THE TIME IS OUT OF JOINT: A HERMENEUTIC
PHENOMENOLOGY OF GRIEF

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In this paper, I embark upon a hermeneutic phenomenological
analysis of the emotion of grief, based upon three experiences of
grief I witnessed over the preceding year. I find that grief is best
construed not as an emotion akin to sadness or anger, but as an af-
fective-behavioural complex resulting from a discord between the
world that we affectively inhabit and the world in which we cur-
rently find ourselves. I therefore conceive the process of getting
over grief, or grieving, as an active process of readjusting our affective
and behavioural habits on both a thematic and a pre-thematic
level.

Introduction

Of all the emotions, grief has perhaps received the least amount of
attention from philosophers. It is not difficult to imagine why this
should be the case. Those who have not yet experienced grief judge
themselves unqualified to discuss it, and those who have are reluctant
to recall such painful memories. Furthermore, subjecting grief to
the cold scalpel of analysis may seem disrespectful both to the
of philosophical inquiry. It is an emotion that cuts to the heart of
what makes us human, namely, our interconnectedness in a network
of meaningful others. Moreover, far from being morally inappropriate,
a suitably sensitive analysis of grief might yield insights that
could ameliorate the suffering of the bereaved.

Over the course of the past year, I had several occasions to wit-ness grief. Twice, and in two very different ways, my partner and I
were visited by tragedy. Not long after, a close friend of mine lost her
father to cancer. In part as a means of coping with the turmoil of

1 A survey of the philosophical literature on grief turned up a small number of
relatively cursory discussions. I consequently expanded my search to include
psychological treatments and literary depictions of grief, a move which proved
significantly more fruitful.
these events, I seized upon them as an opportunity to study this emotion phenomenologically. This enabled me to study grief as experienced by three different people on three different occasions. On two of those occasions, I was privy to both first-person and third-person perspectives. The observations I noted during this period form the basis of this essay. In the following pages, I first lay out my methodology and my conceptual framework. Then, I contrast grief with sadness. On the basis of my phenomenological observations, I attempt to show that grief is best understood through the lens of temporality, as an affective discord between the world of the present and the world of the past. Finally, I consider some issues concerning the process of recovering from grief.

**Methodology**

I follow Maurice Merleau-Ponty in construing phenomenology as the attempt to give voice to our pre-objective, that is, pre-thematic experience. He writes: “In the silence of primary consciousness can be seen appearing not only what words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape.”

Thus conceived, phenomenology aims to bring this primary (pre-thematic) meaning to expression. It is by this token hermeneutic, that is, interpretive, because it attempts to express in words something that is embedded in such pre-linguistic phenomena as bodily comportment, social practices, moods and emotions, and the like.

How do we express in words that for which there are no words? Phenomenology operates in a special mode of language that Merleau-Ponty calls *expressive* language. Similarly, Lawrence Hass attributes to phenomenology the “use of evocative language (for example, descriptive, metaphorical, analogical, gestural language) toward the end of seeing, noticing, or understanding something specific in or about our direct, living experiences.”

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nomenologial language does not re-present either objects in the world or ideas in the speaker's mind. Instead, it gestures toward elements or structures of our shared experience in order to render it more articulate—for instance, by pointing out divergences and connections which may not previously have been evident. Because we are (usually) not in physical proximity, we cannot use actual gestures to this end; rather, this evocative language stretches, twists, and otherwise repurposes existing meanings. To be sure, this is typically done with the purpose of advancing some thesis. Phenomenology is therefore a form of argument the premises of which are our direct, living experiences. It is necessary to bring to linguistic expression the findings of phenomenology because as a practice phenomenology is essentially intersubjective. In other words, if phenomenology is to be a genuine field of research rather than a form of personal expression, others must be able to confirm, contest, and otherwise critically evaluate our claims. This requires that they be put into language and disseminated.

The following interpretations were arrived at through an analysis of affective feeling, bodily comportment (posture, gait, the expressive qualities of face and gesture), perception, and behaviour (actions performed either reflectively or pre-reflectively) during three periods of grief experienced by myself and others close to me. Both first-person (self-observation) and third-person (observation of others) perspectives are utilized. Personal details have been omitted, both for reasons of privacy and because personal details function only as clues to the general patterns and structures of experience that are the subject-matter of phenomenology. Where relevant, parallels are drawn with existing phenomenological and scientific research.

Before proceeding, let us turn to one possible criticism of the methodology employed herein. Phenomenology, according to this criticism, is properly performed in the mode of the immediate, not that of recollection. Recollection increases the probability of error and the danger that we find in the recollected phenomena only what we put there on the basis of our theories, assumptions, and expectations. The observations herein were collected over a series of months and must surely involve a significant degree of recollection and retrospective interpretation.

This requirement that phenomenology be practiced solely in the present tense applies only to Husserlian "pure" phenomenology, not the hermeneutic method employed here. Pure phenomenology is performed behind the phenomenological reduction, what Husserl termed "epoché," which involves a suspension of belief in anything
that is not immediately evident. This includes inferences, recollections, background assumptions, and most notably, the factual existence of the world itself. The purpose of *epoché* is to secure freedom from the possibility of error, and the purpose of Husserlian phenomenology is to provide a secure foundation for knowledge.\(^5\) Hermeneutic phenomenology, by contrast, arose partly in response to doubts about the possibility of a pure phenomenology as envisaged by Husserl. Some of these doubts had to do with the requirement that phenomenology be practiced in language. By its very nature, language imports a host of implicit assumptions, categories, and prejudices of just the sort that the phenomenological reduction is supposed to bracket. Furthermore, the requirement to formulate our phenomenological reflections in language already introduces a temporal gap between our direct experiences and their linguistic expression. To be sure, it could be countered that such work operates in the mode of what Husserl called “retention” (rather than recollection), which he asserted was a direct (rather than representational) presentation of the past. However, it does not seem plausible that any extensive or substantial work of phenomenology could dispense with recollection altogether.

