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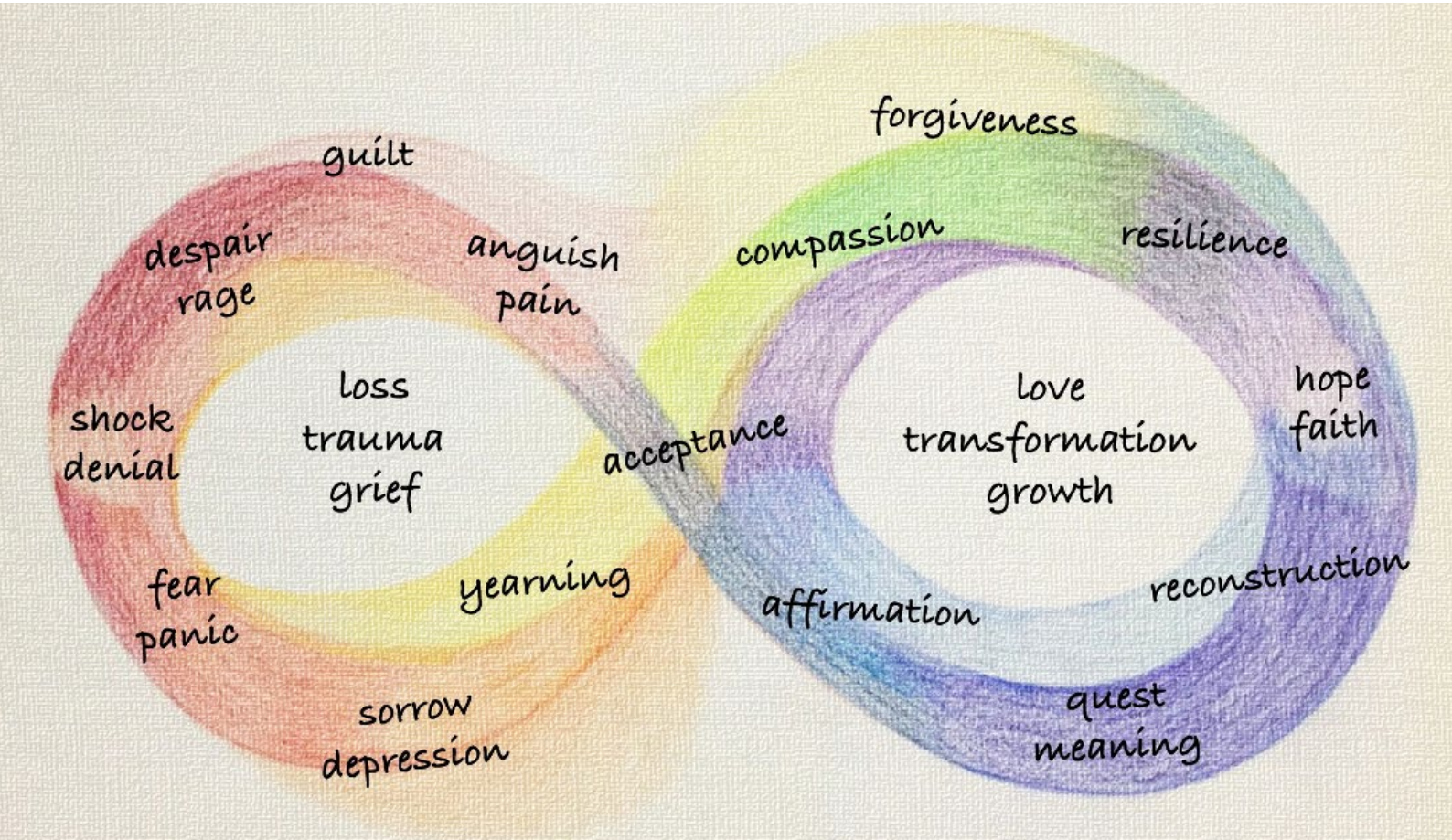
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## Grief and Growth An Appreciative Journey

Edited by

**Neena Verma and Robert A. Neimeyer**

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# Grief and Growth: An Appreciative Journey

When the co-editors of this May 2020 issue of *AI Practitioner* were invited to design and edit an issue on Grief and Growth, they could not know that it would be abruptly and profoundly relevant. A disease that started as someone else's problem has quickly become a global constraint. Grief is a range of emotions in response to a trauma. As William Worden has stated, each person's grief is like everyone else's, but it is also like that of some others'; in the end, it is unique, like no one else's. This issue explores the theme of grief and the unexpected, positive growth it can lead to.

