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The End of All Tears: A Dynamic Interdisciplinary Analysis of Mourning and Complicated Grief With Suggested Applications for Clinicians

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Mourning is a normal, universal response to death with countless cultural elaborations worldwide. When individuals are unable to progress through normal mourning, complicated grief (CG) can be a result. Ways in which humans deal with the universal consequences of death are examined and compared to the typical modern setting found in first world nations. It is suggested that normal mourning is facilitated by various ritual acts and if these activities lack certain features (suggested by cross-cultural analysis of mourning rituals), an increased risk of CG may result. Examination of rituals furthermore suggests ways clinicians may help patients cope with loss.

KEYWORDS *complicated grief, cross-cultural, death, psychiatric treatment, rite of passage*

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps nothing is so universal a human experience as death. And yet, human responses to death are tremendously variable (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, p. 61). Many anthropologists have noted that mourning rituals appear to serve various psychological functions (reviewed in Metcalf & Huntington, 1991; Robben, 2009). In discussing Korean mourning rituals, for example,

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anthropologist Catherine Bell noted how the elaborate rites that accompany a death may help the bereaved manage the shock and change involved in death:

A Korean widow grieving over the death of her spouse and frightened about how to manage alone in the world invites a ritual that demonstrates the continuation of relations after death, the subordination of her loss to an enduring value system, and a catharsis of her anger that enables her to reassume control of her life. (Bell, 2009, p. 136)

Mourning, the cultural complex of behaviors and expectations following the death of a loved one, normally facilitates the transition from the disturbed state of bereavement to a restoration of normal functioning, and this transition is accomplished in many ways worldwide. If, however, this transition is not accomplished, the more troublesome state of complicated grief (CG) can develop. In his essay, *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud, 1914–1916), Freud proposed that loss of a loved one sets up a double bind in the bereaved that, if not resolved, can lead to what we would now likely identify as CG. According to Freud, the unresolved double bind describes a persistent ambivalent state in which the bereaved simultaneously refuses to accept the loss of the loved one while also recognizing the stark reality of loss.

A full review of the literature on CG since Freud is beyond the scope of the present essay. Nevertheless, much has been written since Freud on the subject of mourning and its complications, particularly the work of John Bowlby (1982) and others (cf. Wallin, 2007). Briefly, in the psychological and psychiatric literature, there are a variety of ideas currently in development with respect to normal mourning and CG, both in terms of facilitating normal mourning and identifying the risk factors for CG (explored in more detail next). The subject of the present essay, however, goes beyond the primarily Western European tradition to look cross-culturally at ways humans have tried to deal with the challenges of death and loss. This is accomplished by examining mourning rituals across the world and throughout history and finds commonly encountered and recurrent motifs. The bulk of the present work will therefore focus largely on this comparative, cross-cultural data.

METHOD

Comparing the data of anthropology to psychology can be challenging for a number of reasons that go beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, it is possible to utilize the data of anthropology to inform psychology and vice-versa (explored in depth in Goodwyn, 2014) in a way that avoids oversimplification and misattribution of data and meanings. The central

hypothesis entertained here is that inadequate ritualization can increase the risk of CG, and that cross-cultural study of mourning rituals can tell us what factors may be necessary to facilitate normal mourning. I approached this hypothesis from the perspective of the psychic unity of humankind and the existence of various recurrent motifs (for a full discussion of these topics, see Goodwyn, 2014).

Briefly, according to cognitive anthropologists, recurrent motifs are posited to exist because of universal psychological features in the human mind acting on cultural complexes that are transmitted across generations (reviewed in Goodwyn, 2013). These universal mental biases and concepts tend to cause cultural complexes to gravitate toward recurrent motifs over time, presumably because such motifs (in the case of mourning rituals) address universal challenges of bereavement. This model helps to explain why mourning rituals are so varied, and yet seem to contain (imperfectly) recurrent features. To compare such recurrent features to psychology, however, we must know what, if anything, is universal in mourning rituals. There exists no better resource than anthropology to answer this question.

On this subject opinions certainly vary, but on the whole even an imperfectly thorough reading of the literature reveals a number of commonly agreed upon themes. Since anthropology is normally devoted not to rigorous mathematical prediction but holistic description, however, we cannot hope to achieve perfect precision in this presentation. To investigate this question, not only were classic texts in mourning rituals consulted, but interim works that have achieved high regard in anthropology as well as numerous current works on the subject. A number of broad, resilient themes emerged naturally from this review and are presented in the next section. One weakness of this approach is that it necessitates that we gloss over various controversies over details that could (in the long run) turn out to be critical. As it stands, such details were typically not relevant to the present hypothesis. Nevertheless, we will assume that commonly agreed upon themes that have withstood the test of time and vigorous debate within anthropology are valid from the point of view of anthropology data we will be using.

We will begin with the observations of Arnold van Gennep, progressing to Robert Hertz, as these two investigators have required very little in the way of correction (and in fact have been elaborated on in much the same way Freud has been since their initial work). Then, we will examine mourning rituals around the globe, ending with an exploration of them in Western history up to the present.

EARLY ANTHROPOLOGISTS VAN GENNEP AND HERTZ ON MOURNING RITUALS

In the early part of the 20th century, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960), in his *The Rites of Passage*, famously identified a tripartite structure

in virtually all rituals that is still highly regarded today. The first of the three phases he identified is the *separation* phase, in which the target of the ritual is symbolically separated from the main social group in various ways such as hair cutting, body marking, isolation in the wilderness or physical removal to a sacred area, and so forth. The second phase is the *transition* phase, in which ritual participants must stay for a while in a state of “neither/nor,” where they are neither in the old state or the new—for example, in rites of passage into adulthood, participants are neither child nor adult while in the transition phase. Military recruits in basic training are another example, which during the training the new recruits are not civilians any longer, but also they are not fully military members either. Finally, the third phase is *incorporation*, in which the participant is moved into the new social state. This is accomplished by body marking, hand-fasting, communal meals, and many other acts.

Van Gennep demonstrated that this tripartite structure can be found in nearly all rituals worldwide, but mourning rituals are perhaps the most dramatic of all ritual events, with the deceased as the target of the ritual. Like other rituals, funerals have a similar structure with the separation of the corpse from the world of the living; followed by a dangerous liminal transitional state in which mourning is observed, recognized, and often subject to rigid structures; followed by an incorporation phase which often involves second burial and involves the dead person being finally incorporated into the land of the dead. During the transitional period, the dead are subject to wakes, night-long vigils by close surviving relatives, who themselves share the dead person’s transitional state and are subject to numerous taboos and proscriptions. The corpse is given food and treated as if still alive, as death is normally thought of as a process rather than an abrupt change of status. During this time also it is commonly held cross-culturally that the dead person must prepare for a journey to the land of the dead, and this journey is normally depicted as perilous and requires a specialist in the form of a shaman/folk magician or in some cases, a deity as *psychopomp*. It also requires continued and vigorous efforts by the bereaved to help the deceased—an important function we will return to later.

