

Helping Survivors Find New Identity Through An Innovative "Identity Typology"

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"I was eleven years old when my father died. It had been a long, painful illness, during which he gradually lost strength, functioning, and ultimately, the will to live. It began with weekend "fishing trips," which I learned many years later were actually his clandestine admissions to the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston for experimental treatments. During that year, I watched him grow weaker and weaker -- working half days, then using a walker, then becoming bedridden. I remember hearing him after I'd gone to bed at night, being bathed by my mother, crying, "I want to die." I remember hearing my mother softly murmur comforting words as she washed his blotched skin and welted sores. He was 35 years old.

When my eight-year-old brother and I walked home from school that chilly December afternoon in 1956, my mother and my aunt were standing on the front porch with the news. "Daddy has died." Barely eleven years old, I already "knew" -- intuitively. I was glad that I had said good-bye to him before I left for school that morning.

Shocked, saddened, confused, grieving. We all did our best to continue living. And yet, as I reflect now on the experiences and the choices I have made in the course of my life, I realize how little we understood during that time what a profound impact the loss of my father would have on our family and on each of our lives."

INTRODUCTION

Much research on loss and bereavement has been conducted to explore the complex process of grieving and the immediate impact on the lives of survivors. The focus of this research has been on determining the significance of factors such as relationship to the deceased (including correlates such as age at time of death), the cause of death, coping mechanisms, and personality characteristics. This study departs from this line of inquiry to explore the influence of "worldview" on long-term survivors of loss and the subsequent identity that these survivors have assumed many years after a formal grieving process has occurred. It assumes that the impact of the loss has influenced the values and priorities survivors possess, their views of life and death, the life choices they make, and how they define their relationship to the world. This approach emphasizes the perspective survivors have developed *over time*. It acknowledges that the grieving process is evolutionary, possibly even cyclical, and that as life circumstances change, survivors may adjust their worldview to adapt successfully. This adaptation can affect one's identity, causing the survivor to respond to continuing change and the concomitant opportunities for personal growth.

Erik Erikson (1968) proposed that understanding who we are is essential to our capacity to be intimate with others. Intimacy creates opportunities for love, for achievement, for a sense of belonging. After a loved one dies, a survivor whose identity has been tied, at least in part, to their relationship with the lost loved one, confronts the reality of having to live a changed life. This study wished to explore how the perspective learned from experiencing significant loss influences the survivor's life. Since loss inevitably changes one's life, does it also affect the survivor's sense of himself and the world? If so, how do these changes effect one's identity?

This study was interested in the long-term impact of loss on survivors' lives, as recognized at five years or more after the loved one's death. Finding a new identity has been acknowledged as the final task in the grieving process (Parkes, 1983), and relearning the world has been cited (Attig, 1996) as the significant challenge of all who must adapt their lives to a loved one's loss. This study attempted to answer several

questions about survivors at least five years after the loss of their loved one:

1. What is the long-term impact of loss on survivors' identity and on how they live their lives?
2. Do survivors experience changes in how they view their own mortality? If so, are these changes manifested in their values, priorities and choices as they adapt to a life without their loved one?
3. Do the lives of long-term survivors exhibit any patterns in formation of new identity?
4. Is there any relationship between the new identity adopted and survivors' ability to find intimacy and fulfillment in their post-loss lives?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional Literature

Traditional theories of loss define grieving as a finite set of *stages* during which mourners must go through certain stages and complete certain tasks toward recovery in order to reconstruct their lives. (Freud, 1917), Lindemann (1944) Bowlby (1961,1980,1982), Kubler-Ross (1968), Parkes (1970). The assumption is that having accomplished these tasks, survivors continue on with their lives as they had before. A majority of studies focus on the first year or two years after the loss occurs. Parkes and Weiss' study of widows and widowers followed them for four years after spousal loss (1984). A number of studies of parental loss of sons in Israeli wars extend from between 5 and 25 years (Rubin, 1997).

More recently, a number of researchers have identified grieving as a *process* that may evolve throughout our lifetime. Attig (1996). suggested that survivors had to progress through a process of "relearning the self, how to be and how to act," and ultimately to "relearn the world". Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1997) edited a book of studies putting forth the concept of "continuing bonds." Departing from the traditionally-accepted understanding that people *recover* fully from grief by separating from all vestiges of their loved ones, they suggest that most survivors "construct an inner representation" of their loved one in order to *adapt* to the loss. By doing so, survivors remain connected to their deceased loved ones throughout their lifetimes. Neimeyer (2000) contends that "meaning reconstruction" is the central process in grieving, affirming "the individuality of loss for different persons and cultures, viewing grievers as active agents attempting to assimilate events into personal and shared belief systems," the "delicate interplay between self and social context and the way in which both are renegotiated in the aftermath of significant loss".

