Mourning in Japan

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The authors examine the process of mourning in a culture whose religions sanction the implied presence of the deceased through ancestor worship, as compared to a culture where this is not acceptable or encouraged. Most of 20 Japanese widows interviewed during the acute grief phase of mourning adhered to the cultural beliefs and were less depressed and anxious and had less difficulty accepting the loss than those who did not. The authors suggest that the almost universal Japanese custom of ancestor worship serves an important adaptive function in the work of mourning.

IN JAPAN, religions permit the mourner to maintain contact with the deceased, who become ancestors. This is true both of Shintoism and Buddhism, which include ancestor worship as a part of the respective religious beliefs. Erich Lindemann has stated that the main adaptive purpose in grief work is "to fill the empty space" in the psyche; the religious custom of ancestor worship appears to fulfill this purpose(6). We therefore decided to study the process of mourning in Japan. There, the lost object is not lost. The mourner can cling to the deceased, who has become an ancestor to be worshipped and fed, and with whom the mourner can share experiences and discuss eventful happenings.

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Since Sigmund Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" was published in 1917, there have been studies of the process of mourning among those bereaving in the community(4). Because it was our belief that one aspect of the experience of object loss is the religious and cultural context in which the loss occurs, this study is a report of grief where the cultural institution of ancestor worship may greatly alter the process.

According to Oguchi:

> The nearest thing to a universal element in all Japanese religions is the deep-seated regard for ancestors commonly called ancestor worship, which transcends sectarian lines. In other than Christian circles, the dead are normally referred to as *KAMI* or *HOTOKE*, Shinto and Buddhist terms respectively, which are used also to designate divine beings. According to traditional beliefs, the spirits of the departed can be called back to this world—usually by shamanistic rites similar to those widespread throughout Asia(8).

The ability to call back the spirits of the departed is a part of the religious beliefs, and it may permit the Japanese mourner to hold on to the deceased, in contrast to the British who have no such beliefs(5).

There are data concerning bereavement in British widows(7, 9). To compare our data with the studies of Marris and Parkes, we decided to study widows in Tokyo. We wrote to the widows of men killed in automobile accidents, with the hope of interviewing 20 widows between the ages of 20 and 60. We set the upper age limit of 60 because previous studies had suggested that grief may be attenuated in widows over 60.

In our letters to the widows we requested an interview in their homes, suggesting three alternative times, and asked them to return a postal card indicating their first and second

choices. The following tabulation describes the returns:

Letters to widows	55
Replies: Yes	23
No	7
No reply	18
Address unknown	7
Widows actually interviewed	20

Three widows who agreed to the interviews were not seen; two were ill and therefore indisposed, and one was not home at the appointed time.

We wanted to see the widows ten to 50 days after their loss. The average actual interval of time between the loss and the interview was 42 days, with a range of 12 to 76 days. The age of the widows averaged 38 years and varied from 24 to 52. They had been married for 14 years on the average, with a range of one year to 26 years. Only one widow had no children; the average widow had two children. One woman had five children, two had three children, and the remaining had either one or two children.

Each widow was seen within the confines of her home. Most often this was a small apartment with a tatami floor. When we were invited in, we would bow low on our hands and knees and present the official gift of a package of incense imprinted with the sign and seal of the chief medical examiner of Tokyo. With the permission of the widow we ritualistically paid our respects to the deceased. Then we asked to tape-record the interview, and all but one widow consented. Without exception, tea was served, and if the widow could afford it she also served cookies or candy.

The religious affiliations of the 20 widows are shown in table 1. There was one Shintoist, 13 Buddhists, and six who had no affiliation. The Shintoist and Buddhists each had a family altar, a *kamidana* or *butsudan* respectively. In addition, four of the six widows who had denied religious affiliations also had such altars. Thus, only two had no altar, and even one of these said she planned to get one soon. It is apparent that the widows are conforming with the cultural custom of family altars even when they disavow religious affiliation. Only one widow totally ignored this custom.

