PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION IN MIDLIFE ORPHANHOOD: AN EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY*

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the ways in which being orphaned at midlife leads to personal transformation. Empirical phenomenological methods were applied to in-depth interviews with four participants. Analysis of the explicit and implicit lived meanings of this experience yielded 74 themes organized into a general structural narrative. This narrative ranged from early experiences of providing care to the dying parent to an eventual reorganization of self. In crossing the generational line and assuming the role of elder, study participants developed an increased sense of purpose and meaning, transcendence of egoistic concern, a greater sense of interconnectedness to others, and deeper sensitivity and compassion. Further, the results provide evidence that an ongoing relationship to the deceased parent serves several vital psychological and developmental functions, and that actively “holding on” to the deceased parent drives many of the dynamics through which personal transformation is effected.

The death of a parent can be a very psychologically significant event for the surviving child, even when that child is a middle-aged adult. Although grown and functionally independent, the adult child often retains a tremendous emotional and

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symbolic bond with the parent. When the parent dies, the surviving adult child’s functional independence may minimize practical adjustment, but the significance and duration of the relationship, combined with emerging concerns over his or her own finitude, may dictate a considerably more complex psychological adjustment. It is proposed that this adjustment can involve a significant restructuring of psychological life and sense of self, particularly when a second parental loss has left the middle-aged child psychologically orphaned and “next in line” to die. This study examines the personal transformation that can ensue in middle-aged adults as a result of losing their last living parent.

The amount of literature investigating the loss of a parent pales in comparison to the relatively more dramatic contexts of losing a child or spouse. Within this literature, most attention has been given to contexts in which the bereaved is a young child or adolescent (Baker, Sedney, & Gross, 1992; Servaty-Seib & Hayslip, 2002-2003; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Tyson-Rawson, 1996). Even cross-cultural studies of death and dying pay scant attention to the adult loss of a parent (Moss & Moss, 1983-1984). This deficit in the literature is quite ironic given that growing life expectancies are making midlife parental loss so increasingly common that it is now largely considered a normative life-span transition (Moss & Moss, 1989). This situation may reflect the tendency of psychological researchers to focus on anomalous cases. In addition, one must consider the fact that lifespan literature has placed relatively little focus on midlife, and has restricted that focus primarily to marriage relations and career concerns (Moss & Moss, 1983-1984). Even more significantly, however, the loss of one’s parent may in fact be so painful—and so evocative of guilt and frustration—that researchers have ignored it out of a sense of self-protection (Moss & Moss, 1983-1984). This last explanation is suggestive of the transformative potential engendered by this event and the importance of pursuing it as a research topic.

Granted, some researchers have demonstrated that the adult child’s grief reactions to the loss of a parent are significantly less intense, on average, than those owing to the loss of a child or spouse (Owen, Fulton, & Markusen, 1982-1983; Sanders, 1979-1980) and are sometimes absent altogether (Littlewood, 1992). Alternatively, several researchers have shown that for many individuals the loss of a parent has very intense emotional consequences (Horowitz, Krupnick, Kaltreider, Wilner, Leong, & Marmer, 1981; Scharlach, 1991; Scharlach & Fredriksen, 1993; Umberson & Chen, 1994). Regardless of the degree of emotional intensity caused by the loss of a parent, however, many surviving adult children experience a significant developmental impact, affecting levels of maturity, personal priorities, and career objectives (Scharlach & Fredriksen, 1993). This impact apparently is not limited to the everyday concerns that so commonly pervade adult developmental theory, but also involves fundamental changes in self-image, reflecting personal growth or transformation. Some researchers understand such growth as arising from a forced
confrontation with one’s own finitude (Anderson, 1980; Angel, 1987; Kowalski, 1986; Kastenbaum, 1977), a circumstance that presumably would be amplified if the parental loss leaves the adult child an orphan. Whatever its mechanism, for the purposes of this study personal transformation is understood as enduring changes in self-concept which may or may not lead to changes in behavior or appearance (Metzner, 1998). As such, the task of studying these more existential modes of change calls for methods that probe beneath surface appearances and observable behaviors.

Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) found prevailing theories regarding grieving as a process of letting go of memories of the deceased to be unsupported by the data that emerged in their own studies and those of other bereavement researchers. Nevertheless, traditional theories have a strong hold on researcher expectations. As they state, “We need to bring into our professional dialogue the reality of how people experience and live their lives, rather than finding ways of verifying preconceived theories of how people should live” (p. xix). Indeed, the research methods used in most bereavement studies are based on a natural science orientation that adopts a quantitative approach in seeking causal explanations. Silverman and Klass (1996) characterize this approach as rooted in the idea of individual autonomy fundamental to the philosophy of logical positivism espoused by the English school of empiricism. They state:

[Empiricism’s] concern is with prediction and verification based on external observable phenomena that can be objectively measured. Consciousness and meaning-making are not observable, but behavior is. Behavior is reduced to discrete, observable acts that can be verified in controlled conditions. This reductionism loses sight of the complex social and historical context in which human behavior takes place (p. 21).

When bereavement is investigated with natural science methods, the purpose of mourning is understood as the restoration of pre-bereavement levels of observable behavior and functioning, a viewpoint that focuses on grief reactions, and which offers little accommodation to the processes of personal transformation. The phenomenological tradition argues that the natural science approach, by removing the human being from its lived world context, loses access to the lived meaning of psychological experience (Giorgi, 1970). Interestingly, in the few instances that bereavement researchers have focused on personal experience and/or adopted a more phenomenologically descriptive approach to bereavement, they have concluded that personal transformation or growth is a vital component of the mourning process (Hogan, Morse, & Tason, 1996), if not altogether central to it (Cochran & Claspell, 1987; Kessler, 1987). Therefore, we might conclude that another reason the midlife loss of a parent has received relatively little research attention is that researchers have not had the tools necessary to examine that which is most psychologically significant about it.
METHOD

In an effort to explore the lived meanings of being personally transformed by the loss of one’s last living parent, this study employed an empirical phenomenological research method. The particular methodology used (Fischer, 1974; Giorgi, 1975; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Wertz, 1985) was developed at Duquesne University, and has proved to be well-suited to the study of psychological phenomena rich in lived meanings. In brief, this procedure involves the rigorous examination of a small number of in-depth interviews with study participants. Through a procedure to be explained later, the explicit and implicit meanings of these participants’ experiences are condensed into a single general structural narrative which depicts the essential meanings of this experience as lived. In one sense, this approach can be construed as one of finding generality among a small number of case studies.

Participants

Four participants, aged 52-59, were recruited for this study. Two participants were found by word of mouth, and the other two responded to an advertisement posted at a local hospice. According to the pre-established parameters of the study, all participants had been bereaved of both parents, were middle-aged at the time of the last parental death, and reported that they had felt personally transformed by the experience. In keeping with the conventional designation of midlife as occurring in the age range 35-60, the ages of these participants at the time of the second parental death ranged from 42-58. Two participants were male, and two were female.

Data Collection

Participants were asked to provide a written response to a question and were later interviewed on the basis of this response, or protocol. The question used in this study is as follows:

Please describe, in as much detail as possible, your experience of living with the loss of your last living parent. In your description please pay particular attention to how this experience has been transformative to you and/or your life.

Following submission of the written protocol, each participant was scheduled for an audio-taped interview. Prior to the interview, the researcher read through the protocol several times in order to immerse himself empathically in the experience as the participant lived it. This led to the identification of moments in the narrative that warranted clarification and/or elaboration. At the beginning of each interview, the participant was given a copy of his/her written protocol and asked to read aloud from it. It was explained to each participant that periodically he or she would be
interrupted for questions. The interview was subsequently transcribed so as to form an *edited synthesis* of the original protocol with the interview data. The interview questions were deliberately restricted to very broad questions of a Rogerian nature, asking participants to clarify or expand on particular phrases, in order to reduce researcher bias and not lead the participant to provide information that the researcher wanted or expected to hear. This approach was intended to elicit the most open description possible of the phenomenon.