Popular Literature

A review of popular literature and trade books published in the past ten years by journalists, psychologists and physicians, has uncovered many personal accounts of familial loss and the life-long effects on survivors and those around them. These books have provided excellent insights into how these losses significantly affected survivors for the rest of their lives. For instance:

Ashley Davis Prend's *Transcending Loss* (1997) discusses the ways people "reinvest" in life – "in love, in a new career, a cause, a creative project." Journalist Hope Edelman's personal story, *Motherless Daughters* (1994), brought this issue to national attention. Her research discovered that many daughters unconsciously imitate their mothers' lives and habits before recognizing that they are living their mother's life *recreated* rather than the life they desire for themselves. In *The Loss That Is Forever* (1995), Maxine Harris, Ph.D. describes adult children who gather the fragments of their former lives and reconstruct a new, albeit different, self through the combined forces of necessity and personal courage. *Seven Choices, Taking the Steps to a New Life After Losing Someone You Love* by Elizabeth Harper Neeld, Ph.D., (1990) offers a "map of the complete grieving process," from Step 1: "Life As It Was, The Event" to Step 7: "Life Back in Balance, Freedom from the Domination of Grief." She explains that "the mourning process is an adaptive-transformational process" that results in the wish to engage again fully with life. *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies* by Therese A. Rando, Ph. D, (1988), nationally-recognized grief expert, acknowledges that a survivor becomes a "slightly different self" by successfully integrating their loss, and that with a new identity she can successfully adjust to a new life, develop new relationships to others and to the world.

METHODOLOGY

The research methods for this study consisted of three approaches:

- A review of both academic literature and journals by leading experts on Loss and Bereavement found in the National Center for Death Education in Newton, MA, including Thomas Attig, Rabbi Earl Grollman, John Harvey, Robert A. Neimeyer, Colin M. Parkes, Therese Rando, Phyllis R. Silverman, Margaret S. Stroebe, Wolfgang Stroebe, and Robert S. Weiss.

Trade books by journalists, professionals and individuals writing memoirs of their own loss experiences (see above). The works of spiritual masters and practitioners such as Dalai Llama, Lama Surya Das, Stephen Levine, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Carolyn Myss and Thomas Moore were also reviewed.

- Consultation with spiritual counselors, therapists, academics and other professionals involved in the study and management of bereavement.
- Semi-structured interviews with a sample of 40 survivors, and survey questions with almost 40 respondents focusing on several key factors influencing views of life and loss. Some participants also provided me with material they had written, photographs and other materials that helped them tell their story.

The research approach was qualitative, drawing on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The influence of five factors on survivor identity (defined below) was explored: the survivor's (1) sense of their own mortality, (2) sense of time, (3) orientation towards time, (4) values and priorities; and (5) dominant relationship to the world. The objective was to determine if and how these factors had an influence on survivors' post-loss identity and the way they lived their lives.

Definition of Terms

- **Identity.** Identity is who we are - in relation to our world of family, friends and community. It is how we represent our "self" to our social world. It is our unique composite of experience, values, knowledge and all that life exposes us to. Since identity is often linked to the loved one, death requires survivors to define a new sense of self, and even reality, without their loved one. Identity, as Erikson (1968) proposed, is also a necessary requisite for intimate relationships. As discussed above, "assuming a new identity" is acknowledged by bereavement experts to be one of the most important tasks of grieving. *New identity formation* is, therefore, critical to adjusting to loss, returning to healthy functioning and to developing new relationships, including intimate relationships.
- **View of one's mortality.** This concept is related to how a survivor views his vulnerability as measured by how long the survivor believes his life will be. The researcher wished to explore the affects of loss on the survivor's sense of mortality, how respondents characterized 'life,' and how life is expressed in the survivor's priorities and choices.
- **Sense of 'time'.** This notion addressed the relationship between one's sense of mortality, as measured by relationship to and perception of 'time,' postulating that a sense of time might influence survivors' priorities, life goals or challenges.
- **Orientation toward time.** This concept measures the direction in time survivors focus on. These are defined as 'past,' 'present' and 'future'.
- **Values and priorities.** These issues involve identifying survivors' values and priorities and whether they shift as a result of their loss experience. The study hypothesized that survivors of loss are likely to change their priorities, interests and values and wished to learn what these were and how they changed.

