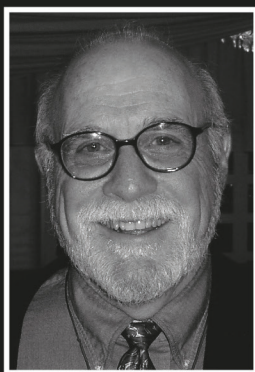


Culture, Consolation, and Continuing Bonds in Bereavement

The Selected Works of
DENNIS KLASS



DENNIS KLASS



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“This landmark volume provides a unique collection of highlights from and developments in Dennis Klass’s momentous scholarship through almost fifty years in bereavement research. With his solid ethnographic, historical, and cross-cultural grounding, Klass has defined the paradigm shift that has taken place in the field. His work has provided conceptual tools that are useful for research and clinical work and also resonates profoundly within the complexity of individual and collective experiences of living with the dead.”

Ester Holte Kofod, *assistant professor of health psychology,
The Culture of Grief Research Center, Aalborg
University, Denmark*



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Culture, Consolation, and Continuing Bonds in Bereavement

Culture, Consolation, and Continuing Bonds in Bereavement presents Dennis Klass's most important contributions to the scholarship of grief and bereavement.

Journal articles, book chapters, and previously unpublished works cover more than 40 years of study and practice on the forefront of our understanding of individual, family, and community grief. The writings range widely, including explorations of continuing bonds and consolation, aspects of grief that were missing when Klass began his work, studies of grief across different cultures, and critical analyses of theories that were popular in grief scholarship but inadequately described bereaved parents' experiences. The book ends with a previously unpublished case study of Charles Darwin, whose experience as a bereaved parent informed the worldview at the heart of his theory of natural selection.

This collection of essays offers an integral understanding of how individuals move through grief and is a valuable addition to the library of anyone working with topics relevant to grieving adults, children, and adolescents.

Dennis Klass, PhD, is the author or editor of six books and over 70 articles or book chapters. He is a professor emeritus at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri.

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Culture, Consolation, and Continuing Bonds in Bereavement

The Selected Works of Dennis Klass

Dennis Klass



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To Carol Speekmann Klass

**Best friend, parenting partner, backpacking buddy, companion
through life for 57 years so far.**



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Not previously published.

1 Introduction

An Intellectual Life Review

The assignment in the invitation from Anna Moore, Routledge's Acquisitions Editor, to do a book in this series was to comb through my publications, which began almost half a century ago, and choose those that I consider the most important. I found essays that I still like. I found many where I could have done better. I found places that foreshadowed ideas that would come out more fully formed later. I found lines of thought that never went anywhere. Much of my academic work has been with co-authors and co-editors. As I read, I had memories of the relationships and simpatico moments in those partnerships and I felt again my bond that continues with each of them.

As I went through the files, I was reminded that sometimes I wrote a description that seemed right, so I just used it again in other essays. More often, however, the writing was the best I could do at the time, and I would revise the texts as I reread them. One of the things I liked best about the change from paper to word-processor files, besides the spellchecker, was that the text and the ideas remained malleable. They can be reworked again and again. Especially after I began to put my publications on the internet, I made revisions that sometimes reflected changes in my thinking, but more often I updated them in light of contributions in bereavement studies from other scholars. As I was preparing the essays for this book, I made more revisions.

The question of which were most important was not easy: I have watched ideas come and go over the last half century while bereavement studies grew and solidified as one aspect of the changes in the cultural narrative about death and dying. I asked myself by what criteria should I judge importance? Whose opinion counts? I never had a long-term plan for research. When an opportunity to look into something interesting appeared, if I had the resources, I took it. If I did not have the resources, I let it go and moved on, sometimes with regret, and sometimes caught up in the new questions. The result is that my list of publications has very little obvious coherence.

Working on this book, then, became an intellectual life review. As I reread my old publications, asking if this or that article should be included, a lot of thoughts and memories swirled in my mind as I remembered the circumstances around my writing and recalled what I was reading at that

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time. The decisions about what essays to include and how to organize them grew from a way of understanding my intellectual journey that emerged as I worked on this book. It is, however, only my self-narrative now. One of the truths that we have learned in bereavement studies is that narrative construction is always an ongoing project.

