

# ‘Endlessly worth understanding’:<sup>1</sup> a phenomenological exploration of the experience of grieving

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**Abstract:** This paper offers an autoethnographic exploration of the phenomenology of grieving, arising from the author’s experience following the death of her close friend. The paper explores several themes which emerge heuristically from that individual experience, namely: grieving as an existential struggle; the embodied experience of grieving; how grieving challenges and destabilises language and theory; recognising grieving as an unfolding process and as part of the situation, rather than located in the individual; and grieving as a universal yet unique experience. The author’s personal experience is used as a springboard to reflect on the opportunities that Gestalt therapy theory and practice might afford grieving clients. The paper compares the Gestalt approach with a selection of contemporary grief theories.

**Keywords:** grief, phenomenology, death, murder, existential concerns, embodiment.

## Introduction

If you asked me to say why I loved him, I can only say ‘because it was him, because it was me’. (Montaigne, 1572/1996, p. 236, author’s translation)

*As I look through the beautiful scrapbook you made me, my breath is wrenched from the centre of my body, more than a gasp, not quite a sob, as though a vacuum is sucking air out of me. It comes when I see your handwriting. You touched this paper; you chose these words. I imagine your voice and remember the shape of your hands. The smouldering flicker of pain is alight.*

It is several years since my closest friend was killed by her ex-partner. Figural in my experience of natural and expected deaths up until that point in my life had been a deep yet uncomplicated sadness. So when my friend died, I did not recognise my grieving. I felt as though it was contaminated by my guilt and shame at not having saved her, my anger, my sense of betrayal at what I had not known about her life, my confrontation with the unthinkable terror of how she had died and a traumatic shattering of the privileged feeling of safety I had largely experienced in my relationships and my life thus far. I felt utter incomprehensibility. How could I make sense of something so senseless?

Even now, at times, I am still caught unawares by the sheer force of grieving in my body or feel silenced by how hard it is to find language remotely adequate to convey my experience of loss. I have experienced comfort in

grieving alongside others *and* felt deeply lonely in those moments when it is our unique friendship that I yearn for with its reciprocity, depth of conversation, robust debate and shared humour, a yearning that has grown not lessened over time. As I write this, I remember the words from Montaigne – ‘because it was [her], because it was me’ – and a sob rises. I pause my writing.

Later, as the figure of this writing takes shape, I become aware that it is emerging from a ground of fear and recall the opening line of Lewis’s (1961) beautiful memoir about grieving for his wife, ‘No-one ever told me that grief felt so like fear’ (p. 5). I feel vulnerable and isolated and reach out to a colleague for support. I tell him I am afraid of the pain of confronting my friend’s death; of feeling inarticulate and unable to make sense of it; and of being weighed down by sadness and sorrow. He responds, ‘I imagine that’s how clients might feel when they come to talk about their grief with you.’

His support enables me to ‘indwell’ (Moustakas, 1990, p. 24) in my phenomenological experience of grieving for my friend, broadly drawing on heuristic research methodology with its emphasis on the researcher’s ‘self-search, self-dialogue and self-discovery’ (ibid., p. 11). Memories, feelings, sensations and thoughts ebb and flow, some excruciatingly painful, others more wistful. Gradually, I find words to describe these experiences in a series of vignettes and, as I follow my self-reflexive process, I identify a cluster of themes which then form a framework for my

theoretical reflections and the structure for this paper. These themes are grieving as: an existential struggle; an embodied experience; a challenge to language and theory; an unfolding process; a part of the situation, rather than belonging to the individual (Wollants, 2012); and a unique yet universal experience.

As I track my unfolding process of writing, I become aware of tussles between moving towards and away from grieving; between isolation and relationship; between yearning for certainty and acceptance of uncertainty; between judgement and compassion. And as I anticipate putting this paper forward to a wider audience, I feel aware both of my fear of being exposed and my desire to connect, a delicate and uncomfortable movement between the intensely private and the public arena. These polarities in my writing mirror closely my phenomenological experience of grieving for my friend.

I hold awareness that this paper emerges into and from a field steeped in grief, separation, rupture and loss as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the profound grief, anger and sense of burning injustice at the violent racist killing of George Floyd, an almost unimaginable loss to mourn. This paper, then, serves both the deeply personal purpose of supporting my own grieving process *and* expresses my intention to reach out by sharing my reflections about the opportunities – so much needed at this moment in time – that Gestalt therapy theory’s phenomenological method can afford clients to express their unique lived experience of grieving, without assumptions about what that should look like.

