

DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF REVISITED: DISCOUNTING HOPE AND LOVE

THOMAS ATTIG, PH.D.
Bowling Green State University

ABSTRACT

Kenneth Doka's two anthologies on disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989, 2002) are filled with discussions of the effects of disenfranchisement and its scope. The present article furthers reflection on both topics. It first explores the nature of disenfranchisement as a denial of a mourner's "right to grieve" and analyzes the empathic, political, and ethical failures involved in this denial. It then notes that the literature on the subject is dominated by treatments of the disenfranchisement of suffering. And it urges that the scope of disenfranchisement extends to efforts to overcome suffering, the constructive labors of hope and love at the heart of grieving response to bereavement.

Although our world is full of suffering,
it is full also of the overcoming of it.
— *Helen Keller*

DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF AS DENIAL OF A RIGHT

Doka, in the "Introduction" to his 2nd volume, offers a succinct definition of disenfranchised grief: "Survivors are not accorded a 'right to grieve'" (Doka, 2002, p. 5). However, he does not explicitly articulate an understanding of what it means to have a "right" to grieve. The following is offered as clarification: Rights are most readily understood as entitlements. Most commonly, holders of rights of the type in question are entitled to do or experience something (e.g., to worship, speak

their minds, or have privacy). And they are entitled to non-interference from others in the free exercise of their rights.

Rights, then, are strongly analogous to tickets. Just as ticket holders are free to use a ticket or not, so holders of rights are free to choose whether to exercise them or not. And, ordinarily, just as no one is obligated to use a ticket, no one is obligated to exercise a right. But, just as a ticket holder must be granted admission or a seat when he or she presents a ticket, so others are obligated to honor a right by allowing its holder to exercise it when he or she chooses to do so. They may not interfere in or prohibit the exercise of the right.

On this understanding, the right to grieve entitles a bereaved person to grieve in a manner and when he or she needs or chooses to, free of interference from others. No one is obligated to grieve or to do so in a particular way. In response, others are obligated to honor the right and refrain from interfering in the experiences and efforts of grieving. Disenfranchisement of grief, as such interference, violates the mourner's right to grieve.

But more can be said about the kind of right that the right to grieve is. Some rights are conventions established by governments or other institutions, for example, rights to vote, own property, drive a truck, park, or access facilities restricted to "members only." Other rights are matters of human right, essential to human dignity, not simply conventions (though they may be subject to some conventional limitations), e.g., rights to speak, worship, receive a fair trial, enter into relationships, or not be enslaved. Clearly, the "right to grieve" is not something that governments or institutions can rightfully establish by convention. Unfortunately, then, the term "disenfranchise" misses the mark by suggesting that, like the practice of denying someone the right to vote (the franchise), it is a matter of denying them entitlement to do something that it is within the power of institutions to grant. Rather, the "right to grieve" is a matter of human dignity. It is grounded in recognition of the nature of human attachments and the inherent needs and desires of all who live in the human condition to grieve in their own ways when loved ones die. Consequently, disenfranchisement of grief is correctly understood to be a matter of denying a human right, not a conventional right.

With this understanding of a right to grieve, we can see that disenfranchising is not simply a matter of indifference to the experiences and efforts of the bereaved. It is more actively negative and destructive as it involves denial of entitlement, interference, and even imposition of sanction. Disenfranchising messages actively discount, dismiss, disapprove, discourage, invalidate, and delegitimize the experiences and efforts of grieving. And disenfranchising behaviors interfere with the exercise of the right to grieve by withholding permission, disallowing, constraining, hindering, and even prohibiting it.

To illustrate, consider the story of Martha's disenfranchised grief. Her parents divorced when she was fifteen. She was forced to choose which parent

to live with. Through considerable anguish, she chose to live with her mother. Her father moved to another city and became quite distant emotionally. He remarried and established a second family.

Martha's father died when she was in her late twenties. She was informed of her father's death and traveled to attend his funeral. When she appeared during calling hours, the eyes and gestures of surviving members of his new family greeted her apprehensively. Clearly, she made them uncomfortable, and she tried her best to be inconspicuous. Within but a few minutes, and before she even had a chance to approach her father's body in his casket, she was told by a spokesman for the family that she was not welcome that evening. "Please leave now, and know that we do not want to see you at the funeral. You rejected your father, hurting him terribly, and none of us want anything to do with you."

Martha was startled and distraught. Swallowing hard out of respect for the pain and anguish of the family, and not wanting to make a scene, she withdrew. She decided not to attend her father's funeral, again deferring to the wishes, really demands, of his new family. She took the initiative to approach the funeral director the next day. Respecting her position as an immediate survivor, he arranged for her to spend time with her father's body where she would have an opportunity to speak to him, touch him again, pray, and say goodbye without the knowledge of the others.

Martha's grief was decidedly disenfranchised. The pain of rejection compounded the pain of first breaking with her father through an unwanted and forced choice and then losing him through an unanticipated death. Her sorrow and her anguish over unfinished business with her father were dismissed as insignificant and inappropriate. And she was excluded from rituals that could support her grieving. Her father's new family made it clear that they believed she had no right to grieve for him. Martha, well centered as she was, knew that she had not only a need to grieve but also a right to do so. The funeral director respected both that need and that right.

