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THE PROBLEM OF LOSS AND MOURNING

Psychoanalytic Perspectives

edited by *David R. Dietrich* and *Peter C. Shabad*

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Reviewed by Gerald J. Gargiulo

Our life is little more than a gathering of days, made up of care and caring, the joy of contact and the pain of loss, the trauma of death, and memory. In this collection of 16 essays on loss and mourning in human experience, the editors and their contributors have successfully translated these shadows that haunt man into a psychoanalytic framework. The chapters are competent, if unexceptional, and the bibliographies for each are extensive and impressive.

The text has five major sections, and the breadth of their approach is extensive. Part I, "Theoretical and Applied Psychoanalytic Perspectives," consists of an excellent chapter by George Pollock on the creative capabilities that can be released through successful mourning. (Some examples from Freud's and Mahler's life are offered.) This theme of self-reorganization issuing in successful life experiences runs throughout the text. When Margaret Mitscherlich-Nielsen (in Part V) speaks not only to the present generation of German people, but to analysts as well, this theme is beautifully and insightfully addressed, in both its positive and negative possibilities. William Niederland carefully builds his chapter around trauma, loss, restoration, and creativity. He elaborates the effects of loss and overwhelming trauma and states that "no truly traumatic event is ever wholly overcome and that increased psychic vulnerability is the inevitable outcome of such experiences" (p. 63).

The effect of loss on one's sense of self-worth is another motif sensitively discussed. Judith Kestenberg, in "Coping with Losses and Survival," (in Part V) studies holocaust survivors and their stories. With dramatic power and intensity undiminished by time,

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Kestenberg states that personal survival and self-worth were made possible when parents "enjoined [their] children to promise that they would survive rather than die with the parents. The parents' love and their desire for the child to survive...were incorporated into the superego" (p. 590). Her studies show the power of the psyche to rise from the most extraordinary loss and make a life that has some meaning. Loss and refinding, or the repeated searches for the unfound, are nicely discussed by Nancy Kulish in "Mourning a Lost Childhood: The Problem of Peter Pan" and by Peter Shabad in his perceptive, although somewhat tedious chapter, "Vicissitudes of Psychic Loss of a Physically Present Parent."

Part II addresses "Development Perspectives" and covers such areas as the effects of a one-parent family on personality development (Erna Furman and Robert A. Furman), the place of object loss in normal development (Fred Pine), and the significance of loss in the older adult, approached from a clinical and research perspective (Jerome Grunes and Wendy Wasson). To my mind, the Furmans's chapter is the weakest, whereas Fred Pine's presents an excellent short discussion of loss in childhood and adolescence with particular focus on developmental and incremental losses in childhood. He speaks of the loss of omnipotence, of bodily beauty, the separation (necessary but painful) from children and, finally, of death and the loss of peers. How early losses, both physical and especially emotional, are handled, both from a normal and pathological perspective, are discussed in Section III, "Clinical Contributions." David Krueger's contribution is of particular help for those working with bulimic and anorexic patients. In his chapter, "The 'Parental Loss' of Empathic Failures and the Model Symbolic Restitution of Eating Disorders," he observes that, "food becomes a quintessential metaphor to represent the giving, loving, nurturing selfobject who has been lost or has never been present consistently and empathically" (p. 204). This theme is intelligently developed with good case material. Milton Viederman discusses pathological and normal grief with clinical cases. The case discussions, however, are somewhat short and seem psychiatric, that is, addressed to symptom alleviation rather than

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psychoanalytic in approach. Mourning over loss from body defects is discussed, somewhat traditionally, by Robert Zuckerman and Vamik Volkan.

David Dietrich's essay, opening Part IV, deals with parent death, psychic trauma, and object relations. "Empirical Studies on Loss and Their Implications: Research Perspectives" is a careful, well-written piece with reasoned conclusions. His use of psychological data supports his psychoanalytic presumptions. His thesis is that "the individuals who lost the parent by death in childhood were significantly lower on quality/level of object relations, object warmth, psychological mindedness, and significantly higher on superego harshness and depression than were those who had not lost a parent by death" (p. 305). Whereas Dietrich augments a psychoanalytic perspective, the chapter by Henry Biller and Margery Salter, "Father Loss and Cognitive and Personality Functioning," leaves much to be desired; it offers little psychoanalytic understanding. Although systematically researched and well documented, it seems primarily addressed to academic psychologists. Its main thesis, I believe, is captured in the following: "Our point is not to deny or deemphasize the general prevalence of initial maternal identifications, but to suggest that this is neither biologically imperative nor necessary for healthy infant and child development" (p. 339). The authors mean by this the frequently overlooked importance played by the father in child rearing.

Section V, "Loss, Mourning and the Holocaust," has chapters by Kestenberg, Margaret Mitscherlich-Nielsen, and Yael Danieli. I alluded above to Kestenberg's points. Mitscherlich-Nielsen's chapter on mourning is superb, and I would like to offer a few highlights from it. She writes: "The ability of an individual to mourn means that he is able to part with open eyes not only from lost human objects but also from lost attitudes and thought patterns that governed his life in important periods of his development" (p. 408). She states that, from her observations, the German people have replaced consumerism for Nazism, with no internal change of attitude: "A sadomasochistic upbringing and mind set, a servile identification with the powerful and contempt

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for the weak survive to this day in broad sectors of our society—as it does in the relation of the sexes to one another” (p. 408). Her chapter is replete with perceptive observations. Mourning is presented as a paradigm of a serious reevaluation of one’s life and one’s values, and she compares the self-reflective mourner to the psychoanalyst, who, in her opinion, must ultimately be an outsider. “A psychoanalyst who does not accept himself as an outsider has, in my opinion, missed his call” (p. 413), she writes. She goes on, “Anyone who succumbs to his fear of being an outsider is in danger of becoming a conformist” (p. 415).

Finally, Yael Danieli’s chapter, “Mourning in Survivors and Children of Survivors of the Nazi Holocaust: The Role of Group and Community Modalities,” is particularly helpful for therapists working with holocaust survivors or their close relatives. She speaks to the function of groups and community modalities in working with such patients. The essay is written with care, warmth, and intelligence. There is much wisdom here. While Danieli identifies the ethical blow that the Holocaust perpetrated on man’s consciousness, shattering the belief that the world is a just place, she provides the necessary corrective to cynicism:

Having been violated does not necessarily mean that one has to live one’s life in constant readiness for its reenactment; having been treated as dispensable does not mean that one is worthless and taking the painful risk of bearing witness does not mean that the world will listen, learn, change, or become a better place. (p. 441)

This volume focuses our attention on the task of mourning and the resolution of loss that can enable a person successfully to go through a symbolic death, whose grief marks the psyche will carry forever. That we are capable of continuing life in the face of death and the memory of loss, and yet experience the world as a loved place, is a hint of the remarkable resiliency of human nature.