The Public Face of Grief:
Parental Bereavement and Social Media

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Abstract

The expression of grief in social media is a complex and multi-layered issue that is ever present in our lives, especially with the increase in social media engagement. In this study, we interviewed 10 bereaved parents around their experiences of social media as vehicle to express their grief following the death of a child. We also interviewed 10 people who posted on sites offering bereavement support and examined multiple social media sites dedicated to grief and loss of a child. Guided by Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics, we developed several interpretations of this complex and complicated relationship of grief and social media. In this paper, we discuss some of our findings around interpretations of relevant emotion, honoring the deceased, and seeking orientation in a changed world. Advice from bereaved parents is offered to others with similar losses and to those posting on bereavement sites. In the end, we are faced with the interpretation that this relationship of social media and grief is many things, but it is never "neutral."

Keywords

Grief, social media, hermeneutics, Gadamer

Grief is a complex, universal experience that has, through time, been expressed in public and private ways. Traditionally, a death in the family was a community event, cloaked in black and with various demonstrations or expressions of sympathy and support. In some cultures, such as the Irish, the community version of mourning continues to be practiced (BBC.com). In other

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cultures, as families have become more insular, the loss of a family member became a more private experience that involved a limited and carefully composed invitation list. Whereas previously people used funerals as the sole opportunity to commune in grief, now social media sites often provide a forum of another kind for an extended, even indefinite period. However, although this medium might offer support to many, it is not without its problems of unsolicited or hurtful advice and even the potential of prolonging grief. With the advancement of technology, the proliferation of social media sites, and social media arising as an often-preferred method of communication, it has become apparent that grief has again become a very public expression. It cannot be assumed that this is necessarily a good or bad thing, but it is a phenomenon that is complex and not clearly understood. Our aim in this hermeneutic study was to understand this phenomenon in the context of the death of an individual person (as opposed to a large-scale tragedy or traumatic event, which could have its own distinctive media dynamic), to problematize it, and to contribute to understanding of the needs of the bereaved as revealed in their posts.

A Brief History of Grief Conceptualizations

The foundation of our current understandings of grief are generally attributed to Freud's (1917/1957) work on melancholy and mourning in which he described grief as the process of energy withdrawal from a person or object that is lost. Freud introduced the idea of stages of grief and the progression from shock to resolution. Lindemann's (1944) classic work on grief following a nightclub fire that claimed many lives described it as a crisis that follows loss, focusing on physical symptoms and positing a recovery trajectory of six to eight weeks. A quarter-century later the popularization of stage theory was propelled by Kübler-Ross' book, *On Death and Dying* (1969), although the focus of her informal observations was the psychological adaptation of terminally ill patients to the eventuality of their own death, rather than bereavement following loss of another. A shift of thinking in the 60s to 80s suggested recovery should be measured in years rather than weeks but still perceived grief as a temporal process albeit one without specific beginning and end points (Engel, 1961; Parkes, 1972, 1985; Schneider, 1984; Worden, 1982).

As the twentieth century drew to a close, newer conceptualizations of grief emerged, suggesting that grief is not a staged, time-dependent process, but instead a lifelong experience that changes over time (Klass et al., 1996; Moules, 1998; Moules & Amundson, 1997; Moules et al., 2004; Neimeyer, 2001a, 2001b). White (1989) rejected the premise that grief involved saying goodbye to a loved one, and instead entailed an ongoing relationship. Similarly, Klass et al. (1996) proposed that the work of grief is not about letting go, getting over loss and recovering but rather maintaining continued but changed bonds with the deceased. Moules (1998) formulated grief as a relational journey and Attig (1996) similarly described mourning as a transition that moves from loving in presence to loving in absence. It is a practice of relearning and reshaping our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the deceased. Neimeyer (2016) developed an evidence-based theory of grief as a process of affirming or reconstructing personal meaning in a world that has been challenged or transformed by loss. This process includes the related practices of sense making, benefit finding, and progressive identity change, as well as learning to negotiate and renegotiate the meaning of the loss over time (Neimeyer, 2001a, 2001b; Neimeyer et al., 2006). The ability to discover or construct meaning in the presence of loss has been identified in numerous studies as predicting more favourable bereavement outcomes (Neimeyer, 2019, 2023).

The History of Social Media

With technology and its availability expanding rapidly, the use of social media sites exploded in the 1990s, ultimately permitting users to create their profiles and invite friends, as well as create groups by common interest (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Das, 2016; Hale, 2015). By 2003, most families in first world countries had home computers and the major social media sites were born, namely, *Friendster, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter*, and especially *Facebook* (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Hale, 2015), which exploded into a public social media site in 2006 and currently has over 1.3 billion users (Briggs & Burke, 2009; Van Dijk, 2013) with the development of smart phones, allowing people to check social media from anywhere at any time. While *Facebook* changed the landscape of social media more than any other site, other platforms are quickly surpassing *Facebook* in terms of popularity, particularly with younger generations. Since 2020, *TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest*, and *Twitter* (*X*) have seen the highest growth rate worldwide (Target Internet, n.d.).

