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Presence in absence. The ambiguous phenomenology of grief

Thomas Fuchs[1]

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Abstract Despite its complex experiential structure, the phenomenon of grief following bereavement has not been a major topic of phenomenological research. The paper investigates its basic structures, elaborating as its core characteristic a conflict between a presentifying and a 'de-presentifying' intention: In grief, the subject experiences a fundamental ambiguity between presence and absence of the deceased, between the present and the past, indeed between two worlds he lives in. This phenomenological structure will be analyzed under several aspects: (1) regarding bodily experience, as disruption of a shared intercorporeality; (2) as a loss of the shared world and shared habitualities, leaving the bereaved person with ubiquitous indications of absence and with a contraction of their own self; (3) regarding temporality, as a separation of two strands of time, namely a still ongoing past and an alienated present which become more and more desynchronized; (4) finally, as an "as-if presence" of the deceased which the bereaved continue to feel and sometimes to perceive, leading to a cognitive-affective conflict between two experienced realities. The transforming process of grief is then analyzed as a gradual adjustment to the loss, finally enabling a re-integration of the conflicting realities. This is achieved through an incorporation and identification with the deceased on the one hand, and through various forms of representation on the other hand, in particular by recollection and symbolization.

Keywords Grief · Bereavement · Phenomenology · Ambiguity · Intercorporeality · Grief work · Identification · Representation

✉ Thomas Fuchs
thomas.fuchs@urz.uni-heidelberg.de

[1] Psychiatric Department, University of Heidelberg, Voss-Str.4, D-69115 Heidelberg, Germany

1 Introduction

In the fourth book of his *Confessions*, which he wrote at the age of 45, not long after his election as bishop of Hippo, Augustine reports his grief at the death of a close friend many years ago:

> My heart was utterly darkened by this sorrow and everywhere I looked I saw death. My native place was a torture room to me and my father's house a strange unhappiness. And all the things I had done with him – now that he was gone – became a frightful torment. My eyes sought him everywhere, but they did not see him; and I hated all places because he was not in them, because they could not say to me, 'Look, he is coming,' as they did when he was alive and absent. I became a hard riddle to myself, and I asked my soul why she was so downcast and why this disquieted me so sorely. But she did not know how to answer me (Augustine [1955], Confessions, IV, 4).

Here we find major components of grief described in a poignant way. The world of the bereaved person has changed profoundly: It appears darkened, homeless, alienated, even permeated by death. All that was connected with the loved one now evokes a tormenting pain. All that formerly indicated the reunion with the friend when he was absent, announcing him, as it were, now points to his irretrievable loss. The transformation of the world is accompanied by an alteration of the subject, who becomes a riddle to himself and, in a sense, does not recognize himself any more. Bereavement and grief thus create a "rift in being" and overthrow the hitherto familiar order of existence.

In view of the profound alterations that the subject undergoes in these processes, it seems striking that apart from some exceptions (Dubose 1997, Schmitz 2005, 122 ff., Klugman 2007, Ratcliffe 2015), grief has hardly been a topic of phenomenological research. In what follows, I will investigate the complex phenomenology of grief and its major components, drawing on self-reports, descriptions in the psychological literature and my own clinical practice. As its core characteristic I will consider a conflict of consciousness between a presentifying and a 'de-presentifying' intention: Bereaved individuals experience a fundamental ambiguity between presence and absence, between the present and the past, indeed between two worlds they live in – an ambiguity which may also manifest itself in being painfully torn between acknowledgment and denial of the loss. In this disturbing ambiguity, grief resembles an otherwise quite different emotional state, namely the feeling of uncanniness: The anxious person in an uncanny environment experiences a menacing presence of something which yet remains invisible in the background. Like grief, it is an experience of a presence in absence. Granted, the uncanny hints at something which is not longed for and wished back, but appears as ominous and threatening. And yet, as we will see, there is a closer connection between grief and the uncanny as it might seem at first glance.

My analysis mainly focuses on the loss of a loved one, be it a spouse, parent or child, since here the phenomenon of grief becomes most visible in all its aspects. I will start with the phenomenology of bodily experience in grief which may be regarded as the primary locus where loss and suffering manifest themselves. I will then turn to the dimension of temporality in which the ambiguity of grief finds its first expression. This will lead to an analysis of the transformation of the bereaved person's experience of the

world. My final considerations will address the process of readjustment ("grief work") and its gradual resolution of ambiguity.

A methodological caveat should precede the analysis: Grief is a complex and heterogeneous process, which proceeds and manifests itself in manifold ways, and which is subject to considerable cultural variation and modification. Differing conceptions and beliefs about the nature of death or an afterlife shape the experience to a considerable extent. A phenomenological account of grief attempts to grasp its typical basic structures, yet cannot completely exclude that it also arrives at ideal types that correspond primarily to the European cultural tradition and do not capture forms of grief in other cultures with equal concision. The consideration of some transcultural studies in later parts of this paper can therefore not replace the reference to related research (e.g. Parkes et al. 1997; Barr-Zisowitz 2000; Robben 2009; Irish et al. 2014). Moreover, although the paper contains some examples of complicated grief processes including reactive depression, the phenomenological analysis should by no means be understood in a normative sense, as if it could yield forms of "adequate" or "proper grief".

Notwithstanding these reservations, a phenomenological investigation still assumes that there is a core structure to the experience of grief which despite all variations may be addressed and carved out to a certain extent. This could also be valuable for further comparative anthropological research or even for a transcultural phenomenology (Csordas 1994, 1999).

