A Worker's Personal Grief and Its Impact on Processing a Group's Termination

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SUMMARY. This article deals with a worker struggling with a personal loss while simultaneously helping her group with the termination of a valued long term member. The focus is on the parallel grieving process and the resistance to mourning. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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I have of late been thinking about beginning again after loss, and grief. This is not surprising to me since my sister died recently and shortly thereafter my friend died. While struggling with the multitude of feelings that come and go when one experiences loss, I continued to work with a group that has been together for ten years. One evening a long term group member announced that she would be moving to Israel

and thus leaving the group. With that announcement, we all entered the termination stage, and, for me, I felt the professional boundary between myself and the group becoming more porous.

Prior to that evening, my work offered me respite from a seemingly endless stream of difficult feelings. Up until that night, I was able to compartmentalize my grief and my work effectively, or so I thought. I was soon to discover how much of my "self" had been absent from my work and therefore how ineffective I really was during this period. The group was not about to allow me to continue to separate myself out and consequently, it forced me to deal with my loss more honestly.

I would like to share with you my thoughts about this struggle: a worker and her group trying to move forward while confronting the complexities of loss. In this discussion I will look at the parallel process of loss between a long term group whose member is leaving and the worker who has experienced the recent death of a sibling. I will attempt to show how the predictable process specific to the termination stage offers a structure of safety to both worker and group, enabling them to process this most difficult period. I also intend that this discussion will show how the individual stages of grieving correspond to the issues in the termination stage of a group.

I hope these thoughts will be healing to me in my journey and informative to you in yours, since I know well it is a voyage we all must take. The very nature of our work demands that we deal with the always threatening collision between the worker's personal struggles and the group's work. Termination triggers the ". . . pain of loss and endings that stalks all of us, worker and client alike . . ." (Brandler and Roman, 1999, p. 94). Old issues of separation and individuation are reactivated for worker and group, making the processing of this stage potentially very difficult.

In Brandler and Roman (1999) the reader is asked to think of the group as a separate living entity, ". . . a being with its own personality composed of many separate and unique parts each part contributing to the whole . . . It has a total personality . . . distinct from any other." The authors suggest that like an individual that is multifaceted, the "conflicting components within the complex structure struggle against each other towards resolution and growth" (Brandler and Roman, 1999, p. 321). This challenge and subsequent resolution of conflict results in a "healthier" being. Thus, the group as a whole begins at a primitive level of functioning and ends at a more developed level. Ideally, the group ends when maximum growth is achieved or its goals are reached.

The end of a group is the end of a life. In a group where there is a high level of intimacy established over time through mutual struggle and built on a strong cohesive base, the leaving of a member is like a death in the family. Whether it is a group ending or an individual member leaving, when a termination occurs, a mourning phase is initiated and a grieving process begins (Shulman, 1979). "In all groups, while the particulars may vary, the letting go is difficult for worker and clients. For both, termination triggers memories of unresolved endings and accompanying loss" (Brandler and Roman, 1999, p. 11).

These residual historical losses can contaminate the group's ability to grieve effectively. If this occurs, the mourning is incomplete and the members' abilities to move forward establishing new intimate relationships will be compromised. For this reason, the worker needs to be keenly aware of her personal feelings and the tasks she must address in her role as worker in helping the group process through the termination phase.

One of the primary tasks of the worker during the ending stage of the group is to help identify and consolidate gains. The identification of achievements and the validation of progress enable the group to make conscious its strengths and experience a sense of mastery and growth. This process takes place through a thorough evaluation of the group's experience. Reminiscing and sharing memories, both positive and negative, reinforces the cohesive group bond. Re-establishing a solid base enables members to then express any ambivalent feelings or unresolved conflicts. The worker's task is to enable the group to verbalize these complex feelings, accept them, and subsequently accept any feelings of helplessness and resignation associated with "unfinished business" (Kurland and Salmon, 1998). The worker needs to be, and needs to help the group to be sensitive to members who struggle with feelings of regret and loss. The nonjudgmental acceptance of these difficult feelings helps normalize them and allows members to move ahead and not get stuck in what could or should have been. The worker must help the group confront the inevitability of change and our powerlessness to stop it. Simultaneously the worker moves to focus the group forward reinforcing gains, and the ability to achieve in the next arena. The task for all is to integrate strengths, accept limits, and advance. This can be a difficult process as it was for me in my work with a long term group.