This vast increase in social media and its availability means that people are constantly available to share their thoughts, opinions, and emotions as soon as they arise. Social media has become the premier way that people communicate with each other and the public at large (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Leonardi et al. 2013). Social media sites have now become a platform to unify people across geographical distance in opinion, political stance, and life circumstance (Edosom-wan et al., 2011; Hale, 2015)—including in bereavement

Grief and Social Media

As western society becomes increasingly reliant on a technological and online world, virtual interactions come to affect the way in which people grieve (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; DeGroot, 2009; Irwin, 2015; Moore et al., 2019; Willis & Ferrucci, 2017). Online mourning began appearing in 1995 (Carroll & Landry, 2010), and has increased exponentially since then, becoming one of the primary platforms for people in contemporary societies to demonstrate, express, and process grief. Whereas previously, newspaper obituaries, the news, and hearsay were where people often learned of a person's death, now social media sites such as *Facebook* are the primary way that people come to know of a person's death and the details surrounding the death (Brubaker & Vertesi, 2010; Brubaker et al., 2013; Carroll & Landry, 2010; Levitt, 2012; Willis & Ferrucci, 2017). Studies suggest that those close to the deceased, who are responsible for announcing the death of a loved one, found it emotionally easier to make one mass online announcement, rather than making an abundance of individual phone calls or emails (Levitt, 2012; Moore et al., 2019). Of note, conversely, some people on the receiving end of death announcement did not appreciate learning of a loved one's death via a social media site (Brubaker et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2019). Not only are social media sites used to announce a person's death, but they have also become one of the primary ways to provide details of events after a person dies, such as funeral notices, celebration of life details, and fundraising pages for the families of the deceased (DeGroot, 2014; Moore et al., 2019; Willis & Ferrucci, 2017).

A recent study of people who have used social media sites to express feelings of grief stated that the bereaved often felt a compulsion or urge to post on social media sites, especially directly after learning of a loved one's death (Raun, 2017). Study participants noted that it was easier to

express feelings of remorse, loss, anger and other emotions related to grief online instead of directly in face-to-face conversations (Moore et al., 2019; Raun, 2017). It was also easier for those reading posts of the bereaved to express their condolences and sympathy in an online forum, instead of face-to-face or over the telephone (Levitt, 2012; Moore et al., 2019). Study participants stated that posting about the death of a loved one on social media pages instigated an acknowledgement and conversation about the death that was silent in the offline world (DeGroot, 2014; Raun, 2017) and those who were grieving felt comfort and validation in the posts of sympathy and condolences by others online (Fearon, 2011; Moore et al., 2019). Therefore, social media sites were used to break the silence that now often surrounds modern day approaches to grief by friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, thus bringing the acknowledgement of death back into the public realm, as it once was in traditional societies (Brubaker et al., 2013; Walter, 1994, 1996).

People often use a deceased person's social media page, such as a *Facebook* page, to express feelings of grief and sorrow directly to the deceased (DeGroot, 2014; Marwick & Ellison, 2012; Moore et al., 2019; Zneimer, 2014). Even when people die, their social media pages can remain active. In 2014, *Facebook* announced that it would not limit access to a deceased person's account (Levitt, 2012; Zneimer, 2014), thus making their pages exist indefinitely. Thus, as of 2014, if a friend or family member contacts *Facebook* to report a death of a *Facebook* user, *Facebook* will switch the user's page to become a memorial page; if the death is unreported, the page will continue to live on, as if the person is still alive (Brubaker et al., 2012; Levitt, 2012; Willis & Ferrucci, 2017). By keeping a people's social media pages active, they become, as Willis and Ferrucci (2017) noted, like a "virtual cemetery" (p. 2), easily accessed at any time, by anyone who wants to visit them. Having active social media pages or memorial pages also can prolong the attachment for the deceased, although studies have noted that it also prolonged the grief. For example, participants in some studies noted that spending less time viewing a deceased person's social media page signified that they were beginning to "move on" from their grief (Brubaker et al., 2013; Brubaker et al., 2012; Levitt, 2012; Moore et al., 2019).

Moreover, the use of social media for grieving has intertwined expressions of grief with everyday life, instead of restricting it to funerals or memorials (Brubaker et al., 2013). Accordingly, it has been reported that when close family members take down or deactivate the deceased's social media pages, the grieving process of others in mourning who expressed a desire to visit the deceased's page can be hampered (Brubaker et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2019). On the other hand, the danger of keeping these pages active is that it can blur the lines between life and death: even though the person has died, they can still be tagged in photos, videos, and status updates making them seem very much alive, at least digitally (Carroll & Landry, 2010; Levitt, 2012; Moore et al., 2019; Zneimer, 2014). Other problematic outcomes can emerge around the use of social media in grief such as the receipt of unsolicited or even hurtful advice, disenfranchisement when some believe others do not have the right to grieve a particular person, competitive grieving, and the possibility of prolonged grief (Moore et al., 2019).

Using or viewing a deceased person's social media page to express grief or share stories and memories gives grieving a more social component than the feelings of isolation that commonly occur in grief (Hollander, 2001; Moore et al., 2019; Zneimer, 2014). In this sense, a virtual community of grievers is united to express emotions and thoughts about the deceased, which can

help those in grief feel a connection not only to the deceased, but also to others who are in mourning (Forman et al., 2012; Willis & Ferrucci, 2017; Zneimer, 2014). Often, this form of online communal mourning leads to the formation or rekindling of relationships through the mutual grieving over a shared friend or family member (Brubaker et al., 2013; Carroll & Landry, 2010; DeGroot, 2009; Levitt, 2012; Moore et al., 2019). Yet, previous studies, when looking into interactions of the bereaved on social media sites, found that those grieving do not primarily use the site to communicate with others in mourning as much as they do to communicate directly to the deceased (Brubaker & Hayes, 2011; Brubaker et al., 2012; Carroll & Landry, 2010; DeGroot, 2014; Dobler, 2009; Irwin, 2015; Levitt, 2012). The deceased person's profile page could be filled with wall posts from friends directly expressing their love and loss for the person, solidify-ing and extending the bond between the person posting and the deceased (Carroll & Landry, 2015; DeGroot, 2012; Forman et al., 2012; Irwin, 2015).

Scholars have argued that those in grief use social media, not only to express their grief, but also to process it (Brubaker et al., 2010; Forman et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2019). Participants in several studies noted that expressing their reactions in social media allowed them to accept the death and process the grief in a way that face-to-face conversations did not (Brubaker et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2019), a finding that accords with growing evidence for the usefulness of expressive writing for the bereaved (e.g., Den Elzen et al., 2023).

