

Ongoing: On grief's open-ended rehearsal

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Abstract Peter Goldie's account of grief as a narrative process that unfolds over time allow us to address the structure of self-understanding in the experience of loss. Taking up the Goldie's idea that narrativity plays a crucial role in grief, I will argue that the experience of desynchronization and an altered relation to language disrupt even of our ability to compose narratives and to think narratively. Further, I will argue that Goldie's account of grief as a narratively structured process focus on the process having come to an end. By contrast, I will propose the idea that grief can be understood as an open-ended rehearsal of our capacity to be alone in the company of an absent other. This makes grief a relational activity that differs from composing narratives about one's past and about one's process of grieving. Thus, grief is not primarily a process of recollecting our past narratively; rather, it can be seen as a dedicational activity which involves a future-oriented and open-ended rehearsal of relatedness despite irrevocable absence.

Keywords Self-understanding · Grief · Narrativity · Irony · Dedication · Continuing bonds

1 Introduction

According to Freud¹ the work of grief and mourning consist in reality testing as well as a denying of the reality tested with the purpose of psychically prolonging the existence of the object lost. This means that the work of grief centres on an

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“understandable opposition” between facing and wanting to deny a change in one’s personal environment. Whereas the opposition can be so strong that we turn away from reality, “normally respect for reality gains the day.”² The idea that the work of grief allows for a person to renegotiate, recalibrate and reintegrate the changed situation and thereby achieve a new self-understanding but also accept the changed relation to the deceased is characteristic for several theoretical attempts to understand grief.

In what follows, I shall not be focusing on the concrete status of phases or waves or pangs of grief; rather, I will narrow my focus to the two following questions: To what extent is grief primarily a self-reflective process and to what extent can grief be thought of as an ongoing activity that doesn’t necessarily come to an end with self-transformation? Or to put it differently, can we think of grief as an ongoing activity rather than a process with the specific aim of a changed conception of ourselves and our world? The idea of grief work has been criticized for various reasons³ mainly because of its neglect of considering grief as a continuing bond that one keeps with the deceased: “In this model the bond with the deceased is not a part of the resolution of grief, but is an attempt to preserve the relationship by fighting against the reality that the person is dead. In this formulation such reality is doomed to failure, for eventually the person must accept the fact that death is real and permanent and in the end the bond must be relinquished.”⁴ Or as Kathleen Higgins writes: “Relinquishment theory is inadequate. Although it is overdetermined that third parties will want grief to come to an end, the love that grief presupposes encourages exactly the opposite situation. Assuming that rapid recovery is particularly unlikely where strong bonds with the deceased exist. [...] The social pressure to stop grieving amounts to a disenfranchisement of all grief that extends beyond a limited span of time.”⁵

In this explorative paper, I will pursue the idea in somewhat agreement with continuing bond theory of grief, namely that grief work consists in the rehearsing of our fundamental capacity to be alone in the company of an absent other. That is, rehearsing our capacity to carry on a world while surviving ourselves the definitive absence of the other.

First, I will address the strange temporality of grief by looking at Peter Goldie’s narrative account of the process of grief. Whereas philosophical theories of grief are rare, Goldie’s account provides us with a promising conceptualization of how to conceive of self-understanding in grief. However, I will suggest that the experience of grief is not mainly to be characterized as recollection of a dead person. Rather, if we focus on how grief is experienced, we need a way to conceive of the presence experienced as plaguing us in the absence of the other. What Freud called the “understandable opposition” between facing and denying the occurrence of change needs to be spelled out not only as a form of recollection mediated by narrativity, but also as a form of vocational experience, to use a term coined by Anthony

² Ibid. (p. 244).

³ Stroebe and Schut (1999), Rubin (1999), Klass et al. (1996), Higgins (2013), Ratcliffe (2016, 2017).

⁴ Silvermann and Klass (1996, p. 4).

⁵ Higgins (2013, p. 171).

