

Invisibility Matters: Adult Sibling Loss and the Complicated Grief Experience

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Abstract: Homicide is a word that unquestionably invokes visceral responses. For families who have endured this traumatic experience, the manner of death augmented by social determinants complicates grieving processes. This narrative uses Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning to chronicle my journey of complicated bereavement following the loss of a sibling.

Keywords: adult sibling bereavement, homicide, complicated bereavement, self-narrative

The day started as usual. I was juggling tasks at work when I received a telephone call from my aunt. "Have you spoken to your sister today?" I answered no; she'd had a presentation to give at work, so I had planned to call her later to see how it went. My aunt replied, "I'll call you later."

Dial tone. I felt a twinge of uneasiness about the call, but I continued with my day. A couple of hours later, my aunt called again. "I need you to come home after work. Your cousin will be waiting for you at the bus stop." I didn't ask why I needed to make the 90-minute trip home, but the apprehension remained.

A strong wave of nausea overcame me and only worsened as the day wore on. It only happens when something is wrong. As I started the first trek of my ride home, the nausea became so intense that I had to lay across the seat. I could not sit up, and it felt like I would pass out. I could barely walk when I arrived at the bus stop. My cousin was waiting in the car with my infant son asleep in his car seat. I asked if he knew what was going on. He said, "No. I just heard we had to come home."

We engaged in small talk, but most of the ride was silent. I kept calling my sister, but she did not answer the phone. Finally, exasperated, I said, "I keep calling, but she's not picking up." He said softly, "Something bad must've happened."

I looked at him and placed a third call. No answer. I don't remember how fast he drove, but we were in front of my aunt's apartment before I realized it.

I opened the car door and began to vomit. "Somebody's dead. I can feel it." He looked at me, unfastened the car seat, and insisted on carrying the baby inside. We slowly walked up the stairs and knocked on the apartment door. When it opened, I saw several family members and a family friend I hadn't seen in years. Everyone was standing and looking uneasily at me but not saying a word. At that moment, I was sure an immediate family member was gone. It seemed like an eternity as I braced myself to hear which parent had died. I could only muster one word, "Who?" When I heard my sister's name, I dropped to my knees, and everything went black. I didn't realize that my entire family had learned of the homicide earlier in the day. I was the last to find out.

Sibling Loss

Sibling loss can be a devastating event in one's life. After a death, a shift automatically occurs in the family dynamic, forcing survivors to develop a new identity independent of the sibling relationship (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2013). Not only are siblings reconfiguring who they are, but they are also navigating altered relationships with relatives (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2013) and associates who may or may not have the capacity to provide needed emotional support. As such, grievors may experience a spectrum of responses, including hardships adapting to the loss, invalidation of the sibling relationship, increased sense of mortality, and social withdrawal (Cicirelli, 2009; Marshall & Davies, 2011). Although sibling loss can cause distress, that is not always the case. For example, some sibling relationships are fraught with conflict, and death may rouse feelings of remorse due to unresolved discord (Marshall & Davies, 2011). In addition, spiritual or faith crises may arise because the loss challenges the sibling's presumptive beliefs and core values, mainly if the death occurred under sudden or tragic circumstances (Burke et al., 2011; Worden, 2018). Thus, it is imperative to fully understand the complexities of sibling loss to learn how to best assist grievors with coping while validating their lived experiences.

Though bereavement research includes adult sibling loss, its inclusion amongst other familial relationships prevents the delineation of individualized experiences (Tasker & Wright, 2020). By extension, few studies solely explore the impact of homicide on bereaved siblings (Tasker & Wright, 2020). When a death occurs due to homicide, grieving processes may be distinctive compared to other forms of loss (Malone, 2007). Exhibited symptoms after homicide loss may include anger and shock as adult survivors attempt to navigate through grief and social systems, post-loss (Malone, 2007). Examinations of the lived experiences of sibling homicide survivors revealed varied symptomology, including delayed grief, isolation, ruptured relationships with parents, and decreased well-being (Pretorius et al., 2010; Tasker & Wright, 2020). Bereaved adult siblings may also perceive victim culpability, stigmatization, and lack of relatability from associates (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2016). Moreover, social pressures to "move on" or "find closure" unduly complicate bereavement and foster increased isolation because the aspect of closure is incongruous for homicide survivors (Aldrich & Kallivayalil, 2016). These findings suggest that further examination of homicide bereavement be conducted solely through the lens of adult siblings to explore coping methodologies and complicated bereavement following a traumatic loss.

