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# **The sadness of lives and the comfort of things: goods as evocative objects in bereavement**

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to understand the texture and emotional tenor of the relations that bereaved people can have with a range of objects, including those that seem mundane or simply part of the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life. Taking Joan Didion's best-selling book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, as its focus, the paper examines the varied and significant roles that certain objects played as she negotiated the vagaries of her first year as a widow. While previous literature has mined the memorialising function of goods for survivors, our analysis suggests that goods and consumption experiences can also play a powerful role as tools to think with for those struggling to create a meaningful narrative of death and loss. It concludes by considering the contribution of the analysis to the understanding of goods as 'active life presences' (Turkle, 2007), the relationship between consumption and bereavement, and 'the sadness of lives and the comfort of things' (Miller, 2008).

## **Keywords:**

consumption symbolism; grief; bereavement; continuing bonds; textual analysis, material culture

## **The sadness of lives and the comfort of things: goods as evocative objects in bereavement**

*"We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought" (Turkle 2007, p. 5).*

Turkle's observation comes from the field of social studies. At one level, many consumer researchers may take issue with her claim that the relationship between goods and thinking or feeling marks 'less familiar ground'. After all, much scholarship in our field has been inspired by Levy's (1959) seminal paper on the symbolic nature of consumption and Douglas and Isherwood's (1980, p. 62) observation that 'commodities are good for thinking...a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty'. Numerous consumer researchers, and scholars from other disciplines, have underscored the symbiotic relationships between thinking, feeling and the world of material objects (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Borgerson, 2005; Csikszentmihályi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Grayson and Shulman, 2000; McCracken, 1986; Miller, 2008, 2010; Zwick and Dholakia, 2006).

At another level, however, Turkle's argument may give pause for further thought. Her reflections on how 'material culture contains emotions and ideas of startling intensity' (p. 6) are a timely reminder to consumer researchers of the depth and passion that is possible in person-object relationships, and of the inseparability of our thinking and emotions towards material goods. Some significant contributions have already been made to this research agenda (Belk, 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry, 1989; Curasi, Price, and Arnould, 2004; Epp and Price, 2010; Grafton-Small, 1983; Pavia, 1993; Price, Arnould,

and Curasi, 2000), but Turkle, and the scholars contributing to her collection, encourage us to consider further just how much things can matter.

So, if things matter, and some things matter a lot, they are likely to do so at particular times in a consumer's life. Bereavement suggests itself as one such time. Things loom large in the lives of survivors and the loss they feel, and the things that matter go beyond houses and heirlooms. Some things are personal, others were shared. Some carry a past, others point to a painful present or a future that is now no more. The clothes from the hospital are in a suitcase on the floor. Mail for the dead still comes through the letterbox. Their book lies open on the bedside locker. The yoghurt nobody else likes sits in the fridge. Their new shoes for the wedding they will never attend are still in the box. The two-seater sofa has only one occupant. Individually and collectively, these become 'evocative objects', 'companions to our emotional lives' and 'provocations to thought' (Turkle, 2007, p. 5), and do so with a passion and intensity they never had before, precisely because somebody has died.

This paper seeks to understand the texture and emotional tenor of the relations bereaved people can have with objects. We begin by reviewing current literature on death, grieving and consumption, together with changing perspectives on the nature of bereavement. Then, focusing on one case study, Joan Didion's account of losing her husband of almost forty years, we explore the varied and significant roles that objects played as she negotiated the vagaries of her first year as a widow. We conclude by considering the

contribution of our analysis to the understanding of goods as 'active life presences' (Turkle, 2007, p. 9) and to the relationship between consumption and bereavement.

### **Dying, bereavement and consumption**

A modest if growing number of researchers have begun to examine how death, dying and bereavement intersect with the world of consumption. Their foci of interest parallel the trajectory of death itself. For example, one group has examined the role of impending death on consumers with particular emphasis on deliberate dispossession and the distillation of personal inventory as role decrements increase and life runs out (Kates, 2001; Pavia, 1993; Price et al., 2000; Young and Wallendorf, 1989). A second group has begun to explore the consumer behaviour of friends, family, and spouses as death approaches and their loved one departs (Bonsu and Belk, 2003; Canning and Szmigin, 2010; Gabel, Mansfield, and Westbrook, 1996; Gentry, Kennedy, Paul, and Hill, 1995). Much of this work highlights how decision-making powers are problematized at this time of cataclysmic personal upheaval, and how comporting oneself as a consumer customarily does may raise eyebrows or lead to condemnation by others. As Bonsu and Belk (2003) demonstrate, a great deal can be at stake for families undertaking funerary rituals. Moving beyond the Western perspective which has characterised most consumer research in this area, their study highlighted how Asante death rituals and related consumption practices had significant implications for the social identity of the deceased.

A third group of consumer researchers has looked at how those left behind comport themselves once the immediate postmortem period has passed. At this point consumers

are typically attempting to chart a course through the vagaries and desolation of the grieving process, and, while no longer needing the services of providers such as funeral directors and lawyers, marketplace concerns can play a significant role in how this process is negotiated. A limited number of authors have taken this medium-term perspective and their work falls into two identifiable research streams. First are those who focus on the role of goods in preserving the memory of the departed loved one (Gentry et al., 1995; Gentry and Goodwin, 1995; Grafton-Small, 1993; Stevenson and Kates, 1999). Second are authors who focus less on memorializing than on how goods can be active partners with bereaved people as they embark on a sense-making and identity-maintenance enterprise (Bonsu 2007; O'Donohoe and Turley, 2005). An anthropological perspective on such practices is provided in Layne's (2000) searing account of how baby clothes, toys and other baby-related goods are used by bereaved parents following stillbirth or neonatal death to tell themselves and others that they are mourning 'a real baby with real baby things'. This suggests that goods contribute actively to retaining and reformulating the identities of the dead and survivors' relationships with them. The current study situates itself within this 'present tense' perspective.

