

## **TIME OF CHANGE? THE SPIRITUAL CHALLENGES OF BEREAVEMENT AND LOSS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Coping with grief can include, in part, trying either to assimilate the loss into the existing worldview and its spiritual and religious components, or changing those components in congruence with the new reality. This spiritual or religious challenge can lead to loss of faith and a loss of spiritual meaning, but it can also provide a struggle that eventually leads to growth in the religious and spiritual domains. In a similar way, the bereaved person's experiences with their proximate culture and social world, particularly if their social systems include a religious community or shared spiritual beliefs with others, can lead to negative changes, but there is the possibility for growth in the social domain as well. Clinicians who work with bereaved persons need to be aware of the possibility that such themes may be important to their clients, and some suggestions are made to assist clinicians in this kind of work.

There is currently a great interest in the domains of human experience delineated by the terms religious and spiritual. We tend to regard them as overlapping, but having sufficiently unique meanings to merit a brief summary of each of these concepts (Klass, 1999). If we restrict the focus to the individual's experience and assumptions, then these two concepts can be regarded as referring to different areas of content and of experience. *Religious* denotes a component of the worldview that includes beliefs about some form of God or gods, and perhaps other supernatural elements, beliefs that, at least in part, address issues of life's purpose, how life should be lived, and what happens after biological death; in addition, the

terms religious and religion tend to connote organized corporate entities, with either explicitly stated creeds or a generally shared set of assumptions about transcendent realities (Abeles et. al, 1999). *Spiritual* is a somewhat broader term, that denotes beliefs in the possibility of some form of transcendent reality, the possibility of experiencing this transcendence in some way, but it connotes neither beliefs in a specific form the transcendent reality takes, nor a corporate structure nor a shared set of beliefs assumed; where religious connotes an organized group and shared beliefs, spiritual connotes an individual focus (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). Similar to religion, however, spiritual beliefs and experiences tend to serve as guides about how to live and the possibilities of what may, or may not happen after death.

In what follows, we will rely particularly, but not exclusively, on the experiences of bereaved parents since we have done a good deal of clinical work with this population (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). We will look first at how challenges to a bereaved person's religious and spiritual beliefs can usher in times of questioning, doubt, and at least for some persons, personal growth. We will then examine how the social context and response of the proximate culture may influence the bereaved person's spiritual journey. Much of what we say will have direct implications for how counselors and other practitioners may address issues of spiritual development in bereaved people.

### **SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF BEREAVEMENT**

Like many other challenging life events, bereavement is a circumstance that may provoke reconsideration of fundamental assumptions about the future course of one's life, what to expect from others, the reasons why things happen to people, one's purpose in life, and other elements that comprise an individual's assumptive world—in sum, the overarching philosophy of life that individuals use to understand their worlds and their place in them may be challenged (Beder, 2004-2005; Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2006; Koltko-Rivera, 2004; Matthews & Marwitt, 2003-2004; Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005; Wickie & Marwitt, 2000-2001). These major structures include, for most persons, especially in the United States, elements that can be called religious or spiritual. The loss of a loved one may present significant challenges to the individual's ability to comprehend or assimilate what has happened into the existing structures of the worldview (Beder, 2004-2005; Janoff-Bulman, 2006). More specifically, bereavement may raise questions specific to the individual's religious and spiritual understandings.

Although not a universal experience (Bonanno, 2004; Wortman & Silver, 1989, 2001), most persons who are bereaved tend to experience distress. Although for most the intensity and frequency of distress tends to abate with the years, the pain most feel at the loss of another presents an additional element that can

create a challenge to the individual's spiritual or religious psychological systems. Making sense out of the pain of grief may lead some persons to seriously re-examine the spiritual elements of their worldviews (Cait, 2004).

