

CHAPTER 1

An Introduction

In London attending a convention, I was stunned by two words in an obituary for a middle-aged adult who died suddenly: “*No mourning*” (Duncan, 1999, June 30, p. 24). When I called *The Times* seeking clarification, an editor assured me that I had read correctly, “No mourning. You know, no going on and on about it . . . crying and all that.” After reflection, I realized that that published phrase captures the attitude of many individuals on this side of the Atlantic toward grief for a friend: no mourning.

I am a griever. I am a friendgriever. By grieving for friends, by crying and “all that” I am experiencing what Cable, Doka, Heflin-Wells, Martin, Nichols, Pine, Redmond, Sanders, and Schachter (2000) call “the hidden sorrow.” At mid-life, I have lost more than my fair share of friends. Those losses have led to an appreciation for Lauren Bacall’s assessment of losing friends, “As the number has shrunk, as the gaping holes multiply—as pieces of me go with those who leave this earth—I become more aware of my own mortality and the incredible sadness that endings bring” (1994, p. 152).

I am not alone. Between six and ten million Americans are annually impacted by the death of a friend, assuming three to five friends per death (Deck & Folta, 1989, p. 77). I have lost my grandparents and my parents, but the shaping losses of my life have been the deaths of my friends. My friendship network, in the words of the Timex commercial, “has taken a lickin’ and kept on tickin’!”

I am grateful that these friends are part of my life—not were but *are*. My life, blessed by their presence, is now graced by their memory. If they had not been part of my life, if they had not demonstrated the meaning of friend and friendship, I would never have given my grieving for them a second thought and would have pursued some other stream of thanatological research.

Once I would have agreed with Pogrebin (1987): “Death is friendship’s final closure” (p. 104) but the work of Klass, Silverman, and

Nickman (1996) has given me the courage to believe in “continuing bonds.” Death is but a pause . . . between sentences. Someday my companions and I will resume our conversations, “Now where were we?” My understanding of life after death is influenced by my belief that somewhere “out yonder”—in the words of poet Doug Malloch (1915/1950)—Rusty and Elva and Martin and John and Twila and Bud and Pat and R. T. and Cecil and Bunny and all the others are enjoying the party and wondering when I will arrive. Gallup (1997) reports that most Americans believe in some form of existence after death. Lewis (1946) explains: “No event has so corroborated my faith in the next world as Williams did simply by dying. When the idea of death and the idea of Williams thus met in my mind, it was the idea of death that was changed” (p. xiv).

My friends, although dead, fill the bleachers of my memory. As I have sat at computers writing, in libraries reading, and listening—sometimes eavesdropping—to grief narratives of other friends, when I have wanted to abandon this project, they have protested. I learned so much from them in life; now, I am learning so much from them by paying attention to the accumulated grief. Friendgrief is like the task of Sisyphus in Greek mythology pushing the stone up the hill, only to have to do it again. And again. Smith (1996) wrote:

I am again a traveler,
wandering through a landscape for which Fodor
has no guidebook—a land called Grief.

. . .

Experiencing my friends’ deaths has depleted my heart.
My heart lies, collapsed, like a party balloon
the morning after the celebration.
No one understands my grief.
I guess that’s what I get for taking friendship so seriously (p. 9).

CONTEMPORARY FRIENDSHIP

I coined the term *friendgrief* based on the phrase “friend-griever” or one who grieves for a friend (Deck & Folta, 1989, p. 77). We friend—and why should *friend* not function as a verb rather than the more passive, befriend?—in a culture in which many are clueless as to how to establish and maintain a friendship. I agree with Ann Swindler’s conclusion: “Modern friendship works in part because it isn’t so demanding. It’s turnonable, and turnoffable. Friends are like a line of credit at the bank, but you don’t draw on them all the time” (as cited in Goodman &

O'Brien, 2000, p. 211). Friendship lite becomes a concession to busy schedules.

FRIENDSHIP VS. FRIENDLINESS

Many confuse friendship with friendliness. Individuals assume a person to be a friend because he is being friendly (Freeman, 1999). Women invest in friendships while men “act friendly.” Women consider a friend to be a friend in all situations while men commonly preface requests of friends with the words, “If it’s not asking too much.” These days, too many consider any friendship to be disposable and replaceable. Jane Mansbridge finds contemporary friendships, “Fantastically voluntaristic” to the point, “I voluntarily enter; I voluntarily leave. You enter into friendships so long as they’re good for you, and then you leave” (in Goodman & O’Brien, 2000, p. 212). Increasingly, friends interact when it is convenient. “So busy these days . . . would love to see you some time.” But we never get around to scheduling some time. Because many friends are too hurried and too stressed to invest time in nurturing friendships (Putnam, 2000), friends drift in and out of our lives. “What ever happened to so-and-so? I never hear you talk about her anymore.” In fact, some leave funeral or memorial services purposing to be a better friend only to be reminded of that failed promise at the next funeral of a friend.

