

Loss, Bereavement and Creativity: Meanings and Uses

Abstract

Within the field of death and bereavement studies, the assumption that loss and bereavement provide the spur to creativity has become so widespread as to assume the status of a conventional wisdom. With this in mind, this paper surveys the literature on the topic, extant and contemporary, revealing its diffuseness as well as the multi-disciplinary synergies produced by those working in disparate academic and clinical fields of practice. In so doing, the paper explores what it means to be creative in the context of loss and bereavement; the potential for self-development and personal growth offered by creativity and loss; the theoretical premises linking creativity and loss; and the application and challenges for creative therapies in the institutional context of hospice and palliative care.

'There's a lot of power in creativity. There's a lot of power in writing things down.

Poetry—and poetry especially is like singing on paper [...]—I think it feeds the soul'

(Joy Harjo, cited in Miller, 2013, p.107)

'Creative work is integral to the process, often unconsciously, of mourning lost love.

Without mourning there can be no self-development, understanding or change.

Without mourning we are psychically ill-equipped for creative living. Without mourning we are hampered in preparing for our own loss, as it were, in death'

(Anthony Elliott, 1999, p. 5)

'Art seems to bring us closer to what language cannot reach and to what poets prove evaporates in exploration and translation'

(Sandra Bertman, 2000, p. 53)

Introduction

It is not unreasonable to surmise, somewhat intuitively, that the attendant feelings engendered by loss of any kind, but especially those summoned by bereavement, should debilitate and disorientate rather than provide the spark for creative endeavour. The wretched feelings of loss, when one's assumptive world¹ (Beder, 2004/5; Kauffman, 2002; Neimeyer, 2005; Parkes, 1975, 1988) has been torn asunder by the physical disappearance of people, places, social relationships and predictability of everyday routines that are themselves profound sources of meaning, (Marris, 1974; Thompson, 2012), should in some sense, and by right, be productive less of creativity than the impulse toward anger and destructivity. That chaos, disorganisation, despair and feelings of anger are the initial residents in the dwelling we call grief has been well-documented by theorists of grief and loss (Bowlby, 1980; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Parkes & Prigerson, 2010). Ariès' (1974, p. 92) comment, that 'a single person is missing...and the whole world is empty', captures succinctly and attests to the acute, and so often ineffable, feelings of being bereft wrought by bereavement in the modern era. In the aftermath of bereavement and loss, meaning and identity are themselves called into question (Butler, 2003, 2004; Cox, Bendiksen & Stevenson, 2003; Fulton & Bendiksen, 1994) in ways that, initially at least, appear to negate and militate against the potential for creativity.

In the mass trauma and catastrophic aftermath of the Holocaust, an absolute event of history (Blanchot, 1995) that defied comprehension as well as meaning, Theodor Adorno's claim, that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno, 1983, p. 34), appeared not only to suggest that the Holocaust defied representation, the experience of which was unspeakable, but that creative efforts at representation were glib and indulgent (Bertman, 2003, p. 204; Richardson, 2005). In a philosophical and existential sense, death in general, as Zygmunt Bauman (1992, p. 2) has suggested, is the absolute (and unimaginable) Other

of being, and as such, “‘absolute nothing” makes no sense’ (see also Sartre, 1957; c.f. Heidegger, 2001). Attempts to render death (as the negation of being), suffering, and loss more generally, as meaningful can be found in a variety of sources, each of which can be understood as creative activity: in religious and spiritual endeavour (theodicy, for Berger (1969, p. 69) is ‘the religious legitimation of anomic phenomena’, chief of which is death); in clinical and therapeutic interventions where the aim is to create a meaningful legacy and find benefit in bereavement and loss (Bonanno, 2011; Holland, Currier & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer & Sands, 2011); and in the use of the creative arts as a means of engaging the bereaved and/or terminally ill in a range of pursuits designed to channel feelings of anger and destructiveness generated by bereavement and loss (Harlow, 2005) by creating an alternative, more hopeful and positive reality out of circumstances dominated by confusion and pain (Bolton, 2008b; Morgan, 1997; Watts, 2009).