It is worth noting that while consumer behavior scholars have begun to study bereavement, bereavement scholars have been studying consumption for quite some time. This is hardly surprising, since anthropology and material culture feature prominently in the literature on death and dying (Francis, Kellaher, and Neophytou, 2005; Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Hockey, Kellaher, and Prendergast, 2007; Walter, 1999). This work has given valuable insight into how artefacts are incorporated into funerary behaviour,

interment traditions, and memorialising practices, and how they serve not only to remember the dead but also to foster social identities and relationships between the living and the dead (Hallam and Hockey, 2001). Gibson (2004) notes how objects used *in* grieving may be transformed over time into "melancholy objects" which encapsulate memories *of* grieving. Based on interviews with Australian survivors, she discusses the moral decisions surrounding the dispersal and disposal of objects belonging to the dead for example, how selling household effects was considered acceptable but selling clothes was not, and how selling inherited jewellery was easier when the deceased was emotionally, geographically, or generationally distant (Gibson, 2008). The cemetery itself can be 'a site for ongoing practices of commemoration, a place of individual, family and collective memory and future cultural heritage...[and] a substantial and visible agreement among individuals that they will not let each other die' (Francis et al., 2007, p. 214). Thus, plants, flowers, photographs and other artefacts were placed on graves in various London cemeteries 'to keep the deceased's identity alive and to regenerate their relationships even after death' (p. 4). Other scholars exploring material culture have also provided deeply moving accounts of the meaning of particular things associated with the dead (Dasté, 2007; Miller, 2008; Pollak, 2007), but have not focused on broader questions concerning person-object relations in bereavement.

### **Changing perspectives on bereavement**

A virtual sea-change in the study of bereavement and grieving has led the traditional Freudian paradigm of grief to be problematised and increasingly discarded. Freud's (1917) view of grief as articulated in 'Mourning and Melancholia' looms colossus-like



over 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking on the purpose and process of mourning. As the theoretical progenitor of detachment theory, his views have attracted many adherents (Bowlby, 1999; Lindemann, 1944; Parkes, 1996) and have served as an intellectual wellspring for both clinical and academic understandings of mourning (Seale, 1998; Silverman and Klass, 1996). Freud depicted mourning as:

*'a normal, even universal, intrapsychic process the main function of which is the incremental divestment of libido (decathexis) from memories of the lost object. It is by means of this painful process that psychological equilibrium is restored and motivation to love is renewed. With the successful completion of the work of mourning all ties to the lost object are relinquished and premorbid functioning restored'* (Hagman, 2001, p. 15).

Whatever his original intention, Freud's description mutated into a prescriptive linear phasic model of emotional detachment, the eventual aim being to move on and live without the deceased. It was both universalist and normative and succeeded in focusing attention away from the mourned in the direction of the mourner and in transmuting the recently departed loved one into a memory, a protagonist in the past-tense as opposed to a participant in the present. In this sense, it resonated with a 20<sup>th</sup> century secular and individualistic zeitgeist and represented a welcome counterpoint to excessive Victorian emotionality and the cult of the dead. It also medicalised grief, viewing it as a disease from which bereaved people would recover (Walter, 1999). The success of grief intervention according to this model was gauged by the speed and efficiency with which those left behind could separate and detach themselves from the dead. The corollary of this injunction was that those who failed to let go, who chose to live with the dead, should be categorized as pathological and treated accordingly (Hagman, 2001).

As the last century drew to a close, bereavement scholars grew increasingly dissatisfied with this model, viewing it primarily as an artefact of Western modernity.

*'Over our history as a species, humans' continued interaction with people after they have died is a far more common pattern than is severing the bonds with the dead, as Westerners have been advised to do through most of the twentieth century' (Klass and Walter, 2001, p. 431).*

Klass and Walter's conclusion underscores how academic orthodoxy can sometimes prove so blinkered and so patently at odds with what bereaved people actually do. It also serves to acknowledge the dominance of the Freudian paradigm which marks the departure point for their own contrasting view of what bereavement is about. Widely termed the Continuing Bonds approach, this alternative model sees communication and ongoing inner relationships with the departed as common, functional and healthy (Gilbert, 2006). Attachment should be privileged over detachment; grieving is about living *with* the dead, not without them (Walter, 1999). Social interaction is not terminated just because the deceased person is absent; relationships with them can continue and develop. In fact people regularly talk to those who are living but absent. Objects appear to have a role to play in continuing bonds; indeed, use of possessions of the deceased is being used as a measure of continuing bonds in experimental thanatology (Boelen, Stroebe, Schut, and Zijerveld, 2006; Field, Nichols, Holen, and Horowitz, 1999).

Proponents of Continuing Bonds would not wish to downplay the devastating emotional and psychological chaos that follow on the death of a loved one, their search to find what cannot be found, and their desperate attempt to make sense of a world that seems meaningless and irrelevant. 'Death radically puts in question the taken-for-granted, "business-as-usual" attitude in which one exists in everyday life...everything in that

world becomes dubious' (Berger, 1967, p. 43). The shared understanding of how things are - the 'assumptive world' that has been jointly fashioned in conversation with significant others over many years - is sundered (Parkes, 1996). In this sense, grieving is a meaning-making exercise where we have to relearn the world, 'to reweave the fabric of our lives...without those we love by our side' (Attig, 2001, p. 41). So, the array of tried and trusted meanings, understandings and feelings bound up in the relationship that was, have now to be transformed so that the survivor can go on without the physical other while continuing to experience a refashioned bond with them (Hagman, 2001). Continuing bonds are predicated precisely on this willingness to engage with this daunting meaning-making enterprise, an enterprise that comprises two principal strands. First, '[d]eath asks us for identity' (Fulton, 1965, p. 3); the loss of a loved one can engender a profound shift in our understanding of who *we* are. The shared past can no longer be shared. The part of us invested in a valued role is surplus to requirements, so that survivors resemble relational amputees. Second, making sense of the personal vacuum in our lives requires that we ask 'who was this person who has died?' As far as identities are concerned, continuing bonds means that it can never be 'business as usual' after the death of a loved one. Identities of both survivor and deceased have to be refashioned.

Recreating the identity of a departed significant other has been likened to creating an inner representation of them with which we can interact (Howarth, 2007). Bereaved people do not typically abandon a biography featuring the deceased in the interests of creating another from which they are absent, they do not create a new biography *ab*

*initio*. As Walter (1997) puts it, they are more likely to create a 'durable biography' of the dead person, one that 'need not be true or agreed. All it needs is to be good enough for practical purposes' (p. 263). Such durable biographies may be formulated jointly with acquaintances of the deceased, but they may also be accomplished by speaking (or writing) to a generalised other (Stroebe, 1997).