Complicated Bereavement

Typical grief is a reaction to the death of a loved one with pronounced responses in the immediate days and weeks following a loss. Normal grief responses may include sadness, withdrawal, sleep disturbance, difficulties with concentration, and loss of appetite (Rando, 1993; Shear, 2015). These initial responses often dissipate within a year as mourners resume their routines and activities, accept the death of their loved ones, and learn to experience joy again in life (Rando, 1993; Shear, 2015). In contrast, complicated bereavement is, according to Worden (2018):

the intensification of grief to the level where the person is either overwhelmed, resorts to maladaptive behavior, or remains interminably in the state of grief without the progression of mourning towards completion. In normal grief, the transition, however painful, is neither overwhelming, interminable, nor prematurely interrupted. (p. 137)

Symptoms of complicated bereavement include anxiety, social detachment, problems accepting loss, identity disruption, and loss of trust in others (Rando, 1993; Shear, 2015). This persistent condition can be problematic due to incapacitation and lack of adjustment after death, and therapeutic intervention has been suggested to alleviate symptoms and assist grievers (Rando, 1993; Shear, 2015).

The DSM-5, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, also includes Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder. Persons assigned this diagnosis endure an incapacitating or extended response to bereavement involving prolonged yearning towards the deceased accompanied by maladaptive thoughts and behaviors and overall impairment in resuming everyday life (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). For those suffering from complicated bereavement, symptomatology increases over time due to denial or circumstances related to death, and the stagnation of grief processes can negatively affect varied aspects of a person's life (Rando, 1993; Shear, 2015). Therefore, addressing maladaptive symptoms that complicate bereavement and stifle productive processing and life adjustment after losing a loved one is imperative to bereaved individuals' overall health and well-being.

Four Tasks of Mourning

According to Worden (2018), mourning processes should be viewed in the context of four tasks: 1) accepting the reality of the loss, 2) processing the pain of grief, 3) adjusting to a world without the deceased, and 4) finding a way to remember the deceased while embarking on the rest of one's journey through life. To begin, Worden asserts that accepting the reality of the loss requires acknowledging that a loved one has died because even though a cognitive understanding of a loss may exist, the griever may still be in denial. Therefore, he argues grievers must fully accept that death has occurred and begin conforming to life without their loved ones. Next, Worden's interpretation of processing the pain of grief is to genuinely experience the raw anguish that accompanies loss with the understanding that all expressed or internalized emotions are valid. Subsequently, his third step of adjusting to a world without the deceased is adapting to a new reality post-loss as grievers recount their relationship with the deceased and how the loss has affected aspects of their external, internal, and spiritual lives. External adjustments involve new responsibilities and the development of life-reacclimating skills, internal adjustments affect one's sense of self, and spiritual adjustments correlate to death's impact on one's core values and belief systems. Finally, finding a way to remember the deceased while embarking on the rest of one's journey through life occurs through the creation of new relationships and goals while maintaining connections to deceased loved ones, experiencing newfound satisfaction in life, and positively redefining themselves post-loss. Along with these tasks, social considerations influence grief responses, which can impede or facilitate healing.

Meditators of Mourning

Worden (2018) suggests that grief processes are influenced by seven meditors: kinship, nature of attachment, manner of death, historical antecedents, social variables, personality variables, and concurrent losses and stressors. Kinship defines the relationship between bereaved and deceased persons and is vital because the closer the bond, the more grief is amplified (Boelen et al., 2003). The nature of attachment is contingent on age, gender, coping styles, and belief systems which vary according to the relationship status prior to the loss (Worden, 2018). Manner of death is a significant determinant in bereavement, and unexpected or stigmatized losses can adversely impact grievers due to trauma, abrupt change in life circumstances, and challenges to religious beliefs and worldviews (Burke et al., 2011; Worden, 2018). Also, examining previous death and non-death losses provides a better context into coping strategies, demonstrates how unresolved issues may compound grief, and offers insight into how to best help bereaved persons (Worden, 2018). By extension, culture, religion, and perceived support by grievers influence expressions of grief and correlate to feelings of validation or dismay depending on whether mourning behaviors align with expected paradigms (Bordere, 2016). Likewise, the death of a loved one can have a ripple effect on the household because concurrent losses or stressors might include financial setbacks or housing insecurity if the deceased was the primary breadwinner or had caregiving responsibilities (Worden, 2018). These life-altering changes can leave grievers in destitute situations or motivate positive changes through newfound independence. Thus, exploring meditors is beneficial in assessing multiple contributors to complicated bereavement and presenting focus points to mitigate impediments to healing and loss acceptance.