My perspective is the psychology of religion (Main, 2008). The objects of study are individual and communal religious behaviors, practices, beliefs, and interactions, as well as the large-scale cultural narratives in religious traditions. The ideas and methods come from psychology as well as other social scientific disciplines. The psychology of religion has been part of the larger discipline of psychology from its foundations: Wilhelm Wundt in *Elements of Folk Psychology* (1916); William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1958); Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1994) and *The Future of an Illusion* (1962); G. Stanley Hall in *Jesus the Christ in the Light of Psychology* (1921); Jean Piaget in *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (2013); B.F. Skinner in *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971). In one of the most interesting contemporary developments, Frans de Waal explores the origins of religion in *The Bonobo and the Atheist* (2013).

In all cultures what we call grief in the contemporary West interfaces with religious teachings, practices, and institutions. When we study grief, either in individuals or in communities, we find that people interpret the death and their response using their culture's explicit or implicit religious narratives. Thus, in the cross-cultural study of grief, researchers are doing grass-roots comparative study of religions. When we study grief in our own culture we are often, consciously or unconsciously, supporting or rejecting one or another of our culture's implicit religious narratives.

Section 1: Bereaved Parents and the Self-Help Process

The defining moment in my scholarly career was when a group of bereaved parents who were founding a local chapter of The Compassionate Friends,¹ a self-help group, asked me to be a professional advisor. I looked but found few studies on bereaved parents and virtually none on self-help groups for these parents. I stayed as advisor for 20 years. As my relationship with the group matured, the national board asked me to sit in on some of their meetings. If I have made significant contributions to the study of bereavement, all of them grow out of what I learned from those bereaved parents.

I quickly realized that my relationship with the group was a unique opportunity to do ethnographic research. Ethnography is a qualitative research method. The goal is understanding that is more wholistic and interactive than quantitative research that measures variables in order to allow the researcher to get an objective picture of the subjects. Rather than bringing the subjects into the world of our academic discourse, ethnography takes the researcher into the subjects' world. In most studies of grief, the research is based on concepts researchers brought from other questions.

For example, John Bowlby's attachment theory came from his experience with children separated from their parents, not from the study of bereaved people.

In a parallel field of study, for much of the 20th-century psychologists studied captive great apes, most often chimpanzees, who we now know share most of our DNA. The psychologists designed problems for the apes to solve in order to earn a small reward. Then they compared the apes' and humans' performance. When they studied tool use, researchers supplied a tool and it was up to the apes to figure out what the humans had in mind. Sometimes researchers raised baby apes in their homes as if they were human. When researchers asked whether apes could communicate with language, they used sign language developed for deaf humans. The research too often had tragic consequences for the apes. After the research was done, or when it was no longer safe for humans to mingle freely with the apes, the apes were put into zoos or other facilities with others of their own species with whom the apes had limited relational skills.

Then pioneers like Jane Goodall went to the primates' world. They studied apes in their natural setting. It turned out that the apes had rich individual and family histories, complex social systems, problem-solving skills in the social as well as the physical domains, and well-developed non-verbal and gestural communication abilities. They could take others' perspectives both to empathize and to deceive. Their motivations grew from a wider range of physiological needs and the politics of social hierarchy than could be observed in captivity.

The invitation to be an advisor was an invitation into the bereaved parents' world. The parents created the self-help group for themselves using experiential knowledge. That is, their knowledge base came from their shared experience, not from social scientific theory. In the first section I have chosen essays that give readers a sense of the ethnographic process as well as what I found.

Ethnography begins with the researchers understanding their place in the setting. The first essay "Professional Roles in a Self-Help Group for the Bereaved" is the first thing I published about the research. In it, Beth Shinnars and I reflect on where she and I fit into the group process and about the experiential knowing that is the basis of the group's way of coming to terms with their grief. Shinnars was the social work practicum student I recruited to help me. She and I closed the bar more than a few times as we talked over beers about what we had heard at the meeting that night.

The second essay in the section is the introduction of my book *The Spiritual Lives of Bereaved Parents* (1999). I hope the chapter gives readers a sense of the personal and conceptual challenges in understanding parents' grief. The essay ends with me speaking directly to other outsiders and to the bereaved parents themselves.

The third essay describes a complex dynamic that is central to self-help's effectiveness. The parents maintain their bonds with the dead children and weave those bonds into their bonds with other parents in the group. "My

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child died” becomes “our children have died.” The parents’ pain and the parents’ bond with their child become a social reality, not just an inner reality. Making the bond with the child into a social reality facilitates the parent transforming the bond in ways that the parents can integrate into their ongoing lives and into their larger social networks.