TABLE 1
Religious Choice of 20 Japanese Widows

RELIGION	NUMBER	BUTSUDAN (FAMILY ALTAR)
Shinto	1	1
Buddhist	13	13
Christian	0	0
None	6	4
Total	20	18

Reaction to Loss

After explaining the purpose of the interview, we asked about the automobile accident and the widow's reaction to it. Table 2 shows the results. Depression or anxiety was experienced by 85 percent, apathy by 55 percent, and insomnia by 70 percent. None of the widows reported cultivation of the idea of the presence of the deceased, but 90 percent reported sensing the presence of the deceased. One widow said that at night she would "wake up and feel he was there." Attempts to escape reminders of the deceased were reported by 55 percent; one widow moved the television out of the living room because she was painfully reminded of how they had watched television together. Sixty percent reported difficulty in accepting the loss, which was typically expressed as an incredulity that the husband was dead. One widow said that at six o'clock she felt he would walk through the door. In addition, all the widows with altars could feel the deceased was there. None blamed herself for the accident, and 60 percent blamed the other drivers.

Although the sample is too small for

TABLE 2
Reactions to Loss of 20 Tokyo Widows

REACTION TO LOSS	PERCENT
Depression or anxiety	85
Apathy	55
Insomnia	70
Cultivation of idea of presence	0
Sense of presence of the deceased	90
Attempts to escape reminders	55
Difficulty in accepting the loss	60
Blames self	0
Blames others	60

TABLE 3
Comparison of 14 Religious with Six Nonreligious Widows in Tokyo

REACTION TO LOSS	RELIGIOUS (PERCENT)	NONRELIGIOUS (PERCENT)
Depression or anxiety	93	83
Apathy	58	67
Insomnia	79	50
Cultivation of idea of presence	0	0
Sense of presence of deceased	93	83
Attempts to escape reminders	64	33
Difficulty in accepting the loss	50	83
Blames self	0	0
Blames others	57	67

probability inferences, table 3 compares the religious and nonreligious widows. The religious widows seemed to be as depressed and apathetic as the nonreligious widows, had more difficulty sleeping, and more often sensed the presence of the deceased. At the same time, they more often attempted to escape reminders of the deceased. However, the fact that they more often sensed the presence of the husband may be a positive sign in helping them adapt to the loss.

Moreover, the religious widows had less difficulty than the nonreligious widows in accepting the loss. They also less frequently blamed others. Perhaps this trend suggests that active religious belief with the rituals and institutionalized belief in ancestors makes the loss less stressful. This and other related issues will be discussed later.

Four widows who said they had no religious preference nevertheless had a *butsudan* at which they made offerings of water, food, incense, prayers, and "goodies" and where related activities occurred. These widows then behaved like the religious widows in following the prescribed rituals, while the remaining two widows without the altars did not.

Table 4 deals with the widows without religious affiliations, comparing the four who had altars to the two without altars. Those without religious beliefs and practices were more troubled, less often sensed the presence of the deceased, more often attempted to escape reminders, had more difficulty in accepting the loss, and more often blamed others.

When the widows in Tokyo are compared with those in London in table 5, it can be

TABLE 4
Nonreligious Widows
Comparison of Those With Altars to Those Without Altars

REACTION TO LOSS	WITH ALTARS (N = 4) (PERCENT)	WITHOUT ALTARS (N = 2) (PERCENT)
Depression and anxiety	75	100
Apathy	50	100
Insomnia	50	50
Cultivation of idea of presence	0	0
Sense of presence of deceased	100	50
Attempts to escape reminders	0	100
Difficulty in accepting the loss	75	100
Blames self	0	0
Blames others	50	100

TABLE 5
Comparison of Marris' London Widows with 20 Tokyo Widows

REACTION TO LOSS	TOKYO GROUP (N = 20) (PERCENT)	MARRIS GROUP [1] (N = 72) (PERCENT)
Depression or anxiety	85	100
Apathy	55	61
Insomnia	70	79
Cultivation of idea of presence	0	21
Sense of presence of deceased	90	50
Attempts to escape reminders	55	18
Difficulty in accepting the loss	60	23
Blames self	0	11
Blames others	60	15

[1] Reprinted by permission from Parkes, C. M.: Bereavement and Mental Illness, Brit. J. Med. Psychol. 38:1-26, 1965.

seen that there are variations in the response. In Tokyo 85 percent of the widows were depressed or anxious, while in London 100 percent were. In contrasting the two groups, 55 percent and 61 percent respectively were apathetic, 70 percent and 79 percent complained of insomnia, and none and 21 percent cultivated the idea of the sense of presence of the deceased.

