

The Sacred Wound
Understanding and Responding
to the Call of Grief



Part I: Toward a Phenomenology of Grief

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall receive the comforter.

Mathew 5:4

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Forthcoming Sections

Part II: **The Varieties of Grief**

Part III: **Grief in the Life of Christ**

Part IV: **Collective Grief in Light of the Mysteries of Eleusis**

Part V: **Grief as a Preparation for a New Michael Festival**

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Introduction

For many years now, I have witnessed and to some degree participated in a wonderful deepening, in and around the anthroposophical community, related to matters of death and dying. A plethora of initiatives, groups and organizations have come into being, for example, to promote and facilitate home deaths, home funerals or green burials. Yet another strand of work focuses more on how we can maintain our spiritual connection to those who have died as well as on how those getting ready to die can leave behind a more conscious, living legacy to the next generation.

As beautiful and significant as all this work is, I have become more and more aware of a missing element in this tapestry—namely, a spiritual scientific understanding of the mysteries of grief that could help us move through the process of loss with the same degree of sensitivity, consciousness and elegance with which we are helping our beloved friends and family members die and transition into the spiritual world.

This essay is an attempt to address this topic, this missing element, for grief, as I hope to show here, is truly an initiation process of the highest order, if we can embrace its powerful energies and open ourselves to its deeper mysteries. I recognize, of course, that home deaths, home funerals and meditative work staying connected to the departed can and do contribute powerfully to a healthy grieving process. Yet, I also believe that a deeper understanding of grief is needed and that these practices and their impact could be greatly enhanced through this understanding.¹

No matter how you look at it, grief is a profoundly intimate and tender topic and I want to acknowledge this at the outset. Whether we are grieving over the loss of a beloved, a home lost in a wildfire, or a lost part of ourselves, there are few emotions that strike so deeply into the core of our being. Trying to approach such a topic through the lens of spiritual science requires a great deal of sensitivity and could still easily cause discomfort if anything here rings even slightly untrue to your own experience.

I ask the reader, therefore, to please keep in mind that what I have shared here is spiritual research that is *in process*, still *evolving*, and still *open* to new perspectives and insights. A single study cannot begin to capture the immense breadth and individual nuance of this topic. Rather, the goal here is to plow open a new field of study with the hope that other and more capable hands will follow me and draw forth ever more abundant and refined fruits.

Besides the griefs that reach us through our personal destiny, such as the examples I have given above, we are all, I would suggest, swimming deeply in the waters of grief due to the incredibly tragic events taking place all around us each day. Isn't it amazing that we can even get on with our lives much less get through a day after reading a few headlines from the daily news? Every day, the most gut-wrenching events land in our inbox, or on our doorstep or take place in our

¹ I also believe that Rudolf Steiner said things about grief that have been misunderstood and have hindered many individuals from embracing and realizing the potential of this emotion. I will address this misunderstanding more fully in Part II of this study.

neighborhoods, and most days, most of us are simply forced—or relieved perhaps—to move on with the routines of our daily lives. We take it in, and at the same time, we don't, we can't really take it in. But it is there nonetheless surrounding us in the atmosphere of our lives, trickling into the depths of our souls and impacting us far more deeply than we are wont to recognize.

I would go so far as to suggest that we are living through an epidemic of “unmetabolized grief” or you could even call it “unmetabolized *civilizational* grief.” This, I believe, is the deeper source of the more publicly acknowledged epidemic of righteous anger in our civil discourse, not to mention the epidemic of psychological disorders associated with anxiety and trauma. In addition, there is the objective, spiritual reality of grief as it lives in the soul of the earth and as it has come into being and changed form in the course of the evolution of consciousness. To fully understand grief then, we must explore all these levels—the personal, the collective and the transpersonal—for in truth, they are all present in every experience we have of grief.

My own journey with grief, as a self-conscious adult, began in 1989 when my brother John was killed in a tragic plane crash. This dramatic accident made worldwide news and has been the topic of many books, plays, films, and research. It was the crash of United Flight 232 into a cornfield in Sioux City, Iowa, in which, through the skill and courage of the pilots, over half of the 300+ people on board survived. Though many of my readers may never have experienced the sudden loss of a loved one, perhaps you can imagine the intensity of grief that occurs under these circumstances.

I remember the way my parent's home was enveloped in a cloud of grief for days and weeks on end. On the one hand, friends and relatives are arriving with food and support, and there are practical arrangements that must be attended to, and there are, of course, helpful moments of normalcy in these encounters and activities. But most of the time one feels oneself completely disoriented, disconnected from time and place and moving instead through a surreal, liminal landscape of mourning.

I remember how I never knew when I walked into one room or another in our family home who I might find there slouched over in the convulsions of grief, for the emotion hits one in the most sudden and unexpected ways, and this goes on and on for days and weeks and months. Since that event, I have lost dozens of close friends and family members and have also worked extensively in a therapeutic context with other kinds of loss and grief experiences and so have had many opportunities to experience and study this emotion, primarily through deep self-observation. It is the fruit of this work that I will attempt to bring forth in this essay.

