

# GRIEVING and the GREEKS

by: Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.

"What's wrong with me?" the woman sobbed. "My father died three months ago and I'm still not over it."

"I was real good during the funeral. I didn't shed a tear. But two weeks ago, I found some letters Dad wrote and I broke down. I'm sorry, Dr. Matsakis. You probably think I'm crazy, but I just couldn't help crying when I found those letters."

"To think I'll never see him again, never hear his voice again ... I can't stand it!"

"Oh my God. There I go again. Sorry Dr. Matsakis, and please forgive me. But this is how I've been ever since I found those letters."

"My friends all think I'm crazy and have deep psychological problems. After all, Dad died three months ago. I should be over it by now. That's why I'm seeking your help."

A vision of my Papou Elias flashed through my mind. After my grandmother died, he would sit before her picture and sing love songs to her on his mandolin, crying until he could cry no more then go to bed. At night he would call out her name. A few times he even yelled out, "Aphrodite, Aphrodite, pou eisai? (Where are you?)"

Despite his pain, papou didn't lay down and die. He went on living. He even remarried, but for years his eyes brimmed with tears, at dinner parties, and sometimes even at work. He grieved my grandmother until the day he died. But nobody thought his grief was "neurotic" or in need of professional attention. Among his particular

circle of Greek-Americans, it was perfectly permissible for him to grieve as long, as hard, and as openly, as he needed to. His grief was respected.

Several years ago one of my favorite cousins died. She was young, too young to die. At the funeral, her mother was almost incoherent, but nobody called a psychiatrist. Even today, this mother grieves her daughter, as do others in the family. Yet,

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none of us has gone to group therapy to "get over" the loss of this cousin. Instead, we still sometimes talk about her, how much we loved her, how much we miss her, what a wonderful person she was, etc.. Some of us still cry for her, all of which is exactly we would do if we were paying to be in group therapy.

In contrast, I find many of my non-ethnic clients, like the woman whose father died, shackled by the American culture's ideal of emotional coolness. While in other societies, it is and has been perfectly acceptable for people to openly grieve their losses, in our society, and in our military especially, to be "emotional" is considered a sign of weakness or mental instability. If

one is "too happy," "too sad," or "too angry," he, or she, may be judged by others, even by some mental health professionals as being "neurotic" or "abnormal". Yet in other cultures, e.g., southern European cultures, Middle Eastern cultures, Latin cultures, and of course, traditional Greek culture, emotional intensity is the norm.

Not all Greeks, Italians, Arabs, etc., are emotive, although that tends to be the stereotype. There are many Greeks and Italians, for example, who are reserved, either by nature or by training. Nevertheless, their cultures permit emotional expression, if the individual is so inclined. In their cultures, there is no such thing as "loving too much," "grieving too long" or suffering "too deeply." Depth of emotion is not only expected, but applauded. Individuals are allowed to suffer without being accused of "self-pity" or of "dwelling in the past." In the face of death or loss, they are permitted to rant and rave and wail loudly for as long as they need to.

In contrast, in the dominant American society, the appropriate response to loss is often a form of stoicism. One is expected to "get over it" as soon as possible. "Don't cry, don't feel, don't suffer, or if you do, don't show it," is the message. Yet what is disparagingly viewed as "falling apart" or "going crazy" may elsewhere be considered a "normal" emotional reaction.

For example, when President J.F. Kennedy was shot, Mrs. Kennedy was widely praised as a loyal wife and brave and strong person for not shedding a tear during his funeral. May I suggest, however, that if Jackie Kennedy was living in some other

society, she might have been considered a disgrace to her husband? In other societies, widows are permitted, if not expected, to cry openly, to moan, scream, and try to jump in the casket.

In these societies, the bereaved are also helped by religious and other rituals, which acknowledge their losses and permit them to receive the support and consolation of others. For example, the Greek Orthodox have forty day, annual, and other memorial services. On the island of Karpathos and in other places in Greece, nine day, three, six and nine month commemorations are also observed.

The Jews read prayers for the dead at every Friday evening service. These prayers, called the Kadush, do not speak of death itself, but serve to comfort the mourners. In Orthodox Jewish services, the bereaved stand during these prayers. In reformed services, the entire congregation stands.

