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# Men's Grief, Meaning and Growth:

## A Phenomenological Investigation into the Experience of Loss

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by Ole Michael Spaten, Mia Nørremark Byrialsen, & Darren Langdrige

### Abstract

*There is a scarcity of research on men's experience of bereavement (Reiniche, 2006), particularly qualitative research which focuses on the meaning of such an experience. This paper seeks to address this by presenting the findings from a phenomenological study of the lifeworld of a small number of bereaved men, and considers how the loss of a spouse affects men's experience of meaning, grief and loss. Three men aged 32-54 who have all lost their partners to cancer between 3 and 7 years ago were interviewed. The hermeneutic phenomenological method of van Manen (1990) was employed revealing three key themes: grief and self-reflection; meaning of life and loss; re-figuring the lifeworld. These themes are discussed in the light of broader existential concerns and the extant literature.*

### Introduction

Grief and bereavement theories have suggested links to mental health and depression since Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917, 1957). In Lindemann's (1944) classic work "Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief" he describes the characteristics of normal grief, which include bodily distress, preoccupation with the image of the deceased, hostility, guilt, and the incapability to function as well as before the loss. However, theories of grief and bereavement have developed considerably from the early psychoanalytic conceptualizations. Parkes (1972) drew attention to the limitations of Lindemann's theory arguing that he had limited data on the frequency of the described symptoms; the number of times the clients were interviewed and the amount of time between the interviews and the time of the loss. Parkes work expanded our understanding of grief and the effects on physical and mental health further, and provided strong evidence for a link between grief and effects on physical and mental health. For these reasons alone it is imperative to gain a deeper understanding of grief, health and the meaning of life and appropriate interventions for those offering support (such as counselling and psychotherapy) to people experiencing bereavement. This is particularly the case for men suffering bereavement, as this remains a particularly under-researched topic (Reiniche, 2006). This paper seeks to provide new insight into the experience of bereavement for men through a phenomenological study of a small number of men who have lost their partners through cancer.

Through research conducted in the second half of the twentieth century it became apparent that certain processes occurred while people 'worked through' the loss of a loved one. Worden (1982) described "tasks of mourning" which were understood as "grief work" to be undergone before a comprehensive mourning could be completed. A variety of grief theories have further described and theorised processes of 'grief work' (Spaten, 2008) operating through several distinct phases. Phases that have been described in the literature include: 1) denial and isolation, 2) anger, 3) negotiation, 4) depression, and 5) acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1969); or from a later Scandinavian version: 1) shock, 2) reaction phase, 3) repairing phase, 4) new orientation phase (Cullberg, 2004). In the Danish best-selling book "The Necessary Pain" Leick and Nielsen (1990) argue that the loss has to be acknowledged such that an emotional unblocking could occur, new competences developed and then these be used and fine-tuned before returning (to life itself) with new energy. The most well-known stage-theory of grieving is that of Elizabeth Kùbler-Ross (1969) and though it has been criticised for the highly subjective manner in which observations were obtained and interpreted (Fitchett, G., 1980; Garfield, 1978; Schultz, R. & Aderman, D,

1974) for many years it was undoubtedly an important work, raising awareness of the need to study death and dying and challenging many widespread taboos of the time. Criticisms of stage models of grieving such as those of Kubler-Ross (see Rodríguez Sánchez; Fichett, 1980; Garfield, 1978) have raised the important question about whether grief needs to be understood in more complex and multi-faceted terms. Stroebe suggested that grieving processes ought to be understood simultaneously and not as distinct phases; and advances in research (Stroebe et al., 1987, 2008) have shown that there is no large scale empirical validation for the positive outcome of support groups which insist on “grief work” operating through separate phases, stages or tasks. Indeed, continuing symbolic bonds with those who have died appears to be of great importance (ibid.). Mourning is necessary, but people experience grief in many different ways. The purpose of the present study was consequently to explore an alternative perspective on grief as embedded in individual, social and interpersonal contexts such that different contexts may enable or disable the search for meaning of loss and ultimately the possibility of growth through such experiences.

### **Meaning of loss and life**

Many existential philosophers have argued that life is inherently meaningless (including Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus: see Macquarrie, 1972) and that we need to create meaning ourselves in the light of this anxiety (or nausea) provoking fact of existence, such that we can face the world with fortitude and passion. Frankl (1997), in contrast, argues that man's basic motivation in life is to find meaning, not to create it, but rather to discover it in the light of the challenges that face us. Whichever position one wishes to take about the nature of existence, one thing is clear from existential thought and that is the need for meaning in existence. Without meaning in life we seem to experience psychological distress, frustration, emptiness and depression (Frankl, 1984, 1986; see Yalom, 1980, and Bugental, 1981, for more on this and also Baumeister, 1991, for empirical support for the argument). Such fundamental existential questions fill the life of a person who has lost a loved one, with survivors asking searching questions about the loss of their partner and what meaning is left in life now that the deceased is no longer there. Whilst a search for meaning may be fundamental to existence, finding meaning in the death of a loved one is not always achievable, reflected in the poignant gravestone inscription written by Sir Henry Wotton (1884): “He first deceased; she for a little tried to live without him, liked it not, and died.”