THE SCOPE OF DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Doka, in his first anthology (Doka, 1989), emphasized elements of *bereavement* that can be disenfranchised:

1. *Relationships* may be disenfranchised if they are non-traditional, e.g., homosexual or extra-marital; are thought not to be close enough, e.g., are not with spouses or members of the immediate family; have remained unsuspected or secret; or are viewed as acceptable though their full implications are not appreciated, e.g., with friends, colleagues, in-laws, or ex-spouses.
2. *Losses* may be disenfranchised when there is failure to recognize that a death has been experienced as a significant loss, e.g., perinatal deaths, abortions, deaths of companion animals, the psychological/social deaths of Alzheimer's sufferers, deaths of prisoners, or deaths on the "losing" side in a war.

3. *Grievers* may be disenfranchised when there is failure to acknowledge that some persons are capable of grieving, e.g., young children, the elderly, or people with mental disabilities.

In his second anthology (Doka, 2002), he added two other categories:

4. *Circumstances of the death*, another feature of bereavement, may be disenfranchised if they inhibit either solicitation of support by the bereaved or offering of support by others, e.g., suicides, deaths from AIDS or other stigmatized diseases, mutilating deaths, executions, or deaths of alcoholics.
5. *Ways individuals grieve* may be disenfranchised when styles of experiencing and expressing grief clash with the expectations of others, e.g., when instrumental grievers fail to show a strong affective response to loss, intuitive grievers show too much emotion, or culturally engrained stoicism or wailing violate the grieving rules of a given society.

Charles Corr (2002, pp. 39-60) expands the scope of understanding of what can be disenfranchised beyond aspects of bereavement.

1. *Grief reactions and expressions of them* can be disenfranchised when some actually insist that it is inappropriate for the bereaved to even experience the feelings, somatic effects, thoughts, and behaviors that come over them as they spontaneously react to the death of someone they love, as if it were possible to short-circuit reflexes. Or when others, who don't go that far, sanction expressions of certain feelings and thoughts or disapprove of behaviors.
2. *Mourning* can be disenfranchised when the significance of rituals in response to loss is dismissed or the bereaved are discouraged from attending or participating in them; or, when others discount the efforts of the bereaved to cope with loss and the suffering it causes or to contend with the hardship of meeting new challenges in life. They visit unrealistic expectations on mourners about, e.g., repeating stories about what happened or dwelling on their hurt.
3. *Outcomes of grieving/mourning* can be disenfranchised when some respond negatively to mourners who, e.g., take too long with their mourning, fail to return to "normal" or move on, persistently hurt, are slow to take up new relationships, or maintain a relationship with the deceased.

FAILURES OF DISENFRANCHISEMENT

Disenfranchisement of grief is a serious social failure in several distinct respects. Some have urged that it is a failure of empathy, which it surely is. But it is not merely that; it is deeper and more serious. Disenfranchisement of grief is a political failure involving both abuse of power and serious neglect. And it is an

ethical failure to respect the bereaved both in their suffering and in their efforts to overcome it and live meaningfully again in the aftermath of loss.

Empathic Failure

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness
 simply means being able to say to him,
 “What are you going through?”

— *Simone Weil*

Robert Neimeyer and Jack Jordan have characterized disenfranchisement as a form of “empathic failure” (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002). Indisputably, disenfranchisement of grief is rooted in a failure to empathize with the bereaved, i.e., to understand their suffering and hurt. It fails to appreciate either the gravity of what has happened or the resulting anguish and loss of meaning in the mourner’s life. It fails to appreciate what he or she is going through, and as such it is hurtful and destructive.

But such a failure to empathize is not the same as a denial of the right to grieve. The negative elements of active discouragement and sanction are missing. However, empathic failure does make it less likely that the right will be acknowledged or mourners supported as they exercise it. Empathic failure is, then, a seedbed for disenfranchisement. But disenfranchisement fails more seriously.

Political Failure

All I maintain is that on this earth
 there are pestilences and there are victims,
 and it’s up to us, so far as possible,
 not to join forces with the pestilences.

— *Albert Camus*

Disenfranchisement of grief involves political failure, including abuse of power and neglect. Politics is essentially about the distribution and exercise of power in relationships. Abuses of power often result from misuse of authority. *Authority as expertise* derives from a differential in knowledge between persons. Abuse is possible when some pretend to know or understand more than others when they do not. Or when some who in fact know more believe erroneously that superior knowledge in itself entails authority to choose for another, e.g., simply “because I know and you do not” or, more paternalistically, “in your best interest.” *Authority as prerogative to choose* sometimes derives from contractual arrangements with professionals and appropriate deference to their expertise. Or it may derive from recognized and legitimate assignment of positions of responsibility, e.g., within governments, traditions, or families. Abuse is possible, then, when some pretend to have such responsibility to choose for another when there is no foundation in contract or agreement or in expertise or when no such authority has been granted.

