Mourning Sickness: The Politicizations of Grief

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In this paper, I propose that the politicization of grief falls into 3 categories of what I have termed different types of Mourning Sickness. In Mourning Sickness Type I, the politicization of grief functions to discipline the individual mourner’s body into a productive, functioning, and contributing member of a capitalistic society. Moreover, I argue that the individualist ethos that pathologizes grief neuters the rage that can come with mourning and turns the gaze away from social injustices such as poverty, imprisonment, and opportunity gaps that are caused by state neglect. In Mourning Sickness Type II, I suggest that the politicization of grief is about consciously manipulating individual and collective grief in the service of nationalism and military power. The manipulation of grief on this level includes the explicit links made between loss and grief and justification for war, aggression, and violence, but also includes the distinctions made between whose lives are deemed grievable and whose lives are considered worthless and unmournable. Both Mourning Sickness Types I and II are of the pathological variety urgently requiring academic and public critique. In the last type of Mourning Sickness, I suggest that grief is also politicized when it is activated as a motivator toward a social justice agenda that includes peace, reconciliation, nonviolence, and positive social change on behalf of individuals, communities, and nations.

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Grief, the intensely painful experience that results when a meaningful loss has occurred, is widely considered to be a universal phenomenon, but the expression of mourning is culturally, historically, geographically, and politically situated (Granek, 2008, 2010, 2013a, 2013b). Grief can include thoughts and feelings, as well as physical responses. Mental manifestations of grief can include disbelief, anxiety, tension, or pain. Emotional manifestations of grief can include sadness, longing, loneliness, sorrow, guilt, anger, and sometimes relief. Physical manifestations of grief can include shortness of breath, feelings of emptiness, muscle weakness, and changes in appetite and sleep. Behavioral manifestations might include crying, talking about the deceased, irritability, or over- or underactivity. Grief has always been policed in one form or another (Holst-Warhaft, 2000; Walter, 2000). In every society, grieving has been regulated in terms of duration, modes of expression, and rituals and traditions around how to mark and mourn loss and death (Gilbert, 2006). Indeed, because grief is so intense, volatile, unpredictable, and all-encompassing, every known society, including ancient biblical ones, have considered the bereaved to be in a special state requiring extra care, direction, and containment (Holst-Warhaft, 2000). The expression of grief is always mediated by one’s social context and is always political. On this, the feminist philosopher Butler (2009) noted,

"Open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential. . . . Whether we are speaking about open grief or outrage, we are talking about affective responses that are highly regulated by regimes of power and sometimes subject to explicit censorship." (p. 39)

This, in combination with the fact that grief is a powerful experience that cracks us open and leaves us immensely vulnerable, makes it a particularly interesting emotion to study in the context of politics. Indeed, as I will show in this paper, given the centrality of grief in the political realm, it is striking how little attention has been paid to the uses and manipulations of this experience in the political arena.

In this paper I examine three domains of the politicization of grief. The first has to do with the psychologization/medicalization of grief and the ways in which individualizing this experience serves to reinforce and encourage the neoliberal 21st century ideal of the productive, consuming citizen. I argue that framing grief within a psychological/medical frame damps the rage that often accompanies widespread losses of all kinds. This includes “natural and expected” deaths, but also deaths caused by murder, and other losses that are a product of social injustice such as poverty, imprisonment, violence, lack of education, and other opportunity gaps that are rampant in Western industrialized societies. The second politicization of grief occurs at the national level where governments actively and consciously manipulate and fan the flames of grief in the service of political aims including instigating or perpetuating war and/or keeping up a nationalistic military mentality to lay the foundation for future military invasions. Finally, in the third instance of the politicization of grief, I discuss the activation of grief as a force toward social activism that can ignite social revolutions and social activism in the service of a social justice agenda.

Within each of these intertwined layers of the political uses of grief, I argue that grief can always be mobilized either toward, or...
away from justice. That is, the mourning sickness can either go in the direction of the pathological uses of grief—individualizing/medicalizing losses, using grief to justify and instigate national wars and terror—or toward the mourning sickness that accompanies gestation, growth, and new life—using grief in the service of social justice agendas including social equality, peace, and collective activist communities seeking political and national change.