Steinbock,⁶ of the present. The term vocational here refers to the experience of 'being called into question'. I will use it in a secular way that differs from being called into following this or that call of profession or duty. As I will elaborate on in what follows, the term vocational refers to how we suffer the experience of *being called into question* and of not knowing how to go on. The experience referred to of being called into question is therefore neither tied to an intellectual process of doubt or self-reflection in relation to norms, nor to a call of following this or that path in one's profession or religion. Rather, in the following I will use the term vocational experience to refer to an emotional struggle with how to survive the absence of the other. I will secondly discuss how experiences of desynchronization and a loss of meaning tied to language are part of such vocational experiences. In doing so, it will become clear that a narrative account of grief will overlook important aspects of grief. Thirdly, to spell out how these aspects can be considered relational, I will revisit Donald Winnicott's idea of our capacity to be alone. Although Winnicott discusses this capacity in a different theoretical setting, namely that of developmental psychology, I will rehearse the structural moments of the process of learning to be alone with the purpose of seeing grief as exposing our capacity to be alone as a relational matter. While Winnicott insist on the way in which we learn to be alone in the company of trusted others, we might say that grief comes with rehearsing this very capacity of being alone without losing oneself in radical solitude when the other dies. As a result of revisiting Winnicott, we will see that the capacity for being alone together can help us survive and understand how to survive the absence of the other. While focusing on the relational aspect of grief rather than on Goldie's self-related narrative aspects of grief, we can see how a world can be continued in which the deceased other still matters for how we keep surviving his or her absence. Although these two attempts might not exclude one another, the emphasis is on the ongoing relational activity of grief. That is, I will suggest that grief is not about giving grief a voice by authoring a narrative; rather, it concerns struggling with hearing grief's voice as one that calls me into question. I will elaborate on the difference between these two approaches in what follows. By the term relational, I do not mean to state the obvious, namely that grief occurs *in relation* to the deceased. The point is not that grief is relational because it is experienced in relation to someone. Rather, I will argue that in grief we are engaged in a relational activity, namely in the rehearsal of being alone in the lived company of the absent other. This will be further spelled out by reflecting on the role of dedication and evocation in grief. As a result, we might see grieving as an open-ended activity that can be viewed as dedicational without being composed by series of performative acts, so I will argue. First, however, I will take a look at Peter Goldie's narrative account of grief.

⁶ Steinbock (2014).

2 Why grief is process and is experienced as a process

In his account of why grieving needs a narrative account, Peter Goldie makes several important points about the phenomenon of grief. First of all, he argues that grief is better understood as a process than as an event, a state or a feeling.⁷ Not only is grief to be seen as a process, it is also experienced as a process by the person in grief. Goldie's account of grief rests on two central arguments; grief is not a feeling, a state or an event for one, and grief cannot be understood simply by causal explanations. The underlying idea is that narratives structure our thinking and that grief is a self-relational process. Unlike pain which will, typically, go away, grief is not a passing sensation or a feeling. Contrary to how theories of emotion would argue, whether they prefer cognitive or non-cognitive basis for their accounts of emotions, grief is not a mental state or an event that takes place at a time, rather, grief unfolds over time.⁸ This is why we need an account that honors its *perdurant* of the phenomenon, its lasting over time.⁹ Obviously, it could be argued to be the case for many other emotional phenomena such as love or even mental states such as doubt or reflection or understanding or even beliefs. It could also be argued to be the case when emotions are said to be expressive of values and judgement, such as Martha Nussbaum discusses it by using the case of grief.¹⁰ However, Goldie argues that we must account for how perdurance itself is related to a complex emotional patterns such as grief. Grief is a complex pattern of irreducible plural elements such as "characteristic thoughts, judgments, feelings, imaginings, actions, expressive actions, habitual actions and much else besides, unfolding over time, but none of which is essential at any particular time."¹¹ According to Goldie, such a process is best accounted for in narrative terms, since the complex pattern is held together by the process of narrating as well as the experience of the process as narrative.

To see this, we must first understand how multiple perspectives are needed for us in order to grasp grief's process. Goldie argues that grief entails an *ironic experience* of looking back at one self while seeing what we couldn't know or possibly grasp at an earlier point of time. This is taken to be characteristic of adult grief concerning the loss of a loved one. Just as a gap opens between the audience in a theatre and the actor on stage when the actor is betrayed by his own ignorance of the state of affairs, think of Oedipus marrying his own mother, a gap opens between our understanding of the state of affairs on the two sides of our loss: Had we known then what we know now, we would have behaved differently towards the deceased, say. Or we come to recall situations with the deceased that now take on a different meaning to us, now that we know that the person we lost was about to die. The experience of grief requires multiple perspectives when it comes to the way we come to realize our loss: There will be a perspective internal to the relation with the deceased and one external to it. And the gap of irony opens, once we realize that we

⁷ Goldie (2011, 2012).

⁸ Goldie (2011, p. 122).

⁹ Ibid. (p. 124).

¹⁰ Nussbaum (2001).

¹¹ Goldie (2011, p. 125), see also Goldie (2012, p. 56).

now know or live with facts that weren't available for our internal perspective at an earlier point of time: "What this kind of [narrative] thinking can do is express, through the way we think, and through the way we remember, how what happened to us is 'infected' by the irony of our position: by what we now know, and by how we now evaluate and feel about what happened."¹² Importantly the experience requires multiple perspectives on oneself without splitting the experience into pieces: "And it [narrative thinking] can do this not, so to speak, in two parts, one being what I then thought and felt, and another being what I now think and feel about what I then thought and felt. It does it rather, all of a piece."¹³