I recognize that the classical expression of grief I have described above, that is, of deep convulsive sobbing or crying, is by no means all there is to the story of grief, it is but a stage in a whole life-cycle, which has been extensively studied and described by contemporary authors and researchers.² But I would like to suggest, nonetheless, that these deep convulsions of tears have a significance that is not yet fully appreciated; indeed, I would go so far so far as to say they are *the archetypal expression of grief* in much the same way that Goethe suggested the leaf is the archetypal expression of the plant.

² See for example [On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss](#), by Elizabeth Kubler Ross and David Kessler.

Just as Goethean researchers have come to discover that when we penetrate the mystery of the leaf, of leaf-ness, in a living, mobile way, we have the possibly of penetrating the mystery of the whole plant and its whole life cycle, so I would suggest, if we can penetrate, phenomenologically, the mystery of deep convulsive mourning, we open the doorway to an understanding of the emotion of grief and the grief process or lifecycle as a whole.

Therefore, I have made this “stage” or “expression” of grief the foundation of this study. I have also chosen to focus on grief as it arises through the death of a beloved other (or in anticipation of the death of a beloved other) because I believe this kind of loss is also archetypal and thus opens a window into, and has relevance for, all the other griefs that we may encounter in our lives.³

My methodology for this study is based on spiritual disciplines that I have learned from Rudolf Steiner and his students. I base this inquiry, in particular, on the fourfold view of the human being as understood by anthroposophical spiritual science and on a way of characterizing and working with these four levels that I learned from Dr. David Tresemer in my training in anthroposophic psychology. David brought forward four words that roughly correspond to the four levels of the human being described by Steiner and that offer, I think, a very helpful doorway into these subtle realities. These words are:

Content: roughly related to the physical body

Expression: roughly related to the etheric body

Relation: roughly related to the astral body

Call: roughly related to the “I,” the individuality

The Content of Grief

At the purely physical level, what do we notice when we or someone else is in the throes of intense grief? There are four primary observations to share at this level.

First, we can observe a generalized withdrawal from the senses, from our orientation in the physical world. It’s hard to imagine, for example, someone in the throes of grief driving a car or washing dishes. It’s not that we stop seeing or hearing or smelling, but our awareness of these impressions moves far to the periphery of our consciousness and with that, our ability to be active in the physical world with our limbs. We are detached or loosened up from the physical world. We see this also in more mild cases of being “moved” by something. To be moved, in the first place, means to have our consciousness *moved*, shifted away from the physical world and into our inner world.

The second thing we can observe is that the whole process comes in waves, waves of grief overtake us, often beginning gradually, reaching a crescendo and then slowly subsiding and then perhaps beginning again. There is a rhythmic quality to the whole experience and this is

³ For simplicity sake, in the below study, I characterize the experience of the loss of a beloved AFTER they have died, but everything I share here also holds good, I believe, for anticipatory grief, i.e. a situation where we know of a beloved’s impending death.

enhanced by the rhythmic undulations of the diaphragm, which cause what I have referred to earlier as the *convulsions* of grief.

Thirdly, we notice that there is the movement of copious amounts of fluid and air moving out of the body. We are crying, and in the crying, tears are flowing out of our eyes, mucus is gathering in and flowing out of our nasal passages. Often, we are also sweating more profusely, and typically our face becomes flushed as blood flows up into our head.

And in concert with the diaphragmatic undulations, carbon dioxide is leaving our body at a rapid rate so that every now and then we must catch our breath and take deep inhalations, much deeper inhalations than we normally ever take in daily life. So, in general, what we can observe is that the forces of water, air and warmth (in the blood) are all loosened up somehow and begin to flow in new ways; there is you could say, a kind of 'physiological chaotization' taking place in our system.

Finally, we can observe that there is a loss of uprightness, a movement of the head, and sometimes the whole upper half of the body, and sometimes even the whole body, downward toward the earth. We tilt our head forward, we lean or bend over, we face the earth or even lie on the earth. And often we take our face in our hands, we hold our head, as though to relieve it from its weightiness. And our instinct in such moments is to give our weight over to others, to be held, embraced, allowing our head and indeed our whole physical body to be upheld and supported by others.

We experience this also when we are near someone else who is grieving; we feel moved to "comfort" them psychologically through a gesture of holding them, of allowing them to release their uprightness into our uprightness.

In a lecture by Dr. James Dyson in one of the Anthroposophic Psychology seminars, he spoke of an event long ago in cosmic history in which the emerging human being, in order to deal with an excess of certain retarding forces, "excreted" the human head as a means to come to terms with and ultimately transform these forces. Is it not interesting, in this light, that in grief our head becomes an organ of excretion and metabolism? And if our head becomes an organ of metabolism, is it possible that our metabolism somehow becomes a sense organ and, if so, for what? And is it perhaps the undulations of the diaphragm that mediate these two states?

I will let these observations rest and echo for now as we move on to the next level.

The Expression of Grief

When we grieve, what is going on at the most basic psychological level? What is the outer layer, the etheric layer, if you will, of this psychological process? What is being *expressed*?

