

Final Case Integration Paper

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Death, Dying, and Bereavement

Joel R. Grassi

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## ***Introduction***

In the 1980 Robert Redford film *Ordinary People*, an American<sup>1</sup> nuclear family, the Jarretts, is shown continuing to grieve the loss of the oldest son of two, Buck. The story is told from the perspective of the younger son Conrad, who is shown interacting with his parents, his schoolmates, and his psychiatrist Dr. Berger, and each character is depicted in different stages of grief.<sup>2</sup> The film allows the viewer who is preparing for grief counseling to stand in the place of the Exquisite Witness, as outlined by J. Shep Jeffreys' three-dimensional heart, head, hand paradigm.<sup>3</sup>

## ***Case Study***

Immediately Conrad Jarrett is shown participating in his community, in this case a religious choir, but to the active listener / observer his eyes give the sense that he is grieving. He is seen having nightmares that relive the moment of his brother's drowning, and there is a long struggle within Conrad concerning whether or not he is up to remaining on the swim team, which requires him to be in the water. It is then revealed that he had been hospitalized for four months for attempting to take his own life after his brother's death. There was also an incident where Conrad did something to his hair causing more than one person to comment that it looks

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<sup>1</sup> This detail is highlighted here as Jeffreys notes, citing Rosenblatt, "Grief is expressed so differently from culture to culture that it is absurd to use notions of pathology from one culture to evaluate people from another." J. Shep Jeffreys, *Helping Grieving People - When Tears Are Not Enough* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> The very notion of "stages of grief" has been challenged in recent times, notably by George A. Bonano, who has given a perspective of waves of grief and the paradoxical phenomenon of human resilience in the midst of grieving. Even this does not follow an absolute paradigm, as he rejoins, "Although resilience is common, resilient people are not a homogeneous group. Their stories give flesh to some of the myriad experiences of grieving, and they show that even when we cope effectively with loss, we have diverse reactions and find different ways to get past it." George A. Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffreys' three dimensional paradigm is: heart - the self-awareness that the grief counselor must have for his own unfinished loss material. This is illustrated by Jeffreys through the anecdote of cowbells from his childhood that have been associated with his feelings of grief throughout his life; head - the understanding of the human grief emotion which the caregiver must be aware of in the various stages through which his counselees find themselves; hand - the action steps, from support to intervention, that the caregiver can be expected to provide for the ones in his care.

better now that it has grown back. Conrad's grief is further complicated, perhaps exponentially, when one of his former fellow rehab patients, Karen, who seemed fine earlier in the film, ends up taking her life,<sup>4</sup> causing Conrad to run to Berger's office in the middle of the night. His sessions with Dr. Berger showcase a range of emotions from conflict to compassion, and seem to challenge the notion of anything that might be termed normative grief.

It is clear that his parents, Calvin and Beth, are having a different experience from Conrad, and from one another, as they experience Buck's death. The mother is depicted as impatient (throwing away the french toast immediately when Conrad expresses lack of interest in food), controlling (engaging in quite conspicuous conflict with Calvin in front of their golfing partners), and even unloving (acting aloof and unmoved toward her own son throughout the film). Conrad expresses more than once that he cannot connect with her. She is also depicted as disconnected from others, such as when Conrad snaps with a loud outburst during a family photo and she replies immediately with, "Who's hungry? I'll make sandwiches." Conrad's fear of never having her forgiveness is partially rooted in his staining of her towels and rug with his own blood from a suicide attempt. She shows no interest in responding to Conrad's request to talk about Buck, though it is apparent a family dynamic of "favorite child" is at play.

The father seems distracted both by work and from work, and his business partner notices, yet he is continually interrupted by memories of his sons, both Buck's death and

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<sup>4</sup> The peculiarity of suicide in contrast to other manners of death has been long discussed since ancient days. In this context, Stephen Levine cites the Maharaji who muses, "Jesus gave away everything, even his body." Stephen Levine, *Who Dies: An Investigation of Conscious Loving and Conscious Dying* (New York: Anchor Press, 1989), p. 219. Conrad's apparent bewilderment at Karen's "sudden" suicide is a response long associated with this sort of death (Cf. the 2013 film *Melancholia*), and this author has attempted to interact with this topic through various mediums, including the recording of a song, "The Alphabet For Children Whose Fathers Have Committed Suicide." Suicide seems to be one of the great obstacles to our mind's need to "make sense" of things, and Jeffrey notes, "Families who have experienced the death of a loved one who has taken his or her life typically have a very difficult and complex grief journey." Jeffrey, p. 88.

Conrad's suicide attempt.<sup>5</sup> The parents must deflect questions from others at a party, and the mother, Beth, is upset that the father, Calvin, has admitted to a party goer that Conrad has been seeing a therapist. The father's own cowbells<sup>6</sup> seem to be revealed at numerous times in his daily life, and ultimately it seems that his marriage to Beth may not survive,<sup>7</sup> and, having been emotionally distant for much of the film, she finally separates herself physically and moves away at the end.

Several of Conrad's sessions with Dr. Berger<sup>8</sup> are shown throughout the film. Conrad tells Dr. Berger of his dreams and his feeling "jumpy," which may be a form of anxiety or panic.<sup>9</sup> He expresses a desire to "be in control," and he asks the psychiatrist, "You're a doctor, I'm supposed to feel better, right?" to which Dr. Berger replies, "Not necessarily." Berger's sessions seem ultimately to address certain challenges within Conrad, specifically his guilt in surviving by hanging onto the boat while his brother drowned. Berger closes by saying, "Feelings are scary

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<sup>5</sup> Yalom's line of life exercise, which allows the participant to visualize the finality of their life through drawing a line with two endpoints and a mark in the middle indicating where "now" is, would be especially helpful in empathizing with a parent's grief over the loss of their child, whose death before the parent's is unimaginable.

