

The Last Veil: Experiences of Bereaved “Adult Orphans”

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the experience of adults who lose both parents, a transition sometimes named “becoming an adult orphan.” Drawing on the image of a veil that drops with the death of the second parent, we argue that this loss discloses mortality as newly proximal rather than merely known in the abstract. Situating bereavement literature alongside philosophical accounts of mourning in Derrida, Blanchot, Patočka, and Malpas, we develop a hermeneutic account of grief as enduring rather than resolved. Central to this is *entwinement*, whereby another person becomes a condition of one's world rather than merely a piece of it, and *answerability*, the claim the dead continue to make on us. We argue that mourning, so understood, is not a stage to pass through but a lasting way of remaining in relation to the dead.

Keywords

Grief, mourning, hermeneutics, adult orphan, loss and living on

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The effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (George Eliot, Middlemarch)

There is a remarkable experience that can lie in the loss of both parents even at an age when one has long expected it. The loss of the second parent, in families where there are two parents, removes the last barrier between oneself and one's own mortality. This invisible veil has been experienced by both of us, and we have now known what it is like to have the veil dropped. How one faces the reality that we are "next in line" is a developmental rite of passage but it is also a complicated one that lives alongside an active living grief for both parents.

George (2017) wrote about the limit situations of grieving and the process of learning to carry a relationship when the other is no longer physically with us. He cited Celan's words "The world is gone, I must carry you" (p. 4), reflecting on how when someone is alive, we jointly carry the relationship, but when one person dies, the remaining person is charged with carrying the relationship alone, with one in the flesh and the other not. Perhaps we all struggle with learning how we carry those who have died, and how their voices come to us. For some, they show up in dreams: there is the deceiving, imagined flesh, and voices show up in other ways – in reminders when we are cooking that we are doing something wrong, or right, or in memory of how some mothers are incapable of hanging up the phone without saying I love you, or some parents struggling with those words always. Moules (2017) reminds us that relationships are complex, and people are complicated and, in grief, we are often left living with contradictions. Perhaps that relational complexity is felt even more acutely after their deaths.

Losing both parents brings with it something obvious: the sense of being next, of being untethered. It is also about losing the self that was always a child to them – that particular way of being seen, of still being someone's child, disappears with them – and there is no recovering it. There is a way of thinking about this that goes beyond the merely emotional: what is lost is one of our most primary forms of rootedness, not merely an affective bond, but an existential orientation, the sense of belonging to a structure larger than oneself that quietly assured one of one's place. When that goes, the freedom that remains is not simply liberating. It carries with it a burden and challenge: the demand to stand, to bear up and out, without the shelter of a relation that preceded one's own self-understanding, and that one never had to choose or construct. One simply has to begin afresh, and keep going, living on without it.

Gratitude seems to come only when one stops trying to simplify the relationship into something wholly good or wholly difficult. Though relationships carry their own contradictions, perhaps the task is not to resolve such contradictions but to carry them well. There is a way in which love distorts itself when it becomes a demand for the other to be something other than what they were: when care tips into possession, or when what we call love is really the wish to be confirmed rather than genuinely met or seen. Perhaps grief, at its most honest, undoes that distortion. It asks us to

see the person as they actually were, in their particularity and their limits, and to remain grateful for what was genuinely given without insisting that it take a simpler or more consoling shape. In that sense, gratitude feels like the other side of restraint: a willingness to let the complexity remain what it was, and to be thankful for what was nonetheless given freely without demanding that it become something simpler. That is close, we think, to what it means to love maturely: not the abolition of need, but the capacity to love another as they are, rather than as one needed them to be. Moules (2017), in her writing of the contradictions in grief and the complexity of losing her father, wrote that grief involves moving back and forth amongst “memory, love, anger, disappointment, reality, romance, gratitude, admiration, regret, and history. It is working through the conflicting things, memories, and emotions that sideswipe you when you least expect them” (p. 2). Relationships are never quite this or quite that.

