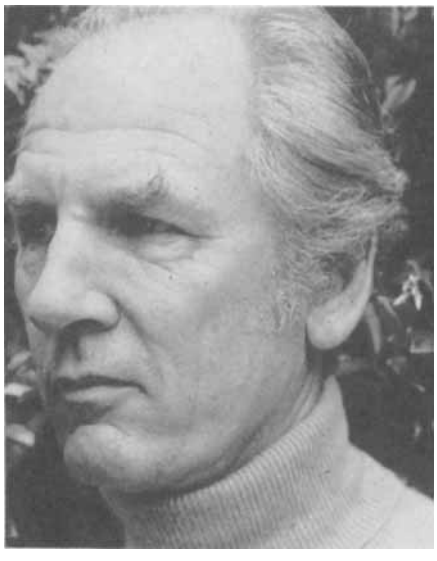
Grief, Loss of Meaning and Society

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Marris' closely argued paper was one of the highlights of the Second International Conference on Bereavement in Contemporary Society in London. It goes to the heart of the greatest problem of bereavement, why it is such a difficult and painful task. With elegant logic he explains the meaning of meaning and demonstrates how it can be undermined by bereavement. He goes on to suggest the means by which this damage can be repaired and meaning be re-established but concludes that there are powerful social forces in Western society which compound the very insecurities we are trying to escape.

Editor

Grief is provoked, not by the loss of a relationship itself, but by the disintegration of the whole structure of meaning centred upon it. The intense anxiety, restlessness and despair express the profound threat which this represents. If recovery from bereavement only involved making good a lost relationship in the context of a life that still made sense, it could be readily accomplished. But how do you make good a loss when nothing seems to matter any more, when the reasons for caring and living are inextricably bound up with what you have lost?

To a casual observer who sees, for instance, an attractive widow with growing children, the extraordinary difficulty of this task may appear baffling. Hasn't she still a great deal to live for? Yes, but each part of it—her children, her family and friends, her career and home—has had its meaning in the context of a relationship to her husband whose loss changes everything. To discover what each can still mean to her involves an insistent searching out of that thread of continuity. She cannot repudiate a past which represents so much of what she valued and experienced and struggled to achieve, without denying her own self, but she cannot go on dwelling in that past, without distorting it and stultifying her life. She has to transform and abstract its meaning, so that it can become relevant to her future, and this is the central task of grieving.

I believe that we can account for many of the essential and fundamental characteristics of grieving by connecting three processes together. The first is the process whereby our experience of attachment relationships in childhood shapes our ideas of security and trust, establishing the basic principles we use to interpret the world and our place in it. The second is the process whereby the child's attachment to mother and father develops into the capacity for, and need for, adult attachments. And the third is the process by which these adult attachments (which may include idealised and abstracted attachments) become so embedded in our sense of the meaning of our lives that their loss provokes grief. Grieving itself, then, is a fourth process, by which this traumatic loss of meaning is remedied.

Let me now draw the outline of such an account of bereavement.

Attachment and the development of meaning

Children begin to show unmistakable attachment behaviour by the age of six months. They cling when frightened, cry when left, smile when reunited. This behaviour is directed to their specific attachment figures, usually the mother most of all. As attachment behaviour develops, so does the fear of strangers. Children's sense of security depends on the particular nurturing figures whom they recognise as their own. In distress, they want their own mother, not just any comforting figure. Correspondingly, the loss of a primary attachment figure in childhood may undermine the sense of security for a lifetime.

These relationships of attachment are crucial to a child's well-being, even its survival. We are born helpless, mature slowly, and throughout our childhood remain primarily dependent on our parenting figures to protect, feed and care for us. An abandoned child is unable to fend for itself and will probably die. In the environment where these patterns of behaviour evolved, a child isolated, even briefly, from the protection of its kind would be vulnerable to predators. The insistence with which a young child claims the attention of its parents, especially when it is troubled or frightened, is its only weapon of defence. Hence a child's most crucial task, for its own survival, is to make its attachment relationships secure. As the years go by, the relationship evolves a distinctive pattern out of the interaction between these particular attachment figures and this particular child which represents, characteristically, both a mutual desire to please and a contest of wills. The relationship becomes only gradually less crucial as we approach maturity and it provides the experience from which we will approach all future relationships in which we seek security.