**Mourning Sickness Type I: Pathologizing Grief**

Medicalizing or psychologizing grief means turning what was once considered a normal, human reaction to the loss of a loved one, or in some cases, grief caused by other losses, into a mental or medical disorder that necessitates psychological or medical intervention (see Granek, 2008, 2010, 2013a, 2013b for a historical, cultural, and social account of the ways in which grief has become pathologized in the last century). What is important to delineate here is that in Western industrialized societies, grief is considered to be a psychological condition and process that has a starting point, a middle point, and an end point. The task of the griever is to do their “grief work” and get back to the job of living full, productive lives as soon as possible. If the griever is not able to “move on” fast enough or “well enough,” it is their responsibility to seek professional help which often takes the shape of a therapist or a prescription for medication. This view is so widely held, a form of grief was recently considered for inclusion in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-V; APA, 2013). Indeed, the American Psychiatric Association has now removed the bereavement exclusion from the major depressive episode diagnosis, meaning that anyone showing sufficient symptoms of clinical depression after a major loss can be diagnosed with clinical depression even if these symptoms are caused by bereavement related losses and even if only two weeks have passed since the loss (see Granek, 2013a). Although the bereavement exclusion has some benefits for mourners including providing essential access to mental health services that would not be accessible to clients without a formal DSM diagnosis (Granek, 2013a), the increasing pathologization of grief has consequences for mourners.

In this frame where all grief is considered potentially pathological, some grief is described as “excessive,” “out of the norm,” and a “mental disorder” (Forstmeier & Maercker, 2007; Horowitz, 2005; Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001; Prigerson et al., 2009; Shear & Frank, 2006; Shear et al., 2011). The extreme end of pathologizing grief is the diagnosis of Complicated Grief (CG), sometimes referred to as traumatic grief, prolonged grief, or pathological grief (Stroebe & Schut, 2005). CG is a proposed diagnostic category for the DSM (Forstmeier & Maercker, 2007; Prigerson et al., 1995, 1997a, 1997b; Shear et al., 2011). Although CG is currently not an official diagnosis, it is widely used by researchers and clinicians alike, and many people are diagnosed with pathological grief and treated with medication and/or target therapies for their condition (see Granek, 2013a for a review of pathological grief in the psychological and medical literature).

These cultural messages about grief originated because of several interlocking discursive movements in the last 150 years. The first contextual factor had to do with the shift toward a modernist society in which the emphasis is on productivity, efficiency, science, logic, and most importantly individualism (Gergen, 1991, 1992). As such, modernism has developed in tandem with a decline in religion and a belief in science instead of God (Bauman, 1992; Gorer, 1967). Whereas it used to be the case that religion and traditional societies offered social processes around mourning that provided rituals and practices to deal with death and grief, the modernist focus on the self has left people bereft of meaning, community, and structure with which to manage grief and has placed the onus of responsibility for managing one’s feelings on the individual self.

Within this modernist paradigm, Western industrialized society has also become more focused on “progress” and on the pursuit of happiness than any other previous generation. This intense focus on progress and happiness has left in its wake an intolerance for the slow process of mourning. As early as 1967, Gorer noted the following:

One reason for the disavowal of mourning in the United States over the last 40 years may have been the increasing pressure of what Leites and Wolfenstein called “fun morality,” the ethical duty to enjoy oneself (to prove that one is psychologically well-adjusted) and the generous imperative to do nothing which might diminish the enjoyment of others, so that the right to the pursuit of happiness has been turned into an obligation. Public and even private mourning may be felt as contravening this ethic. (p. x)

The “right” to be happy, as Gorer (1967) wisely noted, has turned into an obligation that has no tolerance for the time and space required of mourning and the emotional intensity that grief entails. Aries (1974) argued that this peculiar Western attitude, which involves the denial of death and grieving in order to preserve happiness, or at the very least the appearance of happiness, was born in the United States around the beginning of the 20th century. Aries (1974) noted:

The cause of [death and grief denial] is at once apparent: the need for happiness—the moral duty and the social obligation to contribute to the collective happiness by avoiding any cause for sadness or boredom, by appearing to be always happy, even if in the depths of despair. By showing the least sign of sadness, one sins against happiness, threatens it, and society then resists losing its raison d’être. (p. 94)

Cable (1998) similarly noted, that as North Americans, “we live in the days of fast food, high speed modems, supersonic transports, and cellular telephones. Everything and everyone must operate at top efficiency. Mourning is seen as serving no useful purpose and simply getting in the way of our progress” (p. 63). The expression of grief within this paradigm is considered a failure to adapt to this modern, happy, and productive society. The only solution to this problem of adjustment is to seek professional help to get back on track.