If you have a sister and she dies, do you stop saying you have one? Or are you always a sister, even when the other half of the equation is gone?

— Jodi Picoult, *My Sister's Keeper*

Accepting the Reality of the Loss

Following a loss, grievers will often experience shock or disbelief that the death has occurred or pretend that the death has not happened (Worden, 2018). However, following Worden, grievers must accept the reality of the loss, which includes participating in funeral rituals and accepting how significant this loss will be in their lives. Another important aspect involves the circumstances of the loss. For example, when an unexpected or stigmatized death occurs, as in cases of suicide, homicide, or drug-related overdose, societal determinants can complicate the grieving process resulting in mistrust and seclusion. In my experience, the loss and manner of death not only compounded my grief but resulted in unforeseen consequences that lasted for years.

Sister. 24. Dead. Homicide. Those words did not belong in the same sentence. I was in stunned disbelief because things like this happened to other families, not mine. My sister lived a low-risk lifestyle, so why her? No one knew what to say to me, including my family, who were also reeling from this sudden loss. To make matters worse, I had the unfathomable task of identifying my sister's remains. The drive to the medical examiner's office was muted, and the only thing I

recall about the building was its sterileness and ghostly silence. I was accompanied by my aunt, who handled the initial formalities until it was time for me to answer some questions. Afterward, we were escorted into a back room. As I stared at the photographs, there was no question it was her. I was too numb to feel anything because everything was happening so fast. Making the identification was like an out-of-body experience that could not be articulated, and many years later, I still have no words to describe it. I knew she was gone from a cognitive perspective, but my heart didn't want to face the harsh truth. Nothing seemed real, and it was as if I were in a nightmare of helplessness and confusion because her death did not make sense. As expected, my parents were emotionally shattered, so it was left to me to complete the funeral arrangements. I should not have had to undergo the process of picking a casket, deciding on the floral arrangements, and discussing the logistics of the funeral and interment options. Instead, I was on autopilot, trying to get from one hour to the next without losing my mind.

Five days later, we held a viewing that lasted for hours. I quickly grew tired of greeting mourners who chimed common sympathy adages and platitudes: "She's in a better place," or "She's with the Lord." I did not want to hear that. I wanted her with me, not with the Lord. I was in the throes of intense grief, so how were these empty phrases supposed to help? I did appreciate those who held my hands and said they would pray for me and those who hugged me without saying a word. That felt more like genuine compassion and support. Moreover, I knew her death was the topic of conversation and gossip since it occurred. Because of this, I was cautious because I could not discern who was there to pay their respects versus those who showed up out of sheer curiosity.

The following day, we said our goodbyes on a sunny Tuesday morning. The funeral was a complete blur. My only vivid memory was sitting in an alabaster viewing room where the sole object of color was the cherry oak casket in front of me. After the crowd dispersed, I rested my head, wrapped my arms around the casket, and listened for a heartbeat I knew I would never hear. This was the last time my sister and I would physically be together. I did not care who was waiting in the limousine or at the church for the repast. I stayed with her until I was ready to leave. I was an only child for five years and a sibling for 24. Now I was back where I started—without a sibling, and the unconscionable reality I was forced to accept left me incensed. When I reluctantly departed the crematorium, I glanced at her devastated friends standing at the back of the room. I had no words of comfort to offer.