The fourth essay in the section is the methodological chapter in *Spiritual Lives*.

The fifth piece in the section is my acceptance speech when the national board presented me with their Appreciation Award. I used the speech to talk about the congruence between my research and the self-help process, with a few rhetorical flourishes which seemed appropriate to the occasion.

Section 2: Expanding the Western Theory of Grief

One of the most obvious academic projects to come out of the ethnographic research was to expand the model of grief that dominated late-20th-century Western social science. I’m a pragmatist. I think an idea is good if it is useful in describing phenomena we observe. An idea is inadequate if anything we observe must be distorted or omitted in a description based on the idea. The essays in the second section are on continuing bonds and consolation, two phenomena that were missing in most bereavement scholarship when I began trying to describe the bereaved parents and the self-help process.

The most well-known expansion of theory in my work is the idea of continuing bonds. As I tried to describe the self-help processes by which parents were making their way toward coming to terms with their child’s death, I found that I could only use the available psychological bereavement theories by ignoring obvious interactions among the group members or shoehorning my data into those theories in a way that distorted the data. The then-current grief model was based on a misreading of Freud’s paper *Mourning and Melancholia*. The theory held that the work of grief was to withdraw libido, to let go of the lost object thus allowing the bereaved to invest energy in new relationships that served their instrumental needs in the present. The cause of what was then called pathological grief was that the bereaved refused to sever their attachment to the dead person.

The parents did not sever their bonds with their children. I remember thinking that either I had a couple hundred pathological grievers or the definition of pathology was wrong. The parents did not seem pathological to me. Therefore, the definition of pathology, and thus the model of grief must be wrong. When I first described how the parents maintained the bonds with their children I was still thinking grief was an individual process, so I said they maintained the child as an “inner representation.” As I revised my early work I centered the revisions around what we were learning about continuing bonds, a term that described the parent/child relationship better than inner representation.

Phyllis Silverman sought me out at a conference. She said that her data from the Harvard Child Bereavement Project showed that children whose parents had died maintained relationships with their parents just as parents in the self-help group did with their dead children. We found an empty table and she pulled several transcripts of interviews from her briefcase. I read through the places she had marked. Yes, we had found the same thing. We both knew researchers who had similar findings with other populations. Before the end of the day Silverman and I decided to edit an anthology. She asked Steven Nickman, who studied adoption, to join us. The term “continuing bonds” came as we were looking for a better name for the book we were editing, and a better term for the phenomena we were describing. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (1996) is still my most cited publication.

As Silverman and I wrote “What’s the Problem?” to introduce the anthology, we discovered that our backgrounds meshed nicely. We agreed that this needed to be an in-your-face book because we both knew that the grief theory that our finding negated was entrenched. I think sometimes we egged each other on. In “What’s the Problem?” we laid the foundation for what is now called the continuing bonds model of grief. “What’s the Problem?” is the first essay in the second section of this book.

If ever a book was successful, *Continuing Bonds* was one. Within a few years the idea would be incorporated into virtually all Western theories of grief. Our critique of quantitative research brought a strong pushback from psychologically based scholars who regard grief as an individual process. That pushback is still happening. Continuing bonds also served as a bridge to study individual and social responses to death in other cultures and other historical times. Our challenge to quantitative methods helped scholars in other fields to connect their work with ours, first archeology, anthropology, and sociology, and later many other disciplines.

Neil Thompson and Gerry Cox asked me to write a chapter in their *Handbook of the Sociology of Death, Grief, and Bereavement* (2017). I used the opportunity to develop some ideas that explored the social nature of continuing bonds that were so clear in the self-help group. That chapter is the second essay in this section. It also serves as a transition to the concept of consolation in the next essay.

When I listened to the parents, it seemed to me that their sorrow had two elements. First, they felt the pain of the physical absence of the person who died. That still seems to be the definition of sorrow in a good deal of bereavement research. There was, however, another element in their sorrow. The parents knew Death in a way they had not before their child died. The thoughts and feelings they had about their new world were often diagnosed as depression by professionals because they exhibited many of depression’s symptoms. They reported that physicians and counselors prescribed anti-depression medications. The parents reported that the drugs only fogged their minds and did not help them solve the issues of their grief.

