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Why grieve?

Michael Cholbi

ABSTRACT

Grief presents us a paradox: It is nearly always emotionally taxing, involving emotions (such as sadness) that we usually have good reasons to avoid. But at the same time, grief is a valuable and worthwhile experience for us humans. This paradox weakens though once we recognize that grief can provide us an important form of practical self-knowledge.

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In the summer of 1960, 45 year old Joy Davidman — an American poet and the wife of well-known writer and Christian theologian C.S. Lewis — died of cancer. As he grieved, Lewis recorded his thoughts in a set of journals, published a year later under the title *A Grief Observed*. But the book was initially published not under Lewis' name but under the pseudonym N.W. Clerk.¹

Biographies of Lewis shed little light on why he was reluctant to publish *A Grief Observed* under his own name. One suggests his goal was to spare his friends embarrassment.² A more plausible hypothesis is that Lewis published it pseudonymously in order to spare *himself*

¹ Faber and Faber, 1961. The executors of Lewis' estate permitted to be appear under Lewis' name after his death in 1963.

² Alister McGrath, *C.S. Lewis — A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Colorado Springs: Tyndale House, 2013), p. 342. McGrath notes that Lewis took other measures to conceal his authorial identity, including not using his usual publisher and using 'H.' to designate Davidman, whose rarely used middle name was Helen.

embarrassment. For even a cursory reading of this memoir suggests that Lewis was not only profoundly embarrassed by his own grief, but that Joy's death nearly drove him to delirium.

Lewis' grief is an emotional cavalcade; no single feeling or reaction dominates. But the overwhelming impression is that Lewis was caught unprepared for the variety and intensity of forms grief can take. He is surprised to learn that grief involves such a tangle of emotions: agony and "maudlin tears" he expected, but Lewis is by turns afraid, bewildered, and lethargic (he finds it difficult to muster the energy to shave, much the less to write). Lewis is also mentally unfocused. He feels almost drunk or "concussed," easily driven to distraction by thoughts of Joy when others speak to him. At first reluctant to visit places where he and Joy had happy times, Lewis returns to those settings in the hope of finding peace. He instead finds that they make "no difference," for "her absence is no more emphatic in those places than anywhere else." Her absence is "like the sky, spread over everything." When Lewis goes looking for Joy, she is elusive. And yet grief registers in one place Lewis "can't avoid": his own body, which he describes as an "empty house." For Lewis, a staunch Christian, the entire experience of grief even induces a crisis of faith. "Meanwhile," he asks in the midst of all this anguish, "where is God?"

Reading his first-hand account of his grief, it is hard not to worry that Lewis — Oxford don, world renowned author, and archetype of masculine reason — is cracking up, being driven mad by grief. His mind is fractured and disoriented. And as Lewis depicts it, grief haunts us, alienates us from our surroundings and from our selves, and impedes our ability to pursue good things in life. Admittedly, most grief experiences are probably not as emotionally harrowing as Lewis' was. Still, his experience captures something essential about grief: It is often arduous, occasionally terrible.

At the same time though, there is something recognizably human about Lewis' grief. He suffers, yes, but in a way that many people suffer in grief. A compassionate reader, observing Lewis' suffering, would still not wish *for Lewis' sake* that he not grieve at all. He loved and appeared to be in love with Joy, whom he described as his "trustworthy comrade, friend, shipmate, fellow-soldier." We expect people to grieve in such situations, and indeed, it would be unwise and even pathological for them not to. Admittedly, we might wish that Lewis were *less* pained by his grief. But to expunge grief altogether — to render Lewis blithely indifferent to the fact of Joy's death — is not the solution to his plight. That would amount to a 'cure' worse than Lewis' 'disease'. For while grief is painful it is also essential and, in some elusive way, *good*.

Grief thus presents us a paradox: It involves emotional states we ordinarily have good reason to avoid, but grief itself seems valuable or worthwhile nevertheless. The aim of this article is to understand why we ought to grieve despite its involving painful or difficult emotions. In order to answer this question about grief's value, we must first address two questions about the nature of grief. First, for which individuals do we grieve? Second, for what exactly do we grieve?

