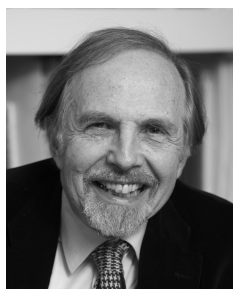


Caring for memories



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Bereavement is a somewhat misleading term for the experience of loss of an intimate person in one's life. It suggests that the loss itself is the whole experience. But grieving is about **yearning** as much as **sadness**. And caregiving does not end with the loss of the person cared for. We go on caring for memories. Memories, moreover, can and do become so vivid, so much a part of our lives, we literally re-member the dead person. So that he or she continues to be a presence among us.

I am not talking about a pseudo-hallucination. Many children and some adults, especially members of certain cultures such as North American Plains Indians, do as a normal act 'see' the dead person before them. I mean rather that our caring for the memories of the dead is a real act that takes up space and time and that itself – the act of caring – becomes such a part of ontological reality that we can regard caregiving as an active part of survivors' grieving and, over the longer term, a normal part of their living their lives.

The care of memories is how societies, not just individuals, survive and endure. At the collective level, cultural myths and monuments, social rituals, and embodiment among its participants are the processes that enable societies to remember. While at the individual level, stories, dreams, conversations, ritual reenactments as well as physical monuments and embodied (read, deeply felt) symbols are how ordinary people care for memories.

Bereavement viewed this way is certainly about loss. But it is also about ongoing caregiving: for memories and through remembering, for ourselves, really. Bereavement, then, is a form of care of the self, a life examined. And that is one important reason why we must be resistant to medicalise it. Memories and meaning shouldn't be interfered with. Their cultivation is what being human is about. ■

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Editor's note

Some, but not all, readers of Bereavement Care will be familiar already with the extensive work of Arthur Kleinman, who has written highly influential books and articles on suffering as a pervasive feature of human experience, although he has not often written before about loss and bereavement. Arthur Kleinman is an internationally renowned Professor of Anthropology as well as a Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, and has written about the mutual benefits of these disciplines working together (Kleinman, 2001). Working with his late wife (the sinologist, Joan Kleinman, 1939-2011), they argued for the importance of paying close attention to the ways in which people in many different contexts and cultures experience their lives in specific material and interpersonal situations. They described such contexts as particular 'local moral worlds', which 'could perhaps be more humanly rendered not as a representation of some other reality (one that we as experts possess special power over), but rather as evocation of close experience that stands for itself' (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1991 p293). In this way they called for a recognition of the limitations of expert knowledge and insight, and the need to pay close attention to the ways in which people experience their own lives, including the (explicit or implicit) invocation of values and interests.

Professor Kleinman has also argued strongly and persistently against the medicalisation of suffering, which he suggests empties out the existential meaning of such difficult but inescapable features of human experience: suffering cannot be reduced to disease or cultural categories, since it entails a moral and existential interpersonal experience (Kleinman, 2012a). His work has thus been highly significant for cautioning against the imposition of universalist psychiatric diagnoses, and for paying close attention to the ways in which people seek to discern some meaning through suffering. This is the particular focus of his very readable and challenging book, which I would recommend to readers, on 'What Really Matters' (2006), in which individuals with very difficult life experiences recount their efforts to make sense of their lives. I have personally found Arthur Kleinman's work extremely helpful and insightful, as have many others seeking to understand difficult experiences of pain and suffering

in people's lives around the world. In the piece published here, his anthropological perspective is very apparent regarding the ways in which societies remember, as well as his very human perspective of continuing to care for lost loved ones (Ribbens McCarthy, 2012; Ribbens McCarthy & Prokhovnik, 2014) – indeed, he has also argued for the importance of recognising the intrinsically human and moral experience of care (Kleinman, 2012b). Much of interest here, then, for readers of this journal.

Jane Ribbens McCarthy

Open University / UCL Institute of Education

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He became an adjunct faculty member at the University of Saint Thomas in 2006, teaching a graduate social work course on grief and loss, which continues to the present day.

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