Understanding Grief

Our understandings of grief are generally traced back to Freud's (1917/1957) conceptualisations of melancholy and mourning in which he understood grief to be about the process of withdrawing energy placed on the lost person. If this was “successfully” achieved, according to Freud, then a person could avoid falling into melancholia. From this work, several authors (Engel, 1961; Lindemann, 1944; Parkes, 1972; Schneider, 1984; Worden, 1982) introduced thinking of grief as a stepwise process of healing which resulted in recovery or resolution. Newer conceptualisations of grief then emerged which made the shift from the staged, time-dependent process to a lifelong experience that changed over time and involved continuing relationships with the deceased (Attig, 1996; Klass et al., 1996; Moules, 1998; Moules et al., 2004; Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer et al., 2006).

Moules and colleagues (2004) offered a metaphor of grief as an invited houseguest who takes up residency in our homes and becomes an enduring part of our being in the world. Houseguests are not always easy, and they are often disruptive, particularly when they overstay what we anticipated their stay to be. Grief often surprises with its stubbornness to leave and, though people might accept its presence and residency over time, there can be times it is disruptive, confusing, full of complexity and contradiction. Moules (1998) also critiqued the cultural expectation that grief should be time-limited and resolved. She argued that these expectations can increase suffering and pathologize normal grieving. Moules conceptualizes grief as an enduring, relational, and interpretive human experience rather than a finite psychological condition to be resolved. Across her scholarship, she critiques cultural and clinical assumptions that position healthy grieving as “letting go,” emotional detachment, or achieving closure. Instead, she argues that grief is best understood as an ongoing relationship with loss that changes over time but does not disappear. She proposes that grief should be legitimized as lifelong yet livable. In her view, bereaved persons often do not seek to relinquish their grief because grief itself serves as an expression of continuing love and connection. Thus, adaptation to loss does not entail severing attachment but reconfiguring the relationship. Death marks not the end of relationality but a transformation of it: the deceased may remain psychologically, narratively, and emotionally present in one's life.

Grief is, therefore, not treated as a symptom cluster but as an existential and interpretive encounter requiring understanding rather than correction. Grief possesses a conflicted and paradoxical character: it includes suffering, longing, and disruption, but may also contain comfort, creativity,

continuity, memories, and emotional inheritance. Grief is therefore not solely a problem to eliminate; it can function as a way of preserving identity, relational continuity, and meaning after profound loss. In summary, grief can be viewed as an enduring, relational, and interpretive experience in which bereaved persons continue establishing bonds with the deceased while learning to live forward, challenging dominant assumptions that healthy grief culminates in closure or detachment.

What philosophical reflection on mourning adds to this account is a more precise account of why grief takes such form, and why the expectation or even language of closure misunderstands not merely the existential-psychology of loss but also its fundamental structure. Jacques Derrida's work on mourning, developed across a number of texts and most fully elaborated in his readings of and with Maurice Blanchot, suggests that the dead do not simply depart from our world but continue to inhabit it in ways that resist the clean categories of presence and absence (Derrida, 2001). The dead are, in a certain sense, neither here nor gone. They remain in us, though not simply as memories that we hold and recall at will, but as a form of presence that addresses us, makes claims on us, and shapes the way we move through a world they helped to constitute. This is not mere sentiment, however; it is a structural observation about what it means to have genuinely shared a world with another person and how the world contains concrete traces of this other, shaped as it was by them. When that person dies, the world does not revert to what it would have been without them. Instead, the world retains their shape while at the same time being diminished by their loss. Jeff Malpas develops a related point from a more topological idiom, claiming that birth and death form two limits of a single horizon rather than a line that simply terminates, so that a life continues to unfold from within that horizon even once it has ended (Malpas, 2026, p. 24).

Not everyone who has engaged with this material has found Derrida's vocabulary equally satisfying, and the disagreement is worth registering rather than smoothing over. Moules has pushed back, in an exchange prompted by an earlier draft of this essay, on the suggestion that talk of traces and mourning can still, however unintentionally, measure loss against some inner experience that has now ended, as though what survives of a person were only ever the residue of an interiority that has stopped. Her worry is not with Derrida's conclusions so much as with the inner/outer picture she thinks his vocabulary can quietly reintroduce even while trying to unsettle it. This essay does not resolve that disagreement so much as hold it open, returning to it below.

