New Approaches to Living with Loss and Separation

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My area of particular interest is loss and the impact of separation that ensues as a result. This can of course be loss due to actual death, or loss arising from life's transitions and changes. Unsurprisingly I have been drawn to these themes through my personal experience of loss and change particularly during the years 2001 – 2004 when my grief over many different kinds of losses was huge and prolonged. A number of key people, and one very important dog, all died. Alongside this, several changes occurred within significant relationships. I lived through transitions with my elderly father, whose health was deteriorating, and with my sons who were leaving home. My partnership came under severe strain during these years and eventually broke down. Some of my important friendships were also in transition as we navigated shifts in intimacy and availability. I felt totally overwhelmed by so much loss and change all at once.

I began to describe the pain and despair that I was experiencing as like a kind of 'inner screaming', something endless within me. However I tried to just 'hold' the pain, this inner screaming simply would not cease.

Despite years of psychotherapy training, involving access to a whole range of theories and understanding about loss, and years of my own personal therapy, I kept coming up against severe limits in integrating my grief. My usual ways of making meaning out of my experience were just not helping me heal the kind of pain with which I was living.

It seems useful here to quickly review the accumulated knowledge that was already available to me during this time. I had various bereavement maps and models for healing and recovery at my fingertips (Kubler-Ross, Colin Murray Parkes, William Worden, C S Lewis). I had perspectives from Attachment Theory that could account for the level of anxiety I was experiencing in relation to separation (Bowlby). I had in-depth understanding of psychoanalytic theory providing me with insight into unconscious

phantasy stirred up by loss (Klein). I had made extensive links between some of my early primitive experience and my present distress of feeling left and abandoned (Winnicott) (Full references for all texts mentioned here available on request).

With all of this understanding it is hard to explain why I was still 'screaming' inside. But somehow it just wasn't enough. And so began my journey of exploring and looking for more. Using heuristic research methods described by Moustakas (1990) I immersed myself in reading, note-taking, gathering information from all kinds of places, discussing loss and grief with anyone who would give me the time of day!

New signposts

As my explorations developed, I came across new signposts - various pieces of writing that I found soothing. There is not room here to describe everything and so I will simply mention three significant markers on my journey. The first was Dorothy Rowe writing about broken pieces and screaming in connection with loss (Rowe in Hurcombe 2004). It was a great relief to find someone else using the same language as me.

The second was discovering the view of neuroscience researcher Jaak Panksepp – that coming off a person feels the same as coming off heroin. In his view attachment to a needed person is like an opiod addiction, and so separation from that person involves all the agony of opiod withdrawal (Panksepp 2004). This felt like a new and very graphic way of naming my pain and understanding it.

The third marker on my journey was a deep exploration of generational loss. I undertook some work with a Family Constellations therapist working from Bert Hellinger's perspective (Hellinger 1998). In his view when a family system is affected by trauma the flow of love and nourishment can be interrupted down through several generations. I explored a possible entanglement with my paternal grandmother who suffered the loss of two sons aged 25 and 26, one after the other, my father's two brothers. Was I 'carrying' some of her pain as well as my own? I experienced relief and release in this process as I honoured her suffering but firmly saw it as hers and not directly mine. I subsequently came across a letter from her to my father which revealed some of her ways of dealing with loss – painting the scullery, making mince pies and cake. Her phrase to my father 'make the best you can of the life you have to live right now' touched me deeply. I felt that I had found a golden thread, linking me back to her love, courage and strength.

Interviewing others

As my research project developed I became very interested in discovering how others had lived through periods of major transition. I decided to recruit people willing to discuss the losses of their lives and their reactions to the separations involved and I was keen to find others who might feel a connection with my phrase 'inner

screaming'. Consequently I set up a series of semi-structured interviews, drawing on two different groups of people. Some of my research participants came from within my Training Organisation (bcpc) and others from the local branch of a social activities group. The focus of my inquiry was ways of healing the pain of loss (of any kind). What had others found to be helpful?

The results that emerged from my interviews were rich and varied. I found myself listening to others who had lived through multiple loss and change and this was comforting just in itself. Many of my interviewees had experienced similar processes to my own. Again there is not room here for the full detail and so I simply summarize the experiences discussed: giving way to uncontrollable tears; defensively fending off the pain of loss and keeping feelings firmly at bay; surrendering to darkness and despair; embracing collapse or illness; allowing bitterness, resentment and rage to surface in a very full way.

