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# Mourning, Melancholia and Being Staunch

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*Grief hollows us out, the more hollowed out, the more we can contain.*  
(After Kahlil Gibran)

## Abstract

In recent publications, both Thomas Ogden (2000) and Jean Laplanche (1999) have highlighted the importance of mourning in their work. This is a particularly noteworthy confluence, coming as they do from very different traditions within psychoanalysis. I wish to discuss these contributions, to contextualise them in relation to Freud's 1915 paper 'Mourning and Melancholia', and to offer some reflections on my own work from within New Zealand.

## Introduction

Approaching the writing of this paper has been accompanied by a sense of both dread and fascination unusual in my writing. I realised that I would inevitably find myself in my own mourning and melancholia and that is at least a reason for writing. Part of the fascination for me is that following Freud (1955: 248), I find mourning both self-evident and mysterious. One might say enigmatic.

It is also a bit of a wondering and wandering around with the topic: an odyssey one might say.

One way to start is to talk about why it may be timely to return to 'Mourning and Melancholia' (Freud: 1955). This is particularly so as we come to mourn the age that is passing: as we face the losses of others and possibilities, of dreams and hopes for the world and ourselves; and the terrifying issue of the survival of our race and planet. With the end of modernism and all of its certainties, we are pitched much more clearly into the void of uncertainty. We are in mourning.

## Freud

Ernest Jones (1953: 343-4) suggests that in 1915 Freud, in his sixtieth year, was feeling lonely and disheartened. All of the younger men were at the war

and his dreams of a more enlightened society were being slaughtered all over Europe. Jones also suggests that Freud was anticipating his own death and therefore feeling his work was coming to an end, unable to foresee his many years of continuing creativity. In an extraordinary and unparalleled spurt of productivity he wrote the 12 metapsychology papers between March and August 1915. (It is a great tragedy that only five of these survived.)

The fourth of these papers was 'Mourning and Melancholia'. In this paper Freud discusses the similarities and differences between mourning and melancholia. The main distinction he makes is to suggest that melancholia is a response to an object loss that is withdrawn from consciousness, whilst mourning is a response to an object loss in which there is nothing about the loss which is unconscious: an extraordinary distinction for him to make. Freud's argument is that melancholia is a response to an object loss which is withdrawn from consciousness through the mechanism of identification. As a term 'melancholia' has fallen out of use since Freud's time (with the coming to the fore of the DSM and ICD), to be replaced by 'endogenous depression', characterised by self-reproach and loathing. This, in particular, differentiates it from mourning in terms of signs and symptoms.

One of the difficulties of these Prozac-fuelled (or SSRI-fuelled) and attachment disordered times is that we may be seeing a lot of melancholia, which could be mourning that has lost conscious connection with its object. Thus, not knowing its aim, for some reason not feeling its attachment and therefore turning in on itself, on the self.

For Freud, the crucial mechanism which determines whether or not mourning proceeds or is arrested is identification. Laplanche and Pontalis define identification as

. . . the psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified (1988: 205).

Drawing on the ideas of Otto Rank, Freud suggests identification with the lost person/object during mourning is an attempt to take in the lost person in an early oral/cannibalistic sense and therefore prevents object relating continuing. That is to say that the work of mourning is abandoned and this leads to melancholia. If melancholia takes in the lost object, or aspects of it, through identification, it is as such a refusal to mourn. For Freud—and this is

fundamental to melancholia—it is the narcissistic appropriation of the other, or aspects of the other, as a way of not feeling the loss. The cost of this is severe, as Freud suggests that the shadow of the object falls on the ego in the form of melancholia. However, Freud is not altogether clear because later he says that identification precedes object cathexis (1955:250). This leaves us with the question of whether identification is part of the process of mourning—whether identification is the prototype for object cathexis—and how one may lead to the other. The end point of mourning for Freud is the cutting of the emotional threads one by one. This does not help us understand how object relating might carry on after the loss. At this point Freud seems to be using a kind of psychic realism that limits the picture.

