

Why We Should Be Glad for Grief



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Scottish Partnership for Palliative Care • May 2022



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Declaration

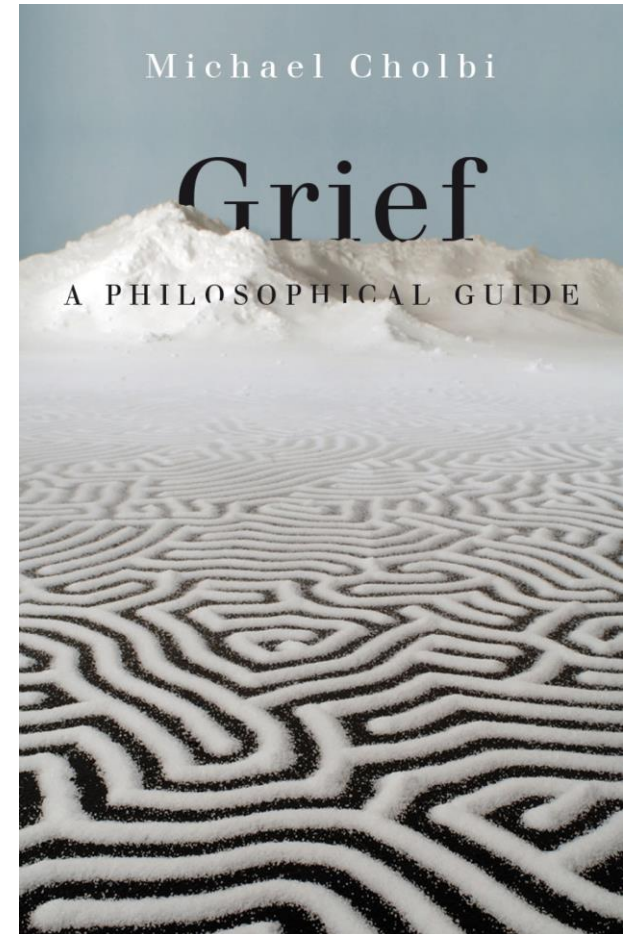
No conflicts of interest

Philosophical inquiry into grief

- a) The nature of grief
- b) The value of grief

Today's goals

- address b) — why we should be glad for grief
- inform your personal and professional understanding of grief





The ‘paradox of grief’

Grief at the deaths of others

- 1) is **intrinsically bad** because it involves psychological (and sometimes physical) pain or anguish
- 2) can nevertheless **be good, contributing positively to our well-being**

How can 1) and 2) be reconciled?



Motivating the paradox

The Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory The Social Readjustment Rating Scale

INSTRUCTIONS: Mark down the point value of each of these life events that has happened to you during the previous year. Total these associated points.

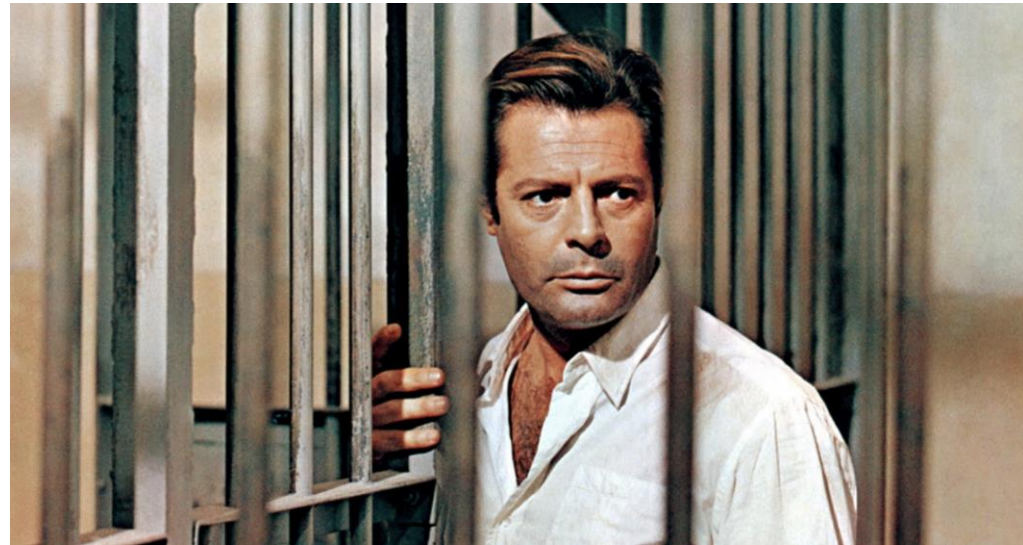
LIFE EVENT	MEAN VALUE
1. Death of spouse	100
2. Divorce	73
3. Marital Separation from mate	65
4. Detention in jail or other institution	63
5. Death of a close family member	63
6. Major personal injury or illness	53
7. Marriage	50
8. Being fired at work	47
9. Marital reconciliation with mate	45
10. Retirement from work	45
11. Major change in the health or behavior of a family member	44
12. Pregnancy	40
13. Sexual Difficulties	39
14. Gaining a new family member (i.e. ... birth, adoption, older adult moving in, etc.)	39
15. Major business readjustment	39
16. Major change in financial state (i.e. ... a lot worse or better off than usual)	38
17. Death of a close friend	37

