Clio's Psyche

Understanding the "Why" of Culture, Current Events, History, and Society

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The Psychology of Confronting Death and Dying

Ralph Colp: Darwin Scholar and Psychiatrist

Paul H. Elovitz
The Psychohistory Forum

Ralph Colp Jr. died in the early morning of October 11th, a day before his eighty-fourth birthday, after a long struggle with prostate cancer. He was Senior Attending Psychiatrist at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center for many years and a psychiatrist at Columbus University and in private practice, member of the Editorial Board of Clio's Psyche, a host of many of the Psychohistory Forum's Work-In-Progress meetings, and a man of great erudition. Most of all he was a distinguished

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Grief in the Family: A Mother's View

Marilyn Charles
Austen Riggs Center

"How many children do you have?" This seemingly simple question is an impossible one for me. I cannot answer it easily; rather I become caught between denying one of my children or potentially traumatizing the unwitting soul who asks the question. I find myself thrust out of the momentum of daily life, once again up against what seems to be a harsh dividing line between those who are able to assume that life "just goes on" and those who cannot.

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The Civil War's Challenge to Perceptions of Death

Nancy Unger
Santa Clara University

Every casualty in the Civil War was an American casualty. As a result, the estimated 620,000 soldiers who died during the Civil War is approximately equal to the combined total of American military deaths in the Revolution, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, and the Korean War. Although the Confederacy suffered from the death toll disproportionately, both sides together constituted a "republic of suffering" whose shared anguish was so profound that it

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Our Own Worst Enemy and the 2008 Financial Crisis

David R. Beisel
SUNY Rockland

The Great Financial Crisis of 2008 must be seen in the largest possible context. Considered in the light of the war between radical Islamic fundamentalists and the West, it's clear that those who wish the West harm couldn't be happier. We've helped them by administering some deep, self-inflicted wounds arising from the many psycholog-

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Grief in the Family

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In some ways, we are all born into grief; we are never quite the children our parents had imagined. From our first breath, we begin to leave behind all the possibilities not taken, as we build the path that will be uniquely ours. I was my own mother's "problem" child; the child she was not quite ready for and never quite understood. Ironically, I was also the child who sought her out relentlessly, ultimately living out some of *her* dreams as I found *my* way. It was only after her death that I began to more comfortably discover her within: her laughter, her fierce determination, her profound appreciation of beauty and of the small moments that make life meaningful.

Perhaps her ambivalence left me particularly vulnerable and resonant to themes of loss, but my early life was also shadowed by the Holocaust, and by the various threads of persecution and displacement marked by this event. I felt this shadow long before I knew the word. Like the cup depleted of its wine each Passover, we titrate our pleasure in deference to those who came before, hoping to leave a better legacy through our own efforts to find our way.

My mother was a teenager during the Holocaust. Her mother's last remaining sisters refused to come to this country from their tiny town in northern Hungary, afraid of how they might affect the lives of their young niece and nephew, and likely also afraid of the unknown life lying across the ocean. Their deaths diminished my grandmother's cup. For her, pleasure was always tempered by sorrow and by a guilty recognition that she had been spared when others had not.

My mother was relentlessly fastidious. It wasn't until decades later that I recognized this obsession as an antidote, warding off the imminent attack marked by the words "dirty Jew." I grew up in the shadows, intently avoiding being cast by any label that might highlight some parts of me while obscuring others. A restless wandering brought me to the Navajo Nation, where I learned something of what it means to be rooted in land, history, and mystery, helping me find my way out of my adolescent wanderings into perhaps the greatest mystery of them all: parenthood.

It was through motherhood that I discovered my mother anew; first vicariously enjoying her pleasure in her grandchildren and then, over time, realizing how profoundly I was patterned in her image, as I noted my reactions to my own daughter and imagined how my mother must have felt in similar moments with me.

Devon was born when I was twenty-six, the first grandchild, a miracle linking me back into the family whose embrace had both constrained and eluded me. Her brother Justin came two years later. Not long afterwards, we moved to a new home, nestled in the foothills just above downtown Santa Fe. Life was simple. Life was good. My children were constant companions, preferring to snuggle together at night rather than sleeping in their own rooms; Justin a softer shadow to Devon's more exuberant self.