According to Janoff-Bulman (1992) most people experience the world as predictable, safe, fair and meaningful, and people consider themselves relatively invulnerable. This is an idea that was well understood before Janoff-Bulman by the existentialists in their description of *sedimentation*, the process by which human beings become fixed in their belief systems (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Many people live contentedly with such sedimented beliefs, that is until these beliefs are challenged and all the sediment is shaken up violently. All our assumptions about ourselves, others and the world are challenged when a catastrophe occurs, such as when our partner dies. In the time after such a tragedy the survivor seeks meaning or causes for the terrible episode, and often this means that they must transform their assumptions about the world (Davis et al, 2001). People have the capacity to find meaning in a given event, though this may not be easy, by explaining this as being in accordance with their existing view of the self and the world or by changing the picture so it is consistent with their meaning of the loss (ibid.).

A large Danish study by Elklit and Jind (1999) shows that there are significant links between gender and the experience of meaning in death. Women find more often a meaning in the loss of their loved one, compared with men, and we therefore extrapolate that men may experience a greater "sense of meaninglessness" with bereavement.

Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema (1998) distinguish between two aspects of sense-making when someone dies: to find benefits in light of the loss (*finding benefits*) and finding explanations for what happened (*making sense of loss*). Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema show how these two aspects play a role in the adjustment process following a loss. Results from their research indicates that being able to 'make sense of loss' is associated with less grief, in the first year after the loss, while finding benefits from the loss is associated with adaptation later, from a year after bereavement (Davis et al, 1998).

To find meaning after the loss of someone close seems to have a significant impact on the quality of future life. However, the process of meaning-making is not static and appears to evolve while describing personal grief experiences themselves (Lydall, Pretorius & Stuart, 2005). It is therefore likely to be important for counsellors and psychotherapists to know the signs of meaninglessness, to be aware of these signs, and understand how it may shift and change over time in trying to help the bereaved to find meaning. Once people who are bereaved have found meaning in their loss, there may be an opportunity for personal growth and significant personal change.

### **Personal growth**

Many people are able to make sense of bereavement and manage their feelings in an adaptive way (Dutton et al., 2005). When human beings face very difficult times, such as after the loss of a loved one, a positive trend may follow, and this phenomenon was coined "posttraumatic growth" by Tedeschi:

Posttraumatic growth represents a shift in perception, knowledge, and/or skill that may occur in survivors who begin to accommodate the effects of a traumatic event, enabling them to recognize positive changes in their interpersonal relationships, in their perceptions of themselves, and/or in their philosophy of life. (Tedeschi in Sheikh & Marotta, 2005, p. 66).

Follow-up studies of survivors have shown that many experience a positive development after bereavement with Davis (2001) finding that the vast majority of participants reported to have undergone positive changes after the death of a loved one. Davis found that those who were able to find explanations and benefits in loss experience had a tendency to state that they had grown in character and that they had developed stronger relationships and an improved perspective on life (ibid.). The positive aspects of grief obviously do not change the painful consequences, but grief work has turned out to be a positive, self-reflective and personal growth process for some, at least. Many feel that the positive effects occur gradually and often unexpectedly, as grief work increases the ability to engage with life, over time (Bugge, Eriksen, & Sandvik, 2003). However, there is also some evidence that the loss of a partner may lead to an increased mortality rate for the surviving partner suggesting that understanding successful ways of coping and recovering from loss are particularly important (Stroebe & Schut, 2001; Stroebe, Stroebe & Schut, 2001).

### **Self-reflection and self-esteem**

In addition to an understanding of extant research on bereavement our research interest in this topic was also generated by our experience of working therapeutically with men who had experienced loss. It became apparent that our clients would continually ask questions about the loss, themselves and the world – shifting paradoxically between meaning and meaninglessness. When attempting to understand these men's experiences it became clear that existing stage-

models of grieving were inadequate to the task. Instead, we felt that we needed to investigate men's experiences of loss in their own terms, as lived rather than through any pre-existing theoretical framework and thus turned to phenomenology. Our clients reflected upon their experience and asked profound questions about identity and selfhood as they worked through their bereavement, reflecting a contemporary concern with the 'reflexive project of self' (Giddens, 1991, 1992).