In the case of grief, the ironic gap opens due to a reflective self-distance. Thinking through your grief or telling it to someone (narrativity does not amount to it being expressed, only to it being expressible to some extent)¹⁴ a gap opens between the perspective you held on some past event and the perspective you hold on it now. Grief's strange temporality is thus revealed in what Goldie calls an ironic splitting of one's perspective on oneself in time; and such an opening entails an invitation to self-reflection. This is where narrativity sets into enrich and reveal how grief speaks through the one grieving: Whether we think through past events with the knowledge we have on them now, or whether we tell someone of how we came to see things in the light of our grief, we experience an ironic gap between how things are now and how they were which is revealed in the way we talk or think about our grief. Whereas such a gap could occur in many other cases where grief is not involved, namely in self-reflective feelings such as shame or regret where a time gap strikes you with significance, the claim here is that it is (also) specific to grief. One way to understand Goldie's claim that the process of self-revelatory enrichment is specific to grief, is to conceive of the contrast he makes with causal approaches to grief. A narrative approach to grief will in addition to the explanatory power that it might share with causal theories of grief's stages offer *revelatory* and *expressive* qualities that a causal theory does not possess.¹⁵ A causal explanation of grief could entail the claim that grieving behavior are caused by the desires resting on the attitudes towards the lost relationship.¹⁶ By contrast, Goldie argues that when grief is seen specifically as a narrative process it will give us a *richer account* of the phenomenon of grief, i.e., one that honors the experiential aspect of grief, because the narrative account lends its capacity for multiple perspectives in narrative thinking to self-understanding and thereby opens grief for the griever to tell or think about the unfolding of a grieving pattern over time: "Autobiographical narrative thinking can reveal or express both one's internal and external perspective on one's tragic loss, so that these two perspectives are intertwined through the psychological correlate of free indirect style."¹⁷

¹² Goldie (2011, p. 130).

¹³ Ibid. *ibid.*

¹⁴ Ibid. (p. 131).

¹⁵ Ibid. (pp. 126–127), Goldie (2012, p. 64 ff).

¹⁶ Cholbi (2017).

¹⁷ Goldie (2012, p. 66).

A further feature of the narrative account of grief concerns the form of remembering involved in grieving. As we were told, grief is a complex pattern and part of what characterizes this pattern is the way in which we come to remember our time with the deceased in terms of what Goldie terms general events. We do not simply remember particular days and events; we remember general events and atmospheres. Just like we might not remember every single detail of a holiday, but the feeling or atmosphere of what we did, grief affects our memory of general events:

By general events I mean a kind of event or event type which recurs as part of a wider pattern – a pattern within a pattern so to speak. ...’for a long time I would go to bed early”. This captures precisely the sort of thing I have in mind: there is a kind of pattern to young Marcel’s activities [Marcel Proust’s activities in his “*À la recherche du temps perdu*”], in which going to bed early was something that he would regularly do at this time of his life.¹⁸

The idea is here that general events are recalled in and structured by narratives: “General events are very often thought through in narrative thinking. We think back to those holidays in France. Or we think back to the days before the clinical depression set in, when we would happily get up in the morning and go for a run whilst it was still dark; then we remember how, after the depression set in, we would for a long time be unable even to summon the energy to pull our socks on in the morning.”¹⁹ In grief, thinking through and reflecting on one’s process of grieving will be narratively structured, and the point is that we do not come to recall various details about the deceased, or even if we do that, such details will be recalled as general events. Goldie aims to show not only that we remember so painfully, say, the way someone would ride his bike or the way he would laugh when feeling particularly well and playful, that is, that we so painfully remember these events as they cannot come to take place anymore. Goldie also seems to say that the way in which we remember general events tell us something about our own grieving process, namely that it reveals not only *how* we remembered the deceased *but also how we come to view our own process of grief*: “Grief is a kind of pattern that, as I mentioned earlier, takes a characteristic shape, and accordingly the capacity of narratives to incorporate and makes sense of general events is especially important here. In grief, we can appreciate that this pattern is unfolding in this way both as we undergo it, and as we later remember it.”²⁰ Here Goldie seems to shift from general events being how narratives structure our experience of grief to how we come to describe our own grief narratively later on, once the process of grief has come to an end.²¹

The assumption seems to be that grief considered narratively has this revelatory power such that it structures the experience of grief and at the same time tell us of how we come to understand our own grief; namely as a process.

¹⁸ Goldie (2011, p. 132).

¹⁹ Ibid. (p. 134).

²⁰ Goldie (2012, p. 66).

²¹ Ibid. (p. 67).

3 Being called into question: reflections on the role of time and language in grief

In the following, I will argue that there are important aspects of grief that the narrative account overlooks. If we focus mainly on grief as a process by which we *give grief a voice* by thinking it thought in narrative terms, there is a chance that we miss the way in which we ourselves are being called into question by grief. Grief can be narrated and narratively thought through when we are *at the end* of our grieving, that is, when the process has come to an end and the struggle is over. Underlying the difference between giving grief a voice and being called into question by grief is, therefore, the important question of the role of self-reflection in grief: Is grief a process of reflection that we painfully think and work our way through narratively such that we come to understand our own grief as a process, *or* is grief rather an ongoing rehearsal of being alone together with the absent other, a rehearsal that need not be structured by narrative thinking? That is, does grief end with a narratively structured and narratively experienced understanding of our own process of grief, or does grief continue to question our capacity to be alone without the specific other?