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The parents lived in a culture that did not do well in providing consolation. I observed that they found solace in their continuing bond with their child. The title of my first attempt to do a book-length report was *Parental Grief: Resolution and Solace* (1988). I do not think that book captured the whole picture. My second attempt, *The Spiritual Lives of Bereaved Parents* (1999), was better, but I focused more on the social nature of grief and on continuing bonds, and less on consolation.

The concept of solace has not been integrated into contemporary theories of grief as continuing bonds has, but is, in my mind, just as important. Consolation is historically grief's amelioration. Problematic grief was *inconsolable*. The bereaved person was *disconsolate*. Solace, however, plays virtually no role in most contemporary research and theory. As problematic grief was put into DSM-5, "disconsolate" was never considered as a diagnostic criterion. I have included the essays on consolation as a neglected aspect of grief because I think present Western grief theory still has a hole where consolation ought to be.

I think there are reasons for bereavement scholarship ignoring solace. First, most bereavement research regards the death of significant others as a trauma. Grief in this view is a time-limited, mostly emotional condition in individuals that is an interruption in normal functioning. The end of grief is a return to normal functioning. That's not, however, how the parents regarded their grief. They told people new to the group that "you don't get over it." Grief might change over time, but they would always be a bereaved parent. I observed lots of what would later be called post-traumatic growth, but there remained a deep sadness for which they found consolation.

The second reason consolation has not been integrated into bereavement scholarship is that psychological theories function as cultural narratives in a world where we are supposed to make everything better, where every story has a happy ending. As the Monty Python song says, "Always look on the bright side of life." For some people that works. For others it doesn't. I remember a woman whose daughter was born with a congenital condition. The physicians said she should support the child to overcome every obstacle. She did that with the power of positive thinking for both her and her daughter. The sound of the gunshot woke her at two in the morning, when the daughter, home for her university spring break, committed suicide. I remember the mother telling me, "I just can't positive think this away."

After continuing bonds was well-established, my thoughts returned to solace. I published two articles with somewhat different foci. The first, "Neglected Areas in Bereavement Research: Sorrow and Solace" tries to be a corrective to the optimistic bias in bereavement scholarship. The second looks at religions. In all cultures people seek consolation from religions. Comparative religions provide a better basis for comparisons between cultures and historical periods than does *spirituality*, the preferred term in psychological bereavement models. The chapter anticipates the next

section, on the cross-cultural study of grief. Although there is an overlap in the essays, I have included both in this section.

Section 3: Cross-Cultural Study of Grief

After I failed to adequately describe the bereaved parents and the self-help process using the grief models that were then available to me, I read some brief accounts of *soseu suhai*, traditional Japanese ancestor rituals. The rituals last 33 to 50 years after someone dies. In effect that means for as long as anyone personally remembers them. The rituals are, then, a very old way of maintaining continuing bonds. My younger son had been hosted by a Shingon Buddhist priest's family in a high school summer exchange program. The experience was profound enough that he double majored in Asian studies and math in college. He got me started reading about ancestor rituals by pointing me to some good books. After he graduated he was hired by a Japanese firm that distributed American semiconductors. When my wife and I visited him in Japan, we stayed for some of our time in his host family's temple where I could observe some of the rituals. Then we traveled around Japan where I could see other aspects of the bonds the Japanese maintain with the dead, for example *Mizuko Koyo*, in which parents, mostly mothers, maintain their bonds with children who have miscarried, aborted, or died as neonates.

I tried using the ancestor rituals as a lens to interpret the data I was gathering on American bereaved parents and it worked. I could describe more of the phenomena in the parents and in the group interactions than I could describe using the Western grief theories available to me then. We included a short chapter on the ancestor rituals in *Continuing Bonds, New Understandings of Grief*.

I still had a problem, however, in that there were cultural differences between Japan and America. In traditional Japan, where the ancestor rituals developed, the dominant cultural value was interdependence. The dominant cultural value in the contemporary West is individual autonomy. The first essay in the third section of the book is "Ancestor Worship in Japan: Dependence and the Resolution of Grief." I tried to be careful not to hold the Western understanding of grief as normative. That is, I wanted to maintain the reciprocal nature of cross-cultural knowing. As I worked out that cultural difference, I understood the Japanese rituals better, but more importantly, I could see more clearly how the values in autonomy pervade the cultural grief narrative in the developed West.