*Grief ...* what could be an apt description of the phenomenon that would hold meaning for one and all?

*Growth ...* is there a way to find meaning in loss, transcend grief and choose the path of regeneration?

In October 2019, when we received an invitation from the co-publishers of *AI Practitioner* to design and edit this issue on the very special theme of *Grief and Growth*, little could we imagine that the theme would come alive the way it has in the trying times that the human universe has been going through over last few months. In these densely demanding days of the sweeping storm of the Covid-19 crisis – with constant cries of all kinds – our lives are becoming surreal, yet also calling us to contemplate a transcendent, wholesome and harmonious way to heal and renew. The very great tears in the social and economic fabric have profound repercussions for our shared grief and collective vulnerability. Equally likely, though, is an invitation to and prospect for resilience and growth through the experience. Our issue could not be more timely and relevant than it is now.

## The maze of grief

Grief can and does happen over any type of death or non-death loss – bereavement, disappearance, separation, divorce, loss of relationship, miscarriage, trauma, sickness, loss of health, calamity and violence. Not limited

to our personal life context, there is a range of losses at the workplace such as lay-offs, missed opportunities, denied opportunities, workplace politics and injustice, manipulation, loss of identity, all of which can cause grief. Very often such grief remains unnoticed, unacknowledged and therefore unaddressed.

It is natural to experience grief over bereavement, but one may also experience anticipatory grief witnessing or caring for a loved one who is in a life-threatening or terminal state. There is ambiguous loss and grief when a loved one is physically present but mentally and psychologically absent (such as in Alzheimer's disease or in a coma) or present in consciousness but missing in body (a disappearance with no mortal remains). Sometimes grief can be disenfranchised (Doka, 2002) such as in case of socially negated loss (the loss of a pregnancy through miscarriage or the inability to have children), stigmatized loss (suicide or a death by drug overdose) or socially unspeakable loss (the demise of someone with whom the mourner had a secret or socially unsanctioned relationship). In normal loss, trauma, sudden/untimely loss, ambiguous loss, or any other loss context, grief can become complicated, causing the person in loss to remain in acute, unrelenting grief over a prolonged period of time.

*Grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss. Except that it isn't simple at all.*

Simply put, grief is a natural and normal reaction to loss. Except that it isn't simple at all. It entangles one in a complex web of feelings. There is shock, pain, anger, sadness, fear, anxiety, loneliness, yearning, guilt, fatigue and more. The mind goes numb with disbelief, feeling dazed, being preoccupied, sometimes even hallucinating. The body reacts with dizziness, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, aches, fever and a state of vague sickness that is often difficult to verify and understand clinically. On an existential plane, one's faith is shaken. The person in grief exhibits a range of states and behaviours – despair, social withdrawal, paranoia, panic attack, absentmindedness, depression among many others. Grief is complex, layered and dense. It comes in waves, now subtle and quiet, now loud, thundering and rocking. Sometimes there is a deadening silence outside, and sometimes there is a deafening wail inside (Verma, 2016). There is no escape from the intensely painful effects of grief.

*And yet ...  
Womb of night  
Nurtures light  
Life pulsates*

### The mystique of growth

Indeed, faith, hope, resilience, call-to-meaning and will-to-reconstruct find a way to stay alive. Where loss evokes sorrow, fear, anguish, vulnerability,

*There is a call to choose one's life-view in the face of loss, trauma and grief.*

despair, a sense of resignation; it also kindles the prospect of deepened faith and encourages us to actively practice hopefulness and resilience. Where there is struggle to make sense of the gut-wrenching turmoil, there is also an invocation to embrace the turbulent churn and discover meaning in life. However painful, it is indeed possible to seek growth through and alongside grief. There is a call to choose one's life-view in the face of loss, trauma and grief. If, on one hand, we encounter the jolting realization of fragility and transience of life, on the other awaits an affirmation of its profoundly meaningful nature.