Separation rites surrounding death (Van Gennep, 1960, pp. 164–165) include transporting the corpse in a special way, burning his possessions, killing his slaves/wives/animals, washing, purifying, and various taboos. The gravesite is itself separated through various ritual means. Sometimes there are mock battles for the corpse by various family members, which seems to involve fighting against losing a beloved member, and various physical methods for separating the components of the corpse into its various parts of body and/or soul. Incorporation rites usually involve stories about the journey to the dead and often involve a specialist reciting a vision or story of the deceased joining with the ancestors.

THE DOUBLE BURIAL

Anthropologist Robert Hertz's classic essay on mortuary ritual (Hertz, 2009, pp. 197–212) complements van Gennep's analysis. Hertz reviews the variety of cultures that practice "double burial"; a practice in which the newly dead corpse is buried (or exposed) for a time in a separate and special location (an example of the transitional state), then exhumed after a prescribed amount of time and buried again somewhere else. The practices Hertz based his analysis on were observed in Indonesia predominantly, but they are by no means exclusive to that region and can be found in many areas around the globe. Here we can see evidence of Van Gennep's tripartite structure, with the first burial representing a liminal state between newly dead and permanently buried. There are further subdivisions evident as well, between newly dead and quickly separated from the group, followed by a variable-length liminal state where relatives often keep vigil with the deceased, followed by burial.

One widespread belief during the time when the corpse is newly dead is that at certain times the corpse is vulnerable to attack and must be defended by various means such as not only standing vigil but keeping a fire or incense burning, protecting orifices to keep spirits from entering the corpse and possessing it, etc. (Hertz, 2009, p. 199). This particular cross-cultural theme, that of helping the deceased is very prominent and will play a large part in our comparative analysis later. During this dangerous transitional state, the corpse not only needs help from the bereaved, but is also potentially dangerous itself when in this state living marginally in two worlds; the condition of being dead is in many places seen as a cause for suffering that the deceased want to share on the living. In many cultures, close relatives share this state and must abide by numerous taboos to symbolize the shared state of death, which are then lifted when the time of temporary burial is over. Variations on the practice of temporary burial and its symbolism are found all over the world from Central Australia to Polynesia to North and South America, with temporary treatment ranging from burial to exposure under various conditions.

As mentioned, a very important part of the transitional state is the practice of helping and/or appeasing the deceased. For example, many funerary practices include keeping a fire lit. This fire near the corpse is interpreted in a variety of ways from keeping demons at bay to warming the soul of the deceased. Cremation is a close analog with similar meanings, as these transformations change the character of the corpse:

[Turn] it into a new body and is, consequently, a necessary condition for the salvation of the soul. This is precisely the meaning of cremation: far from destroying the body of the deceased, it recreates it and makes it capable of entering a new life. (Hertz, 2009, p. 202)

This pattern can be found historically as well, as in the Viking funeral described in the 10th century by Ibn Fadlan (Lunde & Stone, 2012), where a Viking king is temporarily buried, then subjected to various ritual practices, then finally cremated—thus the double-burial/transitional state has examples across the globe and across history. The primary symbolism in these various themes is that decay and destruction symbolize the change of status of the soul, and therefore represent not a sudden change but a gradual, processional change. Furthermore, this transition is not destruction but rebirth (Hertz, 2009, pp. 201–3). All these practices provide the bereaved in physical, concrete terms, a vivid picture of what is going on with the deceased's soul, as the body and its processional change is seen as a symbol of what the soul is going through.

As in other cultures, Hertz noted that among the Indonesian peoples he observed, violent sudden death, death in childbirth, drownings, death by lightning, and suicides were often given special treatment, as their bodies “inspire the most intense horror and are got rid of precipitately . . . their bones are not laid with those of other deceased members of the group who have died a normal death” (p. 211). Later, we will see that, in Western psychological terms, such deaths are associated with higher rates of CG. Hertz argued that this distinction is made in many societies because of the intensity of the emotion impressed upon the survivors, in whom no rite can alleviate their suffering. This belief has parallels, contrasts, and variations in other areas, such as in the Americas (Hultcrantz, 1979), where there are separate otherworlds and afterlife fates for those who die in such a manner.

Hertz next reviewed the final ceremony that follows the transition period, which signifies the final transition to the land of the dead. This corresponds to van Gennep's incorporation phase, wherein the soul of the deceased is transitioned to their final place of residence in the Otherworld. These rituals often involve great expense (normally beyond a single family's capacity), orgies, feasts, and merriment. “The final ceremony has three objects: to give burial to the remains of the deceased, to ensure the soul peace and access to the land of the dead, and finally to free the living from the obligations of mourning” (Hertz, 2009, p. 204). These are three obviously very important functions and emphasize the intensely social nature of mourning rituals, where life and death are social categories as well as (but more important than) physical categories. Note again the importance of the bereaved role in helping the deceased through various rites and actions.

In any case, the final resting place is not a permanent condition, but is frequently seen as a new birth—death/birth symbolism is seen in all kinds of rituals globally, and funerary rites are no exception. Comparing numerous mourning rituals, including Christian ones, Hertz concluded “at whatever stage of religious evolution we place ourselves, the notion of death is linked with that of resurrection; exclusion is always followed by a new integration” (Hertz, 2009, p. 208). This is supported by the related cross-cultural link

between death of the body and death of the cosmos, where the mourning ritual centers around the idea that the body is a symbol of the cosmos, so its death comes to be symbolized by the destruction and rejuvenation of the universe (Parry, 2009, pp. 266–268), providing an important narrative restructuring mechanism, which is another important theme.

CROSS-CULTURAL THEMES: TRAVELING TO THE LAND OF THE DEAD

As mentioned, the journey of the deceased through various incorporation rites from the dangerous transitional period to their final resting place is cross-culturally very commonly seen as requiring strong magic involving mighty psychopomps, priest/ess participation, songs, altered states, and so forth, as the road is often pictured as fraught with peril. Among the Dyak of Borneo, for example, rice is prepared for the souls of the dead and for evil spirits. Then, one of the participants makes offerings of these and states “I place here your food; by this I crush all resistance, all that is impure, all bad dreams, and I set an end to all tears” (Hertz, 2009, pp. 205–206). Note especially this second factor that is common in mourning rituals—the social constraining of emotional response, in this case, tears. This charm is followed by the priestesses singing songs to lead the souls into the celestial city of the dead. One aspect of the release of the kin from mourning is depicted as a removal of impurity—we will see this theme again and again later on. This purification is accomplished with rites such as those previously described, of sacrificing/giving offerings. Other means by which this is accomplished are by swimming in rivers (sometimes with the blood of sacrificed animals), after which evil is purged by way of waving torches or brooms—these acts free the living of the deathly contagion and serve to further make physical the conceptual distinction between the living and the dead. The conceptualization of evil is an important one—whether it is witches, evil spirits, or Satan, cultures that have a clearly defined concept of evil as malicious cause of death and misfortune must be protected or even challenged by such rites.

