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## **Grief and Growth - A Gestalt approach to the experience of grief**

“Losses are part of life – universal, unavoidable, inexorable. And these losses are necessary because we grow up by losing, and leaving and letting go.”

(Viorst, 1986)

In this essay, I look at the experience of grief using the Gestalt stages identified by Sabar in 2000. His approach does not pathologise grief, nor does it suggest that it is a condition that one needs to recover from. Instead, he suggests that grief is integral to life, and as such, it can have a positive impact. I also explore the effect of unresolved childhood trauma on our capacity to deal with grief fully in later life, and the use of Gestalt practices such as dream work, fantasy, art, and exploration of somatic symptoms, to help clients grow through their grief. The case studies and examples in this essay originate from my own experience of grief and trauma, and from work with clients in private practice and at Sydney’s Villawood Detention Centre for Illegal Immigrants.

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Grief relates to the intrinsically painful aspect of the human condition (Sabar, 2000). In fact we have to lose, and leave, and let go in order to grow, but more essentially, in order to survive. The first loss we experience is the loss of the natural connection with our mother, in the womb (Viorst, 1986). We stop being one with mother and become two separate organisms. In order to survive we must leave the outgrown world where

nourishment is provided effortlessly. To stay would mean to die. And so, naturally life is about growth and the change that comes with growth; the loss that comes with change; and the grief that comes with loss.

The second loss is the loss of our first love: losing our mother to our siblings, to our father, or to her life through other responsibilities and desires. (Viorst, 1986). When not supported through to healthy integration, this pre-oedipal experience of loss can leave a troublesome imprint, which will define how we deal with grief in the future. The same can be said of unresolved childhood trauma (Levine, 2005). Blame, guilt and victim-like behaviour in grief are greatly influenced by the anxiety and anger evoked by early separation and struggles with parents, and by trauma in early childhood.

In my personal experience with trauma and in work with traumatised clients, it has become clear how the intensity of unresolved grief and trauma determines the degree to which a person gets stuck in experiences of grief later on. Research into suicide-prone individuals has found that this is due to the fact that traumatic childhood experiences tend to make the individual unstable and liable to breakdown under emotional stress (Stengel, 1964), much like the depressive stage of healthy grieving identified as “Feeling the pain of the loss” in Sabar’s Gestalt model (see pp 8).

This long-term effect of unresolved trauma is particularly noteworthy in relation to grieving as the capacity to be witnessed in our loss, and to have an impact on a significant other at this point of our lives is a major enabler for moving through the stage of feeling the pain of the loss. This is known as experiencing grief relationally in

Gestalt work. It is also what C.S. Lewis (1963) longed for when he said “I wish the world would see my grief and see how much it defines me.”

However, one of the most debilitating effects of unresolved childhood trauma is the degree to which it affects the person’s ability to establish relationships with other people, leading to isolation in adult life (Stengel, 1964).

This is due to the fact that trauma is experienced as a loss of connection to ourselves, to our bodies, to our families, to others, and to the world around us (Levine, 2005).

For the therapist, this disconnection can be seen as the client’s stuckness in the powerless condition in which they were left when the unresolved childhood trauma took place. The new experience of grief triggers the old pain and provides an opportunity for it to emerge and be resolved. This of course creates a complication for dealing with the new grief.

At the core of the client’s disconnection from the world lies his/her inability to have an impact on significant others in relation to the traumatic event. Consider a sexually abused child who was unable to escape or otherwise stop the attacker; a victim of domestic violence who endured years of psychological and physical abuse, unable to strike back; or a belittled child who was not safe to express his anger at the offending party.

As therapists, we can enhance a traumatised client’s ability to experience grief relationally through the use of various art forms. Going with the client’s natural interests, for instance drawing, music or writing, we can provide a channel for them to

express their pain. This technique also allows the client to have a new and positive experience of contact as they share the significance of their artwork and the meanings of the visual or metaphorical imagery they have chosen.