2 The phenomenology of grief

2.1 Bereavement and the body

The immediate reaction to bereavement, in particular to the sudden and unexpected death of a loved one, resembles in many respects a physical accident or trauma. It is usually described as a "shock" or a "blow", shattering one's existence to its core, and often experienced as a sudden physical weakness, as if losing the ground under one's feet. Feelings of numbness, perplexity and even derealization prevail. The event cannot be grasped; it has already seized the person before she can realize what it actually means. "That is not true!" is a frequent first reaction, already anticipating the later struggle between wish and reality, or one may fall completely speechless. Similarly, the experience of a sudden slowing down of time, as if events passed by in slow motion, prefigures the disturbances of temporality which characterize the later stages of grief (see below). In shock and numbness, the subject is stunned and paralyzed, reduced to his bare existence, unable to react or to take distance from the situation. On the other hand, this numbing may also be interpreted as a defense against otherwise overwhelming affects.

Once the immediate shock and numbing subsides, the actual phenomenon of grief comes to the fore. This includes first a typical pattern of bodily symptoms, which resemble to a certain extent those of depression. The bereaved person feels a heavy weight on his body, he hangs his head and shoulders and walks with a bowed gait. A constant pressure on the chest, shortness of breath and respiratory spasms are only intermittently relieved by sighing, crying or sobbing; frequently one feels literally "choked with grief". The typical facial expression of sorrow (raised inner eyebrows,

wrinkled forehead, drooping mouth) is also derived from a tendency to cry.[1] Often the bereaved person closes his eyes or throws his hands before his face in despair, as if to stop vision. This is accompanied by a general bodily exhaustion, passivity and lack of drive which severely restrict one's initiative and scope of action. Finally, loss of appetite and sleep disturbances also resemble the symptoms of depression.

Grief thus manifests itself primarily in bodily heaviness, passivity, constriction and withdrawal. On the other hand, grief does not show the general bodily rigidity and the loss of affective resonance which is characteristic of depressive illness, often amounting to a complete lack of emotions (Fuchs 2005). Moreover, whereas depression remains a constant and frozen mood, grief typically appears in veritable pangs of grief, which take the form of episodes of acute, nearly physical pain, which are kindled each time the fatal loss comes to mind. The pain is experienced as an oppression and constriction mainly around the heart (heartache), a bitter or burning feeling of tightness in the throat, and often occurs in waves of pain and distress which capture the entire body (Parkes 1972a, 60 ff.). Acute grief makes it obvious that there is no clear separation between "physical" and "psychic pain", for pain can only be experienced by an embodied subject. Like physical pain, grief is the experience of damage to the self, and it is felt as an injury to the lived body. As in emotions in general, bodily feelings may be regarded as the "bodily resonance" of grief (Fuchs and Koch 2014): as the way the embodied subject is intentionally directed towards the loss.

To a certain extent, bereavement may thus be regarded as analogous to a bodily mutilation or even amputation.[2] This may be expressed in statements of bereaved individuals such as: "as if my inside had been torn out and left a terrible wound"; the lost one has been "cut off", "as if half of myself was missing", or similar (Parkes 1972a, 114). C. S. Lewis has aptly described this felt absence in his well-known report of the grief over the loss of his wife ("H." for Helen):

> Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything. But no, that is not quite accurate. There is one place where her absence comes locally home to me, and it is a place I can't avoid. I mean my own body. It had such a different importance while it was the body of H.'s lover. Now it's like an empty house (Lewis 1961, 11f.).[3]

We can see here that the attachment to a loved one is not just an "inner" or "mental" condition, but implies a shared *intercorporeality*. This phenomenon becomes first visible in early childhood, namely in behaviors such as clinging, holding, smiling, calling, affective attunement, etc., which have been investigated by attachment and developmental research (Bowlby 1982; Stern 1985). Also in the absence of the loved one, this intercorporeality remains invisibly present and effective in the experiential

[1] Darwin, in his „Expression of the emotions in man and animals" (1872, 178 ff.), described in detail the facial expression of grief and despair and traced it back to the infant's screaming: „In all cases of distress, whether great or small, our brains tend through long habit to send an order to certain muscles to contract, as if we were still infants at the point of screaming out" (l.c., 192 f.).

[2] This analogy also applies in the opposite direction: „The emotion most persons feel when told that they must lose a limb has been well compared with the emotion of grief at the death of a loved one" (Kessler 1951); see also the descriptions by Parkes (1972b).

[3] Lewis also uses the comparison to an amputation (p. 61).

field, namely as felt attraction, tendencies towards approximation, or merely as background awareness of the other's atmospheric presence. This is not to say that intimate relationships usually amount to a kind of fusion – the inappropriability of the other *as other* which Levinas (1969) has emphasized may well co-exist with a deep-felt connection on the intercorporeal level.

This felt presence is the result of an accumulated history of encounters and interactions with the loved one that has left its traces in one's lived body and lived space. Drawing on the concept of body memory (Casey 2000; Fuchs 2012, 2017) we may speak of a *dyadic body memory* which consists in the shared habitualities of interaction, created through mutual gaze, speech, touch, embracement, erotic or sexual encounter. Thus, in the course of sharing their lives, both partners have become part of an intercorporeal sphere with its specific style of greeting, talking, smiling, walking together, etc. Bereavement means a separation of this intercorporeality. The threads of mutual attachment and belonging are cut off, and the wound or pain that is now felt bears resemblance to an amputation of the "dyadic body" that one has formed with the other, and to the phantom pain that the amputee experiences.[4]

2.2 Alienation of world and self

This separation also pertains to the shared world. Living together with a loved one also creates a sphere of common habits and practices (laying the table for two, washing up together, shared leisure activities, meeting friends, and the like), and with it a consensual meaning of familiar objects, places and memories. The bereaved person, however, is torn out of this shared world. Now the familiar environment turns into a place of painful absence, emptiness and even repelling alienation, as already observed by Augustine:

> "My native place was a torture room to me and my father's house a strange unhappiness" (IV, 4). – "All things looked gloomy, even the very light itself. Whatsoever was not what he was, was now repulsive and hateful, except my groans and tears, for in those alone I found a little rest" (l.c., IV, 7).