Yet Blanchot's contribution to this thinking is to attend to the strangeness of death and dying itself: the way in which death is, paradoxically, an experience that cannot be experienced, an event that belongs to the one who undergoes it and yet withdraws from their grasp at the very moment of its arrival, and grief understood not as that which "works" but as that which "keeps watch." Here, Blanchot tells us, grief is "incising, dissecting, exposing a hurt which can no longer be endured, or even remembered" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 59). One does not, strictly speaking, encounter one's own death; one rather lives on and survives toward it, living in a temporal span in which death is always already there and yet always still to come (Blanchot, 1995; Derrida, 2000). This peculiar temporal dislocation helps to account for something that bereaved persons frequently report: the sense that the death of the other has not simply occurred and receded into the past but continues to happen, to arrive, to make its weight felt in the living present. The work of mourning thus unfolds in this strange temporality of past and present, gone and yet not gone. It is not the processing of a completed event but the ongoing encounter with something that has not finished arriving.

Taken together, these reflections deepen the hermeneutic account of grief as enduring, shaped by silence, and deeply relational (Moules, 1998; George, 2017; Keane, 2021). If the dead continue to inhabit us and the world we share, and if the loss we mourn is not a single completed event but a temporally complex and ongoing disruption, then grief is not a response to something that happened and is now over. It is a way of inhabiting a world that has been permanently altered in its structure and givenness, and a way of remaining in relation to those whose absence is itself a form of modified presence. The comfort, creativity, and continuity that grief may carry are not consolations added to loss from outside; they are native to the structure of a mourning that refuses the fiction of closure and remains open to the ongoing claim of the dead. To grieve well, on this account, is not to recover from loss but to learn to live within it: to carry the relation forward into a world that the other helped to shape and that continues, in their absence, to bear their mark.

Jeff Malpas approaches this same territory from a topological idiom not altogether different from Derrida's, arguing that the death of another and one's own death are not symmetrical insofar as one's own death remains always beyond direct encounter, whereas the death of another discloses something we can, in a strange way, actually meet, so that it is the deaths of others, rather than the abstract prospect of our own, that give us the closest thing we have to a direct encounter with mortality (Malpas, 2026, p. 9). And this is one reason the death of a parent carries such disproportionate weight. It is not simply one loss among others but among the most direct encounters with finitude a life affords. Malpas develops a correspondingly relational account of the self, describing it as a "singular being-here," a "unique placing in the world (and, as such, incapable of duplication)" rather than a self-subsistent thing (Malpas, 2026, p. 15), so that the dead persist not as objects once possessed and now lost but as part of the relational fabric within which the survivor's own selfhood continues to take shape. Read alongside what this essay calls the self who had once been someone's child, Malpas's account suggests that losing, say, a parent does not simply remove a person from a life otherwise complete in itself; it alters the very ground and placedness on which that life was, and continues to be, built.

The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka's unfinished reflections on what he called the "phenomenology of afterlife" supply a further layer to this account, one arrived at independently of Derrida and Blanchot but reaching a comparable destination.¹ For Patočka, a person is never simply a stream of experience closed in on itself; each of us exists at once as an original, unshareable interiority and as a being for others, and it is this second mode of being that constitutes one of the most significant components of who we are for ourselves (Patočka, 2024). Death does not abolish this being for others so much as strip it of reciprocity: the dead no longer answer, co-perceive, or act, and yet the fact of having once been bound to us in a living, reciprocal relation does not simply disappear. What Patočka calls "afterlife" is accordingly a "privative mode" of continuing to live with one another (Patočka, 2024, p. 19), which is most intense precisely where the living relationship was most fulfilling, and it persists not as a memory summoned at will but as something closer to what he terms a "metaphysical quality," something like a "global" content understood as the affectively felt sense of who the person was, which outlasts any particular recollection and continues to shape how we recognise and are addressed by them. Patočka even claims that this quality or content surpasses the deceased's own previous relationship to themselves, writing that "this quality is not identical to the originality of the other's life for himself (Patočka, 2024, p. 17). This is of a piece with what we have been calling *entwinement* (Costello & Keane, in press) in that, say, the parent was never merely an object of our concern but, in Patočka's terms,

one of the conditions through which our own being for ourselves was and is constituted, so that a parent's death does not simply remove a person from our world but strips a whole register of reciprocity from a relation that nonetheless continues, asymmetrically, to shape us.