Finally, some grievers have joined a "global community" (Moore et al., 2019, p. 253) and posted on sites of people unknown to them but felt they were also grieving along with others who were mourning, which helped in the processing of their own grief (Forman et al., 2012; Moore et al., 2019). Those who joined online support groups or sites dedicated to grieving a loss found a greater ability to process their grief, compared to those who solely processed their grief on social media sites (Brubaker, 2013; DeGroot, 2012). As social media will no doubt continue to evolve, the complexities of its use in bereavement deserve closer and deeper scrutiny.

Understanding the Phenomenon:
Philosophical Hermeneutics as a Grounding for Inquiry

Hermeneutics serves as the philosophical basis for this research. Hermeneutics as a research method arises from considerations of practice and is "related back to practice" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 231). McCaffrey et al. (2012) suggested this occurs in the context of the "careful explication and exploration of a complex question" (p. 215). Hermeneutic inquiry attends closely to lan-guage; it is a means to uncover that which hides amid words. In this process of revealing, new possibilities for understanding can emerge. Hermeneutic research seeks understanding with a view to practical significance, therefore a practice-oriented hermeneutic sensibility calls us to look for understanding that makes sense of the complexity of the topic.

Hermeneutic research also reveals links between aesthetics and understanding (Gadamer, 1989). This is a particularly salient point for this proposed study given the artistry of social media, which lies in its use of language, photographs, poetry, and literature.

Gadamerian hermeneutics asks questions that emerge from practical day-to-day experiences, attending to the history of a topic, as well as its current state (Moules et al., 2015). Arguably,

there has never been a time in history where the topic of grief was not relevant, but the shift to public expressions of grief admittedly brings grief into our "face" more often than it might have been in the past. Considering grief expressions in social media begs the questions: Does this public expression create a community of support that could not coalesce without it? In what ways does this often "faceless" community support the bereaved? Could it perhaps violate the private experience of loss and create personal and relational distress?

Method and Research Design

The complex nature of grief experiences, expressions, and practices required a method that could account for personal and social complexity. Hermeneutics nudges the boundaries of the ways we think and converse about human experience and allows language to give voice to experiences, such as grief, that are often difficult to articulate. Hermeneutics is a sophisticated method of research, well documented within the human and social sciences (Grondin, 1994, 1995; Moules et al., 2015). It is philosophically driven, rather than guided by a theoretical approach or framework. Hermeneutic research has shown, in practice professions such as nursing, education, counselling psychology, social work, and in the arts and humanities, to have applied utility, offering insight into phenomena that have direct impact on people and practices and therefore is well suited to this study. Hermeneutic inquiry is described as the practice and theory of interpretation and understanding in human contexts. It is a reflective, dialogic inquiry, concerned with understanding the world and the various forms in which such understanding is manifested (Moules et al., 2011).

Our guiding research question was: *How might we understand the complexities of the role of social media as a venue to express and respond to grief, such that we can offer guidance to the bereaved and caring professions?* This question was scaffolded by other questions: a) Is there something about the "faceless," distanced experience of social media that allows people to express and respond in ways that they might not otherwise?; b) Does the "heavy traffic" involved in social media expand communities of support for the bereaved?; c) How do people respond when they receive unsolicited advice or perhaps assertion of religious or other views that do not fit with their belief systems, and how do they navigate that experience?; d) By reading of others' expressions of grief, are individuals' experiences validated or normalized? e) Does social media serve to prolong or amplify grief?

Recruitment

As the population of bereaved people is infinite and their losses quite varied, we limited our recruitment to parental loss of a child—a particularly anguishing loss in which virtual outreach to others and to the deceased child can mitigate the parent's sense of isolation and difference (Lehmann et al., 2022). We accessed the network of families (through Kids Cancer Care Foundation of Alberta [KCCF]) who had experienced the loss of a child with cancer. We recruited 10 parents who had experienced the death of their child and expressed their grief and mourning through a social media venue. We also recruited 10 participants who had, at some point, responded to someone who had, through social media, expressed grief over the loss of a child. In some cases, there were crossovers, in that they were bereaved parents with social media sites, but they had also posted on sites of other bereaved parents.

Data Collection and Analysis

Discussions about the topic of grief are delicate and must be navigated with discretion, discernment, and sensitivity. Unstructured interviews (~ 1 hour) were conducted with parents by the Principal Investigator (Moules), given her background, expertise, and reputation as a researcher and counsellor in the field of grief. All interviews with a contributor to a grief social media site were conducted by an experienced research assistant. Because of the international nature of social media, some of the interviews were conducted by phone or over Zoom. All interviews were audiotaped. Analysis is synonymous with interpretation, which occurs in the complex dialectic of research interviews with participants, intensive review of the transcriptions, and interpretive memos based on the transcripts. The initial individual interpretations of researchers are then raised to another level of interpretive analysis in the research team's conversations through in-depth, rigorous, reflexive, and communal attention to the data. Transcripts stripped of identifiers were preserved. Another source of data was the social media site (e.g., *Facebook*) itself, and we examined the participants' sites as well as 10 publicly available sites where other parents focused on the death of their child. We examined the responses posted on the sites and all these data sources were incorporated in the analysis.