*Unresolved trauma and its grief*

*Grief that sits inside, weeps quietly, and does not run out.*

*Grief that nags to be acknowledged,*

*The underdog behind a victim's mentality*

*To seek pain, to repeat failed relationships,*

*To seek disappointment*

*In the hope for a small gap in the door to its soul*

*So it can escape and be seen.*

*Instead confusion, more disappointments pile up*

*And keep the door to its secret den shut.*

*(Egan, 2008)*

I recently had the opportunity to work with a client whose unresolved trauma was triggered by a recent loss. John (not his real name) is a 40-year-old detainee at the Villawood Detention Centre. His closest and longest standing childhood friend recently committed suicide back home in Holland. This major loss triggered enormous amounts of retroflected anger, which took him close to committing suicide. "How could he leave his wife and children?" John protested. Work with his anger brought up images of his father who abandoned his mother and John as a young child. She became an alcoholic. Subsequent sessions helped him redirect some of his anger

towards both his father and mother, whom he loved dearly but had nevertheless neglected him until she died of cancer when he was 17.

Having reached some completion of his old grief, he then moved more freely to experience the pain and anger for the loss of his friend.

### **The experience of grief**

Mental Health disciplines have long identified various stages of grief. Kubler-Ross (1969) and Wortman, Silver & Kessler (1993) are noteworthy. It is important to note that though grieving is described as a process, it is not linear or cyclical. This can be explained in the fact that a loss affects many aspects of a person's life, with the grieving process often being at different stages for each of these parts.

For example, personally, in addition to the loss of my relationship to my husband, my marriage break-up set in motion changes and loss in the family unit we shared, which included our daughter and extended family relations. Over the next three years, I grieved at different stages for the loss and change of our relationship as partners, our connection as parents of our child who was rapidly changing into a teenager, and also for my role as daughter and sister-in law. The first Christmas was particularly painful, how could I redefine what for 12 years had been a family event? How could I hold Christmas when all I was left with was the ghost of the family we used to be? And so, while at the time I was relatively comfortable with the distance he and I had achieved, I could not make sense of how to fit that distance into the space we still shared as my concept of family changed. To what degree was he still part of my family? What was I aching for in that first Christmas after our separation? And so with my marriage

break-up, at different times I grieved for the loss of my partner, my nuclear family as I knew it, my extended family, and for the person I had become in that life.

Sabar identifies five stages of grief: accepting the loss, experiencing the pain, adjusting to the environment, reinvesting oneself, and keeping a connection (Sabar, 2000). These are explored next.

*1. To accept the reality of the loss*

The shock and disbelief in the face of a loss evidences the mismatch between the reality the person is used to, and the absence of the lost entity in that reality. Once the person has heard of the loss it is not uncommon for them to find it difficult to express much other than disbelief for a while, as the reality starts to sit somewhere in their organism, so that bodily and emotional responses can emerge. It is then that they can begin to verbalise the impact of the event. From this view, the disbelief phase is the conscious mind's way of expressing that the loss hasn't quite sunk in yet with other parts of the self; that the loss is not well defined in the person's physical and emotional body yet. I vividly remember as a 15-year-old, the day I came home from school to learn that my father had passed away in hospital that morning. I was looking at my reflection in a mirror and clearly remember my vacant expression as I thought "I should be feeling something. Dad's just died! And I don't feel anything!"

The therapist can provide support for the client to increase their perception of the current (incomplete) reality as part of the process of accepting that the loss has taken place.

This internal process of coming to terms with the loss can be unsettling for people who consciously know the situation calls for immediate action, however feel they cannot act as the loss does not feel real yet and they are unable to summon the energy required to respond. At this point, encouraging the client to allow external support becomes essential so that the immediate practicalities of the loss can be dealt with by others who are less burdened with the internal process of assimilation of the loss into their emotional fields, and hence can step up to a supporting role (Kepner, 2003).

This process of constant checking and rechecking (Sabar, 2000) of the new field in contrast with the lost one, helps the client come to the point of accepting that the loss is real, and gives way to the painful process of mourning from their new, empty existence.