Before we begin, a few clarifications are in order: Grief, as I shall understand it, is the specific and personal emotional reaction individuals have to others' deaths. It should therefore be distinguished from *mourning*, the behaviors that we engage in so as to publicly acknowledge others' deaths. Many mourning individuals are also grieving, but it is possible to mourn without grieving. We will have a great deal more to say about the nature of grief. But for now, let it suffice that grief arises because others' deaths register as *losses* to the grieving person. Thus, in asking 'why grieve?', we are not asking about the social or moral value of grief (or of

mourning). We are instead seeking after the reasons we have for wanting to grieve — why, in other words, Lewis’ grief might have been good for him, or why your grieving could be good *for you*.

Grief is a *selective* reaction to the deaths of others. Well over 100,000 people die every day on Earth, and most of these deaths escape our particular notice. We grieve when others die — but only *some* others. To grieve every death would not only be impossible; it would require us to have the kind of relationship with each of those individuals for which grief would be appropriate, and we do not (and probably cannot) have the requisite relationship with everyone. But that raises the question of what *kind* of relationship with another person we must have in order for grief to be appropriate.

Our paradigm cases of grief are reactions like Lewis’, grief felt in response to the death of someone with whom we are emotionally intimate, such as a parent or spouse. But we do not grieve only for persons we love or share our lives with. We sometimes grieve the deaths of prominent artists, political leaders, or scientists we admire, for example, despite having no intimate ties with them. We need not even *like* those we grieve for. The Kennedy administration hatched 42 schemes to kill Cuban leader Fidel Castro, but Castro was rueful upon hearing of Kennedy’s assassination, and Barack Obama eulogized John McCain, his 2008 election opponent. So enemies or rivals can grieve each other. We might think that we grieve only those whose deaths *harm* us. But sometimes others’ deaths can be beneficial to us, and we grieve all the same. An overburdened caregiver may grieve when her patient dies, despite the fact that being relieved of those burdens is (arguably) good for her. We can even grieve those whose

identity we hardly have an opportunity to know. Parents are known to grieve miscarried fetuses, and adopted individuals sometimes grieve birth parents they never met.

We thus grieve those who *matter* to us. But as the preceding paragraph indicates, others can matter to us in a variety of ways. They may be life partners, friends, dependents, role models, antagonists, co-workers, professional collaborators, and the like. What unites all those for whom we grieve is what I call *identity investment*.

Each of us has a set of concerns, commitments, values, and goals. Let us call this set a person's *practical identity*. Other people play different roles in our practical identities. Role models, even those we do not know intimately, may shape our practical identities by helping us figure out what we care about. Others — for example, our spouses or romantic partners — play a role in our practical identities by being objects of concern, by sharing values or goals with us, and by caring for us. Some of our commitments or goals only make sense if there are rivals or enemies who stand in the way of their realization. Thus, our practical identities are, in a diversity of ways, invested in the existence of others. We grieve a person's death — and it is *appropriate* that we grieve a person's death — to the extent that our practical identities are invested in their existence. The more central another person is to our practical identity, the greater cause we have for grieving them upon their deaths.

That we grieve for those who are central to our practical identities explains a number of facts about grief. First, it explains how episodes of grief can differ from one another and yet still be instances of the same general emotional phenomenon. Despite the fact that your husband matters to you in a way that differs from how your college roommate matters to you, you might nevertheless grieve their deaths. Your practical identity is more richly invested in your husband than in your college roommate. Second, this thesis helps explain why episodes of grief will vary

in their emotional contents. We stand in different kinds of relationships with those we grieve, and the quantity and quality of our grief will tend to reflect these different kinds of relationships. For example, it would be surprising if someone grieved for a business colleague with the intensity that Lewis grieved Joy Davidman. Everyone whose death we grieve plays some role in our practical identity, but how an episode of grief unfolds will depend on the precise role that the deceased has played in our practical identities.

Still, knowing what conditions must be met in order for us to grieve someone's death does not inform us about exactly what we grieve *about*. We often say to grieving people, "I'm sorry for your loss." But what exactly has a grieving person lost? There is a tendency, in my observation, to leave this question unaddressed.

