

Book Review

How We Grieve: Relearning the World

Thomas Attig

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Reviewed by Ruth Grant Kalischuk

Edward Munch's captivating painting *The Death Chamber* graces the cover of this book which intrigues and invites one to pick it up and find within its pages an understanding of the grieving process that resonates with the experiences of the bereaved. Influenced by Colin Murray Parkes's "pregnant idea" (p. xii) that grieving entails relearning the world, Attig gives birth to the idea by capturing and expanding it from a humanities-based perspective. Attig claims that the loss of a loved one disrupts a person's biography, which, in turn, forces the person to relearn his or her world. *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*, which is based on more than 20 years of teaching and writing experience, represents one philosopher's reflections on grieving as an important human experience rich with learning opportunities.

The six chapters of *How We Grieve* centre around the stories of bereaved persons. It includes an overview of relevant terminology, a critique of three views of grieving, a chapter on the importance of respecting grieving individuals, and an argument in support of grieving as a process of relearning the world.

In keeping with the grounded and pragmatic approach characteristic of this work, Attig develops four themes to explain why people turn to books on grieving. Specifically, readers seek understanding from others, respect for the uniqueness of their experiences, ideas that will enable them to address the helplessness associated with grieving, and practical guidance in caregiving. These themes provide a framework for validating the ideas presented throughout the book.

Attig does not treat stories as merely anecdotal. He fervently believes that stories are at the heart of reflection on loss and coping. Hence *How We Grieve* begins with stories that depict the personal, varied, rich, and complex lives of several bereaved individuals and families. The stories instantly engage the reader. Attig creatively and

skilfully weaves a fine tapestry, interlacing the stories of bereaved individuals with his own ideas. His ideas are meaningful and credible in that he is able to clearly demonstrate how they have relevance for the day-to-day lives of grieving persons.

In the second chapter Attig criticizes the medical and stage/phase views of grieving for neither adequately nor accurately representing the complexity of the many and varied contextual factors integral to the grieving experience. He offers his "Relearning the World Tasks" view, based on a refinement of Worden's task-based view of grieving, as a framework for understanding the grieving process. This view claims that grieving is an active process that involves relearning one's physical and social worlds, as well as one's self and one's relationship with the deceased. Such an understanding represents a shift in thinking: the individual plays an active rather than passive role in the grieving process. It acknowledges the innate strengths and resilience of grieving persons, and it recognizes our ability to make sound decisions about matters that are important to us, even in the face of adversity and grief.

Respecting and caring for others, as an extension of self-care, is the subject of the third chapter. Respecting others when they grieve, says Attig, involves respecting individual ways of flourishing, individual vulnerabilities, and the often far-reaching impact that loss may have on the life of another. Further, Attig claims that grieving persons are vulnerable to "disenfranchised grieving" (p. 82) — that is, they are stigmatized and/or have the significance of their grieving experience minimized or dismissed. Certain people are especially vulnerable — for instance, the grief of the elderly, young children, parents of adult children, the mentally or physically challenged, homosexual partners, and former heterosexual partners commonly goes unrecognized and unacknowledged. The author encourages the reader to be self-reflective and mindful during interactions with any grieving person.

The final three chapters are devoted to expanding the notion of grieving to mean relearning the world. Attig contends that because the idea of learning is familiar to most people, the concept of relearning will be easy to understand. Relearning the world is not about acquiring information about the world but, rather, coming to terms with how to be different and act differently in a world without the earthly presence of the deceased; for example, an important task is learning how to love the deceased person in spite of separation through death. The author addresses the magnitude and complexity of this task, stating that relearning is a never-ending, "multifaceted transitional process" (p. 107)

fraught with "inevitable struggles in the face of finiteness, continuous change, pervasive uncertainty, and vulnerability" (p. 122).

How We Grieve: Relearning the World is a substantial contribution to the voluminous literature on grieving. It offers a unique and holistic understanding of the grieving process that is sensitive to the shortcomings of many theoretical and personal accounts of grieving. A strength of this thought-provoking work is the author's ability to cogently present ideas through the powerful yet often subtle medium of storytelling. Intended for a broad readership, the book is an excellent resource for lay persons and professionals alike. Attig challenges readers to increase their understanding of how we grieve and — importantly — to act on that understanding by providing appropriate care, comfort, and support to grieving individuals and families.

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