Since attachment is so overwhelmingly important to us, above all in the earliest years, it underlies all our understanding of how to survive in and manage the world we inhabit. Our first and most basic grasp of cause and effect, of predictable order, of how to get what we want, we learn from our attempts to manipulate this vital relationship. Attachment itself is neither an emotion nor a purpose. Rather, like falling in love, it is the condition from which emotions and purpose arise. It is a predisposition to become attached, realised by the availability of an appropriate figure, which generates feelings of comfort, anxiety, anger, joy. As we learn how to cope with those feelings, we organise more and more complex strategies of control over both ourselves and others, denying aspects of our experience too confusing or painful to acknowledge, establishing the assumptions of a world we can bear to live in. So the experience of attachment becomes embedded in the principles which guide and interpret our later discoveries of order and relevance, effectiveness and helplessness.

To construct such meanings, a growing child must be able to

identify, classify and compare, to perceive relationships and conceptualise them in abstraction. Jean Piaget and his collaborators have explored how these conceptual abilities mature. As we grow up, we articulate our feelings and purposes more and more self-consciously. They become imbued with the language and relational concepts our culture provides for their expression. The organisation of meaning depends on a maturing power to conceptualise the relationship between feelings, purposes and actions. Attachment influences this development, not only as our first and for a long time most crucial experience of security and danger, order and predictability, but as the guarantor of all other learning.

Confidence to explore is related to security of attachment, as the exploratory behaviour of young children clearly shows; and what we explore is powerfully influenced by what our attachment figures want us to discover. We learn the mastery which makes us independent of them through the approval they give or withhold, and the surer we are of being loved, the more readily we learn. Self-reliance comes from this underlying trust, not from repudiating the need for attachment. We become sure of ourselves if we trust that the moral order, the knowledge and abilities to which we were introduced by those we needed to love, will continue to reward us with secure attachments.

Not that our achievements are motivated only by the need to be securely loved. But when a bereavement, for instance, undermines our trust in attachment, it also undermines our trust that the knowledge, ability and worth we have struggled to achieve will, after all, be rewarded with love. From this comes the bitter sense of the futility of everything which characterises the initial despair of grief.

These two innate predispositions —to conceptualise and to become attached—interact with experience to form habits of feeling, behavioural strategies, perceptions of the nature of relationships and how to control them, which evolve into a more and more differentiated, self-conscious structuring of meaning. This development makes a sense of attachment crucial to the meaning of life, whether it is realised through a sexual bond, ties of kinship or even a symbolic figure.

A grown person can be self-sufficient, need not fear abandonment and may have many purposes which do not relate directly to an attachment. Yet, as I have tried to show, attachment is rooted in our emotional structure as the guarantor that these other activities and achievements will be worthwhile. Attachment is so central to our security in childhood, that it becomes embedded, ineradicably, in the meaning of safety and reward for the rest of our lives. Hence changes which disrupt the specific patterns of attachment upon which anyone depends will disrupt their ability to experience life as meaningful, and plunge them in grief, however rational these changes may seem from the point of view of someone with other attachments.

I do not mean to imply that adult attachments are the same as a child's attachment to parents. While the attachment behaviour of infancy seems common to all human societies, adult patterns of emotional bonding vary greatly, both within and between societies. If we see our adult bonds simply as the projection and transformation of our relationship to our parents, we represent them as childish, and this is morally confusing as well as psychologically misleading. The need to love and be loved by someone, to grieve passionately for their loss, then seems to express an immaturity we have been unable to outgrow, even though we also regard the inability to sustain adult attachment as immature.

This confusion underlies, I think, much of our ambivalence about both love and grief and our tendency to idealise a psychologically impossible self-reliance, at once loving and detached. But with this warning against oversimplification, I would emphasise that the way anyone, anywhere, constructs the meaning of life is the outcome of a constantly developing, interacting set of emotional, purposive and interpretive organisations, in which the experience of attachment has played so primary and crucial a part, that meaning without attachment is fundamentally inconceivable.