Following the in-depth descriptions of these processes my interviewees talked about their ways of healing and coming through the pain of loss, separations and transitions of all kinds. The place of physical activity emerged very strongly as a helpful resource in providing an outlet for pain. Alongside this, and in stark contrast to it, a theme developed of taking time out from all activity – just sitting, being, especially in some quiet special place. This often enabled a healing sense of 'letting it be' to grow. Many of my interviewees arrived at a place where they found themselves able to somehow say 'Enough'. They wanted and needed to stop trying so hard to understand their feelings or work everything out. Within the heart of this idea of 'letting it be' many of my interviewees found the capacity for acceptance, the ability not to blame the other, whoever he or she may be, for the losses changes and transitions often painfully endured. Another important theme that emerged was about finding a place to accept help in a significant way from many different sources. This was often the start of a deep healing process, a fuller recognition of need and dependency.

New approaches

During the period after my interviews I continued to read and explore developments in loss theory and in this ongoing process I found some new theories in which to place both my personal experience and the ideas from my interviews. I found these new contexts remarkably illuminating and exciting.

Dual Process Theory

Firstly, I came across a new approach to loss outlined by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut, who are currently collaborating at the Department of Health Psychology at the University of Utrecht. In 1995 they introduced their Dual Process Model of Coping with Grief at a conference in Oxford (Stroebe and Schut 1995) in which they described two concurrent processes or

'orientations' as a way of explaining reactions to grief. Loss orientation is the traditional realm of sadness, anger and so on. Restoration orientation is by contrast very much characterised by attempts to reconstruct life and get on with things. The model presents a fluid picture of the grieving process in which it is possible to experience the two orientations within the same timescale - times of deep pain alongside attempts to rebuild life. This oscillation between the two opposing modes is the key feature of the theory, rather than a gradual chronological transition from one orientation to the other. Stroebe and Schut argue strongly that most bereaved people will move between these two strategies for managing their grief - at times adopting a loss orientation while at other times becoming immersed in new activities which provide relief from the sheer pain of loss. So, times of momentary forgetfulness or distractions of any kind, rather than being signs of denial, enable daily routines to re-emerge and create a chance to rebuild a stable sense of self. Moments of extreme distress and focus on loss, rather than being signs of an inability to let go, provide a helpful ongoing opportunity for full expression of feelings associated with the loss.

Dual Process Theory seems to me to put forward some very useful perspectives, helpful in themselves and also suggesting a new way forward from other approaches. Grief is not seen as a linear pathway of letting go and moving on, in contrast to the stages approaches of Kubler-Ross and Colin Murray Parkes. According to Stroebe and Schut it is a very complex process, one that is characterised by tension between the opposing tendencies of the two different orientations. I found this theory extremely helpful both personally and in terms of reflecting on the themes from my interviews. I could see how many of my research participants had been oscillating between these two modes – engulfed with tears, as indeed I had been; or finding activity to ease pain. Fully naming and understanding the tension between the different processes was helpful just in itself.

Meaning Reconstruction Theory

Alongside the above I also came across Robert Neimeyer's Meaning Reconstruction Theory (2002). He is currently a Professor in Psychology at the University of Memphis and his ideas are based on the premise that when we experience loss of any kind we also experience a disruption of our life story. This represents a loss of meaning - a deep disturbance to our taken-for-granted beliefs about who we are and where we 'fit' into life. We can no longer rely on ideas like a predictable life or a benign universe. The process of grieving is deeply concerned with attempting to make sense of the loss and to reconstruct what our life now means. This involves integrating not only the loss itself but also possibly a wide range of circumstances, linked to the loss, that are now disrupted. According to Neimeyer 'meaning reconstruction in response to loss is the central feature of grieving' (Neimeyer 2002:47).

In his theory Neimeyer suggests three contexts in which this reconstruction occurs - sense-making regarding the loss, benefit-finding in the experience, and identity reconstruction in its aftermath (Neimeyer 2002:48-51). He then describes the ways in which this meaning can be achieved – 'The losses of central people, places and projects that anchor our sense of self force a reordering of the story of our lives, triggering the re-authorship of a new life narrative that integrates the loss into the plot structure of our biography' (Neimeyer 2002:51). He describes three kinds of narrative process, distinctive styles of storytelling that help to make meaning. External narratives focus on concrete descriptions of events, internal narratives focus on emotional responses, and reflexive narratives include our attempts to analyse our reactions to events (Neimeyer 2002:52-54).