At this most basic level, I believe that we are releasing our attachments to the person which we feel ourselves to have lost. The point is that the person that we are attached to in some way is no longer there "in the form" to which we have become accustomed. This is the key, that there is a loss or dissolution of *form*, which is being experienced in the physical and etheric bodies. This is reflected in the dissolving and re-ordering of the elements of earth, water, air, and warmth, which actually constitute our etheric bodies.

Someone in our lives that gave us a sense of stability and security in the physical world, has been lost. And because of this, the normally secure connection between the physical and etheric bodies is loosened *so that* a re-ordering can come about. In our tears, you could say, lives our etheric and energetic connection to the *form* of the beloved person we have lost. The matter is very complicated, as you will see as we proceed, but it is nonetheless true, I think, that, in the first place, we cry, we grieve, to let go, to try to let go and release that which we feel ourselves to have irrevocably lost and through this process to find ourselves securely connected again to ourselves and to the physical world.

But this process is immeasurably deep and challenging because these attachments live at a far deeper level of our being than we are generally aware of or accustomed to acknowledge. One reason grief often hits so hard and unexpectedly, and can be so challenging to navigate, is that our everyday consciousness in the material world leads us to feel quite separate from the people, places and things of our lives, even those to which we are deeply attached. But in truth, we live and breathe in an etheric matrix that includes our local geography, the weather, our neighborhoods and homes, various institutions and all the people in our lives, whether they live far or near. These are all woven deeply into our etheric bodies and give us our sense of security and embeddedness in the physical world. We are generally unconscious of this reality until we suffer a loss and are thrust into the powerful, rhythmic waves of the etheric body seeking a new equilibrium through the process of grief.

Let me just give you a small example of this from my own experience. At the time of my brother's death he was living in Western Massachusetts in the town of North Adams. But when he died he was on a plane that crashed in Iowa. When I learned of his death I had no idea that he was traveling, and it took me the longest time to accept it in the first 24 hours of his death. "No!" I raged, "my brother is in North Adams, he is NOT ON A PLANE IN FUCKING IOWA!!!" My world, etherically, had been turned upside down.

The Relation of Grief

We have now passed through the outer court of the temple and are ready to approach the inner sanctum, where the deeper mysteries of grief can be found which are so intimate and individual, mighty and complex, that I can only attempt to sketch them here in the broadest outlines. I ask you to please keep this in mind.

Let us begin by asking, what may be going on in the human soul other than feelings of loss, physiological chaotization and etheric disequilibrium? To capture this is challenging because the astral experience represents such a polarity to the etheric experience. One way to describe this polarity is through a comparison of sun and moon. At the physical and etheric level there is a process taking place that could be described as a fading or dying process, a letting go process, a process that is intimately connected to our relationship to the physical world, and as such we could call it a lunar process. Think of the movement of all those fluids through the head! At the astral and I level of our being, however, I would suggest that there is a sun process taking place, we could even go so far as to say there is a kind of sunrise taking place in the human soul—albeit one that can cause the greatest imaginable pain. What is this sunrise?

To put it in the simplest psychological language, we could say that we experience an upwelling of the purest and most profound love for the being that has been lost (or that we are preparing to

lose). Through the very loss of the outward form, like the Druid initiate looking at the sun through the sacred stones of his cromlech, we undergo, often in a dream like state of consciousness, an intimate encounter and even communion with the essence of the person we feel ourselves to have lost. As a result, we feel all the beauty, dignity and significance of this person and what they meant to us in a way that is generally not possible when we were still relating to them with our day to day consciousness. Furthermore, the loosening of the etheric and physical bodies, described earlier, frees up the memories that are imprinted in the etheric body, enhancing the vividness of our memories and the experiences we had of the other. This same loosening also allows the upwelling of love to move through us at a much greater depth, opening pathways into deeper layers of our subconscious.

As a result, we can have the feeling (not necessarily consciously of course) that our body and soul cannot contain this upwelling of love, are too cramped, tight and small. When we try to receive and express the depth of this love our body goes into the convulsions of grief. And in the convulsions, we may then be flooded with the painful awareness of how little of this love and understanding and appreciation actually lived in us while this person was still alive on earth. The deeper content of our love as well as everything in us that stood in the way of the expression of this love can now come together in our soul.

So, we could say that what moves through us during the intensity of grief, and this is often also what actually sets the grief in motion, is both the upwelling of profound love and the pain of unexpressed, unrealized, thwarted or even wounded love and what a profound and terrible pain it can be. For in truth, the outer conditions of our lives, the social customs of our time, and the psychological and karmic challenges faced by so many of us in our relationships, create very few opportunities for the deeper expression or fulfillment of love. The constitution of our physical and etheric bodies alone, conditioned as they are to the demands of our materialistic civilization, create immense obstacles to the expression of the kind of love we are now able to glimpse. And even where there has been a relationship of profound and deep love with the one who has died, we are faced nonetheless with an abyss, through the loss of the beloved in the form we are accustomed to, and thus with the feeling that we can no longer keep loving or sharing love with this person. We are confronted, in other words, with *the existential reality of death*.