Marris reports, "A few seemed to cultivate this sense of their husbands' presence. They talked to his photograph and imagined that he advised them . . . ." Ninety percent of the widows in Tokyo and 50 percent of those in London sensed their husbands' presence. A British widow whose husband died of pneumonia said, "In the night, I've heard him cough—he used to give a little cough, and he'd get up. One night I even called out to him, 'Tommy, you're coming

to bed!' " Fifty-five percent of the Tokyo group and 18 percent of the London group attempted to escape reminders. "Some widows told me the house had become so unbearably charged with memories, that they had spent hours in public parks, or wandering in the street to escape from them." Sixty percent of the Tokyo widows and 23 percent of the London widows had difficulty in accepting the loss. One-half "had illusions of seeing their husbands, or more often hearing his voice or his footsteps after his death." None of the Tokyo widows and 11 percent of the London widows blamed themselves, and 60 percent and 15 percent respectively blamed others.

Discussion

The differences in the pattern of response between the Tokyo and the London widows may be due to the acuteness of the Japanese women's loss, since all were deprived of their husbands due to automobile accidents, an artifact of the experimental design. All of the Tokyo widows were seen during the acute grief phase, that is to say, within 72 days of the death; and thus their data are different from the data of Marris, who saw the London widows from ten to 46 months after bereavement, with an average of two years and two months.

There is an important difference in the two interviewing methods, because we had a schedule on which the responses were listed. Marris listed the widows who had difficulty accepting the loss even though he did not ask each of the 72 widows the same questions. "Altogether, seventeen mentioned this difficulty in grasping the reality of their husbands' death, and fifteen that they continued to behave involuntarily as if he were still alive. The experiences are probably commoner than these figures suggest, since I recorded them only when they were spontaneously mentioned"(7).

There are many other variables, such as the presence of members of the extended family in the Japanese household. We are aware that the presence of relatives or in-laws may be a source of great comfort and may contrariwise be a source of great friction and unhappiness. The so-frequent presence of others in the Japanese household is another cultural variable that complicates the picture by presenting a different life situation and life style. One-half of the widows were living with relatives, either in their own home or in the relative's. The distribution of relatives was of possible importance in that eight of the 14 religious widows had relatives as compared with only two of the nonreligious widows. Of the latter, one widow had a *butsudan*; the other had no altar.

Since both the nonreligious widows without family altars attempted to escape reminders of their husbands, had difficulty in accepting the loss, and blamed others, it might be speculated that they were socially withdrawn and rejecting of help even from the deity. Lindemann has pointed out the tendency of some to withdraw at a time when others would try to be attentive and to comfort the bereaved(6).

The main point of our research was to observe the natural process of mourning in a culture where the religious beliefs and institutions permit the "cultivation of the idea of the presence of the deceased" as ancestors. If you would for a moment give up your Judeo-Christian beliefs and attitudes about one's destiny after death and pretend to be a Japanese, you might be able to feel how you are in direct daily communication with your ancestors. The family altar would be your "hot line." As such, you could immediately ring the bell, light incense, and talk over the current crisis with one whom you have loved and cherished. When you were happy, you could smile and share your good feelings with him. When you were sad your tears would be in his presence. With all those who share the grief he can be cherished, fed, berated, and idealized, and the relationship would be continuous from the live object to the revered ancestor.

The Work of Mourning

Sigmund Freud's view of the work of mourning was the individual's ability to test reality and to be aware of the absence of the object(4). This painful change of reality may at the same time exist with fantasy-making. Pollock has suggested that "fantasies and even day dreams concerning the deceased object can interfere with the

mourning work, and in instances where the death of the object is not realistically appreciated, the object may continue to exist as an unassimilated introject with whom internal conversations can be carried out" (10). There may then be a problem, Pollock believes, due to the lack of completeness of identification and ego integration of the introject.

Bowlby also expresses the idea that in healthy mourning there is a withdrawal of emotional concern from the lost object and that this prepares the way for new relationships(1, 2). In comparing mourning with the separation of the child from his mother, he describes three phases of mourning: the urge to recover the lost object, disorganization with despair and depression, and the phase of reorganization.