Disenfranchisement of grief is an abuse of authority as expertise when others presume to know, but do not actually understand, a mourner's suffering or efforts to overcome it. Disenfranchisement is an abuse of authority to choose when others presume to decide what is best for a mourner, to limit his or her options in grieving, to control his or her expressions, or to sanction his or her efforts to overcome suffering.

Disenfranchisement of grief is also a political failure insofar as the discouragement, interference, and sanction it brings into the lives of the bereaved actually adds to their suffering unnecessarily. All persons will be bereaved in their lifetimes, react in grief and hurt, and endure the hardships of struggling to overcome suffering. This suffering and hardship cannot be eliminated from life in the human condition. It is inevitable and unavoidable. But, in addition to such unavoidable suffering, there is suffering that humans impose or visit upon one another and on themselves, that can be eliminated, or at least minimized. People are responsible for such suffering; they have it within their power to avoid imposing it. Disenfranchisement imposes such unnecessary and avoidable suffering: people can eliminate its devastating consequences. Disenfranchisement is thus a form of neglect insofar as it is a failure to use this power of restraint.

Individuals, families, and communities are primarily responsible for these political failures of abuse of authority and neglect and for the additional hardship and suffering they impose on the disenfranchised. But, as Jeffrey Kauffman has pointed out (Kauffman, 2002), the oppression implicit in these political failures cannot ultimately succeed in stifling grief without at least some small measure of complicity on the part of the disenfranchised themselves. And, in some cases, even in the absence of disenfranchisement by others, the bereaved themselves may believe that they are not entitled to grieve, act on that belief, experience similarly unnecessary additional suffering, and undermine their own effectiveness in the efforts of grieving.

To illustrate these political failures of disenfranchisement, consider one family's experience of a mother's funeral. Elsie had lived a long, full life. She was devoted to her family, including her own beloved mother, many siblings, her husband, and, especially, her two sons, Bill and John, and her grandchildren. And she was devoted to her Christian faith, the local church, and the many friends she made there. After twelve years of one illness and successful surgery after another, including cancer twice, a major heart attack, and the insidious assaults of Alzheimer's disease, Elsie died at 86. Her deep commitments, fighting spirit, and ready smile through the last years of her life touched many. All were grateful for her life and saddened when it came to its welcomed end.

Elsie's surviving siblings had made the funeral arrangements in advance of Bill's and John's arrival in their hometown. The two of them went to visit the minister a couple of days before the service was to take place. Bill wanted to learn what he had planned and to have an opportunity for the two of them to

tell him some of their life's histories with their mother. The minister informed them immediately that he would offer a service in conformity with "what we do in this church." He had no interest in hearing any of their stories or perceptions of their own or others' needs as mourners. When Bill began to volunteer something of his life with his mother, the minister cut him off. And he made it quite clear that, aside from enlisting the sons' help in identifying pall bearers, there would be no other opportunity for either of them, or anyone else for that matter, to participate in the rituals and ceremonies that he had planned. Bill's immediate reading of the situation was that any efforts to press the minister further would have been futile. And he felt as if speaking up would risk alienating the clergyman and possibly overturn the arrangements that, to the extent they understood them, had seemed perfectly fine to Bill's and John's aunts and uncles. When they left the church Bill warned John that they were not likely to have a very meaningful funeral experience.

The funeral itself barely focused on either the experiences of those who were gathered there or Elsie's life and its many meanings. It was as if none of the experiences of the bereaved were of any significance whatever. Missing Elsie and their sadness were discounted to the point where they were not even mentioned. And any desire to remember anything of the fullness of Elsie's life or what she meant to any in attendance was dismissed in similar fashion. Instead, they were told truthfully that Elsie was a woman of deep faith whose faith had secured a place for her in heaven. They were instructed to celebrate this ascendance. And they were told forcefully that they could join Elsie in heaven only on the condition that their faith was identical to hers. There was no other eulogy. No participation other than in the singing of two of Elsie's favorite hymns. No opportunity to share and explore the many memories and legacies of her life. When the church service was over, everyone left quietly, and some carried her casket to the hearse. They followed to the cemetery where they buried her in a perfunctory and equally impersonal graveside ceremony.

Fortunately, most members of the family were able to gather at an uncle's home after the burial. There Bill, John, and the others together lamented the inadequacies of the service briefly. They connected meaningfully with one another, sharing sadness over Elsie's difficult last years and relief at their coming to an untroubled end. And, best of all, they remembered her together, told familiar and unfamiliar stories of days long ago and more recent history, and explored some of the lasting legacies of Elsie's life. All agreed that, were it not for the predilections of the minister, all of these could have been included in a far more meaningful service that would have satisfied not only the family but also Elsie's friends who did not follow to the cemetery and were unable to join with the family later that afternoon.