**Data Analysis**

After all the data had been collected, it was subjected to a systematic phenomenological analysis. The first phase of this analysis consisted of carefully reading and rereading each interview to gain a general sense of it, a process that Wertz (1985) characterizes as an empathic immersion in the described world. This empathic immersion entails “bracketing” the researcher’s own preconceptions, permitting the immanent meanings of the participant’s experience to emerge. Noticing where shifts in meaning occurred, an informal set of situated themes was recorded for each participant. Each of these themes represented a distinct meaning in the participant’s experience as it was lived out in his or her given situation. Anywhere from 73-109 situated themes were developed for each interview.

As these situated themes were recorded, any commonalities of experience that seemed consistent with the accounts of other participants were likewise noticed and recorded. Where commonalities were found, each was questioned as to whether it reflected an essential or merely incidental aspect of the phenomenon in question. When, in the researcher’s estimation, each interview had been exhausted of situated themes, the raw and thematic content of the first interview was revisited in light of the themes that had emerged for the other participants. This process revealed new situated themes not noticed previously, and allowed the discovery of more general themes that applied to all of the participants. That is, it was found that if many of the original situated themes were expressed in terms of their more general psychological meanings, they bore distinct commonality with the meanings of the other participants’ experiences. In expressing and recording these general themes, illustrative quotes were extracted from the interviews, which helped to ensure the applicability of each theme and to refine the expression of its meaning. The process proceeded in this manner, with each interview and its “meaning units” being reviewed in light of the others, until a full body of 74 themes emerged.

When the derivation of general themes was completed, they were organized to form a more narrative account of the phenomenon. This narrative organization afforded a greater sense of the ways in which the themes interrelated, leading to further reordering and rewording. The final result was a general structure of the phenomenon, divided into eight sections, which reads as a narrative account of the
experience of personal transformation beginning prior to, and unfolding long after, the second parent’s death.

It must be noted that the results of any qualitative research project are ultimately related to the presuppositions and expectations that guide the researcher in his or her approach (Giorgi, 1970). Thus, the general structure as derived by phenomenological methods carries the researcher’s implicit assumptions as much as the interview data carries the participant’s implicit meanings. As the researcher had personally experienced the phenomenon in question, this consideration was particularly pertinent in this instance. Therefore, in order to increase the reliability of the research findings, the researcher followed Walsh (1995) in reflecting on his own assumptions regarding the phenomenon under study prior to, during, and after the collection and analysis of data. Although space limitations prevent elaboration on these reflections, suffice it to say that the findings confirmed most of the researcher’s expectations, provided many themes that had not been expected, and revealed unanticipated interconnections between themes.

RESULTS

This section consists of the general structural narrative of living with the loss of one’s last living parent and the personal transformation that ensues. This narrative is comprised of the 74 general themes identified in the phenomenological analysis of the interview data. The presentation of these themes has been divided into eight sections which signify different phases and/or overarching themes of the experience.

Prior to Death of the Parent:
Caring for an Aging Parent

When their last living parent began aging and became increasingly frail, all of the participants felt the weight of caregiving responsibilities, even though only some of them actually assumed these responsibilities. They all experienced the demand introduced by this situation as burdensome and exhausting, and they experienced a tension between what they felt they should do and what they wanted to do. Care and support for the parent was divided up among the siblings in a manner that accorded with old family patterns and the roles assumed by each in childhood. Those who did respond to their parent’s needs found that being there for their parent provided a sense of comfort, while those who did not experienced guilt long after the parent’s death.