Patočka pushes the account of reciprocity further than the language of entwinement alone suggests. A living relation, on his analysis, is never simply a matter of one person needing and relating to another as a fixed presence; what we need, more precisely, is the other's need of us, the "need for the other's need," so that we are for them what they are for us, and it is this structure of mutual need, rather than mere proximity, that constitutes the felt reality of intimacy (Patočka, 2024, p. 19). When death removes the possibility of this mutual need, the resulting absence is not experienced as a simple decrease but as something closer to the annulment of a part of one's own capacity to feel oneself, since it was in being needed by the other that we had also come to exist for ourselves. Patočka links this to a further question that speaks directly to our own present concerns: who, exactly, is the parent we go on addressing once they have died? He distinguishes between the deceased as a "role," a position such as "father" or "headmaster" that others recall and address, and the deceased as an intuited, irreducible character that outlasts any single memory, closer to how one might recognise a particular pianist's style after only a few notes, or a friend's gait from a distance, before any face is seen (Patočka, 2024, p. 17). Patočka illustrates the distinction with his own case, writing that "the deceased is for us, in the first place, what he was *for us*. His past originality is meant along but is not realised in the order of his experiences. The dead father is *my father* and he remains as such for me" (Patočka, 2024, p. 17), a formulation that anticipates the idiom this essay has been working with throughout. It is this quality of "for me," rather than the role, that the bereaved continues to live with and to be addressed by, and it maps onto what we have already called the self who had once been someone's child, which is clearly not a label one simply occupied, but an irreducible way of being seen and met that persists, however privately, once the one who saw and met us in that way is gone.

A further image for this quality developed independently in correspondence between us prompted by this essay, which sits well alongside Patočka's own. Rather than picture a person as an inner life that simply stops, we picture a life as a thread with two sides, an inner side and an outer side, so that, we suggest, a life is never exhausted just by what comes from the inner side of a person, but by what comes from their outer side too, from everything a life touches and leaves in others. On this image, what Patočka calls the metaphysical quality is not simply a residue of an interiority that has ended but the outer thread itself, still doing its work. For example, in leaving behind letters or words, they might mean something more to the bereaved after the death than they did at the time, not because there is now a ghostly author, but because the outer thread has kept moving through the bereaved person's reading of them. The role, in Patočka's sense, belongs mostly to the inner thread others once engaged with; the metaphysical quality however belongs to the outer one, which a parent's death alters in shape but does never severs. This is also, perhaps, a more exact way of putting what Derrida's language of the trace and what Nicolas de Warren has termed the "intimacy of disappearance" (de Warren, 2024, p. 53), in that both are seeking after something without needing to measure what remains against an inner experience that has now ended.

This structure of loss, on Patočka's account, attaches in principle to the death of anyone with whom we have lived in genuine reciprocity, not to parents alone. What gives the loss of a parent its own particular weight is that a parent is very often the relation in which being for another was first and most formatively learned, the ground against which every later experience of mattering to someone

else was drawn. To lose the last parent is therefore not simply to lose one instance of this structure but to lose a founding instance of it, and to do so at a point in the life course when the loss carries its own developmental and existential freight, quite apart from the phenomenological one. It is to this more specific, lived experience, that of the adult who loses both parents and thereby becomes, in a phrase that has entered the clinical and gerontological literature, an “adult orphan,” that we now turn.