> I am feeling comfortable in group during the evening of Malka's disclosure. The group is talking about their difficulty confronting painful decisions. Malka suddenly says, "Speaking of confronting

difficult decisions, I'm struggling all night with my mixed feelings about telling you all that my husband and I have decided to move to Israel." The group reacts with surprise and disbelief. Malka had mentioned her moving as an outside chance several months ago. The group and I had not followed up on this matter (did not want to know?), and so her decision feels sudden and totally unexpected.

I feel a surge of anger. "What is she talking about," I yell in my head, "she can't leave now, she is not 'ready' and besides she didn't even let us know." Various members express disbelief and denial. Beatrice insists Malka could call in for our sessions. Terri laughs and expresses feelings of betrayal. Susan comments that she knew sooner or later someone would leave and she is sorry she had ever joined the group.

That night after leaving the group I feel exhausted. I prefer to attribute my weariness to the lack of sleep rather than my psychic struggle to repress my overwhelming feelings.

The next few weeks feel unproductive. Members come late more often, absences increase and I keep starting the group late because of one unexpected problem or another. Old conflicts resurface. Beatrice and Terri resume an old interactive pattern of attacking and competing. Susan withdraws by interacting less or talking about concrete problems rather than substantive emotional issues. Selma is angry most of the time and Maria is always 'nice' and non-confrontational, taking few emotional risks as she had behaved long ago. I feel more frustrated and unenthusiastic. Cognitively I know I am off but emotionally I am drained.

One night while I am preparing for group I think to myself, "ugh, more termination anguish tonight!" For the first time in weeks, I hear myself. I am reacting to the loss of the group members as if she were my sister. I was not prepared for my sister's death, although I knew it was coming. I wasn't "ready" to let her go. I am angry that I have to experience the loss. I don't want to feel her absence in my life. Most of all I feel powerless; I can do nothing.

When Malka announced her leaving, I, like the group, felt unprepared. We were not "ready" to lose a wonderful rich relationship. We

wanted to deny it would happen ("she can call in from Israel"). We were angry that there was nothing we could do to stop her ("can you postpone this?"). I began to distance as did the group. Our coming late, not talking honestly and openly about feelings and our withdrawing emotionally were all expressions of the fear and anxiety we associated with the loss of a significant person.

I suddenly saw this regressive behavior as being a "normal" part of a group's and an individual's reaction to loss. Often when we are confronted with the irretrievable we revert to a more familiar, psychically safe place, old behavior: Selma's old angry defense, Maria's old "nice guy" routine (as the group had labeled it earlier), Susan's old withdrawal ("the lone ranger" as members had affectionately described her), and the intense old sibling rivalry characteristic of the relationship between Beatrice and Terri.

There it all was clearly before me–the termination stage. I couldn't see it before because the historical noise of my chaotic childhood forced me into hiding. That childhood, filled with multiple losses, has resurfaced during my sister's dying. As I was faced with an unbearable loss, my old defenses kicked in. The past was all too present and was stopping me for going forward. As I was stuck, so too was the group (Kurland and Salmon, 1993).

Once I saw what was happening I was able to feel an element of safety again in the predictable structure of the termination stage. Characteristic responses during the termination stage are: denial (you can call in), regression (old sibling rivalry behavior), flight (increase in my lateness), anxiety and regret (I should have never joined), and withdrawal (not speaking of feelings). It now made sense. Cognitive understanding provided me with a framework for my feelings thus giving them less power and allowing me to use the feelings, therapeutically (Ormont, 2001).