### Jean Laplanche

In the last 40 years (following in his analyst's footsteps) Laplanche has become the exemplar of the close rereading of Freud. In 'The Unfinished Copernican Revolution' he writes: 'All work is the work of mourning' (1987: 298). Laplanche, following Freud, links mourning with temporalisation in general and with 'afterwardsness'<sup>1</sup> specifically. He writes:

Mourning is a kind of *work*, the work of memory (*Erinnerungsarbeit* in the case of Elisabeth); and it is an affect with a *duration* (*Daueraffekt*): it has a beginning and an end, it occupies a *lapse* of time' (1999:241-2: Laplanche's italics).

He moves on to some comments about the use of taboo in mourning and takes as his question: What is it in loss that can be metabolised and what cannot? In this question he makes it clear that there are some aspects of mourning that remain unmetabolised (possibly those parts of the identification that the mourner cannot give up). Through taboos in mourning we invoke the sacred and impure, veneration and loathing. Laplanche suggests (1999:245) one could even say the pre-ambivalent, and that this is necessary to open up possibility.

I believe what he is pointing to is the unpicking of the tapestry of memory in order that something else may be created. What we are left with in the other's death (or withdrawal) is the uncanny and enigmatic nature of it, or more precisely for Laplanche, the enigmatic nature of the message from the dead or withdrawn person. Laplanche points out (1999:248) how constricting is

1. Afterwardsness is Laplanche's neologism for Freud's *nachträglichkeit* which Strachey translated as deferred action. See Chapter 10 of Laplanche (1999).

Freud's view in 'Mourning and Melancholia', where melancholia is viewed as an unconscious object loss, in contradistinction to mourning in which there is nothing about the loss which is unconscious! Laplanche is scandalised because Freud seems to suggest that no analysis of mourning is necessary. As mentioned earlier, this is an either/or distinction that is difficult to maintain in practice, or indeed theoretically.

Laplanche casts around for a prototype for mourning and comes up with Penelope from *The Odyssey* (1999). This is of course a European prototype, and my limited knowledge of local myths and stories prevents any local comparison. You will remember that in Homer's epic poem, for 10 years after the end of the Trojan wars, Odysseus is waylaid by a number of trials and presumed dead by many. He has therefore not been heard from at home for around 20 years. During this time a number of suitors congregate in his court attempting to win the hand of his wife Penelope. Penelope's eventual ruse for keeping them at bay is to say that she cannot remarry until she has completed the weaving of the funeral shroud for her father-in-law Laertes. Every day she can be seen weaving and every night she unpicks the day's work. Laplanche's question is: What is Penelope's work of mourning? Is it the weaving or the unpicking? Is it the construction of something or the deconstruction of something? He writes:

This, then is Penelope's work; but what is it exactly? Is it weaving or unweaving? The analogy between analysing and undoing the fabric invites us to attempt to turn the whole process around. We are used to this kind of interpretation. We are told in the manifest tale: a faithful and wise spouse, she wished to get rid of the suitors, and she weaves with the sole aim of unweaving, in other words to gain time until her Odysseus returns. One can equally well, however, suppose the reverse: that perhaps she only unweaves in order to weave, to be able to weave a new tapestry. It would thus be a case of mourning, mourning for Odysseus. [The former is melancholia and the latter mourning: my brackets.] But Penelope does not cut the threads, as in the Freudian theory of mourning; she patiently unpicks them, to be able to compose them again in a different way. Moreover, this work is nocturnal, far away from the conscious lucidity with which, Freud claims, the threads are cut one by one. This work requires time, it is repetitive, it sets aside a reserve. One could say, to introduce at this point what has been established about the taboo: it sets aside the reserve of the taboo of Odysseus, the reserve of the name of Odysseus. There is however, a possible end. One can imagine that one evening the new cloth, for a while at least, will not be unwoven (1999:251-2).

Incidentally, in the 1997 film of *The Odyssey*, the story is changed to have Penelope weaving the shroud for Odysseus rather than Laertes, who does not appear in the film at all. In this way the weaving and unweaving are much more directly about the mourning of Odysseus.

## Thomas Ogden

Ogden has been involved, for some time, in translating psychoanalysis out of theoretical deadness and deadliness, into everyday and spontaneous language. This project he freely admits remains (perhaps necessarily) incomplete. In his paper 'Borges and the Art of Mourning' (2000) Ogden tells of the Buenos Aires poet J. L. Borges, who from an early age knew of an hereditary blindness that would overtake him in midlife. In this paper Ogden shows us how Borges is engaged in a complicated process of mourning an impending and much anticipated loss. He writes:

Successful mourning centrally involves a demand that we make on ourselves to create something—whether it be a memory, a dream, a story, a poem, a response to a poem—that begins to meet, to be equal to, the full complexity of our relationship to that which has been lost and to the experience of loss itself. Paradoxically, in this process we are enlivened by the experience of loss and death, even when what is given up or taken from us is an aspect of ourselves (2000).