Taken out of
context, grief
has little to
recommend it!

Motivating the paradox

Meursault (protagonist of Camus' *The Stranger*)

- “Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday; I can't be sure.”
- condemned as much for his ‘grieflessness’ as for his ostensible crime



Marcello Mastroianni in L. Visconti, *The Stranger* (Lo straniero, 1967)

Motivating the paradox

Meursault (protagonist of Camus' *The Stranger*)

- his grieflessness is a misfortune, not a blessing
- Meursault misses out on a rich, life-defining experience



Marcello Mastroianni in L. Visconti, *The Stranger* (Lo straniero, 1967)



Resolving the ‘paradox of grief’

Grief

- 1) is **intrinsically bad**
- 2) can nevertheless **be good**

Historically, what (little) philosophers have said about grief has often been **antagonistic**

- nothing good about grief
- shameful and should be minimized

Philosophical antipathy toward grief

Socrates, *Phaedo* death scene — rebukes friends and students for grief

- grief rests on mistaken belief that death harms us
- grief childish and ‘womanly’





Philosophical antipathy toward grief

Seneca, Letter to Lucilius
#63

- grief as self-indulgent
- indication of excessive dependence on others

“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?”

Philosophical antipathy toward grief

Zhuangzi (Chinese Daoist):
grief

- reflects misguided focus on the ephemeral rather than the eternal and cyclical
- a foolish attempt to deny destiny



The value in grief



For these philosophers, the paradox simply doesn't arise — *there's nothing good about grief*

I disagree.



But what is the good in grief?