Bereavement, therefore, because it robs us of a crucial attachment, profoundly disrupts our ability to organise experience in a meaningful way. Correspondingly, social changes which disrupt our ability to interpret and respond to our world of experience are a form of bereavement. Both call for a process of recovery whereby the underlying structure of emotion and purpose can disengage itself from irretrievable assumptions and circumstances without losing its ability to generate meaning.

Conditions which affect recovery from loss

If this understanding of grief is useful, it should enable us to predict the conditions which make recovery more or less likely in both personal and social terms. It suggests four kinds of conditions, before, at or after the loss, which we should expect to influence the ability to reconstitute meaning.

1. The childhood experience of attachment should profoundly influence the sense of security, the pain, serenity or vulnerability with which someone apprehends the world in general, and so the resilience of their underlying emotional and purposive structure in the face of loss.

2. The more conflicted, doubtful or unresolved the meaning of what has been lost, the harder it is likely to be to reconstitute that meaning in a way which successfully disengages emotion and purpose from irretrievable circumstances.

3. The less opportunity to prepare for a loss, the less predictable or meaningful the event itself, the more traumatically will the whole structure of meaning be disrupted, and the more insecure thereafter will all attachment seem, when its loss can be so sudden and unforeseen.

4. Events after the loss may either support the processes of recovery, encouraging the ambivalent impulses to work themselves out, or frustrate them.

For bereavement, there is much evidence from psychotherapeutic practice to support this. Two major studies confirm that the outcome of losses can be predicted from understanding the effects of these sorts of factors. In one of the most thorough and carefully designed studies of severe bereavement undertaken, Colin Murray Parkes, Robert Weiss and their colleagues followed a sample of men and women under 45 in Boston, Massachusetts, through the first two years of their bereavement[1]. They were able to discriminate three factors which seemed especially likely to affect the outcome of grieving: the suddenness and unexpectedness of the bereavement; ambivalence towards the lost partner; and an overly dependent relationship on that partner which seemed to reflect an underlying insecurity about attachment.

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These factors correspond with the causes of depression as Brown and Harris discovered them in a study of 400 women in Camberwell[2]. The comparison helps to show how grief both resembles and fundamentally differs from depression. They found that women who had lost a parent in childhood—especially their mother, and before the age of 11 years—were more vulnerable to depression, but no more likely to be depressed, unless they had suffered some recent misfortune such as a bereavement, a serious illness, loss of job or home. Early losses predisposed women to depression, but it appeared only when precipitated by an event. Other circumstances, such as having three or more children under the age of 14 years, or a marriage without intimacy, also affected how liable the women in the sample were to becoming depressed. The study found, then, that the incidence of depression was influenced by three of the four factors I mentiond above: the early experience of attachment; disruptive, unexpected events; and the supportiveness of circumstances.

Brown interprets his findings in these terms:

> 'We have speculated that the importance of major loss and disappointment is that they deprive women of sources of value and reward, of good thoughts about themselves, their lives, and those close to them, and it is a feeling of hopelessness associated with such deprivation that is critical . . . We believe that relatively few people develop such *generalised* hopelessness in response to loss and disappointment because of the key role played by ongoing feeling of self-esteem or self-worth. If these are low before a major loss or disappointment, a person is less able to imagine emerging from the deprivation. This change from specific to generalised hopelessness can be seen in terms of a secondary level of meaning developing from the primary meaning of an occurrence . . .'[3]

What Brown here calls 'feelings of self-esteem or self-worth' are closely associated with my more inclusive conception of a structure of meaning. (There are close correspondencies, too, with the concept of self in the work of Erikson and Kohut.) Depression differs from grief, I suggest, in that grief expresses the intense anxiety and despair that the disintegration of meaning provokes, while depression represents a perverse reintegration, where worthlessness is conceived to make sense of futility. When people feel helpless, nothing seems worth doing because it cannot fulfil their purpose.

If this feeling becomes generalised, their life will seem meaningless, because there is never any worthwhile, purposive action for them to undertake. In normal grieving, this despair impells a restless search to recover meaning. In depression, it becomes rationalised. Since our sense of our effectiveness or helplessness develops out of our primary experience of attachment relationships, it is associated from the first with being cherished or abandoned, loved or rejected.