By way of context, I outline the phenomenological underpinnings of Gestalt therapy theory, before exploring each theme in turn.

## Phenomenological exploration

Phenomenological exploration is a bedrock of Gestalt therapy theory and praxis (Yontef, 1993, p. 202; Burley and Bloom, 2008, p. 151ff; Wollants, pp. 95–103). It is an attempt to come as close as possible to the uniqueness, complexity and richness of a client’s experience. Yontef writes that ‘phenomenological exploration aims for an increasingly clear and detailed description of the IS’ (p. 182), while phenomenological researcher Finlay (2011) describes it as a ‘movement towards perceiving and reflecting in more complex, layered, expansive and all-encompassing ways’ (p. 48).

The Gestalt therapy theory understanding of phenomenological exploration originates in the philosopher Husserl’s (1859–1938) ambition to devise a method for reaching ‘a more adequate ... knowledge’ (Spinelli, 2005, p. 19) of the phenomenon under investigation, following Brentano’s earlier contributions

(*ibid.*, p. 14). In this paper, that phenomenon is grieving after a death. Methodologically, Husserl attempted to achieve this by following the three rules of the phenomenological reduction (*ibid.*, pp. 20–22; Fairfield, 2004, pp. 345–347; Staemmler, 1997, pp. 45–46): *epoché or bracketing*, in which assumptions and biases are set aside (Wollants, p. 99); *description* of what is immediately observable through the senses rather than explanation derived from abstract hypotheses (*ibid.*, pp. 100–102; Finlay, pp. 17–19); and *horizontalisation* which means treating everything observed as potentially of equal significance (Spinelli, pp. 21–22).

Husserl in his later work, and existential phenomenologists such as Heidegger (1889–1976) and Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), realised that a final reduction was not possible (Spinelli, pp. 24–25). Thus, there is no objective ‘essence’ of grief waiting to be discovered, only our own individual, subjective, situated experiences of it (*ibid.*, p. 31; Staemmler, 1997, p. 46). Bracketing can never be complete; description can never be entirely free of interpretation; and aspects of the situation will inevitably be more figural than others (Spinelli, pp. 20–22). The *intention* of the Gestalt therapist, however, is to remain as open as possible to the client’s actual lived experience of grieving, rather than fitting it into a pre-determined set of diagnostic criteria or imposing dominant cultural norms about what grieving should or should not look like. As O’Shea (2005) states, the Gestalt phenomenological attitude ‘supports the therapist in not making assumptions around the “right way” to grieve, and likewise supports the client in maintaining a similar attitude’ (p. 36). This is quite different from grief theories which seek to define or diagnose pathological grieving.

Gestalt therapists working phenomenologically, therefore, seek to come close to the client’s experience of grieving and stay alongside them in that potentially terrifying, liminal, ontologically threatening place. The challenge of doing this is not to be underestimated, often requiring a ‘willingness to walk together into the deepest circles of the patient’s experiential hell’ (Orange, 2010, p. 116) and a capacity to tolerate great existential uncertainty. This existential struggle in the grieving process is, then, the first theme I wish to explore.

## Grieving as existential struggle

*I stand by a giant bonfire, flames leaping, heat pounding, threatening to engulf us. I am standing right by the blaze, my nose almost touching the flames. I start to choke. I have no choice but to stand back, gasping for fresh air. If I stay close to the burning heat of my grief and terror any longer, I will be consumed by it. I recoil. It’s an act of survival.*

Immediately after the trial of my friend's ex-partner for her murder, during which I gave evidence alongside many other friends, I experienced this metaphor of a bonfire intensely and hauntingly. Even now as I recall it, I feel a chill down my spine. Here I was, at the edge of something vast and dangerous that threatened to consume me. My friend's death rocked many cherished beliefs, especially about safety/danger and God's benevolence, and destabilised my spiritual life. Her death also confronted me violently with questions of mortality, ephemerality, the possibility of non-existence and the reality of violence. I felt cast adrift from my everyday concerns into a liminal space at the edge of life and death and at the limit of what I could bear. This death was indeed "a boundary situation" ... that propels one into a confrontation with one's existential "situation" in the world' (Yalom, 1980, p. 159).