Bereavement also makes necessary, for many people, a reliance on others for support, and in the process people can be gratified or disappointed in the response they receive. For some, reliance on religious communities is an important aspect of coping successfully with the difficulties of bereavement (Michael, Crowther, Schmid, & Allen, 2003). The experiences bereaved persons have with their social networks and support systems can also lead them to question their involvement in religious communities and rituals of mourning. Bereaved persons' interpretations and understandings of how these communities have responded may lead to changes in how the communities are viewed and changes in the value that participation in the spiritual or religious community may have. These challenges in the spiritual and social domains may be a salient component of the difficulties grieving persons may bring to counseling and psychotherapy.

### **CHALLENGES TO SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING**

One of the reasons the spiritual or religious understanding of bereaved parents may be prone to significant challenge and lead to significant spiritual questioning is that the death of a child seems "unnatural" in the modern developed world. Such a loss violates the natural order of things, compared to the death of an adult who has had at least some chance of living a full life. When the death can not, for example, fit well with a conception of a God that is loving and merciful, or with the assumption that living a righteous or virtuous life will lead to just rewards, a time of questioning, rumination about religious or spiritual meaning can ensue.

Much of what can be said about spiritual and religious challenges in bereavement can apply to other losses as well, especially if those losses are traumatic, in the sense that they conflict with the bereaved person's assumptive world (Douglas, 2004). Bereavement can make salient the spiritual dimensions of the worldview, because these are times that can bring to the fore one's beliefs about the afterlife, and whether there is, or is not, a transcendent hand in determining people's fate. Bereavement can also raise questions about one's own mortality, the degree to which one is living well or one is maintaining the right priorities, using a precious lifetime well, or living in such a way as to be preparing well for an encounter with God.

There can be a variety of trajectories in the process of the serious reconsideration of one's spiritual or religious beliefs (Cait, 2004; Calhoun, Tedeschi, & Lincourt, 1992; Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006). Some persons, who were essentially neither spiritual nor religious before their loss, may take their bereavement to support their original view that there is little reason to believe in a transcendent reality. Or, the person with a non-spiritual or religious perspective

may reconsider this perspective, and begin to experience something beyond the strictly observable and material, through the experience of a continuing bond with the deceased (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). One bereaved father, after his son's death, recognized that he believed that his son continued in the afterlife, and if this was so, he must believe in God, and if this was so, that he should consider how to live a better life, in God's eyes (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). There may also be people who have a spiritual perspective and approach to life, who find their bereavement so wrenching that they question God's role in it, God's motives, or God's love for them or for the deceased (Rosenblatt, 2000). This questioning can set them on a journey of doubt that can lead to rejection of religion, or ultimately to a changing or strengthening of religious beliefs (Cait, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). These trajectories that can lead to reaffirmations, to continued questioning and lack of clarity, or to the rejection of previously held spiritual or religious beliefs can be complicated. They tend to be characterized by a mixture of enduring distress, and the recognition of positive changes, as reflected in the oscillating nature of grief where people deal both with loss and a focus on restoration (Strobe & Schut, 1999).

Whether the focus is on religious or on spiritual matters, bereavement tends to have the same kinds of impact in these two domains. The loss of a loved one can present a challenge to previously held understandings. The loss can set in motion a period of serious reconsideration of very important elements of religious or spiritual matters and the outcomes will be different for different people. For some, however, the experience of bereavement, can be "fiery trials," in the words of an old hymn, "your dross to consume and your gold to refine."

Clearly, "fiery trials" can lead to loss of one's religious or spiritual foundations (Cait, 2004). A child's death can lead some persons to engage in a serious re-examination of their spiritual or religious beliefs and experiences, and this experience can be very unsettling. For some persons, the death and consequent re-examination can lead to loss of faith and the loss of spiritual meaning.

However, for many persons, the encounter with bereavement and grief can lead them to a more deeply meaningful and satisfying religious or spiritual life. Here are some examples of what three bereaved parents have had to say about changes in their lives as a result of coping with their children's deaths:

I felt very comfortable around death and dying because I've learned so much about it and love talking about it.

The main thing is the strength. The understanding that God is going to get you through anything that happens to you. And that gives you a different outlook on life. That gives you a different view of how to handle things. That takes away a lot of the fear and trepidation that most of us walk through life with, and that doesn't mean I don't have any fear or that I don't think

about the future or any of that stuff. I do, just like normal people. But I'm not constantly worried about it.