Thus death challenges the very structure of society and its understanding of suffering, and cultures respond with a restructuring of meaning. Hertz explained the very human and social nature of the cosmic themes engaged with in ritual:

When a man dies, society loses in him much more than a unit; it is stricken in the very principle of its life, in the faith it has in itself. . . . It seems that the entire community feels itself lost, or at least directly threatened by the presence of antagonistic forces: the very basis of its existence is shaken. (Hertz, 2009, p. 208)

Those who pass to the land of the dead are then free to live there eternally or to be reborn as a human or animal at some later point, often in a descendant of the deceased. They are also often attributed divine status and thereafter worthy of offerings themselves, periodically intervening in the lives of the living and taking part in their struggles, only this time in a more distant, less potentially dangerous, role. The important theme here is the restructuring of the relationship between deceased and bereaved.

Note that though these themes are extremely widespread, there are always cultural variations. A few examples are illustrative. The Iban of Borneo, for example, rapidly carry off a corpse to a graveyard where it is placed in a rough hollow log coffin, then buried in a shallow grave with various grave goods, whereupon the funeral party returns to the community longhouse. The hurried nature of this practice stems from the belief that the dead struggle with the living for the body, but that once the person dies, the community has lost the struggle and should rapidly give over the body to avoid any more trouble from the ghosts of the dead. Three days after burial, a ceremony is conducted from the longhouse which formally introduces the deceased to the spirits of the dead, and offerings of food are thrown from the longhouse and imagined to be carried to the land of the dead via a bird (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, pp. 103–105).

By contrast, the Mambia, also from Indonesia, speak of the spirit of the dead person journeying to the mountain of the dead in “the west,” with a pole erected next to the corpse so it can journey through the roof. Periodically, however, there are great festivals honoring the dead where deaths are reenacted, and the betel nut bags that belonged to the deceased are buried in a symbolic second burial, whereupon the recently dead travel from the mountain to the sea, transitioning to their final resting place (1991, p. 106). All of this reflects Mambai cosmology, which states that Mother Earth, impregnated by Father Heaven, gives birth to the mountains, trees, and people, then dies after informing the people about mortuary rituals (connecting birth and death). Her body continues on, providing food for all life. Returning the corpse to the earth repays Mother Earth. Such narratives provide context and meaning to the death, which we will see appears to be an important aspect of the prevention of CG.

The idea of a journey to the land of the dead is not present in the rites of the peoples of Madagascar. For them, the dead reside in the local tomb in which they are placed, where they continue to reside with the tribe in a nonphysical manner. The Bara of Madagascar practice drunken revelry at funerals in order to entertain the isolated and lonely deceased. Metcalf and Huntington (1991, pp. 112–113) pointed out that the particular juxtaposition of death with sex and revelry (a theme seen in unrelated cultures across the globe), however, is not arbitrary, but is required to balance out the opposing forces at work: the absolute order of death, sterility, and the tomb versus the absolute vitality of birth, fecundity, and the womb. Among the Bara, death is

an instance of excessive order that must be counterbalanced by an overflow of life and vitality.

At death, for the Bara, a male and female house is selected. The corpse rests in the female house where women gather and keep vigil with ritual weeping. At the male house, men receive male visitors and accept stylized condolences from others. There the men direct the burial arrangements. At night, girls leave their house and sing and dance in the courtyard, and young men join in gradually. Over time, rum and food are served, and the funeral becomes something like an orgy. On the third day the men take the corpse from the women's house and a boisterous funeral procession ensues with youths (with sexual experience only) leading the relay to the burial site and involving racing and cattle wrestling. During this time the practitioners must observe numerous taboos and carry protective charms. After the corpse is buried, an extravagant feast is held—a conspicuous display of wealth, during which time drunken revelry ensues and occasionally fights break out, practical jokes are played. Metcalf and Huntington commented: “It is not enough merely to bury someone. . . . The survivors must bring about the renewed conception and rebirth of their deceased kin into the world of the ancestors. . . . Should it fail, the consequence is nothing short of catastrophic infertility” (1991, p. 129). Here again we see the importance placed on helping the deceased, and in this case it is amplified to where the survivors actions are necessary in order to avoid catastrophe.

CROSS-CULTURAL THEMES: THE DANGEROUS DEAD

Mourning rituals have long contained two major elements: the first is the ritual containment of the fresh corpse with various methods used to keep the restless soul at bay, and the secondary rites, which occur some weeks to years later (depending on the status and power of the dead individual, as well as culture of origin), where the dead are firmly incorporated into the realm of the ancestors. Archeologist Timothy Taylor recognized that these themes are extremely old and enduring (Taylor, 2002, p. 27). The second state—the transitional state—is recognized by the overwhelming majority of cultural data to be the most dangerous state, wherein the dead can wander and wreak havoc on the living (Taylor, 2002, p. 118). Other parallels exist in history. Evidence of rites of passage and second burial, for example have been found in Natufian culture (Taylor, 2002, p. 226), and second burial has been observed in Central Asia, North and South America, Melanesia and Greece, among other places (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, p. 35).

In Hindu belief, as in many others, violent and sudden death is believed to cause the deceased to be bitter and liable to torment the living either with nightmares or evil events (Parry, 2009, p. 271). Proper rituals must be performed to prevent this, and usually involve the survivors sharing in the

deceased state symbolically through not shaving, washing, wearing shoes or shirt, sleeping on the ground, avoiding hot food, and abstaining from sex. Such a state is usually associated with an uncanny power for mourners and for ascetics who adopt such practices permanently (Parry, 2009, p. 277).

CROSS-CULTURAL THEMES: RITUALLY SCULPTING THE EMOTIONALITY OF MOURNING

In many cultures, the closest survivors of the deceased share in their fate and are subject to quarantine and taboos (Metcalf and Huntington, 1991, pp. 90–95). As pointed out by anthropologists (Bloch & Parry, 1982), the two primary objectives apparently associated with cross-cultural death rites is to facilitate the transition of the dead from the world of the living to the Otherworld, however visualized, and to facilitate survivor's acceptance of the death and alteration of social life subsequent to it. The Wari, an Amazonian tribe, for example, for months after a death will go to all the places frequented by the deceased (favorite hunting, fishing, or sitting spots, etc.), then cut the vegetation in a wide circle, burn it and sweep over the circle. As they do this they report thinking about the dead person, recalling and honoring their life, then afterward report that "there is not much sadness there" (Conklin, 2009, p. 250).

What is unique is the many ways mourning rituals appear to serve grief processing. Grieving is a very natural process observed in numerous social animals (Panksepp, 1998), but in humans is elaborated in a great number of different ways. These variations are numerous, but not arbitrary, and constrained by various biological and psychological universals that work in concert with surrounding cultural ideas (also so constrained) to produce the varieties of mourning rituals that exist. Though by no means limited to mourning, one commonly discussed purpose of funeral rites is to help participants express and process their grief in meaningful ways.