To his surprise and sorrow, the bereaved individual discovers how large a part of his customary activities implied the relationship to the deceased and has now lost its significance. All impulses and activities that depended on that implicit dyadic background become meaningless. Bereavement thus undermines "a previously taken-for-granted sense of what matters and how it matters" (Ratcliffe 2015, 206). In his report, C. S. Lewis also describes this frustration:

> So many roads led to H. I set out on one of them. But now there's an impassable frontier-post across it. So many roads once; now so many culs-de-sac (Lewis 1961, 47).

[4] This description of a shared body memory would be compatible with Bowlby's (1982) idea that bereavement also re-actualizes early experiences of separation from the mother, which function as a prototype of later losses.

If the bereaved takes part in everyday life nevertheless, he experiences alienation and loneliness all the more. "I go to social functions, but it is like being in a play; it doesn't really concern me" (Parkes 1972a). The alienation is partly due to the *exclusivity* of grief itself: its gravity and authority does not allow for opening oneself to other, possibly competing feelings and related activities – they would be experienced as deserting or even betraying the loved one. This concerns not only feelings of joy, hilarity or a sense of humor, but also emotions of anger or reproach against the deceased which are frequently repressed and replaced by an idealization. On the other hand, there is also a cultural restriction implied: society imposes a certain behavior on the bereaved, leading them to suppress feelings and impulses that would be found inappropriate. Accordingly, the atmosphere of grief also radiates into the environment, strongly prohibiting others from showing emotions of joy, making jokes, etc., in the presence of a mourner.

As a result of this exclusiveness of grief – in other words, its deep incongruence with most of the everyday occupations, tasks, goals, interests and pleasures – the bereaved seclude themselves more and more from the world which for them has lost its previously shared meanings. Therefore grief is not sufficiently described by the usual concept of emotion as a rather short-lived, intentional feeling episode (e.g. LeDoux 1996; Scherer 2005). Even if the deceased person as the intentional object of grief is not always present in the mourner's mind, grief nevertheless remains as background feelings of lack, loss and isolation, which like a mood tinge one's whole experience and fill the environment with an atmosphere of sorrow and futility. Thus, severe grief may also be described as a pervasive "existential feeling" (Ratcliffe 2008) of not-belonging to the world, of detachment and even of derealisation: everyday life seems empty, hollow and unreal; this reality is no longer one's own.

Since the loss of the shared world concerns the core identity of the bereaved person, the death of the loved one also means a *contraction* or even a *partial loss of self*. This is also expressed by Augustine:

> Someone spoke rightly of his friend as being 'his soul's other half' – for I felt that my soul and his soul were but one soul in two bodies. Consequently, my life was now a horror to me because I did not want to live as a half self (l.c., IV, 6).

Thus, the bereaved person's withdrawal from the world does not lead to a self-sufficient autarchy, for his sense of self essentially implied a *sense of being-with* which he now lacks. We are dealing here with a crucial aspect of grief that I want to consider more closely.

Like hardly any other psychic phenomenon, grief discloses the fact that as human beings we are fundamentally related to, and in need of others, that indeed our self is permeable and open to them. Just as the living being constitutes itself through delimitation from the environment and yet remains dependent on the continuous exchange with it through semipermeable membranes, the self develops from early childhood on through differentiation from significant others as well as in connection and interaction with them. Later on, close and intimate relationships particularly reveal that selfhood and otherness are not mutually exclusive but interdependent, for such relationships basically imply two moments (Aron et al. 1991): one may be called *self-expansion*, meaning that the other opens up potentialities for my self-realization which I would not

have without him or her (extending my scope of knowledge, action, experience, etc.). The other is *identification*, meaning that aspects, characteristics or actions of the other are taken into one's self, as it were, so that, for example, his success or failure also become my own, just as his joy, sorrow or other feelings affect my self as well. Moreover, closeness and intimacy manifest themselves in being able to share one's innermost with the other, and, even in his absence, in living through one's own experiences "from his point of view", as if he were present.

This expansion and mutual overlap of selves may be regarded as the most essential presupposition of grief. For it means that the other is present for me both *as other*, as the real person, and as the "*other-of-myself*", as part of my self-experience. This renders me fundamentally vulnerable, for in losing the other, I lose "half of my self", as it were – the potentialities of experience and self-realization that were bound to the other, and the parts of my self and identity that were represented by him. Reversing the mutual self-extension of being-together, bereavement leads to a contraction of the self, which is expressed in the bodily experience of constriction or violation described above. Moreover, the overlapping self-other structure of intimate relationships is the basis of the deep ambiguity of grief that I will consider more closely below: the other is lost as a real person, while he is still present in my inmost self-experience and thus "cannot be gone".[5]

Only in passing I want to add that here are the roots of depressive reactions that may arise from bereavement: if the self could hitherto only stabilize itself through the relationship and identification with the other, then it is now not only thrown back on itself but also deprived of the central pillar of its own worth and self-esteem. The turn against oneself, consisting of self-degradation, self-accusation and feelings of insufficiency, is the hallmark of depression as distinct from normal grief, as Freud (1917) remarked. The way into either grief or depression bifurcates at the question that bereavement implicitly poses to the subject, namely: "Am I still able and worthy to live on as an integral person without the other?"

2.3 Temporality

I now turn to the dimension of temporality in which the fundamental ambiguity of grief comes to the fore.

The shared intercorporeality with the loved one that I mentioned above also means an implicit *contemporality,* namely a dyadic time of living together, which always continues and grows in accordance with the general or world time. We are dealing here with a pre-reflective level of temporality, namely *implicit* or *lived time* (Fuchs 2013): it may be regarded as living in the ongoing present, usually while being absorbed in some activity, without explicit awareness of the time passing, and without conscious recollection of the past or anticipation of the future.