The minister in this case disenfranchised the grieving of an entire family and of the friends who gathered to mourn and remember Elsie. He presumed authority as expertise when he knew precious little of either the needs or the desires of those for whom he was offering the funeral "service." He presumed authority to choose how the ritual and ceremony would unfold by adhering to the most rigid

of denominational protocols and ignoring the fact that most who came to the funeral were not members of his church. His denomination allows far greater latitude for inclusion of other elements in a funeral service. And he presumed authority to confine his remarks to preaching when preaching was not the exclusive or most important function of the occasion. Consequently, he dismissed the experiences and needs of the bereaved, added unnecessarily to their distress, rendered all spectators, denied mourners opportunities for meaningful participation in ritual, and imposed a message on his audience that few welcomed and many thought entirely inappropriate. Bill, in turn, felt that he had been complicit in the minister's disenfranchising ways. He had sensed his rigidity from the beginning, acquiesced in his assertions of authority, sensed that he would disappoint most all in attendance, and even cautioned his brother not to expect a meaningful service.

Ethical Failure

We live very close together.
 So, our prime purpose in this life is to help others.
 And if you can't help them, at least don't hurt them.
 — The Dalai Lama

Disenfranchisement of grief is, moreover, an ethical failure inasmuch as it is a failure to respect the bereaved. To understand this, consider first what respect for persons, or for human dignity, requires. Respect requires understanding and valuing a person's potential for thriving or living meaningfully. Respect requires understanding and appreciating a person's vulnerability and potential for suffering. And respect requires acting respectfully in accord with these understandings. Minimally, it requires acting in ways that avoid making things worse: 1) ways that reinforce or enhance vulnerability or exacerbate suffering; or 2) ways that hinder, undermine, interfere in, inhibit, or even block effectively contending with suffering and hardship or returning to thriving. Optimally, it requires acting in ways that contribute constructively: 1) ways that acknowledge, reflect genuine concern about, and comfort in response to suffering and hurt; and 2) ways that actively support thriving or a return to it.

Disenfranchisement of grief is profoundly disrespectful on all counts. Failure to empathize with the hurt of the bereaved is but a part of this deeper and more serious ethical failure to respect the bereaved. Neimeyer and Jordan (2002) note only the need to empathize with the hurt and suffering of the disenfranchised. They say nothing explicitly about the equally important need to understand and appreciate the potential for thriving inherent in the bereaved. In failing to discuss the denial of the right to grieve, the active discouragement, and the sanction inherent in disenfranchisement, they miss the essentially ethical failure at its heart. Neimeyer and Jordan miss the offenses of disrespectful action and omission inherent in disenfranchisement: 1) making things worse by compounding

suffering; and 2) failing to respond constructively both to the suffering and in support of a return to thriving.

The remainder of this article expands upon the seriousness of disenfranchisement as an ethical failure first by examining how the literature on disenfranchisement emphasizes the failure to respect the suffering of the bereaved. And it then urges that understanding of the scope of disenfranchisement be expanded to explicitly acknowledge the failure to respect the overcoming of suffering, the efforts of hope and love at the heart of grieving.

THE LIMITED FOCUS OF THE LITERATURE: GROUNDED IN CONCEPTUAL FAILURE

It should be clear to anyone familiar with the substantial literature on disenfranchised grief that its focus falls primarily upon failure to respect suffering. It stresses both the failure to empathize with the suffering of the bereaved (empathic failure) and the ethical failure of denial of the right to suffer or to cope with it (though it never explicitly identifies such failure as an ethical one). These matters are, of course, very important aspects of the disrespect that disenfranchisement entails. But, as will be shown below, the focus of the literature can and should be expanded.

As a check on this claim, readers are invited to peruse Doka's two major anthologies on disenfranchisement (Doka, 1989, 2002). The subtitle of the first anthology, "Recognizing Hidden Sorrow," is appropriate. None of the titles in either anthology gives any indication that it centers on matters of hope, love, or transcending sorrow or suffering. Neither index includes citations of treatments of hope, love, or any equivalent of transcending suffering. Indeed, careful review of the works cited in the individual articles—a far broader sampling of writings on disenfranchisement—reveals scant reference to such topics and nothing explicitly focused on how hope, love, and transcending suffering are also disenfranchised.

The value of the extant literature on disenfranchisement is beyond dispute. It is appropriate to note and honor the important contributions of the literature within its limited focus. In the misunderstanding of loss and the suffering that it entails, disenfranchisement fails to appreciate the extent of the loss of wholeness that mourners experience: how their daily lives are devastated; how their life stories are disrupted and veer off of their expected courses; and how meaningful and sustaining connections in the worlds around them are threatened and undermined. In turn, disenfranchisement fails to appreciate the extent and depth of the pain and anguish that come with such loss of wholeness. This misunderstanding of suffering actually compounds the loss and hurt that mourners endure. It induces and reinforces feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, shame, and guilt. And it withholds support from, breaks connections with, isolates, and abandons the bereaved in their sorrow.

Beyond such misunderstanding, disenfranchisement, as failure to respect suffering, interferes with and undermines mourners' effectiveness in coming to terms with suffering, hurt, and hardship. Through discouraging words and actions, disenfranchisement inhibits expressions of pain and anguish. It undercuts motivation to cope with loss and sorrow. It undermines effectiveness in contending with new hardships and challenges, e.g., those deriving from so-called secondary losses. And, it deprives mourners of comfort and support in efforts to come to terms with the negative aspects of loss and grief and their continuing vulnerability.