Self-reflection is seemingly the hallmark of life in the West in these late- or post-modern times (Giddens, 1991, 1992). Self-reflective competences are more and more the cornerstone during endless and restless decision-making in relation to the constantly changing demands regarding life-choices. After losing a partner numerous unanswered questions and reflections are invariably thrown up: "Should we instead have..." or "could I have done ... before", "what is life about", "who am I now"? Such self-reflective activity may often be circulating mostly unreturned or responded to and for some persons these self-reflections may result in exaggerated worries. Furthermore, people experiencing bereavement may have expected to follow a particular path through their bereavement as a result of societal norms, and if there is too great a gap between their expectation and what is actually experienced the gap may diminish their sense of self-esteem (James, 1890). People experiencing grief will undoubtedly be puzzled and tentative, but certainty and a sense of sameness and continuity are important pillars of personal identity (Spaten, 2009). This sense of identity may be threatened during the turmoil of radical changes and unanswered self-reflections that emerge with bereavement.

But as mentioned above, positive growth does take place and research has demonstrated that positive self-perceptions and a sense of direction and hope may occur among some bereaved only a few months after the loss (Dutton Chentsova et al., 2005). Some resilient widows and widowers have demonstrated considerable self-development and a lower tendency to self-blame, associated with lower levels of grief (Field & Bonanno, 2001). Indeed, for some of these people adjustment to bereavement results in the discovery of personal strengths and a sense of being a separate human being (Dutton Chentsova, 2005).

### **Support services for bereavement in Denmark**

Only a few years ago organizations like The Danish Cancer Society and Centre for Infant Mortality were the only organisations to provide support groups that dealt with grief and mourning for men experiencing bereavement. Although very important initiatives, it has been argued – quite rightly – that much more needed to be done and more support groups and organizations ought to be involved (Reiniche, 2006). In recent years we have witnessed a rise of Men's Crisis Centre facilities in more than ten cities in Denmark, with more facilities to follow in the years to come. Conducting groups with men suffering 'pathological grief' has already been evaluated and found to be significantly useful in enabling men to move beyond a personally problematic grief state (Reiniche, 2006; Stroebe and Schut, 2005).

### **Research Method**

The focus of this study is the lifeworld of men experiencing bereavement and as such we adopted the hermeneutic phenomenological method of van Manen (1990) for our study: "Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research" (ibid., p. 35). The method of van Manen, like many hermeneutic phenomenological methods inspired by Gadamer's work (1975), provides a guide to analysis rather than a rigid set of rules to follow and is thus heuristic (Langdrige, 2007). The focus is on how language reveals different aspects of the

lifeworld, within particular cultural and historical limits, through a fusion of horizons between participant and researcher (van Manen, 1990). This entails an investigation where one moves continuously between part and whole in a hermeneutic circle. There are six basic steps (van Manen, 1990) described in order to achieve this:

- 1) Turn to the phenomenon and commit to it
- 2) Investigate experience as lived (rather than conceptually)
- 3) Reflect on the essential themes which characterise the phenomenon
- 4) Describe the phenomenon through writing
- 5) Maintain a strong and oriented disciplinary relation to the phenomenon
- 6) Balance the research context by examining parts and whole

These steps have been adopted in this study in order to focus the work on revealing the lifeworld of three men who have all lost their partners and have had to face up to this rupture in their worlds. Thus the study explores the subjective meaning men attach to the everyday experience (phenomenon) under investigation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

### **Participants**

The participants selected for this study form a relatively homogeneous sample, with all three men suffering bereavement through cancer of their primary partner when the men were in their twenties, thirties or forties (between 3 and 7 years ago). They were all men with a Danish ethnic background, middle class, and all have a Danish higher education. The men have broadly the same cultural and socio-economic background. This form of purposive sampling enables hermeneutic phenomenological researchers to gather detailed information from a specific group about a particular life experience (Thorne, 2008). The three participants in the study are briefly introduced below:

1. Martin is 32 years and lost 4 years ago, very suddenly, his pregnant girlfriend to leukaemia
2. Jens, who is 54 years, lost 7 years ago his wife to cancer after a long illness. After her death, he was alone with two small children
3. Claus is 41 years and lost his wife to cancer 5 ½ years ago, after a few years of illness. He was left alone with their son

The selection criteria was men who were between 20 and 40 years when they lost their partner, due to the fact that it is often an age that is characterized by optimism and attention to creating families and a sense of a permanent home life. Few people of this age appear to think about the risk that their partner may die, especially if both partners are in good physical and mental health (Kaslow, 2004, p. 227ff). When one's partner is affected by a serious illness such as cancer and dies in this age range it has been suggested that this is likely to induce a sense of meaninglessness (ibid. p.230). The reason for this feeling appears to be that the survivors find it unreasonable that the partner had to die so early. Furthermore, when one's partner dies after a lengthy illness and when the survivors are still young, perhaps with children, 'overwhelming feelings' often appear about the extra duties imposed on a single parent: this may be mixed with a kind of relief that an exhausting illness is over (ibid., p. 228). In this study two of the participants went through such an experience whilst one lost his partner suddenly when pregnant. This variation is not thought to

be problematic in this study, though has been treated with care analytically by attending to any differences expressed in their experiences, but we believe offers up an opportunity to illuminate the possible ameliorating impact of children on the experience of bereavement for men. In summary, our selection criteria required that the participants were a) between 20-40 years b) had recently lost their partner, c) spoke Danish fluently, d) were willing to participate in the study, and e) able to articulate about their experiences (Creswell, 2003; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