Against the nagging misgiving that loss and grief breed only sadness, anomic despair, and nihilistic rage (as well as sometimes violence) comes a plethora of evidence which suggests the opposite: that the loss of others, of intimate relationships, of anything, in short, that we have invested with meaning (and which functions in turn as a profound sense of meaning and identity), can serve to unleash the creative potential within each of us (Bertman, 1999, 2003; Pereira-Stubbs & Rawlence, 2008). While the germ of this creativity may reside within each and every one of us, helping to heal the wounds of lost love as well to facilitate an ongoing relationship with the deceased (Klass et al, 1996; Valentine, 2008; Walter, 1996), it so often requires the nourishment, encouragement and support of therapists employed in the creative arts (Bolton, 2008b; Watts, 2009). There are occasions of course, the Holocaust being the most obvious case in point, that appear to give lie not only to its ‘unspeakability’ but also to the apparent need for guided therapeutic support to help unleash this creative potential. The voluminous corpus of creative first-

hand material, especially poetry and autobiographical victim/survivor testimonies (Borowski, 1976; Frank, 2011/1947; Levi, 2014/1963), were, after all, unbidden attempts to communicate the incommunicable, to make sense of an event at once senseless and incomprehensible.

Even in the darkest of times, therefore, the human impulse and capacity for creativity cannot be fully extinguished; indeed, suffering and loss may inspire and nourish creativity as much as they threaten to destroy it (Elliott, 1999; Homans, 1989; Kristeva, 1989). The journey from Holocaust to hospice, where the creative-as-healing arts are at its very core, is illustrated in the comments of one of its founding mothers, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. As a relief worker following the end of the Second World War, Kübler-Ross visited the Maidanek concentration camp and was struck by the hundreds of butterflies—a powerful symbol of re-birth amidst mass death—carved upon the camp wall by the children there, remarking in an interview that: ‘It was incomprehensible to me. Thousands of children going to the gas chamber, and this is the message they leave behind—a butterfly. That was the beginning’ (Redwood, 2005). This was of course the beginning for Kübler-Ross of a lifetime of devotion to the terminally ill and their families. It was also part of the beginning of the use of the creative arts in hospice and palliative care (another part originating in British psychiatric hospitals of the 1940s (Watson et al, 2005, p. 696)), and it is the beginning of our journey as I attempt to chart a course through the literature on creativity and its relationship to bereavement and loss.

Before doing so, it will be useful to clarify, exactly, what we mean by creativity. I use creativity in a broad, though deliberately limited sense, to refer to the human proclivity for invention, innovation and the capacity and desire *to create*. Such creativity can come in the physical and material form: the fashioning of an object, a product, a piece of writing or art,

from nothing. I qualify this ‘nothing’ in the sense that creativity does not emerge *ex nihilo*, but, in a broadly sociological sense, is inspired by external influences, especially people, places and lived experience more generally. The ‘out of nothing’ refers to the fact that while creative ideas, and/or their material manifestation, may have existed in embryo, they did not already exist but required human intervention and agency on the part of an individual(s) in order to summon their existence. Creativity can also come in the form of new, novel or reconstituted meaning and ideas that serve to transform existing reality. Meaning-making of this sort is especially important following bereavement and loss, where the capacity for recovery and resilience stems in part from an ability to re-learn the world (Attig, 2001, 2002, 2011) in a process of meaning reconstruction (Holland et al, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001) that is supported theoretically and empirically by constructivist psychology. Yet creativity, as Morgan (1997, p. 351) reminds us, is more than simple reproduction: ‘Creativity is a power of engendering, of producing, not simply reproducing what was already there, but in bringing into existence what has yet to be.’