The second essay in this section was co-authored with Robert Goss (now Shore-Goss). When Goss joined our department his office was next to mine. He left the Jesuit order years earlier to be with his partner, who died in the AIDS epidemic. Grief was personal to him. He had a Harvard doctorate focused on Buddhist studies. He read my work and told me he could see how the idea of continuing bonds might help us read the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a guide to the bereaved, not just as an esoteric text on

the soul's journey. Who could resist an offer like that? We tried it and it worked.

Writing with Goss was the most productive scholarly partnership in my career. The Tibetan study led to an invitation to interview American converts to Tibetan Buddhism. Those interviews solidified my seeing psychological models as Western cultural narratives. The two of us just kept asking questions that yielded fascinating results. For example, Why are continuing bonds suppressed in some historical periods and encouraged in others? and How does what we know about grief help us understand continuing bonds with religious founders like the Prophet, the Buddha, and the Christ?

The second essay in the section is "The Buddha and the Christ: How Religious Relics, Doctrines, and Rituals Continue Bonds Between Founders and Their Disciples." The essay is a shortened version of a chapter in *Dead but not Lost: Grief Narratives in Religious Traditions* (2005). I shortened it by taking out bonds with the Prophet in Islam as well as making smaller revisions. The essay revisits Max Weber's theory about the institutionalization of the founder's charisma into a new religious tradition. A widespread critique of Weber's theory is that it is good sociology, but weak psychology. Our thesis is that the dynamics in continuing bonds supply a better psychology than Weber's idea of charismatic individuals. I think the essay is important because it shows that bereavement studies can be applied in intellectual issues and cultural studies beyond the confines of therapeutic applications.

Goss and I would have carried the cross-cultural exploration further, but our partnership was cut short when he was denied tenure even though he was a popular teacher and one of the most published members of the faculty. I believe the underlying reason was his gay activism. I responded to the tenure denial by taking early retirement from the university, and moving to a small town almost at the end of Cape Cod. I stopped participating in the self-help group's meetings as I prepared to leave St. Louis. In the year between the tenure denial and his leaving the university, Goss and I assembled our work and published it as *Dead but not Lost: Grief Narratives in Religious Traditions* (2005). Without Goss, the move to Cape Cod was also the end of cross-cultural study. I now cheer from the sidelines as the cross-cultural project is being carried forward by very talented scholars from several disciplines.

Section 4: Theory and Meaning

In the four decades since I began my study of parents in the self-help group, bereavement studies has expanded in many directions, although it remains largely based in psychology. I have kept abreast of the developments and have had extended conversations with many of the leading scholars. It has been a delight to get to know scholars who are opening up new areas of study.

A full history of bereavement studies would be a monumental undertaking, first because it is both a social scientific project and a Western cultural narrative. Second, the expansion continues apace: Any history would be quickly obsolete. In the fourth section of this book I have two essays that critically analyze the bereavement theories that did not work as I tried to describe bereaved parents and the self-help process. The first is "Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and the Tradition of the Private Sphere: An Analysis of Symbols." During my first year of doctoral studies I was an assistant in her seminar at the University of Chicago Hospitals. Her book *On Death and Dying* (1969) that started the modern death awareness movement was published in time for the Christmas sales that year. Her five stages are cited even now in the media even though her model has been left behind in scholarly work. In the first meeting of the self-help group, as I listened to what the parents were saying, I kept asking in my mind: Is this denial? Is it bargaining, or depression? It certainly was not acceptance as I knew she understood the term. I remember driving home that night and laughing to myself, "Well that didn't work."

Why then, I wondered, was her theory so popular? Why did people believe it despite the inconsistencies and weak intellectual foundation? I had been reading the new feminist cultural histories, and studies on the history of the idea of family. As I reread *On Death and Dying*, it began to make sense to me when I thought about it in terms of Kübler-Ross' own autobiographical accounts, and in the frame of a tradition of symbols in the American cultural narrative.

John Bowlby's model of grief did not work in a more fundamental way in my trying to describe the bereaved parents. The second essay in this section is "John Bowlby's Model of Grief and the Problem of Identification." The third book in his trilogy was published in 1980, at the same time I was beginning to listen to the parents. In it he developed his model of mourning that he had briefly sketched in a 1960 article. I read the new book almost immediately. The problem was that the phenomena that we later called continuing bonds were excluded from Bowlby's theory. In the essay I said, "certain phenomena." The reason was that in the psychiatry of his day, those phenomena were regarded as identification. Bowlby excluded identification because it was the basis of the Freudian Oedipus drama that Bowlby rejected in favor of the theory of childhood trauma that Freud had abandoned in favor of his metapsychology.