- **Relationship to the world.** Related to the above, this concept explored how survivors relate to the world around them as a result of their loss experience. The researcher proposed that this might reveal a spiritual dimension to the survivor's response to loss that could influence identity.

Sample population

Identifying participants occurred through “snowball sampling.” Participants were solicited and evaluated based on the number of post-loss years they had had to examine and think about their loss and its impact on their lives. The key criterion for participation in the study was that the loss had occurred a minimum of five years prior to the interview; in many cases, respondents were ten, fifteen and twenty years beyond their loss. Data were gathered from 80 men and women, ages 24 to 65, who had suffered the loss of a spouse, parent, child, or sibling. Two-thirds of the study participants were female, one-third were male. Respondents came predominantly from northeastern states (Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, New Jersey) Mid-Atlantic (Maryland, Washington, D.C. and North Carolina) and California. They represented a well-educated, upper-middle class sample of individuals from business and various professions. Some were members of the same family. Their losses resulted from several different causes – sudden death, accident or terminal illness.

A semi-structured interview, recorded through written notes and tape recordings, gathered demographic information about the survivor, deceased and family members, cause and circumstances of death, length of time since death. Open-ended questions asked about the respondent's views of life and death, including their post-loss views of their own mortality, their values and priorities, their choices and their relationship to people and the world around them. Each was asked to describe their overall worldview as a result of her/his loss experience.

Because the questions in both the interviews and the questionnaires were open-ended, the data provided sufficient material to identify themes and patterns of responses on the five factors under study.

Limitations of this study are attributable mainly to the sample population and the snowball sampling method for selection of participants. Because this study lacked funding, the author relied on informal means for identifying participants. This implies that the sample was largely self-selected. Representation was skewed toward well-educated, middle-aged females whose losses occurred in childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Although unintended, early life parental losses seemed to predominate, though spousal losses (mainly husbands), and losses of children were included. Losses occurred largely as a result of illness or disease, though represented both sudden and expected. None were due to suicide or violence.

FINDINGS

The majority of study participants maintained a connection to their loved one well after their death. They kept the memories of the past with them, after five, ten or twenty years of living without their loved ones. What is significant is *how* they maintained these connections. For example, a 45 year old woman whose infant daughter died several hours after birth of undetermined causes writes a poem about her each year on her birthday; a 40 year-old man whose father died when he was fourteen has created a life for his family in his community of origin like the one he lost when his father died suddenly of a heart attack. Another woman, whose father died young, is an influential community leader, advocating for improved interracial relations and human services, determined to make a difference in her life for however long she is alive; and, a man whose father died when he was eight years old found his place twenty years later as a practicing Zen Buddhist on the West Coast, leaving his family of origin and painful memories behind on the East Coast.

View of one's mortality. The participants in this study almost universally recognized their own mortality as a result of losing someone close to them. This realization certainly sensitized them to the fact that life is not a permanent condition. The majority acknowledged they "didn't know how long they would live" and that life is "unpredictable," and that "things happen." However, this awareness did not in and of itself contribute to understanding what form a new identity would take. It is best considered a necessary requisite in the process of finding that identity.

Sense of 'time.' Data indicated that most participants expressed the belief that time is "finite." About 25% characterized 'time' as creating a sense of urgency about living. One respondent spoke of "packing in as much as possible." Others were driven to "experience as much as possible" in life, to "make a difference." This sense of "carpe diem" influenced those that shared this perception to attribute a sense of new meaning to their lives -- one that requires action because "I don't know how long I will live."

Orientation toward 'time.' Participants varied in their orientation toward time. As cited above, most respondents acknowledged their past as having an impact on their current lives. However, differences in emphasis contributed to adopting different orientation to "time." For example, over 75% *claimed* to live primarily in the present. Yet, the lives of 25% were seemed to be dominated by the past, evidenced by their focus on the past, holding on to memories and determined to "keep the memory" of their loved one alive. Almost twenty-five percent (25%) incorporated a 'future' orientation into their daily lives -- mainly through their work, but also in their decisions about how to live their lives.

Values and priorities. For about 50% of the respondents, who claimed some awareness of their values and priorities prior to their loss, this consciousness was intensified, influencing, for example, their choice of career or goals in life. For others, losing a loved one, particularly the loss of a parent or a spouse, brought them closer to their own mortality. These realizations caused them to shift their sense of what is important in life and led them to alter their values and priorities, and even their lifestyles. Relationships rather than career, for example. For those individuals who were not fully mindful of these ideas before they lost their loved one, data indicated that they also acknowledged a shift in their awareness.