Given these difficulties, the project of a pure phenomenology free of doubt seems impossible.\(^6\) We must instead practice a more modest phenomenology that does not purport to be foundational, but instead serves as one research method alongside others. Moreover, we must practice this phenomenology critically. We must forever attempt to lay bare the assumptions and prejudices that bias our interpretations of the phenomena and, wherever possible, cross-check our interpretations using various lines of evidence. When phenomenology is understood in this way, as interpretive, self-critical, and modest, rather than aspiring to a special status derived from a spurious appeal to a pure givenness, the requirement that it be based solely upon immediate experience no longer applies.

A further note before we proceed. Grief is a deeply personal phenomenon. My research revealed a significant degree of individual variation in how grief manifests itself in different people. Nevertheless, coherent patterns emerged from this field of variation. Consequently, in what follows, I attempt to outline the existential meaning and structure of grief, while respecting the diversity of grieving

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\(^6\) “The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.” (PP, xiv)
styles among individuals. Moreover, I should add that my researches have been confined mainly to modern, Western sources. Thus, while I believe that it is likely that the structure of grief outlined herein is in fact cross-cultural, I must confine the scope of my claims to our own culture.

**What is Grief? Laying out the Phenomenon**

We may be led into confusion if we do not first carefully lay out the limits and structure of our subject-matter. To begin with, in order to avoid overlooking any relevant phenomena, I am defining grief as the whole affective and behavioural complex that we experience when someone close to us dies.\(^7\) I am aware that this definition is quite vague in scope. By what measure do we determine whether someone is close enough to us for their death to provoke grief? Are there degrees of grief? If so, can we even draw a line between grief and non-grief? Finally, which affective and behavioural experiences are essential parts of grief, and which are merely accidental? It is, of course, impossible to answer these questions at the beginning of the inquiry. I am therefore restricting myself to cases where the deceased was close enough to the putative griever to qualify uncontro-

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\(^7\) Despelder and Strickland introduce a distinction between the concepts of grief, bereavement, and mourning. Some, such as J. Todd Dubose, have chosen to adopt their model. They use the term *bereavement* to denote the event of the loss of a loved one. The term *grief* they reserve for the emotional response to this event. And *mourning* is their word for “the process of incorporating the experience of loss into our ongoing lives” as well as “the outward acknowledgement of loss.” J. Todd Dubose, “The Phenomenology of Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning,” *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1997): 367–74.

I do not find this model helpful, however, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, by conceptualizing grief as an emotional response to an event, it implicitly adopts a subject/object ontology and a model of emotion as an internal response to an external event. Neither of these is phenomenologically sustainable. We are creatures embedded in the world and in particular situations, not subjects set over against the world. Secondly, it explicitly conflates the process of coping with loss with social demonstrations of grief by utilizing the term “mourning” to denote them both. Clearly, these are not the same thing and ought to be distinguished. Moreover, this usage does not conform to our everyday use of the word “mourning.” This word is usually reserved for social demonstrations of grief, whereas the process of incorporating the experience of loss into our ongoing lives is most often referred to as “grieving.” Consequently, I have rejected Despelder and Strickland’s demarcation of these terms. See L. A. Despelder and A. L. Strickland, *The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying* (Mountain View: Mayfield, 1992), 193. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as LD.
versially as cases of grief. As for which phenomena are essential to
grief, I do not intend to answer this question in any systematic way.
Rather, I will identify what I consider to be the core elements of grief,
leaving the outlying factors and corner cases for others to pursue in
subsequent works.⁸

As has been pointed out by others, grief is not a simple emotion,
but a dynamic complex involving a variety of emotions.⁹ In grief, we
may experience periods of sadness, guilt, anger, and other feelings. If
the death comes at the end of a long illness, we may experience
relief. We also commonly experience compassion, in the form of
“feeling bad for” the deceased.¹⁰ None of these emotions is essential,
however (except perhaps sadness, which we shall deal with shortly).
Nor can grief be reduced to or identified with either of these emo-
tions or even the whole group together.

Grief also exhibits complexity on the noematic side (that about
which we feel grief). Grief is about much more than the simple fact
of the loved one’s death. In addition, there are the events surrounding
the loved one’s death, and the loved one’s absence. The loved one’s
absence shows up in the discord between our world as it was when
she was alive (and in which we still to some extent dwell) and the
world as we now find it, without her. The events surrounding the
death can be further analyzed into our own behaviour, the behaviour
of others, and circumstantial factors that are outside of any person’s
control. Any of these aspects can be intentional objects for emotions
and all of them potentially inform the grief-complex as a whole. For
example, we may feel guilty for certain actions we took, or failed to
take, leading up to death or in the wake of it. Likewise, we may
experience anger toward the others for the same reasons. We may
also experience anger, compassion, and other emotions in connec-
tion with the circumstances surrounding the death, including the

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⁸ Not all of the following will figure substantively in my phenomenological
analysis, but I lay it out here for the purposes of clarity and completeness.
⁹ See, for example, G. A. Bonanno, L. Goorin, and K. G. Coifman, “Sadness and
Barrett (New York: Guilford, 2008), 797–810.
¹⁰ It may sound strange to say that we experience compassion for the deceased,
since compassion means “suffering with” and the deceased, being dead, cannot
be suffering. But emotions can be experienced in the “as if” mode: that is, their
targets need not be real. This is a common experience in the reading of fiction,
for example, when we feel sympathy or anger towards fictional characters.
Similarly, we may feel compassion for the deceased, insofar as they have under-
gone a great tragedy, even though they are no longer alive to experience that
tragedy for themselves.
degree of suffering endured by the deceased. Finally, there remains a possibility of second-order emotions, that is, emotions about our own emotions. We may experience anger toward the deceased and feel ashamed of that anger. These emotions will be seen as especially relevant once we turn our attention to the process of moving on from grief, which I call “grieving.”