One of the commonest ways of explaining to ourselves why we are not loved is, then, that we are not lovable. Paradoxically this explanation is hopeful: it implies at least that if we were lovable we would be effective, as others are, and this is something to strive for. Parents often exploit this association of ideas to induce the behaviour they want to see. But if our attempts to secure our attachments are repeatedly disappointed, a chronic sense of worthlessness may develop, which explains and makes sense of our consistent frustration. Such a structure of meaning can interpret events and provide barely enough motivation to go on living, however unhappily. It includes within it a buried hope that somehow our worthlessness may one day be redeemed, because that sense of worthlessness remains a rationalisation of our history; there is still, despite it, a human being crying out to live.

Brown and Harris' findings suggest, then, that depression commonly occurs when feelings of helplessness become diffused and associated with a sense of worthlessness. The insecurity of childhood attachments, the stressfulness of present circumstances, the lack of emotionally supportive relationships, and some precipitating loss or misfortune combine to overwhelm the victim's hope in life. But instead of providing a search for a sense of purpose, as in normal grief, the despair is contained by a self-defeating rationalisation. Conversely, bereaved who fail to work through grief may become chronically depressed.

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I want to stress that grief and depression involve meanings, because feeling worthless or helpless will not, in itself, I believe, provoke either depression or grief, except in the context of disrupted or self-destructive organisations of meaning. In Puritan New England, for instance, children were conventionally regarded as creatures of the devil, brought to some semblance of goodness only by strict correction. But so long as children experienced attachment as reliable, they would not necessarily associate low self-esteem with helplessness and hopelessness. They grow up, rather, to see themselves as worthless sinners redeemed by the mercy of God who has not, after all, abandoned his children. Also, because constructions of meaning represent the history, understanding and relationships of a culture, as well as the individual organisation of experience, an analysis in terms of meaning connects personal and social processes better than the language of feeling, which has no collective counterpart. Societies, properly speaking, do not feel, but we can identify the meanings which govern their relationships.

Collective losses

Two other recent studies are particularly relevant to this theme because they concern disasters which bereaved many people at once, and the comparison between them shows clearly how the cultural traditions and circumstances of a community may influence the course of grief. In February 1972, a West Virginia mining valley called Buffalo Creek was overwhelmed when a dam burst, killing 125 men, women and children, and destroying the settlements along the valley floor.

Kai Erikson was hired as a consultant by the lawyers representing the survivors and discovered an extraordinarily deep and enduring demoralisation amongst them. In *Everything in its Path*[4], he accounts for this collective inability to recover from grief by both the history which formed their culture and the collapse of a supportive community after the disaster. His analysis closely matches the four categories of factors I described earlier in relation to grief and depression. Firstly, he suggests that the often-celebrated, traditional individualism of the Appalachian mountain people masks an underlying strain of submissiveness and dependence rooted in their upbringing.

> 'According to the testimony of observers, mountain parents are likely to be remarkably indulgent with infants, feeding them on demand, holding them in close physical embrace, and drawing a warm curtain of

affection and intimacy around them. As children grow older, however, and begin to toddle off on their own pursuits, parents pay less and less attention to them . . .'

Punishment is erratic but harsh.

'The upshot is that the child often feels expelled from the inner embrace of the family at an early age, and in that sense the major emotional problem he experiences is likely to be fear of separation' (pp. 90-91).

This underlying insecurity contributes to an anxious self-reliance dependent on strong family support.

All this is compounded, Kai Erikson suggests, by the valley's history: its ruthless exploitation, first for timber, then for coal; the creation of company towns which trapped the mountain people in almost feudal dependence; the coming of the great depression, which left most of them to rely on welfare; and the depopulation of the valley from the automation and decline of mining. In the century before the disaster a series of violent irruptions had repeatedly shaken these still isolated communities.

The disaster itself was horrifying: a wall of mud swept down the valley, carrying everything before it, flinging the bodies of its victims into trees and wreckage. But the aftermath led to a second bereavement more enduringly devastating than the dam burst itself. The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development quickly took over responsibility for resettling the survivors, establishing camps of mobile homes. Kai Erikson comments:

'The net result of this procedure, however, was to take a community of people who were already scattered all over the hollow, already torn out of familiar neighborhoods, and make that condition virtually permanent . . . the camps served to stabilize one of the worst forms of disorganization resulting from the disaster by catching people in a moment of extreme dislocation and freezing them there in a kind of holding pattern.' (p. 47).

