

Spit in My Soup: Finding Meaning In Loss

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“Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship, which struggles on in the survivor’s mind toward some final resolution, some clear meaning...”

Robert Anderson

I Never Sang for My Father

The grief of losing those we love is one of the most painful experiences we can have in life. The capacity to resolve our grief largely depends on the extent to which we are able to experience our own angst and derive useful meaning from it. When my little sister was murdered, I was confronted head on with the reality of these tasks; but at the time I could not make any sense of them. I was bewildered by my anguish, confusion, and guilt. In retrospect, I now see that there were really two fatalities. The first was the rape and strangulation of my 5 year-old sister by 16 year-old neighbor boy; the second was my subjugation as a 10 year-old boy to a grief I could not resolve.

The struggle to resolve the murder of my sister was a long one. It started with my failed efforts to forgive my sister’s murderer because of his mental illness. It eventually culminated 20 years later during my training as a family therapist when, in a supervision session, one of my clinical supervisors did what Alfred Adler (as cited in Effran & Fauber, 2015) refers to as “spitting in the client’s soup,” meaning the supervisor jolted me into seeing the loss of my sister in a new light. This article is about my journey of trying to figure out how to let go of my version of the loss and of finally coming up with an entirely new one.

One of our central tasks as therapists is to help our clients work through the unresolved grief that underlies many of their symptoms (Rando, 1984). At its core, resolving this grief involves helping our clients relinquish one interpretation of the loss and find another more meaningful one—one that helps them resolve and move on from the loss (Neimeyer, 2000). One of the most difficult losses to resolve is the death of a loved one where there is an abiding emotional bond and attachment. Particularly difficult are sudden and violent losses of loved ones, like the murder of a child, where the loss is completely unanticipated and out of sync with the normal course of the lifecycle (Schmidt, 1986). Because this kind of loss is so bewildering, it constitutes a major assault on our capacity to absorb and integrate its meaning. This was certainly the case for me. I was one of those people who worked at it, but never really got it until much later in my life. Here is how I became lost and how I found my way.

Finding Forgiveness

As progressive Catholics, my parents emphasized the importance of forgiving my sister’s murderer. They explained that he was mentally ill and could not really know what he was doing. They also stressed that, like my little sister, he was one of God’s

children and therefore should be forgiven. Based on my limited understanding of the matter, this all made sense to me, so I went about the business of telling myself that I had forgiven him. This worked to a certain extent, but it seemed inconsistent with my mother's depression and my father's binge drinking that followed my sister's death. I naively thought that if the grace of forgiveness was real, then it was supposed to wash away everyone's rage and anger about my sister's murder. But that didn't happen with my parents and it certainly didn't happen with me. My parents seemed like wrecks on the outside, but kept telling me I could handle it on the inside—while I was a wreck on the inside, but wanted to look like I was handling it on the outside.

These kinds of emotional incongruities are to be expected when family members are trying to recover from such a chaotic and traumatic loss, but what seemed to make them particularly awkward was the forced nature of the forgiveness that was being fostered. It was a derivation of the Christian ethos to “love thine enemy” and to “forgive them for they know not what they do.” In my case, I thought it was my responsibility to forgive the murderer of my sister because it was the right thing to do; and on top of it, if I could just practice this ethos, I thought I would be the good and responsible oldest son. In essence, this way of handling my grief got rewritten into a family script (Byng-Hall, 1991) in which I believed I was supposed to delete malice and highlight forgiveness.

Genuine forgiveness is most often accomplished when we are first able to experience and sort out our feelings of malice; and then, after we have some time to process these feelings, we can be in a better position to forgive and let some of them go (Rando, 1984). The reality is we can't let go of something we haven't held, and I was trying to accomplish this feat with little or no success. On one hand, I was in a state of denial believing that I was a good guy who could rise above it all; but on the other hand, I was haunted by volcanic rage that would erupt unpredictably when I felt particularly helpless or stymied. Some of this emotionality was just adolescent reactivity, but deep down I knew it was different because there was an all-consuming fury to some of it. In looking back, I am very thankful I had sports as an outlet to channel this abiding ferocity.

Finding Exoneration

The problems in resolving my grief weren't just due to the manner in which I took on a kind of feigned forgiveness at the expense of dealing with my more palpable angst. This part of my unresolved grief involved my inability to sort out the complicated intrapersonal dynamics of forgiveness in which one first tries to deal with the malicious feelings and then gradually works toward what Hargrave (1994) calls exoneration. Exoneration is absolving the wrongdoer of culpability by means of gaining insight and understanding into his or her behavior. Insight involves becoming aware of the relational and family dynamics that contributed to the injustice, and understanding entails grasping the related injustices the wrongdoer has experienced in the past that led him or her to act in this way. The intent is to understand the wrongdoer in the context of his or her family system and to try to see him or her as a damaged rather than a bad person.

From a therapeutic point of view, exoneration makes sense because it encourages the client to step back from his or her suffering (typically the current narrative) and take a look at the possible vulnerabilities of the wrongdoer (often the new narrative). Hargrave (1994) also argues that exoneration can be a more practical approach to resolving a hurt or loss because it does not depend on the interpersonal aspect of forgiveness where the wrongdoer typically is expected to take responsibility and corrective action for his or her bad behavior. In the case of my sister, the murderer took no remorseful actions; and as far as exoneration was concerned, I couldn't find out anything about him. His family had moved out of Washington shortly after he was incarcerated and there wasn't access to any personal information about him and his family. Moreover, since he was a juvenile and considered psychotic, he was judged legally insane and was remanded to the Child Study and Treatment Center at the state mental hospital. He was locked up and I was locked out—left in the dark to find resolution that was not forthcoming.