On the one hand, the force of Goldie's theory is that it expands our understanding of grief as something we are engaged in as a process of thinking and telling rather than us simply being under the influence of something that causally affects us. By seeing grief as a narrative process, we come to see how grief requires a theoretical vocabulary that extends over the experience of time in bereavement and allow us at the same time to grasp something that happens to us during that time. Goldie, I think rightly, argues that grief is a complex pattern of emotions, feelings, states and as such it is irreducible to a singular event happening in time. Therefore, if our account of grief focus mainly on grief as a singular emotion or on causal explanations of the relation between griever and the grief's object, these accounts will lack not only the aspect of perdurance but also that of self-reflectivity which Goldie argues are central to the process of grieving. That is, Goldie places self-reflectivity at the centre of the grieving process while arguing that it entails an ironic experience, i.e., the need for multiple perspectives and the double sidedness of recalling general events; all of which require some sort of self-reflection or reflective self-distance to one's own experiences of grief. By seeing grief as a complex pattern unfolding over time all the while being held together by our narrative autobiographical thinking, Goldie argues that grief is a process *and* that it is experienced as such. We come to see how a person is engaged in grieving, thinking and telling about her grief, thereby recalling the general events in a certain double perspective allowing for self-reflection to take place. Grief as a narratively structured process concerns our reflective self-understanding as well as our *agency* in grief; we come to an understanding of our own grief by thinking it through narratively. It seems to be part of Goldie's narrative approach that grieving is a way of coming to understand this process as one's own grief and thereby grief becomes a way of coming to terms with one's new situation. Thereby, grief is the experience of a potential therapeutic or healing process that allow us to grasp it as such, when we are somehow passed it.

On the other hand, therefore, following the narrative account might add too much emphasis on exactly on the having-to-come-to-an-end of a narrative. We might say that grief has a—to use a term coined by Anthony Steinbock—*vocational* aspect to it; “Vocational experience is not just something out there for me to comprehend; it *plagues* me before I can escape it. What signifies with a sense of being home with Myself also burdens me. ...The matter of vocation is neither merely modal and vague (and universal) nor rational, merely a matter of choice, and fully transparent.”²² A vocational experience, in short, is an experience of being exposed and thereby called into question, existentially. To be called into question is not a matter of stepping back in order to cognitively reflect, doubt, hesitate or question on one’s course of life in general, rather to be called into question refers to a mode of existing while not knowing how to go on. Whereas Steinbock discusses vocational experiences in relation to conscience and as an inter-personal, that is, a relational experience, we might think of it in relation to grief in the following way: To speak of a vocational experience points to the painful experience of not knowing how to go on. First of all, the experience has a responsive structure, that is, it is experienced as a demand. What *calls* is the death of the other, we might say: I myself am called into question by this death; why must I live on without you, why must I live at all, how can I go on? Importantly, these questions are not posed as a matter of intellectual doubt, rather, they existentially haunt me and shape my experience of everything else. Confronted to the limits of my responsiveness, I cannot answer this call, since answering would be to surrender to the impossible demand, namely to follow the dead and die with him. Grief questions my survival in this radical sense and therefore I am brought to a halt, since I cannot respond. Thus, importantly, this ‘how can I go on’ is not the narrative thinking of the gap between what was and what is. It is not the strange temporality of my inner self-reflection over time shaped by the structure of free indirect discourse, as Goldie innovatively suggest. Rather, a gap is opened by grief that freezes me at the limits of responsiveness such that I no longer know how to go on. Being called into question by the death of the other is a matter of being called by death oneself; how can I not not-die with you? The vocational experience of grief confronts me to the limits of my responsiveness, namely with the impossible demand to not go on. Let me elaborate further how grief can be seen as a vocational experience.

First of all, in vocational experiences time comes to a halt. In grief, a gap is opened because time cannot go on, not because we experience two or more perspectives on ourselves. We are stuck; as Denise Riley describes it, time is now lived without its flow, as a timeless time.²³ To be stuck in time refers to a form of de-synchronization with the world where grief as “a new ability to live in the present is a joining-in of that timelessness of being dead.”²⁴ That is, time has come to a halt, and the joining in the timelessness of being dead is to struggle with surviving yourself not being dead. Time is experienced as timeless because in our grief we keep wanting to be with the dead, joining in their timeless time. The

²² Steinbock (2014, p. 126).

²³ Riley (2012).

²⁴ Ibid. (p. 23).

experience of grief does such “violence to the experienced ‘flow’ of time that it stops.”²⁵ What Riley describes as “the feeling of arrested time” where the flow of time has stopped, concerns the impossibility of me moving on without you: “If there is ever to be any movement again, that moving will not be ‘on’. It will be ‘with’.”²⁶ In a timeless time without movement, being stuck in the presence is a way of denying change, denying to move ‘on’, and the only change allowed is the moving ‘with’. Moving ‘with’ the deceased can mean your own death, that is, that you yourself die with the one you are grieving, or moving ‘with’ could mean a form of life in which a world is continued where the capacity to be together is practiced. In what follows, I will try to interpret the latter idea of being ‘with’ the deceased, but for now, I will focus on the experience of desynchronization in grief understood as a vocational experience.