Emotional Response to the Parent’s Death

The loss of the parent produced intense feelings, although initially the participants were protected from the full experience of these feelings by tasks and responsibilities they had to undertake. In some cases these feelings were felt, upon
reflection, to have been more intense than perhaps they were. After these participants completed their immediate tasks, they found that their suppressed feelings tended to find expression at later times when they were better able to deal with them. The participants experienced a mixture of conflicting emotions, the nature of which pertained to other factors in their specific life situations. Over time, these emotions diminished in intensity; however, even some long while following the parent’s death, these emotions tended to periodically resurface, often cued by circumstances reminding the participant of the deceased parent.

In spite of recalling aspects of the parent which they did not miss, the participants still found themselves missing the parent. In missing the parent, they felt as though they had lost a repository of love and a source of emotional support. The loss also signified no longer being able to experience joy or positive moments with the deceased parent. The participants became attuned to the friendship dimension they had shared with the parent and the loss of companionship. Awakening to this aspect of the relationship left them feeling that their time with the parent had been cut short. In addition, each participant felt regret about how they had lived out certain aspects of their relationship to the parent. This regret was experienced with feelings of guilt or shame. In dealing with these feelings, these participants sought to situate their actions within a larger and more forgiving context.

**Beyond Grief: Adjusting to the Parent’s Loss**

The participants experienced the loss of their parents with a tremendous sense of finality reaching beyond mere cognitive knowledge. They came to recognize aspects of their parent that they had taken for granted; further, they realized that they had expected their parent to always be there for them, which made the loss more difficult to accept. In coping with the loss, each recalled an important communication with the parent that will not be easily forgotten. In most cases, this communication carried significations of love by which the parent will be remembered.

Although their parents had died, the participants maintained a psychological relationship to them. The parent’s perceived wishes and expectations played a role in how these participants lived their lives before and after their parent’s death. In some cases, these expectations were honored following the parent’s death; in others, the parent’s death was experienced as liberating the participant from these expectations.

In reflecting on their parents, most participants identified with their personalities. They weighed the parent’s shortcomings and strengths, ultimately coming to an overall favorable evaluation. Most of them came to accept, or realized that they had come to accept, some aspect about the parent that previously they had judged negatively. This realization transferred to other relationships and helped them learn how to relate better with other people.
The participants felt that their parents’ deaths had changed them in some fundamental way. They had become, in some sense, different people as a result. This difference was largely felt as one of having become more mature. This new state of maturity found realization in the activities with which these participants engaged the world.

**Changes in Family Relations**

The ability or inability of the siblings to work well together during and/or after the parent’s death held an emotional significance for these participants. For most of them, the death of the second parent had a significant impact on sibling relationships. This impact was brought about by the changing life circumstances introduced by the parent’s death and by the participants’ perceptions of how their parents had wished for them to get along. In addition, the two participants who were parents themselves experienced, or anticipated experiencing, a shift in their relationships to their adult children. This shift related to their perception that the second parent’s death had left them—or, in time, would leave them—more dependent on their children. This perceived shift in dependency permitted these participants to understand their children, and their ways of relating to them, in new ways.

**Adult Orphanhood and the Shifting of Roles**

The death of the second parent left each of the participants attuned either to being an orphan or one of the senior members of the family. The death effectively served to transfer elder status to the surviving adult child. As such, the participants felt as though they were supposed to be different people with new responsibilities. They experienced the assumption of these new responsibilities as synonymous with entering into a new role requiring that they take on aspects of an authority figure. In this sense, they experienced themselves as becoming more similar to their parents.

The sense of being promoted to new responsibilities put the participants into a unique position in that there was no one above them to tell them what to do. Their sense of responsibility was total in that they could no longer pass it off to the parent. Consequently, they experienced this new position with a profound sense of loneliness. Most of the participants drew from memories of their parents’ lives in order to learn how to become more like them. In the process, they sometimes learned something new about the parent they hadn’t previously realized. That is, the shift in roles provided new and unexpected access to the parent’s experience. In addition, most of these participants found themselves wanting or seeking contact with others bearing resemblance to the deceased parent, as though seeking a model to fill the vacated role.