Phenomenological psychologist Fuchs's (2018) description of grieving as akin to 'uncanniness' (p. 52) resonates strongly with me in my grief and is also frequently echoed in my work with grieving clients. Fuchs links the uncanniness of grieving to the ambiguity of presence and absence of the person who has died and locates uncanniness in the conflict between 'life and death as two concurrent and competing ontological realms' (p. 52). As Yalom (1980) states: 'Life and death are interdependent; they exist simultaneously, not consecutively; death whirrs continuously beneath the membrane of life and exerts a vast influence upon experience and conduct' (p. 29). Heidegger suggests it is only by facing our 'angst' and confronting our own inevitable 'being-towards-death' that we can find 'urgency, meaning and potential for authenticity' in our living (Finlay, p. 51). Yet this is a formidable challenge which perhaps explains why we try to create theories and paradigms around the grieving process, as 'wafer-thin barriers against the pain of uncertainty' (Yalom, 1980, p. 26).

My image of the bonfire finds strong echoes in Didion's (2005) memoir in which she uses the compelling metaphor of the 'vortex effect' (p. 107): the fear of being consumed by grief is very real. Yalom's (1980) evocation of 'a dread that is terrible and inchoate and exists outside of language and image' (p. 189) captures this powerfully. I speculate that this could be likened in Gestalt therapy theory terms to a menacing version of the 'id of the situation' (Wollants, p. 51; Perls, Hefferline and Goodman, 1951, p. 403) where grieving is a pre-reflective experience – undifferentiated, wild, swirling, formless and *embodied*. It is to this notion of grieving as an embodied experience that I would like to turn next.

## Grieving as embodied experience

*Ineffable sadness in my downward gaze, remembering my friend, gently aware of her as unformed feeling, an echo of what it was like to be with her. Tears forming. There's a faintness, an intangible quality, it feels nameless – maybe the tear quavering on my bottom eyelid contains more of my grieving than any of these words.*

McConville (2012) refers to phenomenological exploration as 'orient[ing] us toward the thick ground of originary, *embodied*, perceptual experience' (p. viii, my italics) whilst Wollants describes 'bodying forth' (p. 79) as the pre-verbal feeling through which we apprehend how our situation is for us. My embodied experience of grieving for my friend began with a trauma response of racing adrenaline and shaking (Levine, P., 1997, pp. 97–98) at the moment I was told she had been killed. Later, during my psychotherapy training, I remember an experience of crying tears that felt as though they contained atom upon atom of sadness, each tear laden with the full weight of my grief. Whenever I talked about my friend during therapy, my body felt saturated, weighed down by heavy tiredness. I have experienced slight nausea throughout much of this writing. I can feel a bodily ache when I long to be with her.

In relation to grieving, I link the Gestalt notion of the body as our way of being in the world (ibid., p. 75) to the concept of 'intercorporeality' (Brinkmann, 2017, p. 3; Fuchs, p. 46), in other words the *embodied* intersubjectivity of the person who died and the person who survives. From a Gestalt therapy theory perspective, Wollants writes: 'the concept of contact boundary is metaphorical ... a way of expressing the intertwining reciprocity of the other and me, the experience of myself as a body and the experience of others as bodies' (p. 53). This could be manifest in sexual intimacy, for example, or in quotidian activities like sitting down for dinner together (Fuchs, p. 47). Fuchs talks of 'dyadic body memory' (ibid.), hence grieving can feel physically painful and like a 'mutilation' (Brinkmann, p. 4), a vocabulary that many grieving clients employ and many writers reference, as Aitkenhead (2016) does so vividly in her memoir: 'Without Tony I am limping and bleeding because half of me is missing' (p. 207).

The connection between grieving and the body is widely acknowledged by established grief theories. However, these mostly refer to grief as a causal factor leading to somatic symptoms, such as headaches, chest pain or dizziness, as well as increased mortality risk (Stroebe, Schut and Stroebe, 2007; Parkes, 1996, pp. 14–30). Medically, this is not to be dismissed and important to explore, given what we know about the strain grief places on the body. Therapeutically,



however, this implies that grief is an external entity which has a causal impact on the body (Brinkmann, pp. 2–3), like a germ causing an illness, rather than a way of understanding that grief *is* the body. As Brinkmann writes: ‘Grief, thus, does not simply *happen* to the body in a passive way, but is *done* or *enacted* by the bereaved, embodied individual’ (p. 2, original italics; Kepner, 2003, p. 7).

