Beyond the Myths of Grief: Wisdom for Spiritual Accompaniment

Melissa M. Kelley, Ph.D.
April 21, 2018
Outline

Part 1: Myths of Grief and Beyond
• varied and less recognized forms in which loss may occur
• ambiguous loss
• disenfranchised grief
• narrative/meaning perspective

Part 2: Faith, Resilience, and Spiritual Accompaniment
• The place of faith, resilience, and spiritual accompaniment as we grieve and accompany others in their grief

Photo: https://hakuyako.deviantart.com/art/Tree-Branch-Silhouette-186582739
Proposed Definitions

• What is bereavement?
  "literally means the state of being deprived of someone by death" (Kaplan, Sadock, and Grebb, 1994, p. 80)

• What is grief?
  Distress in response to an important loss (adapted from Weiss, 2001, p. 47)

• What is mourning?
  Synonymous with grieving; cultural/social practices associated with bereavement
Part I

Myths of Grief and Beyond
A Myth of Grief

Death is the experience that will typically prompt grief.
Beyond the Myth

Types of Loss

• Material Loss
• Relationship Loss
• Role Loss
• Functional Loss
• Systemic Loss
• Intrapsychic Loss

Intrapsychic Loss

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.   Or does it explode?
Possible Faith/Spiritual Dimensions

• Can we notice, name the varied losses we might be experiencing?
• How have our many varied losses perhaps shaped our faith?
• Can we trust that God sees every loss and cares deeply about our experience?

Photo:
A Myth of Grief

- **Standard Model (Hagman, 2001)**
  - Grief is time-limited
  - Successful grieving brings closure, full resolution

[Photo: en.wikipedia.org]
Beyond the Myth

- **Ambiguous Loss – Pauline Boss (1999)**
  - A loss that is “incomplete or uncertain” (1999, p. 3)
  - **Example:** someone may be physically present but psychologically absent
  - With ambiguous loss may come unresolved and/or ongoing grief
Possible Faith/Spiritual Dimensions

• If we are grieving (unrecognized) ambiguous loss, do we worry that our faith is weak or inadequate?

• Do we feel able to bring ambiguous loss and unresolved grief to our relationship with God?

Photo:
https://www.wired.it/scienza/medicina/2014/05/15/antidepressivi-contro-alzheimer/
A Myth of Grief

Sometimes we may hold certain assumptions about grief care:

- As spiritual caregivers, we will know when others are grieving
- We will treat all experiences of grief as important and deserving of care

Photo: https://www.flickr.com/photos/tkksummers/4382779679
Beyond the Myth


- Grief that is “not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly observed” (2002, p. 5)
- Example: losses related to pregnancy or childbirth are often disenfranchised
- With disenfranchised grief, support is often lacking or withheld
Possible Faith/Spiritual Dimensions

- Can we trust that God sees all of our struggles and acknowledges our grief? Can we provide this acknowledgment and support for one another?
- Matthew 5:4: Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- As caregivers/directors, do we notice/privilege some griefs over others? Why might this be?

A Myth of Grief

• Standard Model (Hagman, 2001)
  • Grief is a clear, predictable process of decathexis (withdrawal of energy)
  • This model is not concerned with the meaning of a loss

[Photo: en.wikipedia.org]
Beyond the Myth

Narrative Perspective (Robert Neimeyer, 2001)

• We are people of stories
• We think of our lives in terms of stories – received and created
• Central elements:
  • Plot
  • Theme
  • Characters
  • Timing
  • Continuity
  • Sense/Coherence
Narrative Disruptions
(Neimeyer, 2000)

• The meanings of our lives are embedded in our stories
• Loss can disrupt our life stories, and the embedded meanings
• Example: An unexpected loss may make a hopeful future seem impossible
The Great Challenge of Loss

“Like a novel that loses a central character in the middle chapters, the life story disrupted by loss must be reorganized, rewritten, to find a new strand of continuity that bridges the past with the future in an intelligible fashion.”

- Robert Neimeyer

Possible Faith/Spiritual Dimensions

Why is narrative disruption so painful?

- Our life stories reflect the *MEANING* of our lives
- Our life stories reflect our *HOPE* for the future
- Narrative disruption may shake or challenge deep faith meanings *and HOPE*
- Our FAITH may not adequately hold us through our grief

Photo: http://game-icons.net/lorc/originals/despair.html
Reflection

- Has my understanding and/or experience of grief been shaped by any of the myths considered?
- What might the newer understandings of grief open up for me?
- What questions or concerns of faith or the spiritual life are prompted for me?
Part II

Faith, Resilience, and Spiritual Accompaniment
Resilience

• When faced with loss, change and grief, we must respond in some way.
• When loss and change are challenging, our coping skills are needed/tested.
• Some attempts to cope may help us ‘survive’ but little more.

• How might we cope in ways that may allow us to THRIVE???
What Is Resilience?

“Resilience is essentially a set of skills – as opposed to a disposition or personality type – that make it possible for people not only to get through hard times but to thrive during and after them. Just as rubber rebounds after being squeezed or squished, so do resilient people.”

