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Grace is Gone : Rediscovery of Grief

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FILM REVIEW

Grace is Gone: Directed by James Strouse

(Running Time: 94 min)

Amazon: 5.99 rental or own

Rediscovery of Grief

Human beings are storytelling creatures; they spin narratives to construct the world. It is believed that the recounting of stories can alleviate the symptoms of grief, but how? *Grace is Gone* (2007) depicts a family undergoing bereavement. This contemplative, atypical Hollywood, film dramatizes the loss suffered by Stanley, the father of 12-year-old Heidi and 8-year-old Dawn, whose wife Grace dies suddenly. Shocked by Grace's sudden death, Stanley tries concealing his devastation as well as the truth by taking the girls on an impromptu road trip. During the trip, Stanley leaves a message for Grace on the answering machine, articulating his confusion and struggles of explaining her death to the girls. Throughout the road trip, Heidi gradually realizes something is wrong. Stanley eventually takes the girls to a beach and slowly unravels how much Grace had loved them and what happened to her. Later, at Grace's funeral, Heidi delivers a eulogy that recounts Grace's life story. Meanwhile, little Dawn holds the story of a special moment that she shared with her mother every day. As the film unfolds, the audience is a part of the undulating story of grief.

This undulating story of grief explores anxiety, guilt, and the wide array of emotions grief encompasses. When facing a major tragedy, people often tell themselves, "It was my fault" or "Life is not worth living." The collective recounting of a life story and sharing of loss often reduces pain by contextualizing suffering. The act of exchanging memories can stimulate remembrances of occasions and emotions that simultaneously change and solidify with each telling. This story of bereavement is ever relevant today as such recounting can be hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic, war, and humanitarian disasters where social disintegration and isolation are compounded by cumulative losses, pervasive existential terror, and mass trauma. Accordingly, separations and virtual or remote environments can distort the sense of reality, perhaps even boosting depersonalization or diminishing the significance of life. Nevertheless, we can still harmonize with those we love through limited interactions and envisioning, just as Stanley, Heidi and Dawn shared their moments with Grace. Such endeavors can also become opportunities for us to ask ourselves why we must repeat old and familiar tales to ourselves (e.g., always blaming another person or incident to justify an occasion of adversity). They accord us the chance to realize that we often become irrational or impulsive.

In the context of virtual reality, it is also crucial to advance our cognition beyond the over-simplified or idealized narratives that are sometimes transmitted by filmmakers. While film narratives inspire meaningful effects in us, such accounts can bias the sense of loss and grief. This phenomenon is mirrored in the pandemic-induced “disenfranchised (hidden) grief,” wherein grief rituals become virtual, and the variances or nuances of grief frequently remain unacknowledged. We must endeavor to embody the affective conditions of others through continued dialogs if we are to confront real-world loss. In this respect, besides focusing on the deceased (Grace is gone), we can attend to the ways in which we make sense of death or handle our bereavement in communion with others (gone is Grace). I hope this film review motivates readers to more deeply reflect on the impact of storytelling and rituals on the process of grieving. This film has the capacity to encourage the audience to attend to the importance of sharing one’s story of grief and/or endeavoring to understand others’ suffering, perhaps ultimately creating a greater sense of coherence and helping to reconstruct a person’s loss and assuage the feelings of hopelessness.

The quietude of the film along with the tenderness of Clint Eastwood’s piano renderings embodies the sorrow of Stanley’s family and subtle hope. While the film suggests to us how such hope and sorrow illuminate life and probe its meanings, it also reminds us that both should be vigorously envisioned, savored on our own, and recounted to others. Put differently, dealing with grief involves efforts to support other people as well as oneself, and to feel connected to humanity again. In the end this film reminds us that human beings are storytelling creatures; in the setting of grief these stories work to cultivate shared meanings and coherent narratives to ease suffering.