The literature on disenfranchisement is filled with discussion of what is clearly the remedy for such disenfranchisement of suffering: respect for suffering via affirmation of mourners' entitlement to it. Essay after essay promotes understanding and appreciation of the suffering entailed by another range of overlooked or underacknowledged loss experiences. The essays typically go on to urge that, minimally, caregivers must refrain from making things worse by disenfranchising in ways specific to the kinds of losses in question. They urge that, optimally, caregivers should provide time, space, protection, and social support when loss and grief reactions are experienced in full force. And they should encourage and assist in effective coping with brokenness, grief reactions, and extended hardship.

The power of the remedy of respect for suffering is made clear repeatedly. Respectful response to the disenfranchised in their sorrow promotes understanding and empathy. It liberates mourners from discounting or dismissal of the significance of their losses or of the extent and depth of their suffering, discouragement of expressions of their hurt, oppressive interference in efforts to come to terms with brokenness and anguish, isolation, and inappropriate social sanction. Respect from others promotes mourners' self-respect and self-esteem as it welcomes and embraces them in caring community.

This limitation in the literature on disenfranchisement may derive from a conceptual failure in the broader literature on grief in general that has only in recent years been noticed and corrected. It is not easy to bear in mind the distinction between bereavement and grief reactions on the one hand (things that happen to us when another dies) and mourning or grieving response on the other hand (things that we do in response to what happens to us). The literature on grieving has long been dominated by stage/phase models of grieving (Bowlby, 1961; Engel, 1964a; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Lindemann, 1944; Parkes, 1970) or medical models of grieving (Engel, 1964b; Lindemann, 1944; Parkes, 1972; Rando, 1993; Raphael, 1983) that stress grief reaction and suffering and not grieving response. Theories of grief work, or the efforts of grieving response (Freud, 1917; Lindemann, 1944; Parkes & Weiss, 1983; Worden, 1982, 1991, 2002), have emphasized efforts to express sorrow, find closure, sever or moderate ties with the deceased, recover from suffering, and return to normal. Only recently

has the literature begun to treat explicitly the constructive, world-relearning, meaning-affirming, relationship-sustaining character of the labors of grieving (Attig, 1991, 1996, 2000; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Neimeyer, 1998, 2001).

EXPANDING THE FOCUS

When one door of happiness closes, another opens;
but often we look so long at the closed door
that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.

— *Helen Keller*

As the analysis of respect for persons above makes clear, respect for mourners requires not only respect for their suffering. It also requires respect for their continuing potential to thrive and live meaningfully in the aftermath of loss. And this, in turn, requires respect for the inherent human drive to transcend suffering, or resilience, that makes a return to thriving and meaningful living possible. In its emphasis on respect for suffering, the literature on disenfranchised grief pays little, if any, attention to the disenfranchisement of resilience (with hope at its core) and the potential to live meaningfully again (with love at its heart). This despite the fact that so much attention has also recently been devoted to the importance of finding and making meaning in the aftermath of loss (Neimeyer, 2001).

Such disenfranchisement is very much as real as is the disenfranchisement of suffering. And, as with the latter, it involves both: a) misunderstanding and failure to appreciate what mourners are living through; and b) destructive interference in the efforts of grieving. Think of the disenfranchisement, including self-disenfranchisement, that is reflected in expressions like these:

When things like this happen, all you can do is give it time, wait it out.

Eventually, you'll get over this.

I don't see how his life can be worthwhile again. He's lost the only thing that really mattered to him.

Somehow it feels disloyal to laugh or try to be happy. I sometimes feel that I owe it to him to live in sorrow.

What can I possibly have to look forward to?

The best thing is to try to put what happened behind you and get back to normal as soon as possible. Try to go on as if nothing has changed.

There's no point in looking for meaning in something like this. Suffering brings us face to face with absurdity. The best thing is to try to forget.

You shouldn't be looking for anything positive in this. There can't be any such thing.

Oh, that's just a coincidence. You're reading too much into what happened.

I'm kind of embarrassed to admit that in some ways I seem to have grown from the death of my child.

Face reality. She is dead. You will have to fill her place with something else. Everything she meant to you is undone.

If you're going to grieve, you have to let go completely. It is all about the heartache of goodbye. If you don't let go, you are stuck in the past.

Remembering adds to your pain and prolongs suffering. Spending so much time with memories can only bring you down. Let the past stay in the past.

Don't keep talking about her. You should be more focused on those who are still here.

How can I ever let myself love again, if it all comes to this?

To illustrate, consider the story of a woman who approached the author after he had spoken before a large audience about the possibility and desirability of lasting love. She told him that she felt for the first time that she had been given permission to grieve for her mother. Her sorrow had been recognized and accepted. But she had been led to believe that grieving requires complete "letting go" of the one who has died. Seeing no hope on such a path, she had preferred to remain in deep sorrow rather than to stop loving her mother. The next day she caught up with the author again in the hallway and said she was not sure that she had made it clear that her mother had died more than ten years before. Clearly, her hope and love had been disenfranchised.