I found this notion of the power of narrative in assisting in the transcendence of the pain of loss very illuminating. During the summer and early autumn of 2005 as I began to write up my research in more detail I could feel the benefit of the narrative exploration helping me find deeper significance in the various aspects of my 'inner screaming'. My understanding expanded in the actual process of narrative. As part of what Neimeyer would call a reflexive narrative process I began to distinguish more fully between grief connected to loss through death, and grief connected to the changes and transitions of life. I understood how for me loss through death, although sometimes terrible, was ultimately a 'clean' experience because of its finality. By contrast, some of my loss through transition was less straightforward, involving more ambiguity and complexity. These were separations that I found much harder to embrace. I began to understand how they involved more hurt and pain because their impact and significance was more hidden.

Disenfranchised grief

I had named hidden, uncomforted grief before. In my ongoing reading I came across the concept of 'disenfranchised grief' in the work of American sociologist Kenneth Doka (2001). This is quite simply any experience of grief that is not recognised either by society or by the individual. The word 'disenfranchised' added weight to my thinking – I felt it had more dimensions than the word 'hidden', and it gave me another piece for my jigsaw of making sense of my inner screaming. My longing, wanting, waiting and 'hunger' in connection with certain separations could not be openly acknowledged.

Theory of Continuing Bonds

During this period of integrating my research the most important discovery I made was the Theory of Continuing Bonds developed by Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman and Steven Nickman who are currently connected through the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard. It was this notion that provided me with what I had perhaps been instinctively looking for, and it feels like the

key that opened the door into a deeply significant understanding of my inner screaming. Klass and his colleagues discuss the importance not so much of letting go, but of actually holding onto the lost relationship - being able to feel that there is still something ongoing even after the loss has occurred. So grieving is a process of maintaining ties rather than severing them. Klass explains - 'We are not talking about living in the past, but rather recognising how bonds formed in the past can inform our present and our future' (Klass et al 1996:17). He describes the creation of inner representations of significant lost people, processes of adaptation, and the construction and reconstruction of new connections.

Drawing on Piaget's cognitive theory, Klass and his colleagues propose the notion of 'accommodation' as a more appropriate term than recovery or closure. They see this as a dynamic, interactive activity, different from 'psychoanalytic internalisation' (Klass et al 1996:16). According to Klass and his colleagues, accommodation does not disregard past relationships but incorporates them into a larger whole. 'People are changed by the experience; they do not get over it, and part of the change is a transformed but continuing relationship with the lost one' (Klass et al 1996:19). Rather than letting go, the emphasis is on negotiating and renegotiating the loss over time.

These ideas were like an explosion in my mind and heart. So much of my inner screaming had been about my resistance to separations that I did not want to embrace. The notion of Continuing Bonds provided me with another way through the pain of my various losses - rebuilding life with a reorganised, but not relinquished, link with lost ones. It was this paradox - of letting go AND remaining involved – that ultimately soothed my inner screaming. I had found a different perspective that provided a strong challenge to the language of 'letting go'. I could hold on to those lost (by whatever means), and incorporate and integrate them into my ongoing story.

Then came the bombshell that would challenge everything. As I was in the midst of gathering all the threads of my research project together I had an unexpected, unwelcome opportunity to put my discoveries to the test. In the late autumn of 2005 I was plunged right back in to raw grief with the sudden death from heart failure of my son's best mate, a brilliant young man of 23, just graduated from Oxford. This shocking and shattering loss rocked our two families to the core. We had gone from childhood picnics, parties and camping trips with four small boys, through adolescent trials and tribulations, and had arrived into the new millennium with four solid young men in their twenties, living loving and exploring their lives in different ways. Now suddenly there were only three, with a gaping hole, a huge absence spread over everything.

Slowly and painfully we have been finding ways of living this traumatic loss, each from his, or her, own perspective and meaning. We hold on to D and

keep him closely in our hearts. The theory of Continuing Bonds has helped a great deal, pointing overwhelmingly as it does to a different kind of knowledge about loss – that it is possible to feel a strong sense of ongoing connection, even though nothing will ever be the same again.

We keep the bond with D, somehow staying in relationship with him. According to Klass and his colleagues (1996) this is not a form of denial but a way of allowing ourselves to function in the present in an enriched way. In my view this notion adds a new and gentle perspective to the process of living with loss and separation.

Final thoughts

To return to the beginning and my 'inner screaming' – my experiences of multiple loss and separation certainly took me to previously unknown edges of darkness and despair. I would say now that the journey of my research process brought me back. I am grateful for the signposts I found on the way, for the conversations with my research participants, and for the new approaches I subsequently discovered. Overall, I find that I live with a changed focus – keeping a close internal connection with those lost, and appreciating more fully the 'tent pegs' that so far remain in place in my life.

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