Hermeneutics generates a rich description of the phenomenon and strengthens this description through exemplars taken from the data, as well as other supporting literature and theory. Analysis involves careful reading and writing around significant interpretations that arise from the data, attending to the criteria of sound interpretive work: context, agreement, coherence, comprehensiveness, potential, and penetration (Madison, 1988). Rigor and integrity were strengthened by audit trails and memos that detail methodological decisions (Morse, & Field, 1995) as well as through team consultation. Unlike other qualitative methods, hermeneutics is not in search of themes, semantic coding, constructs, or theories, but rather seeks to deepen understanding of a topic so that it can be seen differently and ultimately lead to changes in practice (Moules et al., 2015). Deep listening to the data, precise description, stringent attention to meaning, and careful articulation of relationships between bodies of knowledge are what characterize rigor in this procedure. What this requires is participants who can articulate their experience and provide rich, powerful examples from which to learn. In summary, articulate, thoughtful participants, carefully crafted interviews, and rigorous analysis are what produce the depth of understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

In the following section, we discuss some of our findings from the analysis. Participant quotes are not cited specifically, as in hermeneutics, the topic is not about the participants but the topic. The participants bring understanding to the topic and the participant quotes are not attributed to particular people in the study. Participant quotes are arranged around interpretations: "our intent is not to re-create participants, psychoanalyze them, or "correctly" portray them, but to generate insight derived from their unique knowledge and contribution" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 124). Quotes from all participants are in italics. At times, the bereaved parents are referred to simply as parents; the people who have posted on other people's grief social media sites are sometimes referred to as "posters."

Interpretive Findings

Seeking Family and Home in Groundless Territory

> *So, it's an interesting thing, like it's not a family you want to become a member of, but once you do, it's a pretty special family, you know?*

Parents faced significant changes in their experience of home and family during the cancer experience and after the subsequent death of their children. For many of them, becoming a part of the network, culture, and connection with others in similar circumstances changed what they considered family and where they found home.

> *[The group is] just like Oncology Moms and so I'm part of the group, I've signed up for it – like I've met some Moms at the clinic, and they kept telling me about it and they're like "Just sign up for it" and so that's the only reason why I signed up for a Facebook page, so I thought, "Okay, well I better check this out." And a lot of the people there talk about how they've lost friendships, right like, after diagnosis and it's very – I can see why it's common, because you are then thrown in to this crazy world where your family is - or your child is the most important and everything kind of goes to the wayside. And a lot of people in the outside might not be able to handle that, so a lot of moms lose friends, right, they lose a lot of their close contacts, so they join this Facebook group to gain support and then you go on to – say if you go on to Instagram and get followers of other moms who are going through the same thing, I think it's just sort of like it's replacing--it's like a support group that's replacing what they used to have.*

In addition to forming relationships with other families going through similar experiences, families expressed connections with their caregivers in the hospital that were deep and meaningful during treatment.

> *Well, we call them our hospital family because they were there from the beginning, all the way throughout and they love her like she was their own as well.*

These relationships too began to shift once the child died and the people who might have been the closest to the parents during treatment were continuing their work treating other families and, suddenly, the family members of the child who just died find themselves again without a home and away from the people who felt like family for months and sometimes years.

Outside of the world of childhood cancer, people who have lost a child sometimes look for people who might understand and offer a "home" for a shared grief.

> *I have no social media accounts but sometimes I "lurk." I sometimes need to find others that might know what I feel, and I admit that I look for sites of others who have lost a child.*

In this groundless territory, parents sought others who understood, who might know without being told what it was like to lose a child and to carry on in life without their child. For people

who responded to posts of even unknown sites, some were also bereaved parents who were seeking an understanding community of those who "just knew." The family of bereaved parents sometimes had to find each other and form family of a different constellation.

> *The people that I did respond to were people that, you know, it was just comforting to know that I wasn't alone in the situation.*

Seeking family in groundless territory requires vigilance to a terrain that is full of crevasses and tremors.

> To come to ground is to find a home in circumstances, and in the very physical body we inhabit in the midst of those circumstances, and above all to face the truth, no matter how difficult that truth may be; to come to ground is to begin the courageous conversation, to step into difficulty, and, by taking that first step, begin the movement through all difficulties, to find the support and foundation that has been beneath our feet all along: a place to step onto, a place on which to stand, and a place from which to step. (Whyte, 2014, pp. 107-108)

Not all families find that ground and, often in grief, families can *"share it similarly but suffer it differently"* and do not have the capacity to provide a sense of ground, because everything is groundless when the ground shifts from under one's feet. The search for family in social media in the face of grief may be about trying to find ground when we have felt an earthquake.

Social media provides a home of sorts, a location of being, a possible backdrop or holding of what and who has been there and where the present can evolve, carrying the past with it. Perhaps we all need a place to hold traces of ourselves and others, so they are not forgotten and so those parts of ourselves remain alive. Social media sites might be the very attempt to bring home or find home for things and people that need enlivening, remembering, and revealing, the work of *aletheia* (Moules, 2015). Ironically, the internet is groundless and not tethered to anything, yet it seems to provide a home of some kind. Grief does not create a particularly hospitable home; it is abrasive, exclusive, unwelcoming, simultaneously lonely and crowded. The home that grief makes for us is at times uninhabitable and grief itself is often an unwelcome houseguest in the home (see Moules et al. 2004, for development of the metaphor of grief as the uninvited houseguest). When grief takes residency and creates a home of suffering, there are times when other residents of the home might need to relocate grief, and perhaps social media serves to house an aspect of grief or even to hold some of the overflow of the very crowded house.

Facebook as a Site of Remembering, Carrying, and Reminding

> *You know, I guess, if anything, maybe this is just a general statement, I think the benefit I get out of what, maybe Facebook or maybe whatever platforms there are, is that his name gets mentioned, he's not forgotten.*

Michael White's (1989) classic and then revolutionary work on grief as "re-membering" and "saying hullo [sic] again" is about bringing the deceased person back into membership – re-*member*-ing them into the world.

George (2017) wrote of the call of grief as one to take hold of our relationship with the deceased, now bearing full responsibility to carry that relationship on one's own. He names this as an "ethical profile of our relation to the deceased" (p. 4).