Extending American psychologist Gordon Allport's (1897–1967) belief about the similarity and the uniqueness of human beings, regarding the realm of grief, William Worden (2009) avers that “Each person's grief is like all other people's grief; each person's grief is like some other people's grief; and each person's grief is like no other people's grief”.

Grief is a uniquely personal work that calls for a generative approach. Neimeyer (2004) rightly affirms that grief and its complications can set the stage for growth when approached with openness, validation of pain and willingness to discover collateral beauty. Neimeyer's constructivist grief theory presents Meaning Reconstruction as the central process in grieving, informed by a view that human beings are inveterate meaning-makers (Neimeyer & Stewart, 1996). This approach underlines the constructive processing of grief and espouses the possibility of fear and loss being transformed into faith and love.

As a holocaust survivor and the creator of logotherapy, Viktor Frankl (1984/2004) emphasised in his seminal book *Man's Search For Meaning* that “even in suffering man is unique in the way he chooses to bear his burden”. This abiding human freedom and power to choose one's attitude is what inspires a griever to undertake the intensely treacherous yet appreciatively transformative journey to “growth” – a journey where lament invokes love, woe invokes wonder, cry invokes celebration, and grief invokes grace (Verma, 2016).



The Brahma-Kamal blooms only at night.

### This issue – A mosaic of grief and growth

Grief may feel like a thorny wild undergrowth, and yet may bloom like the mystical Brahma-Kamal (Creator's lotus) flower that gestates over a long period of time and blooms at night, symbolizing the co-existence of dark and light. This rare flower is considered sacred in the Hindu tradition and is also known to have immense medicinal value, symbolizing healing (Ghosh, 2017). Growth through grief may be messy and painful. There is no timeline or set process. Yet we all have an innate life-affirmative capacity to walk that path. All that it asks is – a conscious choice to seek and avow life. It takes time, patience, resilience,

forgiveness, compassion and more for people to make sense of their loss, accept it, work through their grief, let go of the tangled knots of pain, and start making new meanings.

With appreciation and gratitude, we present the abundant gift of knowledge, insight and wisdom that the contributors to this issue have offered through their articles. Each of the articles in this issue on the special theme of grief and growth has been commissioned, created and curated around a specific aspect of loss, grief or trauma. Our amazing authors have woven together stories (their own or others), conceptual knowledge, constructs and practice-relevant applications. As editors we felt privileged to have worked closely with each author, so deeply engaged that with some we almost felt like we were co-authoring the articles.

What inspires and feeds growth after loss? Contributors Jakob van Wielink and Leo Wilhelm explain the way to growth through (re)discovering calling while navigating transitions from one life phase to another. They take us through their secure-base transition cycle model that will be of immense value for grief counsellors in facilitating their clients' discovery of their calling from loss and reconstructing their lives with meaning.



Read more about Sharon Strouse's use of art to help veterans in particular through the grieving process on page 19.

It isn't without reason that the loss of a child is described as the ultimate bereavement. The overwhelming gravity and intensity of pain that a bereaved parent experiences is hard to accept and make sense of. Yet artful grief has a way to facilitate growth, as explained by author Sharon Strouse who combines her life wisdom as a bereaved mother and talent as an art therapist to help her clients reconstruct through art.

Author K. S. Narendran writes about the tragic mishap of his wife, one of those in the mysterious disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH 370 in 2014. In his article, he shares his journey through ambiguous loss, narrated across three inter-connected elements, dealing with the loss, dealing with not knowing, and living with not knowing. Combining his experience with his human-process expertise, he offers practical wisdom for "those who help" clients in dealing with ambiguous loss.

Somewhere in the "desert-like aftermath of loss", resides the oasis of meaning that nourishes the goals of growth. Author Carolyn Ng teaches us, in My LOG Book, a practical and proven grief therapy technique that she has developed to help those in grief and trauma to acknowledge and process their grief with growth in mind.