M. Oaklander, “Bounce Back,” p. 38

“We have many ways of overcoming adversity. Resilience is the capacity to adapt successfully in the face of threats or disaster. People can improve their capacity for resilience at any time of life.”

“This Emotional Life,” PBS online
Resilience and Self-Care

• What is the relationship of resilience and self-care?
  • Self-care is a means of building or cultivating resilience – creating a mind and body and spirit that can respond effectively to and bounce back from adversity, challenge, etc.

  • “Taking care of yourself helps to keep your mind and body primed to deal with situations that require resilience.”

("The Road to Resilience,” American Psychological Association)
Nurturing Resilience

• Good news! The brain can be trained to become more resilient:

  “Forget the old adage that you won’t know what you’re made of until you’re tested; the latest science shows that if you train your brain, how you act under pressure can, in large part, be up to you.” (Oaklander, p. 38)

• Not ‘one size fits all’ in becoming more resilient. Many factors, skills seem to contribute, e.g.:

  • Strong spiritual life/relationship with God
  • Mindfulness VERY significant
  • Inner peace
  • Community/support/good friends
  • Belief that one can overcome adversity
  • Satisfaction in the job

Sources: See references
Ten Resilience-Builders
(Source: Oaklander, p. 42)

• “1. Develop a core set of beliefs that nothing can shake
• 2. Try to find meaning in whatever stressful or traumatic thing has happened
• 3. Try to maintain a positive outlook
• 4. Take cues from someone who is especially resilient
• 5. Don’t run from things that scare you: face them

• 6. Be quick to reach out for support when things go haywire
• 7. Learn new things as often as you can
• 8. Find an exercise regimen you’ll stick to
• 9. Don’t beat yourself up or dwell on the past
• 10. Recognize what makes you uniquely strong- and own it.”
Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

• What gifts of our faith might help us to cultivate, draw on resilience in grief?
• How might spiritual accompaniment help those who are grieving to cultivate, draw on resilience?
Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

Drawing on Oaklander, p. 42:

“1. Develop a core set of beliefs that nothing can shake”

- God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1 John 4:16)
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (Matthew 5:4)
Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

- Such core beliefs help us to trust
  - that God sees all of our losses
  - that our grief is not disenfranchised
  - that God’s love is ultimate meaning
- Spiritual accompaniment can offer, pray with, and model such beliefs.

Blessed are they that mourn:
for they shall be comforted.
~ Matthew 5:4
Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

Drawing on Oaklander, p. 42:

“5. Don’t run from things that scare you: face them”

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)

Photo: https://www.flickr.com/photos/johnloo/1866108579
Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

- With trust that God is with us always, comforting us, we may
  - Face the varied losses of our lives
  - Learn to walk with ambiguous loss
- Spiritual accompaniment can help us to trust that we never walk alone.

Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

Drawing on Oaklander, p. 42:

“2. Try to find meaning in whatever stressful or traumatic thing has happened”

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. (1 Cor. 13:12)
Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

- We will never solve the mystery of suffering and loss. But that does not mean our suffering is meaningless.
- There is meaning in mystery, grounded in God’s unfailing love and care.
- Meanings are co-constructed (Neimeyer), and spiritual accompaniment can help to co-construct meanings following loss that issue from God’s love.

**Julian of Norwich:**

We are “endlessly loved with an endless love.”

Photo: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Julian_of_Norwich.jpg
Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

Drawing on Oaklander, p. 42:

“3. Try to maintain a positive outlook”

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10:10)

Photo: https://sunshineuponmygarden.wordpress.com/2015/03/07/abundance/
Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

- We have never been promised a life without suffering.
- An abundant life will include loss and grief.
- Spiritual accompaniment can help us to notice where God is active in our lives, bringing wholeness out of brokenness, in love.

Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

Drawing on Oaklander, p. 42:

“6. Be quick to reach out for support when things go haywire”

Spiritual accompaniment may offer care and support that

- notices and asks about the many losses another might face
- Walks with another through ambiguous loss
- Co-constructs meaning grounded in God’s constant love and care

Photo: http://www.the-vital-edge.com/knowledge-and-artificial-intelligence/
Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

Drawing on Oaklander, p. 42:

“9. Don’t beat yourself up or dwell on the past”

“in every end a new beginning lies hidden” (Jürgen Moltmann, 2004)

Photo: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Garan_Sunrise.jpg
Thinking Spiritually about Resilience

Spiritual accompaniment may offer care and support that
- notices and asks about the many losses of the past
- Invites the other to notice God’s loving activity in the present
- Supports the other in moving into the “open-ended future” with God (Lester)

Photo: https://www.flickr.com/photos/a_gods_child/4343286660
Reflection

- How do we think about resilience in light of faith and the spiritual life?
- Do we feel called to grow in deeper spiritual resilience?
- How do we maintain our own resilience while supporting resilience in those whom we accompany?
- At this moment, to what might God be inviting you?