Finding Resolution

Over the course of my adolescence and early adulthood, the unresolved grief from my sister's murder gradually receded to emotional depths outside of my reach. Not surprisingly, following the path of the wounded healer (Miller, Wagner, Britton, & Gridley, 1998), I became interested in psychology and eventually began studying family therapy for my master's degree. During the course of this training in a supervision session, one of my clinical supervisors asked me some routine questions about my background. I mentioned that part of my interest in the field was motivated by a desire to help families deal with the loss of loved ones and I told him about the murder of my sister. He asked me a few more questions, and then told me he had treated the kid who murdered my sister when he worked at the Child Study and Treatment Center. I was stunned; I didn't know what to say, but I never forgot what he said.

My supervisor knew from my brief explanation about my background that I believed if I could just understand a problem, I could solve it. I told him that I had conducted my own research project on my sister's murder where I gathered and analyzed all of the newspaper articles about this gruesome crime. My sister was missing for several weeks and the local Seattle papers wrote about it extensively. Looking back on this supervision session, it was pretty clear that my supervisor saw right through my false hope that if I could just make sense of it, I could put my grief to rest. And this is precisely where my supervisor figuratively spit right into my soup. He looked directly at me and empathically stated that no matter how many psychotic kids he treated, he could never figure out the difference between the kids who were violent and those who weren't. At that moment I realized that if a clinician of his experience couldn't figure it out, I was never going to make sense of it—no matter how hard I tried. The impact of this realization was profound. I went from “there is going to be some understandable answer,” to “there isn't going to be any answer.” When this realization finally sunk in, I began to weep, and years of grief began pouring out.

So what happened? I previously tried to find forgiveness and exoneration for my grief, but my forgiveness was compelled by the family script I had adopted and my

exoneration was constrained by the limited access I had to relevant information. The net effect was a residual of unexpressed grief that could not find its way out. It's not that my grief was permanently locked up; I certainly had ample personal and therapeutic opportunities to access and express my pain about this loss. Instead, this lack of resolution had more to do with what I call the "quantum of grief" that was not sufficiently released. In my view, each loss has its own particular quantum of hurt, and we cannot resolve our grief until we are able to sufficiently release it. Based on Stroebe's & Schut's (1999) model of bereavement, I was a typical survivor in that I followed a predictable course of oscillation between avoiding and confronting my grief; however, I was atypical in the sense that my grief did not substantially subside over time. In effect, I could not figure out how to dissipate my quantum of grief to the point where it would no longer take over with unpredictable eruptions. Unfortunately, I remained more or less in this state of unresolved grief for 20 years.

When my clinical supervisor intervened, I was finally able to arrive at a point of convergence where I was able to experience both intense catharsis and acceptance. The convergence between these two components of the grief process was critical to the resolution of my loss. The acceptance provided the realization that I wasn't going to figure out my sister's murder and the catharsis enabled the sufficient release of the remaining quantum of my grief. In my personal and clinical experience, finding this convergence constitutes one of the most critical parts of resolving loss. Furthermore, the acceptance aspect of the resolution process can be one of the most powerful means by which we resolve a traumatic loss.

When using the concept of acceptance in this context, I and some other therapists (e.g., Bach, 2004) refer to it as radical acceptance. Typically, when we endure any painful loss, it is by definition hard to accept. When we have problems with accepting the loss, we tend to come up with meanings of the loss that service those feelings and prolong the grief. Finding resolution to the loss most often involves replacing our story with another one that serves two basic functions: first, it facilitates the realization that the loss could not have been any different than it was; and, second, it supports the need to accept there is now nothing that can be done to change the loss.

In many cases, our grief can be so intense and pervasive that we remain stuck in the sentiment that the loss should never have taken place and that we or other parties should have been able to do something about it. While many losses are admittedly mindless and preventable, the more the grieving remains focused on the unfairness and blame involved, the more difficult it will be for us to achieve some form of radical acceptance. Most of us in this part of the grief process will remain confined to our own insular narrative about the loss and will not be able to construct a more useful one without someone's help—and often without someone spitting in our soup. This was certainly the case with the murder of my sister and it was ultimately how I found some measure of resolution in this terrible tragedy.

I say some measure of resolution because in reality we can never entirely get over some losses. For some losses—particularly family losses—the attachment is simply so

entwined into the fabric of our being, so connected to our DNA, that we cannot completely let go of them. Resolving the grief from these losses is not so much about extinguishing the angst, but about attenuating it to a level where it doesn't constitute a major roadblock to our capacity for living life and loving others. Forgiveness, exoneration, and radical acceptance can all be helpful in one way or another, but they are not elixirs for the grief we all must inevitably experience for losing those we cannot imagine life without. While I have certainly experienced the grace of radical acceptance, I still live with the grief that my sister should never have been taken away. The grief for many of our losses never really goes away; but when we are able to find some measure of resolution, the grief stops taking us away.

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