Processing the Pain of Grief

Worden's (2018) model acknowledges that griever's will inevitably contend with various emotions following a loss, including sadness, anger, shame, hopelessness, blame, and guilt. Unfortunately, societal discomfort regarding death and loss can agitate mourning processes leaving individuals to suppress their feelings and grieve in silence. Successful navigation of this task involves understanding and processing these complicated emotions. Also, Worden reiterates that griever's must not avoid or suppress their feelings because the grief experience is individual, and emotions are typical regardless of whether they align with societal norms.

An array of unique circumstances accompanies death by violent means, and I was utterly unprepared to deal with extraneous variables and their impact on my well-being. There was lingering resentment about going to the medical examiner's office because the imprint of that final picture remains in my subconscious. When that image resurfaces without warning, it causes an acute response that leaves me in a temporary state of emotional paralysis. There was also a need to understand why this happened, and the lack of answers I received from law enforcement only aggregated my bereavement. Plus, I was perturbed by the media intrusion in the days immediately afterward and could not fathom how little respect families are afforded following a violent loss. I learned more about the circumstances of my sister's death from the newspaper than from law enforcement. I had trouble grasping how strangers could access such personal information when all I received were vague answers. There was disregard for her humanity in favor of storylines with no consideration for how it would affect my family. She was not a case number or statistic but a woman who was loved and missed. I could not reconcile that someone made a conscious decision to take her life without regard for the reverberating consequences. I thought about what I could have done to prevent this from happening, about her thoughts in those final moments. Life had thrown a nasty curveball, and there was no way to comprehend the enormity of a future without my sister. I blamed the perpetrator for ruining my life, robbing me of a future with her, and shattering my sense of security. All I believed about life was no longer germane because I existed in a new world of uncertainty and questioned everything, even God.

My cultural and religious upbringing emphasized that God would never give you more than you could bear. I witnessed my family's exhibited faith and reliance on God during times of crisis. They would pray and patiently wait until a solution presented itself. I adopted this practice and enjoyed my closeness to God. However, my sister's homicide shook my spiritual foundation. I wanted nothing to do with God or religion, and I refused to step foot in a church or say a prayer. God was supposed to be omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient, so why was this allowed to occur? Where was God during my sister's time of utmost need and vulnerability? I could not comprehend how unscrupulous people could walk this earth with impunity, but a peace-loving woman had to die so violently. There was no consolation for the pain I was experiencing.

Homicide is socially unspeakable, and it is easier for some to pretend that nothing has happened. As such, my sister became a taboo subject of discussion. It could have been a level of discomfort by others or fear of my reaction, but to not talk about her was to forget she existed. We had great times, so why should she be relegated to hushed conversations? She did nothing to warrant what happened and did not deserve erasure from the present. I wanted to talk about her and whether I laughed or cried was irrelevant. I needed others to support and allow me to be in the moment. My loss also revealed the minimalization of my grief experience as a bereaved sibling. I became invisible. No one I knew experienced a sibling loss, let alone one via homicide. So, where did that leave me? Well-intentioned people would constantly ask how my parents were "holding up," but the same courtesy did not extend to me. There were frequent reminders to be "strong" and care for my mother, but who was supposed to be strong for me? Losing a sibling did not make my grief any less valid. However, it was disheartening to realize how easily it was overlooked. I was unsure how to manage this invalidation, so I pretended not to be bothered while suffering in silence.

I fell hostage to a cycle of maladaptive and coagulated thought processes: First, there was the continuous recollection of postmortem photographs and replaying of the death sequence in my mind. Second, there was a preoccupation about whether she suffered and how she must have felt during those last moments. As such, waking up at times became emotionally taxing because I was returning to a nightmare with no escape. Third, I had an increased fear of mortality and an obsession with time. I tried to make the most of every moment because there was no guarantee I would see the next day. Fourth, I exhibited self-isolating behaviors because I no longer knew whom to trust. Fifth, I grappled with survivor's guilt. I had planned to call my sister the night she died and believed her death might have been averted if I had just picked up the phone. Finally, there was decisive avoidance of the death location and any place she frequented because being there would cause an avalanche of uncontrollable emotions.