And consider another story of an Israeli woman who refused to allow her hope and love to be disenfranchised. She spoke up in the question and answer period after another talk in which the author had spoken favorably of the possibility of love in separation. Her son had left home to live on a kibbutz on the northern border of Israel some five years earlier only to be killed by a mortar shell launched across that border a year before she heard me. In the year since his death she had returned several times to the kibbutz to seek out those who knew him. In exchange for stories she had to tell of her life with him, she sought to learn more about his life from friends he had made in his new life on the kibbutz. She was grateful to all who spoke with her, recorded what she learned from them in a journal, enriched her own store of memories, and came to know and love her son even more. Family and friends had tried to discourage her efforts, thinking her activities to be morbid. But she would have none of it. She asserted that she was neither dwelling in sorrow nor giving her son any more time and attention than she had before he died nor compromising the quality of her other relationships. She, too, felt that the talk was the first to validate her hopeful and loving efforts.

Grieving allows us to heal, to remember with love rather than pain.
 It is a sorting process. One by one you let go of the things that are gone
 and you mourn for them. One by one you take hold of the things
 that have become a part of who you are and build again.

— *Rachel Naomi Remen*

In its misunderstanding of mourners' resilience and continuing capacities for thriving and meaningful living, disenfranchisement of grief fails to appreciate the constructive aspects of grieving. Grieving is about both experiencing and reacting to loss *and* actively responding to it. Grieving is about both suffering *and* resilience, experiencing the devastation and hurt *and* reaching through them to affirm life. Constructively, grieving is about learning to carry the pain of missing those who are mourned rather than being the pain, dwelling in and being totally preoccupied and absorbed by it. Grieving is about discerning hopeful paths through pain to saying "Yes" to life. Grieving is about "relearning the world" (Attig, 1996); i.e., learning how to live meaningfully again within physical surroundings, in social surroundings (including in a transformed relationship with the deceased), in the greater scheme of things, and within the self. Grieving is about reshaping daily life patterns, redirecting life narratives, and being true to the self in ways that lead to living meaningfully again, and even personal growth, in a world transformed by loss. The heart of grieving is making a transition from loving in presence to loving in separation (Attig, 2000).

Disenfranchisement, as conceptual failure to understand the constructive aspects of grieving, makes matters worse for the bereaved. It undermines their self-understanding of their potential to overcome suffering and to relearn the worlds of their experience in meaningful ways. It makes them doubt the legitimacy of active and constructive response to loss. It discourages mourners' opening themselves to new possibilities and envisioning a return to thriving, including lasting love. It deprives mourners of empathy for their longing to overcome suffering, grow through their experiences, and live meaningfully again.

Beyond such misunderstanding, disenfranchisement as failure to respect the potential to thrive and live meaningfully actively undermines efforts to reach through suffering and affirm life. Through discouraging words and actions disenfranchisement inhibits mourners' expression of desires to overcome suffering. It undercuts hopeful motivation to find and make meaning and search for lasting love. It undermines mourner effectiveness in doing the restorative and reconstructive work of grieving. It deprives mourners of comfort and support as they struggle to make themselves whole again. It invalidates, discourages, hinders, even blocks hopeful striving for meaning, value, and love.

The remedy for such disenfranchisement of the potential to thrive and live meaningfully is clear: respect for the potential via affirmation of mourners' entitlement to realization of it and the resilience and love that make it possible. Corresponding to the need to promote understanding of suffering, there is a great need to promote understanding and appreciation of this potential and resilience

inherent in every mourner, no matter how devastating his or her loss may be. Minimally, caregivers must refrain from making things worse by disenfranchising in the ways I have described. And, optimally, caregivers must provide time, space, protection, and social support for efforts to discern hopeful paths beyond suffering. They must encourage and constructively assist mourners in effectively relearning the world and searching for lasting love, finding and making meaning.

The power of the remedy of respect for the potential to thrive again and the resilience that can lead to it is clear. It promotes understanding and empathy for mourners' efforts to overcome their suffering. It liberates them from discounting of their hopeful motivation to overcome, discouragement of their constructive efforts, oppressive interference in their meaning-seeking and searching for lasting love, isolation, and inappropriate social sanction. Respect from others promotes mourners' self-respect and self-confidence, and it affirms community solidarity with their efforts to affirm meaning, value, and love.

ENFRANCHISING HOPE

What oxygen is to the lungs,
such is hope to the meaning of life.
— *Emil Brunner*

Soul Work

It is possible to discern two fundamental motivations or drives that can carry the bereaved through the worst of grief. Some draw upon them more easily than others. But it is constructive to believe that all can find them within themselves, often with the support of good caregivers. The first of these drives is what may be called "soul." It is as if one part of the mourner says,

Despite the worst that life can bring, it is worth being in this here and now. Deep within me I feel this powerful impulse to connect, to care deeply and even to cherish offerings, gifts, and blessings too precious to ignore. I feel this pull to re-immense myself in life, to make myself at home again, to reweave the tattered web of my life. Though it is hard for me to see just now, I believe that too much of the goodness of life can still be mine, and I *will* push through the debris around me to reclaim and embrace enduring meanings.

