

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter is devoted to mourning. It includes four excerpts, two that are from modern classics, two from books just published.

C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, was published in 1963 when Lewis was deep in mourning for his wife, Joy. Lewis was one of the most famous Christian apologists of the twentieth century but the book shows his struggle with the experienced meaninglessness of death. Consistent with the image that mourning is a long and winding journey, the book is a series of epigrammatic insights into the wanderings and confusions that the mourner experiences.

Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning*, was published just a few months after Lewis's book. It is a more academic and scientific study based on interviews in the United States and England. His thesis is that death is hidden in our culture, that there are no public rituals for expressing grief. That finding may seem outdated. It is true that the death of celebrities brings out splashy forms of public grief but I doubt that Gorer would be convinced that these ostentations are a healing of the rift between private grief and public rituals of bereavement.

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, has been one of the surprise best sellers of the year. She obviously touched people with her account of her husband's death and the year that followed. It is difficult to say why the book has sold so well other than the fact that she manages to avoid the treacly cliches that can be found in numerous self-help books on grief. She agrees with Gorer that we lack mourning rituals that would support the bereaved

Sandra Gilbert, *Death's Doors*, is an encyclopedic study of our recent history and our present inadequacies in dealing with mourning. The book overflows with the work of modern poets, as well as the author's own journey after the death of her husband. Her account of mourning on the internet is indicative of a search for new rituals supportive of people in mourning. She is skeptical that the computer can break through the isolation of people's lives in this individualistic culture. But she is aware that people do the best they can with whatever is available to them.

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A GRIEF OBSERVED

By C.S. Lewis

Why has no one told me these things? How easily I might have misjudged another man in the same situation? I might have said, **He's** got over it. **He's** forgotten his wife, **when** the truth was **He** remembers her better *because* he has partly got over it. **Such** was the fact. And I believe I can make sense out of it. You can't see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears. You can't in most things, get what you want if you want it too desperately: anyway, you can't get the best out of it. **Now!** Let's have a good talk **reduces** everyone to silence. Delicious drinks are wasted on a really ravenous thirst. Is it similarly the very intensity of the longing that draws a curtain, that makes us feel we are staring into a vacuum when we think about our dead?

Getting over it too soon? But the words are ambiguous. To say the patient is getting over it after an operation for appendicitis is one thing; after he has had his leg off is quite another. After that operation either the wounded stump heals or the man dies. If it heals, the fierce continuous pain will stop. Presumably he'll get back his strength and be able to stump about on his wooden leg. He has **got** over it. **But** he will probably have recurrent pains in the stump all his life, and perhaps pretty bad ones; and he will always be a one-legged man.

There will be hardly any moment when he forgets it. Bathing, dressing, sitting down and getting up again, even lying in bed, will be different. His whole way of life will be changed. All sorts of pleasures and activities that he once took for granted will have to be simply written off. Duties too. At present I am learning to get about on crutches. Perhaps I shall presently be given a wooden leg. But I shall never be a biped again.

Still, there's no denying that in some sense I **feel** better, **and** with that comes a sort of shame, and a feeling that is under a sort of obligation to cherish and foment and prolong one's unhappiness. **I've** read that in books, but I never dreamed I should feel it myself. We want to prove to ourselves that we are lovers on the grand scale, tragic heroes; not just ordinary privates in the huge army of the bereaved, slogging along and making the best of a bad job.

I seem to remember - though I couldn't quote one at the moment - all sorts of ballads and folk-tales in which the dead tell us that our mourning does them some kind of wrong. They beg us to stop it. There may be far more depth in this than I thought. If so, our grandfather's generation went far astray. All that (sometimes lifelong) ritual of sorrow - visiting graves, keeping anniversaries, leaving the empty bedroom exactly as **he** departed **used** to keep it, mentioning the dead either not at all or always in a special voice or even (like Queen Victoria) having the dead man's clothes put out for dinner every evening - this was like

mummification. It made the dead far more dead.