After years of unresolved grief, I sought professional intervention, which proved challenging yet beneficial because I began to process the pain. The therapeutic process was unpredictable and raw because it meant addressing and working through my trauma. However, there was freedom to share deeply personal aspects of the sibling loss experience without fear of judgment. In addition, therapy allowed for the learning and application of critical emotion regulation techniques and ways to manage loss productively. As a result, I was mindful of triggers and their impact on my well-being and acknowledged those feelings without falling into a depressive state. Most importantly, I no longer felt guilt and engaged in self-compassion for my traumatic experience. The therapeutic environment also supported reconfiguring thoughts and recreating a new self-narrative geared toward acceptance and productive living post-loss.

Adjusting to a World Without the Deceased

Adjusting to life without the deceased can have varied interpretations for griever depending on relationship types and the influence the deceased had in their lives. These readjustments occur over a lengthy period and can require internal, external, and spiritual adjustments (Worden, 2018). Worden's external and environmental adjustments involve changing family dynamics and reconfiguring roles and responsibilities. Additionally, his internal adjustments involve self-assessments to discover and redefine oneself without the deceased. Finally, he states death can alter spiritual perspectives, leading griever to question their faith and reevaluate their lives and purpose post-loss.

External Adjustments

My sister's death will never make sense to me because it should never have happened. The expectations of raising our children and growing old together evaporated. There will be no nieces or nephews to spoil nor an aunt for my son to love. Sometimes I want to pick up the phone and call her about milestones, and it saddens me that I cannot. There would be no more social commentary, political banter, and lively conversations. By extension, I have an unending fear that I will forget the sound of her voice, so I cherish the few existing home videos that allow me to hear her laugh and see her smile again. She was an unspoken part of my narrative, and it never crossed my mind that she would be absent from it. I struggled with admitting she was

deceased to others because the inevitable probes would come after, and there was uneasiness about divulging the circumstances surrounding her death.

Moreover, losing my sister inevitably changed the family dynamic. I was suddenly an only child that felt the weight of potential caregiving situations for my parents in their later years. Even though they have remarried, I grow concerned when a medical issue arises because I know how fleeting life can be. There were new roles and responsibilities that I may shoulder alone— additionally, the parental relationships changed. I could not turn to my parents because they were engrossed in their grief experience. Their emotional detachment prevented them from seeing how devastated I was and my struggles in dealing with my loss. She was the glue that kept the family together; everything fell completely apart when she died. I was unsure how to be around them because we all changed that day. I walked on eggshells because I had no idea how their grief could be triggered. Consequently, finding a new balance and reestablishing boundaries within our relationships took time. It is not perfect, but it is manageable.

So many things were uncertain, but I knew my sister's life could not be defined by how she died. Instead, I wanted to ensure that others knew who she was and how she lived. She was a fashion designer who had just registered her business and had original collections showcased during her tenure at Pratt Institute. She was an innovative free spirit who effortlessly navigated life with an unapologetic stance about who she was and how she chose to live. My sister was the consummate optimist who always saw the glass as half full and danced to the beat of her drum. I will never get over losing her. Nevertheless, I have made it my mission to share my story with others and keep her memory alive. I am grateful to have been a part of a sisterhood, and even though it was for a short time, having her in my life was worth every second.

Internal Adjustments

My sibling relationship was meaningful because it symbolized a literal lifelong bond. We shared family history and childhood experiences and rejoiced in each other's success. So, losing her was not just the loss of a relationship but a connection to my past. She was among the few people in my "circle of trust," with her being privy to more secrets than most. We knew one another in ways that those outside our relationship did not, and her absence resulted in feelings of loneliness. There was an enormous disconnect from the world, and nothing felt the same. We had the expected sibling rivalry, but her death meant there would be no resolution to specific conflicts, and words spoken in exasperation could not be erased. There were things left unsaid because neither of us believed we would die before our lives began to blossom. I have made peace with knowing that our relationship was imperfect, but with no doubt about our love for one another.

My sister was intrinsic to my self-identity. So, I had to ask, who was I without her and how did her death change who I would become? Was it accurate to identify as part of a sibling group if she was no longer here? I wrestled with those questions because the answers were not clearly defined. I knew I was a sibling, which would never change, but did I want to talk about her to strangers? Was I ready to discuss how she died if asked? Some days the answer was yes, and others, no. As a result, I learned the importance of gauging conversational context and self-

disclosure. I disliked being the only child because it was an isolating experience, especially now that my parents are much older. I am not the same person I was before, and sometimes it saddens me because life was more carefree before she died. This transition has inevitably changed me because I am not as optimistic as I once was, but more cautious and aware. So, I take things one day at a time, take leaps of faith, and try to see the best in every encounter.