<sup>6</sup> Didion's relatively recent memoir is a now classic on the topic of living with grief. She notes, "nor can we know ahead of the fact (and here lies the heart of the difference between grief as we imagine it and grief as it is) the unending absence that follows, the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself." Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Vintage International, 2007), p. 189.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. P.C. Rosenblatt, *Help Your Marriage Survive the Death of a Child* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Berger's methodology may be contrasted in several regards to Brenda Mallon's *Working with Bereaved Children and Young People* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), p. 32. For example, neither Berger's empathy nor his active listening are absolute, as he challenges Conrad at several points as to whether his feelings are founded in reality, such as whether or not Conrad should "feel at fault." Contrast this with Mallon who states, "from an adult perspective you may recognize that her anxieties are unfounded, however to the young person they are real."

<sup>9</sup> This phenomenon is so prevalent in our culture that these technical terms are used ubiquitously in folk definitions throughout our society. Cf. for example Robert Handy and Pauline Neff, *Anxiety & Panic Attacks: Their Causes and Cure* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1985).

and painful, and if you don't feel pain then you're not going to feel anything else. Being alive is good, but it doesn't feel good."

### ***Pastoral and Clinical Themes***

In seeking to work with Conrad Jarrett, the pastoral counselor identifies his own unfinished loss material that may surface during counseling efforts via the heart dimension. The counselor will bear in mind his own adolescent struggles with the mundane, and extrapolate them to the unimaginable challenge of coping with the guilt and circumstances of Buck's death. The counselor will allow his own unanswered questions and crises to find soft reflection in Conrad's existential angst, and no doubt the golden rule of counseling others as you would be counseled yourself will give navigational insight.

Secondly, the head dimension will manifest through active listening, which seems almost entirely absent in the Conrad Jarrett case study. Beyond the obvious disconnect from his parents, his peers seem unable or unwilling to get to know him, even though presumably many of them were acquainted with Buck. Conrad's classmate and potential love interest Jeannine has moments of seeming to understand Conrad, but they are brief and infrequent, and in the case of the conversation at a McDonald's restaurant, they disappear in an instant, such as when the members of the swim team appear and amuse the patrons, Jeannine included. She later apologizes for allowing herself to get distracted and caught up in the antics, but the moment of vulnerability that Conrad gifted her is gone, perhaps for good. The counselor must sense the struggles and complexity within Conrad, and give him great breadth in expressing his grief, as he says to Berger, "Just let me feel bad about this." It is inevitable that the topic of Conrad's family and cultural background must be understood

Thirdly, the hands dimension will seek to guide rather than to grip Conrad's broken spirit, and, while recognizing that "all trauma is bad," will be gentle and not stifling in counseling, remembering that a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.<sup>10</sup> Wisdom knows that Conrad has so much life left to live, God willing, and that this devastating trauma does not have to "ruin" him. Jeffreys' third dimension, that of the hands, lends itself naturally to the actions of support and guidance, and he lists several "tasks" that may be explored by those in grief which may give them a feeling that they are being cared for, and perhaps to that resilience. But as the hands motif suggests, the counselors must literally feel their way along with the patient through the grief caregiving process, searching for signs of prolonged grief, psychological trauma, PTSD, PGD,<sup>11</sup> and other conditions that need precise and appropriate care.

### ***Conclusion***

Finally, the topic of growth in and through trauma may be kept in mind by the pastoral counselor as he keeps the long range view, i.e. the faith perspective, in mind.<sup>12</sup> The choice of the word "ordinary" to describe the Jarretts is noteworthy from a biblical perspective, as the prophet Isaiah depicted the coming Christ as one who would be ordinary, saying, "he hath no form nor comeliness: and when we shall see him, there is not beauty that we should desire him." Yet it is this very Christ of whom the prophet says, "surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Proverbs 25:11. In contrast, see 25:20 for the dangers of singing songs to one who is of a heavy heart.

<sup>11</sup> Jordan and Litz identify Prolonged Grief Disorder as a situation where "bereavement difficulties persist or grow rather than diminish with time." Cf. Jordan, A.H. & Litz, B.T., *Prolonged Grief Disorder: Diagnostic Assessment and Treatment* (Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 2014, Vol. 45, No. 3, p. 181.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Werdel and Wicks, who cite the man Job's reference to his, <sup>783</sup> and observe, "such a statement serves as an example of how faith can be strengthened, not thwarted, by the coexistence of the experience of suffering and a belief in God. Such a statement also is further developed in the New Testament and exemplifies the Christian belief in a loving, savior image of a God who can and does coexist with an image of a God who allows suffering." Werdel, M.B. & Wicks, R.J. *Faith, Suffering, & Religious Coping: the Primer of Posttraumatic Growth* (Hoboken, Wiley Press, 2011), p. 161.

sorrows,” and the Apostle Paul describes Christ as having endured every temptation that is common to man.<sup>13</sup> The pastoral counselor may be asked if the one in his care can expect something from his faith in the midst of his grief, and it is here that the caregiver must decide if there is an answer.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Isaiah 53, I Corinthians 10, Hebrews 4, et.al.

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