

Response to “Death of the Analyst”

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In my first reading of Pamela Power’s article I found myself continuously confronted with this question: who is reading it? While the question has softened over the course of several readings it has not gone away, and perhaps it never should. As strange as the question may sound, it is a question that is always at issue because all reading is a complex affair.

Beginning in this way I confess that I have had two sets of eyes on her paper, and acknowledging them helps me better understand and appreciate the tension that I find in her work, or the tension that her work finds in me. With one set of eyes I have been reading her essay as a phenomenologist. With the other, I have been reading it as a Jungian-oriented therapist and thinker. As a phenomenologist I value the ways in which Pamela Power describes so simply and eloquently her experiences of her loss. As a Jungian I value the ways in which she makes use of her knowledge to make sense of that loss. This tension between experience and knowledge haunted my own memoir of loss, and there are, I believe, these two different moments, two different styles of discourse in her essay. I am making no judgment here, nor do I wish to split experience and knowledge into an either/or dichotomy. Rather, I am trying only to differentiate how her essay invites two different ways of understanding the grieving process.

When my wife of twenty-five years died suddenly and in front of me, her death shattered my world. Nothing had prepared me for it and no explanations, psychological, medical, or otherwise helped to make sense of it. In her opening paragraph Pamela Power makes the same point. In spite of her thorough and lengthy analysis she was surprised that the death of her analyst “felt abrupt and premature.” Later, when speaking about her idealizing transference toward her analyst, she wonders if she might have been better prepared for his death if her idealization of him had not so protected her from a number of difficult emotions. Perhaps, but I think not, because what seems so universally true in her first statement is that we are never ready for the death of someone who has mattered so deeply to us, and in the shock of grief no idea or theory or attempt to make meaning can make us ready. Death comes, the one left behind endures, or not, and it is only after the descent into the long winter of mourning, only in retrospect, only in the gesture of a backward glance, only in a later moment of regard that one might take a second look and begin to see the sutures that have knitted together the broken fragments of one’s life. But in this backward re-collection we discover that we

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are not the surgeons of the soul who have made those sutures, who have healed those wounds. Rather, we discover that life has done that, the current of life, and those small epiphanies of the world that begin in odd and often irritating ways to call us back from the dead and into the community of survivors.

Much of Pamela Power's article is a description of those currents. She tells us many tales of small and seemingly insignificant things, which in retrospect were mirrors that reflected back to her the condition of her grieving soul. When, for example, she is diagnosed with low-grade lymphoma, who as a reader is unable to feel with her the ways in which she is suddenly perceived by family and friends. Her husband, she writes, was helpful and sympathetic but left treatment decisions to her, and her children, she adds, "freaked out at the notion that their mother had cancer." "I was disturbed," she writes, "at their abrupt change in attitude toward me. Sentimental or patronizing—either way, I had become an objectified entity." Continuing, she adds, "I told two close friends who felt sorry for me, glad it was me and not them." "After that," she says, "I stopped telling anyone."

Her illness, so close in time to the death of her analyst, distanced her from life, and the faces and gestures and words and attitudes of friends and loved ones reflected the changes in her world and in whom she had become. It is in these ways that we first know the meaning of death, illness, loss and grief. The world tells us. It mirrors the states of our souls. After the death of my wife I became a ghost, and it was in the reflection of this invisibility that I felt her loss. My grief over her death was not a condition within me that I could analyze and interpret. On the contrary, it was the condition of my world, my grief registered over there, reflected in the transformed quality of things, and mirrored in the strange distance that had severed me from my contact with others.

It is stories like this that show that we do not pull ourselves out of the depths of loss but are drawn out of it when we are able to be responsive to the world's appeals. Pamela Power's story of the metal vase is a good example. Stuck in her grief, "endlessly trying to make meaning of [her] situation, trying to find a way to move on," she begins another analysis. But who is the one who begins again and how do we know her? It is through a metal vase, which the interns gave her as a parting gift when she left the clinic, that she discovers and communicates who she is at that moment of beginning anew. In her grief she is that vase that looks so nice but has a big crack in it. That vase is the mirror that reflects back to her the sense of her situation. It is that vase, she says, that moves her to tears.