On its face, others' deaths result in several different sorts of losses. When friends die, we lose their companionship. When parents die, we lose their love and support. When national heroes die, we lose their ability to immediately inspire us.

Once again though, the philosophical challenge is finding the common thread, if any, in all of these losses. Fortunately, our earlier discussion of who we grieve for helps tease out this common thread.

As I argued, we grieve for those in whom our practical identity is invested. In investing our practical identity in another person, we come to have a relationship to them. Such relationships need not be symmetrical (parents do not have the relationship to their children that children have to their parents) or even reciprocal (you may relate to a famous artist but the artist may not even know you). But all such relationships are such that our choices and actions are shaped by them. These relationships are sources of guidance, obligations, and purpose. This is

the sense in which these individuals are sources of *practical* identity for us: We choose and act in ways that make reference to them and that we recognize as influenced by them. Lewis, for example, has clearly crafted many of his aspirations and habits around Joy and on the assumption that she would continue to exist.

In short, we build our lives around those in whom our practical identities are invested. We form expectations about our lives and our futures on the assumption that these individuals and the relationships we have with them will continue in some guise.

The deaths of those in whom our practical identities are invested, I suggest, thus represents a kind of relationship crisis for us. Their deaths entail that they cannot play the same role in our lives we presumed they would. The concerns, commitments, values, and goals we pursued while they were alive either no longer make any sense (those of Lewis' future goals that rested on Joy's continued existence can no longer be pursued) or have to be cast in a new light (Lewis can visit his and Joy's favorite pub but not because *they* will enjoy doing so). When someone who matters to us dies, we cannot 'go on' just as we were. We must adapt our practical identities — our understandings of ourselves and of what matters to us — to a new set of realities. The loss we suffer in grief, then, need not be the complete loss of the relationship in question. Indeed, the relationship often continues inasmuch as we hold the deceased in memory, etc. But we do lose the relationship *as it was* or as we assumed it to be, and we cannot be invested in it exactly as we were before.

That we grieve for the loss of a relationship in which we have invested our practical identities makes sense of how grief, while nearly always sad or sorrowful, is often suffused with confusion and bewilderment. This is evident in Lewis' case. He is anguished, yes, but above all else, Joy's death throws him for a loop. The familiar — pedestrian places and activities, even his

own body — has become unfamiliar to him. Beset by grief, Lewis is not at home in his own world. Grief, it is sometimes said, is a ‘questioning’ emotion, and we see in Lewis someone searching for something whose nature he cannot quite pin down. He is restless, lacking his usual sense of direction or habit. He is trying to discover how best to continue his life given that one of the cornerstones of his practical identity — Joy Davidman — can no longer serve as one of those cornerstones. Grief is not only a loss *to* the self. It often feels like a loss *of* the self.

Note that in arguing that the loss that defines grief is the loss of the relationship insofar as that relationship is central to a person’s practical identity, I am not denying that we grieve for other more specific losses as well. When friends die, we suffer the loss of their companionship; when siblings, we suffer the loss of their support, their knowledge of our histories and personalities, and the shared sense of the past; etc. Again, we have a wide variety of relationships with those whose deaths we grieve, relationships we value in different ways. In grieving the loss of the relationship as it was, we are simultaneously attempting to come to terms with the losses of the various goods associated with that relationship. I only claim that what we grieve for cannot be reduced to a list of goods the deceased person provided. This is why a remark made by the Roman philosopher Seneca, in a letter to his grieving friend Lucillus, seems insensitive, even chilling:

If a man who has lost his one and only tunic through robbery chooses to bewail his plight rather than look about him for some way to escape the cold, or for something with which to cover his shoulders, would you not think him an utter fool? You have buried one whom you loved; look about for someone to love. It is better to replace your friend than to weep for him.³

³ *Moral Letters to Lucillus* [65 A.D.]. R.M. Grummere, trans. (1920) (Letter LXIII, “On Grief for Lost Friends,”

Seneca's analogy between a friend lost to death and a cloak lost to robbery is inapt because he seems to view the friend's value in purely instrumental terms, as if the value of a friend (like the value of a cloak) could be reduced to whatever goods the friend provided. Certainly Lucillus ought, at some point, seek out new friends. But not in the expectation that he could *replace* his deceased friend in the way he might replace a stolen cloak. Having invested his practical identity in his deceased friend, Lucillus has integrated his friend into his self-understanding or self-conception. And in so doing, he made his friend *irreplaceable*. This loss of self is significant part of why grief is painful and disorienting. C.S. Lewis cannot replace Joy, even if he could (say) find another romantic partner who provided him whatever goods he found in his relationship with Joy.