## **Procedure**

In Denmark very few men participate in grief group work or seek help at the Danish Cancer Society or Men's Crisis Centre. When we were gathering data for a quantitative survey on Men's bereavement at the above mentioned Centres a participant interview request letter was also sent and among the responses only three men met the above-mentioned criteria (Byrialsen et al., 2008). It is interesting to note that, even within the supportive context of the Cancer Society so few men were willing to discuss the death of their partner with us, and we were informed by our contacts at the Centre that there were huge difficulties in even recruiting men for grief work. Internationally, few men participate in this kind of research and the level of acceptance rates is generally rather low (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991). This suggests that our sample represents a particularly limited group who both sought support through these organisations and also volunteered for a research study. Their experience may therefore be atypical with the experiences of large numbers of bereaved men not represented in this study.

Data were collected from our participants through one hour long qualitative semi-structured interviews (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) conducted at the Men's Crisis Centres in small Danish villages, which were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interview questions were few and focussed on asking the participants to describe their experience of losing their partner. Follow-up questions were similarly descriptive, asking about aspects of experience including physical and emotional responses, social support and the process of coming to terms with their loss. A tight phenomenological focus was maintained throughout with all material produced driven by the concerns of the men participating in the study rather than any pre-existing theoretical framework.

The transcribed interviews were analysed following the guidance of van Manen (1990). van Manen (1990) does not provide a prescriptive method with clear and concrete steps for analysis and instead, following Gadamer (1975), describes how the analysis needs to recognise the role of the analyst in the co-construction of meaning, through our desire to understand the other and the structures of their experience. The focus was on discerning thematically what is universal from the particular, drawing on the three techniques described by van Manen (1990, p. 93, italics in original):

- 1) In the wholistic reading approach we attend to the text as a whole and ask: *What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or main significance of the text as a whole?* We may then try and express that meaning by formulating such a phrase.
- 2) In the selective reading approach we listen to or read a text several times and ask: *What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?* These statements we then circle, underline, or highlight.
- 3) In the detailed reading approach we look at every single sentence or sentence cluster and ask: *What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?*

We employed all three techniques in our analysis and, as a result, produced a thematic description of the lifeworlds of these men as it relates to their experience of bereavement, which is described and discussed further below.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues about the study were considered by the Qualitative Research Centre at Aalborg University, and discussed in detail by the researchers. Prior to participation the three men were briefed about the research and completed informed consent forms. They understood that their participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. They were furthermore informed about confidentiality and anonymity, and pseudonyms were used to protect them from being identified. Risk from participation in the interviews was minimised since they had all participated in group grief work and we had made arrangements with psychologists if a need should arise for counselling and psychotherapy. When the interviews were over the men engaged in a debriefing discussion and later we discussed with each of them a summary of the findings.

### **Findings and discussion**

The process of data analysis is the core stage in any phenomenological research, and includes the exhaustive work of going back and forth between the whole and the parts, identifying the essence of the experiences described by the participants (van Manen, 1990, Polkinghorne, 1989). During this analytic process three essential themes emerged: 1) grief and self-reflection, 2) meaning of life and loss, and 3) re-figuring the lifeworld. These themes form the focus of the next section of this paper.

The study shows a series of reactions manifest through the loss they have experienced. These men have been forced to review and re-consider the meaning of their lives as the impact of the bereavement left them lacking motivation and engagement in everyday life. Furthermore, they described anger, sorrow, emptiness, fatigue, difficulties in concentration, indifference, guilt, apathy, fear of death, drowning, self-destructive behaviour and an “appetite” for dying themselves amongst the myriad reactions describing the feelings of meaninglessness they experienced after the loss. In what follows we describe and elucidate these reactions within the three overarching themes further.

#### *Grief and self-reflection*

There was a lack of comprehension about the loss for these men. Their lives were suddenly changed but there was a struggle to face this change, to realize their loss and to deal with the consequences of such a loss.

[...] To enter the apartment the day she died, I came home from the hospital; it was like she was not taken away. All her shoes, all of her mittens and hats and everything; she [Mette] could have come straight in through the door and lived her life further on [...] (Martin, 1.1.1, L. 504-513)

For Martin there is a rupture in his lifeworld but one that is haunted by a sense of continuity in the material world of objects that were associated with his partner. Mette was no longer with him, but everything in the apartment stood the same as when they were together some few days ago. Little details of the everyday life that was common before – like her mittens and hats – provided a reminder of what might have been. Mourning was met with and overwhelmed by a feeling of emptiness. As Claus returns to the house after the death of Tanja, he describes a similar

overwhelming feeling of grief, emptiness and says *"everything is completely different when she is not here"* (1.1.2, L. 384f), but at the same time he had to take care of their son and this forced him to continue to engage in life, allowing no possibility for withdrawal. Like Claus, Jens has children and their physical presence meant that there was some sense of continuity for Jens, although one which is dramatically changed as: *"Suddenly it is I who must be both father and mother for the children"* (1.1.3, L. 286ff).

