I measure every Grief I meet
I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes –
I wonder if It weighs like Mine –
Or has an Easier size.

I wonder if They bore it long –
Or did it just begin –
I could not tell the Date of Mine –
It feels so old a pain –

I wonder if it hurts to live –
And if They have to try –
And whether – could They choose
between –
It would not be – to die –

I note that Some – gone patient long –
At length, renew their smile –
An imitation of a Light
That has so little Oil –

I wonder if when Years have piled –
Some Thousands – on the Harm –
That hurt them early – such a lapse
Could give them any Balm –

Or would they go on aching still
Through Centuries of Nerve –
Enlightened to a larger Pain –
In Contrast with the Love –

The Grieved – are many – I am told –
There is the various Cause –
Death – is but one – and comes but once –

And only nails the eyes –
Lecture

Imagine that your brother or sister or best friend is married, and that she loves this person very much. Now, this spouse likes to drink, often too much.

Are you with me?

Now imagine this spouse causing a car accident in which other people – say, a group of children - get killed.

How will you react, what will you say and do, when you meet your sister/brother/best friend?

Imagine your child, or your best friend’s child, has lost a pet hamster. For weeks afterwards the child cries every time she sees the empty corner where the cage used to stand.

How will you react, what will you say and do

Imagine, and that’s a true story, your teenager starts crying serious tears when you come home with a new car, and she hasn’t had a chance to “say goodbye” to the old car?

How will you react, what will you say and do?

Imagine that your brother or sister or best friend comes home from the hospital after having lost an unborn child in the fourth or fifth month of pregnancy.

How will you react, what will you say and do?

Imagine that your brother or sister or best friend, who is married, is in love with and has an affair with another person. This person dies.

How will you react, what will you say and do?

What is grief?

Unresolved grief is like being swallowed by a snake. Let me tell you a story:

_Excerpt from Swallowed By a Snake, a book by Thomas Attig._

This is a story about grief – how grief scares you, paralyses you; how it doesn’t do any good to avoid it; and how you have to go into it in order to eventually overcome it.

When discussing grief, it is very important to recognize that we usually experience loss and grief in a social context. Even when we do so in a more solitary fashion, we learn the "ways of grief and mourning" from others, be it our families, those who have also experienced a loss, or others in our social network.

The same is true for our expressing empathy and sympathy.
Reality is not passively experienced "as it is." Instead we actively construct meaning and we perceive this to be reality. As social animals, we use the social world around us to confirm that our reality is the reality that others sense and are experiencing. In effect, we establish an objective reality, which we see as independent of ourselves, by confirming it with other perspective takers. The importance of this social construction cannot be overemphasized.

Family is first source of information about reality. We learn how to interpret what we see and experience. This is ongoing throughout life.

First problem: Members of a family expect you to grieve the same way they do.

Ambiguous Loss

Ask the audience: At the time of any loss, people are confused and overwhelmed. Let's see if you can give me some examples for "normal" i.e. not ambiguous loss:

Examples: Death through old age, illness, of a parent, or sibling, or child, or close friend.

The situation can be made more complicated if there is ambiguity about the death. Ambiguous losses are those that lack clarity -- question is often as to whether or not a loss has occurred, or if this is a death that should generate deep emotional response. People don’t know how to respond, so often do nothing, even avoid the bereaved because they are uncomfortable with the uncertainty, or put off by intense emotions resulting from an "insignificant" loss.

Here is a list of losses that often are experienced as AMBIGUOUS ones, but the list can be extended much further:

- Birth mothers who give their child up for adoption often experience recurrences of deep grief long after they have given their child up. This commonly reaches its greatest intensity on the child's birthday.
- Perinatal death, in particular death during pregnancy.
- Cases where a pregnancy has been terminated. Although most women who elect to terminate a pregnancy appear to experience relief as their primary emotion, others, especially those who terminate because of a fetal anomaly, experience grief at the death of their child.
- As we discussed earlier in this course, the grief of children is not interpreted accurately or accepted as real by adults.
- The death of a pet, often seen by others as "just an animal". Yet, as we discussed earlier in this class, this may be a particularly significant loss for a child or an elderly person.
- Losses that are so "large" that they overwhelm the imaginations of others, such as suicide or murder. Such a loss overwhelms everyone involved, but the tragedy is that this is a time when the bereaved most need their loss recognized and, at the same time, the time when their social network is most likely to avoid any and all discussion of the person who has been lost.
• Alzheimer's Disease, which may create a situation in which a family member, although alive, may be seen as "dead" by some family members, because the person they know and love is seen to no longer inhabit the body of their loved one.
• The death of an ex-spouse or a lover.
• AIDS deaths certainly are socially ambiguous. Questions about "deserving and undeserving" victims of the disease and the legitimacy of seeing the bereaved partner of a gay victim of the disease as a "bereaved spouse" are examples of the uncertainty related to these deaths.
• Finally, a curious ambiguity surrounds multiple losses, particularly if they are serial losses, taking place over a period of time. The bereaved may come to be seen by others as "marked" or "cursed" (or may feel they are seen this way by others.
• Mental illness and having a loved one with mental illness, which may involve a cycling between periods of relatively typical functioning interspersed with periods of serious to profound recurrence of the mental illness.