We often experience anger when we can't accept the reality of the loss. Rather than giving way to the pain of the loss, the client may become angry with the person or event that has left them, and who puts them in a position of having to confront the loss; or they may retroflect those feelings of anger and chastise themselves for not having done something to prevent it from happening. At this point in the grieving process blaming anyone, including oneself, is an effective way of resisting accepting the loss. In John's case a letter to me venting his anger towards his friend for having taken his life, was a good way of giving voice to his anger. This step honoured his resistance to accepting the loss, while at the same time helping him grieve in a relational manner.

## *2. To experience the pain of the absence*

*We grieve the part of us that has died –  
The father, wife, lover, child we can no longer be.  
(Egan, 2008)*

At its core, grief is pain at the face of absence. What is missing is both, the other *and* the part of us that especially related to that other. It is from focusing on the part of us that has been lost that grief can be a growth experience.

By experiencing the pain of the absence we can become aware of how the lost entity enriched our lives, what the lost one brought to us, how we grew and changed through our relationship with them. What exactly have we lost? A companion, a sense of self, comfort and safety? What did we put into the lost reality? Love, dedication, dreams of success, recognition, patience?

This exploration also needs to include the lost future. The importance of is found in studies indicating that we become traumatised when our ability to respond to a perceived threat is in some way overwhelmed (Levine, 2005). As a result, the energy generated to respond to the threat remains trapped in the body, leading to a range of disorders including post-traumatic stress (PTSD).

This is relevant to grief in that we also invest large amounts of energy in the course of living and planning for our future. As the loss takes place, this energy needs to be attended to by way of grieving for the dreams that will no longer be, so that through fantasy, we allow the energy that had been mobilised to complete and be discharged, instead of remaining trapped in the body.

Consider how grieving for the lost future was useful in recent work with John. In response to what the future would have held for the two friends, John talked about his plan to bring him and his family over to see Australia some time next year. This gave way to him sinking into his pain, with his face in his hands and crying for what would no longer be. He then moved on to talk about his desire to fulfil a variation of this dream in which he would still bring over his friend's wife and children. This way, exploring the lost dream allowed him to momentarily incorporate the loss into his life, reframe his sense of self into the future and salvage part of his desire to share his affection with those who remain.

Grieving clients often feel guilt for being the one who survived and indulging in the pain of the absence. In "A Grief Observed" C.S. Lewis expresses his guilt when he writes, "She died, I survived, and I'M grieving?" and "She lost everything!" (1963)

It is easy for therapists to see the need to validate the client's right to feel the pain of the absence. In addition to this, guilt can be a sign of something other than the presence of an unforgiving critic. By allowing the client to stay with guilt and exploring it, we can find out what guilt says about them.

In John's case, he blamed himself for not having been there to do something about his friend's state of mind. His guilt unveiled his capacity to support his friend, to have a positive impact on others. Guilt explored revealed remarkable aspects of his humanity, and his own pain at having missed out on the opportunity to bring them out

and offer them – and in doing so, himself – to his friend. Working with grief this way took the edge off John’s shaming episode and enhanced his sense of worth.

Somatic symptoms provide great insights into the meanings of the lost one, and how the client is experiencing the loss (Sabar, 2000). People detained at Sydney’s Villawood Detention Centre often experience severe sleep disturbances. In exploring a client’s inability to sleep, he soon started talking about his unbearable feelings of powerlessness to change his situation. Dialogue around his inability to rest unveiled his feelings that he had not done anything that would earn him the right to sleep.

Another client presented the exact opposite somatic response and found it difficult to stay awake. The session was filled with descriptions of soporific sleep without recollection of dreams, and feelings of being unable to face his current situation to the point where sleeping endlessly was a better option. He talked about inner conflict as he felt he really needed to be doing something about his detention, such as “working on his legal case”. However, his energy was engaged in protecting him from the unbearable reality of detention. In this instance, reinforcing the wisdom of his body to regulate the amount of pain he would experience helped him ease his feelings of guilt and self-shaming (Kepner, 2003).

Negotiating some time in his wake time to take some steps – however small - towards dealing with his situation, satisfied his need for action and equally helped validate his need to withdraw from the reality of detention.