This is the crisis toward which the grief process, when it reaches a certain depth, almost inevitably leads it seems to me. For on the one hand, grief opens us to a profound communion with the essence of the person we seem to have lost, but also throws us back on ourselves and reveals to us, in this process, our own failures, resistances, limitations and weaknesses with terrible clarity. And all this, mind you, can happen in the blink of eye while in the throes of intense grief or it can take place over months and years and decades of a gradual processing of grief. And the process is so difficult and painful because this single grief, through the inherent logic of the soul life, inevitably begins to merge and blend with all the unresolved griefs that live in our soul and thus with what certain psychologists have come to call *the primal wound*.

The *primal wound*, as described, for example, by Firman and Gila, in their book on the subject, is a wound to the psyche that lives in each of us and which has its origin in the failures of our childhood caregivers to truly encounter our deeper spiritual nature and meet our genuine developmental needs. As a result, according to Firman and Gila “our intrinsic, authentic self is plunged into the experience of annihilation and non-being;” we experience “a break in the

intricate web of relationships in which we live, move and have our being...we become strangers to ourselves struggling for survival in a seemingly alien world.”⁴

This is strong language and some of us may not feel that the imperfections of our caregivers were so extreme or led to such deep trauma. And yet, I would suggest, anyone who has undertaken a deep spiritual practice inevitably discovers these deep wounds in themselves, however harmonious they feel their childhood may have been. There is a deep mystery here having to do with the deeper origins of psychological wounding and trauma. In truth, I would suggest, it is impossible to fully make sense of the depth of the wounds that lives in the human psyche, no matter how terrible one’s childhood, without also drawing on an understanding of the long spiritual biography of the human being.

From the perspective of spiritual science, these so called primal wounds can be traced back much further than childhood, for example, to the pain of our departure from the spiritual world on the path to incarnation; or to various past-life traumas we brought with us as our karmic debt to be worked through in this lifetime; or to our participation in the fall of humanity in ancient Lemuria; or even to our experience of the fall of the angels on ancient moon or to the “primal exclusion” event that took place for certain spiritual beings on ancient Saturn.⁵

Dr. James Dyson has the used term “sacred wound” to refer to these precursor wounding events that are known in esoteric traditions and are revealed through modern spiritual research. For reasons that will become apparent later in this essay, I would like to refer to these as *the mythic wound* or *the cosmic wounding processes*. Whether we choose to think of these realities more in psychological terms or more in esoteric terms is not of primary importance, however. What is essential is to recognize that the experience of grief has a unique capacity to evoke these wounds in the soul and that our singular griefs can thus very quickly draw us into and call to the surface much deeper griefs living subconsciously within our being—a reality only heightened by the processes taking place in our physical and etheric bodies described above. It is this fact that ultimately makes the grief process so very complex and challenging and at the same time, so very full of potential.

In our tears, therefore, lives not only the release of etheric attachments to the form of the beloved person we have lost, but also the deepest and most profound love for the essence of that person, together with a consciousness of our own failure or inability to express that love in our day to day lives, or put differently you could say, together with a consciousness of our own “non-being.” A great deal of grief, in this sense, whether we are aware of it or not, is really grief over ourselves, over the *loss of ourselves* in the course of our life and in the course of our *lives*, i.e. in the course of our many incarnations.

Grief is thus a profound humbling, a profound emptying out of the instinctive forces of pride in the human soul. Just as the physical-etheric level of grief releases us, you could say, from

⁴ Page 2, [The Primal Wound: A Transpersonal View of Trauma, Addiction and Growth](#), by John Firman and Ann Gila

⁵ This is not even to mention to the impact of the current state of human civilization on the soul of the developing human being in this incarnation or the impact of the unconscious “crossing of the threshold” which humanity is currently undergoing.

Ahrimanic toxins, rigidities and attachments to form, so the astral level of grief pierces through the Luciferic veils of pride, arrogance and illusion that live in the human soul allowing us to feel the reality of our weaknesses, of our primal and mythic wounds, much more deeply than is normally possible. It is as though a tender compassionate light of being from our authentic self is shone into our sense of non-being and we are permitted to release long pent up feelings of pain associated with own challenge to incarnate the capacities and ideals of our authentic self. In fact, in our tears live remarkable healing forces, forces of deepest love and compassion, not only for the person we have lost, but also for ourselves and even, as we shall see later, for the world and for the earth herself.

At the astral level of our being, then, grief can bring us into *relation* with two very different realities. On the one hand, it can lead us to an experience of beholding and being beheld by, the essence of the person we feel ourselves to have lost and can awaken through this process wellsprings of deepest love. On the other hand, it can lead us into relation with the primal psychological wounds of our childhood and the mythic or cosmic wounding processes that stand behind and create the context for these. In this contrast, this dynamic tension, you could say, between the authentic self and the false self, between fulness and emptiness, love and hate, being and non-being, we can be faced in a most dramatic way with the existential reality of our lives and the life of the one we are grieving, whose lifelong destiny struggle to express and realize their potential often stands before us in a most potent and poignant way in and through the grief experience.