Whereas the time of the world might move you on as the hours, days and weeks passes “your apprehension of sequence is halted. Where you have no impression of any succession in events, there is no linkage and no cause. No plans can be entertained, although you keep an outward show of doing so. Where induction itself has failed, so does your capacity for confident anticipation. So your task now is to inhabit the only place left to you—the present instant [...] For one moment will not, now, carry you onward to the next.”²⁷ Time can freeze and leave you to inhabit only the present instant, because time is meaningfully tied to a world we inhabit and share together. The existential significance of the shared world is broken and significantly so that without the deceased nothing can happen any longer; without you, time cannot move and I cannot inhabit this world as a meaningful one; I am stuck in the present instant.

For the same reason, the significance of words will change too, and not simply in relation to the temporal perspectives held on a narrative event. Even the use of words will be affected by the sense of time freezing and coming to a halt. Everyday words will strike us with lack of meaning and with the absence of the world we shared. Riley quotes the American author Lydia Davis’ “Grammar questions” as to show how the very composition of a narrative is incommensurable: “When he is dead, everything to do with him will be in the past tense. Or rather, the sentence ‘he is dead’ will be in the present tense, and also questions such as “Where are they taking him?” or “Where is he now?” But then I won’t know if the words he or him are correct, in the present tense. Is he, once he is dead, still ‘he’, and if so, for how long is he still ‘he’?”²⁸

In order for words to be able to lose their meaning, we must assume that they have one in the first place. Whereas this meaning is neither merely its representation (of course we know what ‘he’ refers to) nor the thought or idea we might attach to certain words (my friend called by that name), what Davis describes is the fundamental lack of meaning that is possible due to the world of meaning that we lived and inhabited with a person, a meaning that we do not primarily comprehend

²⁵ Ibid. (p. 24).

²⁶ Ibid. (p. 35).

²⁷ Ibid. (p. 51).

²⁸ Davis (2009, p. 527).

intellectually. What Merleau Ponty's short sentence that "the word has a sense"²⁹ refers to is the link between a word and its lived meaning. The link is an existentially formed by the position we take up in the world:

This link from the word to its living sense is not an external link of association; the sense inhabits the word, and language "is not an external accompaniment of intellectual process" Thus we are clearly led to recognize a gestural or existential signification of speech [...]. Language certainly has an interior, but this interior is not a thought closed in upon itself and conscious of itself. What, then, does language express if it does not express thought? It presents, or rather it *is*, the subject's taking up a position in the world of his significations. The term "world" is here not just a manner of speaking: it means that "mental" or cultural life borrows its structures from natural life and that the thinking subject must be grounded upon the embodied subject.³⁰

The thought conveyed here is that beyond their conceptual meaning words have an existential meaning that are not merely accidentally tied to a common world, but fundamentally inseparable from what it means to inhabit a world.³¹ This further means that losing someone with whom we shared a world as meaningful threatens the most minimal and everyday use of language too.

If we sum up our two reflections on the strange temporality of grief and the role of language in experiencing grief, it seems that neither time nor language remain untouched in the vocational experience of grief. The kind of gap revealed in grief is not ironic in the way that Goldie would have it; it does not involve my own two or more perspectives on past events in relation to the present. Rather, the gap that is opened by a vocational experience is one of not knowing how to go on. The vocal element, that is the element tied to a calling, is rather the silence tied to the lack of meaning and response elicited by the death of the other; it is vocal because it is experienced as calling *me* and *my survival* into question. Therefore, *before* I come to understand or reflect on grief, it plagues me and calls me and the world I take for granted into question such that "vocational experience does not apply to me generally as a mode of being, but specifically or rather *uniquely* to who I am, Myself. It concerns *the way in which* I am not self-grounding, that is, *the way in which* I am given over to myself as Myself."³²

Different from Goldie's use of irony to characterize two perspectives held in time, Jonathan Lear³³ describes how existential irony brings you to a halt; you are deeply affected and passionately involved, but you cannot go on because you have no idea how to. Here taking distance from what might strike you as life's absurdity or meaninglessness is not possible; Lear's existential irony has nothing in common with taking distance or viewing situations in their absurdity. It is not a matter of saying one thing and meaning another or remembering an event and now viewing it

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 182).

³⁰ Ibid. (p. 199).

³¹ Ibid. (p. 190).

³² Steinbock (2014, p. 127).

³³ Lear (2011).

differently. It is not a matter of witnessing a tragedy and at the same time realizing the tragedy is your own, the tragedy is one you are suffering. The vocational aspect consists in the way you are being called into question yourself. The struggle is experienced in the way that you are exposed; you are being summoned, questioned and plagued. Notably, for both Steinbock and Lear, the vocational experience does not leave you indifferent, neither does it consist primarily on you stepping back to reflect on your past; you are tormented out of passion for what matters to you.