Thus the communities of Buffalo Creek suffered collectively from all four of the kinds of conditions that seem to make the recovery of meaning most difficult: they had already suffered traumatic disruptions in the past which created an ambivalent and insecure approach to life; the meaning of the world they had lost was ambiguous, caught up in changes and contradictions they could not control; the disaster was sudden, horrible and unforeseen, and the resettlement, instead of supporting a process by which they could work through grief and resolve the continuity of meaning in their lives, effectively frustrated it. Hence the survivors seemed characteristically frightened, lonely and grieving endlessly for a community they had no hope of recovering.

Another mining community, with a comparable history of exploitation and hardship, reacted to disaster very differently. In October 1966, a tip above the village of Aberfan in South Wales gave way, engulfing 18 houses and a school and killing 144 men, women and children. The traditions of such a village—its Methodism, trade union Socialism and vocational pride—are, I think, culturally less ambivalent and more secure than the Appalachian culture Kai Erikson describes. But the most obvious difference is that the village itself was not destroyed and took charge (with the help of a small group of sensitive, professional caregivers) of its own recovery, rejecting the paternalistic attempts of most outside professionals to manage either its grief or the millions of pounds subscribed for disaster relief.

Some of the anger of bereavement was directed into pressing the Government and the National Coal Board to remove all the local tips, despite officials' assurances of their safety. From this came a campaign to rehabilitate land everywhere that had been scarred by disused collieries and abandoned spoil heaps. Anger and guilt were discharged into a common purpose, whose meaning derived from the circumstances of loss, giving Aberfan a stronger sense of itself as a community than before the disaster. To reconstitute purposes and meaning out of the conflicted and bitter emotions of bereavement, the grief-stricken must take charge of the process of their recovery, as the survivors of Buffalo Creek collectively could not, scattered as they were[5, 6].

The Buffalo Creek and Aberfan studies illustrate how the society of which the bereaved are part affects the experience of bereavement as much as their personal history. The whole context of meaning, which loss disrupts, is shaped by the values, institutions, formal and informal structures of relationship of a particular culture. Our unique sense of the meaning of our lives is shaped by common assumptions, and assimilates the customs, conventions and beliefs of our time and place.

The widows I interviewed in East London in 1956[7], for instance, defined the meaning of their lives, almost exclusively, in terms of being good wives and good mothers. Bereavement robbed them of their future as wives, and made it much harder for them to be good mothers, because they could no longer provide for their children as they felt they should, having lost the support of their husbands' earnings. Their state pensions were subject to an earnings rule, which prevented them from easily restoring the household income by their own wages. Stigmatised as poor relations, they withdrew from their families. At the same time, they felt awkward with the married couples they had known, sensing an implied sexual rivalry for the man's attention. All this reflected a society in which a woman's status was very narrowly identified with being a successful sexual partner. Unlike most pre-industrial societies, there were no customs or institutions designed to reintegrate a widow into society as a widow. Widowhood in Britain in the 1950s was a lonely and, in many ways, stigmatised state for working class women with children.

Grief in the social context

Thirty years later, women have struggled to gain a wider choice of purposes for their lives. But the experience of bereavement is still very lonely, and I do not know that the careers of married women have made being widowed less traumatic. At least, I think, work outside the house provides a set of routines and social encounters which provide a background of continuity and purposeful activity, an impled reassurance that the widow is still part of everyday life, even when it has lost its meaning for her.

No-one can usefully tell another how to reintegrate the meaning of their lives. But most societies—indeed, I believe all pre-industrial societies—have mourning customs which articulate the stages of grief, expressing and pacing the progress of reintegration. It is to this lack that the UK voluntary organisation Cruse—Bereavement Care has responded so impressively. Yet, at the same time, there are pressures upon contemporary society which I believe are tending to create less security, less confidence in attachment and so less resilience to recover from loss.

