A Time in the Ashes
How Grief Can Liberate Us from Our Life Script and Our Culture of Separation

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Abstract

This article sheds light on how humanity fell into today's collective sorrows, falling from a time of great hospitality into a culture of great separation. It explains how this cultural fall plays an integral role in the inner fragmentation we each experience early in life, when each of us break apart into adult, child, and parent ego states; and it explains how this takes each of us far away from our natural relational self and into an individual and collective life script. Most importantly, it explores how embracing the grief of where we are, within ourselves and within our culture, comes with the remarkable power of liberating us from these scripts and bringing us home to each other. But, to arrive here, we must each endure a time in the ashes.

Keywords: Grief, loneliness, consumer culture, cross-cultural psychology, evolutionary psychology, life script, script cure, Integrative Psychotherapy

Introduction

Psychotherapists have, for the past century, explained that we live as if our lives are scripted. They tell us that, outside our awareness, we've allowed what once happened to us in our pasts to unconsciously dictate how we experience our here-and-now (Berne, 1972; Freud, 1920/1955; Steiner, 1974). In other words, we seldom live life as a natural unfolding; instead, we are repeatedly taken back to past experiences that we imagine are playing out yet again. This is not a critique of the human condition, but rather an awareness of it.

Sigmund Freud (1920/1955) coined the term "repetition compulsion" to describe this unconscious phenomenon, but it was Eric Berne (1961), in outlining his theory of transactional analysis, who popularized the term "script," which he explained as an "extensive unconscious life plan" (p. 23). Fritz Perls, when co-developing Gestalt therapy, used the term "life script" in reference to an "early scene" that led to an embedded life plan (Perls & Baumgardner, 1975). Richard Erskine (2010), in his development of a Relationally-Focused Integrative Psychotherapy, provides a succinct yet comprehensive explanation of the term:

> Life scripts are a complex set of unconscious relational patterns based on physiological survival reactions, implicit experiential conclusions, explicit decisions, and/or self-regulating introjections, made under stress, at any developmental age, that inhibit spontaneity and limit flexibility in problem-solving, health maintenance, and in relationship with people. (p. 1)

In this context, the role of psychotherapy becomes helping people find liberation from their life scripts, in order to live outside of script, freed to reclaim their natural relational selves, to live from their adult ego states (Berne, 1961; Erskine, 1980). This empowers individuals to come to experience life as it is unfolding here-and-now instead of how it once was. In much of the literature, this is referenced as a "script cure" (Erskine, 1980).

Here, the art of the psychotherapeutic work becomes a relational process allowing people to move through past traumas and losses, instead of spending their lives re-experiencing them. Unconscious experiences become conscious and are processed and resolved in the context of a loving, nurturing relationship.

In this article, I explore how our life scripts have been shaped by, and sometimes even formed from, the harmful impacts of our modern culture, and how grief, when allowed in and given room to run its natural course, not only operates outside of our life script, but also contains the power to break us free from our life script. Moreover, the author explains how grief is capable of penetrating our culture's collective/shared script, opening the door to cultural transformation.

Said another way, I explore grief, sorrow, suffering, and loss, explaining how, of all the many things that arrive with the power to liberate us from our separation (a separation from ourselves and others), of all the things that come with the promise of bringing us together and reconnecting us (intra-psychically and interpersonally), there may be no force more powerful than grief. Grief is an experience free from pretense, raw in its genuineness and vulnerability. And, as such, as much as grief brings with it suffering, it also arrives with a promise, a promise to bring us home, home to our shared humanity, home to each other.

Grief the Unavoidable, Grief the Cultural

Suffering, grief, sorrow, and loss are inescapable elements of our human condition. Everything we love, we must one day lose. This is why poets declare it a brave thing to love that which death can touch.

Yet, in our modern culture, most of our clients (and most of us) are taught the cultural norms of hiding grief from one another, hiding it under veil of false positivity, telling others "I'm fine" and

"I'm okay" (Ehrenreich, 2009). For this reason, it's important to begin this writing on grief with a brief introduction to the breadth of personal and collective grief in our modern world. Grief's omnipresence cannot be understated.