Encouraging external support to identify what needed to be done helped him focus his energies on the practical tasks. Even taking time during the session to build a list of activities and allocate reasonable completion times, which satisfied both his need for action and the body's natural defence process, had an enormous impact on his sense of well being and reduction in self-shaming episodes.

Over a period of two weeks, he was able to reduce the amount of time spent sleeping during the day and significantly increased the amount of time spent on dealing with the tasks at hand. Additionally, the times when he was awake and not working on his case, he experienced less shaming and anxiety about the future. He felt this resulted from the sense of empowerment that came with taking action.

However, he still was not experiencing the pain for the loss of his freedom. Only when enough action had been taken that he could relax in the thought that he had done what he could do for now, did the feelings of loss and pain start to emerge. This was a valuable reminder about the kinds of support that people may require in order to allow themselves to go into the consuming feelings of grief.

It is only when we know that the world will not collapse around us and around those we love - be it because enough external support is in place so that we can remove ourselves from the holding role, or because we have done enough to stabilise our world into a self-supporting state - that we allow ourselves to collapse into grief.

This was the case for me as I recently came face to face with unresolved grief from childhood trauma. It all came to the fore as my divorce drew nearer. The divorce

encapsulated the ending of the way of life I had grown to create, and then support for decades of my life. The values around relationship and family that I had developed as I grew up into adulthood, all came crushing down the closer I got to the divorce becoming final. With fewer structures to sustain – such as that of a traditional family - the more space the suppressed feelings of unresolved trauma and grief had to surface, until they finally came bursting out in therapy for months on end.

### *3. To adjust to the environment in which the loss is experienced*

Adjusting to the new environment involves developing creative adjustments appropriate for the new situation. “Creative adjustment during mourning means adaption to ‘what is’, changing oneself and reorganising one’s environment to fit the new reality of the deceased person no longer being physically present in your life. The creativity comes in developing new aspects of oneself, as well as finding new external help to fill in what is missing (Yontef, 1993).

The death of a loved one is a major disruption to one’s personal equilibrium and adjustment in the world. In the early stages of mourning the death of a person or a way of life (i.e. the loss of a family through divorce, or moving to a new city or country), the therapist needs to help the client explore what is no more and how what’s missing took shape in the person’s life. This may involve exploring the rituals of family dinnertime, weekend routines, familiar coffee shops, or the simple joys found in the smell and sounds of one’s hometown first thing in the morning. In turn, this exploration helps free up the client’s energy currently invested in what has been lost, so that it is available to help them adjust to the environment in which the loss is

experienced.

Creating new adjustments can be quite confronting and painful as it heightens the absence of the loved one. Resistance to adjusting can be a sign that the person is still largely engaged in feeling the pain of the loss. In a very real sense the person remains invested in staying with what was. In this case adjusting may imply moving away from the lost one to some degree. The resistance to adjusting provides an opportunity to continue exploring the nature of the loss. What has in fact been lost?

For John, this revealed that he had lost the person who best knew him, and who had witnessed his passing through life the closest and for the longest time. John had lost the person he had impacted the most; he'd had lost the capacity to look into another's eyes and see a (big) part of himself reflected back, a mirror to his soul. He also lost hope in his strength: if his friend living in freedom back in Holland, with a wife and two children could kill himself, "why not me living in detention in Australia?" And so through the loss of his friend John voiced his own grief for the loss of his freedom. Having grieved for it, John was able to re-engage with his casework as a sign of adjustment to the detention environment.

Dreams can provide powerful insights into the hidden riches the person has lost, and the areas calling for environmental adjusting elsewhere in their present field. Consider how during my married years, every time my partner went away on business overnight, or following our break-up, I dreamt that a male intruder was trying to break into my home while I slept with plans to attack me and my daughter. This recurrent dream became less frequent as I adapted to being out of relationship. However, I

started having the same dream after I had established a new relationship and spent the night away from my new partner. Exploration of the dream brought to the fore how safe and protected I felt when I was with my partner in contrast with my fear of having to be strong enough on my own. It also made aware of how the process of withdrawal from my partner involved a re-owning of my sense of self-reliance, evidenced in the reduced frequency of the dream. Seeing myself as a strong and independent woman I came to realise how wonderful it was to feel that I could in fact be dependant and not have to do it all on my own. This was one of the riches of being in relationship. Vulnerability was not something I had comfortably owned in the past and the dream allowed me to realise that though disowned, I had been doing quite well at letting myself be protected in relationship.

