

Grief-Inspired Journeys: Travel as Means of Coping with Loss

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Abstract

The loss of a loved one is a disruptive and potentially devastating experience, which can have serious emotional, psychological, and even physical effects on the bereaved. The grief that results from such loss may occur along a spectrum, from brief and productive resolution to prolonged and complicated crises, leading researchers from various fields to study mourning and propose methods of coping. Drawing from my own experience of travel after loss, I explore the role of travel in the bereavement process. Framing my discussion in constructivist terms, I assert that travel can help the bereaved make meaning of loss in the following ways: by reasserting control over their situation, by reframing the loss narrative in a more positive light, and by connecting with others who have experienced similar tragedies in different contexts. Finally, I consider the potential risks associated with traveling while grieving.

Keywords: grief, loss, bereavement, travel, healing, Uganda, constructivism, mourning, meaning-making, continuing bonds

The loss of a loved one is a disruptive and potentially devastating experience, which can have serious emotional, psychological, and even physical effects on the bereaved (Attig, 1996; 2000; Marrone, 1997; Parkes, 2002; Walter, 1999). The grief that results from such loss occurs along a spectrum, from brief and productive resolution to prolonged and complicated crises (Parkes, 1998), leading researchers from various fields to study mourning and propose methods of coping (Freud, 1917/1957; Dutton & Zisook, 2005; Stroebe & Schut, 2002; Sandler, Wolchik, & Ayers, 2008).

Perhaps it is because of its variable and unpredictable nature that grief has so often been framed as a journey (Doka, 2016; Breen, 2010). Like a physical journey, the grief journey has twists and bends in the road – events or situations that catch us off guard and reveal how unprepared we are to handle the painful emotions that accompany loss. At the same time, the journey introduces us to travel companions who will walk the road with us, or who have walked it before us, and can share their insights. But what happens when grief extends beyond the metaphorical journey and inspires the bereaved to embark on real-life travels? How, if at all, does travel influence the way we cope with sudden loss? This paper will attempt to answer these and other questions by describing my own experience of loss and exploring some of the ways that travel encouraged me to engage more fully in my grief work.

My Story

I have always loved travel and, from an early age, had the opportunity to travel extensively. While still in my teens, I visited Jamaica, Mexico, several US states, Sweden, Latvia and various western European countries. As I grew older, I dreamed of doing humanitarian work in Africa one day. When, in my twenties, I met the man who was to become my husband, I was

excited to learn that he shared my dream. After we married, we got to work building a family, a home, and a business, but we continued to tell ourselves that one day we would get to Africa. We had heard about the civil war in Uganda – about the children that were being abducted to fight in Kony’s Lord’s Resistance Army – and we wanted to help in any way we could.

Then came the windstorm and the motor vehicle accident, which took my husband’s life in July 2007. Phil was driving back to our campground at Paul Lake, British Columbia, when a tree fell onto the cab of his truck. He sustained a severe head injury and was pronounced brain dead nine days later. As I signed the paperwork allowing Phil’s organs to be donated, I felt my world collapse around me. I had lost the one person who’d held my life together – my husband, the father of my children, the primary breadwinner of the family. When Phil died, I knew our dream of travelling to Uganda together had died as well. What I did not know, at the time, was that just six months later I would be boarding a plane to Uganda, in spite of the tragedy I’d recently experienced. It proved to be a trip that not only changed the trajectory of my life (I ended moving to Uganda with my children for a year in 2010), but which also helped me cope with my loss in meaningful and enduring ways.

Coping with Loss

Weiten, Dunn & Hammer (2015) describe coping as “active efforts to master, reduce or tolerate the demands created by stress” (p. 84), noting that coping mechanisms can be either positive or negative. In their evaluations of stress, Holmes and Rahe (1967) consider the death of a spouse to be the most stressful life event one can experience. Indeed, the loss of my husband has been the single most devastating event of my life to date. In the weeks and months following his death, I determined to learn as much as I could about grief. I read self-help books, joined

online support groups, journaled regularly and took up running. As mentioned, I also traveled to Uganda; while there, I worked alongside impoverished women at an income generation project, helped build houses for widows, visited schools and orphanages and explored the country's national parks while on safari. Though I may not have called it such at the time, I recognize now that my decision to travel was very much a coping strategy – one which helped me manage my stress and work through my grief.