Although continuing bonds and meaning-making perspectives highlight the centrality of thinking as well as feeling for experiences of bereavement, such thinking is not necessarily rational. For Lunghi (2006), the transition from existence to non-existence is such a powerful ontological dilemma that bereaved people often resort to magical thinking about the continuity of existence and identity of the dead. Many well-educated Western people retain a range of magical, paranormal and superstitious beliefs, based on ontological confusion concerning 'core attributes of mental, physical, and biological entities and processes' (Lindeman and Aarnio, 2007, p. 732). By shattering the assumptive world, bereavement creates the conditions for these beliefs to infiltrate sense-making processes.

Lindeman and Aarnio draw on Frazer's (1922/1963) laws of sympathetic magic in their analysis of this mode of thought. According to the law of contagion, for example, things that were previously in contact with each other continue to act upon each other, and the law of similarity holds that resemblance indicates or even creates deeper similarity. Zusne and Jones (1989, p. 13) describe magical thinking in terms of beliefs:

*'...that (a) transfer of energy or information between physical systems may take place solely because of their similarity or contiguity in time and space or (b) that*

*one's thoughts, words or actions can achieve specific physical effects in a manner not governed by the principles of ordinary transmission of energy or information'.*

Similarly, Broad (1953) refers to anomalistic thinking as violating four basic limiting principles: causation, the dependence of mind on brain, the power of mind over matter, and ways of acquiring knowledge. Although such thinking is associated primarily with children, dual process theories hold that magical beliefs persist among adults alongside more rational, analytical modes of thought (Lindeman and Aarnio, 2007).

Overall, this paper situates itself in the broad field of literature looking at person-object relations. More specifically, it looks at the multiple roles of goods and possessions in the lives of bereaved people, consumers who have been left behind, as they cope with loss of meaning and loss of those they continue to love. In so doing it draws upon what the Continuing Bonds perspective has to say about the life of survivors and their relationships with those they mourn. According to this perspective objects should perform a variety of roles in support of these post-mortem relationships, roles that extend beyond simply memorialising those who are no longer with us.

### **Methodology**

This paper seeks to explore the significance of goods in bereaved people's lives, and to do so through the prism of 'pathography', a particular form of popular culture. The value of popular literature as a source of insight into consumption has been recognised for some time (Belk 1986, 1987; Friedman, 1985; Holbrook, 1991, 1995). Such works:

*'provide new paths to thick description. They refresh the parts that other research procedures cannot reach ... and provide experiential knowledge – knowledge of the agonies and ecstasies rather than the propositional knowledge that comes*

*from the empirical experimental endeavours of most marketing and consumer researchers' (Brown, 2005, p. 232).*

The advantage of drawing on works of popular literature for consumer behaviour purposes lies precisely in the fact that consumer products function symbolically in literature as they do in everyday life, as part of a wider complex network of symbolic meanings (Holbrook, Bell, and Grayson, 1989). Hirschman (1990) identified autobiographies in particular as valuable repositories of insight into the values and ideologies that underpin patterns of consumption, but the potential of such accounts to shed light on the behaviour of bereaved consumers has yet to be fully realised.

The particular autobiographical form of interest in this paper is the pathography, a personal and often poignant account of illness, dying or bereavement (Hawkins, 1999; Wiltshire, 2000). Pathographies have become a staple of contemporary best-seller lists (Goldberg, 2006, Lawson, 2010) and several have successfully made the transition to celluloid. These books comprise 'coruscating self-scrutiny and an intimate examination of their lives as they bid goodbye' (Gerrard, 1997, p. 5). Although many authors express the desire to help others cope with illness or challenge traditional forms of treatment, Hawkins (1999, p. 129) suggests that all are engaged in 'a kind of psychic rebuilding that involves finding patterns, imposing order, and, for many, discovering meaning'.

A variant or sub-genre of pathographies are 'grief accounts' (Dennis, 2008), works of literature that furnish an account of life following bereavement. Telling the dead person's story tells the storymaker who the deceased was, and by extension who the storymaker is

(Walter, 1999), and it is this fused biographical/autobiographical imperative that underpins much of what occupies the time and thinking of bereaved people. C. S. Lewis' *A Grief Observed* (1961) is arguably the literary progenitor of this sub-genre and has been hailed as 'one of the most revealing personal accounts of loss and grieving in the English language' (Attig, 2001, p. 35). The book is an intimate and unflinching account of his coming to grips with the emotional paralysis following the death of his wife Joy Gresham and was the inspiration for the successful film *Shadowlands* in 1993.

Almost half a century later, the renowned American author Joan Didion published her account of personal loss and grief following the sudden death of her husband, John Dunne, entitled *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Didion, 2006). This award-winning and best-selling grief account, lauded as 'the one indispensable handbook to bereavement' (Luckhurst, 2009), serves as case study for this paper. As well as affording us an indelible and searing account of the months following John's death (Kakutani, 2005; Pinsky, 2005; Wood, 2006), it is also replete with illuminating instances of goods as 'active presences' as she struggled to make sense of her loss. Didion was supremely positioned to write about the experience of bereavement. She was already a celebrated novelist and an exponent of 'new journalism', a literary form of reportage that emphasises the writer's subjectivity and perspective (Wolfe, 1975). Indeed, as she notes, 'The way I write is who I am, or who I have become' (Didion, 2006, p. 7).

Dunne was also an established journalist, literary critic and novelist, and had co-authored a number of screenplays with Didion during their thirty-nine year marriage. Beginning

with his cardiac arrest in their New York apartment, the book offers a forensic introspection and dissection of her emotional and cognitive journey through the first year of bereavement (Kakutani, 2005). The narrative structure of the book alternates between revisiting the events surrounding his death, her current travails in making sense of what had happened, her belief that John would come back, and her fears for their daughter Quintana who had lain unconscious in hospital the night he died and remained seriously ill throughout her first year of widowhood. In the course of Didion's account, it becomes apparent that possessions play a powerful role throughout the grieving process.

The life she shared with John and their daughter was that of a professional, urbane, cosmopolitan, and independent, nuclear family. As a result, the account she pens of her first year without him can come across as self-contained, rarefied, and solitary, far removed from the life world of others facing loss. However, as Lawson (2010) reminds us, bereavement is always an individual, idiosyncratic, and singular experience while retaining elements that are common to all. In Didion's case her revered literary prowess enabled her to craft a taut, precise, and meticulously detailed account of grief (Pinsky, 2005) and its relationship to consumer goods.