An important factor in the resolution of grief is social support from others. The bereaved need support, not only for the reality of the loss, but for the validity of their grief, and of themselves as legitimate grievers.

Ambiguous losses ----- little or no public recognition, no mourning ritual:

- The adulterous person can’t even go to the funeral, let alone show her grief openly;
- The child is not allowed to have a “funeral” for the goldfish
- A priest might not perform a memorial service for a person who committed suicide
- The relatives of a soldier who is missing in action, or whose body has never been recovered, can’t have a ritual for their closure.
- A gay man can not find comfort with his family, because he’s never come out to them, or because they’re rejecting his lifestyle.

If loss is ambiguous, people can not validate the grief of the bereaved.

You will hear people say:

“You should get over it by now.”
Or:
“come on, it was only a pet.”
Or: come on, be a man/ and “come on, grow up.”

And they’ll say:
“Come on, you can always buy another one”
Or:
“You can always have another one” – if it’s a miscarried or aborted child.

Or:
“Come on, you really shouldn’t grieve, maybe it’s for the best” if the person was very sick, had Alzheimer’s, or was depressed and killed himself.”
Others may find providing support difficult to do, since people are more comfortable with "normal" rather than what is perceived as "abnormal" losses and grief responses. Thus, an ambiguous loss may be experienced as irreconcilable. This may, in turn, lead to disenfranchised grief.

So the main aspect of disenfranchised grief is ambiguous loss. The second big aspect is that people do not have a socially recognized right, role or capacity to grieve. The most obvious example we are all familiar with, even if we joke about:

“Come on, be a man!”

It is still not fully acceptable for males to grieve publicly, and/or to experience prolonged grief. I am highly uncomfortable with my 87-year old father when he, 16 years after the death of my mother, still brakes out in tears when he looks at her photo.

As I said in the beginning, we have certain "grieving rules" in our society, and some grief doesn't fit those rules ascribed by the culture and society we live in.

These grieving rules bring me to the third aspect of disenfranchised grief: the way people grieve. From the “stiff upper lip” so common in Anglo-Saxon society, to the “wailing” of many other cultures there is a wide continuum of how we are allowed to express our grief, and how we ritualize it.

Let me tell you another story:

When our last dog, Toby, died, I went into my daughter’s bedroom to tell her that the vet had called, and that Toby was dying. Susanne instantly started wailing. I went to sit with her, and joined in. I had loved that dog so much. I don't know how long we howled our pain to the walls of the bedroom, but when we were “done,” we were both able to get up, to go to the vet, and to say good-bye to our beloved pet. The strange thing for me is that I did my “grief-work” - as psychologist call it – in these minutes of wailing. Although I still feel sad when I think of Toby, or when I see his picture, it doesn’t hurt. The snake did not swallow me. . .

Disenfranchised grief occurs in three primary ways. You may note that some of the examples also were noted under ambiguous losses:

- The relationship is not socially recognized. The relationship is not based on recognizable kin ties (the death of a friend), may not be publicly recognized or socially sanctioned, (a partner in a gay or lesbian relationship), the relationship exists primarily in the past (ex-spouse)
- The loss is not socially recognized or is hidden from others. Not socially recognized losses include peri-natal losses. Hidden losses include abortion (politicization of loss), the loss of pet (fear of ridicule), and losses that result from causes other than death.
- The griever is not socially recognized. This may include those who are not socially defined as capable of grief: very old and very young and the mentally disabled. And people in prisons.
- The grieving person is a public figure.
- Circumstances of the death or deaths that contribute to stigma and negative judgment by others. Forms of death that at least appear to have an element of choice or poor decision-making would fall into this category. Suicide, abortion, death as a result of AIDS, and fatal drug overdose are all examples of this contributor to disenfranchisement.
- The ways individuals grieve. Each culture provides a range of acceptable behavior after a loss, and any dramatic exceptions to these “grieving rules” will be met with anything ranging from concern or irritation through to censure.

Essentially, there is an underlying theme here of stigma or “invisibility” tied to the loss.

