

the gentle art of conscious grieving



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When the emotions of grief first arrive, they are unwelcome guests. These emotions seem like an invasion of your personal space, and you cannot wait for these uninvited visitors to leave. But they do not leave. Grief weaves its way into your life, into your relationships and into your way of seeing the world. Sameet M. Kumar PhD

Introduction

Every one of us will experience loss at some time in our lives and in turn, we will all experience grief. The emotions of grief arrive unbidden and often catch us off guard. Therefore, grief is usually judged as a negative experience; an experience to be toughed out. And yet, grief is a natural and healthy response to loss. So how do we actively grieve the many expected and unexpected losses we encounter throughout our lifetimes? The practice of conscious grieving is one way to actively engage with the emotions of grief. In this regard Kumar argued that conscious grieving: "gives the intensity and distress of grief a purposeful role in transforming the rest of life." In response to the understanding that grief is natural, healthy, and has a purposeful role, this paper offers something of the nature of grief and practice of conscious grieving.

The principles and practices offered in this paper relate to any loss encountered over a life time. That said however, the timing of this paper relates particularly to the lived experience of the covid-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, societies across the globe have been thrust into a strange and somewhat disorientating time, without warning or time to prepare. As well as hundreds of thousands of people dying globally because of the virus, the need for physical distancing has given rise to a loss of connection between individuals, families, communities, and nations. Also, many people, businesses, and governments are experiencing major economic loss. With change comes a sense of loss . . . and grief. Yet, within the current global narrative of positivity and push to regain viable economies, there is little space to consciously grieve. If grief is a natural and healthy response to loss, perhaps our time requires that we make space for grief.

The structure of the paper

The paper commences with a general overview regarding the nature of grief. Such an overview then frames the more personal response. In line with the movement from the general to the personal, the paper is structured in two distinct parts. The first part is entitled: *The nature of grief* and comprises: 1. the connection between loss, spiritual wellbeing, and conscious grieving; 2. certain myths regarding grief; and 3. two interweaving facets of grief. The second part is entitled: *The practice of conscious grieving*. As the title suggests, this section offers particular practices for personal engagement in the gentle art of conscious grieving.

Conscious grieving as a spiritual practice

It is important to highlight that this paper is written in the genre of spiritual wellbeing. Spiritual wellbeing relates to a person's inner landscape in the form of a clear sense of selfhood, i.e., identity, purpose, values, and experience of belonging in the world at any given time. As such, spiritual wellbeing offers an inner shelter of belonging. An inner shelter of belonging, in turn, gives rise to an experience of *being at home* in the world.

Part 1: The nature of grief

1.1 The connection between loss, spiritual wellbeing, and conscious grieving

What is the connection between loss, spiritual wellbeing, and conscious grieving? There is a constant interplay between a person's outer world and their inner landscape. Philosopher Mark Johnson argued that we human beings: "live, move, and have our being via our ongoing relations within our environments." *Ongoing relations* here means that the outer world shapes a person's inner landscape and their inner landscape shapes their interpretation of their experience of the outer world. For that reason, any experience of loss in a person's outer world can challenge the foundational beliefs within their inner landscape, giving rise to an experience of inner disorientation. Therefore, any experience of loss in a person's outer world can stretch, shake, or shatter their inner landscape; their spiritual wellbeing.

As mentioned in the Introduction, grief is a natural and healthy response to loss, and as such, can play a purposeful role in a person's life. Grief becomes purposeful when it enables a person to both respect their emotions of grief and engage with their emotions towards reframing the experience of loss into one of meaning. *Meaning* here signifies that even though a person cannot change the circumstances of their loss, they can change their experience of it; they can transform the way they identify with, or are defined by, their experience of loss. The practice of conscious grieving enables such a transformative process to take place. How? Conscious grieving enables a person to notice, express, explore, and integrate their emotions of grief towards reorienting their inner landscape. As such conscious grieving is a life affirming spiritual practice.

1.2 Myths regarding grief

In light of the above connection between loss, spiritual wellbeing, and conscious grieving, it is now time to turn attention towards the nature of grief. The following myths unearth something of the nature of grief within the context of the practice of conscious grieving.

Myth #1: grief is a universal human experience

In some sense this myth is true. Even so, although there may be universal themes in the human experience of grief, each person will experience such themes in their own way and time. Therefore, each person's experience of grief is unique to them. Because each person's experience of grief is unique to them, the practice of conscious grieving is an art rather than a method.