While the terms grief, bereavement and mourning are themselves used interchangeably, they each convey different aspects of our encounter with loss (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2011, p. 334). Significantly for our purposes, if bereavement refers to the objective state of having been deprived or dispossessed of someone (usually through physical death) or something, then the terms grief and mourning refer to *activities*, rather than a state of being, by which one responds to that loss (Corr & Corr., 2013). Grief, as task-based bereavement theorists have demonstrated (e.g. Worden, 2009), is not simply a set of emotions that accompany our reaction to loss; it is also an endeavour (a ‘work’ or ‘travail’ in Freudian terms) by which we address the activating sorrow in the psycho-social transition (Parkes, 1988) to a changed reality without the person or ‘thing’ we have lost. If grief is the ‘inner’ reaction to loss of various kinds, mourning is its ‘outer’ physical demonstration—in public

displays and rituals intended to facilitate and guide us on our journey through grief. Individual states of bereavement, moreover, and the attendant activities of grief and mourning, are themselves socially inflected (Katz, 2001, p. 6), permeated by social and cultural influences that too have a significant bearing on the types of creativity produced.

Creativity in grief and mourning can be found in a wide variety of material practices reflective of the growth in expressivism and a renaissance in public rituals surrounding death and dying (Walter, 1994). Marked both by their visibility as well as their accessibility (Woodthorpe, 2010), the rituals and practices surrounding both public and private dying and mourning in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first century reflect the tendency for reviving half-forgotten traditions, while at the same creatively adding to these traditions by giving them a personal twist in ways that reflect and are indexical to the identity of the deceased and/or bereaved. RIP/memorial tattoos, roadside shrines, Facebook grieving, the revival of *momento mori* jewellery, celebratory funeral practices, ‘pathographies’ and v/blogs by which the dying narrate their experiences—all of these represent an apparent sea change in attitudes toward death and dying. All, to varying degrees, represent small acts of creativity by which individuals have sought a more active and ‘producerly’ (Fiske, 2010) role in their own and others death and dying (though some will inevitably bear the influence of what has been copied from others in ways that are less creative than they are derivative). Nevertheless, the synergy created between public and private mourning speaks more of the desire for creativity reflective of a postmodern cultural aesthetic than it does the formulaic and proscriptive cultural forms in death ritual and mourning customs characteristic of the Victorian and Fordist eras; when death was hidden and sequestered, a subject best left unstirred, and untouched, because it was ‘an obscenity to be avoided’ (Feifel, 2013/1990, p. 9).²

Theoretical Premises

A long-standing, though not always fully articulated assumption, is that love and loss are twin pillars that have provided the impetus for great works of art and creative genius, from the fine art of painting and sculpture, to the literary art of novels and poetry, and myriad others in between. The productive nature of loss is a theme identified by Kearsley (1989) when he describes the observations of Orson Welles in the 1949 film *The Third Man*: ‘that thirty years of warfare, terror and bloodshed in medieval Italy produced the Renaissance, whereas five hundred years of peace in Switzerland produced the cuckoo clock’ (Kearsley, 1989, p. 380). Until the publication of Freud’s (1917/1957) ground-breaking essay ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ in 1917, which attempted to explain in scientific detail the process and working-out of grief, attempts to express the contours and experiences of grief and loss had been largely the preserve of poets and artists, from Shakespeare and John Donne, through John Keats and Emily Dickinson, to Robert Frost, Virginia Woolf and innumerable others besides. Where artists and poets had first attempted to describe the emotions elicited by loss, and where Freud had first sought to explain these emotions by placing their analysis within a scientific framework, it fell to philosophers to explore the symbiotic relationship between loss and creativity; between loss and the unbidden impulse to create, to fashion something novel and new from the remains of what has been left behind (Eng & Kazanjian, 2003).

Existentialist philosophy in particular, especially the work of Martin Heidegger, has discerned a special relationship, an ‘elective affinity’ to borrow a phrase from German sociologist Max Weber, between suffering—especially a suffering borne of loss—and creativity. As Heidegger explains:

‘All creative action resides in a mood of melancholy, whether we are clearly aware of the fact or not, whether we speak at length about it or not. All creative action resides in a mood of melancholy, but this is not to say that everyone in a melancholy mood is creative.’