> In "Rams," Derrida cites a passage from Paul Celan's poetry to help describe the experience of the death of a friend. The passage reads: 'the world is gone, I must carry you' (Derrida, 2005, p. 141) … What strikes me within the present context, however, is that the verb "to carry" invoked by Celan provides something of a *motto* for the ethical profile of grieving. While our friend or loved one is still alive, our relation is, or at least can be, carried out by us both, mutually and in the flesh. Once our friend or loved one is dead, however, our relation can no longer be carried out by us both in the flesh but must rather be carried on only by the survivor, and only in memory. If grieving involves us in the limit situation of memory, and, indeed, a limit that makes of grieving an infinite task, then this entails the ethical demand to carry the memory of the dead. (George, 2017, p. 4)

> *It's just called Remembering [SON]. Yeah, or just about how much I miss him, that kind of thing. We have a tree in our neighbourhood that we planted just shortly after he passed with a memorial plaque so in the spring, I post pictures of the tree and flowers when it's all colourful and things like that.*

> *The thing that frustrates me the most, and this happens to me very often, you know, I'll see a friend, and it just happened to me today, someone who was at the funeral, you know, I was talking to him today, but they don't bring it up, and maybe that's what you touched on before, is that they're scared of saying something but like it's every day, it's in our thoughts, it's in our minds, it's in our actions. I find it frustrating that even close family, I haven't heard them say his name in 4 years. And I think when there's an opportunity, whether it's with a real-life breathing human being, or through social media, if it gives you the ability to hear, for me personally, I hear his name or something that he did, or a memory, that makes me feel good. So that's the most, one of the frustrating things for me, is when I'm with, and I've had friends who know that he's passed, and they haven't mentioned to me a single thing, and to me it's like, I evaluate it, it's almost like I think to myself after leaving the dinner or whatever we're doing together with this certain person, I almost walk away and maybe I shouldn't be thinking like this, but I almost think to myself, like why did I even go to this lunch? That someone, like I think, do they not get it? Do they not get that one of the most integral things in my life is gone, and that wasn't a great experience? And that somebody had to suffer, and they're not even willing to bring up his name or ask me, like I find that very frustrating and it happens with friends, with acquaintances, with work, with family. So, if social media can somehow help in that…*

Aletheia, the anthesis of lethal, means to enliven. Etymologically, it is also connected the mythical river in Hades, Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness that, if crossed, removes memory, so a-Lethe is about remembering, rather than forgetting. The unconcealing work of *aletheia* then is also about enlivening and remembering (Moules, 2015). There are ways that social media platforms serve to do this in their unconcealment of the personal experience of grief, and in the immortalizing of the deceased, providing a location where memories are not only recalled but are

entered into a public domain and given a public face. Grief, then, moves into a public sphere, with a communal aspect.

Irish author Kevin Toolis reflected on the tradition of Irish wakes, and the communal act and customs of grieving in the small Irish community of his father, reminding us of our universal need to face mortality with community and kindness. This powerful video (BBC.com, n.d) discusses the roles that the mourners had, and particularly, the role of the *Mná chaointe* (chief keener) and the "keening women" who "controlled the stage of the wake" or the emotional temperature of the wake. Toolis says that, although his father was…

> an ordinary man, 300 or 400 people came to the funeral and all were under a moral obligation to shake the hands of the principal bereaved. So, it wasn't just enough for them to be there in the crowd, they all came up to you and shook your hands and as they shook your hands, they said it like a cliché, they say, "sorry for your trouble." In fact, they shake your hands so many times that the bones in your hand begin to ache. This is a way of countering death denial, because these individuals shaking your hands, pressing into your flesh and they're saying, it's not just sorry for your trouble, they are saying "they're dead, they're dead, they're dead." So, you, at the end of that existential experience, it's very hard to then think they're coming back. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/ideas/videos/why-we-need-to-face-our-mortality/p065m7f)

Toolis' comments not only remind us of the communal aspect of grief that happens culturally and has been seen traditionally across cultures, but it also offers the idea that, in some regards, social media almost becomes that handshake that makes the bones in your hand ache. The people responding to posts on grief sites may be serving as the virtual handshake of reminder "they're dead, they're dead, they're dead."

Sometimes anniversaries of deaths are not times of punctuation or marking, and birthdays begin to go unnoticed. One parent said that it is in these times that they turn to social media, being able to post and remember dates that will never be forgotten. Reminders and remembering become the function of social media.

Every year, Texas A&M University holds a "Muster Roll Call (Aggie Muster)" which celebrates the camaraderie and connection of the school through remembering the lives of Aggies (A&M alumni) who have died in the past year. This tradition dates to 1903 and is celebrated in more than 300 locations over the world, the largest being at Texas A&M campus, College Station. This gathering is comprised of a roll call, based on military practices to see if soldiers were present or had fallen—the soldiers names are called and if they do not answer, it is assumed, they have fallen (https://www.aggienetwork.com/muster/rollcall/). With the Aggie tradition, however, as they read the names aloud, everyone in the group answers "here." It is as if, even though the person is no longer with them to answer for themselves, others answer for them, attesting to the fact that they were here, and lived and breathed amongst them.

Waving in the Crowd

> *And that might be one of the other things about social media, it's a positive/negative be-cause people feel they're doing something by looking at it or even commenting on it, but it gives people an arm's length opportunity not to be involved. Yeah, so you're not off the hook by, like you actually have to leave your home, or you have to be engaged to be ef-fective at doing anything. Now you can complete things without leaving your home these days, but to effectively help someone, you need to do more than that. Waving in the crowd; it's the equivalent of that. It's like, "Oh there you are."*

There is an aspect of contributing that gets redefined with social media posting. "Completing things without leaving your home" makes responding to postings of pain, grief, and suffering seem like a very token acknowledgement of a major life loss. Being a "wave in the crowd" is perhaps even a lazy or cowardly way to acknowledge someone's grief or, even further, to help them in it. Toolis' quote from the video above exemplifies this very thing: "So, it wasn't just enough for them to be there in the crowd, they all came up to you and shook your hands…"

> *It's effectively, it gives people the feeling that they're contributing, you know, when they're not. Contributing is actually giving something, by definition of course. And social media has given everyone the opportunity to feel like you're participating, and it also gives speech to negative things, but in essence, positive things that don't really contribute beyond the statement it's made, they are ineffective, when someone really needs some-thing.*

Some studies have reported that it is easier for those reading posts of the bereaved to express their condolences and sympathy in an online forum rather than directly (Levitt, 2012; Moore et al., 2019). Waving a hand in a crowd almost speaks of a request to be noticed amongst the group but only as a nod, a statement of "I showed up" and made an appearance, so please note me and note that I was here. It is, however, an appearance without an obligation.