And I realized before, well you say you realize, you realize things, you read 'em and say yeah that's right you know like God first. And you think your marriage then your family and children and read that and say something like this happens and you know it becomes more real to you, that priority and what's important. So you know it maybe intellectually before, but you realize it in a different way.

These descriptions illustrate the possibilities for bereavement to serve as the catalyst for a struggle that can lead *some* persons to experience positive change in their religious or spiritual lives that can be, for them, highly positive.

As with any major life challenge, bereavement tends to bring with it significant levels of distress, and for many persons this distress can manifest itself in spiritual or religious discomfort. Many persons may find that, in their struggle to deal with the a significant death, they have changed in ways that they view as positive and these changes, for many, may include a changed or renewed spiritual or religious life that is more fulfilling and gratifying (Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005).

### **Challenges from the Socio-Cultural Context**

Individuals are influenced by socio-cultural factors at different levels—from the persons in the immediate environment up to the broader, “macrosystems” and “exosystems” that include large groups of people (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Goss & Klass, 2005; Stuart, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The response of others in the bereaved person's proximate environment may have a particularly strong influence on how they experience their grief (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Klass, 1999). For the individual whose worldview has important spiritual or religious elements, the responses of others who are members of the bereaved person's spiritual or religious group(s) may have particularly strong influence on the outcome of the process of serious examination or doubt. For bereaved persons whose belief systems can assimilate the death experience, it might be relatively easy to make sense of the death, and a recognition that one's religious beliefs can be helpful in coping will be the result. But, if the religious beliefs cannot assimilate the death, the bereaved person will be forced to go on the journey of questioning, doubt, and a personal determination of how to understand this event. This kind of process has more of the spiritual element to it, since it often involves leaving behind some of the doctrinal bases for belief.

We find that when a significant death occurs, attention to the understanding of death and a possible afterlife becomes critical, and that previously accepted teachings about these issues may sometimes no longer be comfortable. The rethinking of these beliefs can bring bereaved people into conflict with others with whom they have previously shared beliefs. For example, we have encountered

many bereaved parents who have taken offense at the idea that the death of their children was part of a divine plan, even thought some of them had adhered to religious ideas that support such an interpretation (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). There is some empirical evidence for the way beliefs before bereavement can affect the process of change and growth. Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1998) reported that religious belief systems of bereaved persons predicted the ability to make sense of the loss, while they did not predict the ability to find benefit in the experience.

The degree to which people experience growth from their struggle with bereavement may be a result, in part, of the social acceptance or constraint they encounter in attempts to self-disclose (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Dyregov, 2003-2004). That is, spiritual development in the struggle with bereavement may depend on the willingness of others to discuss religious or spiritual issues. Although there are individual differences, most bereaved persons want to talk about their situation with other persons, at least on some occasions. Individuals who feel free to “tell their story,” who do not experience constraint about doing so, who receive supportive responses from others to their disclosure, and who have some close by, proximate social guide about how to change in a positive spiritual way, would seem to be the most likely to emerge from the struggle with bereavement with a more satisfactory spiritual life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Dyregov, 2003-2004). Conversely, individuals whose experience is characterized by discomfort in disclosure, who perceive social constraint about telling their story, who receive unhelpful or social sanctioning responses from their close by, proximate social groups, and who do not have available social guides for positive spiritual change from the struggle with bereavement, would be more likely to not experience spiritual growth and would be more likely to experience a loss of spiritual significance or satisfaction. Some bereaved persons are fortunate to have, or to find, people who will engage in supportive responses and considerations over the extensive period of time that bereaved people may need to consider spiritual matters. Others do not find such social support and must attempt the difficult task of working through these spiritual issues on their own.