Further, the rupture in your habitual living is not only broken for a certain period of time, waiting to be reinstalled or re-negotiated; rather, your life with the deceased as a joint embodied practice, a shared life form has now been cut open such that your own life will have the quality of a dead echo or even a sort of phantom limb,³⁴ as the joint practice of “what we would typically do” is now incapable of moving, is now stuck in this timeless time. A past of shared habits and embodied practices can no longer be re-appropriated as our joint future or must be re-appropriated differently now in my own name.³⁵ Therefore, I stand alone with the fundamental lack that I embody. As a shared embodied, habitual life form is broken when you die, I can no longer access the future, I can no longer claim it as mine, I cannot be carried into it, and therefore I remain stuck in the presence. As Jason Throop describes, there is “a painful presencing forth of that which was once the extended tendrils of our being’s attachment, care, and love for the other person who is now gone from our world.”³⁶ My words are now lived in their void of meaning, as a ghost world in which the absent other prevents me from sharing and inhabiting any futural, meaningful world just as time is experienced as leaving me *in the gap* (and not exposed to reflecting on the ironic nature of the gap) of an inescapable presence. In this way, when we lose someone, nothing can happen anymore since we are stuck in time and incapable of expressing and finding meaning.³⁷ So, rather than being the author of narratives of complex emotions, behavior and events; the vocational aspect involved in grief is not one that you master, *it makes the death of the other the active voice in grief while not allowing you to find neither words nor narratives and while fundamentally not allowing me to enter into a meaningful future.*

To sum up, we might ask whether the narrative account of grief fully captures the struggling experience of grief, that is, whether it allows for grief’s immediacy and non-narrative aspects to be part of grief as more than mere elements depending on the narrative structure for them to be spelled out properly. It does not seem to be the case that the experiential vocational struggle or conflict even plays a central part in the narrative account. So although, Goldie emphasizes grief’s processuality, he does it from a point of view somewhere *at the end of the process*, when the struggle is *over* or has lost its intensity. I think Steinbock’s notion of vocational experiences serves as an important reminder of what cannot be turned into a narrative, namely the immediacy of grief’s *voice* that calls *us* into question, rather than us giving grief a voice by being the authors of its narratives, to make use of two guiding metaphors.

³⁴ Talero (2006, pp. 198–199). See also Parkes (2006).

³⁵ Talero (2006, p. 203). See also Ingerslev (2017).

³⁶ Throop (2010, p. 774).

³⁷ See also Lear (2006).

We do not *give* grief a voice by narrative thinking; by contrast, we are delivered over to and exposed to grief by its calling *us* into question. The question of how to go on from here is not a matter of remembering or coming to recall another person in the right way; rather, it is a matter of struggling with how to leave the present of a timeless time, of not knowing how to go on, of not being able to continue when nothing can happen since there is no meaningful shared life form to carry you into the future.

Undergoing the experience of grief seems to involve *more* than self-reflection in the mode of autobiographical thinking about one's past. In Goldie's case we seem to be concerned with finding the right way to recall the dead all the while reflecting on more than one perspective either on the past or on ourselves. In focusing on self-understanding and self-reflection, there is a risk of overlooking the emotional texture of what I think Goldie rightly terms the complex pattern of grief. What do we make of all the parts of this pattern that do not fit into a self-reflective narrative? What do we make of the narratives that somehow *prevent* the deceased to die for real, namely in cases where the narratives protects us against or prevent us from experiencing the uncontrollable vocational aspect of grief? What do we make of the cases where narratives arise out of escape to face the unbearable facts? Can we even *cancel out the dead* of someone while talking about it and narrating it? These questions suggest that beyond or prior to narrativity there is an element of suffering or of undergoing experiences that exceed our narrative thinking, and it might be the case that narrativity can delude or cancel out the experience that the death of the other exposes us to, namely that of being called into question. Even if Goldie's account primarily focuses on the aspect of grief that is in fact characterized by self-reflection, how can we come to understand the aspects that are not? The part of grief that plagues us might not fit into such reflective self-distance taken in Goldie's narrative case. On the contrary, grief might simply be acted out, or it might be an ongoing *activity* that we are engaged in. And that we continue to be engaged in. Unlike a process that ends with the check being written, the cake being baked, grief as an ongoing activity might not come with a *clear* ending to it. Or the self-transformation that grief can lead to might be on-going as a form of rehearsal of our own survival with and without the deceased. The opposition in grief between denying and facing reality involves a struggle of a vocational kind, since we are called into question ourselves; we cannot go on without the other, we cannot go on alone, since it would be a betrayal of the deceased other to let him go on alone. The question of how to go on is not posed by me in the shape of narrative thinking; rather, it existentially calls me into question. This point comes together with an additional worry, namely that grief is not primarily concerned with remembering. Is grief's temporality really concerned with how things were and can no longer be, or is it concerned with, first of all, the struggle of not being able to step out of the present, since not stepping out of the present helps denying the coming of change? In what remains of the paper, I will spell out why understanding the relational aspect of grief as one that is ongoing might help us address some of the aspects that a narrative account focusing on self-reflection could be said to leave out.