For most of humanity's 200,000 year history, the human population sat at no more than five million, affording us the privilege of living our lives in villages, human communities where security was felt in the safety of each other's arms (Kaneda & Haub, 2022). Here, our experiences of grief were, for the most part, bounded.

The human body has always been a dangerous vessel, vulnerable to heart attacks and cancers and airborne pathogens; wrinkling as it ages; and, one day, surrendering to death. Nature, too, has always presented us with dangers, with terrifying earthquakes and violent thunderstorms and, encoded in its very design, its demand that life eat life to survive.

No one among us escapes the toll illness takes on our bodies; the loss of relationships and the breakup of families when the separation caused by long distances takes hold; and death, always death, of a parent, a spouse, a friend, perhaps even a child.

Today, the world's population has exploded from its long-standing low numbers to a little over eight billion. Today, humanity lives in a world where the villages have been overrun by a single culture, our modern consumer culture. This is a culture that has brought with it several self-inflicted losses, losses that create additional sources of grief (Roszak et al., 1995). Grief is our natural response to our increased feelings of vulnerability (Seager, 2019) when we recognize the following:

There is food insecurity. One in nine people in the world go hungry each day, totaling 900 million people in 93 countries who do not have enough food. And the problem is not that we aren't producing enough food. We are. It's that people don't have access to this food (De Vos, 2022).

There is access to fresh water. There is enough fresh water for each person currently living on the planet. But not everyone is a recipient of this water. Two billion people use a water source contaminated with human waste (De Vos, 2022).

Our culture's addiction to oil and gas warms the planet, and our hot planet burns plant and animal life to ash. When we add in the 25 million acres of forest lost annually, we discover we are losing life at an alarming rate, faster than at any time in recorded history. We are quickly extinguishing entire species, many who called Earth home long before humans roamed the Earth (De Vos, 2022).

Including civil wars and internal conflicts, there are more active conflicts today than at any time since World War II. As such, 82 million people around the world flee their homes each year, half of them children, not knowing where they will go. Children are frequently separated from parents, denied access to school and medical care, and become victims of child labor (World Vision International, 2021).

Meanwhile, democracy retreats across the world. The United States saw its peaceful transition of power disrupted for the first time in its history on January 6, 2021, and the country is now labeled a backsliding democracy. India, with the world's largest population, has also been downgraded, from free to partly-free. Authoritarian governments, in Russia and China and numerous nations worldwide, continue to violently suppress democratic efforts (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021).

All too often, our clients emotionally detach from these realities and the deep grief they create within us. Oftentimes, they defend against the feelings of grief by telling themselves they are powerless to address these issues and create any significant impact, or they tell themselves there's nothing to be done about this grief so there's really no reason to experience it (Roszak et al., 1995). But the grief of these cultural realities still resonates within our clients, and for the most part their attempts to keep it from themselves only disconnects them from both contact with themselves and contact with each other around our shared experience of grief.

As I will discuss in the next section, we've arrived at this time and place in human history because of a collective life script that formed some 20 thousand years ago, one that today informs each of our individual life scripts.

Our Collective Life Script: Separation

Common psychological defenses such as rationalization and disavowal are frequently deployed by our clients to avoid the experience of our shared cultural grief. Clients tell themselves, "this is just way it is," or that war, famine, and resource exploitation are "all just part of the human experience, a part we all just have to endure" (Roszak et al., 1995).

As integrative psychotherapists, we know humans are relationship seeking from birth (Erskine, 2011), but we often lack knowledge about recent anthropological and archeological research studies, and as such we are vulnerable to cultural memes such as the inevitability of war and our inability to organize ourselves in peaceful, welcoming societies. Absent of this knowledge, psychotherapists like ourselves might wonder: How much of the suffering in the modern world is human nature? Without an answer, we can accidentally collude with our clients' misconceptions of the human condition and the inevitability of war, exploitation, famine, and forced migration

found in the modern world. We can accidentally support the rationalizations our clients use to avoid their grief.

This section sheds light on how and why much of the collective grief we experience in today's world is cultural in nature as opposed to an outgrowth of human nature (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). This knowledge empowers us, as clinicians, to encourage our clients to put aside their defenses of rationalization and disavowal and experience the fullness of our collective grief. As our clients embrace these sorrows, they can (as I'll explain in future sections) find their way home to themselves and to all those around them.