Whether we live more wakefully or more in a dream-like state through these experiences, they are nonetheless a shattering experience for the human soul. Thus, we not only grieve the “loss of another” and the “loss of ourselves,” but in the very act of intense grief, we “lose ourselves;” our I pours out of us in the flood of our tears and the convulsions of our breath, for if our I did not leave us to some degree, the other members of our being could not enact, with instinctual wisdom, the powerful healing and regulatory processes we know as grief. And this is why in grief we lose our uprightness and seek out the I being of others (and draw the I-being of others toward us), to receive and uphold us. We make a powerful inward and outward movement toward the *other* and toward *the earth* as a source of healing and uprightness. Or we could even say, the grief experience opens us to, and leads us to seek out, a new quality of I-ness or selfhood.

The Call of Grief

Clearly, much of what been described that already bears within it a strong influence of the I of the human being. For example, the communion with the essence of another being and the upwelling of love that results from this communion, I would suggest, takes place, in that “organ” of the astral body that is most connected to the working of the I being, namely in what anthroposophy calls the “consciousness soul” of the human being and from there radiates it influence into the other members of our being. In truth, as we shall see, we can find the signature of the I throughout the processes described above.

Nonetheless, everything that has been described up to this point are largely processes that at least *appear* to be “set in motion” from outside by the loss event and that work in us and upon us like a force of nature. We do not create or call forth these experiences from within but are rather caught up in them. This, of course, is one the defining aspects of most human emotions, namely, that we experience them at the naïve level of our consciousness, as arising *purely in response* to

something happening outside ourselves. In other words, we tend to feel a high degree of passivity or even powerlessness in the face of our emotions and the events that lead to them.

To begin to speak of the working of the I in the grief process, however, and to more fully awaken the I in the grief process, requires us to consider the call or invitation that the grief experience is bringing us to awaken our self from passivity to activity. While the process of grieving is impacted by the degree of passivity or activity we bring to it, grieving alone cannot create this activity in us, though it does invite it with great drama and persistence. For without the active working of the I, the grief experiences I have described so far cannot reach their fulfillment. It is like a plant that can produce leaves and flowers but cannot produce fruit or seed. The grief process has a certain trajectory, or we could also say, it has certain emergent properties or possibilities, but we cannot follow that trajectory or realize those possibilities without beginning to listen and awaken and respond to the many invitations that grief is making to our individuality.

Describing these invitations requires us to begin to turn our attention to some degree outside of the archetypal grief experiences that I have thus far been describing. We must move beyond it because for the I to bring the grief processes to its fulfillment it must undertake things outside of and alongside of the actual experience of grieving. This is inherent in the nature of the I being, namely that it's deeper nature lives to a large degree outside of our day to day experiences and must be invited into these through a special effort of one kind or another, for example, through deep reflection, through counseling and psychotherapy. or through spiritual practices of one kind or another. Nonetheless, all the invitations that I will describe are pre-figured in and set in motion by the archetypal 'convulsive' grief experience I have just described. The question now is whether the I can take hold of these invitations and make them into conscious processes and thus lead them to their fulfillment.

Below then, I will attempt to describe what I have come to recognize as seven *calls or invitations* to our I being brought to us by loss and grief. The first four invitations are easier to recognize and are addressed, in one form or another, in much of the literature on grief. The final three invitations represent emergent properties of the grief process that are less commonly recognized or understood but which are essential, I believe, to a full realization or fulfillment of the grief experience.

1. *The invitation to unite feminine and masculine qualities in the grieving process*

Though I said above that grief is something that we are caught up in like a force of nature, in response to the loss event happening outside ourselves, the truth is that we are only caught up in it if are able to surrender to it. And the reality is, many of us are not so able and must work long and hard *with their I* to become able to in turn *surrender their I* in this way. For many, the habits of their upbringing or the pain of unresolved emotions with the one who has died, are too deep to be able to open to the powerful emotions that arise through grief.

This is familiar territory for therapists and counselors who may work with a client for years as they clear the obstacles and gain the strength to be able to feel their love for another and in doing so enter the healing waters of grief. In loss, there is thus a calling to learn how to surrender to our love for another and feel and release the pain associated with their and our many failures to express that love.

This challenge to surrender and become vulnerable arises most commonly, I would suggest, from those with a more masculine temperament, whatever their gender—that is, those with an etheric and astral body that are more tightly bound to the physical body, and who thus have a more natural attachment to thinking, to form and to the physical world.

A very different challenge faces those with a more feminine temperament, again, whatever their gender—that is, those whose etheric and astral bodies are more loosely connected to the physical body and who thus live more naturally in the feeling body. Here the capacity for surrender works in a deep and instinctive way but can therefore present obstacles to move past the grief experience and begin to integrate and make sense of it with the force of the I being. Here the challenge is to be able to allow the powerful emotions and feelings for the one who has been lost, or the pain of the loss itself, to subside, just as happens naturally in the grief experience itself. When we allow our feelings and emotions to rest, we can then practice looking calmly and objectively at our self and at what the loss is calling for as new qualities of selfhood. We could call this learning to develop the strength of detachment.