How could I adjust to my vulnerability and avoid going into relationship with a disowned motivation to avoid my fear of feeling vulnerable? My dream allowed me to discover this fear, and to explore my range of responses to threatening situations. I also confronted the fact that in the face of vulnerability, sometimes I might not be able to do a thing, other than sink my face in my hands and cry.

Adjusting to the new environment involves accepting the absence of the loved one. In Gestalt terms this is referred to as “staying with the void” – the emptiness that follows the departure of a lost one. In a recent session with another client, Matthew (not his real name) who was moving through the break-up of a long-term relationship, described how recent work to stay with his feelings – rather than his previous tendency of distracting himself with the endless swirl pools his thoughts could create in order to explain them – had allowed him to realise how ‘bland’ his life was. In

contrast to the blandness that filled his life at the time, was the essence of the void: the absence of the extraordinary and exciting things he used to have in the company of his ex-partner. As we explored adjusting to the environment, we fantasised about the kind of things he would like to do.

Matthew rejected every option he had suggested. Exploration of adjustments made more poignant the absence of the significant other.

On the other hand, it was the blandness that allowed him to sustain self-care activities such as retraining to gain new employment, holding a job, and daily life routines. Indeed blandness was rich with nourishment. Staying with the void allowed Matthew not only to see what he was missing, but also what he was bringing into his life.

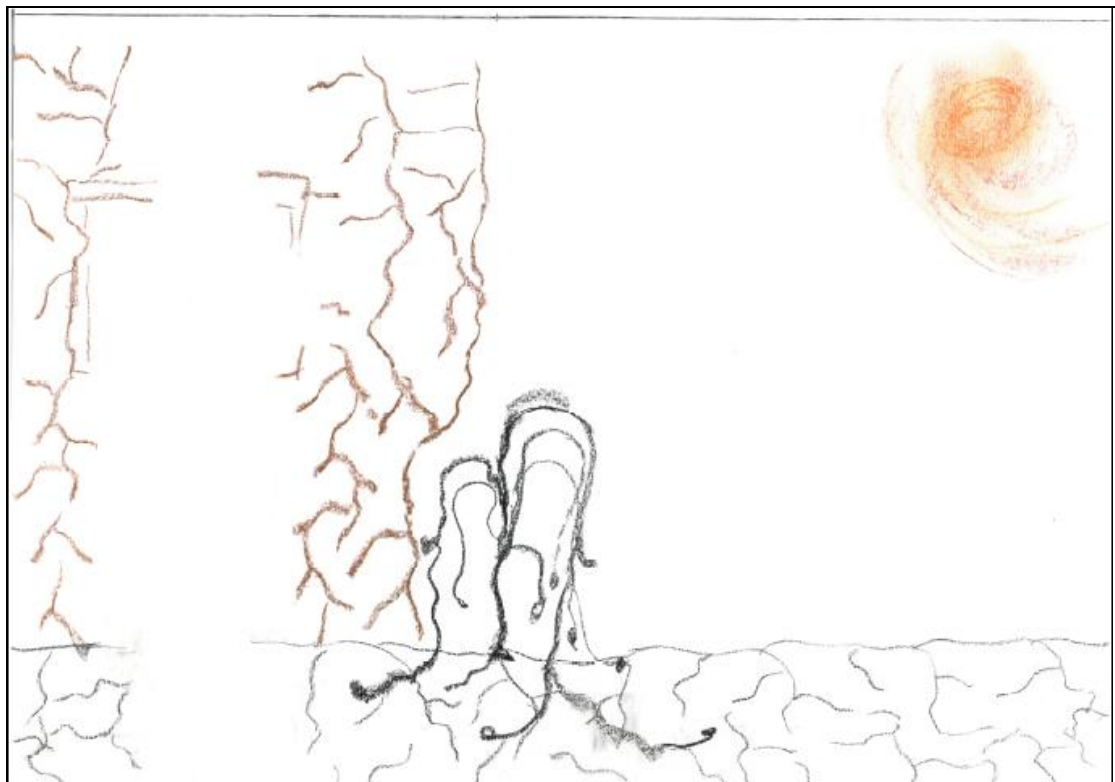
#### *4. To withdraw some emotional energy from the void and reinvest it in another relationship*