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Shortly after Justin's third birthday came a grey day in February, the storm clouds gathering in the distance. Devon and Justin had gone to play with friends who lived a few doors up the unpaved road. Justin came home for a bit to sit on my nap and snuggle. I suggested he stay, but soon he was off to re-join his sister. He went out into the grey day with a small box of raisins tucked into a large pocket in the front of his sweatshirt where treasures could hide and hands stay warm.

Some time later, Devon returned with several of the neighborhood children. "Where's Justin?" I asked. "He wouldn't wait," was the response. "He came on ahead." Wasn't he here?

A dark knot of panic pierced me. Where could he be? I called a few neighbors, but they had not seen him. I looked up and down the street, but there was no sign of him. Storm clouds were gathering, and the day had grown dark and ominous. I searched frantically up and down the hilly gravel road, images of kidnappers assaulting me. My husband returned home from work and began to search with me, finally noticing Justin's boot, lying by the side of the road. He scrambled up the hillside and the world stopped. "Don't come up here," he warned, with such authority that I obeyed, as though some invisible wall had fallen. It would never be lifted, and I would regret not having crossed to the other side.

Chaos ensued. Somehow, the police were called and the streets became thick with neighbors and uniformed individuals clustering in quiet groups, huddling. A neighbor took Devon inside her house. She watched her parents standing together, and wanted to be with us, but no one quite realized at the time that she needed to be there. Jane thought she was "protecting" her. From what, I'm not certain, but we do have these illusions about protecting children, which usually means not giving them information that makes us uncomfortable to deliver. The lack of information increases the child's fear, rather than soothing it. Knowing gives boundaries to our fears, it contains them.

It was our neighbor's dog that had killed our son. People came hunting for it. It kept going back to our front door, then running off as the animal control officers came near. They finally shot it. Its owner was distressed, even outraged. I think she did not want to believe her dog could have been responsible for such a thing. But it was. She had had warnings of danger but had denied them, as well.

The moments after one's world shatters are like a dream. Shock is a potent anesthetic that derealizes everything. We move through our lives, barely touching the edges of it. The activities of daily living need to be performed, reassuring in some ways, providing a frame and a structure for a life whose meaning has lost its center. Encounters with others can be soothing or abrasive, or merely odd: we are all so insufficient in the face of catastrophe. Easier to be with those that capitulate to it and sit with us in our pain, rather than those who try to sew it up, set it aside, make it "ok."

When you lose a small child, you lose a piece of yourself. Justin had just turned three, small enough to need to be lifted and buckled into a car seat, carried into a store. The lack of weight on my hip, the rituals no longer needing to be performed, were carried like an absence in me. I would go into a store and want to explain to the salesperson this vacuum; that I was not in her world any longer. The world as I had known it had ended, and I had been plunged into this odd silence with an interim space between me and the rest of the universe, in which life, somehow, just went on as though nothing had happened.

We all went on. We skirted the emptiness as best we could. Our house was no longer a center of activity: the children congregated elsewhere. Devon seemed to spend as much time as she could at someone else's house—anyone else's house—where life went on and the grief was not so heavy. Close friends drifted away; their own grief engulfed them. Others, who had not known Justin so well, were able to come closer.

Thus began a series of many years in which my daughter came to avoid the terrible, treacherous whirlpool her parents' grief would become to her. In the process, she came to avoid sadness of any kind. Her resilience served her well, and she developed into a fine young woman, but was cut off in important ways from the world of feelings. She had paid a terrible price for our inability to help her through the morass that grief had become. I worried about the toll taken on her ability to engage in relationships, and hoped that she would find her way through. She certainly did not want my help

in the process.

Five years after Justin was killed, another child was born: another beautiful boy with blue eyes and blonde curly hair. In some ways similar to his brother, Jonathan was very different in temperament; very much his own unique person. As the years went by, however, it was difficult to tell whose photo we were looking at without gauging the small boy's age by that of his sister. Confusing for Jonathan, as well: which pictures were of him, and which of his brother? And where was this other little boy?

As Jonathan began to ask questions about this other child, we said as little as possible about what had happened to his brother. His father was reluctant to scare him by telling him the truth about his brother's death but this evasion seemed increasingly problematic. I wondered what it must be like for Jonathan to believe that his parents could lose a child and not seem to be clear quite how this had even happened. As my husband and I struggled over this decision, we were forced once again to recognize the shadows our shared traumas had left. Many couples come apart in the face of such tragedy, whereas, for us, having a shared history of losing Justin has been the bitter counterpart to the shared history of having him. We've learned to hold on to the bitter *and* the sweet; to tolerate our inevitable differences as respectfully as we possibly can; to remember that most things don't matter so that we don't lose sight of what does.

