

Mourning Manifesto

We are all going to die. Perhaps this is the only inescapable truth about human beings. However, the big questions, the ones that keep the species on tenterhooks, are when and how. We wait expectantly for years for this event, hesitant and fearful of what will inevitably happen.

“Men fear death, as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children, is increased with tales, so is the other.”¹

This phrase by Francis Bacon sums up the accumulation of stimuli that have to do with everything related to death, from literature, poetry, cinema, religions and even the commerce linked to it. The constant fear of the unknown that we fill with information that, beyond medicine and the physiological area, we don't even know how accurate it is.

Inevitability brings with it another phenomenon, which is the one that summons us: grief.

Human relationships are determined by attachment, or the bond that is generated. From the time we are in the womb, through our first contact with the world, the connection between mother and baby is indestructible and, although it may vary with the passage of time, it is always present. What happens, then, when that other being, with whom we are associated for life, dies. We can transpose the same situation to other relationships, such as couples or friendships. The point is that when someone dies, the life of the one left behind changes; it is often determined by the grief produced by that loss.

Much has been written about grief, it has been analysed from different perspectives or it has been tried to be structured in stages. In 1969 Elisabeth Kübler-Ross determined that there are different phases that the human being goes through when facing grief. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance were considered to be the stations on the long road from the suffering of loss to happiness.

The complexity of establishing stages is that it is seen as a standard procedure, where one only has to follow the recipe to reach the goal, without taking into account that each situation is particular and unique. What for one person is cause for reflection, for relief, for

¹ Bacon, F 2016, Essays., Hansebooks, S.L.

another may be tantamount to increased sorrow, to feeling worse. There are no statistics and there is no magic recipe to end the pain. The focus is on channelling the suffering until it virtually disappears, when it should be aimed at achieving peace and tranquillity for the bereaved. Acceptance does not necessarily equate to a state of well-being, but to a somewhat forced resignation.

*"The stages have evolved since their introduction and they have been very misunderstood over the past three decades. They were never meant to help tuck messy emotions into neat packages. They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives."*²

After years of using this system, Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross herself talks about the evolution of this system and the misinterpretation that could have been made about it, and even stopped talking about acceptance in its initial sense and simply stated in the same article that it is possible that grief never passes, but that "*We learn to live with it*".

It is important to highlight the role of society in this section. There is such an ingrained fear of death, there is a sense of escape from grief and an almost non-existent willingness to face the loss of a loved one that it puts a great deal of pressure on the bereaved. It is intended that in time the person will be fully functional again and that the sadness will be put aside. Finally there is a feeling of guilt. What do you do when death comes, do you hide your grief so that no one feels uncomfortable, do you hide a bitter smile, do you live with respect and dignity?

The answers should be logical, but there are dozens of clichés that make everything more difficult. From the classic "children don't cry", to the always false "count on me whenever you need me".

The truth is that escaping from open conversation on the subject transforms the moment of grief into a crossroads with dozens of questions and few real answers.

As we move into the 21st century, we notice that we have made progress in many areas, but it is the emotional ones that are lagging behind. Social media is not cooperating either.

² Kübler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2009). The five stages of grief. In Library of Congress Catalogin in Publication Data (Ed.), *On grief and grieving* (pp. 7-30).

There is a "smile culture", the photos posted must be a constant demonstration of happiness, delicious food, beautiful places and smiles, lots of smiles. Even if I am suffering I must show my best face, because no one wants to see someone crying or commenting on their pains. Those are hidden and expressed in solitude.

The reactions we have in our mourning processes are internal, personal, particular, but they also have a social component and our close circle lives it, accompanies it. The suffering is felt by the loved ones who remain at our side and the expressions of grief also go towards them, towards each of those involved in our lives.

"Although the psychology of grief focuses on individuals, grief occurs in the context of social relationships and culture. The dynamic effects of the social and cultural context on individual grief are discussed from the perspective of symbolic interaction theory and family systems theory."³

Both our family groups and the social environment in which we live are affected, and the tidal wave that rises with death can be catastrophic on many and varied levels. Some scholars even speak of different types of grief.

"The boundaries between normal or uncomplicated grief and pathological mourning are not always clear. The distinction, however, is clinically significant, as "normal" grief is considered self-limited, relatively benign, and not amenable to psychotherapeutic intervention, whereas pathological grief is associated with enormous social, psychological, and medical morbidity."⁴

The authors' distinction between "normal" and "pathological" grief is striking. I find the classification somewhat aggressive and I don't know if it really helps what really matters in this case: The grieving person.

I question whether it is really feasible to make a separation between the two behaviours. Perhaps it means that I must cry in a controlled way, that I must manage my grief at acceptable levels and that I cannot transgress that invisible boundary that separates me

³ Rosenblatt, P. C. (1988). Grief: The social context of private feelings. *Journal of Social Issues*, 44(3), 67-78.