Withdrawing emotional energy is aided by making meaning of the loss and reclaiming the parts of us that we invested in the previous relationship. Consider my marriage break-up. I started seeing someone six months after my partner had moved out. Despite truly enjoying the relationship we were forming, I resisted the idea of formalising something concrete with him. I explained it in terms of not wanting him to “be my anything” and for myself, I “did not want to be his anything”. This was no reflection of my lack of feelings for him, I was very fond of him. Rather, it pointed to my resistance to move away from the roles I had grown into as a wife and sister/daughter in law. De-roling had not occurred yet; furthermore, I was resisting de-

roling for fear of how much of myself I would lose if I did move on. Until I re-owned the parts of me I had invested in my marriage I would remain unable to withdraw the energy required to step into new roles and “be someone’s something” again.

Artwork was very helpful at this stage of my own grieving. I completed the following set of drawings over a period of two years after the break-up. They show a process of experiencing the pain of the loss as I watched what I used to have and who I used to be die (drawings 1 and 2), to the desperation of the void and my sadness and vulnerability at being de-roled and lonely (drawings 3 and 4).

Artwork allowed me to express the pain I was going through, and beyond that, to communicate it to others. When they saw my drawings they were moved by what they saw and wanted to understand what I was feeling.



*1. Decay*



2. *Life poors out*



3. *Despair*



#### 4. *Loneliness*

Feelings of guilt can occur at the time of reinvesting oneself in a new relationship. Guilt for being able to move away while the other has lost everything, sometimes life itself (Lewis, 1963). Or guilt for moving away, as in leaving behind the person we used to be. After my marriage break-up, my sense of guilt at the idea of moving on was connected to thoughts of how much I had invested in who I used to be. All the joys, the dreams, the dedication, the struggle!

*Everything can be and die  
And then hurt no more,  
As if it all meant nothing after all.  
How can I move on,  
As though it did not matter?  
As though **I** did not matter.*

*(Egan, 2008)*

As a therapeutic intervention, focusing on how the client invested him/herself in the previous relationship helps them re-own those parts of self, so that moving on needn't mean leaving a significant part of them behind. This may include their capacity to love, generosity of spirit, new skills, endurance, whatever many things they use to describe themselves while they were in the previous relationship. The emphasis here is on how these attributes belong with the client, rather than with the previous relationship.

It is important to acknowledge that we never totally reinvest ourselves or are completely done with mourning a significant loss (Sabar, 2000). We cannot help keeping a special place in our hearts for our loved ones, even long after they have gone. When special occasions remind us of this place and these feelings, it is important to take the opportunity to honour the feelings and the capacity to be more of ourselves that the loved ones enabled in us.

“Although we know that after such a loss the acute stage of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable and never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish” (Freud, 1961)

Last Father's Day, during a very enjoyable breakfast celebration my daughter and I organised for her father, it dawned on me that I had no father to reach out to. This

realisation made me stop and notice more closely the joy that was being shared around the table that very moment, and I was twice as glad for having enabled the moment to come to be, once for my daughter and her father and once for myself. This quiet moment reminded me of the importance of helping the client own the ways in which they grew and changed through the relationship they had with their lost ones (Weenolsen, 1992).

Helping build that connection between their loved one and their sense of self allows them to not just experience the pain of their absence, as will often be the case even many years after they've gone, but also to feel the joy of what the loved ones brought to the client's life. And the sense of inner peace that comes from having pain and joy complete each other.