This is one of the most fundamental affirmations of faith, hope, and love that mourners are challenged to make in the midst of the agony of loss. It is at the core of resilience.

The work of the soul in grieving is the effort of returning home to the familiar (Attig, 2000). Yes, there is a pervasive sense of absence in the world as it is experienced in bereavement. Things, places, activities, experiences, social settings and interactions and mourners' own cares and interests, character traits, dispositions, and aspirations often arouse pain as they remind mourners of those who

have died. But they can reach through that pain and affirm life. They can do so, in part, because those very same features of surroundings and aspects of self also bring to mind precious memories and legacies of those who have died that have not been lost. Mourners can hope to return home to contexts and ways of living that remain viable, to embrace familiar meanings, to make themselves at home again, including at home with reminders not only of absence but of abiding presence. This meaning-*finding* is a central, albeit often overlooked and misunderstood, aspect of the constructive work of grieving (Attig, 2001).

Spirit Work

What may be called “spirit” is the second of the two fundamental motivations or drives that can carry the bereaved through the worst of grief. Again, some draw upon it more easily than others. But it is constructive to believe that all can find it within themselves, often with the support of good caregivers. It is as if another part of the mourner says,

Despite the worst that life can bring, and the undoing of so much of the life I have enjoyed, it is worth entering the unknown future. Deep within me I feel this powerful impulse to say yes to what is yet to be and what I may yet become. I refuse to accept what only appears to be defeat; I will rise above it. Though the pain threatens to crush me, I *will* make the best of inevitable and most unwelcome change, overcome adversity, stretch into the new, make meaning out of chaos and triumph over it.

This is the second of the most fundamental affirmations of faith, hope, and love that mourners are challenged to make in the midst of the agony of loss. It, too, is at the core of resilience.

The work of the spirit in grieving is the effort of contending with the unexpected, the unfamiliar (Attig, 2000). Yes, there is a pervasive sense of challenge and uncertainty in the world transformed by loss, a feeling that there are too many choices to make and too little motivation or direction for making them. Mourners are daunted by challenges to give their daily lives inevitably new shape and substance; rethink and redirect their life narratives; weave new threads into the patterns of connection with their physical surroundings, others, the one they mourn, and even a higher power; and recreate their very selves. And meeting these challenges is painful and burdensome. But mourners can also hope to reach through the pain of these struggles and stretch into inevitably new contexts and ways of living that allow them to thrive again, find and make new meanings, and once again experience joy and happiness. Often they can draw inspiration from those they mourn as they revive their spirits in these ways. Here they are more truly engaged in meaning-*making* in the aftermath of loss, though it more often results from straightforward reengagement in life than either deliberate planning or creative activity (Attig, 2001).

Supporting Hope and Resilience

Optimal respect for the constructive efforts of grieving requires that caregivers actively support those efforts. How can caregivers support hope and resilience if they inhere and arise primarily from within the bereaved? There is much more to say on this subject than this limited article allows. But these suggestions are a beginning: Caregivers can express in word and deed a belief the mourner has within her or him a drive to transcend suffering and the potential to find and make meaning and thrive again. They can appeal to the resilience of mourners' souls and spirits. They can invite them to reflect on whether those they mourn would want them to dwell in the depth of suffering or overcome it and return to thriving and living meaningfully.

Caregivers can help mourners to see that what arouses pain—either reminders of what they miss or of present hardships—often contain familiar and enduring meanings and values or are ripe with possibility for making new meaning and realizing new value. They can help them realize that they can carry the hurt of missing those they love more easily when they redeem or embrace these meanings and values.

Caregivers can help mourners to envision possibilities they would welcome and to identify small steps they can take in constructive directions, including things they can do or say, potentially satisfying experiences, or ways to reach out and connect in the world around them. They can encourage them to open themselves to the offerings of the moment, others, and grace, helping them to realize that good can come from sources outside themselves. They can encourage mourners to try, draw upon their strengths, and learn from mistakes. They can urge them to seek inspiration in the stories of others' efforts to transcend suffering. They can be with mourners in their overcoming as active listeners, companions, and midwives to their resilient souls and spirits.

ENFRANCHISING LASTING LOVE

All our affections, when clear and pure,
and not claims of possession, transport us to another world;
and the loss of contact, here or there, with those external beings
is merely like closing a book which we keep at hand for another occasion.
We know that book by heart. Its verses give life to life.

— *George Santayana*

Memory

Remembering is potentially one of the most powerfully constructive aspects of grieving. The work of memory is to bring the past into present awareness. It reconnects mourners with the lives of those they mourn. Remembering soon after bereavement is often permeated with pain as memories remind them of the

terrible loss of a precious flesh and blood presence. But they can reach through the pain of missing to find what they have not lost of those they love. The legacies of memory itself include moments, episodes, periods, and stories of their lives filled with enduring meanings not cancelled by death, meanings that themselves “give life to life.” Remembering connects mourners with some of the best of life. It is itself an expression of their enduring love for those they mourn. And it enables them still to feel the warmth of the deceased’s love for them.