For humans as social beings, this basic layer of time includes a tacit sense of being temporally connected with others, which Minkowski (1970, p. 72) has called "lived

[5] Of course, these general considerations would have to be differentiated in accordance with the fundamental cultural variety of concepts of the self, namely as being more autonomous and separated or more open and dependent on others; on this, see Markus and Kitayama (1991).

synchronism". From early childhood on, intersubjective synchronicity is constituted through the presence of others and through our shared reference to the world, as in joint attention or joint action. From a Husserlian perspective too, the temporalization of consciousness may be related to a transcendental intersubjectivity: present time, or the "now", always means the actual, imagined or at least implicit presence of others with whom we, in principle at least, co-experience the world (Rodemeyer 2006; Fuchs 2013). This basic or background contemporality characterizes close or intimate, long-standing relationships in particular.

In bereavement and loss, however, lived time sustains a sharp rift: "now" and "no longer" are disconnected and create a fundamental division of time. What hitherto had been an unquestioned continuum of living together is cut off from the present all at once and turns into a lost and irrevocable past. Now on the one hand, the general or world time "runs on" and threatens to separate the bereaved person more and more from the lost object which sinks back into the past. On the other hand, for him this dyadic past is still present. In various ways, which I will explore in the next section, he cannot accept or even realize the pastness of the past. However, this means that world time and dyadic time have dissociated and run on separate tracks. In the case of the former, the loved person is dead and the world moves on, in the case of the latter, he or she is still vividly present. In a sense, he is even no longer subject to the progression of time and remains unchanged. Even a year later, the memories of him may be as vivid as they were at the beginning.

The mourner thus lives in two worlds; one might be inclined to say, in the present and in the past. But it would be more adequate to say: in two conflicting forms of present, namely on the one hand the ongoing reality of everyday life, on the other hand the persisting presence of the loved one. The temporality of grief may be described as a separation of two forms of time, one flowing, one arrested, which become more and more desynchronized (Fuchs 2001, 2013). In a profound report of her experience after her son's sudden death from a heart failure, Denise Riley describes an "acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow", leading to a "freezing of time" (Riley 2012, 7). It is a condition "in which time, for years on end, is arrested" (l.c., 9). This peculiar "a-temporality" or "timeless time" at least maintains the connection with her son:

> "[You're] inside two lives. For if timelessness is the time of your dead, you will go with them in their timelessness. (…) They draw you across to their side, while you incorporate them on your side" (l.c., 39f.).

Yet in a sense, implicit or lived time as a medium of living has come to a standstill:

> "… there is no medium left through which to move anywhere. We were drifting through former time like underwater creatures furnished with gills that they didn't notice they had, until they were fished up out of their element and their breathing apparatus failed" (35). – "Your surrounding fluid of intuitive time has abruptly drained away" (47).

The usual temporality includes an implicit anticipation of the future – in the most general sense corresponding to Husserl's "*and so on*" as the unquestioned assumption

of the continuation of experience.[6] This self-evidence of time flowing onward into the future is now challenged:

> "Unanticipated death does such violence to your ordinary suppositions, as if the whole faculty of induction by which you'd previously lived has crumbled. Its textbook illustration was always, 'Will the sun rise tomorrow?' But now that induction itself is no more, the sun can't any longer be relied on to rise" (27).

Moreover, with the standstill of time, the future is no longer experienced as an open horizon of possibilities and projects:

> "His sudden death has dropped like a guillotine blade to slice right through my old expectation that my days would stream onwards into my coming life" (25).
> "… *there is no time to seize*" (26).

> "No plans can be entertained, although you keep up an outward show of doing so (51).

Stuck in a frozen or timeless time, and captivated by an enduring past, bereaved persons abstain from making plans or projects and from taking part in the ongoing life of others. Instead they frequently preserve and cherish the memorials of the loved ones, their room, furniture, clothes or other belongings, thus "presentifying" the deceased. This may amount to a denial of death: the bereaved then revolt against the relentless course of the real world and by their behavior refuse to acknowledge it.

2.4 Ambiguous presence

These considerations of temporality have already lead us to the core conflict of grief, namely the ambiguity of presence and absence. In her reflections, Riley describes it as an ambivalence between knowing and feeling:

> "Knowing and also not knowing that he is dead. Or I 'know' it but privately I can't feel it to be so (…) These fine gradations of admitting the brute facts of the case, while not feeling them (…) Half realizing while half doubting, assenting while demurring, conceding while finding it ludicrously implausible …" (Riley 2012, 17).

However, the ambiguity also characterizes one's perceptions; this already begins with the loss itself. The very impression of the dead body reveals an unsettling ambivalence between presence and absence of the person. The transformation of the hitherto warm, animated, living body into the rigid, impermeable and repelling corpse creates a feeling of oppression and dismay. The familiar intercorporeal and affective intentions bounce off the pure materiality of the corpse. And yet the impression may

[6] "The real world only rests upon the constantly conceived presumption that experience will continue to unfold in the same constitutive style" (Husserl 1974, § 99, p. 258).

also waver in an uncanny way, for at the same time the dead body is still the deceased person.[7] Uncanniness does not only arise in situations of ominous, invisible threat or a hidden presence, but also in the face of ambiguity whether something is alive or dead, as for example a robot, a zombie, a vampire, or in this case, a corpse (Jentsch 1906; Fuchs 2010). It is as if the border between the dominion of life and the dominion of death has become blurred.

The resulting conflict between life and death as two concurrent and competing ontological realms may gain a more general significance which is pointed out by Augustine:

> And I marveled that other mortals went on living since he whom I had loved as if he would never die was now dead. And I marveled all the more that I, who had been a second self to him, could go on living when he was dead (l.c., IV, 6).