There is also an aspect of "waving in the crowd" that happens for the bereaved who are posting on their grief. There is a function of waving, asking their grief to be noticed in a virtual sea of grief that exists. Sometimes, however, the waves from the bereaved and the waves from the posters have a hard miss.

Dynamite – Words Can Hurt and Words Can Heal

> *Social media is like dynamite. You can use dynamite to build train tunnels, to help get minerals, like copper or whatever, I think dynamite can be very useful for that. Or you can use it to blow up people.*

Not all the parents interviewed saw social media as a comfort. Many used it as an information highway and platform to deliver updates in the most efficient way possible, while avoiding multiple inquiries from others and needs to respond to all interested individuals. Some used it as a vehicle for advocacy for causes such as childhood cancer. However, for some, what they

shared on the social media sites were not personal or at an emotional level and they felt the danger of opening themselves to the world so publicly.

> *Yeah, I think we are closer to the other end of the spectrum, in terms of our way of dealing with our grief. Like going public on social media, is certainly not our preferred choices so…we are careful in terms of how much we do in social media. We certainly chose not to be the active ones as far as dealing with our grieving along the way like that. But others that do, especially the younger age groups, maybe just a personality thing that comes through, I wonder really how successful are they in terms of taking some of the weight off their situation. In terms of the benefit of posting versus some of the negatives, that we know now especially with social media. You know, in every crowd there is some idiot so, whose posts are very insensitive or maybe just wrong stuff…*

> *I just wonder how, you know, like how effective that approach is, but certainly, because our personality thing, I recognized, just by sharing, I know some people, it would ease some of the burden, or some of the difficulties that they are dealing with. Just by sharing. It doesn't have to be verbal, to sit in front of someone and to tell them, but being able to make a post or share a story out there or write a short blurb about what they are feeling on that particular day, or maybe certain triggers kicked in that day or something that really turned their emotions upside down on that particular day or that particular phase, right? But I'm just curious to how successful that tool is in terms of part of the tools that would help one to handle the grief or weight a bit easier.*

> *It's not that we are against it, it's just not our way. We respect and don't have any problem with people sharing in ways as publicly as say on social media, but we know the commonalities and yet we know the differences too. It's just not our way, that's all.*

For some, there was an insincerity that existed in social media exchanges that rendered the support offered useless or even trivial.

> *I feel like, for me, I'm quite immune to it because I feel like I already had kind of a disdain for social media before and so I can see it in a pretty, I feel, like objective way, where I say, "Okay, these 'likes' really don't mean anything to me." And I stopped liking things because things – like a lot of times people will just 'like' – it's the polite thing to do in social media, you don't even read it you just …And I stopped even liking other people's pages because what would happen is, if I 'liked' something it just all –it's such a big web, right?*

> *Like, if you "like" something then that gets kind of broadcasted to the people you follow to say, "Okay, well so and so likes this, what about you, do you think you like this?" So, I stopped liking those sorts of things, but what is the psychology behind "likes" and I think when someone's like publishing all their grief and they've got all these hearts and they're getting followers and they're kind of getting sucked into the emotions of social media, I can see how it is…addicting.*

Some of the parents felt a seductiveness of the social media exchanges and a commodity being created in "likes" and "hearts." Social media also provided a platform for people to make other imprints, signal virtue, offer advice or opinions, and even proselytize.

> *You know, granted when you're dealing with trying to help yourself or help others understand the death of someone important to you, maybe there's a little bit more of a buffer on how good social media can be. I think it can be good. But I also find that there's so many instances of social media where people have lost humanity, lost the ability to be kind, they make statements and they don't put their names behind them, they hurt people, they slander people. Um, there's a case right now in the States where a 21-year-old woman is on trial because she texted 40,000 texts to her boyfriend who killed himself, and the texts were, you should go kill yourself; you're useless, go kill yourself. So, I think that social media in my opinion and maybe why I am a little bit suspicious of it is that I see that it can do good, but at the same time, it is being used as such an antisocial device, I can't believe it. It astonishes me what people get away with.*

Some of the participants who were interviewed because they said they had posted on other people's grief sites talked about being very careful with their words and what they had to offer. They wanted to show support and compassion but were aware that they were interlopers into someone else's world, someone they did not know, so they entered with care. However, both the posters and the bereaved parents admitted to seeing or receiving words that were not so welcome or caring, words that hurt. Examples of these included comments such as: "My best advice to you is to put this behind you, and get on with your life"; "It is all a part of God's plan, and you must accept it"; "There is a reason for everything"; "At least you know you have an angel in heaven"; "I think you should feel lucky she died so young before you got attached to her"…etc.

There were also posters who were drawn to sites of bereavement because of losses and grief in their own lives and they followed these sites to find their own comfort and to find a community of support. Some of the comments posted were more about making a connection than about offering advice or consolation. For some, this was a sometimes-ungratifying endeavour, and they felt unwelcome when their posts went unacknowledged and the reaching out to a community was not met with an invitation to really join it. The community then felt very artificial for them and not very satisfying. What was most striking is most of the people interviewed who posted on grief sites did so with good intentions (if sometimes self-serving) but it often turned out to be a hollow endeavour and a one-dimensional interaction without the gratification it promised.

