

*Routledge Research in Higher Education*

# **HUMANIZING GRIEF IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

**NARRATIVES OF ALLYSHIP AND HOPE**

Edited by Nicole Sieben and Stephanie Anne Shelton



# Humanizing Grief in Higher Education

By showcasing asset-based approaches inspired by individual reflection, research, and experience, this volume offers a fresh and timely perspective on grief and trauma within higher education and illustrates how these approaches can serve as opportunities for hope and allyship.

Featuring a broad range of contributions from scholars and professionals involved in educational research and academia, *Humanizing Grief in Higher Education* explores the varied ways in which students, scholars, and educators experience and navigate grief and trauma. Set into four distinct parts, chapters deploy personal narratives situated within interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research frameworks to illustrate how issues such as race, gender, socio-economic class, and politics intersect with experiences of personal and professional grief in the academy. A variety of intersectional fields of study—from positive psychology, counselling, feminist and queer theories, to trauma theory and disability studies—informs an interdisciplinary framework for processing traumatic experiences and finding ways to hope. These narrative explorations are positioned as key to developing a sense of hope amongst the grieving and those supporting them.

This text will benefit researchers, doctoral students, and academics in the fields of higher education, teacher education, trauma studies, and mental health education. Those interested in positive and educational psychology, as well as grief counselling in adults, will also enjoy this volume. Finally, this collection serves as a companion for those who find themselves grappling with losses, broadly defined.

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Stephanie Anne Shelton**

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*This book is dedicated to the eternal memory of our beloved fathers and the inimitable strength of our beautiful mothers.*



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# Foreword

In her 2010 book *Human Development and Political Violence*, Colette Daiute studied young people's efforts to move forward from the genocide, conflict, and violence they had experienced during the breakup of the former Yugoslavia. She questioned the notion that such young people are necessarily handicapped and damaged by their experiences with trauma, grief, and loss. Rather, she assumed that their feelings can be reflected on and reconstructed through a writing workshop she established to help them construct more hopeful and resilient social futures. The workshop provided a therapeutic means of mediating their understanding of the past and projection of a hopeful, agentive future via narratives and other texts. The past was prologue and present; as William Faulkner (1951, p. 73) once said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Rather, however, than dwelling on the past, the workshop was designed to create an emotionally healthy vision of future possibilities through which the young adults could conceive of a way forward.

The mythologies of many cultures have included figures that represent looking back and looking forward simultaneously. The Roman god Janus, also the term for a gateway, faces both backward and forward and symbolizes both end and beginning. The Akan tribe in Ghana relies on the image of a mythical bird whose feet face forward and head looks backward, such that the past sets the stage for the future. These ancient beliefs are present in the ideas embodied in this book: loss and grief may serve as the substance on which to build a new future.

This impressive collection, edited by Nicole Sieben and Stephanie Anne Shelton, was inspired by their own grieving after the loss of their fathers. This experience led them to assemble a volume that looks at the experience of loss in academia, particularly profound loss that produces seismic emotions. The contributors provide frameworks and narratives of grief that both reflect on the experience of loss and construct pathways of hope for a social future. This hope is buoyed by allies who support them through their process of rebuilding a sense that life may yet move forward in positive ways. The chapters in this collection, orchestrated with wisdom and sensitivity by the editors, echo Daiute's efforts

to help youth from the Western Balkans move forward from the debilitating traumas experienced during catastrophic national and ethnic conflict. Like the youth in Daiute's workshop, the contributors to this volume use narrative means that build on the immense feelings of emptiness, stasis, sadness, disillusionment, and other feelings that follow from a major loss. The past is ever-present in this recovery. Yet it doesn't prevent people from looking forward and incorporating grief into a new outlook, a new phase of reckoning and rebuilding.

The focus of this volume is higher education, although it's impossible to separate it from the K-12 world because most contributors have taught in both arenas, often reflecting on one from the vantage point of the other. Neither schools, nor universities are set up for compassionate care of teachers or students. I attribute this ethos of emotional distance to the powerful influence of the European Enlightenment, which provides the rationalistic basis for much education. In this conception, emotions are frivolous distractions from clear thinking. Undoubtedly, this conception also has roots in historic notions of masculinity, given the hierarchical roles that males have always played in schools. The K-12 teaching force has steadily been occupied by women, with about 75–85% of the national faculty women (and 85% White; see Loewus, 2017) and 85% of school superintendents men (Glass, n.d.). As Gilligan (1982) outlined convincingly, men and women (assuming the gender binary of her day) differ according to their tendencies toward authoritarian, disaffective, hierarchical, categorical thinking (masculine) and relational, caring, nurturing (feminine) dispositions. Who's in charge does seem to matter in which values comprise the deep structure of a school or university. Throw in a neoliberal environment in which everything is reduced to numbers rather than relationships, and you have a perfect storm of conditions that render the emotional life of people in schools somewhere between irrelevant and obstructive.

Meanwhile, the people populating schools live lives heavily affected by affect. And contrary to the belief in cold rationalism driving enlightenment-based educational systems, there is good reason to believe that all of the emphasis on scientific reason misconceptualizes human cognition and social life. If Haidt (2012) is right—and I believe he is (Smagorinsky, 2018)—rationality is an illusion. All thinking, in contrast, is fundamentally emotional. The rational arguments that people present are undergirded by emotion more than reason, with logic applied to emotional decisions after the fact as a way to justify beliefs in scientific terms that have credibility for their rational appearance, while in fact being motivated by gut feelings.

As the chapters in this volume attest, however, emotions run high in educational settings, and overlooking them produces a hostile environment for those experiencing loss and grief. Undoubtedly, some students have had relatives who have died many times over, remarkably concurrent