We told Jonathan about what had happened to his brother as gently as we could. Thus eventuated many months of gazing at the skies and wondering about God and his brother, trying to piece together meaning in a universe in which children could be lost and parents unable to protect them: a hard burden for a small child.

In his own way, Jonathan intensely grieved the loss of the brother he would never know. Sadness became equivalent to his brother; sorrow his link to the absent presence that shadowed *his* young life, profoundly shaping his sense of self and world. He lived his life longingly seeking the protection of the brother who would have made right all the wrongs he experienced at the hands of others. Jonathan was a gentle child, bruised easily, and, like his mother, ever searching for meaning.

Unlike his sister, Jonathan participated fully in family rituals regarding his brother. It was Jonathan who would come with us to visit Justin's grave whenever we went back to Santa Fe. It was Jonathan who would help to plant and water flowers at the graveside and share in the tears, hungry for memories to fill the gap left where his brother should have been. It was Jonathan who would light a candle on a cupcake on his brother's birthday and let the wind blow out the flame. Jonathan could share the grief his sister hoped to leave behind.

For Devon, grief was much more treacherous, like a path across a precipice. It wasn't until her late teens that she began to talk, first with friends, and then with family, about her own sense of loss. In college, she began to be interested in the effects her brother's death had had on her, and to wonder how other children might have been affected in kind. She devised a research study, exploring the effects of sibling loss on young adults, the results of which we later published together (Marilyn and Devon Charles, "Sibling Loss and Attachment Style: An Exploratory Study. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, [2006], 23:72-90).

At about the same time, she became ill with a condition that at first appeared to be life altering. Grappling with the misdiagnosis and eventual re-diagnosis, and healing from that illness, offered Devon an opportunity to meet grief *with* her parents and to join with us rather than closing herself off. By that time, we had worked through our own losses sufficiently to be able to be more responsive to *her* signals and to accommodate to *her* needs for closeness and for distance.

Devon was able to utilize her experiences and her resources in her own way, in her own time, much as her parents needed to do as well. In my own grieving process, I have increasingly realized the hazards of my own (and others') expectations about what it means to be "dealing with it" and "getting over it," as I have encountered various milestones over time. I have discovered that "dealing with it" is uniquely personal and cannot be judged from the outside, only internally by the integrity of our path and the quality of our lives and relationships.

I have discovered that one does not "get over" an important death. One learns to live with it

and, with attention and perseverance, the quality of "living with it" transforms over time. When a loved one dies, the vitality of the person is replaced by a shadow. The shadow need not obscure life; rather, it may come to enrich the quality of our lives quite profoundly. But we would not choose to forget someone so important to us, rather we need a way to remember that allows us to move forward in our lives, in our relationships, and in our development. In sharing our experiences in these articles, Devon and I are hoping to facilitate others in this path of mourning that can be quite treacherous but also ultimately enriching. We hope to invite others to brave the pain entailed in sharing their experiences with one another, rather than becoming closed off by the shared grief that too easily divides us.

The Chinese symbol for crisis also means opportunity. When Justin was killed, I was determined to find a way to make his short life have had meaning. What had seemed like fragments of color in a kaleidoscope finally came into focus for me. I started on the path that led me to finally integrating the art and scholarship that had seemed irreconcilable, finishing college and becoming a psychologist and then a psychoanalyst.

Along the way, Devon was finding her own path, becoming her own kind of psychologist; keeping her distance as she developed her own professional identity, but notably pursuing her own interests in the effects of trauma on human development and how one might intervene to assuage grief and build resiliency. Always my most resilient child, she has taught me a great deal about moving beyond the minor keys to which I tend to resonate. In turn, over time she has learned to accept the inevitable losses of life and to be with her family in both our grief and joy rather than fearing she would founder in the emotional intensity of her parents' despair.