Grief is also informed by what we may call the “appropriateness” of the death. Although most of us would say that no death is ever good, it can be appropriate or inappropriate with respect to a number of different factors. The first is the timeliness of the death. We regard a death which comes at the end of a long life to be more appropriate than one which comes to the young. Another important time-related factor is whether the death is anticipated. A sudden death—resulting from a car accident for example—is less appropriate than an expected death—for instance, as in the case of a terminal illness. These factors affect the grief we experience, its intensity, duration, and so on.11

Lastly, there is the temporal dimension of grief. Analysis will reveal grief to be an importantly temporal phenomenon (that is, temporality is relevant to an adequate understanding of grief), but for now I will lay out some non-controversial temporal aspects of grief. Grief is a temporally extended phenomenon. One does not experience a moment of grief, as one might experience a moment of anger or joy.12 Rather, grief holds us in its grip for weeks or months.13 It is also dynamic, by which I mean that it does not run its course steadily, but moves in waves and through stages. Grief waxes and wanes in intensity. Furthermore, it incorporates other emotions which come and go without any clear pattern.

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11 In a psychological study of the grief experience, Arlene Sheskin and Samuel Wallace found that the type of death, be it accidental, natural, or a suicide, has a significant influence on the experience. See A. Sheskin and S. Wallace, “Differing Bereavements: Suicide, Natural, and Accidental Death,” Omega: Journal of Death and Dying, vol. 7, no. 3 (1976): 229–42.
12 The exception here is what may be termed “grief flashbacks.” It is a normal part of grief to recur after what one usually thinks of as the grieving period ends. Something reminds us of the loved one lost and, for a moment, we find ourselves back in that affective framework which held us when she died. I will say more about this towards the end of the paper.
13 Despelder & Strickland write: “The period of depression and acute grief following a loss usually lasts no longer than several months. But the period of mourning, the time of gradually accepting the loss and reorienting one’s life without the deceased, may continue through the first year of bereavement, sometimes longer.” (LD, 194)
Within this relatively unstructured process, I wish to distinguish three temporal phases: what I call “anticipatory grief,” “being-amidst-grief,” and grieving.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Anticipatory grief} occurs, as the name suggests, before the death happens but when it is perceived to be drawing near. In cases where death comes unexpectedly, anticipatory grief does not occur. There is instead an initial phase characterized by shock, numbness, and a sense of disbelief. (LD, 198) \textit{Being-amidst-grief} is my term for that phase which follows the initial discovery of the death but precedes the commencement of recovery from grief. The language is meant to capture the sense of being lost in one’s grief and not knowing what to do. Being-amidst-grief fades imperceptibly into \textit{grieving}, which is the active process of readjustment that allows us to move on from grief. I shall not attempt to make generalizations about the duration of these temporal phases. It is impossible to demarcate when being-amidst-grief ends and the process of recovery begins, and it is just as impossible to determine the point at which grieving ends. Recovery from grief is very gradual and, it could be argued, never complete while one lives. I will say, however, that in cases where there is anticipatory grief, the period of being-amidst-grief is usually shorter and the process of grieving usually begins much sooner after the death than in cases where the death is sudden and unexpected.\textsuperscript{15}

\section*{Sadness and Grief}

At first glance, grief may appear to be a species of sadness, distinguished by its intentional object rather than by its structural characteristics. Thus construed, the meaning of grief would be “sadness at the death of a loved one.” Grief resembles sadness in its physiognomy and affective tone. Sadness is commonly understood as the emotion of loss (SG, 801), and the death of a loved one certainly qualifies as an instance of loss. Why, then, do we not take grief to be no more than a form of sadness, perhaps a highly intensified one?

Careful comparison of the affective, physiognomic, sensorimotor, and behavioural cues that characterize grief and sadness reveals that, although there are many superficial similarities, there are also

\textsuperscript{14} This is, of course, not the only way to distinguish the phases of grief. Despelder and Strickland offer an excellent summary of various models. (LD, 198–201) The framework I have selected best exhibits the phenomenological insights revealed by my research.

\textsuperscript{15} Despelder & Strickland note the same thing, see LD, 206.
deep differences in the way the two emotions manifest themselves. Sadness draws us down. Our mood is low (that is to say, negative), our energy is low, our faces are downcast, and there is a lassitude of posture and movement. Corresponding to these affective and expressive manifestations is a flattening of the perceptual field. Colours appear dull, sounds muted, and food lacking in flavour.\textsuperscript{16} All of these factors are usually also present in cases of grief. There are, however, many differences between sadness and grief. As stated above, grief is a complex in which several emotions may figure over the course of an extended period of time. Bereaved individuals sometimes experience feelings of helplessness and anger regarding their loss\textsuperscript{17}, they may resent the deceased for “leaving them,”\textsuperscript{18} or be relieved that his suffering is over.\textsuperscript{19} This objection might be countered by maintaining that sadness is the core or central meaning of grief while the other emotions are peripheral, derivative, or nonessential components of the experience. Taking this line of argument, my hypothetical interlocutor would be required to claim that the anger we experience is about the \textit{circumstances} of the loss, rather than the loss itself. Moreover, emotions such as anger, helplessness, and guilt do not necessarily occur in all instances of grief, whereas we find it difficult to imagine a case of grief without sadness. If a loved one died and we did not feel sad, we would hesitate to use the word grief to describe our feelings.