(Heidegger, 2001, pp. 182–183)

In contrast to Sartre, for whom death negates meaning as the embodiment of nothingness, Heidegger sees in death the potential by which human experience is irrevocably altered by our knowledge of it. The very anticipation of our own death, as absolute certainty, elicits fear and creativity to the extent that the meaning of life is itself transformed in such a way that we live our lives in relation to death, or in Heideggerian terms, as ‘being-toward-death.’ The intimacy between death and philosophy more generally is deep rooted and extends beyond the brooding existentialism of Nietzsche and Heidegger. It can be found in the German idealism of G.W.F Hegel (1977), where it serves, dialectically, as the basis for individuation. It can be found too in Montaigne’s (1993) maxim that ‘to philosophise is to learn how to die’, for both involve the metaphysical separation of body and soul (Plato, 1991).

These themes have been taken up in the work of theorists, each of them philosophers in their own way, whose thinking has elaborated the relationship between death and unconscious processes of mind: in Freud’s psychoanalytic theorising of death denial and the ways in which the unconscious imagination ‘behaves as if it were immortal’ (Freud, 1915/1957, p. 296); in the cultural anthropology of Ernest Becker (1973) and the very notion that the production of culture itself is an audacious (and unconscious) attempt to stave-off mortality and all thinking about it; and in the semiotic psychoanalysis of Julia Kristeva (1989), where melancholic suffering is the basis of sublimated artistic activity.

Here, as Kristeva puts it: ‘loss, bereavement, and absence trigger the work of the imagination as much as they threaten it and spoil it’ (Kristeva, 1989, p. 9). More than this, however, while melancholy may serve to summon aesthetic activity, the creative process itself, Kristeva appears to suggest, may help to overcome the melancholy that helped produce it. The paradox, for Becker, is that while the source of creativity is the thought of death, leading to ways in which we seek to transcend mortality by producing cultural artefacts which serve as enduring legacies intended to ensure symbolic immortality, the net result of cultural activity is that of death denial, and worse still, the reproduction of death and destruction in the heroic projects explicitly designed to eliminate evil.³

Psychoanalytic Approaches

Attempts to explore and to understand the relationship between identity, mourning and loss, as well as the relationship between human consciousness of mortality and unconscious processes of mind, lay at the very heart of the project of psychoanalysis. Specific attempts to examine the symbiosis between creativity and loss have indeed been dominated by psychoanalytic approaches, from Freud, through Melanie Klein, to Julia Kristeva.⁴ Within this framework of analysis, creativity is conceived and envisioned within the realm of the imaginary, as a product of unconscious and sublimated mental processes by which an idea, vision or fantasy is stimulated or summoned, often by a precipitating event in the external world, where it is filtered and worked-upon through interior and unconscious experiences of selfhood. In psychoanalytic terms, loss is itself constitutive of selfhood, setting in train a process of individuation by which the individual comes to recognise her (sic) difference and sameness from (m)other (Elliott, 2002; Hershkowitz, 2013).⁵ The first and most significant of losses in the external world, which serve as a trigger for the unconscious imagination, is the separation of infant from mother. At once experienced as both exhilarating (because of the promise of freedom and independence)

and frightening (because of the fear of abandonment), the infant compensates for such loss by re-creating her (sic) in the realm of fantasy, whereby the infant has ‘created an object out of the mother’ (Freud, 1926/1957, p. 170).⁶

Taken up in the object-relations school of psychoanalysis developed by Melanie Klein (1975), creative (and profoundly imaginative) manifestations of selfhood emerge from attempts to negotiate the ‘depressive’ position first experienced during childhood. It is here, for Klein, in the profound ambivalence experienced during infancy toward the mother (as an object that is both loved and hated), that creative and re-creative attempts at reparation are made for the damage done through the violence of destructive and persecutory fantasies about the mother (as object) and maternal breast (as ‘part-object’). Idealised and disparaging fantasies characteristic of the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position, in which mother is ‘split’, as ‘dirty goddess’ (Dinnerstein, 1978, p. 124), between binary and highly unstable poles, are—in the long term at least—unsustainable, leading to experiences that are incongruous with external reality and which hinder self-development. Destructive fantasies projected outward toward (m)other—of hatred, violence and envy (themselves manifestations of the death drive), are, in Kleinian terms, self-defeating, for the projection of such feelings onto (m)other in order to relieve feelings of anxiety stimulates fears that the object of the infant’s vengeance will in turn retaliate and attack it. Genuine creativity, for Klein therefore, is rooted in attempts to restore and recreate the lost object—denigrated in fantasy—as a good object; it is a restorative effort to assuage feelings of guilt and despair for having fanaticised the (m)others destruction.⁷