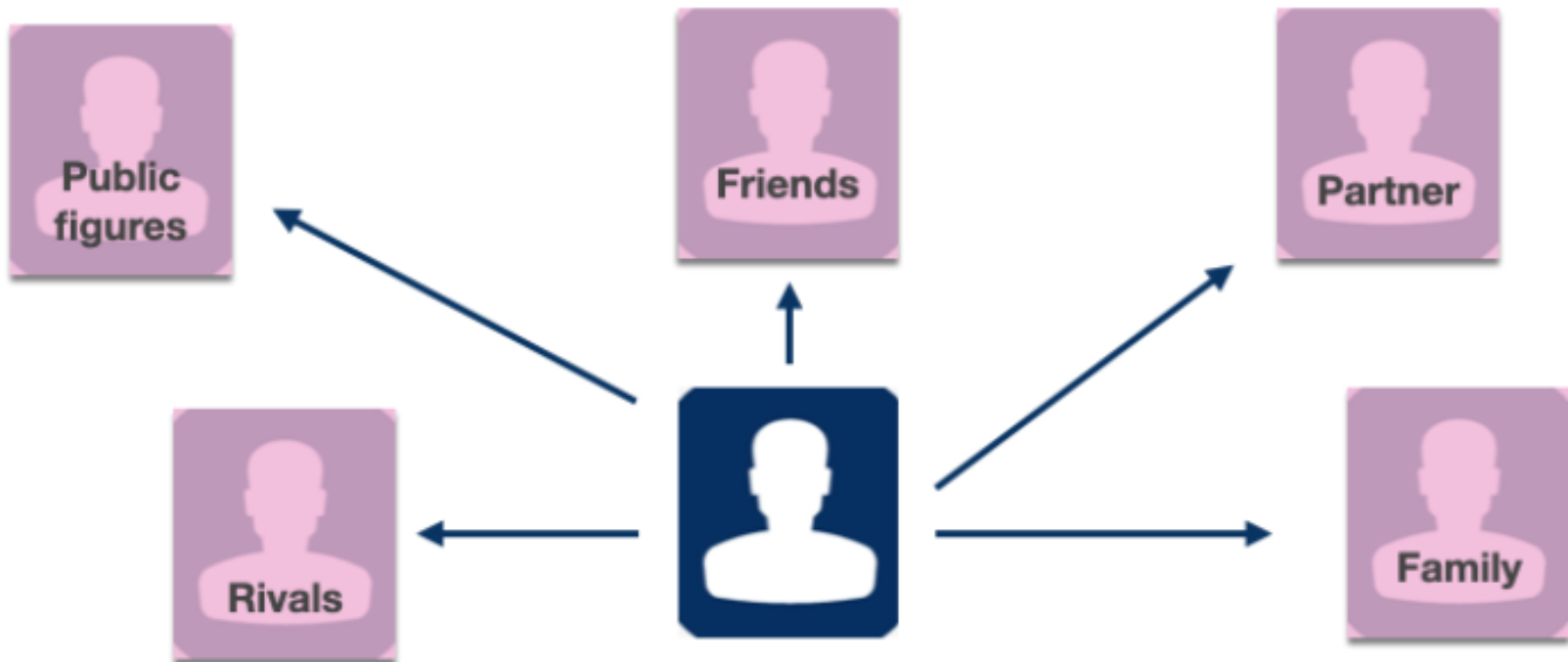


My practical identity account of grief

- grief is a *selective* response to others' deaths (we only grieve some deaths) — grief requires a distinctive sort of relationship with the decedent
- we grieve those in whom we have invested our *practical identities* (our sense of our core self and what matters to us most centrally)
- practical identities are rooted in the past but oriented toward the future

Grief and practical identity

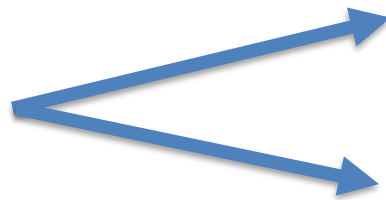
(variety of identity-constituting relationships)



My practical identity account of grief

- death necessitates alteration in our relationship with now-deceased and in our practical identities

Others' death



relationship 'crisis'

identity 'crisis'

- “I’ve lost a part of myself”
(disorientation/alienation/
not being ‘at home’ in the
world)
- how to continue life with
absent other?

PAST

PRESENT

FUTURE

Death of PI-invested person



S's practical identity ???



**Grieving
subject S**



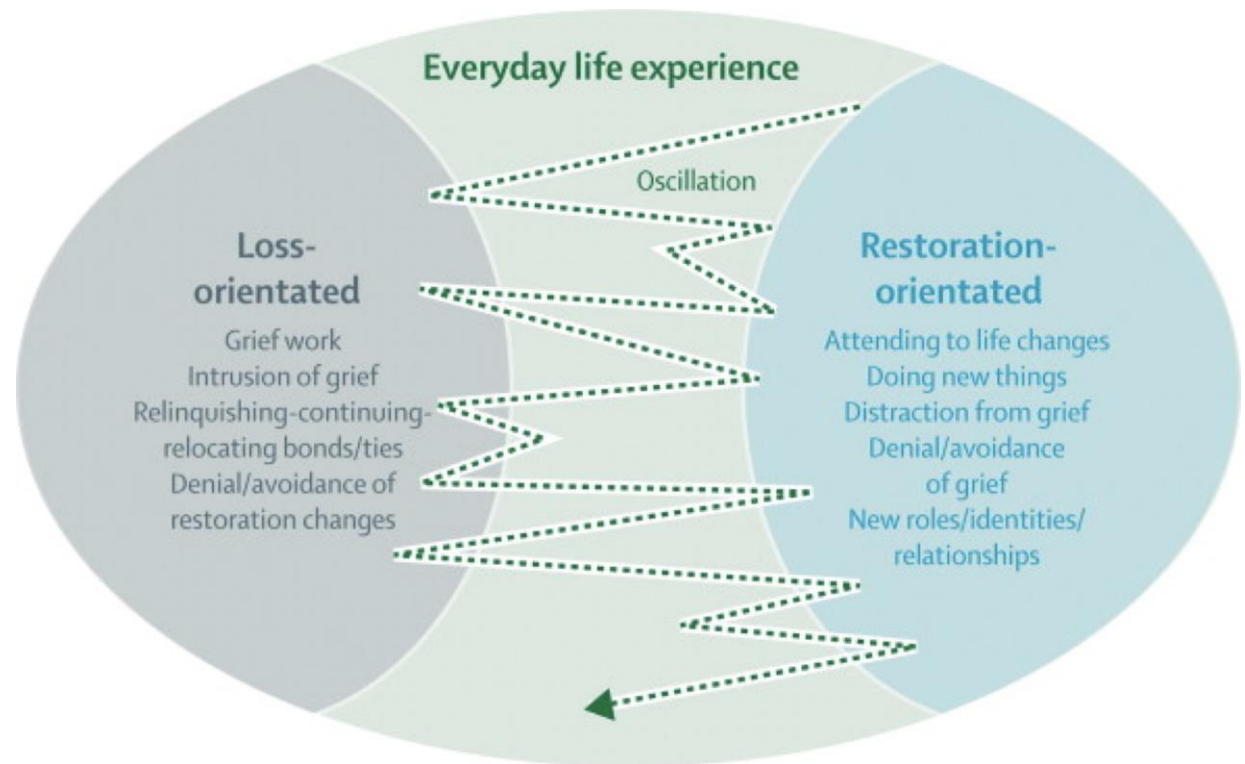
Grief: a tool for addressing this practical identity crisis