Balancing and harmonizing these two qualities of vulnerability and detachment, of surrendering the self and awakening to the self, are key to our ability to move through the whole grief process in a healthy way.

2. The invitation to examine, enlarge, deepen and refashion our worldview

As pointed out above, grief confronts us with the existential realities of death and loss, of fullness and emptiness, and our ability to move through grief is intimately connected to whether we have a view of the universe in which death and loss have a meaningful role or not. Or whether our worldview allows for the notion that love and relationship can continue after death. If we believe life has no inherent meaning, then the death of a beloved can have the impact of hardening our feeling against such a purposeless universe and against love itself. This challenge to our worldview is further heightened in cases where the loss has a seeming tragic or senseless aspect. Even people with a deep religious worldview often find themselves asking, in the face of such events “How can God allow such things?”

Loss and grief thus set in motion processes of reflection and transformation within our I being that can last a lifetime and that often become the focus of countless hours of consultation with priests, counselors and therapists. The deep instinct in most people that love and relationships do not ultimately die, urges them on again and again to this deep reexamination and refashioning of their worldview.

This is a continuation of the purging of toxins from the head that takes place naturally in deep grieving. Only now, the process must be raised into consciousness and taken hold of actively by the I. Then we can begin to excrete and metabolize dead thought forms and belief systems and make room for new ways of thinking about the universe and our role in it.

Even those of us who bring to grief a more sophisticated spiritual worldview, will find that the process quickly reveals the many layers of our being that have not yet been touched or transformed by our conscious worldview. The death of my brother, for example, which took place after I had already been studying anthroposophy for seven years, revealed deep levels of rage I felt toward God and the universe that I was not aware of at the time and which were blocking a

fuller expression of my I being in my day to day life, not to mention a fuller embodiment of my spiritual ideals.

3. The invitation to develop gratitude and appreciation for the people in our lives

Grief awakens in us a profound appreciation for the person we have lost. I remember when my beloved, grandmother died at age 99, I began to write her a poem, and in the writing of the poem, realized the profound impact she had on me as a child. I realized that through her extraordinary dignity, gentleness and reverence, the beautiful way she accepted and lived in her aging body and radiated light through her milky, wrinkled skin, she had represented to me, more than any experience I ever had in a church, the real essence of devotion. In the shower the morning after I learned of her death, the first line of the poem came to me “Nana, you were the prophet of my childhood heart,” and I began to cry and continued crying as I later worked on the poem as memory after memory began to flood over me of my experiences of her as a child.

Grief thus brings us a powerful impetus to remember and reflect on the significance of the people in our lives, to realize all they have meant to us, all they have contributed to our becoming. and to begin to share that appreciation with the people in our lives when they are still alive. Practicing this with the living people in our lives not only enriches our lives immensely but also has another remarkable impact. For when one of these people in our lives, with whom we have made the special effort to recognize and appreciate in the way described above, passes away, then the grief we feel at their death can have a very different character; it can become more of an overflowing of love and less of an overflowing of pain and remorse.

4. The invitation to commit or re-commit ourselves to a deep process of healing and self-transformation and seek the support from others we need for this process

Deep losses and intense grief bring to the surface not only feelings of love and appreciation but also our deepest struggles and traumas, our deepest sense of non-being. The whole experience can turn our lives upside down and leave us feeling lost, wounded and even destabilized, a victim of forces beyond our control. Fortunately, these experiences often come in association with a new and heightened experience of what it could mean to truly love ourselves and others, and with the feeling of having our deepest wounds touched by the healing waters of compassion.

When I was grieving for my brother, for example, I became painfully aware of my unhealthy disconnection from the physical world and my physical body. I realized I was using prayer and meditation to avoid a host of festering wounds in my psyche that I did not want to face and that were blocking my ability to realize my many hopes and ideals. At the same time, the grief experience gave me glimmers of a new way of being in the world and I felt strengthened and encouraged to finally break through patterns that had held me back for years. Just as in the grief experience, we are led to seek out the support and uprightness of others, so did these experiences invite me to also seek out help for my problems in ways I had not been willing to do before. Thus, began a long path in which I had to learn, in my conscious I, to carry out healing processes that happen unconsciously in the grief process, processes such as inviting my higher or authentic self to help me shine a light into my lower or false self, so that I could see clearly my soul distortions and the parts of myself that were in need of healing, and release pent up suffering carried by these lost or exiled parts of the self.

Moving through grief can thus requires a mighty act of will, a resolve by the I, day in and day out, to embrace the journey loss has sent us on into the underworld of our primal and mythic wounds, to undertake the healing of lost and wounded parts of ourselves, and to seek the support we need for this process from the I being of others, so that we can learn to love and live in healthier ways.