In the Jewish traditional, the bereaved are not expected to do much for one year following the death of a significant loved one. This traditional acknowledges the psychological reality that grieving takes time and energy and that one can not truly engage grief and maintain a normal routine. The time spent grieving, however, is not misspent or "wasted." The more progress an individual makes on their grief work, the freer that person will be in the future to live in the present.

People seek the help of mental health professionals for a variety of reasons, one of the most common being that they are suffering from a troubling symptom, e.g., anxiety attacks, insomnia, overeating, etc. In many cases, this symptom is an indication that they are out of touch with one or more of their deepest feelings or that they are experiencing some sort of emotional conflict. Among the most problematic feelings people have are anger, hurt, and of course, grief.

(I am not speaking here of neurotic grief, where the individual is unable to let go of the bereaved no matter how hard they mourn or where that individual uses the loss of a loved one as an excuse to stop functioning. There is also a difference between true grief and clinical depression and chronic self-pity. While depressed feelings and self-pity, along with anger and

guilt, are commonly experienced during the grieving process, if they persist and dominate the personality, the individual may be suffering from more than bereavement.)

Unresolved grief underlies a variety of psychiatric symptoms and psychosomatic problems and is often responsible for the fact that people who are making good progress in their therapy suddenly reach a "stuck point" from which they can progress no further. In order for the symptom to lessen in frequency or intensity (and to hopefully disappear altogether), clients must first identify their losses and then grieve those losses (in full, not in part). Yet they are often blocked in the grief process by the shame and stigma that attends long term mourning in our society.

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Part of the stigma which attends emotionality in the dominant American culture stems from the fact that emotionality is associated with women, who are presumed to be "weak," "hysterical," "irrational," and "needy" because they are "inherently emotional." In contrast, men are endowed with the presumably superior traits of rationality, intellectuality, and emotional self-control. Men who are heavily invested in the "macho" image or in the traditional male sex role which equates strength with emotional control and women who need to distance themselves from the denigration now attached to the traditional female role will do their best to suppress their feelings and appear cool, calm, and collected, regardless of the situation.

In some situations, however, recognizing a loss and grieving that loss is the first step towards restoring emotional control. This is especially the case for trauma survivors, e.g., abuse victims, combat vets, and others, who need to work through their grief, anger, and sense of powerlessness before they can experience relief from their symptoms.

For example, in the clinic where I work, there are many Vietnam veterans who have yet to fully grieve their lost friends in Vietnam. They were not permitted to cry in Vietnam when their friends were blown to bits and they were rarely permitted to express their grief upon their return home, given that our society, for the most part, wanted to forget about Vietnam and all its horrors. These men also stifle their grief because they deem it "unmasculine" to "break down." "Men don't cry" is often their unfortunate slogan.

For example, one of my clients, Mr. X., finally found the courage to go to the Vietnam Wall. He had been putting off going to the Wall for years for fear that he would not be able to handle his grief. Looking at the wall, he saw the names of several dead friends, one of whom had died in his arms. Mr. X cried for ten minutes then went to work.

At our next session, he was a state of panic. "I'm losing it," he said. "I cried for a whole ten minutes. No telling what I'll do if I go back to the Wall again."

Mr. X. was afraid, like many of my clients, that he would die if he experienced the full intensity of his emotion. Truly, when we experience our feelings in the raw, sometimes it feels as if we are going to die. Greek songs are full of expressions such as "My love for you is going to kill me. Missing you is going to kill me. I'm going to die from happiness," etc.. However, nobody ever died from feeling their feelings.. People have died however, from running from their feelings, or from trying to sedate or escape them via a drug or alcohol addiction, self-mutilation, violence towards others, depression, sexual promiscuity, etc.

"No, Mr. X.," I said, "You aren't losing it. You are finding it and you didn't lose control of yourself either. You were able to stop crying and go to work, weren't you? And what if you couldn't stop crying?"

What if you had to take off a day to cry, or even a week? Would that have been the end of the world? Some vets cry for months and they don't die. In fact what happens is that afterwards they have less depression and anger, fewer nightmares, and a greater openness to the good in life today."