Yontef argues it is *sensory* awareness that enables a phenomenological understanding of the situation to emerge (p. 202). Such openness to embodied experience supports the ‘transition from vague, diffuse, global, bodily awareness to explicit knowledge’ (Wollants, p. 51) and exemplifies the intimate connection between what Spinelli calls ‘straightforward experience’ – the raw embodied experience as it happens – and ‘reflective experience’ as we attempt to construct significance and meaning (pp. 26–27). This leads me to explore the attempt to give language to and make sense of the experience of grieving, something I have found deeply challenging and destabilising.

## Grieving, language and theory

*Sitting in the British Library. Handwriting the occasional note. Typing a sentence here and there. Deleting it. Sitting with an overwhelming feeling of blankness, like the computer screen in front of me, and the faintest echo of panic. Abandoning my attempt to write for today. Feeling stuck and scared. I can’t think my way out of this one.*

My diary for the weeks after my friend died is blank. When I spoke at her funeral, my words felt impoverished. At the start of this writing process, I felt completely lost for words, theoretically incoherent, frightened and adrift without the safety net of linguistic and theoretical clarity. I wrestled with my desire to construct a coherent, compelling argument when my actual lived experience of grieving had been incoherent and fragmented. As my writing process has evolved to emerge more from my embodied experience, rather than dichotomising language and body into two separate realms (Perls et al., p. 240), I come to realise that it is not always possible to find neat, articulate language for my grieving. I become more open to other modalities of expression beyond the verbal and literal (Zinker, 1977; Yontef, p. 187) such as movement, sound, image, metaphor, silence, tears. As Katz (1999) writes, tears go beyond ‘the limitations of the expressive possibilities of language’ (p. 193).

My readings on grief throw up a further tension. I am stirred and often moved by the profound, elegiac language of autobiographical accounts of grieving (Lewis, 1961; Evans, 2000; Didion, 2005; Gaffney, 2010a; Kalanathi, 2016; Ferdinand, 2017; Dukes,

2018) or literary evocations such as Porter’s (2015) *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* and Ness’s (2011) children’s novel *A Monster Calls* in which a Crow and a Monster respectively represent powerful, disturbing metaphors for grief. By contrast, I often feel alienated by the dispassionate, desensitised tone of much theoretical writing on grief and the hubristic-sounding assertiveness of some writers, whilst paradoxically feeling attracted to their promise of certainty. I recognise my own desire to create ‘form out of the formlessness’ (de Waal, 2018). One way I understand this ‘legitimate need’ (Staemmler, 1997, p. 41) to strive towards theoretical/linguistic certainty is as a response to the existential terror grieving evokes and a desire to contain and sanitise it.

Theoretically, I think of models of grief based around phases (Bowlby, 1980), stages (Kübler-Ross, 1970; Parkes, 1996), and tasks (Worden, 2003). Though not necessarily intended as such, these models of grief are often interpreted in a linear, positivist, prescriptive way and have a ‘seductive appeal [because] they bring a sense of conceptual order to a complex process and offer the emotional promised land of “recovery” and “closure”’ (Hall, 2014, p. 8; Holland and Neimeyer, 2010, p. 116). They persist in popularity despite empirical evidence that contradicts the validity of such strictly chronological interpretations (Stroebe, Schut and Boerner, 2017, p. 467). The Gestalt phenomenological perspective offers a move away from a ‘chronology of grief’ (Vázquez Bandín, 2013, pp. 290–292) towards one that tolerates uncertainty (Staemmler, 1997), accepts our limitations as therapists to understand completely the client’s experience (Orange, 2011) and is at home in the realms of metaphor and image. It also resists the desire to fix in place and is open to grieving as a dynamic process rather than a static entity, as I explore next.

## Grieving as unfolding process

‘You think the dead we have loved ever truly leave us?’ [Dumbledore to Harry Potter]. (Rowling, 1999, p. 312)

*I feel joy at taking our children to a beautiful carol service at St Paul’s Cathedral. When we leave, they ask to light a candle for their auntie. As they do, I feel a searingly painful surge of grief. The four of us stand together for a while, holding hands.*

*Then breathe, head out into the bright light outside.  
Surfing the wave of grief as it ebbs back into the flow.*

A process orientation underpins the theory and praxis of Gestalt therapy (Yontef, p. 183; Hodges, 2003; Philippson, 2009, pp. 65–67).<sup>2</sup> From the founding text of Perls et al. (1951) onwards, Gestalt practitioners understand human experience to be a continuous, dynamic, recursive process of figure formation taking

place at the contact boundary of the person and the environment (pp. 231–232; see Wollants, p. 9), not as straightforward, linear cause-and-effect (Parlett, 1991, p. 71). Perls et al. acknowledge that as ‘old structures’ (p. 232) are destroyed to make way for new configurations, there will be suffering and painful loss (ibid., p. 249) and argue that this is necessary for the formation of the new gestalt.