Perhaps surprisingly, at least based on the reports of bereaved persons, mostly parents, clergypersons are sometimes described as not very good listeners. We are not sure why this is the case, but our tentative hypothesis is that this is due, at least in part, to a combination of, first, the prevalence of churches that emphasize “negative religious coping” (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000), e.g., God as an agent of punishment, the devil as a cause of suffering, and second, some clergypersons who are not well trained in counseling, and not particularly knowledgeable about current research on grief. Religious persons who are bereaved, and receive unhelpful or perhaps actively damaging responses from leaders of the very social groups who may have the greatest social influence on their religious and spiritual lives, may be particularly vulnerable to the loss of the sacred in their lives (Pargament et al., 2005).

### **SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION: SUGGESTIONS FOR COUNSELORS AND CLINICIANS**

Certain stances taken by psychologists, pastoral counselors, and other clinicians are desirable if they are to provide the best support to bereaved persons as they struggle with religious and spiritual issues. First, clinicians need to be open and accepting of the spiritual and religious concerns of bereaved clients. The assumed antipathy between psychology and religion is probably no longer the case, at least in the United States. But our guess is that many clinicians are still uncomfortable when their clients, who sometimes may be less “intellectual” and more conservative in their views, raise explicitly religious or spiritual issues. One suggestion we have for counselors, then, is to develop the necessary comfort and skill to deal with client’s spiritual concerns in ways that will be most helpful to the client.

Social constraint can prevent bereaved persons from exploring openly the spiritual and religious concerns raised by the death of a loved one with the people in their social groups. Clinicians can provide the opportunity for open discussion that might be hard to have elsewhere. These discussions should respect the spiritual or religious framework<sup>1</sup> of the bereaved person, and this may demand a good deal of familiarity with various religious traditions, and particularly the immediate religious or spiritual influences of other persons in the client’s proximate social world (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Clinicians should also ask about the particular version of religious and spiritual beliefs that the bereaved person has adhered to. Some clients may not have much religious background, or may lack a vocabulary for expressing experiences that appear to be, at least for them, spiritual, and they may need assistance in finding words to describe their concerns and experiences. When clinicians venture into this territory with bereaved persons, they should be willing to hear about all sorts of experiences that might seem alien to them, including encounters with ghosts, discussions about mediums who communicate with the dead, a variety of assumptions about the afterlife, and a host of spiritual or religious views that may prove uncomfortable for some clinicians.

Clinicians should also *encourage exploration* of the issues rather than responding with declarations, or espousing certain religious ideas. Such openness allows bereaved persons to consider carefully ideas and attitudes that may help them begin to make sense in the aftermath of the death. This does not mean that the counselor should be unwilling to say something about what they believe, but that this should *not* be the primary focus. Clinicians should be aware that clients are

<sup>1</sup> We do *not* make the assumption that the client’s religious or spiritual understandings must always be accepted or supported by the clinician. Because the discussion of what might constitute negative, undesirable, or unethical religious views is beyond the scope of this article, sources that may help with these issues include Calhoun & Tedeschi (1999), Klass (1999); Pargament (1997), and Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004).

often coming to them because they are feeling socially constrained in their attempts to rely on familiar persons for support. Bereaved clients can find it to be a great relief when clinicians are open to all kinds of ideas and experiences in relation to the death of a loved one, and the spiritual and religious concerns this raises. For example: Is there an afterlife? If so, is it like the traditional versions of it that I might have been taught about? Is my deceased loved one aware of my thoughts, feelings, and actions now? Can we communicate with each other? Will I recognize them in the afterlife? Did God plan their death? Is their death God's punishment for me? If they weren't baptized, are they in heaven? Could they be reincarnated? Of course, the answers to such questions often reside within certain religious teachings. What a bereaved person chooses to believe will depend to a great extent on whether these teachings allow for a comfortable sense of a continuing bond (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). Bereaved clients tend to reject beliefs that conflict with the assumption that their loved one is at peace, especially if a child has died. It appears that the desire for a continuing bond often outweighs rather firmly held belief systems about death.