The two most salient characteristics of grief, however, are not shared by sadness, while nevertheless being central to the experience of grief (or so I will attempt to show). The first of these is acute affective pain. In grief, we do not merely feel “down” as we do when we are sad. Grief \textit{hurts}. This pain is sometimes located inside the chest or abdomen, either in the form of a cold, dark weight or an emptiness—as if something inside had been torn out. Or the pain


\textsuperscript{17} Indeed, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s famous “five stages” model of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) is more appropriately construed not as an analysis of grief itself, but of the secondary emotions that accompany grief. See Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, \textit{On Death and Dying} (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

\textsuperscript{18} Joan Didion, \textit{The Year of Magical Thinking} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 28.

\textsuperscript{19} As I did when my father passed away after spending five years hospitalized for advanced dementia.
may be diffused through the body, an insistent ache in the muscles or the skin. Joan Didion, in her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*, describes “waves, paroxysms, sudden apprehensions that weaken the knees and blind the eyes and obliterate the dailiness of life.”20 Some experience a constriction in the throat or sudden bouts of crying. (LD, 197) Often the very air seems to be permeated with pain, like an anxious vibration. In such cases, the whole world presents itself under the aspect of pain. Sadness is not like this.

My hypothetical interlocutor might be able to rescue her hypothesis by insisting that this affective pain is a characteristic of *extreme* sadness, and that grief is one class of such extreme sadness. At this point, the onus would be upon her to present other examples of extreme sadness that display these characteristics, but let us waive that for now and move on to a second problem with this move. If we define grief as a class of extreme sadness, this rules out the possibility of degrees of grief. That is, if grief is by definition extreme, it makes little sense to speak of mild or moderate grief. And yet, I believe that the phenomenological evidence speaks in favor of there being degrees of grief, from mild to severe.

Moreover, the second of these central characteristics, and the one through which all other features of grief can be made intelligible, is not consistent with construing grief as a form of sadness, extreme or otherwise. Grief is profoundly *disorienting*. J. Todd DuBose writes of his experience following his wife’s miscarriage: “Time, space, and expectations of new ways of being with our child were in disarray.”21 In grief, we don’t know what to do, what to think, what to feel. At times we feel empty, lacking any emotion, sadness included.22 C.S. Lewis, in his memoir *A Grief Observed*, recounts that “it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed.”23 Our surroundings take on an unreal or dreamlike quality. We may have difficulty concentrating or maintaining interest in things. Lewis writes: “There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting.”24 This disruption of inhabitation is frequently visible to others. Didion describes a look characteristic of those suffering from

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24 Ibid.
grief: “The look is one of extreme vulnerability, nakedness, openness. It is the look of someone who walks from the ophthalmologist’s office into the bright daylight with dilated eyes, or of someone who wears glasses and is suddenly made to take them off.”

Sadness often incorporates a degree of detachment or withdrawal from the world, but it is not disorienting in the manner described above. As an emotion, sadness is precisely a particular orientation toward a situation. It is now a near-consensus view in both philosophical and psychological work on emotion that emotions are intentional in the phenomenological sense—in other words, emotions possess a directedness toward a situation as a situation of a certain class, which is also defined by a corresponding meaning. While different theoretical approaches disagree on many finer points, the majority accept this claim in one form or another. On the basis of my own phenomenological work on emotion, I have found that emotions possess what Merleau-Ponty calls an “operative intentionality,” an intentionality which is non-positing and non-representational, but nevertheless meaningful and organized. The meaning of the emotion is found in an organization of our bodily comportment that informs our movement, posture, facial expression, and the way we construct our perceptual field. This organization draws together aspects of the situation into a coherent whole, which is the meaning of the emotion. In the case of sadness, the meaning is that of personal loss, and it is expressed through a lassitude of posture and movement, a downcast face, and a flattening of the perceptual field. Sadness is a meaningful and organized stance or orientation toward a situation and therefore cannot account for the disorientation which characterizes grief.

How, then, are we to understand this disorientation? Through a consideration of the temporality of grief, to which we now turn.

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25 Didion, The Year, 74–75.
28 “We found beneath the intentionality of acts, or thetic intentionality, another kind which is the condition of the former’s possibility: namely an operative intentionality already at work before any positing or any judgment.” (PP, 429)
Grief and Temporality

I suggest that the disorienting quality of grief results from the discord between the world that we affectively inhabit and the world in which we currently find ourselves. The world which we in-habit—the world of our habits, the network of pre-thematic meanings that form the basis of our objectively posited thoughts and actions—is the world of the loved one lost, the world which is now gone forever. As a result, the world in which we now find ourselves is changed in ways both overt and invisible. “I think I am beginning to understand why grief feels like suspense,” writes Lewis. “It comes from the frustration of so many impulses that had become habitual. Thought after thought, feeling after feeling, action after action, had H. for their object. Now their target is gone.” 29 Integral to grief is not knowing how to act, how to feel, how to be-in-the-world. Our being-in-the-world is shattered, not in the sense that we are no longer in the world, but in the sense that we are no longer in the world in a coherent, settled, habituated way. There is a discord between our habits (of feeling, thinking, and acting) and the world in which we find ourselves, and this is why it seems alien. This is why everyday tasks are challenging. This is why we feel shattered inside: because our world has been shattered, and consciousness is precisely a particular grip upon the world.