Relationship to the world. A common thread among respondents was a search for greater connection, meaning, and positive impact -- whether it was in their families, their work, or their community. A noteworthy distinction emerged from the data, however, emphasizing one of two patterns or directions in their worldview. These two patterns consisted of what the author identified as an *inward* and *outward* worldview.

- a) **Inward worldview.** The survivor with an *inward worldview* tended to focus on the self, the family, and the community in which they live. The priorities of greatest concern were the well being of those closest to them. Their interests and concerns were directed toward the immediate and close-at-hand issues and needs. They tended to view the world as a place that holds memories of sad times or experiences as well as potential disappointments. Their energy is directed toward counteracting the negative experiences of the past with positive ones in the present and future. They chose to shape lives in which they could feel they have some control.
- b) **Outward worldview.** In contrast, the other group of respondents seemed to be more focused on people, the world and life as related to the "family of man" and the Universe. Their primary focus tended toward exploring universal and far-reaching issues. As a result of their loss experience, they concluded that they had been placed on the earth for a specific purpose -- to help others, to create, to make an impact on the quality of life, however that manifested. Their interests and priorities tended to the social and global needs of the world; thus they tended toward an *outward worldview*. Their perspective more often recognized the connectedness of all things, and saw the relationships between humans and other natural systems.

Emergence of an Identity Typology

The aggregated results of the interviews and surveys indicated that each survivor formed a dominant post-loss identity related to the five concepts being studied. The configuration of these issues fell into five patterns related to the survivors' view of life and sense of their own mortality, their sense and orientation towards 'time', their values and priorities, and their relationship to the world. These patterns may be considered as potentially distinct 'identities' and constitute the basis for the author's "identity typology." The author has termed these five identities as follows: (1) *Memorialists*, (2) *Normalizers*, (3) *Activists*, (4) *Seekers* and (5) *Nomads*.

A brief analysis of each identity type is followed by a more detailed description, including an excerpt from a respondent who comprehensively exemplifies this prototype. Names of actual respondents are changed for confidentiality purposes.

1. **Memorialists** are less concerned with the duration of their own lives than preserving the past and the memories of their lost loved one. Focused on the past, they tend to value the memories, experiences and immediate world they had shared with their loved one, placing their priorities on family, friends, and community.

I found that everyone I interviewed was, at some point in their recovery process, a Memorialist. Holding on for about a year is a natural inclination. An extraordinary case I found was a widow who began writing a book about her husband's life within months of her husband's death -- "a tribute," she commented, "to his brilliant career." This kind of memorial, however, does not necessarily occur immediately after the death. Sometimes this process of integrating the impact of the loss can take much longer. This delay may be due to how the individual manages his feelings, in general. One man told me how this happened to him:

My dad died on February 26, 1973. I was scheduled to present a paper at a conference in New Orleans at the time he was in the hospital and not expected to live much longer. My wife and I flew home and spent several days there. Dad was in the intensive care unit. The first day we were there he looked sick, but I had seen him look that weak once or twice before. But on the second or third day, I went in to see him and he looked gray. All the color was gone from his face. I had never seen him look like that. Asking the doctor what I should do, he advised that I should go to my conference, since my father's death could be days or weeks away. On the second night of the conference, my wife and I returned from an evening out with friends to find the message that dad had died. I found someone else to present my paper, and flew home for the funeral.

On the night of the 26th of February, 1989, sixteen years to the day after my father's death, I couldn't sleep. I lay there in bed thinking about my dad and the last time I saw him, and I wrote this song, just lying there. After a couple of hours, I had written the song (in my head), and I was in tears.

This man, John, like many men (Levang, 1998) coped with his father's death by diverting his attention to "work, tennis, and physical exertion generally." He ultimately dealt with his father's death by writing a song, *I Never Said Goodbye*, to his father sixteen years after his death. He finally acknowledged his long-suppressed feelings of loss and love for his father.

Another example of the *Memorialist* was Suzan, whose joyfully anticipated daughter Clarissa was stillborn after a fully normal nine-month pregnancy. She suffered overwhelming grief at her infant daughter's death. The causes were never determined by her doctors. Finding closure for Suzan's loss was particularly difficult because no explanation was found. When she was interviewed over six years later, she reported to me that, as a journalist, she write articles about the long-term impact that losing her beautiful baby daughter has had on her and her family. One of her annual rituals has been to compose a poem to Clarissa on her birthday, describing life events they might have shared that year, how she would have grown -- very much keeping her alive for her family and friends.