Or was that (unconsciously) its purpose? Something very primitive may be at work here. To keep the dead thoroughly dead, to make sure that they won't come sidling back among the living, is a main preoccupation of the savage mind.

At all costs make them stay put. Certainly these rituals do in fact emphasize their deadness. Perhaps this result was not really so unwelcome, not always, as the ritualists believed. But I've no business to judge them. All guess-work; I'd better keep my breath to cool my own porridge. For me at any rate the program is plain. I will turn to her as often as possible in gladness. I will even salute her with a laugh. The less I mourn her the nearer I seem to her. An admirable program. Unfortunately it cannot be carried out.

In grief nothing stays put. One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral? But if a spiral, am I going up or down on it? How often - will it be for always? - how often the vast emptiness astonish me like a complete novelty and make me say, I never realized my loss till this moment. The same leg is cut off time after time.

Sorrow turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not a map but a history, and if I don't stop writing that history at some quite arbitrary point, there's no reason why I should ever stop. There is something new to be chronicled every day. Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape. As I've already noted, not every bend does. Sometimes the surprise is the opposite one; you are presented with exactly the same sort of country you thought you had left behind miles ago. That is when you wonder whether the valley isn't a circular trench. But it isn't. There are partial recurrences, but the sequence doesn't repeat.

DEATH, GRIEF AND MOURNING

By Geoffrey Gorer

At present death and mourning are treated with much the same prudery as sexual impulses were a century ago. Then it was held, quite sincerely, that good women or ladies, had no sexual impulses, and that good men, or gentlemen, could keep theirs under complete control by strength of will or character. Today it would seem to be believed, quite sincerely, that sensible, rational men and women can keep their mourning under complete control by strength of will or character so that it need be given no public expression, and indulged, if at all, furtively in private.

There is not sufficient information to determine the normal pattern of mourning

by adults; but judging by my interviews and the range of rituals and practices reported by historians and anthropologists, it would seem as though most adult mourners pass through three stages: a short period of shock, usually lasting between the occurrence of death and the disposal of the body; a period of intense mourning accompanied by the withdrawal of much attention and affect from the external world and by such physiological changes as disturbed and restless sleep, often with vivid dreams, failure of appetite and loss of weight; and a final period of re-established physical homeostasis - sleep and weight again stabilized and interest again directed outward.

The first period of shock is, it would appear, generally given social recognition. Kinfolk gather round the mourners for the family gatherings, religious ceremonies and, often, ritual meals. Once the funeral, and possibly the post-funeral meal, are finished, the ritual which might give support to the bereaved is finished too, and they are left to face the period of intense mourning without support or guidance.

Traditional customs prescribe, usually in great detail, the costume and behavior appropriate to mourners in this period of intense mourning after the funeral. They also typically impose an etiquette on all those who come in contact with the mourners; and usually designate the number of days, weeks, months and years that this behavior should be followed. This would appear to be the most appropriate technique for mourners to make the complicated psychological and social adjustments involved in the loss of a primary relative. If these adjustments are not made, the outcome is liable to be either the permanent despair of depression or melancholia, an impairment of the capacity to love in the future, or various irrational attitudes toward death and destruction.

Social recognition of mourning has practically disappeared. We no longer recognize a mourner when we see one - a black tie may be worn for its elegance, without any symbolic intent - and we are at a loss and embarrassed when we do consciously meet one. Giving way to grief is stigmatized as morbid, unhealthy, demoralizing; and the proper action of a friend and well-wisher is felt to be distraction of a mourner from his or her grief; taking them **A**ut of themselves **@** by diversions, encouraging them to seek new scenes and experiences, preventing them **✱**iving **@** in the past. **@**

Mourning is treated as if it were a weakness, a self-indulgence, a reprehensible bad habit instead of as a psychological necessity. There are many who accept the implications of the current social attitude uncritically and deny their feelings of mourning to themselves, as well as in public, and fight against giving them any expression as they might against giving way to reprehended sensual indulgences.