As a discord between the habit-body and the world the body currently finds itself in, grief resembles the phenomenon of the phantom limb as explicated by Merleau-Ponty. (PP, 76–89) In fact, grief is often described as feeling like missing a part of your body. 30 As Merleau-Ponty writes:

The man with one leg feels the missing limb in the same way as I feel keenly the existence of a friend who is, nevertheless, not before my eyes; he has not lost it because he continues to allow for it, just as Proust can recognize the death of his grandmother, yet without losing her, as long as he can keep her on the horizon of his life. (PP, 81)

This is possible because “our body comprises as it were two distinct layers, that of the habit-body and that of the body at this moment.” (PP, 82) It is through our habit-body that we are embedded in the world. It comprises a network of pre-thematic meanings that forms

29 Lewis, A Grief Observed, 41.
30 Lewis, for example, makes this analogy. (Ibid., 45–46)
the basis of our objectively posited thoughts and actions. This network articulates the various fields of action that the body has at its disposal: the visual field, the motor field, the field of our spoken language, and so on. Without these structural articulations, we could not find our way around the field in question and coherent action would be impossible. Merleau-Ponty construes these articulations as habits, which are, in turn, the sediment of previous thoughts and acts. The concept of habit is appropriate to these structural articulations because they must be learned; once learned, however, they retreat into the background of our pre-thematic consciousness, to be activated when needed.31

Precisely because it is the sediment of past thoughts and actions, our habit-body lags behind the present. When there is a sudden and significant change in our world, our habits no longer map comfortably upon it. The space we have made for the deceased, the countless habits of thinking, feeling, and behaving that involved her, are still here. But they do not fit onto the world as it now exists. Someone we love is woven into our lives to the extent that she is horizontally connected to many things. Kym MacClaren expresses it well:

His life was cast in terms of this person; his future, his sense of possibility, his very sense of his place in the world, and how he matters was entwined with her. Not only his big life projects, but even his everyday routines had her as a condition of their meaningfulness. Eating breakfast, going to bed at night, shopping at this market: with her around, it had been self-evident how to do these things. They had done them so often together, and for so long, that they rang with the same historical resonances, swelled with the same thickness of meaning, settled into the same familiar routes for her as for him. But without her there to do her part in the dance that awakened these meanings, carved out those routes, and reminded him of his place, now even breakfast seems unimaginable.32

31 If habits are the sediment of past thoughts and actions, and thought and action are only possible on the basis of a background of meaning acquired through habit, two questions beg answer: (1) how are our first actions possible, and (2) where do our earliest habits come from? Merleau-Ponty’s response is that the body “is my basic habit, the one which conditions all the rest.” (PP, 91) In other words, the human body comes to some extent prefigured, with certain organizational structures (such as front-back and left-right) built-in. Learned habits further delineate and organize this basic schema.

The loss of the deceased reverberates throughout our lives, touching everything she touched, leaving behind an alien wasteland. This is why grief is disorienting. This is why the world feels unreal to us, because it is not the world that we in-habit.

We may therefore describe grief as love without a future. In grief, all the future-directed intentions that involve the loved one lost, whether posited or implicit, find cruel refutation. We can understand this better through a comparison of grief with missing. To grieve is not merely to miss the deceased. When someone is away, we miss that person, but we can still look forward to a future with them in it. In most cases, this is the future when they return. But even in the extreme case, when there is no expectation of seeing them ever again, the future still contains the loved one, though forever separated from us. We can imagine her going on with her life in her new home, and our intentions find at least formal fulfillment. Of course, we can also imagine the lives of those whom we mourn—the lives they might have had, had they lived—but we know these lives are not real. In the first instance, we have an intention that is formally fulfilled; in the other, the intention is refuted. The two cases are not the same at all.33

I think the above interpretation may help us to explain the intense affective pain so conspicuous in grief. Insofar as the loved one lost is an integral part of our habits, we may legitimately describe her as a part of ourselves. We literally cannot be the same person we were without her. Thus, the common sentiment that in bereavement, we have lost a part of ourselves has a powerful phenomenological basis.34 In this case, it makes sense to view the pain of grief as the intuition of this loss. The pain of grief is, so to speak, the affective equivalent of the pain of amputation. This may allow us to explain why grief resembles sadness in its physiognomy and affective tone. As with sadness, the intuition of a loss is an essential part of grief. What makes grief distinctive, however, is that what is lost is a part of oneself and furthermore this loss is a permanent one. Whether we should maintain that grief incorporates sadness or hold instead that

33 This may explain in part why so many of us are attracted to the idea of an afterlife. Of the loved one lost we say, “She’s in a better place now.” Here we imagine her life and perhaps even believe that this life is real. We may find comfort in the hope of a reunion after our own deaths. This is a way of dealing with grief—or perhaps avoiding it? —by turning it into missing. Lewis seems to say something like this in his memoir, but only when speaking of other bereaved individuals. His own religious faith, while profound, offers him no comfort.
34 Despelder and Strickland point out that the word bereavement itself comes from a root word meaning “shorn off or torn away.” (LD, 193)
this difference is great enough that we should not employ the word sadness in connection with grief, is largely a definitional question, and it is one that I shall not attempt to address here.35

This analysis of grief as the discord between the world-that-was and the world-that-is can also account for the distortions of experienced time so common in grief. Lewis writes of grief that “it gives life a permanently provisional feeling.... Up till this I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time. Almost pure time, empty successiveness.”36 The hours and days blend into one another, time sometimes stretches and sometimes contracts. Our routines are disrupted. (LD, 196) Time ceases its steady flow, instead dissolving into a single homogeneous moment without defined boundaries or direction. The mismatch between the world that we affectively inhabit and the world in which we find ourselves that in part constitutes grief breaks up the structure of lived time. As Heidegger argues, we project a future on the basis of our past: “To Being-in-the-world, however, belongs the fact that it has been delivered over to itself—that it has in each case already been thrown into a world.... ‘Being-ahead-of-itself’ means, if we grasp it more fully, ‘ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-in-a-world.’”37 The lived present is thus a directedness toward the future on the basis of the past. When the connection between past and future is severed, we are stranded in a present which has lost its meaning. The projected future has been rendered impossible, leaving us stuck in the present.38

35 To avoid confusion, I should remind the reader that I am continuing to define grief as the affective-behavioural complex which results from the death of a loved one. I consider the disorientation discussed above to be the core characteristic of grief, by which I mean it is the characteristic which most successfully makes grief intelligible and distinguishes it from other affective phenomena. Grief does incorporate other aspects, such as the affective pain just noted.