Legacy

Anything good you’ve ever been given is yours forever.

— *Rachel Naomi Remen*

Remembering also enables mourners to identify other legacies of those they mourn. As mourners return to the worlds they have left behind, they can reach through the pain of the experience of absence and realize what they still have—the physical, practical, soulful, and spiritual legacies of the deceased. They may have given the bereaved possessions or material wealth, other members of their families, or physical features and genetic inheritances. Their souls and spirits have indelibly touched things, places, other people, families and communities, and other aspects of mourners’ surroundings. And they have influenced mourners’ ways of doing things, interests in activities or experiences, cares and ways of loving, and ways of striving to better themselves and to overcome adversity, searching for meaning, and seeking adventure and joy in life. Mourners feel loved by the deceased when they recognize how their legacies continue giving to them. Mourners express their lasting love for the deceased when they embrace and cherish such legacies.

Supporting the Search for Lasting Love

How can caregivers support mourners in their search for lasting love? There is much more to say on this subject than this limited article allows (Attig, 2000). But these suggestions are a beginning: Caregivers can express in word and deed a belief that mourners can make the all-important transition from loving in presence to loving in separation. They can affirm the validity of their desire to find lasting love and the life-affirming value of doing so. They can help them to see that though reminders of absence are always possible, they can also open their hearts and give those they mourn a different presence in their lives by keeping memory alive and cherishing enduring legacies.

Caregivers can invite mourners to remember and take genuine interest in the stories they have to tell. They can encourage them to share memories with others, consider ways of preserving memories concretely (e.g., in writing or on tape), reflect upon and cherish the enduring meanings they contain. They can encourage mourners to identify and embrace the physical legacies and the

legacies of practical influence, soul, and spirit they still hold in ways that enable them to feel the abiding love of those they mourn and to express their own abiding love for them in return.

REFERENCES

- Attig, T. (1991). The importance of conceiving of grieving as an active process. *Death Studies, 15*, 385-393.
- Attig, T. (1996). *How we grieve: Relearning the world*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Attig, T. (2000). *The heart of grief: Death and the search for lasting love*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Attig, T. (2001). Relearning the world: Making and finding meanings. In R. Neimeyer (Ed.), *Meaning reconstruction & the experience of loss* (pp. 33-53), Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Bowlby, J. (1961). Processes of mourning. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 42*, 317-340.
- Corr, C. (2002). Rethinking the concept of disenfranchised grief. In K. Doka (Ed.), *Disenfranchised grief: New directions, challenges, and strategies for practice* (pp. 39-60). Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Doka, K. (Ed.). (1989). *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*. Lexington, MA: Lexington.
- Doka, K. (Ed.). (2002). *Disenfranchised grief: New directions, challenges, and strategies for practice*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Engel, G. (1964a). Grief and grieving. *American Journal of Nursing, 64*, 93-98.
- Engel, G. (1964b). Is grief a disease? A challenge for medical research. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 23*, 18-22.
- Freud, S. (1917). Mourning and melancholia. Reprinted in J. Strachey (ed. and trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14, pp. 237-259). London: Hogarth Press (1957).
- Kauffman, J. (2002). The psychology of disenfranchised grief: Liberation, shame, and self-disenfranchisement. In K. Doka (Ed.), *Disenfranchised grief: New directions, challenges, and strategies for practice* (pp. 61-77), Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Klass, D., Silverman, P., & Nickman, S. (1996). *Continuing bonds: New understandings of grief*. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lindemann, E. (1944). Symptomatology and management of acute grief. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 101*, 141-148.
- Neimeyer, R. (1998). *Lessons of loss: A guide to coping*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Neimeyer, R. (Ed.). (2001). *Meaning reconstruction & the experience of loss*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Neimeyer, R., & Jordan, J. (2002). Disenfranchisement as empathic failure: Grief therapy and the co-construction of meaning. In K. Doka (Ed.), *Disenfranchised grief: New directions, challenges, and strategies for practice* (pp. 95-118), Champaign, IL: Research Press.
- Parkes, C. (1970). "Seeking" and "finding" a lost object: Evidence from recent studies of the reaction to bereavement. *Social Science and Medicine, 4*, 187-201.

Parkes, C. (1972). *Bereavement: Studies of grief in adult life*. New York: International Universities Press

Parkes, C., & Weiss, R. (1983). *Recovery from bereavement*. New York: Basic Books.

Rando, T. (1993). *Treatment of complicated mourning*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Raphael, B. (1983). *The anatomy of bereavement*. New York: Basic Books.

Worden, W. (1982, 1991, 2002). *Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner* (1st, 2nd, 3rd eds.). New York: Springer.

Direct reprint requests to:

Thomas Attig, Ph.D.
2948 Quail Hollow Drive
Fairfield, CA 94533
e-mail: tattigca@earthlink.net

Copyright of Omega: Journal of Death & Dying is the property of Baywood Publishing Company, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.