Transitional objects can play a significant role in helping the client own the ways in which their lives have been enriched through the lost relationship. This was illustrated in recent work with Matthew who mentioned how he had found a half-full bottle of coke in his fridge, long after his ex-partner had moved out. This made him reminisce of how she used to drink half the contents and leave the rest in the fridge knowing she had no intention of finishing it later.

The session then revolved about the ways in which they were different. How her disorganised and spontaneous ways had encouraged him, often unwillingly, to come into contact with those same parts of him. This was a significant realisation for Matthew as his parents had shamed him to the point where changing plans and

spontaneity had no room in his childhood. To date the half-drunk bottle remains in his fridge, a warm reminder of her, and of his increased tolerance to more of himself.

5. *To find a place for and to maintain a continuing bond with that we have lost.*

This stage is often defined in terms of sustaining some form of familiar relationship with the lost one (Weenolsen, 1992). culturally this can be seen in rituals of remaining in contact with the dead through visits to their burial site, and conversations with them in people's minds. It is also common to mark meaningful events such as birthdays and anniversaries relating to the lost one. These are significant in that they make it ok for us to honour the love and connection we had with our lost ones, our past and its ongoing presence in our lives.

Another way of maintaining a continuing bond with the lost one is by giving the loss some sense of meaning, hence allowing ourselves to grow anew through the transcendence of the loss (Weenolsen, 1992).

Wortman, Silver & Kessler (1993) state that "some individuals, with some types of losses, may be able to incorporate the loss into their prevailing view of the world. For other individuals, the event may so profoundly shatter their worldview that no integration or resolution is possible." How then can we help these clients transcend their loss? A doorway may be found in their "shattered worldview". Some losses are so profound that we cannot make sense of them, at least not with the value systems we have held to date. The loss defies these values. It forces us to confront them or remain stuck in the pain of the loss.

What comes out of this excruciating process of reformulation of our values is a new worldview grounded in our reality and experience, rather than on untested stories borrowed from significant others such as our parents and society. We may have to repostulate our values around religion or spirituality, marriage, love, family, loyalty. In “A Grief Observed” C.S. Lewis reassesses his spiritual beliefs: “It has been an imaginary faith... I thought I trusted the rope until it mattered to me whether it would bear me. Now it matters and I find it didn’t. And “Nothing less will shake a man... out of his merely verbal thinking and his merely notional beliefs. He has to be knocked silly before he comes to his senses. Only under torture does he discover himself.”

We reassess and redefine our values because letting the loss change us is the only way to make sure what we had mattered, to keep the bond with it and to bring it along with us.

*If it all came and went  
And left us untouched,  
It might as well have never been,  
And WE might as well have never been.  
(Egan, 2008)*

Reformulating our values is a shattering event, comparable to the shedding of skin or the emerging out from an overgrown cocoon so that we can survive, grow and even thrive. No aspect of grief is more powerfully growth-inducing as the need to redefine ourselves in order to incorporate into our humanity the profoundly changing effect of honouring a significant loss. As therapists, witnessing and holding the client who

dives into the depth of their existence to make new and enduring meanings out of the rubble of what used to be, will take us to the edge of our own humanity; test our capacity to hold our own pain for loss, fear of death, despair in loneliness, vulnerability in connection.

## CONCLUSION

When welcomed as intrinsic to our humanity, the experience of grief can be enriching and at the very least leading to the growth of a person's capacity for compassion.

Grieving relationally, either in therapy or with significant others, can help us identify and re-integrate the parts of us that were invested in a lost relationship or way of life. This is fundamental to our capacity to integrate the loss into our lives, which in turn allows us to grow through grief.

However, this is particularly difficult for people for whom unresolved trauma prevents them from establishing relationships with other people, and leaves them isolated in their grief, both old and new.

In these cases, new grief provides an opportunity for therapists to support their healing of unresolved trauma, and to experience skills in relating to a supportive other.

Artwork is particularly effective in providing a channel to experience grief relationally. This is core to enabling a person to achieve a positive outcome out of a painful experience.

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