The Adult Orphan

Such ambiguity and disruption are part of the nature of losing parents, but it is also compounded by the arrival of existential questions about death for ourselves, what we choose to leave behind, and the legacies we hope for but can never fully foresee. The death of both parents in adulthood frequently precipitates not only bereavement but an existential reorientation characterised by heightened awareness of one's own mortality, altered identity within family systems, increased reflection on ageing and meaning, and the loss of intergenerational anchoring. Although associated with distress and diminished psychological well-being for some, this transition may also foster meaning-making, generativity, and life reappraisal (Marks et al., 2007).

There is a body of scholarship on what happens psychologically when adults lose both parents, particularly the death of the second or last surviving parent, sometimes called becoming an “adult orphan” (Marks et al., 2007; McDaniel & Clark, 2009). Researchers have found that this experience often triggers not only grief, but also a profound shift in identity, temporality, existential awareness, and consciousness of one's own mortality and an awareness that “I am next” (Yalom, 1980).

The scholarly literature suggests that, when both parents have died, adults frequently experience a loss of what psychologists call a “generational buffer,” the unconscious sense that one is still protected from mortality because one's parents are alive (Corr et al., 2024). The death of the second parent can make mortality suddenly feel immediate and personal rather than abstract. Moving from being “someone's child” to becoming the older generation is not a shift without its own challenges. The death of the last parent is destabilising because the survivor's loss intensifies an awareness of ageing, health vulnerability, and finite time: What time do I have left? What matters now? What legacy am I leaving? (Corr et al., 2024).

This is a different kind of grief, which is a sense of being untethered and rootless, losing our historical witnesses to our lives, an altered identity, and even a heightened existential isolation as one reflects on ageing and death. From a family-systems and hermeneutic perspective, the death of parents may shift one's sense of self because identity is always already relationally constituted. Adults are not only grieving individuals; they are grieving a change in who they are in the family narrative. The death of both parents often means becoming the “older generation,” keeper of memory, and carrier of family stories.

What this literature registers empirically, the argument developed above allows us to state more precisely. The “generational buffer” identified by Corr and colleagues (2024) is not merely a psychological convenience that shields the living from a fact they already know; it is one instance of the entwinement by which a parent, still living, remains a condition of one's world rather than

merely a content within it. Becoming the “older generation” is not only a shift in family role but the loss of a particular ordering of finitude, in which someone else stood, however tacitly, between oneself and the fact of being next. The adult orphan literature describes the after-effects of this shift with some precision: identity disruption, heightened mortality salience, altered temporal orientation. What it does not quite explain is why these effects should be so pervasive, touching even those whose relationships with their parents were difficult, ambivalent, or estranged. The account offered here suggests a reason: what is disrupted is not the quality of the relationship but its structural place in a life, the fact that a parent, well loved or not, occupied a position that nothing else could occupy.

The Veil as Concealing and Revealing: On Uncovered Estuaries

What world does the metaphor of the veil disclose? What experiences become thinkable through it? What shifts when the veil drops? While parents are alive, one remains, in some existential sense, someone’s child, and their existence mediates one’s relation to death: not as protection from knowing mortality intellectually, but as a buffer against experiencing it as one’s own horizon. Parents stand “ahead” in the line of mortality, and this generational ordering shelters one from a direct encounter with finitude, even though one knows intellectually that death will come. When the last parent dies, the veil drops because death is no longer abstractly known but experientially disclosed. Mortality ceases to belong to the horizon of others and becomes newly proximal, embodied, and personal.

The loss of the second parent may, therefore, feel like the dropping of a veil, which is not simply grief intensified, but a disclosure of oneself as newly exposed to finitude. Yet the veil is not only removed; something is also revealed. One comes to see more clearly the complexity of relationship, the burden and gift of carrying memory, and the altered task of learning to live forward while bearing ahead those who are no longer physically present. In this sense, grief does not merely expose mortality; it reorients belonging, identity, and responsibility. The bereaved is left not only grieving parents but grieving the self who had once been someone’s child and who can now no longer be a child for anyone.

Veils cover and beckon, obscure and promise at the same time. At play here is a hermeneutics of paradox: the veil falls and yet connection remains. One becomes untethered and yet newly responsible for carrying the relationship alone; parents feel farther gone and yet in time strangely nearer in voice, memory, and contradiction. This tension might just be the horrible and wonderful tension that hermeneutics offers us: gone and not forgotten; dead but living; simple and complicated. At the heart of it all is a knowing that something has been revealed in a way that is painfully, exquisitely exposing itself in unexpected ways.

