Personal reflection on the loss of my aunt



I have been very lucky in that I have not suffered the loss of an immediatefamilymember or significant other; however, I have suffered the loss of a family member that was incredibly important to me during mychildhoodand with whom I was particularly close: my aunt. In this paper, I discuss this loss and my own process of grief.

I present this process more-or-less chronologically, bringing up relevant theories of loss along the way. When I was young, my family lived a short distance away from my aunt and her family. Her son, my cousin, was about the same age as me, and we spent a lot of time together.

During the summers, I was at their house every day, and we took extended vacations together every summer. During the school year, weekends were spent at her house, and it was often she who picked me up from school. Because we spent so much time together, we developed quite a close relationship. Later on, my family moved, but I called my aunt at least once a week, and I spent as much time as possible with her. In addition to being my godmother, she easily became my confidant, someone who I could talk to about anything, and I loved being able to spend time with her.

The bad news about her diagnosis with cancer (a rare form of leukaemia) came when I was 13. The entire family rallied behind her. When she tried a macrobiotic diet, we all joined her. When doctors suggested a bone marrow transplant, everyone who was eligible got tested to see if they were a match. When she needed frequent blood transfusions, we all got our blood tested to see if our blood would be better for her than the supply in the blood bank. Throughout this whole process, the thought that my aunt could die never crossed my mind.

I never even considered it as a possibility: even when she lost all her hair from chemotherapy, even when she lost too much weight, even when she was incredibly pale from anaemia. It is quite possible that my uncle, her primary caregiver, suffered from anticipatory grief, or grief suffered in anticipation of death. Mallon (2008) remarked that this type of grief can be experienced by the person who is dying as well as their family. When I moved away from home, I still talked to my aunt frequently. Every time I talked to her, she sounded in such goodhealth.

The last time I talked to her, she was being very active and had taken up playing tennis. I called her for her birthday, but she wasn't home, so I left her a message on her answering machine wishing her happy birthday and saying that I would call her back. My life was very hectic at that time, and I didn't get a chance to call her for a couple of days. Three days after her birthday, my mom called me and told me that my aunt was in the hospital with internal bleeding. She told me that it was serious and that I should try to come home to see my aunt. I got off the phone and bought a plane ticket for the next day.

I called my mom back to tell her when I would arrive, and as I was talking to her, she received the news that my aunt had died. I was in complete shock. I could not understand how this could have happened. I was on the phone with my mom, and I couldn't say anything. One of my first reactions was feeling guilt. I felt so guilty for thinking that all my little stresses were so important that I couldn't take five minutes to call my aunt and wish her a happy birthday. I wondered if my aunt knew how much I loved her and how much

she meant to me. My mom stayed on the phone with me as long as she could, but she had other phone calls to make.

I was geographically distanced from my family, and all I wanted to do was be with people who had known my aunt, who understood what a wonderful person she was, and who knew how much she meant to me. I called some friends, and they came over to keep me company. I am very grateful that they were there for me, but at the time, all I could think about was how much I wanted to be with my family. The next day, I flew to my aunt's home town for the funeral. The whole extended family was there as were about a hundred of the people who knew her well. Because she was cremated, there was no visitation.

While Irespectthis decision for cremation, I would have very much appreciated the chance to see my aunt one last time. At the church, in place of the coffin, there was a framed picture of my aunt in front of the urn carrying her ashes. The service was very personalized. Even if I had not considered the fact that my aunt might die, she and my uncle had put a lot of thought into her memorial service. They had chosenmusicthat had meaning for them, including the song they first danced to at their wedding. This personalized service falls in line with a characteristic of modern-day Western memorials cited by Valentine (2006).

The author mentions qualitative research that has shown that these memorials are "often creative and highly idiosynchratic [sic], reflecting the tastes and the emotions of the family involved" (Bradbury, 2001, p. 221; cited in Valentine, 2006). During the service, I noticed a lot of different grieving styles. Some, like myself, cried a lot. Others, like my grandmother,

made a concerted effort not to cry (or at least not to let anyone see them cry). My grandmother actually wore sunglasses in the church so that no one could see her tears. At the time, I wondered why she did not want anyone to witness her sorrow.

After all losing a child (even one who is grown up) must be one of the greatest losses one could experience. Immediately after the service, there was a reception at the church. All of my aunt's friends and colleagues from her work came and introduced themselves to the family and spoke about how wonderful a person my aunt was. At the time, I found this ritual to be a bit strange. I wanted to go back to her house and be with my family. Looking back on this experience, however, I see that these people wanted us to know how influential a person my aunt was outside of the context in which we best knew her.

They also wanted to be there to support us in our time of sorrow. Now, I am very appreciative of their kind thoughts. When we returned to my aunt's house, I noticed a huge collection of butterflies flying around her front porch. This was such an odd occurrence that I now always associate butterflies with my aunt. Whenever I see a butterfly, I think of my aunt and imagine that she is watching over me. This association came later in the grieving process and is an example of what has been termed continuing bonds. At the house, someone had laid out plates and plates offood.