The evolution (or, perhaps better said, devolution) leading us into a shared culture of sorrow and separation is thoughtfully described in the 692-page seminal work of Graeber and Wengrow (2021), which I'll summarize in part for the sake of brevity. (It is worth noting that while this work has its detractors, Ian Morris among them (Morris, 2022), it is widely considered an expertly researched modern classic in archaeological circles.)

This story begins some 20 thousand years ago, or thereabouts, at the beginning of the end of the last great ice age. In Europe at this time, we find ourselves in the so-called period of Great Hospitality, a time that has come and gone, only to come again, in our collective history. In these times, often enduring for hundreds and sometimes thousands of years, there were many communities—many tribes, many villages, and/or many city states—and there was an integration among these communities (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

Everyone was welcome everywhere. People from all walks of life experienced belonging wherever they travelled. There was no fragmentation into individual "peoples," no "peoples" separated from the whole. People were, in their hearts, one people, everyone embraced everywhere.

Graeber and Wengrow (2021) assert that these were times of great cultural experimentation within many of these communities. It was easy to try on different cultures, different ways of living together, because if one community's culture somehow got in the way of people's natural tendency to care for each other, this was easily overcome.

With no one trapped in place, and everyone embraced everywhere, any unhappy community members could simply pack up and travel to a kinder, gentler place. Hence, people were very willing to change cultures and to try new ways of living together. Culture changed quickly and easily because there was little to no risk and much to gain by trying to find the best ways to live with each other.

For reasons anthropologists can't fully explain, it appears that sometime around 20,000 years ago, there is evidence of this cultural experimentation going astray. Previously, when these European villages had experimented with different cultural structures and norms, they had, for the most part, maintained the concept of "humankindness," maintaining the notion that a shared bond existed between all peoples, a bond that wove humanity together into one people. For reasons still not fully understood—perhaps tied to the changing landscapes created by the retreat of giant ice caps—some village cultures began to define their villagers not as a part of the whole, but apart from the whole. These villages defined themselves based on their differences, exaggerating all that set them apart, minimizing the many things that connected them together. These emerging cultures were founded on principles of separation from the larger interconnected, integrated world (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

A crack formed in the age of Great Hospitality as more and more villages began to regard outsiders as "outcasts," as "them," as "other," even as "less than." These villages broke from the long-standing, worldwide norms of welcome and warmth, no longer allowing "others" to enter their communities. Over a relatively short period of time, likely a few hundred years, this breakdown accelerated until humanity fragmented into "cultural areas" (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

The understated danger in breaking the world into "cultural areas" is not the locking out of "other," but rather the locking in, the locking-in-place, of "us." Citizens in these fragmented cultures, fearing the "other" on the outside instead of welcoming them, by extension feared leaving their community, feared stepping beyond their village lines. Citizens felt trapped, no longer free to leave when leaders changed the internal culture in ways that further separated citizens from their natural social selves, no longer able to leave when these same leaders changed the internal culture in ways that granted themselves arbitrary power (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

Eventually, with some leaders given years and then decades with a locked-in-place citizenry, these leaders convinced their villagers that something had to be done about "them," those they characterized as dangerous others living just outside the village lines. In order to feel safe, one of two things would need to be done. Either "them" needed to eliminated, or "them" needed to be conquered and turned into "us" (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

War is not a natural human state (Ferguson, 2018; Graerber & Wengrow, 2021). Instead, it takes a great deal of time and emotional manipulation to convince people to proactively take up arms and kill their fellow humans. But, this is exactly what some of these leaders did with the time they had. Soon, small standing armies would form and be sent out to attack "them," sometimes colonizing "them," converting "them" into "us," and other times simply killing "them." This brought an end to the time of Great Hospitality (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021).

This, in short, is how the world went from a welcoming place where people were warmly received wherever they went, a world with only “us,” into a world where there was the taking up of arms because now there was a “them” who needed to be converted or killed.

Over the next 20 thousand years, accelerating over the past three thousand years, and reaching breakneck speeds 500 years ago, cultures of separation overran the communal village cultures all across the world. Eventually, ending as recently as 200 years ago, a single culture had spread worldwide, a culture that evolved into our modern consumer culture (Graeber & Wengrow).