With a richer understanding of who we grieve for and of what sort of loss prompts grief, let us now turn to our central question, how grief can be good or desirable for us.

One tempting answer is that grief, owing to the painful or arduous emotions it involves, is not good or desirable in its own right. Rather, experiencing these emotions is a necessary counterpart to the kinds of relationships human beings have, relationships characterized by love, attachment, or affection. If those sorts of relationships are valuable, then the pain we endure when they conclude is simply a price we bear for having those relationships in the first place. In the movie dramatizing Lewis' grief over Joy Davidman's death, Lewis expresses the core of this answer: "Why love if losing hurts so much? ...The pain now is part of the happiness then. That's the deal."⁴ Let us call this proposal — that grief is simply the cost of having the kinds of

para. 11)

⁴ Richard Attenborough, dir., *Shadowlands* (1993, Price Entertainment/Spelling Films International)

relationships where another's death leads to the sufferings associated with grief — the *necessary cost* view of grief's value.

The necessary cost view should be rejected though, for two reasons. First, it would seem to imply that grief, insofar as it is painful or distressing, is *purely* a cost: We cannot enjoy certain kinds of valuable relationships without grieving once the other participant in the relationship dies, so we must simply tolerate or put up with grief. The problem here is that the pain or distress associated with grief is not experienced as purely a cost. For many bereaved persons seem to embrace the more painful or distressing aspects of grief. Recall that Lewis does not avoid the locations he and Joy enjoyed together. He instead seeks them out, knowing that he will feel haunted or distraught whilst there. For Lewis, these negative emotions, which would otherwise be unwelcome in ordinary life, do not feel like costs. They seem rather to be indispensable to his grieving Joy – they seem to be appropriate or fitting reactions to his loss. Were they purely costs, the rational response for Lewis (and other grieving individuals) would be to try to *minimize* the costs, in the way that we seek out the lowest prices for the goods we buy. But Lewis does not try to minimize his painful emotions, nor does he seem irrational for not doing so. And the best episodes of grief — the ones that seem most important or valuable — are not necessarily those with the least amount of negative feelings. Insofar as the negative cost view denies this, it misunderstands the place of these feelings in grieving.

Second, the necessary cost view cordons off grief, seeing it merely as residue of the grieving person's now defunct relationship with the deceased. But as the case of Lewis indicates, grief does not mark the end of our relationship with the deceased. It instead tends to mark a turning point *within* our relationship with the deceased, a turning point necessitated by the fact that the deceased can no longer play exactly the same role in our practical identity as she did

previously. As Lewis recognized, grief “follows marriage as normally as marriage follows courtship or autumn follows summer. It is not a truncation of the process but one of its phases; not the interruption of the dance but the next figure.” Yet if grief is part of our relationship with the deceased, then how we grieve will shape the relationship itself and what it means to us. The necessary cost view depicts grief as a static cost to be weighed against the value of certain relationships, when in fact grief dynamically contributes to the value of those relationships.

Any account of grief’s goodness cannot ignore the sufferings associated with it. However, the necessary cost view, I contend, overemphasizes the role of suffering within grief, and in so doing, overlooks other crucial facts about grief. First, grief is emotionally complex, in that involves many other emotions *besides* suffering. As Lewis’ grieving illustrates, episodes of grief commonly involve other emotions, including anger, guilt, fear, confusion, and joyfulness. Moreover, focusing on the sufferings of grief can mislead us into thinking that grief is a passive experience, something we undergo or that happens to us. But grief — or better yet, *grieving* — is a process in which we are active participants. In the course of his grief, Lewis undergoes various emotions, but he also reacts and acts in light of those emotions. Grieving is therefore something we do, not merely something we feel.