Creativity, especially as envisioned in psychoanalysis (as well as within wider schools of psychology and psychiatry) bears an intimate relationship to grieving. The process of grieving, as Parkes and Prigerson (2010) explain, is a creative activity by which the

bereaved attempt to re-construct a viable image of the deceased; an image that transcends the typically idealised memories that tend to prevail immediately following bereavement but which do not provide a consistent picture of the person ‘as a whole.’ Successful grieving, in this respect, involves attempting to reconstruct the fragmentary picture we have of the person we have loved and lost; fragmented because their lives ‘have been so close to our own that we have experienced them in a thousand...parts’ (Parkes & Prigerson, 2010, p. 71). Grieving is also creative to the extent that it behoves the bereaved to rediscover an identity both separate from the life of the beloved with whom their identity is so often intertwined as to be indistinguishable, as well as to restore the beloved to a place within the bereaved person’s ongoing life that is both positive and viable (Worden, 2009).

As we have seen already above, loss, in psychoanalytic terms, is a vehicle by which individuation is summoned; by which a sense of self is created. Following bereavement, such creativity is witnessed in the transformative, though painful, opportunity for self-development and personal growth that are essential elements in the work of mourning, and the means by which a sense of sense is re-created or create anew. In the most relational, socially inflected interpretations and applications of psychoanalysis, not only does mourning provide an opportunity to attempt to fathom what it is, exactly, that has been lost *in* the person that we have lost (Butler, 2004, p. 21)—for this is not always abundantly clear to us—but also an opportunity to unravel the intersubjective ties (Benjamin, 1990), by which our relationships have been constituted, as a means of understanding ourselves. This is in part what Elliott (1999, p. 46) means when he writes that ‘people create themselves through forgetting and remembering their losses.’ It is more fully encapsulated by post-structuralist feminist philosopher Judith Butler when she writes:

‘Perhaps...one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance.... When we lose certain people, or when we are dispossessed from a place, or a community, we may feel that we are undergoing something temporary, that mourning will be over and some restoration of prior order will be achieved. But maybe when we undergo what we do, something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us...Perhaps what I have lost “in” you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related.’

(Butler, 2004, pp. 21–22)

Hospice, Efficacy and the Therapeutic Value of Creativity

With the growth of hospice and the establishment of palliative care in the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a growing recognition and acceptance of the role of art and creativity, embodied in the concept of holism, as complementary to the scientific thought dominating medical practice (Watson et al, 2005). In the context of hospice, which, as Corr and Corr (2013, pp. 202) remind us, is as much philosophy as it is facility, the uses and benefits of the creative arts have been well documented. Aside from helping to provide a distraction from the pain, anxiety and daily regimen of medical care intended to alleviate suffering that can come to dominate the experience of palliative/hospice care (Graham-Pole, 2000), engagement in creative activity has been used to help re-construct a sense of meaning and purpose shattered by terminal illness (Bertman, 2003; Neimeyer, 2012), to increase the dying person’s feelings of self-worth and motivation for life

(Calman, 2000; D’Lima, 2004; Watts, 2009), and to help re-assert a degree of mastery and control in circumstances in which the dying person may feel as if they have little or no control over a condition and the medical response to it (Bailey, 1990; Jarret, 2007; Morgan, 1997).

In circumstances in which the person is dying, treating the anxiety and suffering precipitated by the knowledge that one is dying (the ontological angst, if you will, induced by the thought of non-being), is as important as treating the physical pain resulting from terminal illness (Bertman, 2003; Bolton, 2008b). Developing a new skill or re-engaging an old one, can, as Morgan (1997, p. 352) suggests, have a positive effect by providing ‘tangible proof that one is still alive and learning.’ Discovering a hidden talent or new-found pleasure in creativity may similarly provide a sense of achievement and personal fulfilment (Watson et al, 2005) for those who are terminally ill. More fundamentally, the impulse to create lies at the heart of what it means to be human, for it is in the act of creating that we ‘give birth to ourselves’ (Graham-Pole, 2008, p. 67), unleashing a sense of agency and self-identity that are vital aspects of a deeper sense of well-being; a well-being that remains possible even in the face of one’s own mortality (Pereira-Stubbs & Rawlence, 2008, p. 30).