In being promoted to the oldest generation, most of these participants found that others were relying on them. For the female participants, the only ones with
children of their own, part of their new responsibility meant remembering and passing down stories of the family history. The male participants, by contrast, were mostly concerned with how they were developing as men and whether they were living up to their fathers’ expectations.

For all of the participants, part of adopting the new role of elder meant discovering their limitations and accepting the challenge to extend themselves in new ways. Confronting their limitations resulted in feelings of doubt about their ability to assume the new role. This doubt took the form of fearing that they would be a disappointment to others, and in this sense would be unable to replace the parent. For this and other reasons, the new sense of responsibility and power that accompanied this change of roles was experienced as a mixed blessing. The role of elder was taken on with some reluctance.

Those participants who managed to take on the responsibilities of the elder found themselves becoming less concerned with what others think about them. This lack of concern was related to a feeling of greater power through which they felt more comfortable imposing their own will on others, usually with the expectation that it was for the others’ own good.

**Confrontation with Mortality**

The participants experienced the second parental death as qualitatively different than that of the first. The loss of the second parent made them more aware of their own mortality, a realization made more profound when accompanied by strong feelings of identification with that parent. This deeper sense of mortality induced fear, particularly in the male participants. All participants alleviated this fear of personal mortality by occupying themselves in ways that enabled them either to avoid thinking of their own death, or to frame their own death within a larger context of meaning. In some cases, these strategies supported positive changes in the ways participants understood or lived their lives. On the whole, the increased awareness of personal mortality helped these participants gain a new sense of appreciation for what they have; simultaneously, they felt motivated to give something back to the world.

**Interconnectedness with Others**

For most of the participants, the loss of both parents led to a greater appreciation of, and/or desire for, family connections. These connections were seen as providing, or potentially providing, a feeling of support and comfort. In addition, following the second parent’s death, the sense of family began to expand beyond the immediate family of origin to incorporate a larger sense of family heritage or community. With this heightened awareness of generational connectedness, most participants experienced a sense of being involved in a process of evolutionary progress wherein they were able to do things their ancestors were not, and/or their children were able to do things they could not. In addition, most participants
identified particular physical objects or symbolic energies related to the parent’s life that signified the sense of the love, connection, and caring passed down through the generations. These objects or symbols helped to carry the memory of the deceased parent at the same time that they hearkened to intergenerational connections.

The loss of both parents led the participants to recognize or revisit a larger view of life and their participation in it. This larger view of life can be seen as an increased spiritual sensibility that was awakened or deepened with the parents’ deaths. As part of that spiritual awakening, most participants sensed or wondered about the ongoing presence of the deceased parents and/or other ancestors. For some it felt as though the parent still existed in another plane, supporting the family with his or her love, and that seeds sown in earlier generations were still growing and coming to fruition. These participants found this spiritual connection to the deceased parent and/or ancestors to be nourishing.

**Transformation of Self**

In seeing themselves as situated within a larger family or world context, these participants found themselves breaking free from a self-centered orientation in order to experience a sense of wholeness larger than the self. In this sense, they experienced a transcendence of egoistic concern. Some of the participants also experienced a sense of separating from this larger wholeness, associated with ancestral heritage, while remaining connected to it. Viewed from these larger perspectives, the parent’s death, and the new position in which these participants consequently found themselves, assumed a sense of rightness. They experienced an increased sense of meaning and purpose in their lives.