4 Relating to the absent other

Let me propose two guiding theses that positively contribute to understanding (1) grief as relational and (2) grief's temporality as being not primarily concerned with remembering or with narrative forms of self-reflection. The first thesis claims that grief involves the rehearsal of our capacity to be alone, which is only possible when practiced as a form of togetherness with the now absent, deceased other. The second thesis suggests that grief involves evocation and dedication rather than a recollection of general events as they were and can never be again. The dedicational aspect of grief involves a certain re-appropriation of the past such that it can be continued into the future rather than merely recollected in the right way as having passed. Importantly, dedication need not be spelled out in terms of performativity, that is, as a series of one-time events, like when we dedicate a piece of work, a book, a memorial day to the deceased. Rather, we could think of dedication as a mode of rehearsing survival in the name of the deceased.

Thesis 1: The capacity to be alone is rehearsed in the presence of the absent other

First, how can we think of grief as relational? Can we think of grief as an ongoing activity in which we rehearse the capacity to be alone in the company of an absent other? In order to understand this idea, we might first reflect on the ways in which our usual understanding of presence is riddled with ambiguity and various forms of absence. We might think of basic ways in which we are directed towards absent others waiting, searching, missing, remembering and imagining. Looking for our friend in a café will fill the room with an absence full of presence; waiting, not finding, or imagining how it will be when he shows up will affect our understanding of the given presence. We might also think of ways in which, when he finally shows up that he can still feel absent, and we might imagine the meeting being differently, regretting how it is, or pretending that the meeting takes on this or another kind of emotional atmosphere. Not only modally, but also historically, we live in the present absence of others in the way that the world is constituted (as described in the phenomenological and hermeneutic tradition of Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer) in the ancestral understanding of culture, tools, lived understanding of what 'world' means. In a given building, say a university, we will think and work together as have done academics before us and we continue and evoke a legacy in the name of... This kind of permanent absence of others partly constitutes what we call world, as Sara Heinämaa argues.³⁸ In our everyday life, our language, tools, and traditions evoke the historical presence of absent others. This allows for a trans-generational communication in the sense that we can address each other across generative time.

If we accept as a premise that absence can be experienced as coming with various shades of presence to it and that absence affects the emotional texture of how we live with and inhabit our world as meaningful, we might see how absence in grief can be experienced as a form of presence, namely that of still being together with an

³⁸ Heinämaa (Heinämaa 2015, p. 111, ff.).

absent other.³⁹ In order for this claim not to sound as mere wishful thinking that in fact does cancel out the death of the other, let us look at how being alone can be understood as a capacity.

In a very short text on the capacity to be alone,⁴⁰ the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's argues that independency and relaxing in one's own company is a capacity we acquire in the company of someone else, the trusted other. The reason why it requires another person is that we need to learn to not respond to others or to have a kind of quiet satisfaction and silent orientation towards the world, where we do not simply react to stimuli coming from the external world. Along with his theory of transitional objects that we make use of developmentally in order to practice separation from our care-takers,⁴¹ Winnicott argues that the capacity to be alone depends on our lived relation with the absent other experienced as still present or as he would have it; internalized. The important point here is that separation is not something we happen to be faced with, granted the number of people in a room say, rather, separation is something we learn. As a capacity, we learn to endure and trust solitude because we feel carried by an affective relation. This capacity is interrupted with the death of the other. In the case of death, we need to learn anew to trust this capacity to be alone, however, this time in the company of the irrevocably absent other. It could therefore be argued that grief takes on the form of rehearsal of this basic capacity to be alone—however importantly as something to be relationally practiced. The capacity to be alone is practiced as a form of togetherness with the deceased other. The idea is that the affective relations that carry us in solitude has to be *rehearsed* which is fundamentally different from a form of animism that brings back to life the dead by recalling them in our narratives or tying a kind of present-by-proxy existence of the deceased to certain objects that then support us and carry us through solitude. In our rehearsal of being alone, the other is neither animated, internalized nor brought back to life by certain rituals or objects. Rather, the mode of relatedness can be understood as a form of lived dedication or evocation. What would have to be re-learned is to experience presence as meaningful while re-learning how to go on in the mode of being 'with' the other as absent. Evocation and dedication are forms of re-appropriation of my future as meaningful namely as modes in which we live with the absent other while practicing our capacity to be alone.

Thesis 2: Ongoing—dedication is moving 'with' the absent other

Therefore, secondly, we must ask how we can understand dedication and evocation as modes in which we can practice on-goingly our capacity to be alone in the presence of the absent others. We might first distinguish between the performative act of dedication and the ongoing act of making judgments, responding and thus living in dedication or appraisal of in a broader sense. To dedicate a book to one's good friend is a performative act, and as such it is

³⁹ See also Ratcliffe (2016, 2017).

⁴⁰ Winnicott (1958).

⁴¹ Winnicott (2005).

performed with the book being written and published.⁴² However, we might also consider dedication as an ongoing activity where we live with, celebrate or honor a love that is present in various aspects of one's life.⁴³ This does not exclude memory from being continuously painful, but it contributes to an ongoing relational rehearsal of being alone in the company of the absent other.