In the consumer culture, the notion of “us” has become so small, that “us” has been reduced to “me.” And the notion of “them” has become so large that everyone else is now “them.” This is the ultimate, inevitable conclusion of the breakdown from our time of great hospitality into our time of “us” and “them” (Putnam, 2001).

In the marketplace culture, each of us are told to survive on our own. We are told that to survive we must collect our own individual pile of wealth and protect it from “them.” This is the only allowed pathway to security. And we must collect this wealth by working, perhaps working tirelessly and endlessly. And we must do whatever it takes to create this wealth. If this means creating our wealth at the expense of others or our planet, well, the culture declares, then this is simply what one must to do to survive.

But this is also a betrayal of our natural, relational self. Each of us are built to thrive in community, places where our security comes from our ability to depend on each other (and not on our ability to create our own financial wealth). This is why, so often, we find ourselves exhausted and isolated in this culture. We have been denied what our nature longs for: The comfort of one another.

(Author’s note: I understand that this brief narrative of human history might run contrary to commonly held notions on the evolution of humanity, and even on human nature itself, many of which are founded on notions initiated by Thomas Hobbes (1651/2017) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1754/2012). However, this author believes Graeber and Wengrow’s (2021) carefully documented, thoroughly referenced thesis represents, by a wide margin, the most complete, accurate account available to date).

Our Individual Life Script: Fragmentation

Integrative psychotherapists understand that not only is our outer culture, a consumer culture, fragmented into “us” and “other,” but our “inner culture” is fragmented as well. We understand that individuals’ sense of a whole self has broken apart into separated ego states (Trautmann & Erskine, 1981).

This understanding began when Eric Berne (1961) wrote eloquently about our inner breakdown into ego states, expanding on Paul Federn's (1953) subdivision of the ego. Berne understood what integrative psychotherapists also hold as true, that our very identity pulls apart, creating disowned, free-floating parts of ourselves that live outside our conscious awareness, parts activated and called into action during times of distress.

What is not widely understood is my proposal that the breaking apart of a global, welcoming human community into what is today's consumer culture (with its motto of "every person for themselves") is at the root of each individual's fragmentation of a whole self into separated ego states. (The concept that culture shapes individual psychology sits at the core of the field of cultural psychology (Cole, 1998).)

The following illustrative narrative explains how this internal fragmentation came about as a result of humanity's separation.

Paul was born for life in a relational matrix, biologically predisposed to anticipate a world rich in relationships. This began with his need for his parents, a longing both frequent and persistent.

But in the marketplace culture, a world of separation demanded Paul's parents survive on their own. This led to briefcases brought home from offices, filled with work to be finished; time lost to paying bills, folding laundry, and vacuuming floors; and to escapes from the exhaustion of it all, when Paul's parents disappeared behind television screens and newspaper walls. In the rare occasions when the briefcases closed, the house was clean, and the TV was off, there was an unspoken worry that filled the air, a fear of not having enough to weather the storms life would one day send their way.

Paul experienced all this as an ongoing absence, an unwanted isolation, felt even when his parents were physically present. As one example, there was a time when the combined cruelty of Paul's schoolmates and schoolteachers scared him so that he hid under the bed every morning, hoping his parents wouldn't force him to ride the bus to school and to its playground of shame. But, each morning they found him in the same hiding place, and each morning all they offered him were false reassurances that everything would be okay, alongside false promises that he would learn to tough it out and be stronger for it.

Paul recognized, through "felt knowns" and relational patterns first, and at a cognitive level much later, that his parents had been taken from him, even when it appeared they were right at home with him.

In fairness, it was not that Paul's parents were never present. It was that they seldom were. Malice did not guide their actions. Rather, fear did. The marketplace culture had taken Paul's mother and father away from Winnicott's (1953) standard of good enough parenting. It had scared Paul's parents away from their own hearts, in turn denying Paul what his heart desired most.

To protect himself from the lonely silence and unspoken heartbreak of absent relationships, Paul introjected a parent ego state, creating a broken-off part of himself who internally repeated what his parents had expressed through their actions: Relationships can't be trusted; you must find a way to survive on your own.

