

The Grief Theory of Continuing Bonds: A Vignette of Sal's Mourning

By Jessica Minieri

My 74-year-old brother-in-law, Sal, lost his wife, Theresa, over one year ago to COVID (she was also undergoing treatment for lung cancer and her immune system was likely compromised). After her death, he appeared to grieve, as evidenced by expressing shock at the rapidity of her demise, and sadness that he could no longer relate with her in the same direct way that he always had. However, in the year since he lost Theresa, he never expressed thoughts like, "I can't believe she's gone," or "I'm sad I can no longer be with her."

At the year anniversary of her death, I asked Sal if he ever went to his Catholic Church's grief group (like he planned on doing). He smiled sheepishly and said, "Not only have I joined the grief group, but I think I'm about to get kicked out." Sal explained that people were starting to get annoyed with him because of his insistence that their loved ones were not dead. He explained that he never accepted that his wife was "gone," because he perceived Theresa's death as a transfiguration of her human form into a spiritual form and was residing in the "Heavenly Plane." Sal said it frustrated him that other group members "didn't get that their loved ones were still with them," while apparently group members were getting frustrated with his inability to tolerate their different way of grieving.

Sal said that over the last year, he spent time with Theresa every day and had visions of her at night. Sal became at a loss for words at the idea that Christians "grieved" their loved ones. In Sal's mind, there is no reason to mourn the loss of his relationship with Theresa, because he is still experiencing life (albeit differently) with Theresa by his side.



Theory of Continuing Bonds

Klass et. al (1996) stated that “the view of grief most accepted in this century holds that for successful mourning to take place the mourner must disengage from the deceased and let go of the past” and that “a continued attachment to the deceased was called unresolved grief.” (intro.) After engaging in qualitative research, Dennis Klass et. al. (1996) posited that one of the principal tasks of mourners was to find ways to *continue* their bond with their deceased loved ones.

Their theory was markedly different than what was proposed by earlier theorists, in which the mourning process was seen through a lens of dysfunction (i.e. Freud), or a series of developmental stages that allowed the grieving person to “move on” to make new connections with others (i.e. Kubler-Ross). (Stevenson, 2000, p. 327) Klass et. al.’s theory (1996) stressed that successful grieving was culturally and spiritually informed, and that continuing the bonds with loved ones did not mean that a person was necessarily stuck or dysfunctional in their grieving process. (Stevenson, 2000, p. 327)

The Theory of Continuing Bonds resonated for Catherine Siegal (2017) who wrote a book about bereaved parents. She wrote: “...writers in the field of bereavement have been questioning the helpfulness of seeing grieving as task oriented. There has been a concern that these theories can be interpreted rigidly, and that sometimes the individual experience of grief can get lost. And... for parents who lose a child, ideas of stages or phases in the grief process, tasks that are addressed and accomplished, and the very prospect of some kind of resolution... none of this

feels real or at all relevant... their child will remain in their heart, mind and being for all time. (p. 12)



How Sal's Mourning Process is Illustrative of the Theory of Continuing Bonds

Sal's mourning process reflects Klass et. al.'s Continuing Bonds Theory, because Sal doesn't believe it is spiritually appropriate to mourn someone who "truly isn't dead." Sal sees Theresa (either in a paranormal sense or in his mind's eye—or both) as fully alive and present in his life, even though she doesn't take a human form. (Sal does not demonstrate symptoms of psychosis and never denies the reality that Theresa is physically deceased.) Klass et. al. (1996) might see this process as normative and healthy (based on his spiritual-cultural norms) because Sal's not trying to deny Theresa's physical death, but rather continue his relationship with her in a new way. Sal's principal task of continuing his bond with Theresa is being fulfilled, while he continues to learn and grow and adjust to life without having Theresa physically present.

Personal Reflection

I have had several significant losses in my life. After reflecting on Sal's story and the Theory of Continuing Bonds, I realize that I too, naturally subscribe to this theory in my grieving process (without ever knowing what it was called in the grief literature). About once a week before bed, I enter a prayerful state, gather with my deceased loved ones (in my mind) and have conversations with each of them. I do this *not* because I "can't say good-bye" or because I "can't get over" the loss.

I do this because I know their spirit still lives (I ascribe to the Christian faith, plus I intuitively believe that my family and loved ones are still around me) and I want to commune with them. I

don't feel as if I'm "trying" to keep their memory alive; it's as though they *are* still alive and visiting with them seems like a natural thing to do. Since my loved ones are still alive and are still with me in spirit, how would it serve me to ignore their love and presence?



One of the key features of this theory that resonates with me is that the death of a loved one does not have to be canceled, erased, or compartmentalized from my emotional life to move forward as a fully functioning person. Paradoxically, it's through the acceptance of my loved ones' deaths, and the spiritual conviction that they are still with me, that I can creatively integrate them in a way that continues our bond.

References:

Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief, edited by Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman. Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis, 1996. ISBN 1-56032-339

Seigal, Catherine (2017). Bereaved Parents and Their Continuing Bonds : Love After Death. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Stevenson, R. C. (2000). Reviews & Resources. *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 8(3), 327.