However much detail and insight Didion's memoir affords, such written accounts are inevitably restricted to the material presented by the author; researchers cannot seek elaboration or reflection on particular aspects of an experience, but must rely on analysis of the text. Although literary critics or narrative analysts may focus on different dimensions, we approached the book as interpretive consumer researchers and undertook



a three-tier mode of analysis. First, we conducted a 'close reading' (Hirschman, 1990; Levy, 1981) and thematic analysis (Dennis, 2008) of *The Year of Magical Thinking* on an individual basis. At this point the analysis was directed at identifying and interpreting any incidents, expressions, or reminiscences relating to consumption. Second, all these consumption-related excerpts were pooled and jointly interpreted with a view to identifying roles that featured objects played during Didion's mourning. Third, we sought to organise and integrate these roles into higher order modalities. Throughout this analytical process, we revisited parts of the book, and reread it in its entirety, to ensure that any emergent understandings could be sustained in the context of Didion's overall grief account.

## **Findings**

The findings are presented in terms of a number of modalities or functions that goods and possessions played as Didion negotiated the loss of her husband. These modalities can usefully be classified under three broad headings: possessions as tools for magical thinking, possessions as props for continuing bonds, and possessions as pitfalls.

### **Tools for magical thinking**

In Didion's own words, magical thinking involves thinking as if 'thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome' (p. 35). Indeed, throughout her book, '[r]epetitive syntactical structures convey both a sense of magical incantation to keep him alive, but also a kind of post-traumatic automatism' (Luckhurst, 2009, p. 93).

These child-like modes of logic, language and learning may be seen as an understandable response to a major loss, a loss that requires 'relearning the world' (Attig, 2001) when it disintegrates with the death of someone we love. This was a particularly strong imperative for Didion, given the intensity of her relationship with Dunne - forty years of close proximity during the working day as well as the rest of the week - and the importance of each other as conversational partners, professionally and personally.

As Luckhurst (2009, p. 94) notes, Didion's grief account is suffused with 'the everydayness of her small acts of magical thinking, their fleetingness and interstitiality, the way they can co-exist with perfectly rational and ordered social behaviours'. Our analysis suggests that for Didion, goods became tools or props for such everyday acts of magical thinking. The magic in Didion's magical thinking admittedly comports many of the features of magic in general such as the suspension and/or inversion of spatio-temporal logic and causation. However, unlike readers who voluntarily immerse themselves in the make-believe world of a Harry Potter novel, there is little sense in Didion's account of elective escapism, of turning deliberately to this child-like mode of thinking in search of therapeutic solace. Rather, the shattering of her assumptive world (Parkes, 1996) causes her reasoning to be infiltrated by less rational beliefs.

The first 'magical' function identified in this analysis is that of products as auguries. For Parkes (1996) searching, together with pining, its emotional concomitant, are distinguishing features of the early stages of grief. The urge to search is not mitigated by the realisation of its inherent futility. In the post-mortem period survivors typically seek

out places and possessions associated with the deceased, but they can also look backwards in search of auguries or intimations given by the dead that their departure was imminent. The fact that these intimations were typically oblique and disguised does not diminish the guilt survivors feel at their failure to recognise them for what they were. She repeatedly berates herself for failing in this regard, using the refrain: *'I had not sufficiently appreciated it'*. What was intimated is only recognised in hindsight. However, this retrospective searching can help sustain the 'bliss of the conditional, the hypothetical cosmos' (Gilbert, 2006). Despite the guilt and regret it may entail, the conditional is a more comforting tense than the present after a death, carrying as it does connotations of reversibility. Didion's account is replete with such retrospective 'what ifs', and they are usually mediated through material possessions.

Two incidents illustrate this role of products as auguries to good effect. In the first she recalls being out to dinner with John shortly before his death. He had forgotten to bring the cards he customarily used to record random thoughts for inclusion in whatever he was writing, so he asked Joan to jot something down in her notebook on his behalf. When she gave him the notebook next day he dismissively told her 'You can use it if you want to'. She muses: 'Was something telling him that night that the time for being able to write was running out?' The second incident, a night or two before he died, involved John asking Joan if she knew how many characters died in a novel of his that had just been dispatched to the printers. In front of him was a list of the names he could remember on a notepad. A few months after his death, Joan happens upon the notebook and notices how John had written the names using a very faint pencil. Yet again, she ponders: 'Why

would he use a pencil that barely left a mark. When did he begin seeing himself as dead?’ Central to these and similar cases of possessions being interpreted as auguries is the ascription of foreknowledge of the impending demise to the departed loved one. In both instances it is important to note that the primary agency ascribed to the objects in question, notebook and pencil, is not related to memorialising. Neither object simply ‘reminds’ her of John; indeed the notebook was hers to begin with. Looking back, Didion is convinced that John had some awareness of his imminent death and that this awareness was communicated to her through the agency of these material artefacts.

Bauman (1998, p. 28) notes that: ‘goods have *memento mori* written all over them, even if with an invisible ink’. For Didion, some goods served as portents or harbingers of death – John's death, rather than her own. Unlike the role of augury above, there is no human agency or instrumentality involved here. It is as though nature and the world of objects, of their own accord, were trying to serve as omens or prescient agents of what was about to happen. Didion notes how:

*‘Survivors look back and see omens, messages they missed. They remember the tree that died, the gull that splattered onto the hood of the car. They live by symbols. They read meaning into the barrage of spam on the unused computer, the delete key that stops working, the imagined abandonment in the decision to replace it’* (p.152).

It is as though the world of objects, either through malfunction or malevolence, had sought in vain to forewarn survivors of what lay in store for them. Products can perform the role of portent in a retrospective fashion also:

*‘There are Christmas lights on the quince branches in the living room. There were also colored Christmas lights on quince branches in the living room a year ago, on the night it happened, but in the spring...those strings burned out, went dead. This served as a symbol’* (p. 212).