According to Søren Kierkegaard, loving the dead is a continuing work of love:

But if you love him, then remember him lovingly, and learn from him, precisely as one who is dead, learn the kindness in thought, the definiteness in expression, the strength in un-changeableness, the pride in life which you would not be able to learn as well from any human being, even the most highly gifted.⁴⁴

The work of love in remembering one who is dead is thus a work of the most disinterested, the freest, the most faithful love. Therefore go out and practise it; remember one dead and learn in just this way to love the living disinterestedly [that is, with a love that does not change, LRI], freely, faithfully- ... Remember one who is dead, and in addition to the blessing which is inseparable from this work of love, you will also have the best guidance to rightly understanding life: that it is one's duty to love the men we do not see, but also those we do see.⁴⁵

Here, we might see how grief as a work of love has to be open-ended; there is no end as to loving your deceased. An open-ended grief's work of love will have to go on, and not to be seen, therefore, as unresolved or pathological (as Silvermann and Klass rightly argue⁴⁶). What Riley described above as the arrested flow of time can equally be understood as an ongoing repetition of remembering one dead, however only if we accept that in grieving as an ongoing activity we can find a way of not moving 'on', but moving 'with' the absent other, as she described.⁴⁷ Here we might distinguish between grief and grieving while emphasising that grief will come with the experience of frozen time, whereas in grieving, we can in fact come to capture the moment of arrested time as a result of our ongoing work of love that keeps us alive, rather than following the dead in dying their death and thereby bringing an end to our shared time. To see this difference, we must think of how dedication as a life form will be timeless, repetitive and on-going. Further, the idea is not to say that grieving will never cease, but that it will persist as open-ended; always questioning our rehearsal and repetition. With Levinas, we can say that the experience of the death of the other remains a pure question mark, a question mark by which we remain emotionally in relation with the death of the other.⁴⁸ We can thus re-inhabit

⁴² See Solomon (2004) and McCracken (2015).

⁴³ See Higgins (2013).

⁴⁴ Kierkegaard (2009, p. 328).

⁴⁵ Ibid. (pp. 328–329).

⁴⁶ Silvermann and Klass (1996).

⁴⁷ Riley (2012, p. 35).

⁴⁸ Levinas (2000, p. 14, ff).

the meaningful ‘with’ the missing other if we relate to him or her by our capacity to be alone in the absence of him or her. The non-presence of our lost other can be experienced as a way in which we move on together when practicing the ongoing activity of being alone in the presence of the absent other *as* a work of love. Importantly, there is a difference in accentuation here; as a work of love rather than a work of mourning, we focus on the relational aspect of grief and not on the internalized object of grief. It is not that the deceased other is becoming part of me, an animated part of me, but rather, I keep surviving the pure question mark of the experience of the death other as an ongoing relational activity. This allow us to see how the deceased other remain part of our ongoing rehearsal of being alone, namely as a rehearsal in the company of a deceased other. Importantly, this is a work because it will be a struggle to rehearse this kind of love as a work of being alone; saluting, dedicating and evoking the absent other. However, it doesn’t have to come with narratives that animate the dead into being ‘almost present’ or present-by-proxy (say, when I tell stories about him or remember him in the right way) or with grief-exercising (turning grief into an explicit memorial project that we believe to control). The work of love will be a work of re-appropriating a world that doesn’t cancel out the death of the other but that can again become meaningful as an expression of my capacity to be alone ‘with’ and in the presence of the irrevocably absent other.

In this way, we might say that when we want to understand grief, we might want to understand it as being *more* than a mood coming over us; as being *more* than a spontaneous (and physical) reaction to loss; and as being *more* than a cognitive response of narrating our grief in recognizing our loss and thereby letting this process be part of a transformative process. More in the sense that we must also seek to understand the way that grief can be an ongoing activity in the presence of an absent other. More in the sense that as a negative excess, the pure question mark left by the experience of the death of the other will keep addressing me as to how I can survive you. What is continued, then, is a bond of love that we keep saluting, as an ongoing work of love, an appraisal that might affect our decisions, our values and our lived dedication to a certain evoked life form. This life form might have been one we shared that I now re-appropriate as mine, ‘with and for you’ but in your absence as an expression of my capacity to be alone, and it might also be life form we didn’t share that I now re-appropriate as my future, ‘with and for you’ in your absence as an expression of my capacity to be alone. Dedication can thus be thought of as a rediscovery or a re-appropriation of a lived past that is carried into the future *in letting grief take place on-goingly* and in the form of a rehearsal—namely as a rehearsal of our capacity to be alone. Importantly, by letting grief take place as an activity, the emphasis is not on grief as an exercise (like we actively go to the gym) nor on grief as an inescapable melancholia (like a mood coming over us, affecting us and emphasizing our passivity). Rather, by letting grief take place, we allow for grief to accompany us and come over us in such a way that we have to respond to grief. Thereby grief is a lived aspect of our relational life that takes place not only occasionally; rather, it is rehearsed with an open end as the sense of communality in the company of absent others.

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