There was even more food (including seven hams) in the refrigerator and freezer. At the time, the last thing any of us could think about was eating, and I thought how bizarre it is that when someone dies, friends and neighbours rush over with casseroles and hams. After reflecting upon this

experience, it seems that this is their way of showing they care. While they cannot really do anything to ease our suffering, they can at least ensure that the family has all of their material needs so that they can focus their attention on the grieving process.

The family gathered around albums of photos. We told stories about my aunt. This reminiscing meant a lot to me. At last, I had a chance to talk to people who knew my aunt. We told stories about all of the great summer vacations, about all of the times my aunt caught us kids doing things we weren't supposed to be doing, about all of her volunteer work, about all of the kids she had mentored, about what she was like as a young girl, about how she met my uncle, and about how she and my mom became best friends. All of these stories were very therapeutic for me.

They gave me further knowledge about my aunt and solidified my conception of her as being a defining influence on my life. Although I wasn't quite ready to accept the fact that she was gone, I was beginning to realize that she would never really be gone because her existence had marked me as a person. How I lived my life was a reflection of her. Without her, I would not be who I am now. The way in which I look at this is another example of a continuing bond, though this one is more intangible than the butterflies mentioned above.

Now that I am fully able to embrace this idea, I feel that I have moved through the grieving process, at least for the primary loss of my aunt. I still have not, however, fully dealt with the secondary loss. After my aunt's death, my uncle (my godfather) distanced himself from our family. Perhaps we remind him too much of his wife. Perhaps he feels that he has no

connection to us without her as she was our blood relative. I, however, will always consider him to be part of my family, and I am a bit angry that he doesn't want to continue having a relationship with me.

Valentine (2006) remarks that bereavement has been traditionally marginalized and that the primary goal of grief counselling has been the severing of ties and attachments with the deceased. This is the type of thought that underlies many of the different "stages of grief" theories. One example of a "stages of grief theory" is that of Kubler-Ross. Kubler-Ross (1997) developed a five-stage model for the grief process: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Another example is Parkes's three phases of grief, modelled on the four-phase model of Bowlby.

Each of these theories seems to conceive of grief as a linear process: there are stages that an individual must pass through on the way to accepting, or adjusting to, their loss. For me at least, these theories do not describe my own experience of dealing with grief. For example, I never passed through the denial, anger, and bargaining phases of Kubler-Ross's model. One model that resonates well with my own experiences is Bowlby's four stages of grief (1980). In an earlier work, Bowlby outlined his theory of attachment, whereby individuals develop emotional bonds with others.

Death disrupts this attachment bond, and the bereaved then passes through four phases: numbness and disbelief, yearning and searching, disorganization and despair, and reorganization (Bowbly, 1980). In my experience, I had definitely developed an attachment bond with my aunt. When my mom first told me that my aunt had died, I was in disbelief. I began to pass through the second stage immediately after the funeral. At first I was

not able to sit still, I simultaneously wanted to be in my aunt's home with my family and to walk in the woods around her house alone.

All of the reminiscing my family did gave me an outlet for my preoccupations with thoughts of my aunt. Once I returned home, her death really hit me (stage three). I was once again geographically distanced from my family, and I was beginning to realize that I would never have the chance to talk to my aunt again, to ask for advice, and to go for walks onthe beach. Eventually, I was able to get to stage four through the acknowledgment of continuing bonds. Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) presented the idea of continuing bonds.

This model contrasts traditional notions of bereavement in that it does not emphasize completely detaching oneself from the deceased. By creating continuing bonds, the bereaved can continue to have a sort of relationship with their loved one after death. For me, I have developed two continuing bonds with my aunt. The first is whenever I see a butterfly, I think of my aunt and imagine her looking out for me. These moments allow me to reflect, at least briefly, on the course of my life and question whether I am holding to the ethical and moral principles she instilled in me.

The second continuing bond is related to the first. I acknowledge the fact that part of who I am is a result of her influence. I know the kind of person she was, and I turned to her so many times for advice, that I can still hear her voice inside my head and I know what she would say to me. Both of these continuing bonds illustrate Klass, Silverman, and Nickman's (1996) concept of continuing bonds as active relationships, as opposed to

staticmemories. In conclusion, grieving is a complex process that every individual will experience differently.

An individual's process will be determined by their relationship with the deceased, the support of family and friends, cultural and societal factors, and how they are able to re-interpret their relationship with the deceased. Scholars from many different fields have developed different models for the grieving process. For me, the model that fit the best was Bowlby's attachment theory and four phases of grief. Continuing bonds, as described by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman, was essential for me to move through the grieving process.

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