In sum, whether material goods are marshalled as auguries by the still-living loved one or whether they act of their own accord as independent portents of impending death, the likelihood is that survivors will have failed to pick up on what was intimated and will subsequently berate themselves for this lack of perspicacity and retrospective oversight. None of the objects featuring in this magical thinking are subsequently cherished as mementos of John. Their performative function and prominence lie primarily in the way they presaged the future as opposed to memorialising any past.

The next 'magical' function might best be described as 'products as pathways to return'. This dimension was particularly evident in the earlier post-mortem period. Two months after the death, Didion set about disposing of her husband's clothes. Although Gibson (2004) notes how the clothes of the dead, imprinted with their shape, size and odour, have great power in their immediacy, Didion saw this act of disposal as a standard unproblematic element of post-funeral ritual; it was 'part of what people did'. She began carrying out this task for John's belongings in a business-like fashion, placing the contents of his wardrobe in bags to be donated to a local church. Thinking that disposing of his suits might prove emotionally demanding, she opted instead to bag his shoes. However this was something she found herself simply unable to do, for a reason that was immediately apparent to her: 'he would need shoes if he was to return' (p. 37). This is quite distinct from instances of mummification (Francis et al., 2005; Gentry et al., 1995) where survivors keep the dead person's personal inventory or bedroom 'exactly as they left it' as an untouched memorial. Here, Didion was in the full throes of disposing of

John's wardrobe and was pulled up unexpectedly by a perceived necessity to keep his shoes.

She also realises that the same reasoning lay behind her refusal to accede to a request to donate John's organs following the autopsy: 'How could he come back if they took his organs?' These incidents highlight not only how magical thinking is performed through objects but also how powerful and persistent an impulse it is, even when we are aware of it. As Didion herself reflects:

*"Bringing him back" had been through these months my hidden focus, a magic trick. By late summer I was beginning to see this clearly. "Seeing it clearly" did not yet allow me to give away the clothes he would need' (p. 44).*

Disposing of the possessions of a departed loved one has begun to attract the attention of researchers (Kates, 2001; Miller and Parrott, 2009; Young and Wallendorf, 1989). Didion's account suggests that survivors' reluctance to part with what was close to the departed may be more textured than previously thought. The received wisdom that possessions are retained primarily to serve as mementos of the dead may serve to obscure other more immediate concerns, particularly for those recently bereaved.

It is worth stressing here that the 'return' in question is a physical, corporeal one. As Gibson (2004, p. 291) notes, '... the ongoing absence of the deceased in their bodily being is one of the profound existential shocks of bereavement and the desire for their bodily return is a powerful fantasy in the early months of a death'. Indeed, Parkes (1996) has shown convincingly that the constant searching characteristic of many recently bereaved people betokens belief in such a return. They search precisely because they

believe their loved one can be found. Thus, Didion's resolve to retain John's shoes and his organs is not based on a desire to remember him by them but by a more pressing and proximate concern that he should have what he needs when he is found. As the title of her book states, Didion's account is that of a woman recently bereaved. The possibility of forgetting him was, at that stage, unthinkable, the need to preserve personal effects to remember him by almost non-existent.

The magical thinking of the book's title is thinking that both countenances and conjures up narrative reversibility. Thinking that John would return was the exemplar, but many other cases of confounding causal and spatio-temporal conventions populate her account. They often feature objects that function as talismanic agents of time-reversal. By virtue of the fact that they fulfilled a role prior to John's death, they now possess the power to conjure up and reinstate that past as present. This suspension of chronological linear time is also echoed in the common observation by bereaved people that 'time stands still' (Francis et al., 2005). Didion and her husband had lived and worked for 24 years in Los Angeles. After moving to New York, they still made a point of coming back regularly to LA and, when they did, it was usually to stay at the Beverly Wiltshire Hotel. While many locations in LA were associated with John and thus had the power to 'trigger the vortex' effect,

*'the Beverly Wiltshire seemed ... the only safe place for me to be, the place where everything would be the same, the place where no one would know about or refer to the events of my recent life; the place where I would still be the person I had been before any of this happened'* (p.114).

In this case it was a hotel room whose housekeepers, doormen, safety-deposit box, shower heads were so utterly familiar, so much a part of her former life, that they could magically transport her back to a time when she was Joan, still married to John.

If goods can act as pathways to return they also do exactly the opposite; they can just as magically act as prohibitors of return. In an intriguing passage that typifies the magical thinking that John will return, Didion expresses the wish that public awareness of his death could be contained. The items militating against or prohibiting his return in this case are obituaries. One might have thought that a surviving spouse would welcome public acknowledgement and appreciation for a deceased spouse in newspaper obituaries however, she:

*'could not read them. This continued from when the first obituaries appeared, until the night of the 2004 Academy Awards, when I saw a photograph of John in the Academy's 'In Memoriam' montage. When I saw the photograph I realized for the first time why the obituaries had so disturbed me. I had allowed other people to think he was dead. I had allowed him to be buried alive' (35).*

Publicising the death constitutes complicity in his burial, limiting the numbers who know can affect and effect the likelihood and ease with which he can physically resume his rightful place in the body social. Ironically, these same obituaries may well serve to perpetuate the deceased's place in social memory, not least when transformed into newspaper *In Memoriams* on subsequent anniversaries (Adams, 1997; Bonsu, 2007).

### **Props for continuing bonds**

The emergence of the Continuing Bonds perspective was outlined earlier. While Didion's autodidactic reading on bereavement and scouring of the internet centre exclusively on



traditional Freudian approaches to grieving<sup>1</sup>, the novel itself is replete with examples of her own continuing, albeit transformed, bond with John. Possessions act as facilitators of this bond, the second person-object modality, and do so in a variety of ways. Arguably the most memorable instance was on the night of the death when she returns alone to the apartment from the hospital carrying his belongings in a plastic bag. She writes: ‘I remember combining the cash that had been in his pocket with the cash in my own bag, smoothing the bills, taking special care to interleaf twenties with twenties, tens with tens, fives and ones with fives and ones’ (p.18). There is an overpowering sense here of the conjoined dollar bills serving as both metaphor and marker of her need to stay close to him. It is as though the physical fusing of their respective finances can help secure the continuation of a bond forged over four decades.