Grief

- *alerts* us to this crisis
- *motivates* us to attend to it (painful affect)
- *provides evidence* about how to resolve it (emotional ‘data dump’)
 - grief as an emotional process (sadness + (guilt, anxiety, anger, etc.))

Dual process model of grief (Stroebe & Schut)

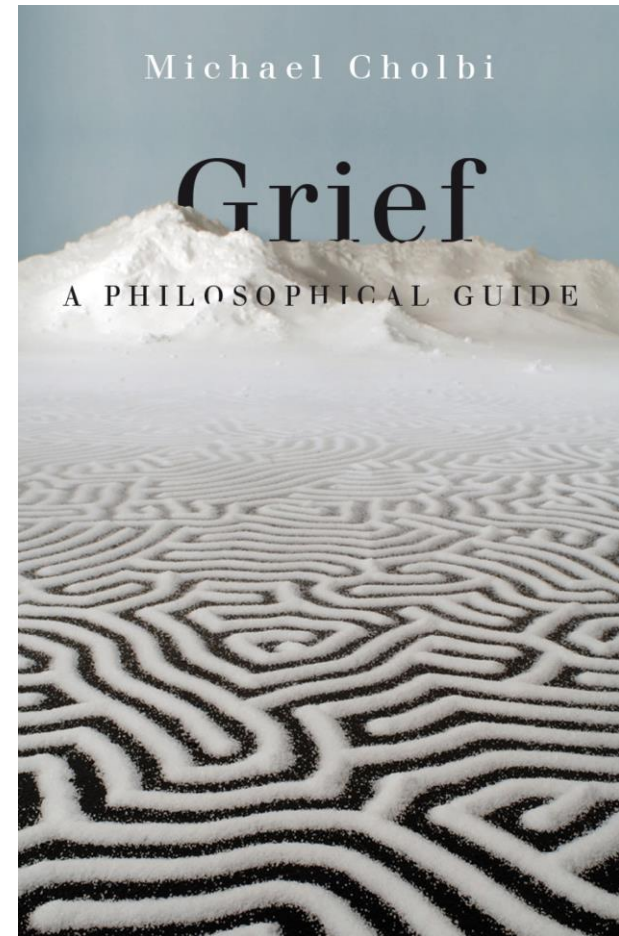
- enables us to grasp loss (backward-looking)
- fosters capacity to incorporate loss into our future commitments and identity (forward-looking)



The good in grief

Grief is a tool for enabling us to manage loss

- resolution of our practical identity crisis
- transformation/adaptation into a 'post-mortem' self
- contributes to **self-knowledge**





The ‘paradox of grief’

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How can 1) and 2) be reconciled?

- **offered a defense of 2):** grief isn’t *always* good for us, but it often is — and it’s valuable and welcome feature of human nature (we shouldn’t want to be like Meursault)



We should be very hesitant to pathologize grief

I seem to be fighting a losing battle!

- ‘Prolonged grief disorder’ to be included in next DSM revisions

How Long Should It Take to Grieve? Psychiatry Has Come Up With an Answer.

📄 [nytimes.com/2022/03/18/health/prolonged-grief-disorder.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/health/prolonged-grief-disorder.html)

Ellen Barry

March 18, 2022



My optimistic message: Being glad for grief

The great secret of death, and perhaps its deepest connection with us, is this: that, in taking from us a being we have loved and venerated, death does not wound us without, at the same time, lifting us toward a more perfect understanding of this being and of ourselves.

— Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter to Countess Margot Sizzo-Noris-Crousty (1924)



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**Thank you very much
for listening!**

**Further comments and
questions to
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