The example of the Tlinglit, a North American Coastal tribe documented in the 19th century, is illustrative. Like so many unrelated cultures, the practice of taking the body out a side door, mourners cutting their hair, fasting, painting themselves black, and singing death songs are also observed among the Tlinglit (Kan, 2009, pp. 286–302). The Tlinglit also invoke the ancestors by speaking their names and recalling their deeds (Kan, 2009, p. 289), and grief is expressed by mourners in sacred and highly treasured crying songs, by the sanctioned flow of tears during specific times, and by the male mourners striking the floor with their staffs four times, where they are instructed to pour all their grief into the act of striking the ground (Kan, 2009, p. 291). Note the especially psychological advice and symbolization of emotion in physical action here, as well as the culturally sanctioned, but strictly bounded expression of emotion.

Warmth and comfort are equated as the hosts clothe the mourners in various clothing during the ceremony as a way to symbolize and concretize providing comfort to them, and reinforced by the exchanging of gifts (sometimes accompanied by rubbing the gift on the forehead of the recipient). Funerals are, as in other places, associated with competitive games among families of the deceased as well as feasts, both of which emphasize the unity of them while allowing them to jockey for political position in a nonviolent manner. Tlinglit oratory is described as a great art form based on the idea that words had the power to heal or harm, thus speeches were used to smooth out, strengthen, and heal the mourner's "inside" (Kan, 2009, p. 295), an idea not too distant from the concepts of many kinds of psychotherapy.

The Tlinglit began such speeches with genealogical lists (not unlike those found in ancient European literature), which had the effect of connecting the speaker's ties with others present, and with culturally ideal typical emotions inherent in such links such as father's love for his children, etc. Next the speaker presented a story from his clan, of someone in great peril that is saved by some kind of mythical helper (god, animal spirit, etc.), with the host's sorrow equated with the hero's suffering, the guest's love with that of the mythical helper. Grief and nongrief are then pictured as opposites, compared with hunger/eating, light/dark, wet/dry, war/peace, etc. and finally the story is ended with the hero being saved by the mythical helper and the opposites reconciled. Love songs are then recited, bringing in images of reconciliation, fertility, etc.

This is but one example among many such rituals that appear to deal directly with the symbolization, enactment, visualization, and concretization of grief and existential dread (among many other things). Anthropologists Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Olson, for example, "believe [the] influence of death on psychological life is due to the importance of symbolization in mental activity rather than to what Freud called a death instinct." (Lifton & Olson, 2009, p. 32). Lifton and Olson drew from Freud and Jung in their conception of the meaning of mourning ritual symbolism and argued that it aims toward "symbolic immortality," expressed in many ways. This sense of symbolic immortality is necessary to normal functioning, without which challenges everyday living and a capacity to feel at home in the world (2009, p. 34). These various forms of immortality are expressed through survival of descendants and tribe members, through the production of cultural expressions such as art and music that survive one's physical body, through self-conscious theological speculation, through communion with nature—since the processes of nature carry on independently of humankind's activities and so represent revitalization and renewal, and experiential transcendence through altered states of consciousness: "However it occurs, experiential transcendence involves a sense of timelessness, of which Jung spoke. There does seem to be a universal psychic potential and even need for occasional suspension of ordinary awareness of time." (Lifton & Olson, 2009, p. 37). This

observation connects with concepts of social bonding and group identity—without social connection, obligation, structure, and identity, insignificance and despair results, and so part of the function here is to (at least momentarily) provide such things ritually to alleviate those feelings that the lack of them typically engender.

For Lifton and Olson, then, the ritual becomes highly analogous to psychotherapy:

The process of therapy in psychiatry involves a symbolic reordering analogous to that which occurs in experiential transcendence. When therapy is successful, a patient feels a widening of the space in which he lives. It is as if the narrow images through which he has seen reality have been reorganized so that the past appears more coherent and the future more inviting. Death imagery is reconceived, and life imagery of connection, integrity, and movement becomes dominant. (2009, p. 38)

This corresponds to the ever-recurrent linking of death to sexuality, fertility, and to vigorous assertions of continued life among the bereaved. I would add, however, that Lifton and Olson neglected the important effect of focusing the bereaved on the needs of the deceased in deflecting the sting of death as it becomes a restructuring of the relationship between the two in which such transcendence can be shared.

CROSS-CULTURAL THEME: CULTURAL BELIEFS AND THE EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION OF MOURNING

The way participants in mourning rituals express emotion varies widely from dramatic outbursts of vehement emotional expression to self-consciously stoic nonexpression. What is universal is that emotion must be dealt with in some manner or another; it cannot be ignored, and each culture over time develops a particular technique or belief system to “sculpt” (if you will) the raw emotionality of mourning and loss. Several examples will suffice to illustrate the ways in which the emotion of loss is processed, constrained, enhanced, diminished, and/or otherwise transformed via ritual expression.

The relationship between emotion and ritual is complex—it is not a simple matter of one causing the other. In studying various cultures, Metcalf and Huntington (1991) noted that ritual weeping is closely and tightly structured within each culture at funeral rites. Many cultures have nearly on-cue weeping, but only at specifically outlined times, such as when the body is in a specific hut, just before the secondary burial, or when specialists recite highly poetic and/or theatrical lamentation performances. Amid all the variation, weeping occurs in carefully specified contexts, and is a symbol with meaning and not necessarily a spontaneous show of emotion that is related

to indigenous beliefs (1991, p. 47). Metcalf and Huntington summarized their assessment of the way grief and mourning rituals interact:

It was and is our opinion that the psychic process of grieving only partially intersects with the performance of death rites. As we plainly say, it may be that ritual sometimes aids the process, but it could as easily be no help at all, or even an extra burden to bear. (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, p. 5)

Among the Northern Cheyenne, grieving and weeping over the dead is expected to end in four days, lest mourners be given “something else to cry about,” for death is seen as a release from a life of hard struggle, rewarded with reunion with the departed and a beautiful abode with the Creator god and the culture hero Sweet Medicine (Straus, 2009, p. 75). Here we see, again, that the actions and emotional behaviors of the bereaved are connected to the deceased in a spiritual manner and the bereaved are called upon to act in a manner that emphasizes the needs of the deceased. Among the Andaman Islanders studied by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, weeping has a strong ceremonial character to it that is, in relation to death, confined to certain events, including weeping over the corpse after death, over the bones of the dead man when they are recovered for purposes of second burial, and at the end of the mourning period as joined by those who have not wept yet (2009, p. 151). Weeping accompanies other occasions such as the reunion of separated friends and weddings and is “obligatory, a matter of duty” (p. 154). Here we see the expression of tears as having important spiritual consequences for the deceased is a powerful cross-culturally resonant idea.