Some goods seem to harbour material traces of those who have died. This function of possessions is vividly captured when Didion describes how:

*‘The voice on my answering machine is still John’s. The fact that it was his in the first place was arbitrary, having to do with who was around on the day the answering machine last needed programming, but if I need to retape it now I would do so with a sense of betrayal. One day when I was talking on the telephone in his office I mindlessly turned the pages of the dictionary that he had always left open on the table by the desk. When I realized what I had done I was stricken: what word had he last looked up, what had he been thinking? By turning the pages had I lost the message?’* (p.152).

This passage captures how mundane functional goods that were not necessarily singular or cherished can serve as potent material footprints of the departed and how easily they can be unwittingly expunged by those left behind. In this sense, possessions become ‘evocative objects’ (Turkle, 2007) anchoring the departed in the land of the living and

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<sup>1</sup> we thank Tony Walter for this observation

thereby sustaining continuing bonds. At another level it also underscores how, by enabling the dead to linger a little longer, material goods can serve to undermine the radical disjuncture between life and death, between the living and the dead (Baudrillard, 1993). Challenging simplistic notions of goods as merely associated with the dead, and of the dead as detached from the materiality of existence, Gibson (2004, p. 293) insists that '[w]hile material things are associated with the deceased they are also part of the substance *of their very being*'.

Field (1996) has noted how death can often lead to role decrements, and Commuri and Gentry (2000) have emphasised how transitional interstices between roles can furnish valuable insights into how we consume. After a death, survivors can lose the role of spouse, partner, daughter, or friend. Conversely, they can acquire new ones, usually unwanted, such as widow or orphan. Joan Didion is no exception in this regard and is startled when she first hears the term 'widow' applied to her. 'I have trouble thinking of myself as a widow. I remember hesitating the first time I had to check that box on the 'marital status' part of a form' (p. 208). However, one role transition attendant on the death of a spouse or partner that is typically ignored is that from joint to sole ownership. One of the most difficult lessons for Didion in relearning the world after losing John is finding the emotional wherewithal to substitute 'my' for 'our'. Three months after the death she continues to refer to 'John's and my apartment' (p. 86). Didion's behaviour here encapsulates an intriguing intersection between the continuing bonds perspective and the notions of co-ownership and co-consumption in consumer behaviour. Co-ownership, whether incarnated in deeds, documents, titles, or simple possession can

function as a material concomitant and confirmation of a bond between two people that can continue beyond the grave. Ownership is agency, albeit disembodied agency, and as long as they own something the dead make a difference.

A final way in which material goods facilitate continuing bonds for Didion is where items that were tangentially or coincidentally connected with the deceased become privileged over time during the post-mortem period. This appears to be distinct from cases where intimate and close possessions of the deceased, elements of their extended selves (Belk, 1988), are understandably treasured and retained as inalienable objects by those left behind (Curasi et al., 2004). Indeed, in Didion's case the objects in question seem to have emerged somewhat serendipitously. One night, eight months after the death, she found herself using a 'crackled and worn Spode plate' when preparing dinner alone in the apartment. A set of these plates had been given to John in his single days, but they had been scarcely used during their marriage and many had been broken. From this night on however, Didion deliberately ran her dishwasher quarter full so that at least one of the set would always be ready for use. Other examples of this posthumous privileging of unremarkable possessions included her retaining a modest wafer-thin alarm clock that had stopped working even before he died together with some ballpoint pens that had long gone dry. Didion's privileging of certain goods echoes other accounts of how certain objects can move from mundane commodity to valued memento via singularisation and decommmodification (Epp and Price, 2010; Kopytoff, 1986). Together with other significant life transitions and disruptions, the loss of a loved one can occasion major turning points in the biographies of material goods associated with them.

In summary, it should be noted that the collective role of material goods in sustaining continuing bonds is both conceptually and operationally distinct from the role of goods as memorial objects. The combined dollar bills, the voice on the answering machine, the open dictionary page, the joint ownership and the Spode plates serve in concert to support and sustain a continuing bond, not to remember or memorialise a bond that has been irreparably severed.

### **Possessions as pitfalls.**

As Didion recounts her story, most of the incidences involving possessions as props for continuing bonds carry a positive and affirmative hue. On the other hand, instances of magical thinking, as the name suggests, are predictably more nebulous and fantastic. However, for all that, the function of material goods in this second modality remains benign. When it comes to the third modality, possessions as pitfalls, goods appear to exercise a more negative and ambivalent role, serving as painful reminders that whatever relationship or continuing bond she maintains with John, it is inevitably and irrevocably altered by his physical absence.

In the early stages of grieving Didion is very much taken by what can only be described as the stark and vivid physicality of material objects, particularly objects associated with John. The presence of these objects, in all their singular detail, stands in marked contrast to the searing absence of the person who owned and used them. Their being there was a reminder in matter that he was not. She refers, for example to 'our bedroom, the one in

which there still lay on a sofa a faded terrycloth XL robe bought in the 1970s at Richard Carroll in Beverly Hills' (p. 5). Here, Didion captures 'the strangeness of realising that things have outlived persons' and 'come to stand for them, in their absence' (Gibson 2008, p.1, 2004, p. 285).

The night he died provides another telling example. There was much that unfolded on that night that she could only remember vaguely, but she offers minute and fine-tuned descriptions of receiving John's personal inventory from the hospital authorities. Her account reads as a verbal close-up of objects that force themselves upon her on foot of their sheer physicality and presence:

*'They gave me the silver clip in which John kept his driver's license and credit cards. They gave me the cash that had been in his pocket. They gave me his watch. They gave me his cell phone. They gave me a plastic bag in which they said I would find his clothes ... in the plastic bag there were a pair of corduroy pants, a wool shirt, a belt ... The legs of the corduroy pants had been slit open, I supposed by the paramedics. There was blood on the shirt. The belt was braided'* (15/17).

These and similar passages in the book bear testament to Didion's insight that material possessions are never more alive than when those to whom they belong are no longer with us. Additionally, this passage shows how the rips and blood stains on John's clothes served to bring home the brute fact of his absence to her. The repeated refrain 'they gave me' further serves to mark the gulf that death opened between husband and wife; his possessions relied on the action of strangers, not their owner, to be returned to her.