Emoticons: When Words Fail in a Wordless Situation

> *And sometimes, like I'll look for certain people, even just to make an emoji and when I don't get that, that upsets me.*
> *Interviewer: Because what would the emoji mean to you?*
> *That they're acknowledging my post.*

Emoticons or emojis are symbolic representations of expressions, words, reactions and are often the language of social media, functioning as a stand-in for words. They can express every emotion possible or replace words with pictures. They stand in for laughter, tears, shock, disgust,

and even gradients and degrees of each of these emotions. They also serve as acknowledgement without having to find the right words to say.

Gadamer (2007) suggested that there are certain moments that "leave us speechless" (p. 93). Grief is often a wordless experience and Gadamer suggested that "language deserts us, and it deserts us precisely because what enlightens is standing so strong before our ever more encompassing gaze that words would not be adequate to grasp it" (p. 93).

Risser (2019) wrote about experiences of the sublime or profound, that are "excessive to the point that we are at a loss for words" (p. 2). However, he says there is another kind of experience that invites wordlessness – that of deeply personal experiences that range from "traumatic to blissful." One of those he identifies is the "awkward situation of speaking in the face of death" (p. 2). These experiences often find words failing and rather than signalling the impossibility of speech. He says it is just the opposite. "The breakdown of language actually testifies to one's capacity to search out an expression for everything" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 93). Accordingly, then, such a breakdown of language does not have to lead to quiet isolation. Instead, sometimes at least, such a breakdown can lead us into attempts to converse with one another—to help one another search for an expression that captures our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. In this, the emoticon is perhaps a testament to our desire to communicate in times when we have not, and perhaps cannot, bring our experience to language (George, 2011, 2020 [see in particular chapter 2, *The capacity for displacement*]).

Rather than searching for the "right word" in the face of the profound or personal, emoticons step in as both effort and excuse. They are effort because, at the very least, they acknowledge, but they are excuses because they are easy and they are general and the poster really claims no authorship over them, only the choice or selection of a particular symbol that could have multiple interpretations and meanings.

> *No, I just generally don't respond, but sometimes maybe they'll say, "Oh it's been 5 years since so and so passed away," I might, if I know them, I'll maybe just put a sad emoji on there, and that's pretty much it. But with some other people that I don't know, or are not that close, I just don't do anything.*

> *Do you think that people that do use social media as their primary way… because I noticed that some people who, like rather than talking to each other as a couple, that, and it is typically more the mom, though I know of one situation where it's more the dad, but maybe it's somewhat gendered, but maybe not totally, but do you think people who do that, that they missed that opportunity to share that together? If you're sort of sharing it with the world. I don't know what I'm trying to say, help me out here. But I was speculating like, is there something about being so public about all that that takes away from the intimacy that is something that just you share?*

Perhaps it is the very intimacy of grief that begs for some removal for it and a relocation to a place where things are not as intense and intimate. The distancing that emoticons provide compose the culture of the more public sphere of expression that is outside of intimacy.

But the thing is too about social media, just like any text or email that you don't get the body language, right? You don't get the tone and you don't get the body language, so I make this post, I posted this thing about [SON] and I'm bawling my eyes out, I hadn't slept for days. I'm barely even able to type it, but that's not what comes across right? It almost comes across as a bit glorified right? It's kind of hard to explain. It's like, "Oh well [SON's] dead," you know? But it's not like a phone call where, like when was speaking to you where you can hardly get the words out, and I could hardly type the words out, but it's almost like that's lost. That's what I don't like about social media is that the tone and the body language is lost.

In 2010, Moules was invited to Sao Paulo, Brazil as a visiting scholar. She learned from her colleague Professor Regina Bousso that there is no equivalent word for grief in Portuguese. Language's inability to name and signify something somehow is not surprising around something such as grief. Grief is a difficult thing to define and articulate. It escapes simply because it is not *just* an emotion, or *just* an action, or *just* an experience. It is full of complexity, complication, contradictions, and ambiguity. In our best efforts to try to define it through research, we are often only left with metaphors that try somehow to carry and represent the complexity of it (Moules et al., 2004).

Perhaps the use of social media and the symbols, emoticons, and media images that arise, allows a space for wordlessness to live and be expressed. The contradictions of grief – its terrible and gracious ability to live in the in-between of joy and pain, remembering and forgetting, richness and loss – maybe finds a home where wordlessness is possible. It also provides a way to hold things in a location that does not have to be looked at, answered to, responded to unless chosen. Unlike the physical encounter with another, it can, to an extent, be controlled.

Casserole Wisdom: Helping Other People with Their Awkwardness

I don't tell other people she died. Well, I think, not only does it open it for you, but it some ways it's protective of other people. Because you don't want to make other people feel awkward too, right?

Because then they'll say, "Oh I'm so sorry," and then they don't know what to say and it is an awkward situation, where you're just like, oh. Then they feel bad if they asked too maybe.

Many people do not know how to respond to others when faced with their grief, and there are times when the bereaved person is trying to comfort the other person and ease their awkwardness. One participant talked about this general lack that others have in knowing what to say and not say.

People wanted to be helpful. I remember when he died. They kept writing, "Is there anything I can do?" or the biggest one, "Is there anything you need?" I didn't know what I needed. I didn't have the strength or energy to think of something to tell them so that they can do something to make themselves feel better that they helped me. I know they meant

well but don't put the weight on me to find something to help you feel good about yourself. I'm dealing with enough right now.

In some regards, social media creates a physical distance that did not exist previously.

We recall from earlier generations being in a culture of community support demonstrated by doing things without being asked. If someone was sick or had experienced a death or any other hardship, people stepped in by doing something. This typically took the form of supplying food, often in the form of a casserole or dish that could be used immediately or frozen for future use. We offered food to say we cared, to help. This offering was not prefaced by asking the person if you could do anything to help or if you could bring food. You just did it. And there is wisdom in the simple, yet complex, act of caring and caregiving. There is a gift in not placing the burden of asking the person what they need because often in times of need, people do not know what they need; there is wisdom in casseroles.