5. *The invitation to reconnect at a higher level with the one who has died and gain deeper insights into the mystery of destiny*

Unfortunately, in most of the psychological literature, we find grief associated, again and again with loss, accepting loss and coming to terms with loss, etc. But as I have attempted to show here, the inner content of grief is actually suffused with a profound experience of connection and communion with the person we appear to have lost. This experience points to a higher possibility, through our work with grief, to forge a new connection with the one we appear to have lost. It is not happenstance that the convulsions of grief have a certain similarity to the labor pains of birth. In grief, you could say, we “release from our loins” the old form of relationship we had with our beloved, we release our old images and unresolved feelings with that person, not simply so we can move on with our lives, but so that we can reconnect and reunite with this person at a higher level, in a new form of relationship. We are trying to give birth to something new.

This invitation, however, requires of us a worldview and a spiritual practice, or a natural intuitive capacity, that allows us to open our hearts and minds to this possibility. Rudolf Steiner points out that it is a great source of pain and disappointment for many souls after death, to discover that those on earth whom they loved, are not aware that their loving relationship can continue. And we know, of course, that it is also a great source of pain for those on earth who are trapped in a worldview or soul disposition that does not allow them to open to this possibility. In the literature of anthroposophy, one finds tremendous guidance and inspiration for establishing this new kind of relationship with those who have died. What is less appreciated in this community, however, are the many ways in which deep grieving can support and assist us in this process.

When my brother died, for example, I began immediately, whenever I was not in the throes of intense grief, to work with meditations designed to support my brother on his spiritual journey and awaken the possibility for a continued relationship between us after his death. I experienced that the alternation from grieving to meditating was like a higher kind of breathing, a swinging back and forth between *catharsis* and *illumination*, that ultimately led to *union*. For through this effort I slowly but with great certainty became aware that my relationship with my brother was really just beginning, that I had not really known him fully when he was alive, but that I could now begin to truly know him and love him and even work with him. In the coming years many profound *exchanges* of encouragement, love and knowledge took place between us and continue to this day. He has become, you could say, an intimate part of my community of friends and colleagues.

Through this process I also gained deep insights into my brother’s destiny. In reviewing his life, for example, I saw the signature of his death already in the character of his whole biography. It became clear to me that he had agreed, before birth, to be open to the possibility of such a death, in order to make significant strides in his own spiritual development but also as a loving

sacrifice for the earth. I began to realize that his death was not a random *accident* but rather his *destiny*.

By working in this way, two of the greatest “stings” of death can begin to be transformed by the human being, the *sting* of the loss of connection to the beloved and the *sting* of the seeming randomness and tragedy of many deaths. All this, however, requires enormous effort on the part of the human I. In this light, perhaps we could even consider a new definition of grief: namely, *that grief is the process the human being goes through in order to reconnect with that which appears to have been irretrievably lost.*

6. *The invitation to develop a sense organ for the suffering in the world and for our own deeper purpose in life*

We have spoken very concretely about the grief experience but only abstractly about the loss event itself, which is always and in very case utterly unique. Earlier I said that our I being lives largely outside of our day-to-day consciousness and thus must be cultivated through special efforts alongside of our usual responsibilities in life. One such effort is to pay special attention to what comes toward us in our lives, the people and events that find their way to us, seemingly through no effort on our part. The major losses in our lives represent just these kinds of events.

Paradoxically, it is by looking to the unique character of our losses that a path is opened beyond the personal and private dimension of our pain to that which connects us to the wider world and calls us be in empathetic relationship with the wider world. If we lose a parent to Alzheimer’s, for example, our loss has a unique character which is inextricably tied up with a whole community of people who have also suffered through this experience. We have probably also come to know a great deal about Alzheimer’s by caring for our aging parent and thus have formed a kind of karmic connection with the disease itself. Thus, grief can awaken empathy, connect us with a wider community and with the collective karma of our time, which in turn can help us find or quicken our sense of purpose and mission in life.

As I grieved my brother’s death, for example, I became deeply interested in the drama of his plane crash and the significance of his death in a cornfield in Iowa. I felt the whole event had some kind for message for me. Through this exploration, there awoke in me an interest in the history of agriculture and a growing empathetic awareness of the devastating impacts of industrial agriculture on the earth and on the invisible life forces of the land. Around this same time, I became a member of one of the first community supported agriculture (CSA) projects in the US, and this experience further quickened my interest in agriculture and the potential for new social and economic forms that could support organic and biodynamic farms. Long story short, these experiences ultimately led me into a 20+ year career working in the field of local, sustainable, organic and biodynamic agriculture (ten years of which actually took place in the state of Iowa). By embracing the grief process, while tuning into the deeper mystery and signature of my brother’s death, I found my way to my life’s purpose.

My story may sound unique but truly it is not. Think of Candace Lightner who founded *Mothers Against Drunk Driving* (MADD) after her 13-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver. Today there is a chapter of MADD in every state in the US and every province of Canada, fueled by the passion of others those who have suffered similar losses. For Candace, grief became a doorway to action and a life of meaningful purpose, that has had a profound impact on the world. There are

untold stories of a similar nature. To fulfill its mission, the wound of our losses and grief must be transformed into a sense organ that opens us to the suffering in the world around us, which in turn can open a doorway to our own deeper purpose in life.

