

How do you feel something when there is no word for it? Reflections on Grief in Brazil – Teaching, Nursing, and Research

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My first meeting with the country of Brazil occurred during an invited week of lecturing to undergraduate, graduate, and faculty of the Escola de Enfermagem at the Universidade de Sao Paulo. The opportunity to present on my research related to grief, bereavement, and family nursing was a privilege as I had a first glimpse into the beauty and contradiction of what is Brazil.

I have always maintained that grief is a universal phenomenon that crosses cultures and locations. It is a human condition in which, because we have the capacity to love and attach, is unfortunately inescapable in our lifetimes. In my discussions with Professor Bousso and her students, I learned that in Portuguese there is no equivalent word for *grief*. This lack of language to name and signify something is an interesting condition. Grief is a difficult thing to define and to articulate. It is something that escapes simply being an emotion, activity, or experience. It is physical, emotional, social, relational, spiritual, psychological, cognitive, and behavioral. In our best efforts to try to define grief through our research, we were left with only metaphors that tried to somehow represent and carry the complexity of it. For example, some authors⁽¹⁾ suggested the metaphor of a houseguest that arrives without invitation, infiltrating all aspects of lives, families, relationships, and health. In this insidious infiltration, grief has the potential to take over lives and relationships and the more the effort is made to force it out, the more intrusive it becomes.

If, however, room is made for this houseguest, its presence becomes expected at times, its comings and goings are not surprises, its intrusions not unanticipated. In time, its presence even becomes welcomed as something familiar... its very absence and presence serves to sustain a mutable, evolving, sometimes intermittent, but lifelong relationship with the loss⁽¹⁾.

The tendency of describing or finding words to define grief seem not to be limited to the experience of grief itself, but even to the betrayal of words in trying to articulate what it is we, as health care professionals, do to be therapeutically helpful to the bereaved. In research interviews with grief counselors, we encountered this struggle to find language that captured the work that they did⁽²⁾. This mystery of the human condition that is located in loss reminds us that language in all its certainty is not always enough to capture the *in-between* nature of grief.

Grief is something that lies in the in-between, reminding us that things – life in all its complexity – are never clearly *quite this* or *quite that*. Grief is universal and individual; benign and malignant; life-giving and life-requiring; active and passive; internal and external; a state and a process, heart and head: inarticulate and poetic; celebration and bereavement⁽²⁾.

That there is no Portuguese word for grief is perhaps profound. Perhaps our efforts to name and define such an inarticulate life event of human suffering is demonstrative of one of the ways that we have evolved a culture of theories and discourses around grief that complicate, if not intensify, the suffering that occurs in grief. If we believe that grief is something to be resolved or *gotten over*; if we believe that grief is about simply forgetting and saying goodbye to our loved ones; if we believe that grief is felt the same by all people at all times; if we believe that, to feel bereaved over time, is symptomatic of illness or some form of pathology – then we are in danger of falling into the trap of theory that convinces us that human responses are predictable and controllable, even *nameable*. In Brazil, as I listened to faculty, undergraduate, and graduate students, I was struck with the sensitivity they have towards a recognition that grief is not something to be *treated* but rather something that requires a tending, an attention towards. It requires a tending of wounds⁽²⁾, and an attention to making room and space⁽¹⁾ for it to be experienced, respected, and honored.

Prof. Bousso, who is a member of the most prestigious gathering of grief colleagues in the world, The International Work Group in Death, Dying, and Bereavement (IWG), and the founding director of NIPPEL, a research group focused on bereavement, suggests that though there may be no word for grief, there is no shortage of bereavement in Brazil. She is aware, as well, that there are cultural influences that affect how

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bereavement is embodied and acted. One such influence, she offers, is that in a city of 15 million, there is little physical *room* for grief, or mourning and bereavement rituals and practices. Whereas, in my culture, a death would most often involve the physical presence of families and friends, a gathering that may continue long after the funeral has occurred. Post funeral, it is most common that large communities of supporters and mourners would gather at someone's house to mark the shared experience of the death. Akin to the traditional wakes in Irish culture, some cultures in Canada mark these events with a sense of communal and shared loss, pain, support, and even celebration of the life of the deceased. Prof. Bousso points out the logistical impossibility of this kind of gathering. There is not physical space such as large enough homes, community or church halls, or other venues where such a gathering can occur. In another way, however, she addresses that in Brazilian culture there is also a hesitancy to talk about death, loss, or bereavement. I was surprised by this suggestion, given how the Brazilian people in my brief meeting presented with a kind of openness and embracing warmth. In summary, I am fascinated by this notion, and eagerly look forward to us doing future research in areas of how culture shapes and defines the nature of human loss and bereavement.

Yet, despite possible cultural differences, as I spoke to a group of Brazilian undergraduate and graduate students and faculty in translated English, I saw a glimmer of something that transverses and transcends culture and physical location in the world. There were tears, and nods, smiles and connection that were *right behind the eyes* as they embraced me, my ideas, my implications for how we as nurses and other health professionals can be most helpful to those who are present while a loved one is dying, hearing a terminal diagnosis, or living in the aftermath of the loss of the physical presence of someone who is still profoundly *present* in the lives of those left behind. I felt a synergy with my colleagues in Brazil, a passion for the work that we do around this unavoidable human event of loss, a powerful sense of commitment, and a research savvy that gives me hope for the ways we can make a difference to those suffering in grief, and inevitably to our own suffering.

In Brazil, I was met with the juxtaposition of extreme poverty and extreme wealth living side by side. While I was warned of danger and violence, and I saw poverty and despair, a favela burned, and children begging, I also experienced grace, compassion, commitment, and love. Perhaps Brazil knows something of the contradictions of grief – its terrible and gracious ability to live in the in-between of joy and pain, remembering and forgetting, richness and loss. I know that Brazil and its people gave me something that enriches my life forever and that I will never forget. Perhaps I have no word or words to describe my experience there, but I certainly feel it.

References

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