Grief Travel

To date, little research has been conducted on the role of travel as a coping mechanism for grief; however, a handful of grief experts have explored the subject informally and have written about it in self-help books and blog posts. Dr. Karen Wyatt (2017), a hospice physician who also hosts an online interview series on end-of-life topics, has suggested there are six types of grief travel (Table 1). This categorization of grief travel provides a helpful starting point for a discussion of travel as a coping mechanism for grief and will be referred to in later sections of this paper.

Travel is often framed as an escape (Rojek, 1993). An escape from cold temperatures in the winter months, an escape from the responsibilities of work during summer vacation, an escape from the drudgery of everyday life, at any time of the year. These types of escapes are generally regarded as healthy and necessary, with benefits ranging from improvements in personal wellbeing to strengthened familial relationships (Petrick & Huether, 2013; Pressman et al., 2009). In the context of bereavement, however, the term “escape” may carry negative connotations, with travel after loss potentially seen as a procrastination tactic to delay the hard work of grieving.

Table 1

Characteristics and Examples of Six Types of Grief Travel (adapted from Wyatt, 2017)

	Characteristics	Examples
Restorative	Very early and acute stages of grief Safe travel, where all one's basic needs are met Gradual introduction back into the real world	Visits to see close family and friends
Contemplative	May occur further along in the grief journey Bereaved is comfortable with solitude Ready to process deep feelings and emotions	Meditative retreats, healing spas
Physically Active	Provides an outlet for stress May involve training, preparation	Travel for sport, backpacking trips
Commemorative	Can help connect the bereaved to healing memories Strengthens one's sense of ongoing connection	Revisiting memorable or significant places
Informative	May be appropriate when there are unanswered questions about the death	Historical research, personal interviews
Intuitive	Involves no set plans or agenda Requires an open mind Opportunity to discover unknown connections	Spontaneous trips, side excursions

Psychologist, Dr. Robert Gangi, refutes this perspective, claiming “distractions are a necessary part of coping with any traumatic loss” (as cited in Delarato, 2017). Travel can provide these much-needed distractions; it can also provide respite and opportunities for relaxation. Research has shown that leisure activities, including travel, lower blood pressure and cortisol levels (Pressman et al., 2009). Wyatt’s (2017) concept of restorative travel has value in this respect. In the context of my situation, for example, travel offered very tangible emotional, mental and physical benefits. Not only was I a woman who had recently lost her husband, I was also a single mother doing the exhausting work of raising four young children and managing a business on my own. A two-week vacation in a tropical locale allowed me to catch up on rest, temporarily set aside my domestic responsibilities, and focus on my own wants and needs for a time.

Baggett (2013) astutely notes, however, that “[t]here is no such thing as a long-term geographical cure for grief, because we take our heartaches wherever we go” (p. 46). This reality was made clear to me, while I was on safari in Uganda. I was traveling with a group of other tourists, and, as we waited for the ferry that would take us across the Nile River, I was happily distracted with thoughts of our upcoming game drive and by the sight of massive hippos, wading along the marshy banks of the river. Then, just as it had on the day of Phil’s accident, the weather turned and a windstorm blew in, triggering painful memories. I recall climbing into our empty safari van, where I stowed myself away in back seat, so that my tears wouldn’t be seen by the rest of the group. In that moment, I was very much aware that as much as travel might allow me to forget my grief temporarily, it could not erase the heartache, which was still there, waiting to be attended to.