**In Service of What?**

I underscore the discursive complexities of grieving in modern Western industrialized cultures to view the pathologization of grief within a wider social and political lens. I contend that pathologizing grief within this first political context has to do with how individualizing this experience serves to reinforce and encourage the neoliberal 21st century ideal of the productive, consuming citizen held entirely responsible for themselves and their actions. Indeed, the specific criteria of what constitutes pathology are less important than the notion that one can evaluate one’s grief on a
Continuum of normality/abnormality at all. Regardless of how grief has become pathologized, the very notion that it is something that can go away, and that the individual mourner is responsible for monitoring themselves for any deviance from the “norm,” has social and political ramifications for the public’s understanding of their grief (Granek, 2008, 2010; Granek & O’Rourke, 2011). The ideal mourner within this capitalistic paradigm is expected to keep functioning and producing in spite of their emotional pain (Harris, 2009).

On this, Horwitz and Wakefield (2007) have noted that North America is experiencing a pervasive “loss of sadness” in the culture. They suggest that sadness, including grief, is no longer tolerated in society and the pressure to be “up to speed” and “on track” is so immense people are medicating themselves by the millions to appear normal. Cushman (1990) and Gergen (1991) have similarly argued that North Americans are distracted from their unhappiness and sadness by being encouraged to fill up on various diversions that can be purchased. The sheer amount of things people consume, from food, to people (including empathetic therapists), to goods (such as antidepressives), to images, all contribute to the smooth running of the economy. In the context of grieving, the pressure to be happy, productive, and functioning leaves little room for sadness, and because this is not a demand that most bereaved people can accommodate, many feel a sense of shame and embarrassment at their inadequacy. Indeed, this is the quintessential experience of contemporary grievers. Embarrassment at one’s inadequacy, or feeling like one is not functioning up to speed, has now become part and parcel of the grieving experience, leading many to seek professional help (Granek, 2008). In the first instance then, pathologizing grief serves to reinforce a political ideal of the “good” functioning and productive citizen that ensures the continued engagement and contribution to the market economy.

In the second instance, pathologizing grief also serves to dampen the rage that frequently accompanies losses of all kinds. This includes “natural and expected” deaths, but also deaths caused by various kinds of social injustices, including murder, but also those caused by poverty, imprisonment, violence, lack of education, and other opportunity gaps that are rampant in Western industrialized market-based societies. For example, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world with over two billion people serving time in jails (Wakefield & Uggen, 2010). A disproportional amount of these prisoners are African American citizens and it is well established that racial injustice (e.g., disproportionate arrests, policing, and more severe sentencing of African Americans; educational, vocational, promotion opportunity gaps for people of color, etc.) is responsible for this fact (Guerrino, Harrison & Sabol, 2011). Moreover, in the United States close to 60% of the population will spend one or more years below the poverty line at some point in their lives (Hacker, 2006). In 2012, the United States Census Bureau reported that 16% of the population lived in poverty and 20% of these citizens were children.

I bring up these examples—a few out of an endless list of injustices—and these statistics to make the point that grief is a much wider and much more social concept than we typically allow for. This is especially true when we start to consider grief in the political context. Whereas we often think of grief (especially within the academic domain) as a response to the death of a loved one, imprisonment and the subsequent splitting of families and hope for a future that comes with it, and poverty and the subsequent pain of going without are two out of infinite unjust social and political conditions that leave millions of people bereft and suffering and urgently need to be considered within the grief domain. In these instances of terrible injustice, pathologizing and individualizing grief serves to turn the gaze of the mourner inward toward what is wrong with them for not moving on and “succeeding” in their lives, instead of outward toward the social conditions that have caused these losses.

This phenomenon of pathologizing individual mourners for losses caused by political injustices has become distressingly and increasingly widespread in recent years. For example, the construct of pathological grief has been used to assess Bosnian refugees (Silove, Momartin, Marnane, Steel, & Manicavasagar, 2010), among African Americans in the United States (Cruz et al., 2007), and among orphaned or widowed survivors of the Rwandan genocide (Schaal, Dusingizemungu, Jacob, Neuner & Elbert, 2012). The focus on the individual mourner’s grief at the expense of the social conditions that caused the losses they are mourning delegitimizes the anger of the mourner, places the focus on the individual body of the griever, and effectively takes away attention from the wider social forces that are producing these losses en masse.