What is the difference between a method and an art? A method offers a step-by-step guide to a predictable and repeatable outcome. An art on the other hand involves a structured process, however the outcome remains open-ended. In terms of conscious grieving, the structured process weaves its way through each person's current belief system and lived experience. Therefore, whilst the process is the same, each person's experience of the process is unique to them.

Myth #2: grief follows a clear linear pathway

The emotions of grief weave their way through each person in an intricate and unpredictable way. Some days a person can feel overwhelmed by the pain of their grief; some days the intensity of the pain can lessen; then without warning, the intensity can increase again. Kumar names this process as the: "complex dance of acute and subtle grief." Such a complex dance can be unnerving for a grieving person because there is no clear linear pathway to follow. Even though there is no clear linear pathway, conscious grieving enables a grieving person to participate in the process as it takes place within them. Therefore, whilst a grieving person cannot control, or plot the progress of the process, neither are they completely at the mercy of it.

The pathway for participating in the complex dance of acute and subtle grief can be well illustrated by the image of a labyrinth. A labyrinth is not to be confused with a maze. A maze is designed to confound with its many dead ends. In contrast, a labyrinth is a singular pathway of purpose and direction, even though it has many disorientating twists and turns as it weaves its way into the centre and back out again. In a similar manner, conscious grieving is also a singular pathway which has many disorientating twists and turns as the emotions of acute and subtle grief weave their way towards reframing loss into meaning. Therefore, the symbol of the labyrinth is one which can both support and inform the complex dance of acute and subtle grief.



the labyrinth well illustrates the pathway of conscious grieving

Myth #3: if a person opens the flood gates to the emotions of grief, they will be swept away

It takes a lot of energy to metaphorically run-a-way, hide from, or numb the emotions of grief. Therefore, even though it may seem counter-intuitive, the practice of accepting and gently leaning towards the emotions of grief can offer a form of relief. In this regard Kumar argued: "awareness is accepting the pain of your grief, thereby finding relief in not running away from your loss." Therefore, conscious grieving has little chance of emotionally overwhelming a person.

Myth #4: time heals

In terms of the *time* aspect, Kumar argued that the "uninvited visitors" of the emotions of grief "do not leave" of their own accord. So time alone is usually not enough to shrink or resolve the pain of grief.

A model of healing

What does *healing* look like? The model of healing offered in this paper aligns with author, Nora McInerney's understanding that: "we do not move on from our grief, we move forward with our grief" (TED talk March 4th). Therefore, rather than a model of healing which focuses on shrinking the experience of grief before life can gain some semblance of normality, this model of healing allows each person to gently engage with their present moment emotions of grief in such a way that both respects the role of grief and allows a person's life to grow beyond the boundaries of grief.

How does a person's life grow beyond the boundaries of grief? According to social worker, Virginia Lafond: "conscious grieving leads towards acceptance and acceptance leads towards seeing new possibilities." The ability to see new possibilities is important because according to Kumar: "each time we suffer a loss, a part of our identity dies . . .and (can be) transformed." Why does loss impact identity? As mentioned previously, a person's outer world and inner landscape are in constant interplay. Therefore, any loss in a person's outer world can challenge the foundational beliefs within their inner landscape. When those foundational beliefs are challenged, a person may experience inner disorientation. Conscious grieving can pave the way for a person to see new possibilities in terms of who they now know their self to be and how they now belong in their world; or in the words of Johnson: "to reestablish a new dynamic equilibrium" within their inner landscape.

Myth #5: to grieve implies a lack of trust in God or a higher power

To grieve does not imply a lack of trust in God or a higher power. Rather, conscious grieving is a courageous act of trust in that it enables each person to offer their unqualified yes to all the seasons of their living. An unqualified yes does not mean that a person is grateful for the loss, rather that they can reframe their experience of loss in a meaningful way.

Myth #6: if a person prays or meditates hard enough, they should be able to *give over* their emotions of grief to God or a higher power

Conscious grieving takes a different approach to that of seeking to *give over* painful emotions. Rather, conscious grieving enables a person to accept the reality of the emotions of grief and to invite the gentling light of lovingkindness to meet with them where they are; into their body/mind experience of grief. Then, within the awareness of the gentling light of lovingkindness, the person allows the emotions to work their way through in their own time and way. In response, what had once felt like unbearable pain, becomes bearable - not pleasant or easy, but bearable.

Myth#7: if a person is not sad, how can they be grieving?

It is a common misunderstanding that grief simply involves the emotions of sorrow and sadness. Even though grief does include those emotions, grief also includes many other emotions. To name a few: anger, frustration, irritation, shame, guilt, weariness, anxiety, numbness, isolation. Therefore, the emotions of grief are wide ranging.