THE ABSENCE OF A TIGHT DEFINITION

A definition is essential because defining friend or friendship in contemporary society is whatever I want friend to mean. It is not easy especially when a presidential candidate who has difficulty remembering names opens speeches, “My *friends*. . .” Or when this sentence runs in a major metropolitan newspaper, “As 3,000 of his closest friends gathered at First Baptist Church on Friday . . .” (Whitley, 1999, October 30, p. D-1). (“3,000 *closest* friends?” I want to ask how many *casual* friends did he have?) When former President George Bush writes in his memoirs: “One of my best friends died, C. Fred Chambers” (1999, p. 443) I stumble over “*one of my best friends*.” What does Bush mean by *best* friend? Some would argue that one has *a* best friend rather than multiple best friends (Yager, 1999). Reading such statements, I concur with Nardi’s assessment that “the word ‘friend’ is thrown around quite loosely and requires layers of explanation for coherent communication” (1999, p. 2) particularly in a clinical setting.

Goodman and O'Brien (2000) lament that Americans use friend to cover everyone from intimates to mere acquaintances. Steinsaltz (1999) charges that friend is "so vague in English" (p. 159) that the term, at times, covers relationships that may be anything but a friendship. "Some unfortunate people have no understanding of the word 'friend' beyond the dictionary definition. They have never experienced a deep friendship, so they do not even know that it exists, and are therefore missing something in their lives" (p. 161).

WHEN CLINICIANS DEFINE FRIENDSHIP

In a clinical setting, definition and clarification of operative terms are critical; definition frames the parameters in which research and practice are conducted. Nevertheless, clinicians tend to rely on their own experience to find the meanings of words like "friend." I opened a presentation on friendgrief at the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) with a definition of friend from *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (L. Brown, 1993), "A person joined by affection and intimacy to another, independent of sexual or family love" (p. 1028). Immediately, some participants challenged the definition. "I consider my spouse to be my best friend," and "All my research is in *groups* of widowed friends." I used the exercise to demonstrate the variety of definitions among clinicians attending the workshop.

Little has changed since Wright (1982) concluded that research on friendship is "rarely based on a clearly delineated conception of what friendship is." My experience at ADEC illustrates Wright's conclusion that friendship has "broad and ambiguous boundaries, allowing for a great deal of variability in subjective definitions" (1982, p. 3). "I wouldn't call that a friend" has become a well-worn cliché. It is too easy for writers, researchers, clinicians, and friends to assume that others know or share a definition of "friend." These days, I have to say "No, I don't know. Tell me." Constructing an exact, universal definition for friendship may be as difficult as Justice Potter Stewart's experience on the Supreme Court with pornography: "I shall not attempt further to define . . . but I will know it when I see it" (Applewhite, Evans, & Frothingham, 1992, p. 449).

Gregory DeBourgh of the University of San Francisco, who critiqued an early draft of this manuscript, challenged me to define friend up-front. "If I were you, I would add an introduction and get the definition business done in the introduction. That way everyone would know what you mean by friend even if they do not happen to share that

definition.” So, for this book, I have constructed a definition of *friend* from two sources:

A person joined by affection and intimacy to another, independent of sexual or family love (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1993, p. 1028).

and

A voluntary, personal relationship typically providing intimacy and assistance. . . . the two parties like each other and seek each other’s company (Fehr, 1996, p. 20).

My working definition of friendship reads,

Friendship is a voluntary, personal relationship providing intimacy and support. The participants, independently of sexual and family love, like each other and seek each other’s company and comfort and highly value attributes such as trust, loyalty, and self-disclosure.

I concede that not everyone will concur with the exclusion of sexual or family relationships in this definition. Heterosexual and same-sex partners would challenge that exclusion (Clark, 1997; Nardi, 1999; Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996) insisting, “My spouse/partner *is* my best friend.” Mitchell Wright, whose wife was killed in the schoolyard shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas, confronted the convicted shooters in court before their sentencing: “I not only lost a wife, I lost my best friend, thanks to you” (Lieb, 1998, August 12, p. A38). Siblings such as Wiltshire (1994) would contend that brothers and sisters and other family members can be friends. Adult children may contend that some parents can be friends. Jarrett Payton (1999, November 21) writes, in reference to his father, Chicago Bears running back, Walter Payton, “He was my best friend and it’s kind of hard when you lose your best friend and your father at the same time” (p. D8).