Thus, one perspective is to see grieving as the mode of contacting a radically altered contact boundary with an environment now bereft of the person who died (Perls et al., p. 229; Wollants, p. 53). For me, this is most poignantly evident in moments when I want to talk specifically with my friend, especially about a worry or something I know would make us both laugh. As Lewis writes so eloquently:

Thought after thought, feeling after feeling, action after action, had H. for their object. Now, their target is gone. I keep on through habit fitting an arrow to the string; then I remember and have to lay the bow down. (p. 41)

I often reflect on a client’s figure-ground formation process as they grieve. Is their grief relentlessly figural (Melnick and Roos, 2007, p. 98), such that it almost eclipses the ground? Or does grief permeate the ‘structures of ground’ (Wheeler, 1991, p. 118), as when the client’s presenting issue is not explicitly linked to grief yet ‘background feelings of lack, loss and isolation ... tinge one’s whole experience’ (Fuchs, p. 48)?

Just as healthy gestalt formation is a process of continual movement of figure and ground, so too is grieving a fluid, dynamic process. This is embodied at a micro level in the pang or ‘wave’ of grief (Didion, p. 27; Fuchs, p. 57), as an intense figure momentarily forms and subsides, as I experienced in St Paul’s Cathedral. Without such movement, the grieving itself becomes a fixed gestalt that prevents the mourner from establishing the ‘double loyalty’ (Francesetti, 2015, p. 140) to the person who died *and* to the life remaining. This fluidity is compatible with the dual process model of grieving whose authors view ‘healthy’ grieving as an ‘oscillation’ between facing the loss and ‘reorient[ing] oneself in a changed world without the deceased person’ through ‘restoration’ (Stroebe and Schut, 2010, p. 277). By contrast, many other models persist in reifying grief as if it were static and quantifiable.

Grieving for my friend feels like a fluid, dynamic, unfolding process at a macro level too, over a lifetime, continually taking on new meanings and hues (Francesetti, p. 143). Recently, I have been most aware of feelings of pure sadness and missing her deeply, as other emotions have receded into the ground, as well as a reconfiguring of my spiritual life after much turmoil in the wake of her death. Thus, new experiences and meanings *are* possible as the figure and ground

continually shift, as Seán Gaffney’s (2010a) deeply moving account of his evolving grief for his son over many years testifies.

This chimes with the continuing bonds model of grief which emphasises an ongoing, though of course radically altered, relationship with the person who died (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, 1996). This notion of an ongoing relationship is quite unlike the traditional Freudian view that the purpose of grieving is the decathexis of libido (Freud, 1917), divesting energy away from the lost object in order to re-establish psychological equilibrium and return to ‘premorbid functioning’ (Hagman, 2000, p. 15). The prescriptive/normative tenor of some theoretical writing is predicated on this Freudian conception of grief (ibid., p. 18), in layman’s terms, ‘getting over it’. These norms can often lead to a pathologising of the individual’s grief, rather than recognising that a grieving individual is always part of a wider situation, as I explore next.

## The grieving situation

*The CD sitting on my desk feels like a thorn in my side. It includes a piece of choral music composed in my friend’s memory for Remembrance Sunday. I feel ashamed I have never listened to it. I hear a voice say I should play it. Because if I can’t go there, how can I expect my clients to?*

*I pause.*

*I’m taken aback by my lack of self-compassion, the harshness of my tone towards myself. Here I am, judging my grieving.*

My experience of judging myself for not listening to the CD and my introjected belief that I should confront my grief shocks me. It is a reminder of how assumptions can exist out-of-awareness and bracketing is a continuous process (Finlay, p. 96). I breathe a deep sigh of relief when a colleague suggests experimenting with putting the CD away for now, enabling me to embrace more self-compassion (Staemmler, 2012, p. 23) and giving me permission to be in the ‘restoration’ rather than the ‘loss’ orientation of the dual process model (Stroebe and Schut, 2010). I realise that staying with my experience of grieving does not necessarily mean confronting or pushing, but rather attuning to its ebb and flow with an awareness of the level of support available at that moment to venture further towards the painful and hitherto off-limits.