Ogden believes Borges is able to mourn through the writing of a poem. This is a very different way of talking about mourning from Freud's. Rather than talking about the mechanisms involved, Ogden is trying to stay with the experience of the subject in mourning and to suggest what is both enlivening and deadening in the process. In order for this to happen he suggests that what is created

... must capture in its own voice, not the voice that has been lost, but a voice brought to life in the experiencing of that loss, a voice enlivened by the experience of that death. The new voice cannot replace the old ones and does not attempt to do so; one voice, one person, one aspect of one's life cannot replace another. But there can be a sense that the new voice has somehow been there all along in the old ones, as a child is somehow an imminence in his ancestors and is brought to life both through their lives and through their deaths (2000).

## **Repetition, repair, creation**

What both Ogden and Laplanche appear to agree on is that the crucial aspect of mourning is in the creation of something new through the process. It seems to me that things are not as cut and dried as Freud would have it. It is sometimes difficult to know what is mourning and what melancholia, what is repetition in the service of melancholia rather than mourning. These are very difficult questions. I have been wondering how many of us would have diagnosed Penelope, still weaving and unpicking after 10 years, as having an abnormal grief reaction.

The question seems to be what is the repetition of memory in the service of? If Laplanche (1999) is to be believed, it is in the service of understanding the messages left by the other, analysing or unpicking what has been left behind inside us. I believe he is saying that the extent to which this is mourning or melancholia, is the extent to which any metabolising of these messages is taking place or not. In another language we might ask whether or not any object relating is taking place. The beginning of the end of mourning then, is the return of the libido to the object world from the ego. One is then in relation to something new and enlivening.

In his 1999 Auckland lecture, which he titled 'Forgiving and Unforgivable', Jacques Derrida suggested, similarly to Laplanche, that 'the work of memory is the work of mourning'. It is the continual remembering of the other that allows the possibility of change, of feeling something different, of the creation of a relationship with something different. For him, that night, in relation to the possibility of forgiveness. I believe Laplanche is right when he disagrees with Freud about the end product of mourning being the cutting of the threads rather than the creation of something new, a relation to something Other.

At the funeral of his friend Emanuel Levinas in 1995, Derrida was asked to speak. He reminded us of Levinas's definition of death as 'the death that we meet in the face of the other as non-response' (1999:5). This definition opens the way to consider mourning in relation to the confusing area of not getting a response from those who are still alive: the emotionally deadened or closed down.

After drawing to our attention that it was Levinas who redefined the French word adieu (to God, à-Dieu), Derrida writes:

I said that I did not want simply to recall what he entrusted to us of the à-Dieu, but first to say adieu to him, to call him by his name, his first name,

what he is called at the moment when, if he no longer responds, it is because he is responding in us, from the bottom of our hearts, in us but before us, right before us—in calling us, in recalling to us: à-Dieu. Adieu Emanuel (1999:13).

I hesitate to say anything further about something so beautiful, but in these terms the work of mourning is a movement of a relationship to within, with the other through the use of the name. Not as a melancholic appropriation, but a letting be, an adieu/à Dieu.

## Staunch

Would we say that Penelope was staunch?

In the last few years I have noticed the word 'staunch' used in the media in a way that has a different quality to my (foreign, English) ears. Sports writers, popstars and political commentators use it quite freely as though we will all understand what they mean. It feels as though it is used to invoke a desired set of attributes at times when fortitude is called for, a kind of holding in and propping up (as in stanchion). As such it is a kind of imaginary identification, in the Lacanian sense. I have also had the experience of two patients who use it as a way of describing the way they have felt they have had to be, in relation to their experience of what has felt like unsymbolisable emotional absences in their lives. I will not dwell on these clients' experiences except to say that what they had in common was a kind of emotional parental failure that they could not think about, or feel, and therefore, could not understand. Both of them being (necessarily) rather creative and attentive to their environment, learned how to be what they called staunch. This helped them to survive but at the cost of an emotional isolation into mid-life.