Despite the popularity of Kübler-Ross' (1969) stage-based approach to the grieving process, there is a growing view that such linear sequential models fail to capture how

idiosyncratic and reversible it can be (Valentine, 2006). Didion's novel cites times when products, places or people can act as pitfalls, ambushing unsuspecting and vulnerable survivors and disabusing them of any sense of being able to progress through their grief. She recounts a number of instances when life appeared to be getting back to normal only to be completely thrown by something she encounters, something that ruptures and reverses her sense of coping. As a case in point, she recalls driving down a street in LA where she was visiting her ailing daughter some months after John's death:

*'I cannot count the days on which I found myself driving abruptly blinded by tears ... One afternoon I caught sight unprepared, of a movie theater in which John and I had in 1967 seen The Graduate. There had been no particular sense of moment about seeing The Graduate in 1967 ... but the theater was still there, if only to trap the unwary. There were many such traps' (117).*

It is as though the world of objects and places, particularly those that had been co-consumed, were intent on ambushing her and conspiring to frustrate her best efforts to move on. Their arbitrariness meant that it was impossible to buttress herself against what lay in store on any given day. No amount of ingenuity on her part could neutralise 'the potential of places to trigger this vortex affect' (113). In another case the culprit was a seemingly innocuous TV commercial:

*'I fretted for example over a Bayer commercial for a low-dose aspirin that was said to 'significantly reduce' the risk of a heart attack. I knew perfectly well how aspirin reduces the risk of heart attack; it keeps the blood from clotting. I also knew that John was taking Coumadin, a far more powerful anticoagulant. Yet I was seized nonetheless by the possible folly of having overlooked low-dose aspirin' (205).*

In this case the pitfall serves to draw her back into the conditional thinking mode of the immediate post-mortem period, into speculating about what might have happened 'if ...'.

The potential for goods to waylay those who are grieving is a striking example of the intense relationships that are possible between people and objects. In particular, it suggests that for bereaved people, goods can serve as a *punctum*, 'the element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me...' (Barthes, 1982, p. 26).

## **Conclusions**

As Miller (2010, p. 153) reminds us:

*'[t]he study of material culture appears a rather circuitous route to understanding people and relationships, but we may arrive more swiftly at our destination, and reach much further, than many more tempting and more direct paths'.*

This paper has explored the nature of the relationships between people and the objects that surround them, and how traumatic life events can serve as a catalyst for heightening those relationships. Such traumatic events could include divorce, separation, or illness. Our analysis of *The Year of Magical Thinking* seeks in particular to progress the emerging interest in the intersection between bereaved people and their material surroundings, between grieving and consumer behaviour. This particular grief account highlights the myriad, nuanced and even paradoxical roles played by possessions and consumption experiences in the aftermath of significant loss.

What was striking about many of the evocative objects in the book was their sheer mundaneness – chipped crockery, broken clocks, dollar bills, notebooks and a dressing gown. That mundane objects can become so significant should not surprise us; both Kopytoff (1986) and Epp and Price (2010) have shown to good effect how the mundane and quotidian can become special and singularised. Much of Didion's relationship with

her deceased husband is refracted and articulated through this motley, mundane and nondescript array of material artefacts. This was why this stuff mattered to her and mattered so much.

The objects and places associated with her late husband marked out in matter the topography of Didion's transformed and unwelcome life-world as a bereaved wife. *That* those particular goods delineated this new and altered world may well have been a matter of chance and cognitive convenience, suggesting that bereaved people are engaged in acts of bricolage, incorporating the objects at hand into their sensemaking enterprise. *What* those objects delineated was often a matter of acute poignancy and overwhelming intensity. As evocative objects, each of these artefacts in turn spoke the same message, albeit transposed in a different register: John was gone and their earthly life together was now at an end. If Miller (2008) explores 'the sadness of lives and the comfort of things' (p. 3), Didion shows that things can confront as well as comfort us. Although this may seem to support Freudian notions of deatathesis, there is little sense in the book of Didion withdrawing psychic energy from John's effects as a means of 'letting him go'.

It is worth reiterating here that Didion's singularising of objects and places associated with her deceased husband was not restricted to memorialising. Some goods may well have served as valued mementos of her deceased husband, but Didion does not dwell on these in the book. Rather, her emphasis is on how goods served as 'tools to think with' as she relearned the world, negotiated the vagaries and vicissitudes of life without him, and began to construct continuing bonds with him. Didion's account suggests three additional



modalities for person-object relationships in bereavement: tools for magical thinking, props for continuing bonds, and pitfalls. Conceptually distinct from the function of goods as memory markers, all three modalities are nonetheless predicated upon memory; remembering is a necessary but not sufficient condition for these particular forms of person-object relationships. Our findings also raised the broader issue of how these modalities fit in the wider tapestry of object attachment and agency. The particular modalities of object agency instanced in Didion's narrative prompted the possibility of proposing general dimensions or classifications that could accommodate the wider universe of object attachment in consumer behaviour.

Three broad dimensions suggested themselves. The first is **emotional intensity**. The blood-stained shirt returned to Didion by the hospital packed a more powerful emotional punch than the used biros left behind on his desk. As may be expected in an account of bereavement, many of the emotions were negative ones such as grief, guilt and sadness. Some emotions were more positive, however, such as the relief experienced at the Beverly Wiltshire hotel. The emotional tenor of person-object relations could also be ambivalent, as when guilt and regret were tempered by the 'bliss of the conditional' (Gilbert, 2006) when Didion contemplated the 'what ifs' that allowed her to conjure up a world in which John had not died.

This emotional dimension resonates with other studies on person-object attachment in consumer behaviour. For example, Epp and Price (2010) explore a family's deep attachment to their long kitchen table that had been singularized and sacralized through

its incorporation into family rituals and storytelling. In contrast, Kleine et al. (1993) show how mundane products facilitate everyday activities, contributing at some level to self-identity and social relationships.

The second person/object dimension suggested by this study is **agency locus**. Scholars of materiality emphasise the dialectical nature of person-object relationships (Borgerson, 2005; Miller 1987, 2008, 2010), acknowledging that '[while artifacts] are made by humans, they also help to make humans what they are, transmitting culture and shaping bodies and minds' (Pattison, 2009, p. 55). As recounted by Didion, the relationship between people and objects is symbiotic; goods both effect and reflect her grieving. Put another way, across the three modalities, agency was sometimes, initiated by the person, but in others it was attributed to the object. Retaining John's shoes and combining his dollar bills, for example, were both primarily done on Didion's initiative, reflecting and effecting her continuing bond with John. Agency did not appear to reside only with the living however; continued co-ownership, for example, constituted ongoing, post-mortem agency. The failure of the Christmas lights to come on, thereby trumpeting John's absence, served as an augury and was ascribed to object agency. Other goods had the power to act as traps or pitfalls, challenging Didion's sense of control and catapulting her into the "vortex" of her grief.