Because of the lack of social recognition, disenfranchised grief is a hidden grief and this "hidden-ness" can paradoxically increase the reaction to loss. There can be intensely emotional reactions. It can intensify feelings of anger, guilt and/or powerlessness, thus resulting in a more complicated grief response. Rituals may be absent or the grievers may be excluded from rituals. The reduced or absent social support promotes a sense of generalized isolation on the part of the griever.

So what? – or: What’s the big deal?

Disenfranchised grief may lay hidden for years, but it doesn’t go away.

Significant grief responses which go unresolved can lead to mental, physical, and sociological problems and contribute to family dysfunction across generations.

Repressed grief will eventually surface, often triggered by later losses. Then you may see exaggerated reactions that don’t seem to make sense at all.

This was the case with my daughter Susanne, when we came home with a new car. She had not had a chance to say goodbye, so she “made quite a scene.” Only later did I recognize that this over-reaction was because of grief she did not have a chance to express when her beloved grandmother died and I didn’t tell her about it; I thought at four years she was too small to handle it. But Susanne had also in some respect “lost” her home and relatives when we moved to the States.

By the way, I’ve been focusing on death, but the same holds true for grief about loss that does not result in death, like the loss of home when you emigrate or flee; or the loss of your life’s hope and expectations, when you discover you can’t have a child, or you give birth to a child with disabilities.

There may be delayed grief reactions where new grief may build on or trigger old, unresolved grief responses. This may result in chronic grief reaction where grief is never resolved, life becomes stagnant, and new emotional growth cannot take place.

Grief reactions may be masked, and grief may express itself in a variety of physical, psychological, or behavioral manifestations. Post-traumatic stress disorder is one the more drastic results of disenfranchised grief.
So what can you do?

- Recognize and label/name the ambiguity as a major stressor for family members (for recognition of their situation). Make it clear that you see this grief as valid.
- Encourage or suggest family meetings, or meetings of your support network, so that all can build meaning together and reduce intra-familial ambiguity.
- Provide as much information as possible about their situation (to reduce uncertainty).
- Help by researching support interventions (rituals, support groups, grief counselors) to increase the likelihood of social confirmation of their situation).
- Take personal inventory of yourself (the interventionist), to recognize your own grief.

Perhaps most important: be there.
Listen.
My main advice: Don’t tell people how they “should” feel.
   Listen to what they say, and what’s between the lines.
Even if you think this is exaggerated, or weird, accept the person’s feeling.
   And – don’t say “I understand what you are going through, I’ve been there” because everybody’s grief is different. Rather say: “Tell me about your feeling, I want to understand you.”
Do not ignore/not talk about it just because you don’t know what to say. It is perfectly okay – even desirable – to say “I don’t know what to say.”
Realize that there are no right words. There is nothing you can say that will make the loss go away. The best thing you can do is be there; and/or let the person know that you are available to listen, to help.

General Conclusions

Ambiguity and disenfranchisement often are experienced as essential components of our grief process, components that complicate the grief process for the bereaved. The ambiguity of a loss may lead to uncertainty among the members of one’s social network as to how they should respond, or even if they should respond. It may even be possible that the loss will not be seen to exist. Friends and relatives may feel that the best response is no response.

At the same time, bereaved individuals need to have their loss and grief socially legitimized by others. When it is not, their grief may be hidden and its course extended. They may develop a type of chronic grief that repeats itself, possibly with greater intensity, with each new loss.

Intervention in these situations emphasize recognizing and legitimizing the loss (or losses, as in the case of multiple losses) and the grief. Building a sense of community within the family also facilitates the completion of family tasks centered on recognition, reorganization and reinvestment.
Closing with a Prayer by Ted Loder

Prayer: I teeter on the brink of ending

O God of endings
    You promised to be with me always,
    Even to the end of time.
Move with me now in these occasions of last things,
    Of shivering vulnerabilities and letting go:
    Letting go of parents gone,
    Past gone,
    Friends going;
    Old self growing;
    Letting go of children grown,
    Needs outgrown,
    Prejudices ingrown
    Illusions overgrown;
    Letting go of swollen grudges and shrunken loves.

Be with me in my end of things,
My letting go of dead things,
    Dead ways,
    Dead words,
    Dead self I hold so tightly
    Defend so blindly,
    Fear losing so frantically.

I teeter on the brink of endings:
    Some anticipated,
    Some resisted,
    Some inevitable,
    Some surprising,
    Most painful;

And the mystery of them quiets me to awe.
In silence, Lord,
I feel now the curious blend of grief and gladness in me
Over the endings that the ticking and whirling of things brings;
And I listen for your leading
    To help me faithfully move on through the fear
    Of my time to let go
    So the timeless may take hold of me.