A complimentary ego state formed (simultaneously), a child ego state that contained Paul's incomplete Gestalts, a container for all the natural expressions of protest, sadness, fear, anger, and grief that were disallowed and disavowed in the world Paul was born into. This child ego state included a wide array of defense mechanisms to quell these parts of himself.

Paul's natural relational self, what Eric Berne (1961) referred to as his adult ego state, that innate part of Paul available for script-free living, was surrendering its position of prominence in Paul's identity. It was giving way to Paul's parent ego state's demands that he find ways to survive on his own, and his child ego state's demands for self-containment. Combined, his parent and child ego states were locking Paul into a life script. This was a script written in large part by the unexpressed grief of his parents' absence from his childhood, an absence caused by the marketplace culture.

A culture of separation had, in time, created a Paul who fragmented, and now a fragmented Paul would perpetuate a culture of separation. A cycle of isolation, from the outside in, and then the inside out, was set in motion.

Our Lost Home

Today's culture of separation sits in stark contrast to the cultures it destroyed along the way. In indigenous worlds, no one stockpiled wealth for the sake of security. Instead, by working and living together, safety was found in the mutuality that blossomed when life unfolded in a rich relational web.

Working arm in arm, the chores of life took only fifteen hours a week (Sahlins, 1972). This allowed for abundant leisure time, a social time to play, sing, dance, engage in meaningful ritual, and connect to a transcendental force.

In this world, villages raised children, and children grew wanted and welcomed wherever they went. This was the ancestral village Paul was biologically born longing for, one that would never appear, leaving Paul without a place to fully engage, to feel truly welcomed with all his vitality and excitement as well as his sorrow and sadness. This was the village Paul waited for, even as an adult, an external container that could hold all the sorrows now trapped inside.

The Grief Knocking at Our Door

As integrative psychotherapists, we're well aware we have individual scripts keeping us from our naturalness. And, as I propose, all of us have both a (1) collective (cultural) script and (2) an individual script informed and shaped by this collective. In this and the next two sections, I address how grief can liberate us from both individual and collective scripts; how, when grief arrives, it comes with great power; how grief visits us with the power to overcome both the separation within the culture and the fragmentation within each of us. It knocks at our doors with the strength to bring us home, collectively and individually.

But, first, we must answer the door.

Grief is a universal and inescapable experience. We are each aware of the simple yet painful reality that all we love we must one day lose. In this world, we can only love that which death can touch.

Despite this unavoidable truth, we live in a marketplace culture teaching its children, and telling its adults, to avoid grief (Cain, 2022). When we were young, we were taught that boys don't cry and that there was no reason to cry over spilled milk. Sometimes we were told to stop our crying or we'd really be given something to cry about. When we grew into adulthood, the words changed but the message remained, telling us real men are strong men, that good people pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and that tough times don't last, tough people do. When I was younger, a popular song played time and again on the radio, reminding me that when "the going gets tough, the tough get going."

All these messages are nothing more than cultural manipulations masquerading as virtues. There exists one primary reason our culture, founded on (and rooted in) separation, insists on this repression of grief. This culture understands that our coming together is its greatest threat, and that grief holds within it the remarkable power to brings us home to one another.

Our consumer culture, in an act of self-preservation, insists we hurry through our loss, rush past our sorrow, as if we are running a race that requires us to stay a step ahead of grief. Too often, we have responded to our culture's insistence by putting on "brave faces," offering hollow reassurances, and taking on a disingenuous posture of effortless happiness (Cain, 2022).

When we, at last, open the door to grief, we immediately recognize that staying one step ahead of loss was never possible (Weller, 2015). We can only journey through. This is a journey we must take, whether we wish to or not. Grief has come knocking, and we cannot say “no.” Rather, we must rebuff the consumer culture’s call to busy ourselves away from our own hearts. We must refuse its demands to prematurely bury our own soul.

If we do not, we sentence ourselves to a lifetime constructing dams, only to one day realize that grief cannot be contained.