What is revealed, however, may be more fundamental than the fact of mortality itself. To pursue this thought, it helps to reach for a second image that runs alongside the veil and illuminates what the veil’s falling discloses. Consider a tidal estuary. In everyday life, action, influence, intervention, care, projects, and outcomes swirl around us like the incoming and turbid tide. Our attention is drawn towards what can be done, altered, repaired, achieved, or prevented. The living relation to a parent is precisely such a tidal world: full of possibility, obligation, negotiation, and the ongoing movement of mutual influence. Death withdraws much of this movement, like the tide receding.

What is revealed is not a hidden foundation but a peculiar terrain, an estuary that is neither sea nor land, neither the open water of full presence nor the dry ground of simple absence. It is a liminal zone, and it is the zone in which mourning is conducted.

The two metaphors, veil and estuary, point toward the same disclosure from different directions. The veil names what is removed; the estuary names what is revealed when it is removed. Both resist the temptation to understand loss as a subtraction that leaves behind an otherwise unchanged world. What the dropping of the veil and the receding of the tide disclose is not a world minus one person but the contours of a shared world that those persons helped constitute. The dead are neither simply present nor simply absent. The relationship cannot continue in the way it once did, yet neither has it disappeared. Influence has largely withdrawn, and yet something continues to make a claim on us. This claim, which persists even when nothing can be altered, repaired, completed, or resolved, might be named *answerability*.

Answerability, understood in this way, is not primarily a moral concept, though it has moral dimensions. It names something more fundamental about the structure of a life lived with others. When we inhabit a shared world with particular people, those people become, over time, not merely objects of concern within our world but conditions of the world itself. Their presence shapes the very terrain of what matters, what is noticed, what is avoided, what is hoped for. This shaping is what those working in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics have called *entwinement* (Costello & Keane, in press): not the mere fact of being related to another, but the deeper phenomenon of having one's world, and the spaces in-between, configured by and with another over time. Parents are, for most of us, among the most fundamental of such others. They do not merely inhabit our world; they are among its constitutive conditions. To lose them is not only to lose someone within the world but to find the world itself differently configured.

This suggests a sequence that the experience of adult bereavement makes newly visible. *Entwinement* comes first: the long, largely unnoticed process by which others become conditions of one's world rather than merely contents of it. From *entwinement* arises finitude in its properly existential sense, not the abstract knowledge that life ends but the lived sense that what matters is bounded and irreversible. From finitude, in turn, emerges *mattering* itself: the acute awareness, often sharpened by loss, that some people, places, relationships, and possibilities carry a weight that exceeds calculation or preference. From *mattering* arises *answerability*: the ongoing claim that what has mattered continues to make on us, even after the relation that gave rise to it has been transformed by death. Answerability, on this account, is not generated by death. Death discloses it. The tidal withdrawal does not create the estuary bed; it reveals what was always holding and shaping the water.

This account of answerability helps to clarify why mourning does not end and why the cultural expectation that it should end, as Moules (1998) has argued, does such damage. If answerability were simply a response to loss, it might be expected to diminish as the loss recedes in time. But if answerability is disclosed by loss rather than generated by it, if it names something about the structure of a life lived with others that death makes visible rather than creates, then there is no reason why it should dissolve. The dead continue to matter because they were always conditions of the world, and conditions of the world do not simply disappear when the person who embodied

them is gone. The world shaped by their presence retains their shape. We remain answerable to what matters even when nothing can be altered, repaired, completed, or resolved.