But if grieving is an emotionally complex activity, then we may well ask: What is the point of this activity? What valuable end can be pursued by grieving?

My own view is that grief is a particularly distinctive opportunity for a good that we might call *self-knowledge* or *self-understanding*. As noted earlier, the deaths of those in whom are practical identities are invested induce in us something of a relationship crisis: We cannot

continue in the relationship as before, but it is often not evident how, if at all, to continue that relationship. But this crisis also represents a crucial opportunity to examine our values and commitments and identify which of these we hope will carry us into the future. When Joy dies, Lewis struggles to figure out what his life might be like in her absence but under her influence. This struggle is an attempt to integrate the past and the future, a struggle to understand the place of Joy in his practical identity. But such a struggle is simultaneously Lewis' struggle to figure himself out and craft a new practical identity. Even if Lewis (or other grieving people) do not recognize this at the time, the tacit point of grieving is to understand, articulate, and endorse, in ways that are rationally responsive to the fact of the other's death, the values and commitments that will constitute the grieving person's prospective practical identity. Having lost an element of identity, we grieve so as to find our way again. In this respect, grief represents a poignant opportunity to engage the question at the heart of the philosophical enterprise: How shall I live?

Grief makes possible this self-knowledge because the deaths of others upset the contingencies around which our practical identities are built. Many of our central values and commitments depend on others' continuing to exist. We know this, but it is easy in the blur of everyday life to forget this and take their existences for granted. We thereby fail to live in light of other people's mortality. And once others die, the fragility of our practical identities is exposed — we see that much of what we have cared about has depended on persons whose existence was finite and contingent. We grieve in the hope that we can move forward in life under a different set of contingencies and with a revised practical identity. If this hope is realized, we have gained a richer knowledge of who we have been and who we seek to be.

To evade grief, or to grieve halfheartedly or in bad faith, is therefore bad for us because it deprives us of one of our greatest opportunities for self-knowledge. Only in rare cases, I suggest, would it be sensible to forego this opportunity in order to avoid the emotional tumult of grief.

My answer, then, to ‘why grieve?’ is that the activity of grieving offers us an especially fruitful chance of attaining the good of self-knowledge. One might wonder, though, why self-knowledge is good.

Unfortunately, I cannot defend that claim fully here. But let me say a few words about the value of self-knowledge in the context of grief in particular.

First, self-knowledge of the sort grief can yield enables us to avoid the unfortunate conditions of *inauthenticity* and *alienation*. Imagine, for example, that Lewis, who was evidently embarrassed by grief, had managed to suppress altogether his grief for Joy. We would, I expect, think that Lewis was trying to proceed forward in life as someone other than himself — as if Joy had not been such a central figure in his life. The self-knowledge that grieving can provide thus seems intrinsically worthwhile, a mark of a life lived honestly and with integrity.

Second, the self-knowledge grief enables also has good consequences for us. Grief, I have suggested, reflects a central feature of the human condition, namely that our identities are invested in others. We should hence be apprehensive about attempts to pathologize or medicalize grief, to see it as an illness rather than an entirely understandable reaction to the fracture that occurs when those in whom we have invested our identities die. But grief can clearly become detrimental to us. (To my eyes, Lewis’ grief becomes perilously close to being harmful to him.) The therapeutic community speaks of how grief can be prolonged, complicated, delayed, or unresolved. In such cases, the grieving individual has not ascertained how to live after the loss of

her prior relationship with the deceased. She lacks, in other words, the self-knowledge that I have proposed is the culmination of beneficial episodes of grief. The sufferings of these forms of grief reflect the frustration of the grieving individual's hope to incorporate the deceased individual, and her relationship with the deceased, into a stable and satisfactory practical identity.

Grief presents us a philosophical puzzle because it involves emotional states that we ordinarily suppose are bad and should therefore be avoided: sadness most crucially, but also anguish, confusion, distress, and the like. (Of course, it can also involve good states too, such as joyfulness or gratitude.) At the same time, we should welcome our capacity to grieve inasmuch it nourishes self-knowledge. This fact does not lessen the emotional burdens associated with grief by eliminating them. Rather, it helps us appreciate why those burdens can be worth bearing.