For those who are dying, creativity can serve as a powerful counterweight to the sense of powerlessness, invisibility and social death (Elias, 1985; Sudnow, 1967) that routinely accompanies the process of terminal illness (Jarrett, 2007).⁸ Jarrett (2007) has written about the ways in which creativity can, if harnessed effectively, serve to transform power relationships within the context of hospice and palliative care: of how, for example, creativity is important in helping the individual not only find a voice with which to articulate their anxieties and fears, but also, crucially, in summoning a listener. The use of

narrative based medicine can in this way enable the patient to become an active participant in their illness and care rather simply a passive victim or recipient of it, allowing both doctor and patient to educate each other about how to communicate (Jarrett, 2007, p. xiii). Simple steps like encouraging the terminally ill to create art for the hospice walls in which they are being cared for can similarly serve a deeply political and transformative function, enabling them to take ownership of the space in which they receive their care in ways that encourage a greater personal responsibility for what goes on in that place (ibid., pp. x-xi). Work such as this illustrates the intersection and multi-disciplinary synergy created between the creative arts, humanities, social sciences and palliative care community (Bertman, 1991).

There is some debate as to the guided use of creative therapy with terminally ill patients. For purists, art should seek no purpose other than art itself—as ‘art only for art’s sake.’ For others, while there is a creative germ in each of us, such creativity requires the careful cultivation of professional therapists trained in the use of the creative arts (Bailey, 1990; Bolton, 2008b; Romanoff & Thompson, 2006). While guided therapeutic intervention may yield benefits for patients, their care givers/families, and healthcare professionals alike (Coulehan & Clary, 2005; Mason et al, 2008; Watts, 2009), there is also the risk that the power of therapists—embodied in knowledge, expertise and control—may inadvertently be exercised over vulnerable clients; that in allowing therapists to enter the deeply personal and subjective world of the terminally ill it may somehow be colonised by them (Watts, 2009). Such tendencies can be countered through the increasing use of reflective—and indeed, reflexive—practice (Brookfield, 1995; Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004; Schon, 1991; Thompson & Thompson, 2008), though more research is needed from artists and creative therapists themselves to evaluate self-critically the efficacy and ethical limitations of the work that they do (Hartley, 2008).

A key difficulty facing the use of the creative arts in the context of hospice and palliative care is how to evaluate their effectiveness and efficacy (McGuinness & Finucane, 2011). In a climate of fiscal austerity (escalated in the financial crisis post-2008), the use of a conventional business model in which services are appraised according to an organisation's bottom line, does not lend itself (Watts, 2009), and cannot fully capture, the value-added by creative therapies. Precisely because the value of creative therapies cannot be evaluated using a crude economic metric, and partly because any attempt to measure the value of creative therapies appears somewhat incongruent with evidence-based medicine, any such resistance to an audit culture that has become so widespread in other sectors of society has left us with 'a barren evidence landscape' (Watts, 2009: 103). In resource depleted systems of healthcare, there is a risk that such services are perceived as the 'low hanging fruit'; 'a valuable but unjustifiable luxury' (ibid., p. 104).