36 Lewis, A Grief Observed, 30.


38 We encounter similar phenomena in cases of despair and depression. Of depression, Matthew Ratcliffe writes: “the sufferer is presented with a future that lacks openness; it no longer appears as a domain of possible activity.” See Matthew Ratcliffe, “Varieties of Temporal Experience in Depression,” Journal of Medicine and Philosophy, vol. 37 (2012): 114–38, here 118. And Anthony J. Steinbock argues that in despair, I experience the future as closed of meaningful possibilities that should otherwise be there. Through the experience of being abandoned to myself, I experience being abandoned to the present. In despair, however, neither the future nor the past offers anything to the present.... In despair, I am consumed not so much by the now, but by the absence of the
irretrievable past and an unattainable future, this present floats without direction or articulation.\textsuperscript{39}

If the above interpretation is correct, then we cannot properly classify grief as an emotion, at least not in the sense outlined earlier. An emotion is a specific stance or orientation toward a situation that defines it as a situation of that particular type. But grief, at least in the aspect just described, is not a particular stance or orientation, but the conspicuous absence of such a stance. It is therefore more accurately described as what MacClaren calls an \textit{authentic passion}. She writes, “Sometimes life presents us with a genuine question—a question for which we do not have an answer prepared, a question that unsettles and deranges not only the habitual network of meanings that structures our world, but our very sense of self, of who we are and how to live.”\textsuperscript{40} The affective response we construct to such a question is what she calls an “authentic passion.” She contrasts such passions with what she calls “emotional clichés”: situations that fit familiar patterns and for which we have already developed habitual emotional responses. I have chosen to refer to these simply as “emotions,” since the vast majority of emotional episodes we experience are of this type. I concur with MacClaren that the category of affect is broader than that of emotion narrowly construed (that is, what she calls emotional clichés), and I will return to her explication of authentic passions in the next section.

**Grieving**

The process of reorientation and readjustment by which we regain our grip on the world, and move on from grief, I have chosen to call “grieving.” The verb grief-\textit{ing} is appropriate because it refers to an active process. It should be distinguished from the observation of socially sanctioned demonstrations of grief, which I call \textit{mourning}, although mourning can certainly play a role in grieving. If the interpretation outlined above is correct, then grieving is a process of re-

\textsuperscript{39} Cf. Dubose, “The Phenomenology of Bereavement,” 368: “Grief gazes at an ever-receding present as it moves further and further into the past.”

\textsuperscript{40} MacClaren, “Emotional Clichés,” 59–60.
building our world. This involves adjusting all of the habits of thinking, feeling, and acting that involved the loved one lost, and perhaps also redrawing the whole pattern of one’s life into a new configuration. As MacClaren writes:

The bereaved must become someone new, and live in a transformed world. He must cultivate a new form of life in which he might live meaningfully without either pretending that his beloved is still here, or leaving her entirely behind.... Such creation can be slow and agonizing precisely because it calls for something genuinely new.... Nor is it easy for the bereaved to get his bearings and to articulate quite what is at issue here, for part of the issue is a significant breakdown in the habitual routines for articulating and making sense of things.41

It is helpful to analyze this process on two levels, which may be broadly described as the thematic and pre-thematic. Let us consider the pre-thematic first.

On its most basic level, grieving is a matter of learning new habits and adjusting old ones. It functions according to the same dynamic as learning skills. We must encourage our body to let go of its current configuration of habits and move on to a new one. This is done through action. We attempt to live our life in the new shape it has without the loved one. When we speak of “moving on with our lives” we are alluding to this process. Just as the body slowly weaves the habits of love, it slowly unweaves them. As with learning a motor skill, our actions are initially forced and artificial, and we must think about what we are doing at every stage. We say we are “going through the motions.” In time, however, our body catches on and finds a new orientation. To our surprise, we discover that we are no longer going through the motions, but acting in accordance with our new behavioural norms.

The expression “going through the motions” highlights an apparent weakness of this analysis. We may alter our daily routine, change our surroundings and even our patterns of thought, but affectivity is not subject to conscious control. We cannot simply force ourselves to feel differently and hope that it sticks. Does not “going through the

motions” mean precisely acting without the appropriate feeling behind it?

Closer analysis, however, reveals that affective adjustment is not as different from the learning of skills as we are inclined to think. The situation in which we find ourselves bears some resemblance to Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the spatial level. In our everyday experience, the directions up and down, horizontal and vertical appear to be fixed and given alongside the contents of perception. But experiments with introducing alterations into the orientation of the visual field reveal that the spatial level is tied neither to the contents of perception, nor to the physical orientation of the body. For example, subjects fitted with glasses that invert the visual field first experience their surroundings as upside down and unreal. By the second day, however, the landscape has righted itself, but the subject feels his own body to be upside down. Over the next few days, the body gradually seems to resume an upright position and things increasingly develop a sense of reality. (PP, 244–45) This experiment indicates that the meanings “top” and “bottom” are not simply derived from the visual field, since they can be detached from it. In a second experiment, a mirror is used such that the subject sees the room he is in tilted at a forty-five degree angle. At first the subject sees the room as slanted, himself as leaning to one side as he walks through the room. The overall effect he describes as “queer.” But after only a few minutes of interacting with it, the room appears to right itself. (PP, 248) This shows that “up” and “down” are also not derived in any simple way from the position of the body. Thus, Merleau-Ponty is led to conclude that orientation is “a certain possession of the world by my body, a certain gearing of my body into the world.” (PP, 250)