7. *The invitation to forge a new relationship with the earth as a living being and with the mysteries of grief as they live in the world soul*

When we grief something mysterious takes place in our relationship with the earth which I have not yet tried to describe. There are several aspects to this. On the one hand, when looked at with spiritual vision, I believe we discover that the tears we shed and the convulsions we undergo in deep grief, have a significance not only for ourselves but for the earth herself. Rigid, ahrimanic forces in the aura of the earth are loosened up, the false light of lucifer that darkens human souls is transmuted and the light and love of the Christ forces within the earth are strengthened and enhanced. This is true especially in the case of the larger collective events of grief which I will discuss in the fourth part of this study, but I believe every grief, in a small way, is also such a gift to the earth.

But there is more. I suggested above that our I somewhat leaves us during moments of intense grief but if so, where does it go? I believe the movement of our body toward the earth points to the answer, namely, that our I enters into a union with the I being of the earth herself, who for a time holds us in loving embrace. This is the source, I think, of the *light of being that can shine into our sense of non-being*, during grief. There is a profound giving and receiving that takes place during grief between the soul of the human being and the soul of the earth.

Grief thus invites us to raise an unconscious communion with the earth into consciousness and become residents of the earth in a new way. One day, for example, while still grieving for my brother, I read a newspaper article about a number of people killed in an act of violence in the Middle East and this led me to a very profound experience. I felt for the first time the reality that all around those people who had been killed, there was a constellation of family members and friends, of real people, who had just been thrown into the depths of grief just as my family had been. This was not simply an intellectual inference but rather a deeply felt experience.

Meditating on these experiences later, I began to feel the *movements* of grief all around the planet, like furrows being plowed into the etheric folds of the earth, by the tragic events of our time. I realized that at any given moment certain parts of the planet undergoing natural and man-made disasters were being engulfed in these waves of grief, which, as I have shown, are also waves of deepest love, love born of tragedy.

My grief, you could say, was awakening a new organ of cognition in me, an organ for grief itself as it lives objectively in the world soul as well as an organ for the planet as a living, sentient being that is undergoing immense suffering in our time under the weight of human error. As St. Paul said "the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth..." Grief can thus bring us in intimate contact with the with the suffering, the labor pains, the evolving spiritual intentions of the earth as living being.

When we seek, through spiritual inquiry, to understand why tragic events that take human life happen, we discover that tragedy is always the result of a lack of free-willed, conscious, spiritual

development on the part of human beings.⁶ If enough human beings would rise to the occasion of the spiritual callings of our time, and in so doing, begin to guide the cultural, social and economic life of humanity in a healthy direction, tragic events such as wars, accidents and even natural disasters would begin to decrease. This is a fundamental law of human evolution.

It is never the will of the spiritual world that tragic events happen; God does not punish humanity. Rather, such events become tragically *inevitable* when human beings do not learn to transform their egoism into selfless courage for the good.

Thus, we bring these events upon ourselves but in doing so, we also gain the impetus we need, through grief, to move out of our passivity and egoism. Through loss and grief, the earth receives the nourishment she needs that would ideally have come through conscious spiritual development and conscious deeds of healing. And we receive the lessons we need to awaken from our slumber and carry out deeds of healing that carry within them the moral equivalent of grief itself, that is, that have the power to free ourselves, our communities and the earth from Ahrimanic demons and Luciferic interference and widen the circle and strengthen the power of love in the world. Surely this call resounds to us from each and every grief in our lives and from the grief of the earth itself. Exactly how each of us chooses to enact this call is utterly individual.

The Sacred Wound ⁷

What I have tried to show in this essay, is that grief is as an instinctive regulatory process of the human being that helps us manage, on the one hand, the disequilibrium that the loss event creates in our etheric body, and on the other hand, the extremes of being and non-being, love and hate, authentic self and false self that rise up in us through the experience of loss in our astral body. By taking up the call, the invitations of grief, we can raise this incredible wisdom into consciousness through the power of our I and learn to embody it in our day to day lives. In this way, we can begin to gradually transform the primal and mythic wounds in us into a sacred wound, a wound that unites us with the suffering and compassion of the world soul, the divine Sophia, and with the healing power of the world I, the planetary logos, the Risen One. Though much psychological literature and popular spirituality today are infused with the concept of *wholeness*, we do well to remember that the wounds of our many losses are not meant to be dissolved or transcended, but rather transformed into organs of empathy, healing and courageous, love imbued deeds of service to the world.

⁶ Keep in mind that from a certain standpoint death itself is such a tragedy that emerged in the course of evolution and thus every death, even those by so called "natural causes" confronts us with this mystery.

⁷ In pre-Christian times, the word sacred was used to connote the working of divine forces into earthly life in a manner that was free of, or unsullied by, the flaws of the emerging human I. In the age of the consciousness soul, I believe, the word sacred should connote the working of divine forces in concert or in collaboration with, the awakened human I. With all due respect to my friend and teacher Dr. Dyson, I have thus chosen to use the term *Sacred Wound* in a slightly different manner than he, but fully compatible, I believe with his deeper intentions, as I hope this essay has shown.