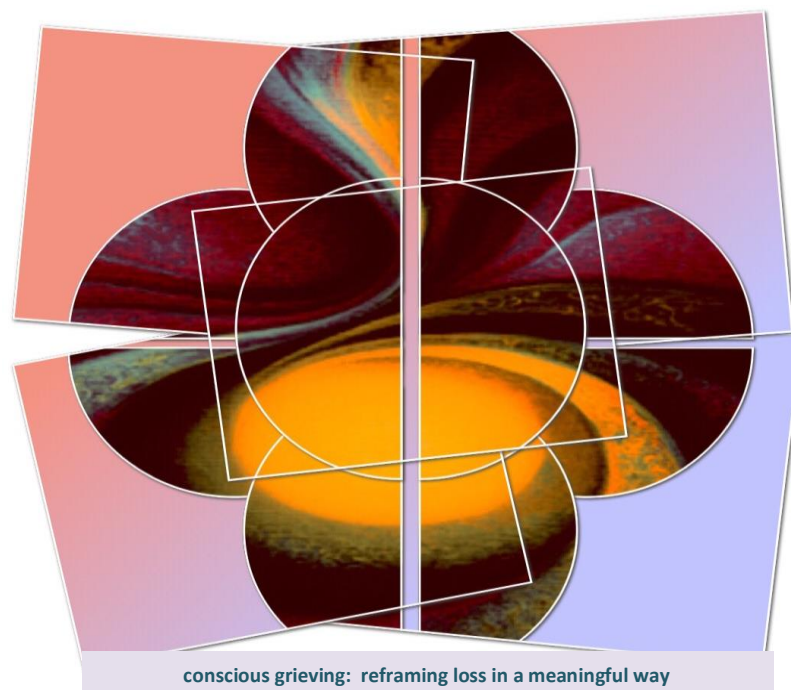
Myth #8: grief and depression are similar experiences

The emotions of grief are a natural and healthy response to loss. Depression on the other hand involves much more than grief. Kumar argued that depression is also characterized by a sense of guilt which is unrelated to anything specific; a preoccupation with worthlessness; or suicidal ideation. So, whilst grief and depression share some elements, they are very different experiences. As a result, the practice of conscious grieving as offered is designed for people who are grieving a loss in their lives, as distinct from an episode of depression.

Summary

Losses in a person's outer world can stretch, shake, or shatter their inner landscape, giving rise to the emotions of grief. The nature of grief is that it involves a wide range of emotions which weave their way in an intricate and unpredictable way through each person's life.

As has been highlighted through the responses to the myths presented, conscious grieving is a gentle, courageous, life affirming spiritual practice of accepting and leaning towards the present moment emotions of grief. Therefore, conscious grieving is a spiritual practice for noticing, expressing, exploring, and integrating the emotions of grief - towards reframing an experience of loss into one of meaning.



1.3 Two interweaving facets of grief

As mentioned above, grieving is not a linear process where a person moves through an acute stage of grief, to a subtle stage, and then to a stage of non-grief. Rather the emotions of grief weave their way through each person in more of a labyrinthine pathway; a pathway which continues to interweave the two facets of acute and subtle grief. The emotions of acute and subtle grief were mentioned in myth #2. Now the paper will further outline each of these two facets.

1.3.1 The emotions of acute grief

According to Kumar: "Acute grief is where the emotions of grief are so intense . . . they interfere with your ability to do everyday tasks." So acute grief can feel like the inner world has lost its moorings, giving rise to a loss of inner safety. Furthermore, in times of acute grief a person's usual inner resources seem to abandon them. As a result, acute grief can give rise to a time of feeling *unsheltered* within self, with others, and within Life itself.

In light of such an *unsheltered* experience, it is inappropriate to seek to explore the emotions of acute grief. In this regard Kumar cautioned: "periods of acute grief are too intense to allow us to focus on issues of spiritual growth." Therefore, when a person is experiencing the emotions of acute grief inner exploration is inappropriate and even harmful. What does conscious grieving involve during times of acute grief? Section two will address that question. (See 2.3 Responses to the emotions of acute grief).

1.3.2 The emotions of subtle grief

Kumar argued that subtle grief is where the present moment emotions of grief have: "lessened in intensity." Therefore, it is the emotions of subtle grief which become the entry point for inner exploration. Such inner exploration takes the form of contemplative self discovery. A contemplative orientation embraces two particular elements. The first element is that of relinquishing the desire to control the process of self discovery. Or in the words of Australian poet, Michael Leunig: "to undertake the journey without knowing the destination." The second element is that of remaining open to inner wisdom's stirrings towards new possibilities; new possibilities in the form of transformative shifts in each person's experience of selfhood-in-the-world. Therefore a contemplative orientation involves an attitude of nonjudgmental openness and curiosity to whatever inner wisdom is inviting each person to see, or see afresh, in the present moment.