Mourning Sickness Type II: Nationalizing Grief

The writing of this article coincided with the 18th national Israeli Memorial Day for Yitzchak Rabin in 2013. Rabin was a beloved politician who promoted peace between Israelis and Palestinians and was regarded by the nation as a beacon of hope toward peace and reconciliation. He was assassinated in 1995 by Yigal Amir, a right-wing Jewish Orthodox man who opposed the signing of the Oslo accords. In October 2013, the fliers advertising the event to be held in Rabin Square in central Tel Aviv (the physical place where he was assassinated) were posted around the city in the form of large banners or distributed in smaller flier versions to people in the streets. The slogan read, “Remembering the murder. Fighting for democracy.”

The complexity of this slogan in the context of this particular figure and the way in which he died is beyond the scope of this paper to address; however, what is worth noting here is that the “fighting for democracy,” in this particular context, has as double meaning for Israeli citizens struggling with both internal and external conflicts when it comes to democratic practices. The “internal” in this case has to do with the intense conflicts between the Orthodox right-wing political parties metaphorically represented by the fanatical Amir, and the large proportion of secular Israelis opposing religious limitations on their freedoms (e.g., the right for civil marriage vs. marriage through the Rabbinate, the right to have commerce on the Sabbath, etc.). In the second instance, the “fighting for democracy” has to do with the Palestinian/Israeli conflict and the widespread belief among the nation that with Rabin’s death came a profound loss of hope for peace. In both cases, the link between remembering the murder and grieving the loss is intimately bound together with struggling for political democracy in both the internal and external realms of Israeli society.

The nationalization of grief for political purposes runs rampant in Israeli society. Indeed, Israel has a yearly cycle of such events...
whereby the government actively and consciously manipulates and fans the flames of grief in the service of political aims including perpetuating, or in some cases instigating, the conflict and keeping up a nationalistic military mentality to lay the foundation for future military invasions. Unlike in the United States where Memorial Day is often a day of mourning primarily for soldiers, veterans, and their families (while the rest of the nation shops the sales), Israeli Memorial Day is a national day of intense collective grief. Absolutely nothing is open and the majority of people do not work. Two sirens are blared throughout the country that literally bring every citizen to a total and complete standstill (even if they happen to be traveling on a busy super highway). There is nothing on TV or on the radio but programs about grieving families. Every school and every institute has a Remembrance Day ceremony. It is a day of tears, of collective memory and collective grief; it is a day of remembrance for every soldier killed in every war, and every victim of every terrorist attack the country has ever faced since the establishment of the state.

This day is truly impressive in its ability to bring together a deeply divided nation in 24 hours of collective mourning and collective support. It is unusual to see such a coherent and united day of collective public mourning anywhere in the modern world today. It is also a day that is deeply politicized, and as with Rabin’s memorial, is always linked to what Israelis call “the situation,” or the state of the conflict with the Palestinians. Every politician who speaks, and there are many who participate in televised ceremonies, link together grief and war, grief and national security, grief and patriotism. The rousing of grief in the service of nationalism has two political goals. The first is to give meaning to the bereaved families’ losses and situate the death of their sons, fathers, husbands, brothers (and in some cases, though rarely, daughters mothers, wives, sisters) in the context of nation building. The fallen soldiers are considered heroes who bravely defended their nation. Framing the deaths in this context makes protest against the government’s actions psychologically challenging for the bereaved, because rejecting this nationalistic and cultural narrative would mean that the deaths of their loved ones were meaningless and in vain.

In the second instance, grief is used as a justification for the current conflict and sets the stage for further militarism in the future. The conjuring up of loss in the same breath as the reminder to the nation that they need to be strong and defend their borders is a binding together of grief with political action. These links are dramatically explicit in Israeli society. Israeli Memorial Day is situated between Holocaust Memorial Day, which happens a week before Memorial Day, and one day before Independence Day. Israelis thus move from a day of deep and intense collective mourning over their dead directly into a day of intense and wild celebrations for the establishment of the state. It is impossible not to intellectually critique.