As I was preparing this book, I read through the essay on Bowlby and realized that I was also working through a great deal of the bereavement literature of the time looking for a way to include what we later called continuing bonds in the resolution of grief. In retrospect it seems apparent that my contribution to the continuing bonds model grows out of this essay.

Bereavement scholars who use Bowlby's attachment theory have found work-arounds to his rejecting any notions of identification. This essay was written before their work matured. There is good critical literature on the

individualism of attachment theory, especially from a feminist perspective. I tried to use attachment as those scholars define it to understand more about the parents in the self-help group, but it had less explanatory power than continuing bonds. It has never seemed to me that devoting my time to the critical analysis of the attachment model of grief built on Bowlby's theory would help me move my own work forward. So, I just stuck with talking about bonds, not attachment.

Section 5: Case Study of a Bereaved Parent

The concluding section brings us back to where the book started, trying to understand how parents respond to the death of a child. The section has one chapter, a case study of Charles Darwin as a bereaved parent. I had been interested in Darwin since I chose *On the Origin of Species* for a book report when I was 15 years old. My interest was renewed when I read Randal Keynes's widely-reviewed book on how Darwin's grief for his daughter Annie affected his worldview. All the Darwin papers both published and unpublished had recently been put on the internet with new transcriptions of hand-written documents. I spent the long Cape Cod winter of 2012–2013 immersed in the Darwin papers. Using historical material felt like a return to the scholarship I was doing before the bereaved parents asked me to be an advisor. My doctoral thesis was a study of John Humphrey Noyes using Erik Erikson's psycho-historical method. My first academic publication was a psychological study of existential theologian Paul Tillich. I could use what I learned from the bereaved parents to try to get inside Darwin's life in a far better way than I had done with Noyes and Tillich.

I shopped the essay briefly to journal editors but decided that I had no interest in joining the crowded scholarly field that is sometime called "the Darwin Industry," and my wife and I saw the signs of aging that would lead us to leave Cape Cod and move to a continuing care retirement community. So, I put the paper on academia.edu where it has a consistent stream of readers.

I have included the essay in this book, first, because it shows that the meanings bereaved parents find in their grief can have implications in large-scale cultural narratives, not just in personal and family narratives. Darwin's theory changed the way we understand humans' relationship with nature, and thus the narratives we have available when we grieve.

The second reason for including this essay is that it shows meaning making in bereavement can be much more sophisticated than bereavement studies currently recognizes. Darwin was well-read in the philosophy and theology of his day. The essay on Darwin's grief might be an example of how bereavement scholarship could expand to understand the cognitive/intellectual aspects of grief as well as we now understand the emotional aspects.

Conclusion to an Introduction

I began assembling this book just before the Covid-19 pandemic put our retirement community into a hard lockdown. The retrospective review to identify the most important publications in my 50-year career was a meaningful way to spend the year's enforced isolation. I want to thank Anna Moore, therefore, for both the honor of her invitation, and for the perspective on my past that the review process has given me. After I had assembled the old files for this book, I enlisted the help of Stephanie White Lund. She re-formatted references, smoothed the editing, and managed the manuscript. Along the way, her thoughtful questions and suggestions helped me make the text better. She was invaluable.

Note

- 1 During the time I was with the group, a disagreement on the national board led to the formation of Bereaved Parents of the USA. The parents in our local chapter decided to affiliate with the new group. As of this writing, 40 years after I became an advisor, both groups seem to be doing well. Although there is a somewhat different tone at the national level, the processes within the local chapters remain the same. In some of the essays I chose for this book, I have retained the name Compassionate Friends because that is what it was when I wrote the descriptions.

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Section 1

Bereaved Parents and the Self-Help Process



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2 Professional Roles in a Self-Help Group for the Bereaved

Co-authored with Beth Shinnors

Some time ago, a group of bereaved parents asked us to help form and advise a local chapter of The Compassionate Friends. TCF is an international self-help organization for bereaved parents, which has 180 chapters in the USA. As we began to work with the group and to define our role within that structure, we went to the professional literature in an attempt to find guidance. We found that the professional literature on self-help groups recognized our predicaments and raised many new ones for us. However, the literature that we reviewed failed to provide us with the positive actions we needed to take as professionals in a self-help group. At the same time, we found a good deal of theory which was helpful in our work. This paper is a result of our experience. We will first outline some theory and insights into the self-help group that we found useful; then we will sketch some areas in which we believe that we, as professionals, have been useful to our local TCF chapter. Finally, we will argue for the rejection of a role many expected us to play.