Initially, my biggest mistake was trying to live life for both of us, which was fruitless. Her life had ended, but I was still here. Hence, I had to forge new pathways and adventures that benefited me. Ironically my sister's influence is more significant now, and my life is truly better because she was in it. She modeled how to live life to the fullest and without regret. As a result, I developed a renewed focus on my professional and personal goals. I proceed boldly in my pursuits, and whether the endeavor manifests or not is immaterial; it is the attempt that matters most. Moreover, I adopted her philosophy regarding healthy living and self-care, being especially cognizant of my mental health. I live life on my terms, and because of her passing, I learned to relinquish control and allow things to happen. I also understand that life can be a whirlwind voyage, but it is more important to live life than to exist in it with fear.

Spiritual Adjustments

The injustice of my sister's death begged the question of why God would allow good people to suffer. However, I knew that individuals were free to make choices in certain circumstances and that every action had consequences. That did not make my pain less impactful, nor did it invoke a need to pray or seek religious counsel. On the contrary, the interruption of religious practice clearly illustrated my disconnect from God. I could not bring myself to enter a place of worship and celebrate when I was at the lowest point of my life. Previously held religious beliefs were out of alignment with my new reality, and I could not rely on the truths and promises that once provided solace and security.

Although I never stopped believing in God, more than a decade passed before I resumed religious practices. The anger I harbored for so long slowly dissipated and turned into immeasurable sorrow. I longed for a relationship with God and missed the comfort of weekly congregational assembly. Finally, I began attending church which was a first step to regaining my spiritual footing. There were frequent prayers for increased faith and purpose, and the eventual resuscitation of my faith resulted in a stronger connection and reliance on God. Select members of my chosen church family have been instrumental in providing support and encouragement. Their acceptance allowed me to share my loss experiences freely and struggles with faith without condemnation. As a result, my faith walk has grown more substantial, and I am an active participant in church activities. In addition, I have grown fond of the church elders or "seasoned saints" who have shared their life and grief experiences and provided me with unconditional love and words of wisdom. Their stories validate my experience and demonstrate that there is joy post-loss.

Each day is an opportunity for growth. Life is not without struggles, but we learn who we are through adversity. Even though life can be uncertain, as stated in Romans 8:28, I know that "all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according

to His purpose” (*The New King James Version Bible*, 2013). That scripture has become my mantra because it gives me hope and confidence to manage life circumstances. I know that God is with me; it is in His Word and promises that I find strength and guidance. There is hope in knowing a spiritual reunification will occur. My sister is in heaven, and I will see her again when the time comes. Until then, I will keep the faith, be thankful for the blessings I have been privileged to experience, and serve others in need just as others were there during my struggle.

Finding a Way to Remember the Deceased while Embarking on the Rest of One’s Journey through Life

Grievers must understand that their life does not end when a loved one dies (Worden, 2018). Instead, the bond evolves as they find ways to incorporate their loved ones into their existing lives. Through readaptation and self-discovery, grievers develop new identities outside of preexisting relationships they have lost and eventually experience fulfillment as they navigate life with renewed meaning and purpose. Worden’s final task allows grievers to honor the memory of loved ones but not at the expense of progressing in life. Finally, these tasks can be reassessed throughout the lifespan as grievers undergo the transformative processes associated with death and grief.

I had to decide whether I would let grief stunt my growth or use it for a greater purpose, which led to pursuing doctoral studies. One thing was abundantly clear from the beginning of the DSW journey. Although I had decades of experience in social work, there was much I needed to learn. I sat in classrooms with practicing therapists and clinicians whose worlds intertwined with theory and modalities. As such, there were many instances where I felt victim to imposter syndrome and wondered if I belonged. Frameworks and evidence-based practice are not part of a Child Protective Services worker’s vernacular. So, finding my voice and becoming secure in my knowledge and experience as a Child Protective Services worker amongst established clinicians took time. Moreover, I discovered that my lack of clinical experience did not lessen my positionality with peers but added to the already expansive dimensions of social work practice.