In the United States, the link between grief and war has been as explicit and as politically manipulated as it is in Israel. Memorial Days in the United states are rife with the political manipulation of public grief for the purposes of justifying military action. Butler noted in 2009, “The differential distribution of public grieving is a political issue of enormous significance” (p. 38). That is, which lives are publically grieved, and the ways in which this grief is conjured up in public discourse, is a deeply political issue that has tremendous consequences. For example, in a discourse analysis looking at a corpus of 27 Presidential speeches on Memorial Day given at Arlington National Cemetery in the United States over the last several decades, Slavickova (2013) found that legitimation of past, present, and future military action and an emphasis on nationalism in direct relationship to the soldiers who died in war was a common theme in all the speeches. Moreover, she noted that within these speeches, the subtext given to the public is that they should most certainly grieve their losses, but any critique, regret, or remorse over the loss of lives in the military context is unpatriotic and disrespectful to the dead. She noted,

In each case, the death is represented as heroic because the individual was acting selflessly for a great cause (resistance to aggression—though not always defined) and/or because the ultimate goal that precipitated the death was achieved (and therefore, we should infer, not in vain). (p. 366)

A classic example of this linking of grief, loss, and political action was evident in George Bush’s Memorial Day speech in 2006. He remarked,

We also remember those who went to war and are still missing, and we are determined to account for them all . . . . Our nation is free because of brave Americans like these [deceased personnel from whose correspondence Bush has been quoting], who volunteer to confront our adversaries abroad so we don’t have to face them here at home. Our Nation mourns the loss of our men and women in uniform; we will honor them by completing the mission for which they gave their lives—by defeating the terrorists, by advancing the cause of liberty, and by laying the foundation for peace for a generation of young Americans. (Bush, 2006, quoted in Slavickova, 2013, p. 373)

The link between loss and military action is clear in this speech, as are the clues that military occupation will continue. Especially worthy to note is the first line about “accounting for them all.” This rhetoric around the missing soldiers and a justification for further military engagement is an echo of what happened in the Vietnam War several decades prior. In an analysis of the Vietnam battle, Holst-Warhaft (2000) examined the public campaign to bring back

1 A significant difference between the United States and Israel is that Israel has mandatory conscription for men and women, while the United States is voluntary. Moreover, Israel is frequently under military threat while the United States is often fighting wars in other parts of the world. As such, Memorial Day in Israel is, by definition, a more collective experience because it touches almost every citizen of the state regardless of socioeconomic status, class, ethnicity, and so on. In the United States, on the other hand, only a relatively small segment of the population, usually those coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds, are in the army, and the wars are happening at a great distance from the United States. While the war rhetoric described in this paper for each country is similar, the context of each of these countries is important to consider.
the soldiers (or their remains) who were reported missing in action, or potentially prisoners of war. She noted,

Relatives of the dead and missing in Vietnam were a resource to be exploited in the desire for retribution. Their desire to believe their relatives were still alive, and when they had lost hope, to recover the bodies of their dead made them pawns in the campaign of public disinformation that continues to this day. (p. 15)

In 1968, presidential candidate Richard Nixon pledged to bring an end to the war that was seeing increasing protests and expression of public disgust among the American electorate. Instead, when he came to power, Nixon shifted the focus of attention from the mistreatment of the Vietnamese and tremendous loss of lives on both sides of the divide to the missing and imprisoned American soldiers who he promised to “bring home” in spite of having no information or evidence that these missing soldiers could be found. The exploitation and perpetuation of the families grief under the public’s gaze, and the encouragement of false hope for their missing family members to come home, was a conscious and precise manipulation of national and collective loss in the service of continuing the war for several more years. (Holst-Warhaft, 2000)

The same manipulation of grief in the political realm was evident after the World Trade Centers were destroyed in a terrorist attack that killed more than 3000 people on September 11, 2001 (9/11). The public mourning that followed 9/11 was encouraged and later used by political figures as justification for invasion of Iraq, despite the fact that it was Al Qaida who had taken responsibility for the attacks. In one of the first addresses to the nation after the tragedy, Bush, in his speech to a joint session of Congress and to the nation liberally used the words “grief,” “mourning,” and “losses” throughout his talk as a strong justification for revenge, “justice,” and what later became extremely violent action in the war against Iraq. Bush (2001) stated,

We have seen the decency of a loving and giving people who have made the grief of strangers their own. My fellow citizens, for the last nine days, the entire world has seen for itself the state of union, and it is strong. Tonight, we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done . . . . As long as the United States of America is determined and strong, this will not be an age of terror. This will be an age of liberty here and across the world. Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment. (Washington Post. accessed online 2013)