The world is the home, the habitat of our subjectivity, and he or she who would understand the other must understand the physiognomy of that person's world. Our existence is not in what we think or what we know as subjects who turn inside and look for meaning. Rather, our existence is in the ways we engage and are engaged by the world. Pamela Power tells us what the world of grief after the death of her analyst is when she describes the landscapes of her life. And so, as readers we are drawn in as fellow companions on the journey of grief when she tells the story of the air conditioner in her analyst's office, or the story of the parked cars, or, perhaps the most poignant, the story of the boiling eggs. "The image of fully mature chickens trapped in egg shells screaming for help," she writes, "became the metaphor to understand my distress during the week: indifferent adults, not aware or able to hear my screams for help."

This is phenomenology. The stories are the tales spoken by the raw heart in its anguish and sorrow, and when we allow ourselves to be taken by their images we enter into the world of grief. Seven years after my wife's death I returned to those landscapes of mourning and in the memoir that I wrote of that time I said, "The grieving soul hungers for the *experience* of mourning and in the winter of the soul *knowledge* about loss is not enough. In grief's far country, I was not nourished by explanation. In the long winter night I yearned only for the vignettes and the stories that witnessed my experience of loss and echoed its collective depths" (1999, p. 28, my italics).

In the shock of grief, before the long season of mourning begins, "We don't feel very securely at home within our interpreted world" (Rilke, 1939, p. 21). But in the long winter of sorrow, when our souls lie like fallen fruit on frozen ground, we begin to ripen, and as the seed hungers for the sun so too do our souls hunger for meaning. Pamela Power tells this side of the story with fidelity and courage. The death of her analyst reaches deeply into old wounds. "I kept myself as unaware," she writes, "of how ill my former analyst was as I had been about my own father." With this insight not only does she know that the death of the analyst is the death of the father, she knows that the one who experiences his death is the child. "As if following a very old script," she adds, "I kept myself outside his dying process, not contacting him, not wanting to know, as if to know were going against an ancient taboo." Indeed, it is the child who begins analysis again, the child who breaks into tears at the sight of the cracked vase. The person of Pamela Power who comes to therapy is and is not the figure of the child who comes for therapy.

There are other examples of how Pamela Power transforms her experience of loss into meaning. Her discussion of her somatic symptoms is especially insightful because it illustrates so very persuasively how affects that are spilt off from consciousness take up residence in the flesh. I read her descriptions here and I am stopped. I know this of course as an idea and there have been enough times that I have experienced this reality. But it never fails to shock and her descriptions are potent reminders that psyche always matters.

Pamela Power's essay teaches us that grief is a forced individuation process that leads us through old wounds into a confrontation with ourselves. It teaches us also that while there are no road maps for the journey, no steps to follow in order to overcome the grief over loss, there are tales told by travelers to that far country of loss whose stories guide the way when the storms of grief blow apart those fragile structures of order and meaning that have sheltered our lives.

Before I conclude my response I want to return to my opening question. Reading Pamela Power's essay has raised anew for me the question of how one balances the tension between thinking and feeling in psychological writing. How does one write down the soul when one is writing up one's experience? How does one say of his or her grief the heart and the mind of sorrow? Poets know how to do this. Rilke's poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes" is a sustained meditation on love, death, loss and grief. But the psychologist is not a poet. I have no answer to this question. I am grateful, however, for how Pamela Power's essay keeps this question alive.

In conclusion I want to say that what I also deeply appreciate about Pamela Power's essay is the way in which it focuses for us the central place of death in the

analytic situation. For in the end what is analysis if it not a sustained education in the good and ethical life by preparing one for dying. That such preparation is always an ongoing task that opens up old wounds is inevitable. It is as inevitable as "the death of the analyst."

References

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