Conclusion

The corpus of literature on creativity, bereavement and loss is diffuse—dominated by some disciplinary fields and areas of special academic interest (psychoanalysis, thanatology, the creative arts), but not colonised or confined to anyone of them; spread across a wide array of fora and found in a variety of forms, from tightly focused special issue journals, such as this one, to chapters within more broadly focused books on death and dying, to works in which creativity and loss constitute only a passing, but important, part of a broader theme (for example, on meaning-making and meaning reconstruction following bereavement). The synergies created, between individuals and across organisational and disciplinary domains, reflect the expansive and capacious nature of creativity (including what it means *to create* or to *be creative*) and its application to, and precipitation by, bereavement and loss. Bertman's (1991, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2008)

voluminous and long-standing contribution to the field is perhaps an exemplar of the interdisciplinary uses of creativity, especially the invocation not only of the creative arts, humanities, and social sciences, but also of healthcare providers and users in a matrix that at once recognises the limits of spoken language while permitting forms of symbolic communication ‘when communication by word alone is too difficult’ (Watson et al., 2005, p. 696).⁹

Within the confines of the space permitted here, such a review is not intended (nor could it ever be) completely exhaustive. Within existing literature, there appear to be some significant lacunae. I am unaware, for example, of any empirical and/or clinical studies that have explored in full the relationship between complicated grief (where loss is experienced as utterly debilitating) and creativity, or that attempt to correlate differences in grieving and creativity in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality etc. Future directions ripe for empirical study would include the effects of the purported increase in creativity in public and private mourning ritual, including the synergy between this and the increased creativity facilitated by digital and social media, especially developments such as Web 2.0 which invite greater user involvement. Nevertheless, whether documented in extant theoretical literature or more contemporary studies, there appears to be (perhaps it is, as psychologists would suggest, a product of evolutionary processes) an inextinguishable human impulse to create in the face of loss; more counter-intuitively, to create something beautiful from the ugly detritus of pain and suffering (Edwards, 1993). For creativity serves here as a bridge (and to some extent a choice), between a life dominated by the pain and suffering of loss, and the future possibilities by which these feelings can be used to provide the raw material that can be fashioned into something new, into something that can help sustain rather than destroy life.¹⁰

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Notes

¹ Derived from psychology, notions of the assumptive world refer to taken-for-granted assumptions about the self and the external world that help serve as an orienting device; a practice guide to thought and action governing our understanding of the world, our place within it, and how and why things are the way they are. The assumptive world is essentially a benign view of the world—as benevolent, meaningful, and in which the self is valued and worthy (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). However, death (especially violent and traumatic death), threaten to violate and overwhelm this worldview, replacing it with fear, terror and disillusionment. In sociological terms, such a worldview can perhaps be seen to approximate to what Giddens (1991) has articulated as ‘ontological security’; the practical consciousness and fundamental feelings of trust, which, in phenomenological terms, are related to the tacit assumptions and routines of everyday life. Like one’s assumptive world, death and serious illness are a potent threat to the individual’s basic sense of ontological security. For a useful discussion of the development of notions of the assumptive world, see Beder (2004-5, p. 258-9). See also Mallon (2008).

² The synergy created between public and private mourning has led seemingly to an altered funerary and commemorative landscape in which creativity, ingenuity and individual self-identity are very much at the fore and have replaced standardised cultural protocol in mourning practices. There is abundant anecdotal and empirical evidence of creativity in public (e.g. Brennan, 2008; Harlow, 2005; Kear & Steinberg, 1999) and private mourning (e.g. Co-operative Funeralcare, 2011).

³ Becker’s theory provides the theoretical basis for terror management theory (TMT), whereby heightened awareness of one’s own mortality is understood to produce not only positive attempts at overcoming death (in the immortality fantasies provided by creative cultural activities such as writing a book or producing a work of art), but also negative attempts to eliminate others perceived as presenting a threat to our existence. For an overview of TMT, see Brennan (2014).

⁴ Creative transformation through wounding and loss has also been the subject of Jungian psychoanalysis. For a useful discussion of loss as the impetus for creativity and growth from a Jungian perspective, see Marlan (2005). For a discussion of creativity as a defence against pain and mourning, see Kogan (2007). For a discussion of poetry from a psychoanalytic perspective, as the ego’s attempt to exert mastery over mental pain, see Akhtar (2001). For a discussion of the relationship between object loss and creativity more generally, see Pollock, 1975, 1977; Hamilton, 1969, 1976, 1979).