Those participants who had somewhat successfully met the challenges of becoming an elder and adopted the role of their parent found themselves feeling humbler, more tolerant, and/or more generous than they had in the past. This newfound generosity and/or humility contrasted with a more selfish or arrogant orientation prior to the parent’s death. In addition, these participants found that their parents’ deaths led them to develop greater sensitivity to the experiences of others, and a greater sense of responsibility to them. They came to relate to the suffering of others and to feel connected with them. With this increased generosity and sensitivity, these participants came to act on behalf of others in ways they never had before. Some experienced themselves as awakening, as though from a slumber. They had come to new insight that had transformed the ways they think about and interact with others.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of the phenomenological analysis indicate that the midlife loss of one’s last living parent has the potential to significantly facilitate psychological
and spiritual development in what Moss and Moss (1989) have characterized as a "developmental push." It is suggested that one of the primary factors giving rise to this personal growth is the ongoing relationship that endures between the surviving adult child and the deceased parent. Specifically, this study reveals a variety of ways in which the orphaned adult actively "holds on" to the deceased parent, and these strategies, when enacted in this particular bereavement context with its unique set of personal meanings, act as catalysts for effecting personal transformation. This finding supports the contention that it is healthy for continuing bonds to persist after the death of a loved one (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996), in contradistinction to the breaking bonds hypothesis (Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, & Stroebe, 1992) which holds that normal grieving entails breaking all bonds with the deceased. In this view, it is precisely because the ongoing relationship is recognized and maintained that the surviving adult child is able to come away from this experience fundamentally changed in ways that extend beyond the restoration of pre-bereavement levels of functioning.

A number of researchers have suggested that losing a parent furthers the developmental goal of cultivating autonomy (Anderson, 1980; Moss & Moss, 1983-1984; Pincus, 1974; Scharlach, 1991; Scharlach & Fredriksen, 1993). The present study supports this finding and illustrates some of the psychological dynamics by which this goal is realized. One of these dynamics involves imaginary review of the parent’s life, leading to a reexamination of the orphaned adult’s own life. As noted by Moss and Moss (1989), with the loss of a parent there is a generosity in life review that supports the surviving son or daughter’s own sense of ego integrity by way of identification with the parent. This identification serves to bring the adult child’s own life into a focus that is healing, insofar as new feelings of forgiveness directed toward the parent are likewise directed toward oneself. The present study further indicates that this identification can extend beyond parent and child to encompass other persons as well, bringing with it a general sense of goodwill. Insofar as the parent continues to represent the adult child’s most formative relationship, quite possibly the adult child’s way of relating to the parent continues to inform all of his or her relationships. Life review therefore constitutes one way that the adult son or daughter continues to learn from the parent following the parent’s death.

Moss and Moss (1989) warn that if the adult child is overly identified with the parent, the parent’s death may plunge that individual into despair and impede the development of autonomy. This situation seemed to apply to one of the participants of the current study who emphasized in his interview his sense of identification with both of his parents’ personalities; his mourning was clearly complicated, as manifested through his ensuing struggles with depression and feelings of worthlessness. Nevertheless, even this participant spoke of feeling a deeper level of maturity resulting from the deaths of his parents.

Autonomy is also deepened by the manner in which the orphaned adult is thrust into the role of elder, a key finding of this study. Although previous researchers
have considered the psychological impact of losing the child role (Anderson, 1980; Moss & Moss, 1983-1984), none of the participants of this study drew attention to this loss. Rather, they emphasized the new responsibilities that come with crossing the generational line. The transition to elder status represents a social shift that used to be marked through rituals no longer observed in the modern Western world. As such, this transition necessarily carries with it a greater psychological “burden” than in the past. The results of this study suggest that the transition to elder as initiated and marked by losing one’s last living parent is a very psychologically rich phenomenon opening onto a profoundly increased sense of responsibility.

Finding oneself suddenly at the top of the ancestral hierarchy, without recourse to a higher authority, invites confrontation with existential isolation, defined by Yalom (1980) as the unbridgeable gap between oneself and any other being. From this vantage point, the bereaved son or daughter yearns not so much for the parent’s actual presence, but for the function that the parent provided. Existential isolation forces a confrontation with ultimate freedom and responsibility. In relinquishing a state of interpersonal fusion with the parent, one must take up the ultimate responsibility to oneself, i.e., authorship of one’s life, the ultimate autonomy. Although existential aloneness is often characterized as a state of groundlessness, two of the participants referred to the absence of someone above them, not below. This description positions them psychologically with an unobstructed view of the heavens, opening upward to new possibilities for spiritual transcendence, even in the midst of ambivalently grappling with the worldly responsibilities attending their privileged position. Ironically, this position at the top also comes with a deepened sense of being rooted and connected to the past, expressed as a heightened allegiance to ancestry.