As the research I have referred to has found, our vital organisa-

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tions of meaning are more vulnerable to being overwhelmed, or crippled in their development, the more we are exposed to unintelligible, unexpected and disruptive events; the more our confidence in attachment has been undermined or distorted by the experiences of childhood; and the less support we have. Or to put this the other way about: a society that best protected its members from being permanently crippled by grief and depression would organise its relationships so that they were as stable, predictable, understandable and careful of attachment as is humanly possible. And the qualities of behaviour that would need to inform such relationships—sensitivity, responsiveness, mutual understanding, consistency, ability to negotiate—are very much the same as those which create secure attachment. I believe such a society corresponds to our need to nurture and be nurtured, to find secure attachments, and to see the meaning of our lives confirmed by the meaning of society at large, as a compassionate organisation respectful of our uniqueness.

In practice, I fear that our society is tending sharply away from these qualities. Its relationships are becoming less stable and predictable, and more ruthlessly indifferent to the meaning of the lives of the unprivileged, under the pressures of global economic competition. Because multi-national corporations can reorganise their resources on a vast scale very quickly, their freedom of action makes every community vulnerable to abrupt economic changes, and because these changes arise from organisational needs remote from the community, they are often locally unintelligible and hard to foresee or prepare for. As unemployment rises and whole communities lose a sense of their future, the accumulated stresses act upon families. More marriages break down, more wives and children are abused, more children are born to youngsters out of boredom and despair. Children's experience of attachment is less and less likely to be secure.

These misfortunes may seem the temporary consequences of changes which cannot be postponed, if the British economy is to compete successfully in a global market But this is wrong, on at least two counts: the effects of loss and instability are not temporary, even if the economy were to settle into a more stable pattern; and national competitiveness does not require that the internal hardships of change be distributed competitively. On the contrary, a society which deals co-operatively and reciprocally with the burdens of uncertainty and change, because it restores predictability and security, releases energy that would otherwise be absorbed in assimilating the traumas of loss.

Competitiveness and humanity need not be, as our business ideologies often seem to assume, incompatible principles. Nor is individualism fundamentally at odds with social responsibility, because our uniqueness is nourished or impoverished by the society in which it was formed. There is nothing inevitable about policies which ignore the psychic costs of change. They represent a deliberate decision to displace the burdens of loss onto those unable to defend themselves, and I do not know how to understand that decision except as a fear of weakness. Impelled by our own insecurities, we strive for a defensive autonomy whose ruthlessness and mistrust compounds the very insecurities we are trying to escape, in a vicious spiral of self-impoverishment. To mistake these self-inflicted social wounds for economic realism is a profound misunderstanding.

If these reflections seem far from the topic of grief and bereavement, that is partly, I think, because we are accustomed to treat psychological well-being and social policy as involving d.fferent systems of thought and different practices. But that separation is itself a social invention, the outcome of ideologies which have institutionalised the boundaries of scientific disciplines so as to exclude any consideration of the unique qualities of human experience from the calculus of social utility.

If, as I have suggested, grief is a response to a profound disruption of meaning, we cannot understand the nature of bereavement without understanding the beliefs and values, institutions and relationships, language and culture from which each of us has formed our sense of ourselves and the world we inhabit; any more than we can understand how to make our institutions responsive to the needs of the bereaved, without understanding the uniqueness of each life. We cannot hope to create a world without loss and grief. But we are collectively responsible for the social context in which loss is experienced and grief worked out. Our willingness to recognise that responsibility is, I believe, a crucial measure of our society's humanity.

This article is based on the paper presented by Peter Marris at the Second International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society, London, July 1988, organised by Cruse—Bereavement Care. The paper was adapted in part from the preface to the second edition of his book, 'Loss and Change', London: Routledge, 1986.

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Making the Most of a Funeral

by Jenny Hockey PhD

With a Foreword by the Archbishop of York

This book will be of interest to bereavement counsellors, sociologists and, of course, to ministers and those who train them. One theme constantly emerges: that a funeral should be as personal an event as possible, and should reflect the unique nature of human life.

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'Making the Most of a Funeral' is available direct from the publishers: Cruse—Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR, price £3.25 plus £1 UK, £1.50 overseas p&p. Tel: 081-940 4818