"One year ago I was washing all her clothes, tiny pink things. I even lost a sock in the dryer; already she was part of the family. I placed all her clothes and baby things in her dresser lined with lavender sachets her Dad had brought from the south of France. I made up her cradle in white eyelet and placed the doll and teddy bear I it. I knew she was a girl and I was happy. The next week I was following a small hearse into the cemetery, tiny white coffin lowered into the ground. Part of me died with her that day."

We had a star named after her for her first birthday. I wonder if her eyes would have stayed blue, her hair curly. In her death, she taught us the vulnerability of life and we will never

again take for granted those we love. They say time heals. I know I will never be the same. It's been a year. Only a year." (Excerpt from Derry News, Friday, August 26, 1994).

2. **Normalizers** appreciate that life is finite and work to create or re-create the kind of life they either lost or never had. While they are guided by their past loss, their main concern is the quality of their present and future life -- for themselves and their family -- as well as an appreciation for the world around them. Their values and priorities reflect their desire for "normalcy" and a good life now and in the future.

"Ralph and I were married for just three and a half years when he died of a massive stroke. It was my first marriage – I was a rather elderly bride at fifty! It was his second marriage. Ralph had two grown children and a close family -- his elderly and elegant mother and two sisters, and many good friends whom I grew very fond of. He also had a joie de vivre that kept us laughing together. During the two years prior to his death, he suffered two strokes and a blood clot in his spleen. While I worried about his failing health, he maintained an irreverence that both endeared and frustrated me. When he died, I was exhausted, but relieved that his death was quick and painless. His family members were all there when he passed on.

Thinking back, I learned a lot from Ralph – to be able to look at things objectively, and to make the best of things. I loved being married to my husband. He taught me a lot about relationships and about life.

Now, I live in the present, accepting the realities life presents. My Jungian therapy group is discussing the Holy Grail, and that learning about life is a journey. They said that the meaning of life is to learn, to give to others, to be a community of people. I view life as a challenge. Sometimes it's uphill, rocky and hard. Sometimes it's smooth sailing and lovely. Sometimes it's lonely. Ultimately, though, it's about relationships. What's important are families, people, and the world around us. I feel blessed to have had the experience, the memories. I have a continuing relationship with Ralph's family, which I value enormously. I feel hopeful. I'd love to be married again one day."

Barbara has learned to live in the present, accepting the realities life presents. Her husband's physical decline and ultimately sudden death motivates her appreciation for life and all that it offers. Her orientation toward 'time' is explicit, as are her stated values and priorities. Her relationship to the world combines both an *inward* focus on retaining connection to her husband's family and also a reflective sense of life as a journey through a larger world in which family and community provide an anchor of stability. The priorities she expressed for another marriage exemplify a worldview that places enhanced priorities on relationships and motivates her to *recreate* her positive marital experience.

3. **Activists** are driven by their past loss and the time-limited nature of existence. Hungry for experience and a desire to make a difference, they are oriented toward the future, striving for illusive immortality through the impact they can make on people and the world. Their values and priorities are directed toward improving the quality of life for all members of the global community. They have a strong sense of connection between their life experience and that of others.

"My father died suddenly of a heart attack when he was thirty-six. My mother was left with three children to raise -- my older sister, age 9, my ten-month-old brother, and me, age seven. When she went off to work as a dental hygienist, the reality of my father's death sank in. But, when my grandmother told us that God needed him more than we did, I developed a sense of optimism. I focused on achieving success as a way to gain attention, recognition, I wasn't getting from my mother. After ten years of fairly normal family life, things collapsed. My mother fell apart, suffering her first hospitalization after my brother's Bar Mitzvah.

The impact of my father's death on who I am today has been overwhelming. There is a hole, and the only way to feel good on the inside is by doing good on the outside through my

career in social work, working in the community I care deeply about. Doing work from a faith base gives me a warm sense of community and a strong network of friends I didn't have in my childhood family structure. I am driven in my work, but I get a lot more done than most people do and I feel good about it. I have meaning in my life and I will not go to my grave feeling I didn't do what I wanted to do.

I feel what happened to me and my family could happen to anyone. It's a "There but for the grace of God go I" situation. We were fortunate to have the support of my grandparents and my uncles. But what about other people? Not everyone has a support system. How do they get along? I developed this passion for fairness and justice, and social justice has been the focus of my work throughout my career."