When James was ten years old, his father died. At the young age of nineteen, just as James was leaving home for college, his mother’s life also came to an abrupt and unexpected end. Orphaned, with no home to return to on Christmases and summer breaks, James’ grief was beating at his door. But James refused to answer. Instead, as James explained, “I found someone in college who I could desperately cling to, someone as scared as I was who clung back with the same ferocity.” At a very young age, James married and in quick succession had two children, all this in the misguided hope that this new family would keep him from grieving the one he had lost. But his cure was a band-aid on the internal bleeding of his heart. James then anesthetized himself with the busyness at work and the alcohol at home, but even these numbing agents would lose their potency. By the time James arrived at my door, he had come to the painful recognition that grief would not be denied.

And for those who spend entire lives building dams that keep grief bottled up, continually refusing to answer’s grief knock, they are doomed to transmit their grief to the next generation, to their children, children who must answer this door for them (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Grief will not be denied, even if it must travel generations to find expression and relief.

Paul had only been told a little of his father’s life story, but he never-the-less carried the weight of the stories he knew and the many he had never been told but had always felt. Paul knew that at age 3, his father’s older sister and mother died. Tuberculosis took their bodies. He had heard the stories of his father spending time, as a child, sitting on the rooftop, explaining this brought him closer to the heaven where his family now lived. At age 5, a step-mother arrived into Paul’s father’s life, but she was an emotionally frozen, deeply wounded teenager whose family had been killed by the brutality of the Nazis, and who herself had narrowly and harrowingly escaped the same fate. At age 7, Paul’s father’s home was shattered by war: His father recalls being shot at by snipers while standing in line at the schoolyard, waiting to be allowed back inside after recess; it was then that a classmate, a little girl, standing just in front of him, fell to the ground; blood poured from her lifeless head; a bullet had pierced her skull. Paul only learned these stories, alongside one or two more, in his adult life. But, as a child, he’d always felt the grief these stories had

imprinted in his father heart. This was a grief he now carried for his father, a grief that, in his time in my office, he would allow in, a grief that arrived with the promise it had somewhere important to take Paul.

When Script Encounters Grief

Once we acknowledge the grief and allow it in, it's important we outline (and understand) the process of transformation we, as script-bound individuals, can undergo.

Francis Weller (2015) explains that, when we answer grief's call, we enter into a time outside of time, a time when little can be expected of us. From the vantage point of our consumer culture, we have entered a lost time, a time "gone to waste."

When grief arrives at our doorstep, we are called upon to go through a time in the ashes. Ash is all that remains when the fire of loss has burnt through our lives. Ash is all that remains of the life we once knew, of objects of love we once cherished. Even our very thoughts and our familiar actions have been reduced to ash.

We move into another world, a world only grief takes us to: an "underworld." In this world beneath our world, the daily routines of household chores, grocery shopping, and even childcare feel strangely foreign.

In the language of Eric Berne, Fritz Perls, and Richard Erskine, when we open the door to grief, we are pulled outside of the radius of our life script. Grief, wild and fierce, enters untamed by script. It refuses our call to live by the rules we have created and carefully maintained for ourselves.

Script had infused us with a false sense of predictability, stability, and consistency (Erskine & Trautmann, 1996). Of greater significance, our script and our identity had become enmeshed. We had over identified with script, believing "my life is my script."

But, as psychologists, spiritual teachers, mystics, and prophets from Buddha to Christ have told us for millennia, script is nothing more than a powerful illusion with the power to trap us. We are lured in by its promise of a predictable and stable world, but this turns out to be script's greatest falsehood, a lie robbing us of our natural spontaneity in response to a lifetime of change.

With script, we attempted to impose a predictable model on an unpredictable world. We insisted the predictability we demanded of life was real, and declared everything outside of it as illusion or

falsehood of some sort. But this represented a denial of our human condition, of the truth of our humanity.

Grief arrives and unexpectedly blows script away. It a strong wind blowing the roof off our old homes. Suddenly, we see the entire sky, and its enormity frightens us. It is a strong wind breaking rigid poles that had refused to bend. We believed we needed to lean on these poles, forgetting were born to stand on our own.

When grief first arrives, we are overtaken by loss. And there is nowhere to go but to allow wherever this loss takes us.

For a time, we will drown in sorrow. There is no way around this. Grief accepts nothing less. And when we come up for air, and we look around, we will realize we are far from the shores of our scripted lives, the lives we once knew, and there will never be a way back.