Structurally, our analysis revealed that all three participants described the shock of the loss of their partner in similar ways (1.1.1, L. 53F; 1.1.2, l. 387, 1.1.3, L. 82). After Mette's death, Martin was in shock and describes how he walked around like a zombie: *"You are present without being present anyway"* (1.1.1, L. 300-303). The body moves around with you and this sense of 'being present without being present' is significant. Others may witness his presence and even perceive him to be carrying on with his life relatively as usual (accepting his grief state) but his lifeworld was so profoundly shattered that his very being was called into question. After the initial shock Martin describes a sense of bodily rupture. He felt torn apart; a visceral embodied emotionality overcame him:

I was ready to do anything, because it just hurt so terribly inside my body, it feels like someone is trying to rip your body apart from the inside, so it can't [-] it's a pain that I can't compare to anything I have ever experienced, you know, I have put my arm around a stove and it was nothing, you know this, this was [-] it was so unspeakably painful.(1.1.1, L. 208ff; 294f)

Martin speaks evocatively of the deep embodied pain he felt. His pain was incomparable to anything that might be straightforwardly felt as physical. Indeed, such was the strength of his pain that he describes it as unspeakable. One of the characteristics of intense pain (whether physical or psychological) is the difficulty one has in putting such pain into words (Scarry, 1985). Martin's use of simile, in his comparison of his mental pain with that one might experience when being burnt by a stove, is an attempt to communicate the level of distress that he has experienced but even with such devices, he knows that it will be hard for the 'Other' to understand the intensity of his pain unless they have experienced it themselves. Could this suggest that men like Martin may well find further group work with other men who have experienced a similar event beneficial? At the very least, he might find comfort in knowing that the 'Other' in this particular case knows at least some of the pain he is experiencing.

When the individual realizes that future experiences with the partner have now disappeared, it often results in a feeling of losing control. All participants describe a wide range of emotions, realizing that everything they used to do with their partners they must now do on their own. They are left alone as widowers with grief, but also with anger as one of the central emotions arising out of this experience. Martin, scolded his wife because she is dead: *"[...] I stood out in the kitchen and cried to her that she had not been allowed to leave [...]."* (1.1.1, L. 377f). He was also angry with people when they said they were sad: *"It was my right to be upset"* (ibid., L. 190f).

Added to Martin's anger above the sense of being inferior/less-than occurred after only a few days. Martin no longer had access to anything which belonged to his now former partner Mette because Martin and Mette were not married. Martin was a student and Mette had a permanent job and as a result she had paid most of their living costs. This meant that Martin also had financial difficulties upon her death, as he is not entitled to Mette's retirement savings and with this he suddenly felt like a complete stranger to her life, with no formal links and influence:

[ - ] there was never anyone who told us that it would be a good idea if we had written a piece of paper which said that we were each others closest. So from the moment she stopped uh breathing, I was just a random by-passer in her life” (ibid., L. 135- 177).

He became, in his words, ‘a random by-passer in her life’ wrenched in a very practical - everyday - way from her life still further. His anger was deeply individualized, with him failing to understand how others might experience the pain of bereavement he was going through:

Her parents lost their child and to loose a child is devastating, no doubt about that, but I am the one who experience it every morning, I would get up and experience the loss every morning, every night when I went to bed, I missed her, every time I wanted to say something, I was alone with no one to listen.... Ehhmm so so so [-] I can remember I was angry at people when they said they were sad, I was allowed to be sad, they were not allowed to. (1.1.1, L. 184-191)

Jens also experienced anger during the initial grieving process, both during Ingrid Marie's illness and after her death. His anger is directed against a doctor who he describes as 'a psychopath', because he felt he lacked appropriate empathy in his treatment (1.1.3, L. 55-63; 144-147). The strength of anger experienced by these men highlights an important aspect of grieving amongst men that may otherwise be missed and may be qualitatively different from the grieving experience of women. Here we see how the sense of unfairness, the rupture in their lifeworlds, results in a rage that potentially disconnects them from others able to offer comfort and support. In the immediate aftermath of the loss there was a profound sense of being alone, in both a practical daily sense and, also most importantly, emotionally.

#### *Meaning of life and loss*

The sense of anger, feeling alone and emptiness in their lives provoked a profound existential crisis amongst these men. Although not asking directly what was the meaning of life it was the underlying background for much of their interview. Now the partner had died, the overwhelming sense of emptiness, meaninglessness, and irrelevance became central. Claus is talking about the minutes and days around the death of his partner:

On Sunday [-] ehme [-] well, then we were besides her until Tuesday when she died, ehme [-] and the whole process it was just crying [-] and yes, to be there with her [-] And then I had a reaction when we came home again [-] when we left the hospital, came home to the farm and suddenly thought [-] Wow [-] now she's simply not here anymore, so ... [-] and thus came the next big reaction, right, but the reaction of emptiness - complete emptiness and such indifference - everything is completely irrelevant (1.1.2, L. 376-386)

What are present are emptiness and a sense of a lack of meaning in life. Martin, similarly, considered whether life was worth living at all, now that he was alone (L. 973ff).