Being able to speak about the deceased, the profundity of the loss, the presence of grief is not a capacity that all hold and perhaps the distance of social media saves people from those awkward encounters where the respondent is unable to respond in any way to the bereaved.

Possibly, social media serves to protect both the person writing about their grief and the people reading about it, not needing to have a response ready, or not needing to find the right words. Reactions are hidden unless expressed on the site.

Implications: Balance, Ignoring, and Recognizing Hollow Platforms

I think maybe, like if you just acknowledge that it's a tool that can help you. It's not going to give you that 100% aha moment after, it's just something that can kind of push you maybe, it can help maybe push you in the right direction, where, I think if you're going to use it because you want it to be the 100% answer to your problems, that won't be it.

Of the parents interviewed, some of whom used social media and others who did not, there were cautions and bits of advice that they would offer another parent, as well as advice to those who are posting on the sites of remembrance.

There's a saying that goes around Facebook, I can't remember the exact words, but it's like, don't be afraid to talk about my child to me. If you think it's going to make me sad because I miss him, or because he's gone, well I know he's gone. I know that he's dead, so it's not going to make me any more sad; it's going to make me happy for you to talk about him. It's in better words than that, but that's the gist of it.

When somebody that I know in the neighbourhood or you know, friends, they say something like, 'Do you remember when [SON] did that?' that just makes me the happiest. It's not going to make the person sad to bring up your child, never. Not for me anyway.

Bringing up the name of the deceased came up frequently in the conversations with our participants. The acknowledgement of the deceased is another way of helping the bereaved "carry" the

relationship or at least the affirmation of that person in the world. It is about not being shy about saying "here" to help the bereaved know that their loved one was here and mattered. Other pieces of advice for the bereaved were offered.

> *Don't hold back. Post whatever you want. I mean I've had a couple of people say, I remember, it was my sister-in-law, I can't remember exactly what she said. Or she said it to somebody, and I heard it. Like, "How much longer is she going to post these pictures?" Or I can't remember exactly what it was, and I didn't hold it against her and I didn't get mad at her for it or anything. But it'll be 9 years in March, and if I want to post pictures of him for the next 9 years, then I'm going to.*

Almost every bereaved parent in this study mentioned getting or reading hurtful remarks, judgment, or unhelpful advice. Comments such as, "Don't you think it's time to let this go?" do not go without impact, and the participants had suggestions around dealing with those. They also had advice about how to post, when to post, and what to expect out of the posts.

> *I would ignore it. I feel that a lot of people who post controversial things on social media is because they want a reaction. So, if they don't get reaction, they're not going to do it again. If it continues, block them.*

> *I think I would probably say stay true to what's in your heart. If the feeling led to do that, then go ahead and do it. Don't worry about what anybody else thinks. This is what is going to help you. What I would do before I would post something, I would keep it as a only me, so if I hit post accidentally, it didn't go for everybody to read initially. I would re-read and re-read until I was comfortable for it to be out.*

> *It's to make sure like I said to keep those little security barriers in place initially. Until you do feel comfortable in allowing others to read a piece of your heart, basically. I think to have an awareness as well that you might get a comment back that could hurt you, like say it could be well intentioned, but it could hurt. And be prepared for a lack of response as well at times.*

> *The one thing that pops into my mind is balance. Like not to get tied to it. I often reflect around when I do post something, especially when it is around grief. What am I expecting out of that?*

> *Am I concerned about how many shares there are? Am I concerned about how many likes there are? So, for me it's on my radar, and because I know there's an aspect of feedback and perhaps…comments and validation…if people are posting and that's their only source of validation, I think it could be problematic.*

> *Remember in the beginning I said I had some reservations around it? And I think it's that if that is the only source that people are having for their support, and then they're so sensitive, like one family was telling me that they'd get really hurt if somebody doesn't acknowledge when they've posted something.*

> *It's a very hollow platform. Social media can be a very powerful tool, but it can also be a very destructive tool. You have to know how to balance…what's so cool about social media is that it can bring a large group closer. Like you can have connection points that kind of, you would not normally have in life; it's just not possible. So that's really powerful. You know, I guess I've coined it to a pen pal, you know the connections that some people can make with other people around the world, even if never even meeting them, it can still be a very authentic friendship, right? It can be very powerful, but it's not the only tool. It can't replace you know, a physical hug. You know what I mean? You still need to hear people within your community, and I guess the other caution is that because some people are so afraid of grief and death and talking about it, and sometimes it's not comfortable for people, you can sometimes hide behind social media that way too. Because I think you don't have to have that face-to-face connection time.*

From the words of the participants in this study, we hear advice to people considering using or currently using social media as a platform for their expressions of grief. The advice is about caution, discernment, and emotional safety. This study also makes us very mindful of the care, caution, and responsibility that posters need to adopt in choosing to comment on sites of the bereaved.

Conclusion

Grief has many faces, names, aliases, and presentations. Where it shows and where we choose to go with it is very much a personal choice. For some, they find themselves or choose to go with grief into public domains that open certain dimensions and dilemmas. Social media is an active and developing medium in our connection to others and in our communication and interaction with the world. In this study, the bereaved parents interviewed, and the participants posting on sites of remembrance and grief, helped us understand more of the complexity of using social media to direct some expression of grief. Hermeneutics is about understanding rather than explanation, and this study helps us understand how some people find comfort and strength through expressing their grief over social media and some people find hurt, insensitivity, and even violation and, finally, how some people find both. Heidegger reminds us that "everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral" (1977, p. 4). Social media, as a home for grief, can offer many things but it is *never* neutral.

Acknowledgements

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