Our family has had many opportunities to learn resilience in the face of despair. When Devon was twenty-three and her brother Jonathan fifteen, he fell (or was pushed) and sustained a traumatic brain injury. I was in France, on vacation, when I received a telephone call from my daughter; the quality of her voice told me that catastrophe had struck once again. "Tell me," I said, as the terrible suspense mounted. "Jonathan fell," said Devon. "He's in the hospital, unconscious." Thus began another nightmare that was to enfold us in its grip, as we gathered together to try to will Jonathan back from some terrible twilight that had overtaken him. For many days, we did not know whether he would ever regain consciousness; as consciousness was regained, we did not know to what extent he would recover his physical or his mental functions.

Through these initial hours, days and weeks, Devon was with us at her brother's side. This time, she was not a helpless five-year-old fighting for psychic survival in a world turned utterly upside down. This time, she was not a young child standing helplessly alone in the face of impossible tragedy. This time, she was a competent young adult who could come to be at her brother's side, to care for him and advocate for him while he could not do that for himself. This time, she could fend off the darkness, staying at Jonathan's side until he was stable enough that she felt able to return to her own life.

Jonathan's fall came at the heels of the loss of my mother after an intense and arduous bout with cancer. My mother had been the seemingly perfect grandmother. Much as her own mother had done, she seemed to atone for and attenuate the disappointments between parent and child by becoming the consummate grandparent.

Already reeling from loss, when Jonathan fell we were perhaps even more open to move into the place of acceptance and determination, and to find there an impossible faith: a faith that does not make demands, but rather accepts the inevitability of loss and the possibility of finding one's way through. Our ability to be profoundly present in the moment seems to be the most fundamental and potentially mutative aspect of faith, helping us to confront the unknown.

There can be a fine line between faith and folly, and at times we must wrestle between using up our resources in search of an aim that might ultimately be illusory versus foreclosing on some dim yet deeply desired possibility. At such moments, echo in my mind the words of my venerated MD uncle, saying: "Sometimes, you just need to leave it to the experts," knowing that he had, in that moment, been absolutely wrong: that if we had followed the experts' advice when Devon was ill,

the results would have been disastrous. We are all faced, at times, with this fine line between craziness and possibility, needing to be able to differentiate between what might be inherently impossible and what is being limited by contextual factors that are not immutable, even though they seem to be.

When Jonathan sustained his brain injury, our hyper-vigilance was a desperate way of searching for signs of psychic life where none had been apparent. Our faith sustained us through the long days and nights, becoming a scaffolding within which his recovery grew. The intensity of our attunement enabled us to facilitate, ease, and evoke growth; much as the psychoanalytic therapist's attention to the singularity of the patient's dilemma provides the type of profound recognition that can become a call into being. Despair is an ever-present danger that leads us to foreclose possibilities; faith is an ever-present madness that leads us to discover possibilities and to build on them (Charles, 2003).

Jonathan's fall taught me the difference between grief that one suffers largely alone and unencumbered in the wake of a death, versus the grief that is ongoing in relation to what a loved one has lost. In the latter case, successful grieving entails increasing recognition of the magnitude of the loss. This recognition is an important marker but can also be an utterly intolerable reminder. Grieving the loss of the child one expected to have or the future one expected for him presents ongoing personal and relational challenges. At these times, one's attunement to one's child can pose additional burdens as the child resonates to your pain rather than having his own softened. We need a place to deposit our fears and have them held without having them precipitously or prematurely turned back on one another.

One of the truly wonderful things about being a psychoanalyst is that one is always learning both on and off the job and, if we can keep our bearings, each complements the other. Having lived through the loss of a child helps me to be profoundly empathic to others' losses in ways that seem to help them to sit with and be more respectful of their own losses. Being able to tolerate and sit with the grief, anger, and despair facilitates the type of working through that is ultimately healing, enriching, and enlivening.

So, too, having faced my son's psychic death and struggled through the long hours, days, months, and years of not knowing how fully he might recover—and then gradually recognizing that one never fully "recovers"—helps me to have a more profound and nuanced appreciation of the dilemmas faced by those so injured and by their families. Real healing, as Freud marked in his writings, requires that we face as much as possible the magnitude of the loss, thereby providing a ground we can stand on as we rebuild our lives.

We live in what has been described as a "manic" society, in which we deny the inevitability of loss. Watching my son work so hard now at building for himself a satisfying and meaningful life reminds me of how easily we, in this culture, get caught up by details that do not matter at all, and fail to recognize the elements that actually do make life meaningful. Our "self-help psychology" invites us to take responsibility for and believe in our capacities to make things better, but can also offer the illusion that, if we were doing it right, we should be able to actually *make* everything "better," rather than acknowledging the absolute edges of loss that mark human existence and sweeten our joy.