The new responsibilities that come with being an elder, combined with discomfort arising from concomitant feelings of existential isolation and freedom, motivate the adult orphan to seek the wisdom of others. Moss and Moss (1989) have observed that the parent is the model of adult competency; accordingly, the participants of the present study often negotiated situations by imagining what their parents would do. They also sought models of adult competency in parental surrogates. One could view these “strategies” as attempts by the son or daughter to forestall the loss of the child role and ameliorate the disquiet of existential isolation; alternatively, these approaches could be seen as promoting the learning required to successfully adapt to the role of elder. The latter interpretation exemplifies what Stroebe et al. (1992) mean when they suggest that letting go must be balanced with holding on. Holding on to memories of the parent in this case need not imply a pathological resistance to getting well, but rather a vital component to personal growth and development.

The deepened, existential sense of responsibility to others (whether person or project) that attends midlife orphanhood goes beyond that accorded the normal roles and functions of societal living. For Erikson (1985), the premier social
achievement in midlife is the cultivation of generativity, the “concern in establishing and guiding the next generation” (p. 267). Knowles (1986) characterizes the existential mode of generativity as caring, by which he means that our genuine human capacity to care for others ripens in midlife so as to make generativity possible. In care, as an authentic mode of midlife, one revisits the earlier developmental goal of cultivating autonomy. In childhood, the cultivation of autonomy results in will; in adulthood, the cultivation of autonomy results in a willingness to accept one’s responsibilities. Recall that prior to the death of the parent, the participants experienced a conflict between the sense that they should care for the aging parent, and an aversion to what they perceived as the burdensome nature of the task. The present study suggests that the death of the parent, through confrontation with isolation and mortality, “pushes” the surviving son or daughter to take up responsibility toward others more willingly, thereby developing autonomy in the deepest sense.

Similar to the manner in which the development of autonomy is revisited in the cultivation of midlife caring, the loss of the child role forces a confrontation with one’s own sense of identity. Losing the last of the adult child’s longest and most nurturing relationships, along with the primary role that attends it, leaves the son or daughter’s identity temporarily shattered. The shattering of the old identity presents an opportunity to cultivate a new one more in accord with the responsibilities of adulthood. According to Knowles (1986), realizing the existential capacity to care entails, in part, cultivating a new identity which constellates around one’s authentically lived caring concerns and commitments, rather than one’s socially constructed roles and expectations. In adopting the role of elder, the adult orphan begins to assume such an identity, developing fidelity to his or her lived sense of “place” in the world. The adult orphan experiences these new commitments with doubt, which Knowles suggests to be indicative of the authenticity of the commitment. Doubt affords the possibility of affirming the commitment by choosing it, and it encourages the bereaved adult to wield his or her newfound power with care and sensitivity, rather than in an authoritarian way. Such power and responsibility are initially ego-dystonic; consequently, the adult orphan is continually pulled out of his or her habitual modes, affording the incorporation of new dimensions of him or herself.

Anderson (1980) has suggested that the death of a second parent can thrust the surviving middle-aged son or daughter into a confrontation with his or her own finitude. The present study affirms this observation. The participants lived out their confrontation with mortality in a way consistent with Gilligan’s (1993) observation that, whereas men are very concerned with their individual existence, and hence death, women are more focused on relationship. The men expressed concerns about being next in line to die, while the women expressed concern about others and felt a connection to the cyclic character of life. Nevertheless, all of the participants experienced a deepening sense of interconnectedness to others in such a way that the notion of family became extended well beyond its
narrow, conventional parameters. This heightened sense of interpersonal connection seems to be based in a deeper sense of personal autonomy and integrity.