A Constructivist Perspective

The death of a loved one upends the core beliefs held by most people – namely that the world is generally benevolent and just, that the self is worthy and deserving of positive outcomes, and that individuals exert some level of control over their lives (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). From a constructivist perspective, grief involves “reconstructing a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss” (Neimeyer, Burke, Mackay & van Dyke Stringer, 2010, p.73) by integrating the loss into a coherent self-narrative¹. Travel, as I’ve experienced it, can provide a framework for this process in several ways: by allowing the bereaved to reassert control over their lives, by providing the context whereby the bereaved can reframe their loss narrative in a

¹ See Neimeyer (2004) for an in-depth definition of self-narratives (pp. 53–54).

more positive light, and by facilitating connections with others who have experienced similar tragedy.

Reasserting Control

I experienced the loss of my husband not just as the loss of someone I loved dearly, but also as the loss of control over my circumstances. There was nothing I could do during the nine days when my husband's life hung in the balance – except perhaps to pray – that could influence the outcome of his accident and subsequent surgery. I felt incredibly helpless, completely at the mercy of fate. It was a very visceral reminder that life is inherently random and risk-filled. Regardless of the circumstances, feelings of loss of control are common in the bereavement process – so common, in fact, that “Loss of Control” is included, along with eight other clinical scales in the Grief Experience Inventory, a self-report instrument that measures an individual's experiences during the grief process (Sanders, Mauger & Strong, 1985).

Whereas bereavement can leave a person feeling incapacitated (Tyree, 2010), travel can help a person regain a sense of freedom and control during the turbulent period after a loss. Travel helped me through the grieving process by providing me with opportunities to exert control in at least some areas of my life. Planning a trip, for example, requires decision-making on many levels. Sirakaya and Woodside (2005) have suggested that people usually go through some, if not all, of the following steps when making a travel decision: 1) recognizing the need for making a decision; 2) identifying goals; 3) formulating choice sets; 4) collecting information on each choice; 5) making a choice among the alternatives; 6) purchasing and/or consuming products/services; and 7) post purchase evaluation. Decision-making at both the micro and macro level – from the initial “big” decision to travel to Uganda to all the small steps required along the way – allowed me to feel, once again, that I had a role to play in the direction my life would take.

Reframing the Loss Narrative

Narratives play an important role in how people make sense of the world (Lule, 1990), and, when a person loses a loved one, familiar narratives must be rewritten. The way this new story is told will determine how well the bereaved are able to move forward with their lives in the absence of the loved one. In situations of loss, one can easily assume the role of the victim in a narrative that includes sentiments like, “My life is over;” “I no longer have anything to live for;” “I will never love again.” Travel can reframe this narrative in a more positive light by inspiring a renewed sense of awe in the world and providing an awareness that opportunities for happiness and a full life still exist.

Early theories on mourning and grief (Freud, 1917/1957; Kubler-Ross, 1969) viewed detachment from the lost loved one as a prerequisite for healthy mourning. More recently, however, a different approach has been suggested. The Continuing Bonds Theory (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996) emphasizes the importance of “maintaining the presence of the deceased in the web of family and social relationships by establishing a continuing role for them within the lives of the bereaved” (Madison, 2005, pp.198-199). Becky Livingstone, from Vancouver, BC, lost a daughter who loved to travel. She writes:

After my daughter died (she was 23) I quit my job and went traveling with her ashes (some of them) in my suitcase. I was gone for 26 months. For me, the loss...was evidence that none of us has control over anything in our lives except how we respond to what life throws our way. Leaving my daughter’s ashes around the world was what worked for me (as cited in Livingstone, 2018).

In a similar way, my trip to Uganda, in the spirit of Wyatt’s (2017) commemorative travel, gave me new purpose and kept alive the connection I’d shared with my husband. It showed me that my loss came with certain gifts: the ability to empathize with others more easily,

a greater appreciation for the good things in life that remained, and an opportunity to embark on new adventures. My story began to read very differently than it once had.