The presence of death which has broken up in the midst of life can also exert a pull on the bereaved individual. Not infrequently passive death wishes or suicidal thoughts may arise (Clayton et al. 1968; Parkes 1972a, 73), and suicide rates are indeed increased in periods after bereavement.[8] Depending on the cultural and religious background, the dominion of death may represent a powerful and uncanny reality beyond the everyday world.[9] It has to be closed again through manifold rituals in order to banish its spell – I will return to this later on. But even when the deceased are not exerting their main influence from a transcendent world, they are still experienced as being present in this world. The bereaved continue to feel, perceive and behave *as if* their loved ones were still alive, although they know intellectually that they are dead in reality.[10]

This "as-if presence" comes in manifold ways. To begin with, the whole environment is permeated by affordances pointing to the lost person:

[7] Strictly speaking, already the grammar of „he is dead" is ambiguous – the present tense indicates that „he" is still an existing subject.

[8] Since Emile Durkheim's classic 1897 monograph on suicide, this has been repeatedly demonstrated, the risk being greatest for the period immediately following the loss (Durkheim 1897; Kreitman 1988; Erlangsen et al. 2004; Agerbo 2005). Thus, MacMahon and Pugh (1965) found an increased ratio for suicide in the first 4 years after the death of the spouse (2.5 times higher compared to the general population in the first year, 1.5 times higher in year 2–4). In a Swiss study, the suicide rates were highest in the first week after bereavement and still significantly increased in the first months (Ajdacic-Gross et al. 2008).

[9] It seems plausible to assume with Assmann (2005, 2006) and Haas (2002, 146) that the longing and pain of grief, combined with the still felt presence of the loved one, have been one of the strongest sources of the belief in a transcendent world and in immortality. Death, grief and contact to this other world are obviously connected in the various mortuary cults which we find at the origins of human religion and culture (see section 5 below).

[10] Granted, at this point we face a methodological dilemma: The analysis of ambiguous presence obviously cannot proceed in complete „ontological neutrality", since already the characterization „as if" implies an appraisal that would not be shared by cultures with a taken for granted presence of the dead as ghosts, demons or other personal entities in the everyday world. Thus, the very term „as-if presence" already presupposes, at least in principle, a separation of the world of the living from the dead (independent from whether or not a survival after death is assumed). Here we meet the above-mentioned methodological limitations of a phenomenological analysis that is primarily oriented to Western grief processes. Nevertheless, at least some kind of ambiguity of the presence of the deceased probably constitutes a basic experience in all cultures (on this, see section 5 below).

> After my father's death, all objects that he had collected and been living with seemed completely useless to me at first, because they had only been animated by his presence. In the process, however, his presence condensed in them, and they took on an auratic character (report of a 32-year old woman from my own practice).

Similarly, vacant clothing or familiar belongings evoke the loved one's presence, while in the next moment painfully reminding their absence. Routes jointly taken, shared everyday routines, familiar noises and anticipated encounters all belong to the intercorporeal memory which still harbors the deceased. This habitual memory manifests itself in involuntary bodily protentions – hearing the door at the time the partner used to come, expecting him to sit in his accustomed chair, to call on the phone when it is ringing, etc. – and projects his presence into the environment. Thus, one young woman, after the death of her husband, "… was repeatedly glancing over her right shoulder. She did this, she said, 'because he was always on my right'" (Parkes 1972a, 68).

This felt persistence of the loved ones may also be understood as mitigating the pain of the loss by retaining contact with them. The "continuing bonds" theory of grief put forward by Klass et al. (1996) builds upon these experiences in order to challenge the dominant "breaking bonds" concept of grief in recent Western culture (I will return to this below). However, even if this adaptive and relieving function is acknowledged, the juxtaposition of two worlds also can also create a cognitive-affective conflict, namely an 'ontological confusion' about which of these worlds is 'more real', sometimes leading to the point of derealization.[11]

The degree to which the 'as if' of the presentification is still acknowledged may of course vary. But the stronger the power of attachment and longing, the less can the awareness of the 'as if' be maintained. Then the presence of the deceased is felt overwhelmingly ("I can almost feel his skin or touch his hands", Parkes 1972a, 68) and overrides critical reality testing. The loved ones may literally be searched for in familiar places ("I can't help looking for him everywhere"; "it's as if I was drawn towards him", l.c., 64 f.), and actions are taken which assume their participation: one sets the table and adds an extra dish; one prepares things to be given to them at the next opportunity, and the like. From an attachment perspective, this searching behavior may be taken to show that on the affective level, the lost loved one is registered as simply missing, not as dead (Archer 1999; Shaver and Tancredy 2001).

At this stage, people frequently experience what has been called "after death communications". The deceased appear in dreams or visions; they are being talked to or asked for their opinion like imaginary companions (Parkes 1972b; Brown and Stoudemire 1983), as in the following case:

> A young navy pilot lost a close friend; he remained a vivid part of his imagery, not in terms of a religious survival but in terms of an imaginary companion. He ate with him and talked over problems with him, for instance, discussing with him his plan of joining the Air Corps. Even six months later, he denied the fact that the boy was no longer with him (Parkes 1972a).

[11] This is expressed by one widow in Parkes' study: „I feel I'm waiting for something to happen, for the unreal feeling to pass … I feel this is a different life … as if there is another life going on somewhere else and I'll waken up." In this ‚other life' her husband was still alive and well (Parkes 1972a, 85).

