

# Intentionality's Breaking Point: Lessons from Grief

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## 1. Introduction

### [Quote 1]

This state is physically raw, and has nothing whatever to do with thinking sad thoughts or with 'mourning'. It thuds into you. Inexorable carnal knowledge.

The plainest simplest horror from which the mind flinches away: never to see that person again. The purely *cognitive* violence of it. Now you understand those ideas of the migration of spirits, or of reincarnation: to try to soften that blow. Or no, not to soften it – but to provide something for baffled cognition to grasp at. (Riley, 2019, p. 28)

### [Quote 2]

Knowing and not knowing that he's dead. Or I 'know' it, but privately I can't feel it to be so. These fine gradations of admitting the brute facts of the case, while not feeling them. (...) Half-realizing while half-doubting, assenting while demurring, conceding while finding it ludicrously implausible – so many distinctions, all of them nicely in play. To characterize such accurate nuances as my 'denial' of his death would be off the mark. Yet who is policing my 'acceptance' of it? (Riley 2019, 23f.)

## 2. How grief breaks it: Loss of a world

[grief] "is temporally extended and changeable; there is no single, constant, essential ingredient that we can track across its whole course a longer-lasting sequence in the emoter's life, consisting potentially of very heterogeneous elements" (Ratcliffe 2017, 158).

### [Quote 3]

An unanticipated and irrevocable vanishing smashes through your habitual cognitive assumptions that objects and people will continue to exist, to reappear. The person who says, 'I keep expecting to hear his key in the door at any moment,' isn't merely falling back on a well-worn trope. She's issuing a factual report. Once so ferociously shaken up, cognition can't readily regroup its forces to reassemble with its old anticipation intact. The entire stance inside which you'd previously lived is changed. Not by any disfiguring melancholia on your part, or even by simple reflective sadness – but by an upheaval of that pre-conscious topography through which your old apprehension of the world had once quietly moved. (Riley 2019, 59f.)

### [Quote 5]

The person who has died was not only an object within one's world but also a condition of intelligibility for that world. Complete acknowledgement of loss therefore involves a disturbance of the world within which the loss is initially experienced as occurring. (Ratcliffe 2020, 660)

### [Quote 6]

Grief (...) affects systems of anticipation that both shape perceptual experience and provide guidance for action, disrupting what was once presupposed. (...) [I]t is the practically meaningful

connections between things that are eroded—one's sense of the overall situation in which things are experienced as appearing and changing. Determinate arrangements give way to haziness. What is lacking here is not merely epistemic in nature. It is not just that one cannot find a path to follow; the paths have gone. (Ratcliffe 2020, 661)

### 3. Time without its flow (Denise Riley)

Riley speaks of a “freezing of time” (p. 13); of the “extraordinary feeling of a-temporality” (p. 14); of a “private non-time of pure stasis” (p. 15); or a “condition of being ‘outside time’” (p. 17).

#### [Quote 7]

What do the dead give us? A grip on the present instant in which we're now relentlessly inserted. Not in a contemplative sense, but vigorously. A carnal sensation. (p. 29)

A sudden death, for the one left behind, does such violence to the experienced 'flow' of time that it stops, and then slowly wells up into a large pool. Instead of the old line of forward time, now something like a globe holds you. You live inside a great circle with no rim. (Riley 2019, p. 31)

Not that your sense of time is 'distorted'. What's changed is more radical than that. Simply, you are no longer *in* time. Only from your freshly removed perspective can you fully understand how our habitual intuitions of time are not without their limits, and can falter. (Riley 2019, p. 42)

#### [Quote 8]

Unanticipated death does such violence to your ordinary suppositions, as if the whole inductive faculty by which you'd previously lived has faltered. Its textbook illustration was always 'Will the sun rise tomorrow?' But now that induction itself is no more, the sun can't any longer be relied on to rise. (Riley 2019, p. 33)

#### [Quote 9]

You share the death of your child, in that you approach it so closely that you sense that a part of you, too, has died that instant. At the same time, you feel that the spirit of the child has leaped into you. So you are both partly dead and yet more alive. You are cut down, and yet you burn with life. (Riley 2019, p. 20)

A vicarious death. If a sheet of blackness fell on him, it has fallen on me too. As if I also know that blackness after his loss of consciousness. (Riley 2019, p. 28)

This deep tiredness, as if sharing his grave. (Riley 2019, p. 29)

#### [Quote 10]

Perhaps what's specific is this: that with the death of your child, your own experience of time might be especially prone to disturbance because the lost life had, so to speak, previously unfurled itself inside your own life. (p. 49f.)

If you had once sensed the time of your child as quietly uncoiling inside your own, then when that child is cut away by its death, your doubled inner time is also 'untimely ripped'. Yours, and the child's. The severance of the child's life makes a cut through your own. You as its mother can no longer be present to yourself in the old temporal way. A sculptural imagination rises to grip you; the hollow of the old shelter for the living child has now been gouged out of you. It was the space of the child's past, which used to lie like an inner shell enveloped by your own time. That child you had,

alone, when you were young yourself, a child you grew up with, nested like a Russian doll whose shorter years sat within yours, gave you a time that was always layered. Then you held times, in the plural. (Riley 2019, p. 50)

**[Quote 11]**

Yet after this scooping-out by the death, a fresh incorporation arrives: the child gets reanimated in your effort to embody its qualities and carry them onwards. Perhaps this is the peculiar fate of mothers of dead children: still to contain that other life, and to shelter it twice over. Once before the child's birth, and once after the death when you're left with an impression of a spirit internalized. (...) And this inserts itself in the pressure of your forceful but not especially disconcerting sensation of living outside time. (p. 50f.)

**[Quote 12]**

After its sudden disappearance, your temporal intuition becomes violently altered by the scooping away of that doubled sense of time that you'd lived in before, if without always being aware of it. Yet in this same moment of subtraction, the dead one, although now sheared away from your old conjoined temporality, now comes to re-inhabit your newly arrested time vividly, as an incorporated presence. In a shared a-temporality. (p. 82f.)

Half bitten away by the child's disappearance, your time is nevertheless augmented – for the time of the dead is, from now on, freshly contained within your own. (p. 83)

#### **4. How love makes it: Intentionality reassembled**

**[Quote 13]**

This affective history will extend your usual scope of felt time well beyond your own skin. In the past you had sensed your living child's time, including the physically interior time of its gestation as well as its early growing and independent life, as if it were internal to your own. You had aged in tandem with it. But now the time of the vanished child has been cut away from your impression of your interior time. As I'd noted, it's as if, from a set of nested Russian wooden dolls, the innermost one's had fallen out. (2019, 82)

#### **5. Continuing the bond while re-learning to be alone**

“grief can be understood as an open-ended rehearsal of our capacity to be alone in the company of an absent other” (Ingerslev 2018, p. 343).

**[Quote 14]**

In our rehearsal of being alone, the other is neither animated, internalized nor brought back to life by certain rituals or objects. Rather, the mode of relatedness can be understood as a form of lived dedication or evocation. (Ingerslev 2018, p. 356)

**[Quote 15]**

What Riley described [...] as the arrested flow of time can equally be understood as an ongoing repetition of remembering one dead, however only if we accept that in grieving as an ongoing activity we can find a way of not moving 'on', but moving 'with' the absent other. (Ingerslev, 2018, 357).

## 6. Outlook: On Inconsolability

### [Quote 16]

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute, no matter what may fill the gap; even if it will be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually this is how it should be [...] *it is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.* (Sigmund Freud, *Letter to Binswanger*, 1929, as quoted in Riley, 2019, p. 74)

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