The question of whether or not mourning rituals are merely primitive defenses has been fielded by a number of scholars. Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2009, pp. 182–193), for example, described how while the poor of Bom Jesus Brazil angrily cite extreme poverty and poor and inadequate food, water, medical care and clothing as reasons for their high infant mortality rate, when a specific infant or very young child dies, there is not outrage. The baby is described as an *anjinbo* or “little angel,” “blameless” and innocent who is returned to the Blessed Virgin from whence they came. Unlike the proscribed weeping of other rituals discussed, weeping in this instance is forbidden because a mother’s tears are believed to make the angel-baby’s path to the Blessed Virgin more difficult for them (a belief we have seen echoed in numerous cultures). Note again the recurrent theme that links the bereaved emotional expression with the spiritual fate of the deceased. Mothers are expected to be happy their child will be waiting for them in Heaven, free of suffering. But are not these responses merely “defenses” imposed by culture upon the true feelings the bereaved possess but are not “allowed” to express due to cultural imposition? Scheper-Hughes

examined such common explanations given for this behavior as “a defense” against mourning and finds them wanting. Rather than unfettered sorrow, mothers express pity for the dead child, and weeping is forbidden, reinforced by a folk belief that for the few hours the infant is in the coffin (i.e., the transitional state), they are neither child nor angel but a spirit-child trying to leave this world to find the next. They must climb a dark path, and tears can make it difficult by dampening their wings or making the road slippery.

Scheper-Hughes argued that explanations of defense underestimate the ability of cultural expression and powerful belief systems to influence the mother’s grief by identifying that there:

Is a presumed binary split between public sentiments and private feelings, between what is cultural and what is “natural.” . . . I have no doubt (and have gone great lengths to show) that the local culture is organized to defend women against . . . grief, I assume that the culture is quite successful in doing so. . . . One need not speak of “masks” or “disguises” or engage in second-guessing on the basis of alien and imported psychological concepts of the self . . . [such beliefs] projected a very secular view of religious belief as a superficial feature of the interior life, rather than as a powerful force that penetrates and constitutes the person. (Scheper-Hughes, 2009, pp. 188–190)

Another example of how a culture sculpts the emotionality of mourning can be found in the Warramunga. The Warramunga, along with several other Australian tribes, engage in extremely violent rites when a village member dies:

People gouge their faces, slash their thighs, burn their breasts, and attack their friends. Much of this activity is so ferocious that it is not uncommon for mourning to add to the death toll. But the violence is not as random as it appears; on the contrary, it is meted out according to definite rules. (Metcalf & Hungtington, 1991, p. 49)

Sorrow and anger dominate the scene, both encouraged by and contributing to the chaos, until eventually the din dies down and the bereaved begin to sing together, slowly transforming the scene into a jubilant celebration that emphasizes love conquering death.

To further contrast, Clifford Geertz (1973), described the funeral ceremonies of the Javanese as “a calm, undemonstrative, almost languid letting go, a brief ritualized relinquishment of a relationship no longer possible” (p. 72). Geertz observed that in one case when a young girl was caught crying after her father died suddenly, others gently reminded her not to cry because such tears made it difficult for the deceased to find his path to the grave. This response corresponds to the Javanese fatalism about death, and

the belief that death is felt to be a good state that is devoid of desire and striving (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, p. 60). Thus it seems the emotionality of death, and the raw feelings it evokes, are often transformed and even partially created or destroyed by the cultural elements in the collective and personal psyche of participants.

MOURNING IN THE WEST: HISTORICAL EXAMPLES

A large number of the aforementioned themes found in widespread areas can be found in the ancient cultures of the West. Among medieval European cultures, for example, excessive weeping was believed to cause the deceased extreme discomfort in the next world and would result in the dead visiting the living in anger (LeCouteux, 1996, p. 223). The idea of the journey to the land of the dead also existed among the ancient Germanic and Celtic tribes of northern Europe (Cunliffe 1999; Davidson, 1968, 1988, 1993; Monaghan 2006; Turville-Petre, 1964).

The belief that the newly dead were in an uncanny and dangerous (to the living) state, for example, was extremely widespread:

A potentially vast number of revenants and ghosts existed: the deceased who sought vengeance or someone to avenge them or that aspired to ritual burial. They were discontented and envious—therefore evildoing dead. These beliefs can be found among all Indo-European peoples. (LeCouteux, 1996, p. 16)

In both Germanic and Roman folk beliefs, the dead can always return to plague the living if the form of their deaths and the behavior of the living were not pleasing to them—again revisiting the theme of the helpful bereaved, and the perilous state of the newly dead. Historian Claude LeCouteux observed that in European folk practice and lore, those who died in uncanny or sudden ways (women who died in labor, stillborn, victims of drowning, murder victims, the unbaptized) inspire the most terror and ritual action to defend against—this is a theme we have seen before in the above study of Indonesian and Native American practices. Often rituals used to quiet the dead involve decapitation or dismemberment of the corpse, pinning or staking the corpse in place (to prevent it from walking around on its own), or cremation (1996, pp. 19–31). Additional ritual effort was often done (as in cases cross culturally) in situations of uncanny or emotionally intense deaths (LeCouteux, 1996, p. 29, n. 23). Also prevalent are the themes of the helpful bereaved and a focus on the needs of the deceased.

Other common beliefs that we have seen reported in other cultures appear in European folklore, saga, and folk practice across many centuries

(collected by LeCouteux, 1996, pp. 32–44; see also Jaffe, 1964) and include the following:

Practices that seek to help the spirit of the deceased in their confused newly dead state:

- The corpse's eyes and mouth had to be closed in order to prevent the spirit from leaving the corpse prematurely, as this occurred at common orifices.
- The dead body needed to leave the house where death occurred through an unusual opening (like the side of the house) that was rapidly closed up. This was done to confuse the corpse's spirit to keep it from returning.
- The dead are often bound either in a pinned or stitched shroud, or their limbs corded together with various sacred or profane ties to keep the spirit from reanimating the corpse. Stakes were often used to pin the corpse in place.

Practices that seek to soothe the spirit of the deceased and aid their journey to the Otherworld:

- Vigils for the recently dead are common, often including singing, games, and dancing.
- Food, tokens, and favorite objects and tools are buried with the corpse, along with money, slaughtered animals, and/or sometimes a slave or spouse ritually killed beforehand, in the case of high-ranking dead. Subsequent dead could be given any forgotten items with the idea that they would be given to the formerly dead in the next world (LeCouteux, 1996, p. 159).
- Means of transportation, from a boat to new shoes, are provided to the corpse to ensure safe travel to the Otherworld.

Beliefs that emphasize the occult powers of the deceased, which encouraged proper treatment of the corpse with spiritual rewards or punishments (i.e., restructure the relationship of the bereaved to the deceased):

- Honoring the dead is a duty that brings with it blessings of good harvest, luck in battle, etc., and maledictions when breached or ignored.
- The dead have power over animals and local vegetation, as well as on local weather patterns.
- The dead can take animal form—often marked by characteristic color (such as grey or red).
- The dead could cause madness in the living if displeased.