Interestingly, in the years following 9/11 when the rhetoric of the nation’s grief as a justification for war increased by the American government, the political uses of the affect were also taken up by antiwar activists opposing the war. Michael Moore, for example, in his documentary film Fahrenheit 9/11, profiled a desperate mother, Lila Lipscomb, trying to find out why her son, an American soldier, died in Iraq. The film depicted several heartbreaking scenes in which Ms. Lipscomb breaks down in tears and the link between grief, war, and politics is effectively used in the service of critiquing the war. Similarly, the media coverage of Cindy Sheehan, another mother whose son died in the war, and who camped outside of President Bush’s Texas ranch demanding answers, is another example of the political uses of grief for antiwar action. (Sheehan, 2006)

Even prior to Sheehan’s “sit in,” some of the families of the victims murdered in the 9/11 attacks recognized the political manipulations of their grief and countered with their own stories of mourning in service of promoting peace instead of war. For example, the group September 11 Families for a Peaceful Tomorrow published an edited volume collecting narratives of family members and friends who advocated for turning their grief into a source of political action with the goal of demanding an end to the war and an end to violence (Portarti, 2003). Whether pro- or anti-war, what all of these examples illustrate is the tremendous power in the manipulation of grief for political purposes and the ways in which it consciously used in the service of particular political aims. The politicization of grief in the national sphere moves beyond inciting public mourning in the service of war or militarism. It is also nationalized in the social distinctions about which life is grievable and which life is fungible. That is, that as a society we grieve personally and publically for those lost on “our side” as on Israeli Memorial Day, or as was the case with the thousands of 9/11 memorials, we are making deeply political distinctions between whose life is worth grieving over and whose lives we find disposable and unafflicting. These distinctions are not natural or arbitrary; they are consciously manipulated and managed by the state with a frightening precision. In her book Frames of War, Butler (2009) argued that war divides populations in those who are grievable and those who are not. She stated,

An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all. We can see the division of the globe into grievable and ungrievable lives from the perspective of those who wage war in order to defend the lives of certain communities, and to defend them against the lives of others—even if it means taking those latter lives. (p. 38)

These political manipulations of grief function both within the state and without. On Israeli Memorial Day, it is largely Jewish Israeli soldiers (as opposed to Arab Israelis who also died in wars and in terrorist attacks) who are mourned in public. In the United States, the 9/11 memorials tended to commemorate a certain type of citizen, leaving out countless others. For example, those who were illegal immigrants or those who were not United States citizens received little coverage, little public grief, and very little attention in general.

The distinctions of who is grievable within the state are mild compared with those who act against the state. No memorial day in any country recognizes the losses of the other side, even when the death count is in the millions, and even when it involves children and other innocent civilians. No Israeli Memorial Day for example, gives the death toll for Palestinians, although it is astonishingly precise in providing the numbers for all soldiers and civilians killed in war or terror attacks since the establishment of the state. The United States frequently fails to provide information for the death toll for their own soldiers who died in war, let alone of their “enemies.” For example, a recent op-ed in the International Herald Tribune entitled “For America, life was cheap in Vietnam” described the tremendous loss of life on both sides of the divide during the Vietnam War. Sixty thousand American soldiers died in combat, whereas nearly two million Vietnamese civilians were killed. In coming to terms with America’s responsibility for
unjust war tactics including the military command to “shoot anything that moves,” the author, Turse (2013), quoted the chief army of staff, Westmoreland, who proclaimed, “The Oriental doesn’t put the same high price on life as does the Westerner. Life is plentiful, life is cheap in the Orient.”

Turse (2013) publically takes to task the American “double standard when it comes to human life” and pleads with the public to recognize that all life is equally grievable. Despite this powerful public commentary, the United States government has not encouraged any consciousness of the loss of life that it has caused and continues to cause in places around the globe including today in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and as has already been noted, puts the entire focus on publically mourning the loss of American lives.

As these examples illustrate, nationalizing, and thus politicizing, grief is often used as justification for further military engagement, and ironically results in more loss of lives. These types of political uses of grief, are in my view, mourning sickness par excellence. But as has also been the case, and as was evident in the examples of Cindy Sheehan and the 9/11 Families for Peace, the politicization of grief can only be used in the service of social activism and promotion of peace. In the final type of Mourning Sickness, I describe case examples of the conscious use of grief as a political strategy for a social justice agenda.