*The Dictionary of Modern New Zealand Slang* defines 'staunch' as 'Originally in gang, thence in general use. Of unquestioning loyalty; completely dependable, especially in a tough situation. Hence staunchness, the quality of loyalty or dependability' (Orsman:1999). 'Staunch' is both an adjective and a verb. *The Collins English Dictionary* (1979) suggests the etymology of 'staunch' (or 'stanch') is from the Latin *stagnare*, 'to be, or make, stagnant', or from the Old French, *estanchier*, 'to check the flow of liquid, to make watertight'. 'Staunch' is both a verb with the action of staunching something, stopping the flow of something (e.g. blood, emotion), and an adjective describing a loyal, firm, or dependable person.

What became clear to me as I puzzled over the way the word was being used in my consulting room was that whilst my patients' conscious intent was to say something about being staunch, that is, dependable, they were in fact talking about staunching something emotional. In both cases what was staunched was grief. This function is close to the archaic root of the word in 'assuage': that is, grief is assuaged, leaving melancholia. Therefore, the function of being staunch is to staunch the flow of emotion, to staunch grief. So that when someone says 'I am staunch', could we hear something like: 'I have had to stop myself feeling something that has been too difficult, confusing and painful for me'? If so we might call this disavowal.

In the recent film *What Becomes of the Broken Hearted*, Jake Heke's eldest son has joined a gang. Early in the film when they are going to fight with another gang he feels questioned by his gang leader as to his ability and loyalty. His response is to affirm that he is 'staunch' and therefore trustworthy. If you remember back to *Once Were Warriors*, we are led to believe that the young Heke's joining a gang in the first place was due to his father's inability to understand anything of his son's emotional needs. So he joins a gang in order to gain the kind of masculine relationships that he cannot get from his father. To some extent he attempts emotional repair but ends up repeating his experience. The leader of the gang is as treacherous as his father and in wanting to repay Jake for a beating of many years previously, he gets the younger Heke killed.

What is in common between the experience of my two clients and the *Once Were Warriors* scenario, is how confusing it is for a child to have parents who are not dead but who act in some ways as though they are emotionally dead or deadened. This confuses the child as to what they have to learn emotionally, and what to feel about their own feelings. In this the child is left with an unsymbolisable choice between feeling alone with the threat of disintegration, or being staunch. For Jake's son, as for my clients, the death they meet in the other's non-response is too difficult to understand because it is an absence rather than a loss. They respond by abandoning the enigmatic message of the other's emotional absence and replacing it with a perceived set of desired attributes: staunchness. In this sense 'staunch' refers to a total personality constellation rather than a specific personal quality, as in 'staunch supporter'. Being staunch in these terms is to take on the perceived emotional self-containment of the other as a way of not grieving his loss. This is the identification Freud talks about.

This manic defence against melancholia is an emotionally costly and dangerous manoeuvre. Becoming staunch in relation to the other's emotional absence, identifying with their perceived self-containment through emotional staunchness, short-circuits mourning into melancholia.

Of course there are many routes to avoiding feeling this as melancholia. Robert Young in his paper 'Disappointment, Stoicism and the Future of Psychoanalysis and the Public Sphere' (1999), sees disappointment as being the beginning of the depressive position, the beginning of grieving. But disappointment can only happen if one can know what one is disappointed in or has not received. I believe this kind of realisation only happens in what we know as secure attachment or containment.

### **My place in this**

My mother died 8 months after my eldest daughter was born. It was certainly not a conscious choice, but for me there was sense of a conflict between being with my grief and being with my daughter. This conflict has emerged for me since then in my work with the two patients I have mentioned, particularly in relation to what I now understand as staunched grief. I believe that my own capacity for grieving, including re-contacting stuck aspects of my grieving for my mother, has played its part in helping my patients who have similar stuckness within them. In particular what I noticed was how much I was remembering my mother, at times in the therapy of the two people I have mentioned, when initially there was no indication of grief being an issue for them. The memories that were coming to me were of stuck or unresolved issues between my mother and me. It took some time for me to determine that the work I had to do was in relation to my own staunched grief. This became particularly apparent to me when I felt I was in the presence of something in myself and in my clients that felt deadened and deadening.

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