There is an aporetic dimension to this that deserves acknowledgement. The answerability that remains is very real, but it is also permanently asymmetrical: the call is there but no final answer is possible. The relation continues but cannot be reciprocated in the way it once was. This structure, in which something makes a claim that cannot be fully met, is not a deficiency of mourning but its proper character. Contemporary philosophy of mourning, drawing on figures such as Derrida (2001) and Blanchot (1995), has explored this aporetic structure carefully, attending to the way in which the dead continue to inhabit us in ways that exceed straightforward notions of presence and absence. What those philosophical accounts illuminate, when read alongside the lived experience described in this essay, is that the aporia of mourning is not a puzzle to be solved but the very shape of an existence that has been genuinely entwined with another. The intertidal zone is not a problem; it is where we now live.

Recent commentary engaging directly with Patočka's text sharpens this aporetic structure further, in ways that complement the account offered here. Hugo Strandberg (2024), reading Patočka alongside Kierkegaard, observes that, where a relationship with a parent was itself contradictory, marked by both love and injury, the asymmetry of mourning takes on a further dimension: something like the need to forgive or be forgiven persists, but it can no longer be addressed to anyone capable of answering. What remains is not resolution but a demand with nowhere left to land, and yet this demand is not for that reason unreal or merely private; it continues to organize the survivor's sense of what the relationship was and might still become for them. Kierkegaard's claim, taken up by Erin Plunkett (2024), that the dead cannot be deceived and make no repayment, so that only the living side of the relation can properly be said to change, gives a harder edge to the asymmetry we have been describing. In this sense, the dead become an occasion rather than a mere nothing, a relation with only one party left able to act within it. As previously mentioned, de Warren (2024) names the resulting condition an "intimacy of disappearance," insofar as what is missed in the wake of a parent's passing is often not the memorable, datable episodes of a shared life but instead its ordinary textures, threads so commonplace they were barely noticed at the time, and it is this "unremarkable and unnoticed" (de Warren, 2024, p. 63) closeness, rather than any single memory, that continues to touch the survivor once the parent is gone. Again, de Warren describes such loss as testifying to "an intimacy of disappearance within the interstices of memory" (de Warren, 2024, p. 53), a formulation whose force lies precisely in holding disappearance and intimacy together, rather than treating the one as simply cancelling out the other. Read together, these accounts suggest that the aporia named above is not incidental to mourning a parent but is rather its very shape, becoming a claim that persists without a respondent, an intimacy that persists without an active respondent.

To grieve honestly, then, is not to move through stages toward resolution but to inhabit this terrain with as much resolve and openness as one can. It is to carry the relationship, in all its complexity and contradiction, without demanding that it become something simpler than it was or something reducible to the inner life of memory. It is to remain answerable to what mattered, to what continues to matter, without pretending that the claim can be finally discharged. It is to recognise that the world disclosed by the dropping of the veil, this shared finite world in which others matter

not as finished objects of concern but as conditions of existence itself, is not a world that grief destroys but the world that grief, at its most honest, allows us to see.

Summary

Losing the last of our parents is an expected lifetime event if the order of things goes as anticipated. We know that one day, we will likely bury our parents, just as our children expect to lose us. What we do not know, however, is the experience it might evoke – the surprises revealed when the invisible veil between us and our mortality lifts and we face the loss of being someone's child in the world. With this shift, gazing into our futures looks different and the experience comes as a surprise arrival, as we look to what is to come while still hoping to hear voices of the past in one way or another.

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Notes

¹ Jan Patočka is not a widely familiar name outside of phenomenology, so a short gloss is worth including before we draw further on him. Jan Patočka was born in 1907 in Bohemia and studied in Prague, Paris, Berlin, and Freiburg, where he became one of the last students of both Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and a lifelong interpreter of each. He spent most of his working life in Prague, but rarely as a salaried academic: barred from university teaching for long stretches first under Nazi and then communist rule, he supported himself as a schoolteacher and librarian and taught philosophy for years in private, informal seminars, one of which the young Václav Havel attended. His essay “The Phenomenology of Afterlife” was left unfinished among his papers and it is thought to date from the period after the death of his wife Helena in 1966. In January 1977 Patočka became one of the three first spokesmen of Charter 77, the Czechoslovak human rights declaration, and that March, after a lengthy interrogation by the secret police, he collapsed and died within days. The essay drawn on here was therefore written by someone for whom the question of what remains of another once reciprocity ends was not a purely speculative affair.