Illusions of the deceased, usually misinterpretations of some occurring sight or sound (e.g. of another person or a voice), are quite common after bereavement, but hypnagogic or similar hallucinations may also occur.[12] Though realizing the overwhelming wish, such realization also borders on the uncanny, for as Freud remarked, "an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary" (Freud 2003, 150). The following example illustrates such a presence:

> A 62 year-old woman witnessed the death of her beloved father on an intensive care unit. As she reported, she felt neither grief nor pain, but was completely frozen. At the funeral, she could not cry and was unable to grasp her father's death; it did not seem as if he was in the grave. Soon afterwards, she felt that he was still around her and had to tell her something important. She stayed in his rooms for hours, could hear his steps and kept silently talking with him, even receiving his replies which she did not experience as given by herself (Fuchs 2000, 275).

Again we may consider the analogy of this kind of presence to an amputation and the subsequent occurrence of a phantom limb. Most amputees have a persisting awareness of the lost limb (one year after the amputation in 80% of cases, cf. Parkes 1972a, 203). They often forget that it is missing, and inadvertently try to use it, or to withdraw it when it is 'threatened'. In other words, habitual and actual body come into conflict with each other in a disturbing way. Just as the amputated limb is irrefutably felt even though it is missing, the deceased person is present even though his body is no longer visible. He is anticipated in bodily protentions just as the missing limb one tries to lean on, and there is a similar surprise and disappointment when the failure is realized. Of course, the phantom limb is a circumscribed and localized part of the body schema, whereas the presence of the lost person remains rather vague and variable. Nevertheless, in both cases there is a similar unsettling 'ontological ambiguity' of presence and absence in lived space, a conflict which neither the amputees nor the bereaved are able to resolve.

2.5 Grief as readjustment ("grief work")

As we have seen, grief is characterized by a persistent conflict between a presentifying and a de-presentifying intention that compete with one another for dominance in the experiential field. Correspondingly, the mourner oscillates between the intruding impression of the deceased's presence and the reality of his irrevocable absence. A bond is ruptured, but even in the rupture the mourner remains connected to the loved one, often more strongly than before. It is precisely this contradiction which can seem unbearable

[12] Rees (1971), in a study of 300 bereaved men and women, found a sense of presence of the dead spouse in 39%, and illusions or hallucinations in 14%; see also Kalish and Reynolds (1973). However, a significant decline in reported illusions and hallucinations of the deceased was found over the course of the first year of bereavement (Grimby 1993).

to him. He may revolt against the fact of death, accuse himself or the doctors of omissions, rage against fate or God, and in another state he may bear and accept the loss in silent sorrow.

On the other hand, the interplay between presence and absence may also be regarded as the necessary concomitant of a prolonged adjustment process. Given the significance of the dyadic background of shared feelings, habits and practices, it seems obvious that this framework of one's life cannot be changed overnight. A gradual adjustment necessarily includes an alternation between habitual immersion in activities that implicate the deceased, and repeated experiences of absence and negation of one's expectations. Granted, this may sometimes include elements of avoidance and denial of the loss, thus lending the process of grief a conflictual acuity. This was emphasized by Freud somewhat prosaically in "Mourning and Melancholia":

> Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachment to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition (…) This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless, its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the object is psychically prolonged (Freud 1917, 244f.).

Of course, this is the language of drive economy, but it soberly describes what Freud called the process of "grief work":

> Each single one of the memories and situation of expectancy which demonstrate the libido's attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists; and the ego, confronted as it were with the question whether it shall share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished (l.c., 255).

This is a rather unsparing description which makes it clear that the process of grief also means a self-rescue from the uncanny pull of death. What Freud does not take into account, however, is the way the relation to the lost person is re-established on a new level. Since Freud's time, the goals of detachment, breaking of bonds, and 'getting over it' as soon as possible have been ever more emphasized by postmodern capitalist culture, manifesting themselves in psychiatric diagnostic manuals by reduced grief periods that are conceded before a diagnosis of depression is made.[13] In this way, grief tends to become pathologized. However, a quick detachment should hardly be regarded as the preferable outcome of grief; I will come back to this below. For now, Freud has to

[13] Thus, in DSM-4 a severe grief reaction to the loss of a loved one could last two months before a diagnosis of depression was possible (APA 1994). In DSM-5, however, even this short period conceded for „normal grief" has been dropped, and a depression can now be diagnosed right after the loss provided the symptoms are severe enough (APA 2013).

be granted that the process of grief cannot be successful without ultimately acknowledging a fundamentally changed reality. Culture has always scaffolded this process through "rites of passage", such as funeral or cremation ceremonies, condolence, legitimate mourning periods, often with a final concluding ritual, commemoration days, and the like (Hertz 1907/1960, van Gennep 1909, Rosenblatt et al. 1976). Their function is to gradually establish and confirm the new order, and not in the least, to clearly demarcate the dominions of life and death from each other again.

This is also mirrored in the myths of death, grief and farewell which can be found in most cultures. Most prominent in European culture is the myth of Orpheus and his futile attempt to regain Eurydice from Hades; similar tales are present in other traditions, however.[14] As Haas (2006) has pointed out, it is not a fatal mistake that Orpheus looks back at his wife. His struggle for his lost love is actually bound to fail in order for the living to be able to live on, and for the dead to actually die.[15] In most cultures, the relation to the dead is ambivalent, for it is as important to maintain the connection with them as it is to prevent their return as ghosts and revenants. This is often reflected by an intermediate realm where the dead are thought to dwell, until after a year or more they are finally released from the community of the living and integrated into the community of the ancestors. By thus "establishing a society for the dead, the society of the living regularly recreates itself" (Hertz 1907/1960, 72). This usually requires a ritual farewell or a second burial of the dead which has been termed "second death" in anthropology (Hertz l.c., Cipoletti 1983, Haas 2006, Assmann 2007). Through this, the uncanny or even threatening deceased are transformed into benign ancestral forces which are often installed and worshipped in household shrines or a similar form of symbolic presence.

