to me, but not connecting them in any way to Mom's death. I'd selected a strategy, one I'd learned well: I would spare my sister from suffering. I described the pleasure of life in heaven after death, explaining how much better things are in the next world. It didn't matter that I didn't believe in the next world.

For the purposes of my task, heaven was just fine. And, I informed my sister, if Mom were to die, she would go to this wonderful place where she would be much happier than she was here on earth and where she could watch over us at every moment. As I said it, I realized that I sort of believed in that part a little, or at least I wanted to—that my Mom still knew what I was doing even if she couldn't be here, that she could see I was still her reliable helper, and that I was slowly getting up my courage to tell Alexis. (pp. 70–71)

I could certainly recite the fact that my mother was dead and never returning. This belief existed side-by-side with the fantasy of remaining in an ongoing relationship with her. The extent to which children behave in this manner has been central to the psychoanalytic debates about whether children can mourn a parent's death, and if so whether their mourning is pathological.

Increasingly, we have come to recognize the importance of integrating observations about normal development into theories of pathology. In the area of childhood mourning, useful data would consist of studies of community samples of children who are going through an ordinary process of mourning outside of the treatment setting.

One of the most interesting such projects is the Harvard Childhood Bereavement Study, whose findings were reported in a paper by Silverman and Worden (1993). The study was unusual in that the researchers contacted all intact families seen by funeral directors in the Boston area where a parent had died leaving behind children between the ages of 6 and 17. Half of the eligible families agreed to participate. There were 125 children whose average age was 12. When the children were interviewed at four months, 57% reported speaking to the deceased parent,

and 43% of these, mostly younger, felt that they got an answer. Eighty-one percent experienced the parent as watching over them, a nearly universal fantasy. After one year, most children still felt watched. In effect, the majority of these children treated their dead parents as if they were still in some sense alive. The authors suggest that accepting the reality of the death may mean finding a way for the parent to continue to live in some sense in the child's life.

Yet even if childhood mourning ordinarily includes the continued imaginary presence of the parent in the child's psychological life, it is a tremendous oversimplification to say that the child denies the parent's death because it is painfully obvious to any child how inadequate this substitute is. It is perhaps the awareness of the vast gap between the imaginary parent and the once present original that constitutes the child's mourning.

Those psychoanalytic writers who view childhood mourning as unique to a child's developmental capabilities and environment rather than a deficient version of adult mourning have gained acceptance among the broader community of mental health professionals who deal with bereaved children. These analysts refer to the limited choices children have in seeking substitutes, the frequent lack of suitable substitutes, and the adaptive value in such circumstances of maintaining a living image of the deceased parent.

Erna Furman has written:

When an adult is ready to reinvest his love, he can actively seek a new person. The child cannot do that, particularly when he wants a new parent. . . . A parent who is well known and loved will forever be missed to some extent with each new developmental step. . . . A parent who is hardly known accompanies the child throughout life differently, but remains as meaningful.

Robert Furman notes: "For many adults, a child's grief is so poignant they prefer for their own sake to deny its existence. The dictum that a child cannot mourn could only support this unfortunate attitude."

Non-analytic studies of childhood and adult psychopathology—for example, mood and anxiety disorders—following the experience of parental loss in childhood suggest that the adverse impact on mental health of the loss of a parent for any reason—death, divorce, or other separation—is largely mediated by the adequacy of substitute care that follows. Unfortunately, optimal outcomes are uncommon. It would be wonderful if most children lived in settings that could provide a degree of emotional responsiveness and physical nurturing that fully met the bereaved child's needs. Sadly, this is often not the case. Adaptation must

take reality into account. From that perspective, many children may find it helpful to maintain a fantasy that includes an active interaction with the dead parent. Like any supernatural being, it can be frightening or vengeful but nevertheless serves many important purposes. It supports the child's sense of wholeness because all children need their parents for this function. It helps resolve loyalty conflicts by allowing the irreplaceable dead parent to exist psychologically side-by-side with new living caretakers. It becomes part of mastering important developmental milestones that would, if the parent were still living, require a renegotiation that can take place now only in the child's imagination. If subsequent adult development proceeds well, this adaptation becomes increasingly less important.

My own circumstances made relinquishing this adaptation difficult. My mother died without making plans for what would happen to her children after she was gone. Following her death, my sister and I continued to live with my grandmother. After two years my aunts and uncles decided that my grandmother was no longer able to take care of us, but none of them wanted to take us in. They placed us into foster care when my sister was nine and I was thirteen. My brother was already living separately from us in a residential school. While my mother's death was the saddest event of my childhood, placement into foster care was the most traumatic. For many reasons, I was unable to form a new set of attachments to my foster parents, and I gradually fell into a numb, disorganized state.