The next step was to convince Mr. X that he was not a "sissy" or a "cry baby" for crying, that it took courage to feel anything, especially grief. He needed to know that "keep a stiff upper lip" was a culturally relative value, not a God given sign of manhood and that in other cultures and at other times, warriors were not only allowed, but expected, to openly grieve their dead.

For example, in the *Illiad*, Homer gives a long description of grief of Achilles after his best friend, Patroclus, was slain in battle.

"Sorrow fell on Achilles like a cloud. He swept up the dust with both hands, and poured it over his head and smirched his handsome tunic. He tore his hair and fell flat in the dust, grand in his grandeur. The captive woman who he and Patroclus had taken wailed in grief and ran out to where he lay, beating their breasts and half fainting. Antilochos had taken the hands of Achilles and stood weeping beside him, while he moaned heavily; for he feared Achilles might put the steel sword to his own throat.

"The Greeks mourned Patroclus all night long. Achilles let their lamentations, sobbing and pressing on his friend's breast those hands which had slain so many; groaning like a lion, when some robber had robbed him of his cubs..."

Achilles was the "macho of machos" of all the warriors. He was fearless in battle for he had been dipped by his mother Thetis in the River Styx which protected him from all manner of human wounds. He was invulnerable, save for his heel, the portion of his body which his mother held in his hand as she dipped him.

There was nothing "feminine," "weak," or "cowardly" about Achilles, yet he did not hesitate to grieve openly. He did not view himself as deficient or irrational or grieving, nor did his comrades ever view him as anything less than the strongest and bravest of all the Greek warriors. Later on Achilles says, "there is no profit in freezing lamentation. This is the way the gods have spun their threads for poor mortals! Our

life is all sorrow, but they are untroubled themselves."

Achilles "lay with Patroclus in his arms, weeping bitterly, while his comrades were mourning around" for ten days. Yet my client could not cry for ten minutes.

In my life, I have also struggled with grief. Like the woman who lost her father and like my veteran client, I too resisted the grieving process. I was afraid of the hurt, afraid of acknowledging the reality that my losses were real and that I was powerless to restore what had been lost.

I was aided in my attempts to deny my losses and to forestall the suffering inherent to the grieving process by people around me who were uncomfortable with emo-

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tional pain or who, in attempt to comfort me, tried to minimize my losses and point out the positives in my life. After all, other people had it much worse than I. Therefore, I had no right to complain, or hurt.

Over the years, I have learned not to compare emotional pain and losses. I try never to tell people. "You shouldn't feel that way" when they are sad about some loss. Each person is entitled to their own pain, even if someone else's losses seem to be of a greater order of magnitude. In my particular case, the loss was full time custody of my children. The judge ordered that they live six months with their father, and six months with me.

I was shattered, but people told me that I would "get over it," that I would enjoy the freedom for the burdens of motherhood and the freedom to develop my career and my social life. I was also reminded that my children were healthy and alive, not ill or dead. Therefore, there was no reason to grieve.

Yet whenever it came close to the time for the children to leave, I would go into anticipatory grief. After they had gone, I would be "numb" or in mourning for at least one to two months. I didn't have the desire or interest to develop my wonderful career or meet exciting new people. All I wanted to do was stay home and cry. Sometimes, I did just that. But mainly, I forced myself out — to the gym, to parties, to professional activities. Yet, inside I was shambles — not only sad, but furious at the judge's decision and at my own powerlessness to change the situation.

The hardest part was the loneliness of it all — not being able to share the grief with anyone. There were a few who understood, but the majority of people I know felt I had no "legitimate" reason to be sad and kept telling me that I had to "adapt," "give up the past" and "get on with the present."

But, I was "getting on with the present." I was active both professionally and socially, but inside, I was hurting for nothing seemed to replace those two children. Not all the friends or professional achievements or free time in the world. At the same time, I was torturing myself with the idea that I should no longer feel so bad. Like the woman who lost her father, I felt there was something deeply wrong with me for continuing to grieve my loss.

I found comfort in Greek myth of Demetra and Persephone. The story is a familiar one: that of a parent's grief over the loss of a child. It speaks specifically of a daughter's abduction, but in a more general sense, they myth speaks to all parents who must face the inevitable separation, which occurs when children grow up and leave home.