To repeat, grief work cannot proceed as long as death is not acknowledged. Where it remains questionable and unclarified as in the case of missing persons, the relatives are left in a state of persistent and tormenting ambiguity, torn between hope and resignation. The power of the wish still anticipates a potential reunion even against all odds. Thus, in South American military dictatorships of the last century, thousands of victims were arrested and later on disappeared without any trace, the so-called *desapparecidos.* Careful measures were taken to let the corpses vanish, for example to dump them far out in the sea. Again, we are touching here on the uncanny: The ambiguity, intended as a part of terror, left the relatives desperate but unable to mourn their loved ones and thus to gain a new future. They were retained in the no man's land between life and death.

The process of grief may also be arrested when the usual rites of passage are interrupted in less dramatic ways, as in the following example:

> A 55-year-old married woman was admitted to the psychiatric department with a severe depressive episode. For more than two years, she had been taking care of her beloved mother who suffered from cancer. After she had eventually died, it turned out that she had left her corpse to the medical department for scientific

[14] For example Isis and Osiris in Egypt, the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, the myth of Izanagi in Japan, etc. On this, cf. Hultkrantz (1957), Cipolletti (2003) and Haas (2006, pp. 126–129).

[15] In the myth Charon refuses to ferry Orpheus over the Styx again after his having lost Eurydice. This indicates that the demarcation between life and death has been drawn again; cf. Haas 2002, 147.

purposes, meaning that since then there had been no funeral, no burial, nor a grave. One year later, the patient still felt the bodily proximity of her mother, often in a frightening way. When falling asleep, she frequently heard her voice asking where she was and why she left her alone for so long. On a holiday by the sea, she heard her mother calling again and started to drown herself, but was eventually rescued by her husband. From then on, she no longer dared to enter the balcony of her flat in the 6th floor for fear of jumping down in a suicidal impulse. She could no longer take part in social life, kept musing about the past and possible faults she had committed, and felt more and more desperate (case report from my own practice).

Here, the lack of a corpse and grave obviously lead to a prolonged and finally arrested grief process, turning the beloved mother into an ambivalent revenant who kept exerting an uncanny pull on her daughter. The resulting depression could be successfully treated in the further course by gradually exposing the patient to all the possibilities of acknowledgment and farewell that she had been refused or that she had avoided herself before.

2.6 Re-integration

Grief needs resistance and weight of reality in order to gradually let go of the wish, the longing, and the searching one feels. On this precondition, the bereaved now undergo a complex and protracted process of transformation. They have to integrate a profound change of their world into their self-concept, to make sense of the loss, and to reinvest time, attention and energy into other spheres of their life. The question is "Who am I now that my loved one is gone?" Since this means a fundamental re-organization of one's identity, grief proceeds in phases and waves, and, compared with other emotions, lasts unusually long, mostly over months, sometimes over years. However, it offers the chance to ultimately gain a new relation to the deceased and to resolve the ambiguity in two complementary ways: The one means taking the lost person inward, namely through incorporation and *identification*, the other proceeds by way of *representation,* be it by recollection or by symbolization. I will take a closer look at both processes of integration:

(a) *Identification.* The persisting presence of the lost person in the mourner's embodied memory not only projects him or her into the surroundings. It also enables a mimetic process by which the loved one is gradually incorporated, as it were, instead of being searched in vain outside. Sometimes this bodily mimesis or identification manifests itself early on, namely in the transitory acquisition of symptoms belonging to the last illness of the deceased. For example, a bereaved person may feel a constant heartache resembling the suffering of her father who died from a heart attack (Brown and Stoudemire 1983).

In later stages of grief, the mimetic incorporation proceeds more subtly. One can frequently observe the appearance of traits of the deceased in the behavior of the bereaved. They may be observed or find themselves gesturing or walking in the same manner, or they may take over the loved one's former habits, interests and activities by

an often unconscious identification.[16] As Freud himself remarked, "if one has lost a love object or has had to give it up, one often compensates oneself by identifying oneself with it" (Freud 1933, 91).[17] However, instead of the detachment or the cutting of bonds which Freud considered the purpose of grief work, it may rather lead to a new inner presence of the deceased which does not get in conflict with external reality any longer. The loved one is now "in me", within my own field of emotional experience; still present, but as an inner, comforting presence, without having to be searched for or "found" outside.

(b) *Representation.* Instead of the ambiguous presence of the deceased in external space which continuously oscillates between an as-if and an illusion, the process of grief may lead to various forms of representation of the loved one. Here the loss is acknowledged, which means that the intentional mode of representation is definitely an as-if mode, without remaining ambiguity.

- Representation is realized, on the one hand, by *recollection:* Remembering does not retain the deceased in the memory of the body and its implicit protentions but represents him in imagination, yet in clear awareness of his absence. This may even clarify the memory itself, a phenomenon that is found in C. S. Lewis' account: "And suddenly at the very moment when, so far, I mourned H least, I remembered her best. (…) You can't see anything properly while your eyes are blurred with tears" (Lewis 1961, 44 f.). Explicit recollection or looking back, by representing the loved one in clear memory, is different from the felt sense of continuous presence: it represents the past *as past*. Yet precisely as such, the past may also retain a consolatory indelibility: what we have shared and experienced together remains and cannot be extinguished.

- *Iconic and symbolic representation* is the particular way which culture offers to bridge the gap to the lost object. Thus, memorial rites, commemoration days etc., are institutionalized forms of shared representation. Similarly, images, statues, gravestones, and other memorials represent and substitute the lost object instead of embodying or enacting it. The representation even need no longer be mimetic or iconic; instead, it may symbolize the object by the abstract relation of signifier and signified, such as inscriptions or memorial slabs. Presupposing the loss and thus the negation of the object, the as-if of the symbol implies at the same time the sublation of the negation on a higher level, which is precisely the meaning of a re-presentation.