Joan, age fifty, is a highly prominent social welfare leader in a major metropolitan city. Her public persona belies the emotional pain she has suffered for the last twenty-five years as the result of her early childhood loss. Not only did she lose her father but also the mother as she had known her and a family life that never recovered from the multiple blows to normal functioning. Her need to contribute exemplifies the *Activist* because this identity type understands human suffering, loss and the dreadful toll it takes on the human spirit. As a result, she has devoted her life to improving quality of life, inter-racial relations, and social welfare in places as diverse as Boston and the Ukraine.

Activists are driven to use their loss experience to accomplish things in this world. It is the most powerful identity of the types described. The individuals in this study who fell into this category held an outward and future oriented, highly time-conscious worldview. They possess a powerful combination of personality characteristics that turn the experience of loss into a catalyst for influence and change. The *Activist* identity is cogently summed up in the words of Bertoldt Brecht: "Do not fear death so much, but rather the inadequate life."

4. *Seekers* experience their loss as a catalyst for inquiry into the philosophical questions about life. They tend to believe that humans are intended to fulfill some specific purpose in this life, acknowledging possibilities of transcendence between this life and other forms of reality. *Seekers* value the human quest for connection with each other, the natural world and the divine. For them, life is a mystery, an opportunity to explore the range of human experience on this earth and the vast unknowns in the universe.

"After my father died, I channeled my energies into my studies at college because I knew I would need scholarships to continue. I became quite inner directed. I asked why God could allow such things to happen. Was I being punished? Because I felt marginalized by the community I had grown up in, I developed a "victim consciousness." I no longer allowed myself to depend on others outside myself. I became independent to an extreme, protecting myself against the pain of further losses. I decided to depend on the Universe rather than on any individual. As years went on, I was aware that much of my identity was tied up with my career, and then my job started to crumble. I felt so alone. I realized that I had a choice either to fall more deeply into depression or do something about it.

I decided that I had to work on becoming "interdependent," to learn to trust others. I joined a healing group and channeled with others seeking to understand the challenges in their lives. Being part of this group provided me with an infrastructure that wasn't there for us when my father died. My spiritual work with others made me realize that others also experienced loss, that the Universe was not singling me out. The most healing thing was knowing I was like everyone else.

Through these experiences, I learned to trust others and to acknowledge that my father's death was a part of life. It had positive benefits I would otherwise not have experienced. I had been given a choice to be a victim or create a new identity that helped me, as Victor Frankl pointed out, to look to the positives, accept tragedy as a part of the human experience

and move beyond it. This tragedy tempered me a bit like steel, but it also made me appreciate life and sent me on a spiritual journey. "

Helen's story illustrates how her loss helped her to develop a spiritual orientation to life. Coupled with her fear of dependency, it motivated her to seek solace in a higher power, the mark of a *Seeker* with an outward perspective and a need for connection with the Universe.

Seekers tend to live in the present but look to the future. They value life here on earth but also understand its transcendent nature. *Seekers* appreciate the immediate, the present moment, as the only "truth" we really know; yet they also can transcend this reality. In awe of the universe and its complexity. *Seekers* are on a quest to understand their relationship to the universe, to their fellow humans, to other living beings, and other forms of life. *Seekers* do not seem to fear death despite the loss of their own loved one. Several expressed the belief that they might reunite with their loved ones when they die. *Seekers* want to find the key to happiness, fulfillment and the meaning of their lives. Their search for something beyond themselves may be a search for the divine and its manifestation in human beings. A disciplined and cultivated awareness is their way of finding the answers to their questions about life. Through a spiritual practice of daily rituals that heighten their awareness, *Seekers* want most to be at peace with themselves and have a sense of belonging to the world.

5. **Nomads** have characteristics of the other four identities. They are aware that their behavior and life choices have been affected by their loss. However, they have not yet adequately addressed or resolved their loss and as such are not clear about their direction in the world. The *Nomad's* challenge is to find the identity that helps them resolve their loss and provide them with a particular purpose and perspective similar to those offered by the other identities.

"After my father died when I was seven, I felt adrift and alone. Even though I grew up living with my mother and older sister, there wasn't anyone to talk to. My sister was always busy with her friends and later, her boyfriend. My mother chose to work at three jobs – school teaching every day, Sunday School on the weekends and camp in the summer. That didn't leave too much time to listen to me or deal with her feelings either, for that matter. Being the boy in this female-dominant household didn't help either. So, no one taught me how to be a man, to be physically strong, to relate to women. I was extremely shy, terrified, I had few friends. I didn't know how to make sense of the world.