It was me who saw it every morning. I stood up and someone was missing. Every evening when I went to bed, someone was missing. Every time I wanted to say something, I missed someone to hear it. (Martin, 1.1.1, L. 185-188)

Feeling left alone in the world was the immediate sentiment for all of these men, but as time goes by, when the participants had some distance from the immediacy of the loss as they moved through their own personal process of grief: they appeared to find meaning in the loss and changed way of living (Kruse, A., et al, 2007) and experienced a more solid sense of self-esteem. When we asked how Martin perceived his life today he answered:

By and large I guess very few things will uh [-] er [-] really distress me any longer [-] So uh [-] and I usually tell myself every once and a while that you had actually survived this, they will really have to come up with a lot in order to make me, in order to make me unable to survive one more time, right?  
(1.1.1, L. 969-971)

These findings are furthermore consistent with Byrialsen & Spaten (2008) and Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson (1998) who found that individuals: a) who find meaning and learn from the loss and b) who learn to appreciate life more, deal with grief better than individuals who do not manage to find the positive aspects (Dyregrov, 2004, p. 63).

Claus and Jens differed from Martin, presumably because they have children, as they were forced to engage with life immediately. Claus describes how the first focus after his wife's death was to take care of their son. Responsibilities towards children appear to have made it necessary for them to engage in life right away. Martin did not have the same responsibility and commitment, which could be one reason for his strong emotional reactions and difficulties in engaging with life after Mette's death. However, for the two men with children they had to face the additional difficulty of dealing with their children's reaction to the loss. Claus describes how he had to face his questioning son, reminding him of his previous promise that everything would be well:

... my boy's strongest reaction was when we received the disappointing results from mum's first chemo cure and she was sent on to the next. Then I said to him, OK the first did not work [-] so now we must try a second and then mum will recover. Then he looked at me and said, that you said that all the other times as well dad [-] and his truism was tough ... And I was just about to get mad at him, and that just isn't fair because we have to fight this together and things like that. ... And then I started thinking [-] no, he is absolutely right, right, it's us who put words in his mouth and said it will be good again. ... And it hit me very much when he said that (1.1.2, L. 280-285)

Claus was reminded of the seriousness of the disease, which he had tried to ignore, and it became important for them as a family to spend the last time together, to have a good time and enjoy and appreciate each others company. He describes the time after Tanja's funeral as: "*[...] we were about to find out [-] what is it we need to do [-] only the two of us [-] two boys [-] how is it the world looks like?*" (1.1.2 L. 439ff). Claus immediately contacted the Cancer Society in order to get help for his son because "*I did not know what to do with a boy of his age*" (*ibid.*, L. 445f). At the Cancer Society he got help for his son and was offered counselling himself.

It appears that Claus was able to find meaning in life immediately by engaging in being a good enough parent for his son and upon reflection he realised that he had also learnt from his son's own reaction. All three men appear to have searched for meaning after the death of their spouse, partly a meaning in the loss and also a meaning for their new life without their partners. Life is said to be a series of paradoxes or dilemmas between, for example the experience of meaning versus meaninglessness (van Deurzen, 1998). This study revealed a number of considerations

about the way in which these men considered whether life is worth living, and how this was accomplished in the light of immediate feelings of anger, fear and emptiness.

Yalom (1998), drawing on existentialism, argues that all human beings require a sense of meaning to live their lives, and that commitment to life is an important way to find meaning, particularly by helping to make the world better for others. Altruism, creativity and self actualization seem to have served as ways in which these men found meaning in their lives following their bereavement. All three men have participated in group grief work and have benefited from the social sharing that this entails: “*Although it was not exactly the same things we went through we did a lot of mirroring in each other and the stories that were told*” (1.1.3, L. 579). Furthermore, Claus has become a leader of a grief group after his own experience of being a group member. Additionally, the creative processes in love relationships give life meaning (ibid) so when Martin describes how a new relationship was “*a necessary step in the healing process*” (1.1.1, L. 465-468) it could be his way to find meaning. During the interview Jens explains how he had found a new aspect of self-hood, which was not expressed when his partner was alive. He has now read several books on Tibetan Buddhism and this proved to be a way for Jens to relate to death and also find a way to live his life differently: “*The death of my wife has changed my life. I would not have been right here in my life if she was still here, would I?*” (1.1.3, L. 582f).

To be able to find a meaning in the loss of a spouse it was necessary for the participants to alter basic assumptions, to find new ways of living in the light of their bereavement. The challenge to their taken-for-granted assumptions of the lifeworld resulted in a realization that life is fragile and should be lived in tension between the finite and infinite, a living in 'inwardness' (Kierkegaard, 1849).