How interesting, I mused, the process of my breaking through this countertransferential block was a living example of something I often speak about to students. When discussing the use of self as a therapeutic tool, I lecture that the worker must feel free to immerse herself in her feelings. The challenge is to feel and let those feelings pass through a cognitive filter that enables distance from the feeling and insight into its connection to the group's process. The fear of most workers is that you can get lost in your feelings and become ineffectual. I had forgotten "the impulse to protect the self and not allow the group to go where it needs to go in order to do its work is strong. The group must be held to the work, no matter how frightening it is for the worker" (Roman, 2002,

p. 63). I had come close. I must share this with my class but for now I had work to do. I had to reclaim the worker's role in the ending stage of group development (Kurland and Salmon, 1998, pp. 218-219). This would serve to help the group, and me.

> The following evening I am on time for group. Members trickle in with a variety of explanations for arriving late. I comment that recently it seems difficult for us to start on time. Selma rolls her eyes, and suggests that "life is complicated. You can't predict what's going to happen, schedule changes, problems with the kids–you know." I hear the latent message–it is complicated here, we can't control things and we're not sure we're up to confronting it. I pursue, "How else are things complicated?" Selma leads the charge, "Oh, here she goes! What's that supposed to mean?" "Yeah and how do you 'feel' about those complications," Terri mocks. We all laugh.

> This group has been here before, struggling to risk. I say, "You know I agree with your analysis Selma. Things are complicated and unpredictable and it's exhausting trying to still be here. We've all been running scared lately, including me. I've been starting late for weeks." "Yeah, I wanted to say something," Malka comments, "it's unusual for you and everyone to come late but I felt since I was leaving it wasn't my place anymore to say anything." "You think there is some connection here between my behavior, the group's behavior and Malka's leaving?" I inquire. They agree there may be some connection.

> Maria replies that she has also been disappointed in the return of her "nice guy" attitude and her old inability to say she was annoyed with not only the lateness but also the superficial level of discussion. Terri comments, "Yeah and I noticed the return of the 'Lone Ranger'" referring to Susan's old pattern of withdrawal. We laugh, relieved to be present again with each other. Selma is quick to pick up on Terri's comment. Looking at me, Selma quips, "You also were rather 'quiet.' " I own up to my avoidant behavior and share with them my analysis of what had happened. And with a "hearty high ho Silver," we are off and running. I have finally given permission for the group to express their honest feelings, by being honest myself. We are again bonded and safe enough to risk.

They verbalize, with great gusto, their anger at Malka for leaving and me for abandoning them when I was most needed. They talk about their guilt; how could they be angry with me, my sister had died. All of these women have suffered the loss of an intimate other; they know I must be in pain. At the same time, they struggle with feelings of resentment at having to "take care of me," by denying their own pain. Terri proclaims her lack of empathy for me. She needs to hold on to her anger. They all have functioned as "parentified" children in their families. Fear of loss, anger, resentment, sorrow and compassion fill the room for ninety minutes. I marvel at their insights, honesty and at their ability to own their group.

We had broken through the fear. I went home feeling exhausted and elated at the same time. What a group! We had done good work. For the first time in weeks I slept soundly.

We are still processing the loss of Malka and what that represents to us. Some sessions are more intense than others. My feelings of loss were further intensified by the loss of a colleague and friend some months later, but the group did not know about that and was already deep into their work. I felt the old sense of sadness and the impulse to withdraw but the group was so present, they would not allow it. They demanded my presence by being active and confrontational. I had recovered my professional distance and my ability to be empathic without merging. I was able to reclaim, and resume the worker's role, as needed, in helping the group deal with loss and endings.

Both the group and I went into mourning when each was confronted with the loss of a significant relationship. Our grief processes paralleled. Individual grieving and group grieving are both characterized by denial, anger, withdrawal, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Northen and Kurland, 2001). When I was able to identify how my own mourning reflected the mourning of the group, I was able to connect the two. The use of a model for the termination phase enabled me to process the feelings in the safety of a cognitive structure (Kurland and Salmon, 1998, pp. 218-219).

Both worker and group continue to work on building new relationships, acknowledging the contribution of those gone, and accepting the totality of our feelings. We have again experienced what Carl Jung said so eloquently, that "One does not become enlightened by imagining light but by making darkness conscious" (Zweig and Abraham, 1990, p. 4).

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