- Combining remembering and symbolic representation, *narration* is the final way of bridging the gulf to the lost person. Telling the story of one's relation with the loved one to others is a way of coping with the loss by raising and integrating it into an intersubjective sphere – the sphere of the symbolic. It

[16] In the following case, the identification is quite conscious: „My husband's in me, right through and through. I can feel him in me doing everything. … I enjoy the things my husband used to do. It's like a thought in my head – what he would say or do" (Parkes 1972b, 100). Similarly, Riley writes: "Meanwhile I'll try to incorporate J's [her son's] best qualities of easy friendliness, warmth, and stoicism, and I shall carry him on in that way. Which is the only kind of resurrection of the dead that I know about" (Riley 2012, 22).

[17] On the psychoanalytic concept of identification, see Bowlby 1980, 22–37.

implies the possibility of sharing one's grief with others and embedding it in a "we" – the community of the mourning. On a collective or cultural level, we find a similar movement: The shared narratives, stories and myths about ancestors or primordial founders which are passed on to the descendants may also be regarded as forms of coping with collective grief about the initial loss. This was, for example, one of the functions of the gospels for the early Christian community helping to overcome their grief about Jesus' death and non-return.

These various forms of representation all share acknowledgment of loss as well as indirect reconnection to the lost person by means of an 'as-if' that is fully recognized. They also signify changed temporality: Only now the past has really become past, and the dead have really died – which is precisely the condition of a new, symbolic form of their presence.[18]

If we consider both ways of integration, i.e. the internal presence of identification and the external representation, we find that taken together they may form a new balance: through identification, the attachment to the loved one has gained a new form of continuity, while through the as-if of representation the irreversibility of time is acknowledged nevertheless. Thus, the solution of the central conflict of grief consists in a kind of "double book-keeping": the inner, felt reality and the external, objective reality may now coexist without getting in conflict with each other. Through this process of re-integration, the blurred border between life and death is both redrawn and bridged at the same time.

3 Conclusion

I have described several dimensions of grief, ranging from bodily to temporal to ontological aspects concerning the relation of imagination and reality. As the core of grief, I have elaborated the conflict between a wishful, presentifying and a realistic, de-presentifying intention; in other words, an ambiguity between presence and absence, and often between denial and acknowledgment. The process of grief may considerably vary in duration, stages and individual ways of coping. However, the final resolution of the central ambiguity will be crucially based on the 'as-if' mode in two ways:

[18] This process of the symbolization of death characterizes the development of human culture in general; on this, cf. Balzer from a psychoanalytic point of view: „The affirmation of the absence opened up the symbolic transitional space of reminiscence, of temporality and of the possible narration of the non-visible" (Balzer 2009, 105; my translation).

Similarly, pictorial scientist Belting describes the burial and other funeral ceremonies as a symbolic or social death by which native cultures attempt to overcome the haunting presence of biological death: "At a point of time which in several cultures may be months or years later, the catastrophe of death is exchanged by the definition of death, not a definition through terms, but through a ceremonial action in which the community re-establishes its own order […] With it, the dead finds his place […] The social event [of death] replaces the biological event" (Belting 1996, 108; my translation).

Finally, drawing on ancient Egypt and other cultures, Egyptologist Jan Assmann (2005, 2006, 2011) has extensively demonstrated how the origins of cultural memory may be derived from the rituals of death, burial, mourning, and collective recollection; death could even be seen as a „generator of culture" (Assmann 2005).

(1) on realizing the as-if of all seeming external "presences" of the loved one, and
(2) on using the as-if precisely as a mode of recollection and representation.

In this process, the deceased is lost a second time, as it were, and the order of linear time is established again. And yet, the relation to the loved one is also regained in two complementary ways: (1) in the way of incorporation and identification, which retains the affective bonds to the lost person within an inner sphere that is not subject to linear time; (2) through representational or symbolic modes of relatedness and commemoration. This is in accordance with the growing literature on "continuing bonds" which suggests that in typical grief processes relationships with the deceased are reshaped and sustained rather than abandoned (Klass et al. 1996).[19]

The as-if signifies a peculiar mode of intentionality (cf. Fuchs forthc.). These two seemingly innocuous particles acquire highly dynamic power and tension when joined together. The comparing particle "as" brings two items into analogy or similarity, whereas the "if" questions or even suspends the comparison again, as it is only counterfactual. In other words, something given is compared with something other whose unreality or impossibility is declared at the same time. Thus, the expression "as if" itself shows an ambiguous structure: It requires a kind of double intention or "double book-keeping" which holds both items, the real and the irreal, present and separated at the same time. We may now conclude that the as-if is the way the ambiguity of grief is both expressed and resolved. For the as-if implies the negation of the illusory presence of the deceased as well as the affirmation of his symbolic presence: No, it is only *as if* the deceased were present in external space, in fact he is not; and yes, it is *as if* the lost person is still present now, namely in form of a representation or a symbol. Realizing the as-if means, on the one hand, to restrict the power of the affect which refuses to let the deceased be dead; and on the other hand, to open up the inner space in which the relation to him or her may be regained and maintained.

The as-if thus signifies the weak, yet insistent and finally decisive power of the "symbolic species" (Deacon 1998) by which humans are able to overcome the overwhelming impact of affective reality, to restrict the power of the wish, and to escape the uncanny pull of death. It is arguable that symbolic human culture has crucially developed through the struggle with death (Assmann 2006, 2011), not only by installing the earliest rites of burial, but also by establishing the as-if of the image, the memorial, the recollection and narration – both as a means of demarcating the domain of life from the domain of death and as a means of bridging this boundary again through the modes of representation. It is in this sense that we may regard the process of grief as one of the most important fundaments of human culture.

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[19] Despite this important shift of perspective, it should not be overlooked that according to recent empirical studies the emphasis on „continuing bonds" may not be invariably adaptive (Field et al. 2003, 2005).

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