In the myth, Persephone, Demetra's daughter, is abducted by Hades, God of the Dead, into the underworld to be his unwilling wife. Demetra, the goddess of agriculture, searches the world for her daughter, but cannot find her. Nobody tells Demetra where her daughter is because they fear

Hades and because Hades' brother, Zeus, King of Gods, knew of the abduction, and "approved of it."

As Demetra searches and searches for her daughter, she pines and pines, totally forgetting about her "job" as goddess of agriculture. The fields fail to produce and people begin to starve. They cry out to Zeus to "do something." The gods cry out to Zeus too because the famine has left people with nothing with which to make proper sacrifices at the temples.

Zeus feels trapped. He needs to appease the human race and the other gods, but he also promised Hades that he could have Persephone. He bargains with Demetra. If she will return to work and cause the fields to flourish, he will give her a daughter even fairer than Persephone, or any honor or material goods she could desire.

Demetra flies into a rage. She wants Persephone, not somebody else's child or gold.

Eventually, a "compromise" is reached whereby Demetra would have Persephone six months a year and Hades would have her the other six months. Demetra doesn't like the compromise, but she has to accept it for she is outnumbered by the male gods who would not totally deprive Hades of his stolen prize.

Like myself, Demetra had to accept the unacceptable. But, she allowed herself to have her feelings about it. She didn't pretend "everything's okay" when it wasn't.

Apparently, Demetra is still angry and sad about her daughter. According to the ancient Greeks, spring and summer, when the land flourishes, represent the time that Persephone visits her mother and Demetra feels happy enough to do her work as goddess of agriculture. Fall and winter, on the other hand, reflect Demetra's grief that her daughter is leaving or gone.

The myth of Demetra and Persephone helped me legitimize my feelings and feel less "crazy" for going through my annual grieving process. Since that time, there have been other losses, and I know that I

grow older there will be even more. I am grateful that I will be able to fall back on my Greek heritage to help me with those losses.

There are many Greek poems, plays and books and many Greek songs, especially the miriologia, and songs such as Sinefi-asmeni Kiriaki (Cloudy Sunday), which can provide a language for grief. I can also share with certain relatives without feeling like they are going to judge me or tell me to "hurry up and feel better." Most importantly of all, I can now recognize grief when I feel it and allow myself to view it as part of being an emotionally alive person, not as negative which is to be avoided at all costs.

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I have learned, from my own experience as well as from my work clients, that while grieving is stressful, suppressing the grieving process is even more stressful. When people try to act brave and pretend everything is fine, they spend great deal of energy trying to keep a lid on a very pow-

erful normal emotion which it is not expressed normally, through crying, feeling sad, etc., tends to be expressed destructively, through irritability, psychosomatic symptoms, anger at the self or addiction.

It is no accident that the Greek word, pathos, means both pain and passion. The dual meaning of this word indicates that the ancients had grasped the deep psychological truth: that the experience of pain and loss is the birthplace of our joy and creativity. When we are "stuck" in denying our pain and losses, we are also crippled in experiencing the happy parts of life. We cannot fully commit ourselves to the present because we have not yet resolved the past.

I always assure my clients that if they but have the courage to grieve, for it does take courage to suffer so, they they will experience a rebirth at the end of the process. While the loss may leave a permanent scar, all the energy they now spend suppressing the grief, running from it, and hiding it from themselves and others, will not be theirs to invest in the present, in love, work and play.

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If you know of a Vietnam or Vietnam era veteran who is in need of serves, please encourage him (or her) to contact the local Veteran's Administration Medical Center or local Vet Center. The mission of the Vet Center program is to assist Vietnam era veterans and their families in making satisfactory readjustment to civilian life through direct counseling and appropriate referrals. The Vet Centers offer a variety of services to veterans coping with the readjustment process. These range from employment services to psychological counseling. All services are free of charge. Consult your local phone directory for the number of the Vet Center nearest you.

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#### **Editors' Note:**

*The Editorial Committee wishes to express to Dr. Aphrodite Matsakis the gratitude of its readership for her contribution to the KARPATOS magazine.*

*In appreciation, the committee has formally incorporated her into the magazine staff as a contributing editor.*

**THANK YOU.**