Interestingly, despite great effort on part of the clergy, throughout Medieval Europe many of these beliefs and practices surrounding the dead persisted even though they had a markedly “pagan” character to them; that is, they did not usually conform to established priestly dogma concerning the dead. For example, a 19th century Icelandic text describes how to awaken a corpse in order to ask favors of it (described in LeCouteux, 1996, p. 73, n. 41), and the ritual involves carving runes on a staff, performing an incantation, as well as warnings as to the dangerousness of this activity, centuries after the *Eddas* were written down describing this practice as performed by the god Odin. Common syncretistic beliefs emerged that strayed little from the original beliefs. In Western industrialized nations, of course, such practices and beliefs are encountered very rarely, though they often crop up in spontaneous fantasies and dream material clinically.

EXAMPLE ACROSS TIME: MISCARRIAGE

The 10th century charm “against a miscarriage” is a particularly poignant example of the emotional resonance of these rituals. The charm itself has symbolic actions of superiority over death, statements to that effect, and symbolic actions to that effect, before, and during the pregnancy. Initially, in this charm (Storms, 1948, p. 200), a newly pregnant woman who has already suffered a miscarriage begins fasting and goes to an altar and thanks Christ for the pregnancy. Likely Christ replaced the god Ingunar-Freyr of the Inguaeones to which the Saxons belonged. Afterward, once certain of the pregnancy, she “puts away” the sorrow of the lost child by taking earth from its grave, wrapping it in black wool and selling it to merchants to sell yet again, thus objectifying the grief and allowing it to disappear, essentially taking out of her sight and out of mind, and carrying with it the dark spirit and getting it lost. Finally she must ensure enough milk for her new child by filling her mouth with a cow of one color—the rarity of such a cow, and the work involved in finding one, certainty contributes to the magical power of such a cow. Then she must go to a running stream and spit out the milk, ladling the “pure” flowing water into the same hand and drinking it which expels the evil spirits (a purification rite), and speaks the *galdor* (translated by Storms from the alliterated Old English verse): “Everywhere I carried with me this great powerful strong one, strong because of this great food; such a one I want to have and go home with.” Next, the woman must leave the brook “along a different road” so no new evil spirits can enter her, and she must remain silent and not look about—these two especially are psychologically significant to maintain concentration and presumably protect her baby. Finally she enters a different house than she came from to further confuse the evil spirits. She arrives, therefore, in a psychologically “pure” state and finally is allowed to eat. All during this last “lactating” part she is

fasting, which will to intensify the sensory impression of the milk and water, and finally the food that she eats at the end. The fasting would be more likely to create strong memories. The ritual is clearly finished with the boundary action of eating at a neighbor's house. An important theme here is the ritual enactment of emotional processes.

Contrasting this is a more recent example of a ritual for a woman who had several miscarriages followed by severe depressive symptoms, as described by a psychoanalyst (Orlandini, 2009). In this case, the psychoanalyst and her patient co-constructed a ritual to help alleviate the grief of a miscarriage. In that ritual, the participant symbolically buried dolls that represented the lost children, along with a letter she wrote to her children. This ritual was followed by a significant reduction in psychological distress and CG. Over a millennia separates the psychotherapist's patient and the women who practiced the Anglo-Saxon charm "against a miscarriage," however we can see numerous similarities. As Orlandini's ritual had a powerful effect on her patient's psychiatric symptoms, we can reasonably guess that the ancient charm was also effective in this manner.

DEATH WAYS IN MODERN NATIONS

Historian Claude LeCouteux argued that much of the previously noted kinds of beliefs and practices about the dead such as the dangerous transitional period, the ability of the dead to affect the land, and the many needs of the dead from the bereaved are eroded by industrialization and disconnection of humans with the land. Such practices typically "exist wherever a human community lives closely connected to nature or withdrawn into itself. The farmer, the mountain-dweller, and the sailor have experienced ghosts and tend to believe in them." (LeCouteux, 1996, pp. 226–227). This is no doubt part of the picture. The massive economic, cultural, and technological changes undergirding modern industrial society likely have their part as well.

It is interesting, however, that in the United States, despite the vast number of cultural backgrounds present, there is remarkable uniformity in the method of death rite, and though exceptions exist, they are rare and limited to small, tight-knit, isolated communities. For the rest of us, generally a dying person is sequestered in a sterile environment such as a hospital or nursing home, in which the rest of the bereaved are removed from the dying process. Then, a doctor pronounces a person dead at an agreed upon time, whereupon the corpse is rapidly removed to a funeral parlor, with embalming, institutionalized "viewing," and disposal by burial occurs (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991, p. 194). This commonality of practice exists despite widely disparate cosmology and beliefs about the afterlife, and very commonly no beliefs or extremely vague beliefs are all that are held among participants: "Just how Americans conceive of death [is] a thorny issue. Few

seem able to adopt a thoroughgoing agnosticism, and yet the majority seem shaky in their faith in a Christian afterlife.” (1991, p. 196). Since afterlife beliefs appear to be such an integral part of what is helpful in the grieving process, this high level of agnosticism is of concern.

Archeologist Timothy Taylor argued furthermore that the sheer level of insulation from death experienced by the typical modern is excessive, unprecedented, and probably unhealthy psychologically (2002, p. 277). “This is a reversal of the common practice in tribal societies, where the care of the corpse is specifically the duty of the nearest relatives and the idea of a stranger being involved would be deeply offensive.” (279). While perhaps not going this far, Metcalf and Huntington did observe that:

In contrast to medieval Europe, the nuclear family in America has been invested with enormous sentiment that was formerly dispersed over a wider group. Yet in a country where “togetherness” is a national fetish, no phase of the most severe crisis of the family’s existence takes place at home. The oddest feature is that a society that provided harsh living conditions and little chance of mobility for its members stressed a positive role for them in death, whereas a country that emphasizes individual achievement allows only a passive role to the dying. (1991, p. 208)

This approach to death is not unique to America, and can be observed in the nonidentical but heavily overlapping situation observed in other highly industrialized nations, which suggest economic factors are behind them. Traditional Japanese beliefs, for example (Lock, 2009, pp. 103–106), were that proper ritual separation of soul and body was necessary at death and that harsh treatment of a corpse is repulsive and disrespectful—beliefs that have survived a considerable amount of Western influence, judging by surveys done in the 1980s which showed the majority of Japanese still performed daily rituals at their homes and graves of their deceased parents and grandparents (Lock, 2009, p. 104). Like beliefs in ancient Northern Europe (Davidson, 1968) and many other cultures, the Japanese believed that ancestors continued to act in the everyday world, but eventually drifted into the world of nature spirits, forming a connection between spiritual, social, and natural domains. Such a transition from ancestor spirit to nature spirit existed in folk beliefs of the pre-Christian Celts and Germanic peoples of Europe, and archeologist Timothy Taylor noted that local nature spirits appear in numerous cultures, such as the *ylfe* of the Anglo-Saxons, which were a persistent aspect of folk belief lasting at least 2000 years and probably longer, barely touched by Christianization.