Within such a contemplative orientation the process of self discovery involves gently posing open ended questions in response to present moment emotions of grief. Even though questions are pivotal to contemplative self discovery, do not mistake this as an intellectual or analytical exercise. According to Parker Palmer the still, small whisper of inner wisdom hides from analysis. Therefore, the tone of questioning necessitates an attitude of nonjudgmental curiosity and openness. In response to such an attitude, inner wisdom's stirrings become known.

Summary

Grief works its way through each person in the two interweaving facets of acute and subtle emotional responses. In turn, the gentle art of conscious grieving involves two distinct responses. (For a response to acute grief see 2.3. For a response to subtle grief see 2.4).



the interweaving facets of acute and subtle grief

Part 2: The practice of conscious grieving

It felt love

How did the rose ever open its heart
And give to this world all its beauty?
It felt the encouragement of light against its Being.
Otherwise we all remain too frightened,
Hafiz (14th century Persian poet)

2.1 Fundamental to the practice of conscious grieving

Fundamental to the practice of conscious grieving is an awareness of the gentling light of lovingkindness. Why? Because if the practice is not situated within an awareness of lovingkindness, it may become too harsh and invasive, leading towards despondency. Furthermore, philosopher and poet John O'Donohue cautioned that a person's inner world: "was never meant to be seen completely." So he suggested that each person approach their inner landscape through the metaphor of candlelight. He maintained that a candle sheds enough light for present moment inner exploration. Therefore, conscious grieving always commences with a stilling practice which evokes an awareness of the gentling light of lovingkindness.

2.2 Grounding the practice of conscious grieving

As well as an awareness of the gentling light of lovingkindness, conscious grieving is most effective when the practice is grounded by an experiential understanding that we each have thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations without being totally identified with them. With such an experiential

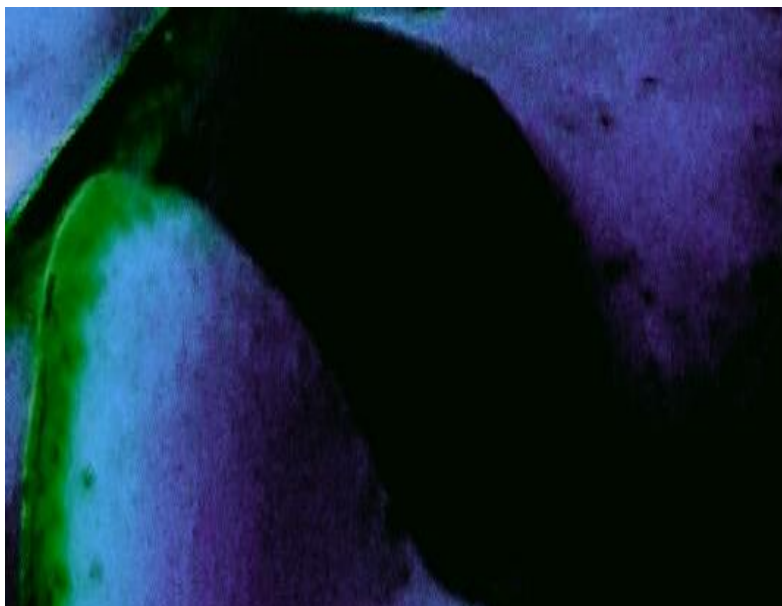
understanding a person can both experience and witness that which is taking place within them. Any mindfulness practice which enables a person to notice their present moment affective experience without getting caught up in them is appropriate. One such mindfulness practice is sitting meditation as taught by Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron in *The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Lovingkindness*.

2.3 Response to the emotions of acute grief

Within the context that grief is a natural and healthy response to loss, what does conscious grieving comprise during times of acute grief? Remembering that in times of acute grief a person's usual inner resources seem to abandon them, conscious grieving here involves each person:

- a/. nonjudgmentally recognizing their present moment affective experience of acute grief. Affective experience includes bodily sensations, emotions, and thoughts
- b/. allowing the gentling light of lovingkindness to meet with them in their body/mind experience of grief, without denying/resisting/seeking change
- c/. discovering their own resource anchors which can sustain them whilst their inner world is unmoored.