I went off to college not knowing who I was or where I belonged. After college, I left the East Coast, heading for the Open Land movement in Northern California. I remember my mother, who was by this time succumbing to her seven-year battle with cancer, read about the place I was living in Harper's Magazine. She hit the roof that I was in such a depraved, free love, environment. Truth is, I wasn't happy there anyway, so after six months, I moved on. I found myself in San Francisco, which abounded with free spirits of all kinds – Hari Krishnas, Zen Buddhists, hippies, and flower children – just like the Mamas and the Papas' songs described. I found the Zen Center populated by lots of lost souls like myself, as well as some notables like Linda Ronstadt and Gerry Brown.

I joined the Zen monastery there because it gave me sustenance, a sense of family and community. I learned social skills and found a male role model who in many ways replaced my father and taught me. I spent thirteen years in that community working on the farm and in the community bakery making bread that was sold to a well-known vegetarian restaurant until a scandal with the Roshi blew the community apart. When that happened, I had to figure out what to do next. Someone I knew at the Center was in the insurance business, and when he suggested I could make a lot of money doing that, I just sort of floated into it. That's how I landed in this situation, in this financial services company, that really doesn't suit me."

This is David, who at fifty-three, more than forty years after his father's death, has never quite found his place in the world. He is unmarried though he yearns for a loving relationship with a woman. Although he has been in therapy on numerous occasions and sought guidance from a series of Zen masters, he remains confused, makes inappropriate choices for his life and lacks the internal compass to guide him through life in a fulfilling way.

The *Nomad* is the person least likely to resolve his grief in a way that allows him to move on and form a satisfying new identity. While he shares some of the perspectives of the other identity types, his worldview has not yet evolved into a coherent shape to allow him to lead a fulfilling life. Often, this person has never had the kind of support that would work for him to acknowledge his grief and go through all the complex yet necessary steps of the grieving process. Sometimes, the *Nomad* has repressed feelings of loss and abandonment or been in denial. As a result, he probably has not made the commitment necessary to resolve his grief. Ultimately, the *Nomad* is lost or at least confused about life and how to achieve satisfaction and contentment.

Attributes of the Identity Types

Analysis of the study data also found that each "identity type" seemed to have what the author interpreted as both positive and negative attributes.

Positive attributes

The most outstanding of the positive attributes or traits were seen as a *creative element* associated with each identity. This creative element seemed to have helped the survivors to travel along a path toward successful adaptation and their new identity.

- The *Memorialist* created memories, through personal integration of the loss and ongoing activities that maintained the image of the beloved. An example was the mother who established a foundation for her teenaged son or the man who wrote a song as a continuing memorial to his father. Each in their way was keeping alive the meaning of their loved one's life.
- *Normalizers* created a sense of stability for their family. Having experienced major disruption in their lifestyle, *Normalizers* desire a sense of security. They tend to be contributors to their community, their church, their neighborhood center or the social causes they embrace. Examples include the husband and father who established his family in a community near where his father's death disrupted his own childhood and family life; or the woman who "adopted" her beloved sister's grandchild as her own.
- The *Activist* created positive change in the quality of life of those around them. They turned their own loss experience into a mirror of other people's suffering. Sometimes, this loss actually became the catalytic event for change – like the woman who lost her father in her teens and became a feminist activist, or the mother who lost her ten year old daughter and became a grief counselor to support other parents and siblings experiencing similar losses.
- The *Seeker* created a search for meaning. For these individuals, life and death became mysteries about humanity and its relationship to the universe. They sought knowledge from classical philosophy, Eastern and Western religion, New Age practices, or ancient wisdom of indigenous cultures throughout the world. Their focus was on exploring the spiritual, the sacred, and the Divine, seeking approaches to attain a higher level of consciousness, a transcendence of this reality, and a harnessing of cosmic energy for the higher purpose of helping all human beings.
- The *Nomad* created an illusion of freedom. These respondents valued their freedom, the sense of continual exploration, and the ability to move on without being "tied down" by roots or obligations. The *Nomad* may reflect positive aspects of the other types, experimenting with being settled like the *Normalizer*, seeking involvement in social causes like the *Activist* or searching for community like the *Seeker*. Ultimately, though, this "identity" lacked clarity because their grief was unresolved, and they seemed to be the least fulfilled survivors among the "identities".

Negative attributes

Not surprisingly, the data revealed that each identity type might also be seen to have negative attributes. These attributes were interpreted by the researcher as challenges for survivors to overcome in order to achieve a healthier, happier life.