In Tokyo the process of mourning is different due to the cultural beliefs. Ninety percent of the widows worked to maintain ties with the deceased, who becomes an ancestor. This of course is the counterpart of the 21 percent of the British widows who worked to cultivate the idea of the sense of presence of the deceased. The important theoretical difference is that in Tokyo this is acceptable and encouraged by the culture and religious rituals. The London widows would cultivate the idea of the presence of the deceased "by imagining him speaking to them, or in one case by lying on the bed of her dead child and playing with his toys"(9). The Tokyo widows did something like this at least once a day when they offered incense at the family altar. The photograph of the deceased, the urn of ashes, the flowers, water, rice, and other offerings were all for the ancestor. As one widow said, "When I look at his smiling face, I feel he is alive, but then I look at the urn and know he is dead."

A number of widows executed actions previously directed toward the dead persons. For example, one widow would go to the streetcar stop at the hour when the husband previously came home. Another kept his clothes in case he needed them. Still another widow thought it was her husband returning when she heard a motorbike, and she went to the door. Because we neglected to include such acts on our interview schedule, we do not have the number who executed acts associated with the deceased.

Ninety percent of the Japanese widows sensed the presence of the deceased; often this occurred not only in sensing the physical presence of the deceased, but in sensing the presence of the ancestor as well. With this "transitional object," most gained comfort in the rituals around the *butsudan.* The widows often said they had difficulty in accepting the loss, but this was in the sense of feeling that perhaps the husband was merely teasing and would return, for example, at suppertime. One widow was angry at the husband and said that when he returned she would scold him. A large number were hostile toward the people who drove the lethal car or truck.

The Tokyo widows more often wished to escape reminders of their husbands. We will have to allow for the variables of the abrupt death due to the accident and the acute phase during which the women were interviewed. In addition, there were examples of gory reminders that seemed to be related to witnessing the accident scene. One widow described how she walked by the place of the accident and was reminded of the accident scene, and so she escaped this by avoiding that particular street.

Because the widows were victims of automobile accidents, they had no need to blame themselves. The closest any widow came to self-blame was to state that she had suggested that her husband take the streetcar instead of the motor bicycle, and she wished that she had insisted he do so. Another widow explained that she had wanted her husband to wear a helmet when riding the motor bicycle and that he had refused to do so; she thought that she should have suggested it again.

Freud said that the mourner has "to detach the survivor's memories and hopes from the dead"(3). Perhaps there will be a problem ultimately for the Tokyo widows. We do not have data on them six months later, although an attempt at follow-up was made. When letters were mailed to eight widows who had been seen six months previously, only two consented to the second interview. We were able to see just one widow, however; the other one was sick. Five did not reply to the letter, and one had

moved. The only widow we saw six months after bereavement was not so depressed or disorganized, and the only residual signs of the loss were mild depression and insomnia. She no longer spoke of sensing the presence of the deceased or of other behavior associated with the deceased. This widow had become a devout Buddhist and felt that the religious beliefs helped.

Our data on the Tokyo widows suggest that at times of death, religious beliefs and customs are a source of comfort and that even when the loss is abrupt and the widow is seen during the acute grief phase, the idea of ancestors substitutes for the "cultivation of the idea of the presence of the deceased." These widows were less accepting of the idea of the loss, which may be evidence of greater difficulty in adapting or may be a function of the abrupt loss due to the accident and the acute grief phase during which they were interviewed. The widow who was seen six months later was no longer having difficulty accepting the loss.

Summary

Because there are quite strong urges to regain the deceased one, it seemed reasonable to assume that religious concepts and practices may have a bearing on the process of mourning. In Japan the deceased become ancestors who are fed, watered, given gifts, and talked to, and so the tie between the widow and the dead husband remains through the concrete medium of the husband's photograph on the family altar. The family altar is almost universal and is a cultural "cultivation of the idea of the presence of the deceased." The rituals appeared to aid the widows, and although they were acutely grieving, they seemed to be adapting to the loss. They certainly required no special fantasy-making since they could "look at the picture and feel he is alive and look at the urn of ashes and realize he is dead."

We have added data on how individuals grieve, specifically those who are not patients but who are experiencing the acute phase of the process of mourning. There is evidence from these data that the feelings of grief are considerable and that when the loss is acute there frequently may be difficulty in accepting it. It appears that mourning requires a major adaptation and that we who help the bereaved need to know what can be expected as a part of the adaptive process and need to understand that religion may play an important role here. Those bereaved without religious support may have greater difficulty in coping with the loss. None of the Tokyo widows worried about their sanity because they felt their husband's presence. Religion aided in this aspect of the grieving, for in the religious beliefs the husband was present as an ancestor.

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