If one can deny one's own grief, how much more easily can one deny the grief of others; and one possible outcome of the public denial of mourning is a great increase in public callousness. The changed techniques of mass communication have so enlarged the world in which most people live that increased callousness may be the only possible response to the ever-increasing amount of misery and cruelty of which one is informed. The pornography of death—whether it be furtively enjoyed or self-righteously condemned, manifests an irrational attitude towards death and a denial of mourning.

If I am right in tracing a connection between the denial of death and callousness, then it would seem correct to state that a society which denies mourning and gives no rational support to mourners is producing maladaptive and neurotic responses in a number of its citizens. And this further suggests the desirability of making social inventions which will provide secular mourning rituals for the bereaved, their kin and their friends and neighbors.

Such rituals must be basically secular, though they could be elastic enough to comprise religious components for the pious minority. But the fact that there has been no invention of civil mourning—analogue to the invention of civil marriage—may well have contributed to the denial of mourning by the majority of the population who have residual or no religious belief. Such rituals would have to take into account the need of the mourner for both companionship and privacy; for the fact that it is (almost certainly) desirable for the mourner to give expression to their grief without embarrassment or reticence; and for the fact that for some weeks of bereavement a mourner is undergoing much the same physical changes as occur during and after a severe illness.

During mourning the person is in more need of social support and assistance than at any time since infancy and early childhood; and at the moment our society is signally failing to give this support and assistance. The cost of this failure in misery, loneliness, despair and maladaptive behavior is very high.

GRIEF

By Joan Didion

Grief turns out to be a place none of us knows until we reach it. We anticipate that someone close to us could die, but we do not look beyond the few days or weeks that immediately follow such an imagined death. We misconstrue the nature of even those few days or weeks. We might expect if the death is sudden to feel shock. We do not expect this shock to be oblitative, dislocating to both body and mind. We might expect that we will be prostrate, inconsolable, crazy with loss. We do not expect to be literally crazy, cool customers who believe that their husband is about to return and need his shoes. In the version of grief we imagine, the model will be healing. A certain forward movement will prevail.

The worst days will be the earliest days.

We imagine that the most severe test of us will be the funeral, after which this hypothetical healing will take place. When we anticipate the funeral we wonder about failing to **A**get through it, **@**rise to the occasion, exhibit the **A**strength **@**hat invariably gets mentioned as the correct response to death. We anticipate needing to steel ourselves for the moment: will I be able to greet people, will I be able to leave the scene, will I be able even to get dressed that day? We have no way of knowing that this will not be the issue.

We have no way of knowing that the funeral itself will be anodyne, a kind of narcotic regression in which we are wrapped in the care of others and the gravity and meaning of the occasion. Nor can we know ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.

People in grief think a great deal about self-pity. We worry about it, dread it, scourge our thinking for signs of it. We fear that our actions will reveal the condition tellingly described as **A**welling on it. **@**We understand the aversion most of us have to **A**welling on it. **@**Visible mourning reminds us of death, which is construed as unnatural, a failure to manage the situation. **A** single person is missing for you and the whole world is empty, **@**Philippe Aries wrote, **A**ut one no longer has the right to say so aloud. **@**We remind ourselves repeatedly that our own loss is nothing compared to the loss experienced by he or she who died.

This attempt at corrective thinking serves only to plunge us deeper into the self-regarding deep. Self-pity remains both the most common and the most universally reviled of our character defects, its pestilential destructiveness accepted as given. Our worst enemy, Helen Keller called it. **A** never saw a wild thing/sorry for itself, **@**D.H. Lawrence wrote, in a much quoted four line in a homily that turns out on examination to be free of any but tendentious meaning. **A** small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough/without ever having felt sorry for itself. **@**

This may be what Lawrence (or we) would prefer to believe about wild things, but consider those dolphins who refuse to eat after the death of a mate. Consider those geese who search for the lost mate until they themselves become disoriented and die. In fact, the grieving have urgent reasons, even an urgent need, to feel sorry for themselves. Husbands walk out, wives walk out, divorces happen, but these husbands and wives leave behind them webs of intact associations, however acrimonious. Only the survivors of a death are truly left alone. The connections that made up their life - both the deep connections and

the apparently (until broken) insignificant connections - have all vanished.