Taking forward the gift of practitioner toolkits, Lucy Hone shares her model of resilient grieving that helping professionals can use to help their clients adapt to



Read more about Carolyn Ng's work with a client which led the client to be able to look outward and draw this picture of a dancing girl on page 30.

loss in a healthy way, and grieve with resilience to restore their sense of agency and enable posttraumatic growth. A bereaved mother herself and a positive psychologist, Lucy combines experiential wisdom and proven expertise to help readers learn the art and craft of facilitating resilient grieving for oneself or clients. She generously shares her training module that practitioners can use to conduct similar training for their client groups.

Contributor Bhavana Issar takes forward our learning by putting the spotlight on an often unacknowledged realm, caregiving. Inspired by her own story, she has taken up as her life calling creation of healthy ecosystems of affirmative support for caregivers. Her article offers an insider's view of a caregiver's trials and a journey from trauma to wholesomeness.

Whether to facilitate adaptive coping, resilient grieving, post-traumatic growth or healthy acceptance, a helping professional derives great strength from the ability to hold conversations that aid healing and growth. Author Tony Silbert offers a simple yet effective model of healing conversations that inspire growth through positively biased inquiry.

How rarely do we come across people who have dedicated their lives to working with survivors of socio-communal violence! Author Harsh Mander, a human-rights and peace worker, is one such person, who gave up a life of privilege to immerse himself in serving survivors of mass violence, hunger and homelessness. Co-authored with Neena Verma, who serves similar causes, the article delves deep into the complex phenomenon of reconciliation in survivors' journeys from rescue, relief and rehabilitation towards reparation and justice.

The issue concludes with constructivist theory pioneer Robert A. Neimeyer offering a scientific framework of post-traumatic growth and complicated grief. The article presents a research-grounded and practice-relevant way to move from loss to a quest for meaning in an appreciative and meaning-reconstructive way.

With hope and prayer that our human world transcends the dark night of COVID-19 trauma and grief, and awakens with transformation and growth, we welcome you to this rich and profound issue with *Life in Verse*, a poetry collage created by the co-editors.

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Neena Verma Robert Neimeyer

# Life in Verse

## On Fear

### Robert Neimeyer

In fear's noose  
we stiffen, freeze,  
build walls between  
self and other

We place ourselves  
under a protective order,  
lock down,  
shelter in place

We sense threat,  
pull back, cut off,  
safeguard a self under siege

Fear is about  
hardening the body,  
focusing on the threat,  
harboring the hurt,  
running from imagined loss

It is about  
fencing ... distancing ... censoring  
saying goodbye

It is a world of  
limits ... orders ... alerts ... masks

In its grip  
we strangle the life  
struggling to be born

**Acknowledge fear**

## On Faith

### Neena Verma

Faith  
the quiet call of soul  
an invocation for life  
in grief and growth

We hold ourselves gentle  
In our own embrace  
snug and soft,  
safe and strong

We sense life  
and feel light  
and sing in silence

Faith is about  
being in surrender  
to not-knowing,  
and staying awake  
to what wants to happen

It is about  
sitting in awe and avowing  
welcoming

It is a call for  
letting-go and letting-come

In the darkest despair  
hope illuminates  
and life calls

**Invoke faith**



## On Loss

**Neena Verma**

In loss's clutch  
we writhe, wrench,  
slide with despair  
in cracks and crevices

We drown ourselves  
in the ocean of despair,  
lose breathe,  
cry, search and yearn

We feel numb,  
frail, fragile, frightened  
longing for affirmation

Loss  
stifles all senses,  
blinds vision,  
invades with pain  
intrudes with grief

It is about  
knocking on door  
that wouldn't open  
about clutching-on

It is a cave  
dark ... dingy  
fear... anger ... sadness

In its grip  
life gets smothered  
yet wants to resurrect

**Accept loss**

## On Love

**Robert Neimeyer**

In love's embrace  
we soften, flow,  
bridge gaps of  
self and other

We usher ourselves  
into broader fields,  
open up,  
invite others over for tea

We sense possibility,  
step up, reach out,  
affirm our common bond

Love is about  
releasing the body,  
broadening our vision,  
remembering the joy,  
sensing possible growth

It is about  
doorways  
meeting ... sharing  
saying hello again

It is a world of  
play ... touch  
iguanas ... elephants

In its caress  
we nurture the life  
yearning to be born

**Choose love**