In Jung’s (1971) developmental model, midlife marks the time in which one turns his or her attention inward to confront and resolve opposing tendencies to achieve greater integration and wholeness. During this process of individuation, one’s ideals, values, and body reverse and move in the opposite direction. A major life trauma during this time can evoke a transformational epoch in which one’s sense of self and meaning is dramatically changed over the course of months or years (Stein, 1998). Therefore, an event such as the death of a parent, and in particular a second parent, could have the effect of hastening the normal teleological and developmental processes of individuation. This idea provides a compelling way of understanding the experiences of the participants of this study, all of whom indicated some level of transcending a sense of self to embrace a larger whole. The psychic reversal of ideals and values that Jung identifies with individuation is exemplified in the way the participants’ more arrogant or selfish orientations yielded to greater humility, tolerance, and/or generosity, as they began thinking less of themselves and more of others and of how they might benefit them.

In adopting this larger spiritual perspective and expanded sense of self, these participants also demonstrated that they had started to move into the final of Erikson’s (1985) stages of development, marked by the social conflict between integrity and despair. Although Erikson conceives of integrity as an emotional and cognitive integration of various ego qualities, he also refers to it as a “post-narcissistic love of the human ego—not of the self—as an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense” (p. 268). Knowles (1986) suggests that the words “ego” and “self” be reversed in this statement so as to convey that integrity involves the love of a self larger than the ego. From this perspective, cultivating integrity involves transcending identification with the ego and egoistic concern in order to embrace a fuller sense of self that is integrated with family and community. Certainly being orphaned and having to confront one’s own future death provides a temptation to despair; however, while one participant in particular struggled with this temptation, all managed to varying degrees to intra-psychically incorporate elements of the deceased parent, developing a greater sense of ego integrity and a greater spiritual sensitivity.

It is important to consider the principle limitations of this study. While focusing so closely on a few participants afforded deep investigation into each one’s experience, the lack of numbers, combined with a lack of ethnic and cultural diversity, limits the robustness of the findings. In addition, this study only used participants who claimed to have been personally transformed by the loss of their last living parent. Therefore, it is not suggested that midlife orphanhood necessarily leads to enduring changes in one’s sense of self, although it is speculated that such a potential always exists, even if not always actualized. Although the participants came from similar cultural backgrounds, their life
circumstances and bereavement contexts varied widely, and in this sense the degree of generality in lived meaning revealed by the phenomenological analysis is noteworthy. As such, it is asserted that the narrative structure detailed in this study is suggestive of the potentials for personal transformation in midlife orphanhood, and, of the types of dynamics that underlie their realization.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that following the death of one’s last living parent, the relationship between the deceased parent and the surviving middle-aged child continues and is instrumental in whatever transformational experiences the survivor subsequently undergoes. Ironically, we can view the tendency to actively hold onto memories of the deceased parent—and in some cases to adhere to the parent’s expectations as though he or she were still alive—as serving to promote a deeper sense of autonomy. Holding onto the parent in this case forces changes in the intra-psychic incorporation of aspects of the dead parent’s personality, values, and roles so as to release emotional and cognitive attachments and find a state of greater integrity and wholeness. The personal changes that accompany and follow the midlife loss of one’s last living parent reflect what might be expected of the “normal” unfolding of human development; however, this developmental unfolding is accelerated in the way these processes are mediated by the ongoing relationship with the deceased parents.

While this study details the lived emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, and spiritual realities of its four participants, providing a structural portrait of how their lived meanings unfold and interrelate, its findings are inchoate and warrant further investigation. Nevertheless, the phenomenological research approach used here has offered access to existential realities not easily gained through quantitative approaches. It is hoped that the present work will stimulate further interest in qualitative research as a way of complementing more traditional research methodologies and grounding theoretical reflection. It is also desired that this work will stimulate interest in a largely neglected, but very important, area of bereavement studies. Finally, it is hoped that the preliminary understandings expressed in the present study will serve to promote in its readers greater self-understanding and clinical sensitivity.

REFERENCES


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