We are not idealized wild things. We are imperfect mortal beings, aware of our mortality even as we push it away, failed by our very complication, so wired that when we mourn our losses we also mourn, for better or for worse, for ourselves. As we were. As we are no longer. As we will one day not be at all. *Time is the school in which we learn/Time is the fire in which we burn*: Delmore Schwartz.

I remember despising the book Dylan Thomas's widow, Caitlin, wrote after her husband's death, *Leftover Life To Kill*. I remember being dismissive of, even censorious about her self-pity, her whining, her wallowing on it. *Leftover Life To Kill* was published in 1957. I was twenty-two years old. Time is the school in which we learn.

I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account. Nor did I want to finish the year. The craziness is receding but no clarity is taking its place. I look for resolution and find none. I did not want to finish the year because I know that as the days pass, as January becomes February and February becomes summer, certain things will happen. My image of John at the instant of his death will become less immediate, less raw. It will become something that happened in another year. My sense of John himself, John alive, will become more remote, even nudgy, softened, transmuted into whatever best serves my life without him. All year I have been keeping time by last year's calendar: what we were doing on this day last year, where did we have dinner, *is it the day*.

I know why we try to keep the dead alive: we try to keep them alive in order to keep them with us. I also know that if we are to live ourselves there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead. Let them become the photograph on the table. Let them become the name on the trust account. Let go of them in the water. Knowing this does not make it any easier to let go of him in the water.

MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRONIC

By Sandra Gilbert

As Gertrude Stein might put it, mourning is mourning is mourning. Mourning is weeping at loss and lack and absence. But now in the new millennium we shape our mourning differently from the way, say, our nineteenth-century precursors did. For one thing, the mythology of modern death, deflected by new technology associated with death and dying, has presented us with transformed visions of mortality and therefore new approaches to the experience of bereavement.

At the same time, hitherto unimaginable technologies of mourning have begun to alter our procedures for grieving. If the techniques of memory and preservation

represented by film and video represent one such technology, the invisible but everywhere-and-nowhere cyberspace represents another. Nearly a decade before Legacy.com began memorializing 9/11, the world wide web offered mourners some ten **A**irtual cemeteries@n which they could figuratively erect **A**nonuments@commemorating lost loved ones.

Ranging from the Virtual Memorial Garden which contains more than 1500 memorials to people and over 1000 memorials to pets, to the Virtual Pet Cemetery, Dearly Departed, the Garden of Remembrance, and the Cyber Cemetery, many of these sites are available free of charge to the bereaved, and a number of them include entries that are quite engaging and often moving. Many mourners write what I have called e-mails to the dead as part of their cyberspace memorials to loved ones

Nor do the words of mourners go unnoticed by other wanderers in cyberspace. Many apparently casual readers of the memorials posted in the Garden of Remembrance, the World Wide Cemetery, and other elegiac sites add their own tributes (sometimes called flowers) to the **A**nonuments@hey encounter. Some are addressed to individuals.

What drives these rapidly multiplying throngs of internet users to tour virtual cemeteries and to leave virtual flowers for people who are really - not virtually - dead? Perhaps, along with compassion, many writers are motivated by loneliness, curiosity, and even (or perhaps especially) that fluttering, shadowy fear of mortality we always try but sometimes fail to hide from ourselves; taken together, these feelings infuse the entries of visitors to the Garden of Remembrance and all those other imaginary graveyards.

Just as we have relegated the dying to social margins (hospitals, nursing homes, hospices), so too we've sequestered death's twins -grief and mourning - because they all too often constitute unnerving, in some cases indeed, embarrassing reminders of the death whose ugly materiality we not only want to hide but also seek to flee. When bereavement is itself nearly as problematic as death, it's no wonder that sufferers feel freest to air their feelings of loss when they are most alone - at the glimmering computer screen. It shouldn't surprise us if words of consolation are easiest to utter when articulated in silence on a keyboard.