I wanted to understand the spectrum of grief theories and evidence-based research to examine the impact of loss and trauma on bereaved populations. There were conversations with notable grief experts who shared their personal experiences and insight into the evolution of bereavement work. Accordingly, these exchanges were fundamental in honing my social work concentration on thanatology, particularly adult sibling loss. In addition, I had opportunities to share my narrative of complicated bereavement with peers and professors. I was also able to advocate for bereaved adult siblings and the necessity of receiving support from informal and formal systems. My disclosure culminated in inquiries about how best to serve bereaved siblings and personal admissions from peers regarding their lack of awareness about this specific segment of grievers. Moreover, I discovered societal responses to grief could be inequitable, with a higher value bestowed on losses involving children, spouses, and parents (Marshall & Davies, 2011). Having experienced this firsthand, I desire to use my platform to bring greater awareness and advocacy for grief equity on behalf of bereaved adult siblings.

A significant undertaking during this period was separating my personal and professional perspectives of grief and loss. As a bereaved sibling there was an intimate relationship in which a mourning process was prominent with lifelong consequences. However, there is also recognition that one must invest in addressing personal adversity before assisting others with their challenges. From an academic lens, there was a shift from the self toward the community. Understanding the complexities associated with grief and how it impacts the totality of one's well-being was crucial. As a result, there were opportunities to examine how lived experiences can influence service provision and be an impetus toward awareness, change, and social justice within professional practice. From a researcher's perspective, receiving constructive feedback from others about my lived experiences has been humbling. Although others may view my work through varied scopes, I am learning to receive these observations objectively and within an academic framework. That is not to say that receiving feedback has become easier, but I am teachable and still developing in this area.

During my DSW journey, I found the language to articulate my position as a woman of color within social work practice. I used my voice and experience to highlight disparities, historical traumas, and ways systems aggregate grief following traumatic losses (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2021). The doctoral experience also made me question how my privilege and authority as a social worker impacted engagement with clients and colleagues. I had to ask myself whether I was authentically present for families suffering from a loss and evaluate the effectiveness of my service provision. Through scholarship and reflective self-assessment, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of inclusive language, being cognizant of death and non-death losses, and how they influence decision-making and coping (Worden, 2018). More importantly, it is centering the clients' humanity, respecting their autonomy, and empowering them to speak their truths even when it makes me uncomfortable.

Everyone has a story to tell, and those narratives often illuminate how clients react to life stressors, including death and loss. Therefore, it is crucial to hold space with families during their most vulnerable moments authentically. In addition, advocacy is imperative for families whose voices are overshadowed by larger social systems (Bordere, 2016). Because the communities I serve are predominantly those of color, I witness how systemic marginalization can impede families from seeking assistance from entities they perceive as authoritative or discriminatory (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2021). As such, I wish to use intersectionality to examine systemic disparities and their impact on the grieving processes of bereaved siblings (Crenshaw, 1991).

Although death will affect everyone during their lifespan, addressing it initiates uneasiness and avoidance. Social workers are "helping professionals" tasked to value each person and engage in empathetic human connection. Consequently, there should be candid and uncomfortable conversations about death. My professional and personal experiences invite dialogue about allyship, privilege, and social justice in bereavement work (Bordere, 2016). First, it challenges social workers to critically assess their biases and value systems when working with diverse communities with complex and historical traumas (Bordere, 2016). Second, it provides avenues for thought, attitude, and behavioral changes that would otherwise harm persons in

vulnerable positions. Finally, social workers can revisit their loss journeys, make meaning for themselves, and be more attuned to others during bereavement.

Conclusion

Bereavement is not a linear process. It ebbs, flows, and undergoes continuous readaptation according to life changes and personal redefinition. There is no way to erase the experience that formed the person I am today. However, it has helped me better understand the multifaceted aspects of grief from a personal and professional perspective. Reflecting on my experiences has demonstrated meaning-making after homicide loss and the importance of narratives. Life experiences hold value and are worthy of being told. I hope this narrative emboldens other adult siblings to give voice to their bereavement, speak their truth, and know that they are not alone.

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