Definitions and Questions

Self-help groups, according to Lieberman and Borman (1979), have been traditionally defined as

composed of members who share a common condition, situation, heritage, symptom or experience. They emphasize self-reliance and generally offer a face-to-face or phone-to-phone fellowship network, available and accessible without charge. They tend to be self-supporting rather than dependent on external funding.

(p. 2)

Lieberman and Borman add that such organizations are “usually composed of strangers, having a structure and requiring those wishing to utilize their resources to spend effort and energy much as they would had they sought professional systems” (p. 4).

First article I published on the study of the self-help group, *Omega*, 1983.

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The term "self-help" may be somewhat misleading, since the "self" aspect includes help to others. The self-help under discussion here should be differentiated from the self-help of the drugstore reading rack. The emphasis in these groups is on helpfulness to the other or to the group, mutuality, and cooperation (Katz, 1970, p. 54). We might think of the self-help group as providing an active role to the participant who gives service to himself and to peers. This relegates the professional provider to a secondary role or to no role at all. The self-help group, then, emphasizes the power of its members to assist one another rather than to depend on the help of professionals.

Implicit in the self-help thrust is a profound critique of professionalism. The mutual aid groups developed, in large measure, because of various limitations of professional organizations—unwillingness to deal with certain problems, a limited research with regard to various populations, an overly intellectual orientation, monopolistic credentialism, etc. The entire ethos of the professional orientation is very different from the self-help orientation which is much more activistic, peer oriented, informal, open, and inexpensive.

(Gartner & Reissman, 1976, p. 785)

There was an assumption early in the scholarly literature that self-help would naturally evolve into professional services. For example, Katz thought there was a five-step evolution from self-help to a more professional organization: (1) origin, (2) informal organizational, (3) emergence of leadership, (4) beginnings of formal organization, (5) beginnings of professionalization. In our experience and research, this prediction was not realized. Lieberman and Borman attribute the fact that these groups did not professionalize to the professionals themselves, who they call a "new breed." Those professionals who have formed or supported self-help groups have gone beyond the conventional boundary lines of their disciplines and recognized the limits of their discipline's conventional domain.

TCF has given some thought to the question of the role of the professional and formulated their own policy statement:

Chapters of TCF are and should be organized with bereaved parents responsible for programs and activities and with members of the helping professions serving in consulting roles. Someone who has not lost a child should not attempt to play a central role in the process.

TCF can benefit from maintaining a cooperative and friendly relationship with members of the helping professions.

The selection of the individuals themselves is of paramount importance.

They should have demonstrated commitment to the self-help principle and be comfortable in a consultative capacity. If a professional attends meeting, he could serve as an invited speaker, facilitator, or

may simply be present as a resource to be called upon if the group feels the need. The professional should be there to react, not to initiate.

Several have viewed the self-help approach as unlike professional interventions because self-help “stresses the concrete, the subjective, the experiential, the intuitive, empathy, etc., in contrast to the more professional accent on distance, perspective, systematic knowledge, understanding” (Gartner & Reissman, 1976, p. 785). Schwartz (1975) thinks “that the role of professional leadership is deliberately minimized or even systematically excluded” (p. 746) and Powell (1975) asserts that the self-help groups “have not been widely accepted by or integrated into the professional human service system” (p. 756).

Vattano (1972) found that

When professionals participate, their role is modified to adapt to the self-help group’s distinctive culture. Thus, they are expected to act as peers and shorten the social distance between themselves and the members by diffusing the leadership function and sharing their own personal concerns with the group.

(p. 14)

He sees the professional as uniquely equipped to perform three functions: to act as catalyst or facilitator particularly in the early stages, to do research on problems the group is dealing with and the effectiveness of the methods employed, and to conceptualize the group’s experiences and provide the theory building and feedback necessary for further development. We found these functions an extremely useful theoretic basis on which to begin. However, Vattano’s apparent personal lack of extended direct work in a self-help group keeps his program theoretic without giving practical help.