Certainly, some males identify wives as a best friend. For many males a wife is not only their best friend but possibly their *only* friend. For these men, a spouse/best friend’s death is a duo grief. Rarely has a wife reported to me that her husband is her best friend. In some spousal and family relationships, boundaries blur and overlap but one relationship dominates (Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996). I conclude that an individual is either more spouse or more friend. So, in this study of friends-in-grief, I exclude spouses and family members.

WHAT ABOUT “MAN’S BEST FRIEND”?

I also exclude grief for a pet. Admittedly, some consider a pet a friend; a dog may well be a particular man’s “best friend.” Individuals may be reluctant to acknowledge their strong attachment to a pet “for fear of reprisal or being demeaned or ridiculed” (Jarolmen, 1998). One griever told me, “I am ashamed to admit this, but I wept more for my dog than I did for my mother.” Without discounting the grief following the death of a pet, I leave this friendship to other researchers.

A WORKING DEFINITION OF GRIEF

Grief is also broadly defined. I chose the definition framed by Wolfelt (1988) “as the emotional suffering caused by death” or loss; a “constellation of thoughts, feelings and behaviors” (p. 1). Increasingly, in Western culture, grief is perceived to be a private matter, best experienced in the privacy of one’s own residence, or better still, in the sanctuary of one’s own mind and heart. For many, grief will have a short shelf life. I was amazed by a headline in *The Kansas City Star* on the fifth day after the death of twelve students in the bonfire collapse at Texas A & M, “Texas continues to mourn” (Texas continues to mourn, 1999, November 23, p. A2). *Continues?* How could anyone quickly get over the death of multiple friends?

The banishment of mourning from our vocabulary and our daily lives results in an epidemic of unresolved grief. For those who find public expression of grief for a family member discomfiting, how much more so for someone who was “merely” a friend. In many respects, friends are not only disenfranchised but are “invisible grievers” (Silverman, 1999, p. 167) who mask their grief, sometimes through a flurry of activities of support for the friend’s family. In a disposable society, you do not grieve—you replace.

Discounting grief for a friend’s death is not new. Poet Alfred Lord Tennyson (1895) was chastised for exaggerating grief for his close friend, Arthur Hallam. Tennyson responds

One writes, that “Other friends remain,”
That “Loss is common to the race”—
And common is the commonplace,
And vacant chaff well meant for grain.
That loss is common would not make
My own less bitter, rather more (p. 18).

A WORKING DEFINITION OF FRIENDGRIEF

I define *friendgrief* as “the thoughts, feelings, or behaviors experienced when acknowledging and integrating a friend’s death into our daily lives and into the narrative of our lives as well as into the narrative of the friendorbit in which we are participants.” The friendorbit is a subset of persons in a social network who are available for socio-emotional aid or instrumental aid, or both (Thoits, 1982). Participants in a friendorbit provide emotional concern, instrumental aid (goods and services), information; and appraisal (House, 1981). In my friendorbit I have individuals to whom I look specifically for each of those gifts; a death will create an immediate void. The friendship network’s boundaries must be renegotiated to accommodate losses. A particular death “can test the limits of friendship” (Barroso, 1997, p. 554) among those who compose the social support network. Some friends will rally together in the crisis, others will desert or drift away, especially when the deceased was the magnet that held friends together. How do I grieve when the friend who was always there for me is now *not* there?

SOCIAL NETWORK AS A CONVOY

Oltjenbruns (1995) introduced me to Kahn and Antonucci’s (1980) paradigm for social support network: convoy. In World War I, as the German Navy disrupted British shipping lanes, war supplies were torpedoed to the bottom of the North Sea. Prime Minister Lloyd George ordered that cargo ships have escorts and travel in a protected group. The convoys reduced losses to just 1.1 percent of trade (Island, 1998, p. 19) and changed naval warfare.

Lofland (1982) argues that children need a “convoy of friends” to help them navigate childhood and Oltjenbruns (1995) insists that children require a convoy of support to survive the death of a childhood playmate-friend. I believe that adults and adolescents also need a convoy of “you-can-count-on-me” friends. Even when the network of friends is small or scattered geographically—a “I’ll-be-there-for-you” friend comes through. The friendorbit assists an individual navigate through the minefield of life, especially bereavement.

According to Kahn and Antonucci (1980) in a convoy an individual moves “through the life cycle surrounded by a set of other people to whom he or she is related by the giving and receiving of social support.” An individual’s convoy “consists of the set of persons on whom he or she relies for support and those who rely on him or her for support” (p. 269). As an individual has a narrative, so does the convoy. When an individual dies, friends grieve individually but the friendorbit collectively grieves as

well. Both the me and the we are “forever changed by the experience of grief” (Wolfelt, 1999) or by the avoidance of grief. Listen at a visitation or memorial service and you may hear, “Things will not be the same without Sallie!”