Optimally, we learn through our experiences and our ability to embrace what life offers, even when we would not choose to enter such terrain. In learning to make the most of what life brings us—from our mistakes and from our difficulties, and to enjoy whatever moments we are offered for relief, satisfaction, or pleasure—the human circle becomes both more varied in its hues and subtleties, and connected in its commonalities.

My own struggles have taught me about the importance of using such experience to better and more respectfully understand others' struggles; to use our own experience to listen more deeply, restraining our desire to say why or how we understand but rather being willing to sit in those difficult spaces that are not unfamiliar to us. Such receptiveness, I have found, reassures my patients without preempting their own journeys.

Grief is a powerful experience that can shake us to our very foundations. It is also a long-term process. If we are willing to embrace it and work through it, we grow through the encounter and become transformed through our efforts.

However, to the extent that we are unable to meet this challenge, we become diminished quite literally: unresolved grief taps our resources, leaving us ill-equipped to meet life's challenges.

Unresolved mourning becomes a barrier to living. As we try to tolerate and titrate our grief, we overburden our emotional resources and limit our fluidity and flexibility. We "keep going," but part of us remains behind, caught by the unresolved grief. These limitations are then passed along the generations, until we can understand the patterns sufficiently that we can begin to free ourselves from some of the constrictions encountered by previous generations.

Through our own struggles, Devon and I have learned something about the difficulties posed by closeness and by distance, over the years discovering enough about one another's uniqueness to have been able to build a relationship that is enriched by our common histories. We have learned that in speaking to and through whatever divides us we become both more differentiated and more closely bound. This, ultimately, is the gift of psychoanalysis: to remind us that we are all more simply human than otherwise and then, thus connected, to remind us to savor the subtleties and nuances of tone, gesture, and coloration that make the world so glorious and various.

At this moment in time, much has been resolved between my daughter and me. We still bump up against the invisible trip wires of "too close" or "too far" but now we speak to one another as we bump along life's road together. It has always been most apparent to me the ways in which we are different: she looks "just like her father" and has his greater equanimity. And yet, we are both women, giving deep and powerful undercurrents to our connections. I would imagine that those ties are part of what kept Devon away for so long. She needed to be sturdy enough within herself to feel that she could "take on" the family legacy of intensity and sorrow running through her mother's veins without succumbing to it and becoming lost within. I have learned from her a great deal about resilience and, together, we have been learning to be freer to share life's joys and sorrows.

Now, as Devon approaches and embraces motherhood, I see her caught up in a process as old as life itself, willing to face life's hopes and sorrows as they will transform over time for this new evolving life she carries within. Like me, she will revisit old joys and sorrows and come to new understandings as she finds herself in the place of the mother in relation to her own child. Unlike me, she will have been invited to face both past and future with open eyes, thus hopefully encouraging her children to do the same.

Our cultural tradition tells us to "keep faith with those who lie in the dust." For us, this faith has long, entangled threads that both diminish and replenish our cups. As we learn to better keep our bearings—and to tolerate the inevitable disequilibrium that life also brings—our offerings are more useful to those who come to us seeking their own understanding and forebearance in the face of life's challenges.

Marilyn Charles, PhD, ABPP, *is a psychologist and psychoanalyst, currently on staff at the Austen Riggs Center and in private practice in Stockbridge and Richmond, MA. A poet and artist herself, Marilyn has worked extensively with artists, writers, and musicians, and has a special interest in the creative process. She maintains affiliations with the Michigan Psychoanalytic Council, Michigan State University, and the National Training Program. As Co-Chair of the Association for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society and of the APA Division of Psychoanalysis Early Career Committee, she tries to encourage the application and integration of psychoanalytic theory and practice. She has published and presented her work nationally and internationally, and is the author of Patterns: Building Blocks of Experience (2002), Constructing Realities: Transformations Through Myth and Metaphor (2004) and Learning from Experience: a Guidebook for Clinicians (2004). Dr. Charles may be contacted at mcharles @msu.edu.*❑

Grief in the Family: A Daughter's View

Devon Charles King
National Inst. of Mental Health Contractor

One of the first questions asked when people find out you are pregnant is, "Do you have a