Connection with Others

Author and grief therapist, Claire Bidwell Smith, has written that “Grief is an isolating experience. It's lonely and quiet and it's easy to sink into. Reminding yourself that there is a whole world out there still turning on its axis can be vital” (as cited in Hansen, 2012). Human connection is an important part of the healing process, and it has been my experience that travel allows us to connect with others in uniquely intimate ways². When we travel, we are more vulnerable than we are at home, where our familiar habits and stolid comforts may lull us into a fall sense of security. Such vulnerability is often read as an invitation to enter another person’s space and to engage them in conversation. Perhaps the anonymity of being in a foreign place also allows people to bare their souls more easily.

Travel takes the specific and makes it universal. It allows us to meet others whose experiences, though different in the details, mirror our own in the grand scheme of things. In this way, travel causes us to feel less alone in our suffering. Although I experienced the therapeutic effects of human connection many times during my travels, one interaction stands out:

Shortly after I moved to Uganda with my family in 2010, I hired house help. One day, not long after she started working for me, Mama Eunice approached me somberly. “Mama Mara,” she said to me. “I have something to tell you. I want to say I am sorry.” I assumed from her tone and her language that she had broken something or, worse yet, stolen something, so I braced myself for whatever bad news she was about to share. Instead she said, “Sister Janet told me that your husband died, and I want to say I am so, so sorry. Thank you for coming here with your babies!” We hugged and I cried harder than I had in a long time.

² See White & White (2008) for a fuller discussion of the human connections that are made during travel.

It was only months later, that I learned her story. We were sitting at my kitchen table one evening, waiting for the motorcycle taxi she'd called, when she asked me if I would make a cake. It was her daughter's birthday that weekend. Almost as an afterthought, she added that it would also be the one-year anniversary of the death of her baby boy. I was taken aback. All these months she'd been working for me, she had never mentioned she'd lost a child. Now, as we sat at the table, she described how he'd gotten sick with diarrhea, how he hadn't stop vomiting and how lack of money had kept her from taking him to the hospital. When, finally, she had scraped together enough cash to have her baby admitted, it proved to be too late. He died in her arms a few hours later.

When Mama Eunice finished her story, I found myself in tears again, and the only thing I could think to say in that moment, which felt almost sacred to me, was, "Of course I will make you a cake!"

Potential Risks

Not only are all losses unique, but everyone responds to loss differently (Rando, 1985). Although travel helped me to cope with my loss, it may not be beneficial for everyone. Firstly, not everyone finds travel enjoyable; for such people, travel could conceivably *add* to their stress. Secondly, there are inherent risks associated with travel in the aftermath of loss, including isolation from one's support network, limited access to mental health services, and the experience of exacerbating triggers. Unfortunately, empirical studies on the effects of travel on the bereaved are limited, making it difficult to determine to what extent travel should be used as a coping mechanism for grief. In general, researchers have found that certain individuals are better equipped to handle loss – those, for example who have secure versus insecure attachments (Waskowic & Chartier, 2003), and those who score high in resilience and hardiness (Sandler et al., 2008; Maddi, 2013). Perhaps I was able to benefit from my travels, because I was already predisposed to view hardships as opportunities for growth. Someone with a less optimistic outlook on life may not glean the same benefits.

Certain types of losses are more likely to result in complicated grief (Burke & Neimeyer, 2012). Additionally, the experience of multiples losses can have compounding effects (Nord,

1996; Thomas & Sours, 2007). Either scenario may result in a more complex or prolonged bereavement process, that could make travel after loss a questionable proposition. These and other factors ought to be considered, before a bereaved individual embarks on travel following the death of a loved one.

Conclusion

The loss of a loved one is among one of the most stressful life experiences. To manage their grief, the bereaved adapt to their changed circumstances through various coping mechanisms. When I reflect on my own experience of loss, I recognize that travel helped me to work through my grief in several ways. It provided a temporary escape and a much-needed distraction – an adventure amid my sadness. It also allowed me to regain a sense of control over my life, helped me to reframe my loss in a more positive light and gave me the opportunity to connect with others who shared my experience of loss, albeit in their own unique ways. The lack of empirical research on the effects of travel on the bereaved suggests it is an important subject for future study.

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