Many people are unfamiliar with specific teachings of their own religion about the afterlife, even if they consider themselves to be quite religious. There is a burgeoning popular fascination with near-death experiences, communication with the dead, and the like, that may play an important role in the development of views about death. This component of the worldview can become a very personal and pragmatic part of belief that may be closely considered, since what is believed about the welfare of the deceased is dependent on this view. Perhaps the prevailing culture of North America, with a focus on individualism (Klass, 1999), and a toleration for a wide variety of beliefs about these matters, may have a weak influence on the individual's understanding of issues related to death. Specific cultures with stronger and more homogeneous traditions and beliefs about death may not provide this kind of questioning and concerns.

Clinicians who hold strong religious beliefs may be somewhat discouraged by the individualistic approach of many bereaved persons toward developing their belief systems about death. Clinicians who have not developed their own clear belief system, on the other hand, may find themselves joining their clients in the sometimes difficult search for answers that ultimately rely on faith. All clinicians must recognize that they have entered territory where they have little concrete to offer their bereaved clients when it comes to the content of their belief system about death. Instead of offering clear answers to the kinds of questions of faith that clients bring up, clinicians do best when they regard themselves as companions on the journey through grief's unfamiliar territory. On this journey, it is useful for clinicians to assist clients in developing beliefs that provide some comfort in the midst of the distress that is death. Given the ambiguity of these issues, it appears that in order to "do no harm," we are obligated to help clients find the more comfortable conclusions that are also ethical and adaptive. However, we also recognize that some unpleasant realities about death simply

cannot be avoided, and the clinician needs to have the courage to deal with them honestly.

For some North Americans, who hold traditional religious views, comfortable conclusions about their loss may involve a general perspective that may include: First, the bereaved person and their loved one have a continuing bond, and this goes beyond the memory of them, to some spiritual existence. Second, in this existence, the deceased has peace and experiences love. Third, there will be a reunion with the lost loved one in the future. The particulars of these beliefs can be found in various religious traditions that, at least for the present, tend to be common in the United States.

Bereaved clients who can develop or strengthen beliefs that involve these three elements, may be better able to tolerate other challenging spiritual and religious ambiguities. It becomes less crucial to answer such theological questions as “Was this part of God’s plan?” “Was this part of God’s punishment?” “Could this have been prevented?” “What was the purpose of this death?” Generally, a useful response to these kinds of questions is that the purpose and the plan associated with this death depends on the decisions of the surviving loved one. Can the bereaved clients and others make this experience meaningful? For example, many bereaved parents decide to memorialize their deceased children by naming some valuable cause or project for them. In this way the death does not appear to be “in vain.”

Some have questioned whether an emphasis on growth in the aftermath of traumatic events sets up unfortunate and often unrealistic expectations for the survivors of these events, creating the possibility of additional distress (Wortman, 2004). It is not our intention to set up such expectations for bereaved persons or other survivors of trauma. We are acknowledging that positive developments such as spiritual growth occur, but clearly do not derogate those who do not report such developments. Managing the aftermath of these events is hard enough without raising the bar on the survivors (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). At the same time, clinicians should also be open to the sometimes surprising positive changes that clients can experience. Our clinical work and reading of the research indicates that the process of bereavement is more lengthy, difficult, and unpredictable than often recognized, while allowing for spiritual and other forms of personal growth that is too often unacknowledged. This growth does not necessarily result in a worldview that produces happiness, but can leave people sad, but also valuing the wisdom and spiritual depth that has resulted from their struggles. The way we have conceived posttraumatic growth includes a recognition that there is often ongoing distress and a willingness to address existential and spiritual themes that are challenging and sobering (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004).

Clinicians who work with bereaved clients need to be knowledgeable about the contemporary findings on the actual experience of bereaved persons. Research indicates that for many persons (but not all), grief can involve significant distress, and that for some of these the struggle will include important spiritual and

religious elements (Klass, 1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The struggle with loss, in addition to leading to significant psychological pain, can, for many persons, provide a significant opportunity for spiritual or religious growth (Riches & Dawson, 2000; Talbot, 2002). Wise clinicians can be open and accepting of the possibilities for religious and spiritual growth in their bereaved clients, but they also need to deeply realize that such positive change is neither universal nor inevitable.

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