NEEDED: A CONTEMPORARY METAPHOR

However, working with younger adults—those for whom World War II is an experience perceived through movies and videos like *Saving Private Ryan* rather than memories—convinces me that *convoy* is dated. In an age of “Star Wars” something planetary seems appropriate for constructing a metaphor to facilitate the translation of the loss from the experience of the friend into the understanding of the clinician. Such a metaphor encourages the sharing and the hearing of the loss. Bolen reports, “One of the major functions of a friend or a therapist is being a witness to the life story of another person” (as cited in Ciardiello, 1993, November/December, p. 89).

The American myth of rugged individualism limits friendships and silences grievers throughout a support network. Confronted by the untimely or violent death of a friend, the surviving friend needs the aggressive support of others in the first moments of trying out the awareness of a friend’s death, during initial rituals and gathering of friends, and long afterwards. Some co-friends may be unable or unwilling to provide support “over the long haul” a strategy that may force the friendgriever to attempt to go it alone which can be as dangerous to an individual as to a solo ship crossing the North Sea in 1917.

One day while enjoying fine Kansas City barbecue with a friend, Gregory DeBourgh, I attempted to explain my new analogy. Off the top of my head, I speculated that a friendship support system functions like the planetary system with orbiting friends. Soon we were sketching orbit configurations and variations. DeBourgh identifies this concept as a sociological paradigm which fosters understanding of the dynamics of friend networks impacted by death. The death of a friend—especially in the sparsely populated friend roster—results in significant changes and deprivation throughout the friendorbit.

THE ANALOGY IS NOT ORIGINAL

Attempts to conceptualize friend network are not new. Twenty-five hundred years ago, Aristotle (1987) talked about a “circle of friends” (p. 317). English cleric-poet, John Donne rejects isolation in the classic line, “No man is an island” Robert Louis Stevenson, eulogizing his

childhood friend James Ferrier, commented, “There falls along with him a whole wing of the palace of our life” (Theroux, 1997, p. 279). Tennyson (1985) compared a friend’s death to a “Slide from the bosom of the stars” (p. 31). In Theroux (1997), a passage leaped from the page:

Every person is born into a particular quadrant of the heavens. Our friends hang like companion stars around us, giving us point and direction. We run to them when we have something to celebrate, fall back upon them when feeling ill-used or ill-defined (p. 279).

Working with individuals grieving for a friend, I have found friend-orbit an explainable metaphor that describes their social network.

THE FOUNDATION OF THIS BOOK

In *Friendgrief* I advance a set of core beliefs:

1. Friends have a right—as much a right as any griever—to mourn publicly and to be socially supported in their grief work before the death, during the dying, and after the death of a friend or friends.
2. Friendgrievors have a right to explore their own unique integration of the loss.
3. Friendgrievors have a right to maintain continuing bonds with that friend/friends.
4. Friendgrievors have a right to grieve regardless of the social status of the friend or the value assigned that individual by others.
5. Friendgrievors have a right to hear: “Your grief for a friend counts!”
6. Friendgrievors have to recruit support for the friendgrief.

“I MUST SEE YOU OFF ON THE ROAD”

Sometimes, theory is best supported by a story. Two men sat eating breakfast in 1871. For five years one had been lost in the jungles of Africa until the other, a reporter for *The New York Herald*, found him. The reporter’s first words, “Doctor Livingstone, I presume” earned both men a niche in history and led to an intense friendship. Eventually, when Henry Morton Stanley had to return to New York, both realized that this would be their last meeting. Stanley, unable to eat, broke their shared silence, “And now we must part. There is no help for it. Good-bye” (Seaver, 1957, p. 595).

Livingstone interrupted: “Oh, I am coming with you a little way. I must see you off on the road” (Seaver, 1957, p. 595). As they walked, the

friends talked about the future. Finally, Stanley stopped. “Now, my dear doctor, the best of friends must part. You have come far enough; let me beg you to turn back” (p. 596). Livingstone looked at his friend: “You have done what few men could do—far better than some great travellers I know. And I am grateful to you for what you have done for me” (p. 596).

According to Rosen (1996) “It is the task of therapy to assist clients in revising their old stories and in constructing new ones that have more relevance and meaning for their current and future lives” (p. 24). As clinicians listen, question, clarify, and “be with” the narratives of this particular friendgriever and this particular episode of friendgrief, we too “see them off” on the road to revision of their stories, reconciliation with the loss, and reorganization of their friendorbit.