⁵ For Hershkowitz (2013, p. 54), the origins of art lie in the ‘symbiotic unity and the experience of separateness that follows the earliest phase of infancy.’ Born of a desire for maternal oneness and to return inside the mother’s body, the urge for creativity has its origins in the oedipal conflict, for it seeks ‘to deny the primal scene and erase the real presence of the father’ (ibid.).

⁶ Identity, in psychoanalytic terms, is not, as Elliott (2002, p. 21) puts it, somehow ‘magically assigned to us by the external world.’ Instead, he explains, it ‘has to be made or created’ and this process is accomplished through the ‘twin boundary posts’ of *identification* and *incorporation*. Loss is significant to identity in psychoanalytic terms because it is the loss of the beloved that precipitates the introjection of that person into the structure of the ego itself. It is, as Elliott explains, ‘as if the hurt of losing somebody is so terrifying that the ego incorporates the lost love as an act of self-preservation’ (ibid.).

⁷ Feminist criticism of psychoanalytic understandings of motherhood has focused upon notions of the ‘good enough mother’ first elaborated by paediatrician and object relations theorist D. W. Winnicott (1967). Shifting the locus of development from the oedipal rupture between father and child first theorised by Freud to the dyadic relationship between mother and child, Winnicott contends that healthy childhood adjustment depends upon the quality of the object relations between mother and child. Winnicott’s theory of ‘good enough mothering’ has been criticised by some as politically regressive; romantically idealizing motherhood in ways that are ‘used *against* women as both fantasy and blame’ (Elliott, 2002, p. 75). Although Klein’s orientation was not explicitly feminist, others have drawn out the feminist significance of her work in understanding the experience of female sexuality and mothering (e.g. Chernin, 1986; Dinnerstein, 1978; Mitchell, 1986). Dinnerstein (1978) has extended Klein’s analysis in a feminist psychoanalytic direction by locating the denigration and subordination of women in society in the absence of shared parenting. In this view, precisely because parenting falls primarily upon mothers, the paranoid/depressive anxieties identified by Klein as a natural part of infantile development are short-circuited and never fully worked-through. Thus, as Sayers (1987, p. 30) explains: ‘If men participated equally with women in childcare...they would then equally be invested with phantasies involved in the paranoid and depressive anxieties of infancy.’ For a

discussion of feminist psychoanalytic theories of mothering and critique of fantasized/idealized notions of the 'perfect mother', see Chodorow and Contratto (1989).

⁸ The term 'social death' refers to the process of social withdrawal by which the long-term sick and dying were, for much of the 20th century, treated as already dead, long before physical death occurred: removed from the public gaze (usually in hospitals); excluded from communication (with friends, family members, and healthcare professionals, c.f., Glaser & Strauss, 1965); and treated with general awkwardness and embarrassment by those with whom they did come into contact. In the 21st century, modern communication technology and social media, such as blogging by the terminally ill, has seemingly contributed to a process of de-sequestration, by which the communicative and spatial segregation of healthy from sick is being eroded.

⁹ As a creative and therapeutic modality, writing can help ameliorate the effects of grief by allowing griever a sense of interpretive as well as symbolic control in circumstances in which they seemingly have none (Doka & Martin, 2011). Writing can also serve as a 'bridge to a new way of life', whereby creativity can help 'fill the space left by the one who has died' (Moss, 2012, p. 13). Specific types of writing, such as auto/biography (Stanley, 1993), while not considered creative in the conventional sense, can serve a reparative rather than escapist function, helping to re-create a storied sense of what has been lost, to re-create a life story, a life disrupted by illness or loss, a life cut short, or a life ending (Letherby, 2009; Thornton & Letherby & 2009). To do so in such circumstances can, as Bolton (2008, p. 15) suggests, facilitate healing and a sense of hope by helping the person facing impending death or following bereavement to come to terms with their loss by creating a narrative that helps them readjust to a changed reality rather than dwell in the destructive feelings of loss.

¹⁰ Native American poet Joy Harjo puts it thus: 'I've...come...to realise that this stuff called failure, [...] this debris of historical trauma, [...] family trauma...stuff that can kill your spirit, is actually material to make things with and to build a bridge over that which would [otherwise] destroy you' (cited in Miller, 2013, p. 107).