⁴ Zisook, S., & DeVaul, R. (1985). Unresolved grief. *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 45(4), 370-379.

from the healthy to the sick. How many losses must a human being have before he or she is really able to take his or her grief and reaction in the right or expected way?

Pressure again.

Perhaps the only ones who have tried to give an explanation to death, but especially to what comes after it, are the religions. The answers are not necessarily perfect, in some cases they lack logical sense, but it cannot be argued that at least their attempt gives some reassurance to the bereaved. Rituals have been important to us since time immemorial, and while it may not be a full stop solution, it is at least less aggressive. For those who do not believe in the dogmas of the churches, there are thousands of rituals that are just as effective as church rituals. Finally, the meaning we attach to events is determined by our life experiences, by our past, by what we consider important and part of our history.

Without being a psychologist, a doctor or a specialist in the field, I present my statement of intent to all those who have gone down the path of tears, for those who suffer, suffered and will suffer, for all those who have been lost and have let days, months and years go by without knowing how to find themselves. Not because my words are wise, but because I have gone through the same, because I cried before.

Decalogue for pain

1- I declare myself to be "pro tears", an absolute defender of the sorrowful cry, the one that comes from beyond the heart, emotions and sensations. The kind that burns and leaves you immobile, the kind that creates a curtain in front of your eyes and clouds your senses. Pain transformed into drops of rage is necessary. It keeps the essence of the human being clean and should not be questioned. I propose to cry until there is no more air left, until a river is formed to help navigate to the one who left.

2- Leave a space for weakness, for as many millennia as necessary, in the way the soul requires. It is not necessary to stand up with nobility, but to let oneself be carried by the pain to the deepest and darkest places of meaninglessness. To heal is not to create a fierce and unyielding being, it is to lovingly treat a damaged heart to the point where it blossoms with a gentle caress.

3- Reject false support. It is in extreme moments that the human being brings out the best and the worst, the alpha and the omega. It is where the easy laugh comes in, the forced word. It is a stick that breaks because it is not real, it is only a chimera. It is proclaimed because it is politically correct, not because it is true. Funeral rites require a special invitation, only for those who love and loved, the rest is a bunch of small tree branches, which break at the slightest movement.

4- The only real way to minimise pain is to love first. Death is an absolute state, there is no going back, and trying to repair what was not even done causes guilt and grief. This implies a paradigm shift for those who, given their way of seeing life or their culture, promote physical and emotional distance. A kiss, a hug, a caress, physical contact, demonstrations of affection can be the keys to open the safe in which hope is kept.

5- The arrogance of rationalisation has transformed grief into a process, into a set of standardised stages. Nothing could be further from the life and death of a human being. The stages that are part of this process can be lifted, not from scientific observation, but from the depths of the emotions. Here are the stages that I present in contrast to those of Kübler-Ross.

6- Laughing with sadness: Memories are images built with dreams, with moments of joy. It mixes the happiness of having lived it, with the sadness that it will never happen again, not with the same person, never in the same way. Time will make one become detached from the other, that joy will overcome tears, that the mirage will become an oasis of calm and serenity.

7- Selfishness/altruism dichotomy: This personal journey must be focused on who is in command of the ship, the captain will drive according to his possibilities and will arrive at port one spring morning, but to achieve the goal he must do it alone. However, his crew can help to hoist the sails, control the helm in the storm and make the long journey more bearable. The secret is to find the right moment for everyone. Sometimes suffering in silence and sometimes dividing the pain, because I am definitely not the only one who suffers.

8- Calm down, there is no hurry, each process is different from the previous one and it is impossible to determine the real times. Many will try to get you to speed up the pace, but few will be willing to keep up with you. The heartbeat sets the pace and some days will be so dark that you won't even want to wake up, so patience is the skill that needs to be developed.

9- Die a little to live again. Let death kiss you on the cheek, let it be your confidant, let you play with it in the middle of the beach. To understand that the previous version of your being died with the person you love, you could not leave her alone and you allowed that "you" to keep her company. By saying goodbye to both of them you opened the door to a new interpretation of your existence, to the rewriting of your verses, to dreams undreamed, to illusions that didn't exist. Have a coffee with your new being, embrace him because he also needs you, give him a space to grow and to give a different meaning to being alive.

10- In front of the mirror of your life, talk to your reflection and tell it about your sadness, about what you long for, about the last sound of that laughter that is so missing. Sign that authorisation that says that the years are allowed to pass and the memories remain intact, that it is not necessary to punish yourself, that you don't really know how much time is left, but that every second will be worthy of a tear contained in the form of a memory. There is no more beautiful gift than to always miss, simply because it is easier to live that way.