Katz says that the role of the professional, if it exists at all in a self-help group, is unclear, and is minimized when compared to the usual social agencies. Unless they share the common problem, the professional is not considered to be a member and does not participate in the decision-making process. Instead of membership, the professionals’ roles are consultant, resource advisor, evaluator, or expeditor. However, Katz provided us no practical handles on how these roles can be accomplished. We found, then, a broadly based call for the professional to work in a self-help group in a collaborative and secondary role. We have, however, not found any sustained writings on how that might be accomplished.

Experiential Knowledge, Community Building, and Systems Theory

We found the most useful theoretic distinction to be the difference between experiential knowledge and professional knowledge. A self-help group is based on the premise that experiential knowledge is a primary source of

truth, and as such, experiential knowledge competes with the professional knowledge, which is the foundation of expertise in most other human service organizations.

Experiential knowledge is truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather than truth acquired by discursive reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others ... It is a conviction that the insights learned from direct participation in a situation are truth.

(Borkman, 1976, pp. 446–447)

Experiential knowledge leads to an experiential expertise, that is, competence or skill in handling or resolving a problem through the use of one's own experience. Not everyone in a self-help group can be said to have such experiential expertise. There are those who are defined by the group as just starting, others defined as mid-course, and some who have arrived at a reconciliation with their loss. One who has successfully utilized and integrated this expertise becomes both a role model and a source of hope for others. Since everyone does not become an experiential expert, the selection of leadership tends to be an interaction between the person's self-perceived growth and the group's recognition of such.

Professional knowledge, on the other hand, is truth developed, applied, and transmitted by an established group of specialists. Most movements for personal transformation, healing, or change in contemporary American culture are based on professional knowledge. Credentials certifying professional knowledge are only given to those who have met specialized education and training requirements. As the titles "patient" and "client" show, the professional community assumes that others will accept on faith their ability to diagnose and prescribe treatment which will alleviate pain and suffering. Only the professional is in "possession of a skill so esoteric or complex that nonmembers of the profession work properly" (Borkman, 1976, p. 448).

In practice we found that experiential knowledge adds a greater importance to the cathetic dimension, or individuals' feelings about and evaluation of themselves and various aspects of their situation. The feeling of being understood, as well as the open communication among those peers with whom they identify is not transference to a relationship from the past but is empathy in the present.

The holistic quality of the self-help group can be understood in a larger framework. It appears to us that what is important is the concept of the group as a community, and as such, the group has communal activities which need to be performed. These communal activities fall into three areas:

- 1 The actual grief work which takes place in the meeting where the sharing and grief are accomplished. The group's newsletter acts as an

adjunct to this process by reaching not only the members but others who may not utilize the group's formal meeting. (It also educates and informs professionals in the field.) There is also a formal and informal network of phone contacts.

- 2 The social dimension of the group. The actual meeting allows for time to become acquainted and form relationships. This very often carries over outside formalized meeting times, and many members find it to be an unexpected bonus of group participation.
- 3 The business and group management aspect of the group. This is a necessary and vital function if the group is to remain in existence. This includes fundraising, policy and program planning, recruitment of new members, and public relations activities including a widespread public interpretation to a variety of audiences (Katz, 1970, pp. 56–58).

Schwartz (1975) notes that many self-help groups report a sense of community. It is that sense which is a significant differentiating factor between professionalism and self-help, for it is a shift from the perspective of the individual as an entity to the individual as a member of a significant group. Community is

a readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend and as a result of which one does not experience sustained feelings of loneliness that impel one to actions or to adopting a style of living masking anxiety and setting the stage for later and more destructive anguish.

(p. 747)

We are dealing here with a systems theory of human services. A person's bereavement is not dealt with outside of their family, the community in which they live, or the values of society which they have incorporated. The self-help groups are thus a challenge to our traditional concept of human services because they emphasize the power of their members to assist one another using their own cognitive and emotional resources rather than to depend on professionals (Vattano, 1972, p. 7). As such, we may view the formation of groups such as TCF as doing for the bereaved what hospice does for the dying. It takes bereavement out of the province of professionals and substitutes a sense of community. It transfers the locus of control to the individual, as well as emphasizing interaction and growth as keys to the resolution of bereavement.

Just as hospice took death, dying, and bereavement out of the acute care medical model, so the self-help concept takes death, dying, and bereavement out of the medical model of psychotherapy. The self-help ideology holds that life is a process of understanding, growth, change, and transformation. The holism of the self-help group allows its members to understand the wholeness of life. The experiential knowledge of group members results in the demystification of professionalism.