**Mourning Sickness Type III: Activating Grief**

Although I have been describing the political manipulations of grief throughout this paper for the purposes of questionable political aims, it is often the case that grief can be used as an activating force toward social justice goals. These aims range from the personal sphere to the national one, but underlying both is the principle that grief and loss can be a powerful catalyst toward demanding and instituting positive social change. The relationship between grief, outrage, justice, and politics was noted by Butler in 2009 when she stated the following: “Our grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential” (p. 39). Although Butler here is referring primarily to the American context and the war on terror, the grief and the accompanying outrage at injustice have motivated millions of people toward social activism in other arenas.

One particularly impressive example of this phenomenon in action is group known as The Parent’s Circle. The Palestinian/Israeli Bereaved Families for Peace organization, which runs The Parents Circle, is a joint Palestinian-Israeli organization with more than 600 families, all of whom have lost a close family member in the prolonged Middle East conflict. Their mission statement includes “Creating a framework of reconciliation between the two peoples that takes into account that any peace agreement must include an infrastructure for the process of reconciliation; to work toward an end to violence and toward achieving an accepted political agreement; to influence the public and the political decision makers to choose dialogue and the path of peace over violence and war in order to achieve a just settlement based on empathy and understanding; and to avoid the use of bereavement for further violence and retribution.” (Palestinian/Israeli Families for Peace, 2013).

The group’s programs include face to face reconciliation meetings between Palestinians and Israelis, public events promoting awareness and dialogue, extensive media outreach including TV, film, radio and newspapers publications, and member seminars and workshops that include professional training for activists, lecturers, youth groups, and summer camps. The organization’s mission is impressive in scope and in reach. At the core of all of their activities and actions is the intense grief over their loved ones. Indeed, it is the unifying factor that brings everyone together in this shared mission. Every member of the Palestinian/Israeli Bereaved Families for Peace, for example, must have lost a loved one in the conflict to be part of the group. Every event and activity begins and ends with remembering the dead, grieving over the losses, and linking together the deaths, their pain, and their grief with the promotion of—and justification for—peace and nonviolence.

The complexities of these meetings, especially the reconciliation groups between Palestinians and Israelis, are immense. These are high-conflict and highly emotional situations that often threaten to break down (e.g., the film *Two Sides of the Story*, which documents one such reconciliation group in process). The unifying thread that holds the group together and allows the conversation to continue is their shared condition of bereavement and the emotional pain and heartbreak that comes with it. It is from the place of grief that growth occurs and it is the primary motivating factor in continuing to seek reconciliation and peace despite the immense psychological, emotional, and ideological difficulties of this process. (see Palestinian/Israeli Families for Peace Website, 2013).

Another group that began in Israel and eventually extended to an international community of supporters and protesters are the Women in Black, who gather every Friday afternoon between 1 and 2 p.m. in Jerusalem at a busy city square to protest the occupation. The group began in 1988, and continues to meet for weekly protests to this day. Indeed, the group states that they will continue to meet, mourn, and protest until the occupation ends. They meet at the same time and place every week, they always wear black, and always the hold the same signs with the slogan “Stop the Occupation.” Women of all ages and backgrounds attend the weekly vigil, and as with The Parents Group, embedded within the foundation of the protest is the recognition of both personal and collective grief. Gabriel (1992), an anthropologist who did her fieldwork on Women in Black, noted,

> The grief expressed in the black clothes speaks of both Jewish and Palestinian vulnerabilities and is readily verbalized by the participants. Daphna, an Israeli Jewish woman, offers her understanding of it: “The black symbolizes our sadness and mourning. We have lost many, many Israelis in the war. But the other side has also lost, and so the black is a sign of mourning. We want this to stop. That is why we wear black.” (p. 321)

Unsurprisingly, the Women in Black are often met with aggressive counterprotestors who see these meetings as unpatriotic and as a betrayal of national values (see Gabriel, 1992 for a political and gendered analysis of these conflicts). The appearances of these counterprotestors wax and wane depending on the political situation at the time in Israel, but what is of particular interest is their use of the same grief rhetoric to promote violence and aggression against the Palestinians. As in the case of nationalizing grief described in Mourning Sickness Type II, these right-wing groups elicit the same grief reactions over lost lives in the service of further aggression, occupation, war, and militarism that the
Women in Black are trying to detangle. The explicitness of this split is visually embodied in the protest site itself. Gabriel (1992) described the scene as follows:

Right-wing groups have linked violence against Palestinians with grief. The Women in Black pull apart the Right groups’ elision of grief and violence in Jewish mourning and reconstitute the autonomy of grief. In the Friday political stage collective emotions display a dramatic reconstruction of boundaries: grief-mourning (the Women in Black) stand on side of the street (representing one position regarding the Middle East Conflict) and rage-violence (the counterdemonstration) stand on the other; they face each other, spatially divided and in political contestation. (p. 328)

The Women in Black have extended their activities throughout the globe, not only in support of Israeli women and the fight against the occupation, but also for the purpose of protesting their own state violence with great success (see Women in Black – History, 2013).