Hence there are a number of typical and universal thematic elements in the above. In modern commercialized settings, however, this situation is interpreted differently by participants than in the more rural communities from which it evolved. In older communities, reported anthropologist H.

Suzuki (2009) mourning rituals such as washing the corpse were done to ensure the purity of the corpse, and to protect it from the evil spirit *onryo*. In modern settings, however, the ritual is explained by the funeral industry as something far more vague (and one might argue, diluted), designed simply to “bring family members together in the ceremony.” Like many cultures, an all-night vigil is carried out with the body, though this practice was dwindling in urban communities when Suzuki reported it in 2000. This may be because of the beliefs behind the practice: in the rural communities, the vigil was believed essential to protect the deceased’s soul from evil spirits from entering the body. In modern urban settings, this belief has dwindled, and the deceased are felt to be “taken care of by professionals.” Thus, the absence of beliefs about impurity, death pollution, and evil spirits make such practices “optional,” which typically leads to people opting out of the practice. Thus the example of Japanese mourning rituals provides further evidence, in comparison with old and new, that (again) the role of helpful bereaved has eroded completely, giving way to a more passive role of the bereaved, as “experts” take over the process, separating the bereaved from the deceased.

COMPARING CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS WITH THE CLINICAL STUDY OF MOURNING AND COMPLICATED GRIEF

Normal mourning and CG are related phenomena. In general, many researchers recognize that CG results from a failure of normal mourning. In other words, CG can be viewed as abnormal mourning, rather than as an unrelated phenomenon. The present article suggests that inadequate ritualization of the normal mourning process may contribute to the occurrence of CG and that examination of strongly recurrent themes may help us understand what elements of mourning ritual may minimize the development of CG. The clinical manifestations of CG, as outlined by various researchers on the subject (Alves et al., 2014; Bogensperger & Leuger-Schuster, 2014; Eisma et al., 2013; Maercker & Lolor, 2012; Nakajima, Masaya, & Takako, 2012; Simon, 2013), gravitate around a number of common features. These include preoccupation with the deceased, a paradoxical denial of or refusal to accept the death combined with avoidance of reminders of the death, persistent yearning for the lost loved one, detachment from others, feelings of emptiness or meaninglessness, and inadequate adaptation to the loss. All of these symptoms must persist longer than 6 months to 1 year after the death to qualify as CG. Prevalence of CG is estimated to be 4.8% for the general U.S. population, with an incidence rate of between 8% and 25.4% among those currently experiencing grief (Newson, Boelen, Hek, Hofman, & Tiemeier, 2011; Simon, 2013).

Much of the presumed psychological potency of these ritual acts is likely enhanced by the public nature of such rituals, as they force participants to perform and utter the prescribed actions before an assembly of the like-minded. Like all rituals, these communications reinforce pervasive myths and beliefs, create a sacred space and time, and connect the abstract and ineffable to the concrete and physical, all of which helps to facilitate the transition in the minds of the bereaved in a visceral and material manner, connecting inner feelings with outward objects and materials (i.e., the decay of the body signals in an unambiguous way that the deceased has traveled to the Otherworld, which is both an event in whatever spiritual dimension believers acknowledge, and also an event intrapsychically in the bereaved). In any case, something sensorily concrete and not generated by the individual is interpreted as a sign from the physical world that the intrapsychic event has occurred. Meanwhile, variably circumscribed expressions of emotion accompany such rituals, providing for either a controlled explosion of emotionality, or a heavily transformed expression of a conspicuous lack thereof (which may be entirely the point). Both kinds of practice appear to be capable of actually up- or down-modulating such emotion; the emotion is not seen as primary or secondary. It is simply seen as irreducible.

In any case, it appears throughout the foregoing that Freud's analysis presented a broadly accurate but incomplete picture of the main universal problems arising in grief that we can elaborate upon. These problems appear to be:

1. A refusal to let the deceased go emotionally and/or fully accept the fact of the person's death.
2. A pronounced tendency to avoid reminders of the reality of the deceased person's death. These first two opposing tendencies create a double bind, which, if left alone, will allow grief to continue indefinitely (a situation analogous if not identical to CG).
3. An inability to "make sense of" the death.
4. An inability to sufficiently modulate the intense emotionality of grief.

These problems have already been recognized as indicators of CG as explored in the introduction. CG, of course is not a new phenomenon, but probably is as old as humanity itself. Thus, it is unsurprising that cross culturally, a number of themes in mourning rituals likely evolved over generations to perhaps deal with these problems, as cultural practices that help participants function better may be more likely to be passed on to future generations (Goodwyn, 2013). As we have seen, the themes most commonly encountered cross culturally in mourning rituals include some or all of the following:

1. Provide a cultural container for the raw emotionality of grief that puts it firmly into a culturally defined context.
2. Force acceptance through intense, extended close contact between the deceased and the bereaved.
3. Contain a collection of important tasks for the bereaved to accomplish to help the deceased transition into the next world.
4. Recognize the especially vulnerable state of the bereaved and the community closely following a death.
5. Recognize the even more vulnerable state following a violent/unexpected death.
6. Create a framework to destroy, and then reframe and reorganize the relationship between bereaved and deceased in the minds of the bereaved.
7. Employ methods to physically enact, but also contain and channel emotional expression in culturally specific ways.
8. Employ methods to integrate the death into a coherent narrative that is compatible with surrounding belief systems.

For the present analysis it is important to note that the most commonly encountered death ways in the United States and other industrialized societies arguably do not have many of the above elements. U.S. deathways, for example, do not have clearly defined beliefs or traditions that circumscribe and define the proper emotional expression of the bereaved. One possible exception to this is the clinical definition of CG itself, which is under continual debate and is primarily limited to health care professionals. It should be noted that Theme 5 (extraordinary death) is a noted and identified risk factor for CG (Simon, 2013), but in this case it is not seen as “spiritually dangerous,” rather only more potentially emotionally upsetting. This lack of spiritual interpretation may reduce the overall impact on the bereaved since it goes unaddressed and/or undefined.

Furthermore, while wake traditions bring the bereaved near the deceased for a brief period of time, this amount of time is miniscule compared to other cultures and continues to shrink with industrialization and modernization, as evidenced by the changes occurring in the Japanese. With few exceptions, there are no tasks for the bereaved to accomplish that are believed to help the deceased in the United States, and there is no recognition of any sort of vulnerable state for the deceased or the bereaved that must be addressed ritually. Furthermore violent/unexpected deaths do not receive any sort of special treatment in general. There are moreover very few methods specifically aimed at physically enacting/channeling emotional expression. And as mentioned by Metcalf and Huntington (1991), coherent narrative systems are also commonly lacking or excessively vague, so integration with them is impossible.