Moving beyond the context of bereavement, the locus of agency in persons is instanced where inalienable bequeathed asset gifts function as surrogate caring family members (Bradford, 2009; Curasi et al., 2004) where gifts are used to reformulate relationships

(Ruth et al., 1999), where older people secure emotional attachment with survivors through the objects they leave them (Unruh, 1983) and where consumers eliminate product assortments to enable them forge new lives and relationships (Cherrier and Murray, 2007; Miller, 2010). Cases of agency ascribed to a product could be where sacred objects contaminate both humans and other objects (Belk et al., 1989), or where goods embody an undesired self (Karanika and Hogg, 2010; Lastovika and Fernandez, 2005) or unhappy relationship (Miller and Parrott, 2009).

Finally, Didion's account offers valuable insight into the **temporal range** of person-object relationships, the power of objects to conjure up different tenses following loss. Some consumption phenomena, such as the cinema where she and John saw *The Graduate*, brought back the past, while others, such as the Christmas lights or the list of names from his novel, were seen to have intimated the future in the past. Continued co-ownership – ‘John’s and my apartment’ – was a means of continuing his presence in the here and now. Consuming also allowed Didion to contemplate different futures: the Aspirin advertisement prompted her to engage with ‘what ifs’ – the future that might have been, while his shoes were kept to facilitate his impending return – an impossible and fantastic future. Similar temporal variation might also be found in cases of illness, divorce or separation.

On a broader plain, consumer researchers have discussed how objects such as heirlooms and intergenerational transfers speak to the past (Curasi et al., 2004; Heisley and Cours, 2007), inflect present experiences (Epp and Price, 2010), or even influence family

members' future lives (Price et al., 2000). By exploring how goods are implicated in the 'bliss of the conditional' (Gilbert, 2006), this study adds further texture to our understanding of materiality's temporal dimension. Any of the agentic modalities found in Didion's novel could be productively matched against these three person/object dimensions. For example, the torn clothing returned to her by the hospital, an example of the third 'pitfall' modality, carried a high emotional intensity, evidenced object agency, and underscored his sudden absence from her life at that moment in time. Before leaving these three person-object dimensions it is worth cautioning against viewing them too monochromatically. The terms used to anchor each dimension – high versus low intensity, person versus object agency, and present versus past and future - are not intended to denote discrete clear-cut distinctions. For example the foregoing discussion on temporal range suggests that these dimensions operate in a way that is quite layered and nuanced.

As indicated above, one way for Didion of giving flesh to her continuing bonds with John lay in trying to prolong their joint ownership of goods and possessions. The concept of co-ownership after death encourages us to acknowledge the role of objects in relational identity. 'Bereaved people are repeatedly surprised at ... the extent to which things take their meaning from the presence of another person' (Parkes 1996, p. 91). The meaninglessness of things, objects, and possessions experienced by survivors may well be a critical if overlooked component of more general feelings of meaninglessness reported by those who mourn (Attig, 2001; Berger, 1967; Hockey, 2001). Didion's story reminds us that the meaning of many goods is not solipsistically conjured up but is rather

constituted and co-produced through significant others with whom we have interacted and with whom the goods were consumed. With the demise of a significant other, this co-constituted meaning of valued possessions and experiences is threatened, and survivors are faced with the challenge of maintaining or changing these meanings alone.

Furthermore, the onerous task of relearning the world during bereavement often includes relearning to consume - to consume certain objects again as an individual. Put another way, the survivor's relationship with an array of material goods has to be reconfigured. Didion's narrative contains numerous instances of recoiling from consuming products and services, from visiting places, from listening to radio stations, all because she would have to do so as single and widowed for the first time. If learning to consume as an individual, where 'we' becomes 'I', was a daunting task, so too was accepting that 'ours' becomes 'mine'. The move from plural to singular consumption exacts a heavy emotional toll precisely because it signals tacit recognition that the survivor is now physically alone.

Didion's insights should matter to friends, family and professionals seeking to help those facing loss. At the very least, they suggest that disposal and divestment following a bereavement may be bound up with important processes of sifting and sense-making, and that encouraging bereaved people to rid themselves of apparently redundant things may compound their loss rather than help them cope with it. A variety of service providers may be called upon to assist survivors in determining how best to deal with the personal inventory of their deceased loved ones: estate agents, caregivers and solicitors come to

mind. What Didion has to say suggests that they should tread warily, especially in the early stages of bereavement, allowing for the possibility that the emotional valence of belongings can modulate or even reverse over time.

Didion's insights into person-object relationships also suggest that a sensitive response to bereaved clients requires taking cues from them concerning the appropriate use of language. For example, and in the spirit of the continuing bonds perspective, providers might do well to recognise a relationship that endures and to be open to using the present rather than the past tense when speaking of the dead person – ‘is this something your husband would like?’ as opposed to ‘is this something your husband would have liked?’ Similarly, using the formal appellation ‘widow’ instead of ‘wife’, even on forms, can smack of unnecessary insensitivity and indiscretion. Service providers should also be sensitive to the slipperiness of agency in the aftermath of a death; given the power of magical thinking in bereavement, bereaved clients may attribute agency to the dead or to inanimate objects.

Didion's account refers to her experiences in the year immediately following the death of her husband. Different person-object relationships may emerge over time, amongst other survivors, in different cultures, or in response to different types of loss, and this merits further research attention. Interviews with bereaved people may generate insight into these relationships, bearing in mind the ethical imperatives of engaging with people who are grieving (Parkes, 1995). Whilst not every grief account is penned by survivors with Didion's literary and observational skills, we suggest that other pathographies may still be

fruitful sources of insight into these relationships. We also suggest that the continuing bonds perspective represents a fresh and promising lens through which the nexus between goods and grieving can be profitably explored. Indeed, the growing acceptance of this perspective marks a window of opportunity for consumer researchers to engage more fully with other scholars in the thanatological field in order to explore the role of goods in creating, maintaining and modulating bonds with those who have died.

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