While The Parent’s Circle and Women in Black channel their grief toward social activism that targets specific wars between nations, other examples of grief and its relationship with social activism exist in other contexts. The Louis D. Brown Peace Institute in the United States, for example, “serves as a center of healing, teaching and learning for families and communities dealing with murder, trauma, grief and loss.” The institute’s slogan is “transferring pain and anger into power and action” and is “committed to restorative justice theories.” To achieve this mission, they provide programs to teach peace in school and community settings, support survivors of homicide victims and families of perpetrators of homicide, and provide training for health care providers, professionals, and faith leaders working with youth and families that were impacted by violence. This grassroots community institute was started by Tina Cheri, the mother of Louis D. Brown, a 15-year-old boy who was murdered by a gang member while on his way to a “teens against gang violence” event in 1993.

Ms. Cheri’s goal in developing the institute was, and remains, to provide families with support as noted above, but more importantly, to use her own grief, pain, sorrow, and anger in the service of reducing violence across the nation, particularly for youth (see Louis D. Brown Institute Website, 2013)

What all of these impressive examples have in common when it comes to the politicization of grief is the following: (a) the conscious and explicit use of grief as an activating and motivating force toward a social justice agenda; (b) the linking together of personal and collective grief with a national or community level desire for positive social change; and (c) the recognition in each case of the losses and the grief happening for, and to everyone in these unbearable situations. With the Palestinian/Israel Bereaved Families and with Women in Black, it’s the recognition of the suffering, losses, and grief for everyone regardless of which political divide they are on. In the case of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, it is the recognition of the grief by both the families of victims and the families of the perpetrators of the violence, and in some cases, even with the perpetrators themselves. In direct opposition to the nationalization of grief described in Mourning Sickness Type II where only certain lives are considered grievable and worthy of attention, these groups all understand that the recognition of everyone’s grief and loss is the only solid foundation from which social change can begin. It is for this reason that I called this type of politicization of grief Mourning Sickness Type III. Whereas the other two types of mourning sicknesses imply something diseased and deeply unwell, this third type of mourning/morning sickness is, in my view, the healthy kind that comes with gestation, with new life, and with the process of birthing something new.

Conclusion

Grief is one of the most powerful affects we can experience in our lives. In some instances, it is more powerful than love, anger, and desire. Because of the passion it can arouse, and because it is an emotion that can leave us open and vulnerable, it is an especially effective and poignant experience to manipulate for political ends. Holst-Warhaft wrote in the year 2000, “[grief’s] emotional potential is inexhaustible. For the angry, the ambitious, the dispossessed, the persecuted, and the marginalized, the energy of extreme grief may offer a unique opportunity for social mobilization and political action” (p. 9).

In this paper I have proposed that the politicization of grief falls into three categories of what I have termed different types of Mourning Sickness. Each type, in its own way, pushes social mobilization and political action for its own aims. In Mourning Sickness Type I, the politicization of grief functions to discipline the individual mourner’s body into a productive, functioning, and contributing member of a capitalistic society. Moreover, I argued that the individualist ethos that pathologizes grief effectively neuters the justifiable rage that can come with mourning, and turns the gaze away from social injustices such as poverty, imprisonment, and opportunity gaps that are caused by state neglect and injustice.

In Mourning Sickness Type II, I have suggested that the politicization of grief is about consciously manipulating individual and collective grief in the service of nationalism and military power. The manipulation of grief on this level includes the explicit links made between loss and grief and justification for further war, aggression, and violence, but also includes the social distinctions made between whose lives are deemed grievable and those whose lives are considered to be worthless and unmanufacturable. Both Mourning Sickness Types I and II are of the pathological variety worthy of, and urgently requiring, academic and public critique.

In the last type of Mourning Sickness, I suggest that grief is also politicized when it is activated as a motivator toward a social justice agenda that includes peace, reconciliation, nonviolence, and positive social change on behalf of individuals, communities, and nations.

References