#### *Re-figuring the lifeworld*

Recent research has suggested that it is a common condition amongst men who lose their partners to fluctuate between being focused on their loss and a state where they are future-oriented (Stoebe & Schut, 2005). The men in this study described this struggle, between the present (inflected by the past) and the future (with new possibilities), from a position where they are able now to look back and reflect on their experiences. These three men believed that their loss had made them stronger, gaining new strength to face the challenges of life, as Martin explains: “*Generally, more will have to happen before I will be shocked [...] I have survived this loss [-] now I just can't imagine what could happen that will get me down [...]*” (1.1.1, L. 968-971). He is facing the lifeworld from another and more self-assured platform. Despite the participant's unique and different ways to seek meaning, with time they all found meaning by confrontation with and then embracing life's basic conditions (Yalom, 1980).

We understand the process undergone here by drawing on Ricoeur's (1984, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1992) work on narrative and, in particular, his notion of 'narrative re-figuration'. Ricoeur (ibid) writes of how there is a fundamental human need to re-configure the episodes of our lives together into a coherent narrative, a narrative in which we construct our identities. This is, in part, the product of a human attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable, to bridge the gap between the vast, essentially infinite, quality of cosmic time and the limited, finite, nature of phenomenological time (time as lived). The human desire to leave traces on the cosmos results in histories, both socio-cultural through the array of stories that we are thrown into and also personal, as we attempt to make meaning out of often seemingly disparate and conflicting moments in our lives. A crisis, such as losing one's partner, will rupture any sense of narrative continuity, as we see here with our participants. The future *as planned* is no longer possible and there is a danger of

becoming stuck in only present and past concerns. These men did, however, find ways beyond such 'stuckness', not by forgetting or 'moving-on' but instead by finding ways to integrate their loss into their life stories. This was no easy task but clearly is an essential one if future possibilities are once again to be opened-up within consciousness.

There were particular struggles to be faced in re-narrating their identities, however. Of note, is where these men found themselves being identified by others as the men who had lost their partner, at least in part because of how unexpected this was? Martin describes it:

I didn't experience the curiosity, but I know people around me were curios, that is [-] they heard someone: [-] Were you the one? [-] Or do you know the man with the dead wife? Uh, and [-] it's hard eh, it's hard to be the man in the neighbourhood with [-] I mean to be the man with the dead wife ... but it was never something I was confronted directly with, it was, it was something other people came to me and told me, said that you are the one who eh [-] and I also read something about that in that book that he experienced that as well, and it is not unusual (laughs) apparently if you are young and lose someone, then you are the one with the dead wife because it uh [-] it's uh apparently more common if you're 65 you can say ... (1.1.1, L.927-941)

Suddenly finding oneself with a new identity, at least as perceived by others, further adds to the work necessary for these men to re-figure their story of self-hood. Even though Martin was never openly confronted by others referring to him as the 'man with the dead wife', he heard about this from those he knew and was therefore confronted with the social world and normative cultural perceptions of loss in a very real way. It is one example amongst many where cultural values apparently shape experience in a very direct way. Martin, like the other men in this study, did however find a way to move beyond being nothing more than 'the man with the dead wife', forging a new identity for himself in the light of his new and changed sense of self-hood. Martin says:

[-] Now I can't imagine what would happen that [...] could get me really down [-] of all these common things as [-] uh layoffs and whatever else is [...] it can't really touch me [-] I'll do fine [...] Life's good [...] and now it seems like we are expecting a child eh [-] now there are only a few months back eh [-] so everything is bright and well (1.1.1, L. 981)

As a result of the loss the men in this study talked of having learned a number of things, which they feel have led to greater strength and appreciation for life itself. They express great appreciation for close family and that we should live our lives while we have the opportunity (Byrialsen, M. N. & Spaten, O. M., 2008). There is now less focus on the minutiae of life and the loss has strengthened the relationship with significant others, with these men better able to prioritize what is important to them according to their own values rather than what they felt was socially expected of them. Finally, they describe how the loss has resulted in increased self-awareness, a more positive attitude, strength and gratitude. In general, they have become more inclusive, tolerant, caring, sensitive, outgoing and generous to others. Finally, two of these men have described that the loss has meant that they have found solace in Buddhism or Christianity and that they have become more aware of getting something out of each day (Kruse, A., et al, 2007; Byrialsen & Spaten, 2008). Jens describes it thus:

I feel I have learned much and have a little more of that presence, of course one can easily forget it [-] when you are [-] care too much about details, that in the great picture basically don't matter at all. ... I have a greater presence concerning some things that many people can benefit from and, and it is without putting yourself up on

a high-horse, but you know, I think so. ... hmm, at least I feel like that sometimes and it comes from that if it hadn't happened and that, then I wouldn't be there. (1.1.3, L. 550-583)

These accounts support the notion of posttraumatic growth from Tedeschi's (2005, 2006) research on bereavement and loss, which suggest that bereavement creates positive changes in their perceptions of themselves, strengthen their relationship with significant others, and positive changes in their philosophy of life. Not only this but it is also testifies to the strength of these men to face the adversities of life, no matter how difficult this may be, with 'the courage to be' (Tillich, 1952).