It was a long way back from that place to re-establishing myself in relationship to other living people. This task was the major goal of my lengthy experiences in treatment, and it was largely the relationships I had with my therapists that allowed me to achieve it. I began a first attempt at psychoanalysis when I was 23, with a candidate. I was unable to tolerate the deprivation of the psychoanalytic experience, convinced I didn't need a psychoanalyst in any case but rather a parent, which in some sense he became.

I was intensely attached to my new therapist. His warmth and interest and insight were central to my hopes for building a new set of relationships to replace those I'd lost. But lying on a couch staring at the ceiling for 45 minutes four times a week trying to say whatever came into my mind, while another person sat behind me, out of sight—it all made me feel as if I'd entered some alternate universe, floating through murky space where nothing was quite real. Besides, who would say whatever comes to mind anyway? Certainly not me, cautious and controlled, suspicious and distrustful, ashamed and fearful. Just because I'd been accepted for psychoanalysis didn't mean I had to spread my inner life all over the place.

I never did learn to free associate, and eventually he and I gave up the idea of formal psychoanalysis altogether, and began to meet face to face. But this very maternal man (who in fact would make a career of studying babies) would help raise me, staying with me for eight years until I'd established a secure place in the adult world and was ready to be on my own. (pp. 163–164)

Re-establishing myself in the world seemed to be the prerequisite for a much more successful second attempt at psychoanalysis. When I tried again at 38, my life was full—husband, child, career—but the theme of separation was still foremost.

Every time my analyst went on vacation, I felt like a helpless little girl again, convinced my whole world was about to unravel. Despite all my attempts to be logical and rational and to remind myself that the past is past, every absence provoked another confrontation with my childhood. What if she disappears permanently just when I need her most, after she has come with me into the frightening territories of my own mind, places I would never be traversing without her? And why am I subjecting myself to a treatment that has the power to elicit such feelings repeatedly, a power no other real-life person or event seems to possess? I hate my dependence, I hate her leaving, I hate these repetitions, I hate watching myself spiral downward until everything starts to feel meaningless, as if her presence holds my life together and it will fall apart without her. I'm not good at this separation business.

"You're angry at me," she'd say simply, and she would wait. I had to keep rediscovering it was true, that just below my despair lay helpless rage. If people I need could just come and go, then the only escape I had was to rid myself of needing them, to refuse to want what I could not control. But now I could see that having completed this internal rampage, having momentarily allowed it to obliterate the importance of everything and everyone, the world seemed meaningless again, and present reality irrelevant. Just give me back what I lost, I'd tell my analyst. Be my real parent. You could if you wanted to. Now I was digging myself in, childlike, insisting that she had the magic to undo the past that I felt unable to concede could not be undone. Finally when I understood how painful this way of protecting myself was, and how angry her desertion made me feel, I saw I was nevertheless still connected, that my terrible feelings had not destroyed our bond. (pp. 238–239)

I do think my analyst's belief that the constructive forces within me outweighed the destructive ones, and that I had the internal resources to heal myself, allowed me to move much closer to relinquishing my lost parents than I had ever imagined possible. I was in my mid-forties when I finally let go of the yearning and reproach that Bowlby speaks of in his studies of childhood mourning.

My parents still exist in my interior life. I appreciate what they gave me. I accept my fury at their leaving. I acknowledge my disappointment and bewilderment that they didn't work out more successful arrangements for their children. I understand that I will never know them adult-to-adult. And I no longer feel that I am capable of giving my parents continued life. I have stopped trying to reclaim them, and I have moved on. In the memoir, I describe it this way:

A chance for ordinary adult happiness now is enough for me. I once imagined that the ordinary would be boring, or at least a kind of defeat, a failure to reclaim the most desirable but now lost original, a second-best settlement agreed upon not because it is ideal but because it is realistic and possible. But the ordinary turns out to be wonderful, even magical. It is the pleasure of daily life with a man who has shown me how reliable someone I love can really be. It is having a daughter who grows into a delightful and competent adult, proving that mother and child can survive and prosper. It is letting go of the impossible only to find that the possible is nevertheless of great value, that my patients and projects at work provide me with unending satisfaction. It is integrating the past, the pain and losses of childhood, with a present marked by the successes of adult life. It is living in a world that is solid, and not about to fall apart. It is a feeling of repair and inner peace, the end of a tortuous route from the comfort of my first home as a small child, through the years of unraveling and destruction, to the creation of a second secure base, established after great effort and with considerable help from others. Although it once seemed unlikely, it has happened. I have found my way home. (p. 249)

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