As grief takes us on a journey outside of script, we realize we will always travel with this grief, that this grief will become a part of us. If we allow it, it will continuously break script down so it can break us free.

Sarah Wildman (2023) shared her sorrowful experience with an unbearable loss. At the time of her writing, she had lived for less than a year with the terrible weight of her daughter's death. Paraphrasing for brevity, she explains,

> I have struggled, since writing a eulogy for my 14-year-old. I have struggled to use the past tense. How can I apply the past tense to someone still so fully present? So fully herself, so fully … alive?…
>
> I am asked, daily, by friends and colleagues about how I'm feeling. I try to explain that I am terrifically, terribly, surrealistically sad, but I am not always unhappy.
>
> Sometimes I find my daughter in her phone, which is alive with her photos and videos, and the beginnings of stories she wrote. I miss her phone when I am away from it. I crave it. I share it with myself in tiny doses. But the stories in my daughter's phone are finite. And I have all her photos I will ever have. I can only look backward.
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> The pain that my remaining daughter, Hana, feels over losing her sister is concrete and complex… In the early days, her hurt was so raw we could just barely keep a hold of her … Hana worried that she was so angry with God that God would be angry with her. We explained to her that we come from a tradition of questioning and of confronting even God. We reassured her: We are all angry.

> In the heartbreaking time since my daughter left us, we have struggled to understand how it's possible such a big life is no longer here. I have taken some comfort in knowing, the night before she died, that her final words were to tell her sister she loved her. I have taken some comfort in knowing how we all whispered to her, again and again and again, that we loved her, even in those last moments, even as I felt her leaving me. I lay with her for hours after she was gone, knowing I would never have the chance again, until my husband had to gently tell me it was time to let the men from the funeral home in.
>
> Shockingly, I still wake each morning. In the first moments of each day a part of me still wonders if somehow reality will change or if this new grief sickness is here to stay. The honor of my daughter's physical presence was only ours for 14 years. But her joy and her pain are ours forever, even if we live another 50 years without her.

As Sarah Wildman so eloquently expresses, she has given herself permission to enter a place of loss, to become intimately familiar with the landscape of grief. I would not presume to know where her journey will deliver her, but rather I can only echo what Francis Weller (2015) explains: For those brave enough to take this journey into the underworld, they come back changed and deepened by their time there, returning with a wisdom that can only be gathered in the darkness, a wisdom that can one day hold others in times of great challenge. This is reminiscent of the writings of spiritual teacher Ram Dass in his letter to parents who had recently lost their daughter (Dass, n.d.). Paraphrasing again for brevity,

> I can not soothe your pain with any words, nor should I… It must burn its purifying way to completion. Now is the time to let your grief find expression. No false strength…
>
> Our rational minds can never understand what has happened, but our hearts—if we can keep them open to God—will find their own intuitive way. For something in you dies when you bear the unbearable, but, as you pass through that dark night of the soul, you begin see as God sees, and to love as God loves.

This is the journey that awaits us when we allow grief into our lives. We will need each other on this journey…

Together Again: When the Culture Encounters Grief

While we must embark on grief's journey when it comes knocking, it's best never to travel this road alone.

In a culture that favors the hurried, our grief asks us to find the people around us ready to sit and honor the needs of our soul, those who will support us in taking our time in the ashes. It calls us to the integrative psychotherapists of the world, individuals like ourselves who have the official certificates on their walls, and others for whom its teaching were written in their hearts. In our grief, we are never a burden to them. Not at all. We are an invitation.

These integrative psychotherapists recognize that feelings, all our feelings, come with a promise to connect us. Anxiety is our cry for the reassurance of another. Fear is our call to be held and feel safe in the arms of another. Anger demands we be taken seriously and speaks to our longing to make an impact. And sadness and sorrow are the heart's cry for compassion from those around us (Erskine & Trautmann, 1996).

There is nothing more vulnerable, tender, or raw than a person openly grieving. Of all the many things that bring us together, nothing connects us more than our compassion in response to this grief. This compassion summons our presence, calls out our ability to genuinely show up, and creates an experience of truly being here together.

You arrive in your sorrow, and I, the integrative psychotherapist, meet you there, feeling your sorrow deeply, yet also serving as a container for all of it. It is in this moment that we share our deepest humanness with each other. And it is in this moment that grief begins to liberate you from script.