I suggest that the world inhabited by us is constituted by a configuration of pre-thematic, sedimented levels and norms, of which the spatial level is only one example. When the world no longer conforms to these sedimented (that is, habitual) levels and norms, we are disoriented and action is difficult. At first, our interactions with the world, even our daily routines, are out of sync with that world and consequently awkward and hesitant. We may speak of “going through the motions.” However, especially if we attempt such affectively meaningful activities as work, we slowly regain our grip on this alien world, and our norms and levels readjust themselves.

As I have argued elsewhere, affectivity is best understood in terms of a grasp on our circumstances, not unlike the spatial level described above. Affectivity is an orientation toward some sector of being that makes it meaningful in a motivational sense. It is an “at-
tunement," to use Stambaugh's and Blattner's preferred translation of Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit*, a way of “tuning in” to something in a way that makes it relevant. As we saw in our discussion of the spatial level, these structural articulations of our environment tend to follow upon action. This is part of what it means to say that they are habitual. If we find ourselves in a world that does not correspond to our affective organization, and we act in accordance with this new world, then in time our affects will follow. In other words, no, we cannot choose to feel differently, but we can deliberately create the conditions which will encourage our feelings to change themselves.

Unfortunately, the course of human interaction is seldom so untroubled as to permit this process to go smoothly. Death interrupts a life, not only for the deceased, but also for all those that interact with him or her. This means that it leaves certain tasks unfinished, certain needs and desires unfulfilled. Despelder and Strickland write:

> Something in the relationship was left incomplete—perhaps some long-standing conflict was never resolved during the deceased’s lifetime, and now the survivor feels it is too late. Such unfinished business can include things that were or were not said, things done or not done. Unfinished business may give the survivor feelings of unfulfillment. (LD, 209)

If we lose our chance to resolve a conflict due to the death of a loved one, we are left with an emotional intention that presses toward its fulfillment in action without the possibility of finding it. Such an unfulfilled intention can be distressing in itself and may provoke second-order emotions such as guilt. These intentional threads keep us tied to the world-that-was and hinder the process of reorienting ourselves to the world-that-is.

Furthermore, death itself is rarely a tidy matter. The death of a loved one is an *event*, and we and those around us are culpable for our behaviour before, during, and after. This opens up further opportunity for conflict and for emotions such as anger and guilt. If these emotions are directed toward a person other than the deceased (family members, for example), then the possibility remains for us to act on these emotions and consequently for them to discharge themselves in action. To be sure, resolving emotional conflicts (what we colloquially call “drama”) is rarely easy and sometimes leads only to further conflict. Yet if we do not allow these emotions to reach some resolution, they continue to tug at us and get in the way of readjusting our affective levels and norms.

Finally, the death of a loved one, with its concomitant suffering and uncertainty, is an event few of us are prepared to face, at least
the first time that it happens. As Heidegger so ably explains, death is something that is “covered up” in our culture.\textsuperscript{42} We either avoid speaking of it, or mask it with inadequate and inauthentic interpretations. Thus, when brought face to face with death, we lack an effective stance to take toward it. We do not know how to act, think, or feel. I can say from my own experience of grief that the fact of the death seemed quite alien. The notion that someone could simply \textit{cease to be}, irrevocably, in a moment, did not fit into my experience. I could not get a grip on it. Given this lack of a ready-made stance toward death, we must grope toward one amidst the upheaval of grief. We must find a meaning for it. Not necessarily in the sense of “a meaningful death,” as in “she died for...,” but meaning in the sense of a handle on the death, a way to approach it cognitively and affectively. Is the death a welcome relief from suffering or a senseless tragedy? The judgment of God or a sign that there \textit{is} no God?

We are now speaking of grieving at the thematic level. By this, I have in mind what is sometimes called “processing” grief, that is, actively thinking through what has happened, trying to put words to it, reason out consequences, and take stock. This is commonly done in dialogue with one or more compassionate interlocutors. Processing grief can work in several ways. It reinforces the fact that the loved one is now gone and thereby aids in reorienting our habits to the world-that-is. But much more than that, it helps us to figure out the new shape that our world must take in the wake of the loss. In grief, so much of our life has been shaken that it can be difficult to find stable points by which to reorient ourselves. Talking it over with another person can be very helpful, especially since it reaffirms the presence of the other as a stable landmark in our life. Another way in which processing helps is in constructing a narrative about the death. The peculiarly timeless quality of grief results from our being severed from our past and future, stranding us in a perpetual present. A narrative weaves the loss into a past and a future, allowing it to recede into the flow of time. This in turn aids in our letting go of the world-that-was.\textsuperscript{43}

Dialogue highlights the role of a community in grieving. By confirming the meanings by which we tentatively approach the events surrounding the death of the loved one and grope toward a new configuration for our lives without her, a community of others helps us to bring these prospective meanings out of the inner realm of