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

There are a number of limitations to the study and the findings must therefore be considered tentative though they do point to some important factors in successful grieving processes. The focus of this study was men's experiences and therefore we are not including accounts from women and so are unable to discuss any differences between men and women. Indeed, it was notable that many issues that might have been thought specific to men did not emerge in our data and future research may usefully explore whether this was atypical and whether other men speak to concerns more closely related to men and masculinity. The participants in this study did not themselves reflect on issues concerning men and masculinities, even when discussing the need to take on the role of lone parent. This may be a product of these men living in a socially progressive country in which gender stereotyping is less common but we cannot know for sure. Only three men were interviewed and we are not able to forward arguments concerning the impact of specific or stereotypical gendered cultural values in men's process of finding meaning after bereavement. One possible exception concerns the sense of anger that these men described. Whilst this emotion has been similarly documented amongst women suffering loss, the power of this anger was palpable, which may be peculiarly masculine in quality: something that might usefully be explored in future research.

Future studies might usefully employ larger samples and/or samples involving men of different ages, ethnicity, social class or other socio-cultural variables, and length of time between interviews and the loss. A key question here for future studies, however, concerns the difficulty in recruitment. Few men were willing to participate and research suggests that men engage in more extreme avoidance strategies than widows (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991). Finding ways of engaging men in research of this kind must, therefore, remain a priority. The men in our study all appeared to have made sense of their loss but we cannot know whether this is true for other men. Whilst this is problematic if we were seeking to generalise from this sample to the wider population of bereaved men, this was not our intention and instead this study offers up insight into the experiences of three men who have sought support and found successful ways through their loss. If a wider range of men would participate in future studies it could facilitate both a deeper understanding of and a broader perspective of the experience of meaning, grief, and growth due to partner loss.

### **Implications of the Study**

This is a small study and so any implications must be considered tentative. The findings may, however, have implications for the understanding of men coping with bereavement amongst, for example, practitioners working with this client group. We have shown that, for

these three men at least, grieving is a complex experience of meaning, meaninglessness, and posttraumatic growth – not through distinct phases but – oscillating between processes of loss and reorientation in their everyday life experiences. Our interviews indicate that finding meaning is not something appearing at the end of the grieving process, after several years or after the initial phase of shock, but something that appears right alongside powerful feelings of anger, grief and despair. The group facilitated treatment during grief work included social sharing where the men, among other activities, produced stories about the deceased so continuing bonds were strengthened. The interviews revealed that men experienced a variety of rather ambivalent feelings towards themselves, other people and the world including anger, sadness, and despair, and joy, which at times had profound implications for their social relationships and how they were perceived. Whilst our analysis has highlighted the essence of the process of grieving for these men, it is also undoubtedly a highly individual process inflected by many contextual factors, which is perhaps the most important message to be headed by practitioners working in their field.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study has highlighted the complex multi-faceted nature of the experience of bereavement for a small number of men. The process of grieving was emotionally complex as conflicting feelings emerged and disappeared with the need for a continuing bond to the one that was lost and, therefore, provides a distinct challenge to previous research which has focussed on grieving as a series of discrete stages. We found no evidence for discrete stages of grieving but rather a complex and dynamically shifting process in which these men moved between their experience of anger and emptiness, as they experienced a rupture in their lifeworlds, to a sense of finding meaning in their loss such that they were better able to engage with life. Among the men emerged the expression of strong and varying emotions, and importance of social sharing. Moreover, cross-referencing of the transcripts revealed that phenomena such as grief, anger, and especially continuing bonds with the deceased were present. This finding is in line with newer bereavement theories like Stroebe et al. (2008) but at odds with traditional theories of bereavement.

These men did not demonstrate stereotypical masculine traits, such as the need to hide one's feelings, although they spend considerable periods of time during the interviews talking about things other than the loss of their partner. They initiated conversations about everyday life, and periods of stillness and reflection were very common. It is perhaps important for researchers and practitioners to be aware and recognize this silence in a delicate balance between denial and the minimizing of loss with the need to express deeply troubling emotional responses.

Implications for support services and practitioners alike include the personalization of grief therapy for the bereaved as a substitute to using a 'one size fits all' approach, as well as group facilitated treatment, arguably something especially important for men. Having children was also significant for keeping two of our participants engaged in the world when faced with the immediate impact of grief but even for Martin, who did not have children, there came a move in his experiencing process where he was able to make sense of his loss and re-connect with the world around him. There was no sense of 'letting go' here but rather an ability to find a way to story their experience such that this crisis provoking episode could make sense within their understanding of themselves through the development of new narrative identities.

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