What is a resource anchor? Resource anchor is a term that Tara Brach uses in her book *Radical Compassion*. For Brach a resource anchor is anything a person can call on to sustain them during *unmoored* times. For example: bringing to mind a trusted family member, or friend or spiritual figure who evokes a sense kindness; literally or imaginatively leaning against a tree; holding a rock; or it could be a song; or an image of some sort. A resource anchor is anything that will both sustain a person during times of acute grief, and sow the seeds of inner safety in the depths of their inner being.



Response to the emotions of acute grief:
notice the present moment affective experience within the gentling light
of lovingkindness and seek "resource anchors" (Tara Brach)

2.4 Response to the emotions of subtle grief

The following is one contemplative practice for gently engaging with the emotions of subtle grief, towards reframing loss in a meaningful way. The practice is one of contemplative self discovery (see 1.3.2 for a contemplative orientation). The practice involves the elements of stilling; noticing present moment affective experience; letting be; deepening the experience; discerning inner wisdom's stirrings. The structure of the practice is as follows:

1. Stilling practice

Commence with some form of stilling practice which evokes an awareness of the gentling light of lovingkindness. Also, remember that even though you have thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, you do not have to be totally identified with them.

2. Noticing your affective experience

Bodily felt experience e.g. tightening, coldness, shutting down. . .

Emotional response e.g. sad, angry, anxious, fearful, shame, guilt. . .

Thinking e.g. judgmental, circular, racing, stuck in a habitual pattern. . .

3. Letting be

As you are able, simply hold your affective experience within the gentle light of loving kindness - breathing through your experience without denying/resisting/seeking change.

4. Deepening the experience

If and when you are ready, the following open ended questions may be helpful.

Note: You will know you are ready when you are able to pose the questions with an attitude of nonjudgmental curiosity and lovingkindness; allowing the questions to work their way through you in their own time and way

Feeling	Questions
Sorrow/sadness	Is something in my very being lost? Is there something that I have to let go?
Fear/anxiety	Is there something that is out of my control?
Anger	Is there something that I am protecting? What of value am I losing that I need to restore?
Guilt/shame	Have I let myself or another down in some way that is contrary to my values system? What have I not been listening to in the truest part of my being?

5. What is inner wisdom inviting you to see, or see afresh, through this experience

- . Is there any insight arising for you?
- . Are you being invited to stay, move, change, grow?
- . Are you being invited to embrace your current inner shelter of belonging, or perhaps surrender some attachment to a fixed identity, or perhaps name and claim new elements within your experience of selfhood-in-the-world.

Note: Do not try to manufacture a response. Simply wait for a response to arise - metaphorically try it on and see how it fits. Do not worry if there is no discernible response initially. As the poet Rilke urged: "pose the question and live into the response."

6. Conclude your practice of conscious grieving by resting quietly for a few moments.



response to the emotions of subtle grief:
contemplative self discovery within an awareness of the gentling
light of lovingkindness

Concluding Remarks

Grief is a natural and healthy response to loss, and as such, has a purposeful role to play in a person's life. Even so, the experience can be emotionally painful, which in turn, can stretch, shake, or break a person's spiritual wellbeing. Conscious grieving, in response, does not focus on shrinking the pain of the experience. Rather, conscious grieving focuses on reframing the experience of loss into one of meaning. As such, conscious grieving involves a gentle, courageous, life affirming spiritual practice which enables each person to notice, express, explore, and integrate their emotions of grief in a meaningful way.

The two facets of acute and subtle grief work their way through each person in a labyrinthine manner. Acute grief is too intense for inner exploration. Therefore, when a person is experiencing acute grief, conscious grieving involves noticing the present moment emotions within the gentling light of lovingkindness, and seeking resource anchors. Subtle grief is where the intensity of the emotions has lessened. As a result, the emotions of subtle grief offer an entry point for inner exploration in the form of contemplative self discovery towards reestablishing an inner equilibrium.

Resources

The primary resource for this paper was:

Sameet M. Kumar PhD, *Grieving Mindfully: A Compassionate and Spiritual Guide to Coping with Loss*

Other resources were:

Tara Brach, *Radical Compassion: Learning to Love Yourself and Your World with the Practice of RAIN*

Pema Chodron, *The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Lovingkindness*

Mark Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought: The Bodily Roots of Philosophy, Science, Morality, and Art*

Virginia Lafond, *Grieving Mental Illness: A Guide for Patients and their Care Givers*

Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*

John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*

Kaye Twining, [www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative practices &](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative_practices_)

[Resources/Our sacred stories: the essential pathway for meaning and belonging](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative_practices_)