\textsuperscript{42} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 297–98.
\textsuperscript{43} Didion, for example, combs her recollections for clues and omens of her husband’s death, leading her to reinterpret the meaning of several events.
“mere feelings” in order to become part of the shared flesh of intersubjective existence. One of the most powerful ways a community can contribute to the grieving process is through the rituals by which we acknowledge death: funerals, wakes, and the like. This can work in a number of ways. Most simply, they give us something to do in a time marked by disorientation and uncertainty.\footnote{See LD, 199: “Social institutions and customs may perform a valuable service to the survivor during the initial period of grief.... The presence of family and other social groups and the need to actively attend to the various details of the funeral and disposition of the body may help to define the role and behaviors expected of survivors at a time of crisis.”} We hold funerals, speak eulogies, go through all the demonstrations of mourning because “that is what one does” when a loved one dies. They provide a ready-made framework that may ease our transition into this terrifying alien landscape left in the wake of the loved one’s departure. Moreover, these rituals, like the rituals surrounding birth and marriage, are invested with a powerful cultural significance. Merleau-Ponty writes, “round the human world which each of us has made for himself is a world in general terms to which one must first of all belong in order to be able to enclose oneself in the particular context of a love or ambition.” (PP, 84) Part of this world is, of course, the culture in which we are embedded. Cultural practices constitute the parameters of our setting just as much as the spatial configuration of a room in the discussion of levels above, and our habits must grasp them if we are to navigate this setting successfully. This explains the power that rituals such as the marriage and the funeral hold over us, whether we intellectually affirm them or not. To recall, I asserted earlier that we change our habits through action. Rituals are one kind of action, and a potentially powerful one. Spreading the ashes of our loved one or watching them go into the ground need not be only a symbolic gesture; it can be a genuine gesture in which our whole body loosens its grip upon the world-that-was and once more opens up to a future.\footnote{See PP, where Merleau-Ponty discusses the case of a young woman who is forbidden by her mother to see the man she loves and subsequently suffers a hysterical loss of speech: “The girl will recover her voice, not by an intellectual effort or by an abstract decree of the will, but through a conversion in which the whole of her body makes a concentrated effort in the form of a genuine gesture, as we seek and recover a name forgotten not ‘in our mind,’ but ‘in our head’ or ‘on the tip of our tongue.’” (PP, 165)} For some, the funeral marks the point at which the bereaved makes the movement from
being-amidst-grief to active grieving. But this works only insofar as we are genuinely engaged in the ritual. Didion, for example, describes the funeral as “anodyne, a kind of narcotic regression in which we are wrapped in the care of others and the gravity and the meaning of the occasion.” It was not until much later that she began to genuinely grieve.

Recall also that issues such as guilt or conflict often tie us to the world-that-was. A community of others can sometimes help us resolve these issues. In the case of guilt, for example, we might seek forgiveness from a close friend, or absolution from a religious authority, as a proxy for the loved one who is no longer in a position to forgive us. The communally shared nature of meaning makes the cooperation of others integral to this process. It is much easier for us to obtain forgiveness from another than to bestow it upon ourselves.

The rebuilding of our world in grieving is slow, but not gradual. Rather it is intermittent, punctuated. First there are brief moments of feeling normal, each of which comes as a surprise. These moments become longer and more frequent until there is a gestalt shift and they become the background upon which we now experience moments of grief. Then the moments of grief become briefer and less frequent until they no longer significantly interfere with our life. But they never go away completely. We never completely get over grief. This is true in a number of ways. The first is that we never reach a stage where the grief no longer recurs. The intentional threads are still there—they just need to be re-activated. Years later, something reminds us of the lost child, mother, pet, and her absence gapes before us. This is not simply a memory of the grief; rather, one re-lives the feeling of loss and disorientation in the present, albeit in attenuated form and usually briefly. I might remember feeling angry at my partner for some slight that occurred weeks ago, but I do not re-experience the anger when remembering the slight unless I have not gotten over it—that is, unless I am still angry. Similarly, if these re-awakenings of grief were simply memories of how we felt at the time, we would not re-experience those feelings now.

The second way in which we never get over grief is that we never revert to the person we were before the loss. This would be impossible because, as explained earlier on, our being is woven together with that of those closest to us by a network of pre-objective meanings and habits. We simply cannot be the same person we were in the

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47 Didion, *The Year*, 189.
absence of the loved one lost. Our world has taken on a new shape. Her absence is no longer a gaping void, but, for better or for worse, it has been integrated into the background structure of our life.\(^{48}\) This is not to say, however, that this new configuration of our existence must be less full or happy than it was before the loss. There is even the possibility of being enriched by the experience, through gaining a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness with others.

**Concluding Remarks**

I hope that by now it has become clear that grieving is neither a weakness nor an evil, but a healthy and adaptive response to loss. Given that our existence is inextricably intertwined with that of others, a period of readjustment and reorientation following the death of a loved one is inevitable if we are to maintain the integrity of our lives. Grief is therefore not to be feared, but accepted as an affirmation both of the importance of the loved one lost in particular and this facet of the human condition in general. Grief is the converse of love and we cannot have one without risking the other. This is not to downplay the suffering experienced by the bereaved, however. Instead, I hope that this exposition, by enhancing our understanding of grief, may assist those who have taken it upon themselves to offer them compassion and aid.

That said, I wish to reiterate that this essay should be nowise regarded as definitive. As I indicated in the methodology section, phenomenology is an inherently intersubjective endeavor. Therefore, all of the assertions made herein should be taken as tentative and as invitations to further exploration of this troubling yet important topic.\(^{49}\)

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\(^{48}\) Lewis articulates this by means of an analogy with amputation: “[H]e will always be a one-legged man. There will hardly be any moment when he forgets it. Bathing, dressing, sitting down and getting up again, even lying in bed, will all be different. His whole way of life will be changed. All sorts of pleasures and activities that he once took for granted will have to be simply written off.” (*A Grief Observed*, 45–46)

\(^{49}\) I wish to acknowledge my debt to two anonymous referees, whose suggestions enabled me to significantly strengthen this paper.