Within the framework of a contemporary Gestalt understanding of psychopathology, the client’s grieving is not seen as being located within the individual, nor as an individual disorder, but rather it is the situation as a whole, person and environment, that is considered (Wollants, p. 37; Roubal, Francesetti and Gecele, 2017, p. 4). I often ask myself what support is available in a

‘grieving situation’ to ‘enable’ (Jacobs, 2006, p. 10) the client’s grieving process and what support is lacking, developmentally, therapeutically, and in their wider field that perhaps modifies how they feel able to grieve. Grieving clients and those around them may co-create a situation where overt expressions of grief are retroflected, for example. Anger may be projected onto others, such as doctors. There may be confluence with an idealised memory of the person who died (Philippon, p. 120) and, in therapy, client and therapist may intentionally or unintentionally deflect away from grief.

Just like my introjected belief that I ‘should’ listen to the CD, clients and therapists may bring out-of-awareness introjects too (Manning, 1995, p. 70; Fuchs, p. 48; Levine, S., 1987, p. 102), many of which are culturally determined, for example around the completion of grieving. Within contemporary Western culture, these often translate into statements like ‘moving on’, ‘letting go’ or ‘starting again’. Yet cultural expressions of grief and rituals of mourning vary significantly, such as norms around restraint and expressiveness (Parkes, Laungani and Young, 2015, p. 194), private and public grief, and attachment to the person who died. By working phenomenologically and embracing Gestalt’s cross-cultural roots (Gaffney, 2010b, p. 154), the Gestalt therapist can create opportunities to explore with clients their encultured process of grieving and to challenge both dominant and non-dominant cultural norms. In this way, the culturally sensitive Gestalt therapist can avoid the danger of privileging certain aspects of the client’s experience, according to their own cultural assumptions (Singh and Dutta, 2010, p. 11).

Models and theories of grief, too, can create potentially unhelpful and culturally determined expectations. The meaning-reconstruction school of grief theory, for example, places great value on finding a ‘narrative ... that promotes a new sense of coherence’ (Neimeyer, 2000, p. 290) and stresses the potential benefits and possible positive transformation arising from grief (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema and Larson, 1998). This is linked to popular Western discourses around ‘post-traumatic growth’ (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2000, pp. 157–172) and ‘resilience’ (Machin, 2014, pp. 133–149; Sandberg and Grant, 2017, p. 10). I believe for some clients such notions are valuable as they find solace and motivation in discerning the personal growth they have experienced as a result of loss. I recognise that my impetus to write this paper stems in part from a desire to make sense of my experience and to accept what will perhaps never make sense.

My concern is when such models set up expectations for the client and therapist that inadvertently lead clients to feel they are ‘failing’ when their own experiences of grieving do not conform. For me, the narrative of my

friend’s death was a disquieting, fragmented story of domestic abuse kept hidden for many years. I felt no epiphany or transformation after she died. Instead, I felt a hideous self-conquest (Perls et al., pp. 362–363), in other words a self-attack based on introjected beliefs about what I ‘should have done’ and how I ‘should’ feel, leading to shame that I had not changed ‘for the better’ as a result of her death. Pathologising language that implies the grieving person is doing something wrong is prevalent in some grief theory literature, such as ‘abnormal’ (Worden, p. 83) and ‘exaggerated’ grief (ibid., p. 92), and can be detrimental.

By contrast, a Gestalt phenomenological approach is an attempt by the therapist to ‘avoid the imposing of set beliefs, biases, explanatory theories and hypotheses upon our experience’ (Spinelli, p. 25), though I note how easy it can be as therapist to slip very subtly into unaware assumptions, for example about what constitutes healthy grieving or what the client needs or about the client’s and therapist’s cultural contexts. However disturbed, prolonged or intense a client’s style of grieving may be, the therapist understands that their creative adjustments will always be their ‘best contact ... under the given circumstances’ (Wheeler, p. 77; see also Melnick and Roos, p. 98), according to the field theoretical principle of the Law of Prägnanz (Wollants, p. 63). I believe that people may present for grief therapy when their habitual fixed gestalts – the ways they have tended to creatively adjust over time with varying degrees of adequacy – begin to collapse when faced with an existential onslaught and destabilisation of self-other relations (Fuchs, pp. 48–49) as great as that of grief. The relational support that therapy offers can hold clients in the process of reconfiguration that grief calls forth.