It is in this moment that two additional, profound experiences also happen simultaneously.

1.

Everyone in this culture has accumulated a lifetime of losses, and these slowly weigh each of us down. Some have never been grieved, others only grieved partially. This grief unexpressed hardens, becomes a rock, a rock that blocks the flow of life.

But when you grieve, and I am called to help in my compassion, it is also an invitation for me to honor my own losses, to accept the call back to what happened to me, to continue my own unfolding process with grief. This way, my rocks of grief can be carried down the river of life, and I too can live in the flow, free from script.

2.

And… in the very moment that you arrive in your sorrow and I greet you there, we exist outside of our everyday culture. We are no longer two people in the marketplace culture creating security

by collecting our own piles of wealth. This feels as absurd as it is foreign. In this moment, we are creating our own culture, reincarnating an ancient, indigenous culture, remembering and alive in our true culture where safety is found with each other. We have found our way back to “us.”

When allowed in and then graciously shared, grief takes each of us out of our life script, and takes us, together, out of our collective (cultural) script of separation. I have written the example that follows to articulate this experience from the perspective of one of my clients.

“Upon arriving for my first appointment at Carl’s office, I requested permission to play a song about longing. Quickly, I entered a space that had been calling to me for many years. Tears came. There had been no unexpected tsunami of loss to pull me into my ocean of grief [as had happened to Sarah Wildman]. Rather, grief had inched its way into my life at an early age, and there it had resided, restlessly, for all these many years.

“As a young child, I felt the well of grief buried deep within both my parents, grief borne from childhoods interrupted by war, violence, fear, and brutality. I felt the sorrow of their troubled marriage, a marriage gravely scarred by the unfinished business of their pasts, a sorrow playing out first as violent conflict and later as unwelcome silence. And, deeper than even this, I felt my parents’ unspoken plea, a plea outside of their awareness, one that would take me on an impossible rescue mission: I was to save my parents from their lives of sorrow by becoming their perfect little boy.

“Becoming the perfect son meant, in part, becoming an accomplished student, a first step in their unspoken plan. It was no wonder, then, that little made my parents happier than watching me at the desk in my bedroom, hours at a time, a tall stack of books my companions, displaying my commitment to the future they both desperately needed me to have.

“I traded in my childhood for an arranged busyness I had never explicitly agreed upon, a busyness I hoped would gift my mother with relief from sorrow (and perhaps grant her some happiness), something I longed for with her. Perhaps if she could be less mournful, if she could at last relax, I reasoned, maybe I would be allowed my freedom.

“So here I sat, two decades later, on Carl’s couch, tears expressing a sorrow I was only beginning to make sense of. In the safe container of this space, with its spaciousness for my felt experience without the worry of how this might impact my parents, my restless grief surfaced. And out it poured: Tears for a childhood unable to welcome my yearnings, my fears, my anger, and my sadness; sorrow for a childhood absent of an engagement with essential parts of my humanness; ache for a childhood lacking in important aspects of love.

"There we sat, my therapist and I, in moments outside of time, in a space far removed from the outside world, in place where all that remained was the divinity of two people connecting and belonging, all made possible by a presence I had waited twenty plus years to appear, a container into which I could fully acknowledge my sorrows. Here was grief breaking me free from the bondage of my life story, and bringing Carl and me to an experience of 'us'."

Conclusion: Circles of Welcome

As therapists, it is essential we create circles of welcome for the many clients who enter our lives, gathering with these important people to make room for their deepest experiences. This keeps us leaning into the world, experiencing the people of the world unafraid to bring themselves back to their grief, and becoming unafraid to experience our own grief in resonance with them, journeying into and through sorrow. If we keep moving grief through, we liberate others and ourselves from our individual scripts, and we break free from the collective script of a marketplace culture by coming back to each other.

And we have much to grieve, individually and collectively.

Something becomes possible through this grief, and only through this grief, something that was impossible without it. When we allow it, and others are allowed it with us, it is a sacred road home, to each other, to our own hearts, and to the divine in this life. Perhaps each sorrow, at its deepest level, is a cry for our felt separation from the Divine, and perhaps each sorrow shared is our road back to Divinity.

Notes on Author

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