- *Memorialists* did not always fully resolve their loss and therefore held onto their former identity in ways that no longer applied. An example was the widow, still seeing herself as a married woman, who prevented herself from appreciating the beneficial aspects of being single and independent or open to opportunities to meet someone new.
- In their desire for stability, *Normalizers* feared suffering additional losses. The evidence indicated that some became somewhat inflexible or risk-averse. They seemed to resist changes, even though these changes might have offered potential advantages for a more lucrative job or an improved lifestyle.
- *Activists* tended to be ‘Type A personalities’ driven to taking risks in their personal and work lives. This drive weakened one person's health and threatened another's marriage and family stability. Strongly motivated to creating change, *Activists* may like change for change's sake, because the loss conditioned them to such expectations.
- *Seekers* exhibited difficulty conforming to conventional norms and had trouble finding a “place” in mainstream society where their philosophical or religious beliefs or practices would be acceptable. At times judged as “strange” or “far-out” by those more conventional, *Seekers* risk social isolation.
- *Nomads* were those who simply had not found a true focus for their life and often lacked the fulfillment other types discovered. As the name implies, these individuals were always on the move, perhaps because they had not sufficiently worked through their grief. Whether or not this lack of clarity is due to insufficient time, external support, or personal inquiry, *Nomads* face the challenge of finding their own way to resolve their loss and its impact on their lives, so that they can assume a more fulfilling identity.

Evolving identity

This typology provides the flexibility to acknowledge that grieving is a process -- a lifelong process -- during which survivors confront memories or resolve issues in an evolving way. Based on the data, it appears that many participants expressed different beliefs and priorities depending on the ongoing situations of their lives. Each person composes his or her life from multiple experiences beyond personal history.

It is not necessary for everyone who loses a loved one to experience every identity in order to “re-invent” themselves. However, the results of this study demonstrate that every individual assumes a dominant identity – as a *Memorialist*, *Normalizer*, *Activist*, *Seeker* or *Nomad* based on view of one's life, perspective on time, values and priorities, and relationship to the world. If survivors do not adequately resolve these issues, my research has indicated that they are likely to find themselves as *Nomads* again and again. The normal process of finding a new identity after someone loved dies evolves throughout one's lifetime.

DISCUSSION

The impact of loss on survivors in the first few years after the death has been well researched in the literature. In addition, psycho-social aspects have received considerable attention. What has remained relatively unexamined is the *long-term impact* of loss on survivors and its influence on the worldview of those left behind many years after the loss has occurred. The study findings suggest that particular configurations of the five key issues studied led to formation of five different identity types. Each has unique strengths evidenced by particular forms of creative expression influenced by loss. These vary considerably.

For example, the *Memorializer* memorializes their loved ones through efforts such as poetry, song and charitable foundations established in their memory. *Activists* strive to make a difference in the world through social action, educational efforts and pursuing creative arts. Each type also reflects certain weaknesses that pose challenges for survivors. For example, *Normalizers* may fear change and risk-taking. *Activists* may push too hard, jeopardizing their health or personal life. *Seekers* may perpetuate their sense of isolation by pursuing non-conventional lifestyles or belief systems.

Each identity type deals with intimacy in a different way as well. Depending on the values and priorities of survivors, as well as the effectiveness of their grieving process, survivors seem to be more or less successful in achieving levels of intimacy in their relationships.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Qualitative analysis of almost eighty survivors indicate that there are certain patterns in perception of 'time,' values and priorities, and relationship to the world that lead to development of a new identity for survivors of loss. These identity types are based on response patterns that emerged from research around five psychological and spiritual issues. I believe these issues contribute significantly to the new identity survivors develop after their loss. This is because *they shape the worldview the survivor embraces as a result of the loss and experiences related to it*. These issues are the survivor's

- View of their own *mortality*
- *Sense of 'time'*
- *Orientation toward time* -- past, present, or future
- *Values and priorities* regarding people and the world around them.
- *Relationship to the world*

Understanding the influence of these concepts on long-term survivors of loss offers enormous potential for professionals as well as self-help organizations to assist bereaved individuals in developing a healthy new identity. Furthermore, understanding the significant influence of *worldview* on survivors' long-term self-perception, values and priorities may complement existing theories of loss and grieving about how survivors adapt to major life changes and relearn the world. The "identity typology" may serve as a valuable professional tool for assessing and guiding bereaved clients toward finding intimacy, meaning, and fulfillment in their post-loss life.

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