Indeed, the therapist’s intention to offer non-judgemental compassion and relational, phenomenological, culturally sensitive openness towards the client’s grieving situation, just as it is, without preconception, is one of the most healing approaches I know, both as client myself and as therapist (Orange, 2010, p. 116). From the hermeneutic perspective, Gadamer (1960) writes that ‘we try to understand how what [the client] is saying could be right’ (p. 292). This creates space for experiences of grieving that are mundane or do not make sense; for vulnerability, not just resilience; for meanings construed around negative experience or lack of benefit; and for the shadow side of grief and more taboo feelings such as relief to be voiced.

## Grieving as unique and universal

... there is in every individual something which is inexpressible, peculiar to him alone, and is, therefore,



absolutely and irretrievably lost. (Schopenhauer, 1874/1974, p. 585)

*Zennor Head, Cornwall. Sitting with my two friends up on the cliffs looking out at a wild sea. Thinking of our dear friend who's not with us on this walk. It would have been the four of us. We cry. Suddenly I'm aware I'm experiencing our shared grieving for our friend. I'm not alone. We are holding our communal sorrow together. So is the sea.*

As Clark (1982) writes, '[Grief] is the statement of our relatedness . . . , also of our separateness, our aloneness, our loneliness and our loss' (pp. 50–51). I have sometimes felt desperately alone in my grieving process, especially when it is my friend's unique friendship that I long for and which feels so 'irretrievable'. This alone-ness has been echoed at points in my writing when I have cloistered myself, hermit-like, at my desk. By contrast, my experience of grieving is also one of connectedness, from my husband being alongside me unflinching during the awful days of the trial, to grieving with my two friends in Cornwall, to beautiful moments of connection with clients, to the breakthroughs that came in my writing when I reached out for support and entered into conversation. As Gadamer (2001) says, it is 'through an encounter with the other [that] we are lifted above the narrow confines of our knowledge . . . In every genuine conversation, this happens' (p. 49). This is how I understand Hycner's (1995) words, that 'the uniqueness of the individual [is] within the context of the relational' (p. 6, original italics).

I have long been fascinated by the experience of grieving as both intensely, uniquely personal and yet also universal. I have at times questioned the legitimacy of extrapolating at all from my own experience to a wider level of applicability in this paper (Robine, 2011, p. 36), especially mindful that grieving after murder is often considered a 'special' bereavement (Parkes, 1993; Beder, 2004). Yet I also firmly believe that, whatever the circumstances, my specific grieving process '... expresses not only my uniqueness, it also reveals that this uniqueness emerges from, or is an expression of, universal existential "givens"' (Spinelli, pp. 108–109; see also Philippon, p. 116). Even while I am inevitably situated in my own individual existence (Orange, 2010, p. 108) and my own body (Wollants, p. 74) and within my own culture, I am nonetheless a 'being-with-others' (or 'Mitsein') with whom I share a common world (Finlay, p. 50, citing Heidegger) and, perhaps now more than ever, a collective grief. As a Gestalt therapist working phenomenologically, my aspiration is to draw from the well of my common humanity with my client, as a fellow human being, while being alongside them and supporting them to express their unique experience of grief, treating their grief as 'endlessly worth understanding' (Orange, 2010, p. 115).

## Conclusion

I believe the Gestalt phenomenological approach affords a profoundly moving opportunity to be open to the uniqueness and complexity of an individual's grieving process within the crucible of the dialogic relational space, whether dyadically in therapy or in a group setting, whether as figure or as a force operating in the ground. Yet I know the profound challenges of doing this, both from my own experience of grieving and of being with grieving clients in the face of existential dread, uncertainty, limitations of language and our powerlessness to change the outcome. I realise no matter how many aspects of grief I turn to look at, it will always partially elude me, just as the phenomenological reduction is never complete. Grief is 'endlessly worth understanding' (ibid.), even as I know I will never fully understand it.

*And so I choose to end where I began. With my friend.  
With the bittersweet feeling of dwelling in your presence  
and of our friendship having sustained me as I write.*

## Notes

1. Orange, 2010, p. 115.
2. I reflect this process orientation by using the verb 'grieving' in preference to the noun 'grief' wherever grammatically possible (Miller, 2011, p. 18).

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