CONCLUSIONS

What does clinical work tell us regarding these processes and CG? There is some empirical and theoretical work that suggests that the aforementioned cultural themes, nearly all of which are integrated into most traditional mourning rituals, have been independently discovered/invented by therapists in an attempt to deal with CG after the fact, rather than preventatively as traditional rituals appear to do. In a widely recognized approach to treating CG, M. Katherine Shear advocated using imaginal and in vivo techniques that involve confronting the deceased and “revisiting” the deceased, as well as various interventions that aim toward redeveloping a psycho-spiritual connection with the deceased (Shear, Frank, Houck, & Reynolds, 2005). These interventions are clearly variants on the aforementioned processes found in many world rituals, including Themes 2, 6, and 8 (forcing acceptance, reorganizing relationship with deceased, and narrative forming). Another approach advocates not only confrontation but the establishment of rituals to commemorate the deceased (Wagner, Knaevelsrud, & Maercker, 2006), in which one can see Themes 2, 6, and 7 (forcing acceptance, reorganizing relationship with deceased, and physical enactment of emotion), but with the nonspiritual “commemorate” connotation instead of a spiritual interpretation (a distinction which may make a significant difference). The concept of sense-making has been recognized by some investigators (Nakajima et al., 2012) particularly in the case of violent/unexpected death, which addresses Themes 5 and 8 (extraordinary death and narrative-forming), though again in a manner that leaves spiritual interpretations undefined or unaddressed. Some investigators (Bogensperger & Leuger-Schuster, 2014; Neimeyer, 2000) have proposed that an important aspect of recovery from CG is “meaning reconstruction” and sense-making processes, which reflects Theme 8 (narrative forming) and appears to be important for reorganizing the bereaved’s relationship with the deceased in a positive manner, which seems to support the importance of Theme 6 (reorganizing relationship with deceased).

Support for the importance of Theme 3 (bereaved helping the deceased) is difficult to find, but hints can be found in study of rumination and CG (for example, Eisma et al., 2013). In this work, recurrent self-focused negative thinking is commonly identified as a risk factor for CG, presumably because it interrupts problem-solving, blocks instrumental behavior and drives away social support. The excessively self-absorbed nature of such thinking furthermore can be seen as a way of avoiding painful aspects of the loss. This relentlessly self-focused dwelling on the bereaved’s feelings and reasons why the loss occurred increase and perpetuate psychopathic grief responses not only because it distracts from confronting the loss, but also because not doing so makes ruminators feel disloyal to the deceased (Stroebe et al., 2007). I argue that Theme 3 (bereaved helping the deceased) specifically

addresses these concerns and may be a protective factor that can reduce the risk of ruminative thinking because such practices force the bereaved to spend a great deal of time and activity helping the deceased. Such ritual acts may assuage the grief because they concretize the emotions and structure the guilt, providing concrete ways in which it can be dealt with. Having provided spiritual services for the deceased, the bereaved can reassure themselves that they have done what has been agreed upon a priori by the culture for the deceased and helped them achieve their final destination. It also prevents ruminative avoidance of the reality of the death in the same manner that close proximity does, by occupying the bereaved in continual activity that registers on multiple (self) communicative channels (Rappaport, 1999).

Finally, support for the importance of Theme 8 (narrative forming) may be found in the study of narrative reconstruction in CG (for example, Alves et al, 2014). In this framework, the normal transitioning of acute grief to integrated grief is seen as a process of continual self-narrative formation that is interrupted if the bereaved is unable to reconceptualize their own life narrative in light of the new death. Since death often temporarily makes the bereaved's self-narrative incoherent and unstable, increased mental resources are required to create a new self-narrative, but in CG this process is interrupted and stagnates, so that the bereaved is in a continually incoherent self-narrative state that allows psychopathology to continue. The above authors found empirically that changing self-narrative co-occurred with therapeutic change, supporting the theory. These results suggest that ritual mechanisms aiming toward that end, such as the elaborate integration of the death into established cultural narratives, cosmology, and mythology, may achieve the same results.

These observations raise many concerns regarding the adequacy of American death ways to handle the stress of mourning and help prevent CG. Unfortunately, there are no rigorous cross-cultural studies to my knowledge that compare the rates of CG in cultures that have the above factors incorporated in their death ways. Such studies would be challenging to perform say the least, for a variety of logistical and conceptual reasons. Nevertheless, the foregoing theoretical considerations certainly raise concern that the present death ways may be inadequate and requiring additional cultural intervention (which in our culture will typically manifest as psychotherapy which occurs after the mourning ritual has already been performed).

These various findings provide preliminary support for the idea that traditional mourning rituals may prevent CG through highly concentrated nonverbal and verbal acts of symbolism, belief, and spirituality. By comparison, the best studied treatment for CG in the United States is a targeted cognitive behavior therapy modality (Wittouck, Autreve, Jaegere, Portzky, & Heeringen, 2011) that involves "loss processing and restoration of life

without the deceased” (Simon, 2013, p. 420) and hence presumably only addressing Themes 2, 8, and possibly 6 (forcing acceptance, narrative forming, and reorganizing relationship), and therefore perhaps not addressing the other themes. This leads one to suspect such methods may be less than optimal since they lack substantive cultural consensus on the proper parameters/boundaries of emotional expression (Theme 1), they lack significant tasks for the bereaved to accomplish in the name of the deceased due to their vulnerable/dangerous state (Themes 3–5), and they lack nonverbal, symbolic, and/or physical means to enact grief and other emotional or intangible expressions (Theme 7). Furthermore the focus is typically nonspiritual and/or spiritually neutral in content, which questionably assumes that an individual’s religious/philosophical beliefs can be extracted and treated as a neutral independent variable. This practice may unintentionally cut off the inherent capacity of firmly held spiritual belief to structure life experience and aid in the healing process.

Psychiatrists and other mental health professionals as well as pastoral counselors should, therefore, consider the aforementioned factors in developing interventions when helping patients who are struggling with mourning. In the frequently encountered setting that has no established traditional answers to the aforementioned factors, of course, we will find additional difficulties. Therefore, in such settings, it will be incumbent upon the bereaved and their support network to attempt to provide them. As it stands, I suggest that therapists may benefit from working with their patients to attempt to co-create the aforementioned factors when addressing CG in a noninvasive manner that honors a patient’s personal autonomy. This can be accomplished by gently probing the patient’s own intuitions on such issues and working closely together to ritualize the mourning process with the aforementioned factors in mind. Whether or not this frankly “reinvention of the wheel” technique will be as good as what can be provided in a more culturally/traditionally rich context remains an open question, but it may help considerably nonetheless.

All cultures have developed (with varying degrees of self-awareness) ways to handle the universal problem of mourning. While not all cultures have all eight of the above themes in their mourning rituals, many cultures have most of them. In the rapidly expanding world of the modern nation, it is possible that these themes have disappeared simply because the cultural and psychological forces that shaped them originally have not had enough time to “catch up” with the massive cultural changes brought about by the technological and political changes of the last 150 years. The foregoing represents some hints as to what directions we may need to go to help alleviate this gap and answer the problem of mourning in an effective way that meshes with modern life.

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