

## **Mourning a Loved One Who Has Not Quite Passed Away [FINAL Edition]**

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\* "Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live With Unresolved Grief"

By Pauline Boss

Harvard University Press

140 pages; \$22

When I visit with my father and his female companion, both 72, our conversation often leads to their mutual fear of a severe but not quite fatal stroke. For these lively seniors, losing basic motor skills or the ability to write and speak would create an almost unbearable scenario for both the stroke's victim and the loved one who would have to care for the other indefinitely.

The burden of these caregivers is one type of "ambiguous loss" described by Pauline Boss, a professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota. In cases like this, the "lost" person is physically present but psychologically absent.

Boss also identifies a second type of loss, in which a loved one-- a missing soldier, a kidnapped child, a family member living an ocean away--is physically absent but psychologically present.

Boss first examined this stressful and debilitating territory in 1974, while interviewing the wives of American military personnel who had been declared missing in Southeast Asia. She found that wives who kept their husbands psychologically alive fared worse than those who let go. One woman refused to discipline her children for years, saying, "Wait until your father gets home." Another kept all financial decisions on hold.

"The greater the ambiguity surrounding the loss, the more difficult it is to master it and the greater one's depression, anxiety and family conflict," Boss writes.

In death, there are clear-cut rituals and everyone agrees that a permanent loss has occurred. Grieving is a process meant to end. But when should the spouse of someone with Alzheimer's grieve the loss of that person? And what happens when family members don't agree on the best way and time to acknowledge the grief? Squabbles within families- -for example, should Grandpa continue to carve the Thanksgiving turkey even though he can't safely handle a knife any longer?-- account for much of the hardship surrounding such loss.

To compound these internal struggles, outside support is thin. In fact, friends and neighbors tend to disappear, confused about how to act around their former bridge partner who no longer knows his own name.

Boss also looks at less catastrophic scenarios, naming dozens of ways ambiguous loss creeps into our lives:

- \* The wife and children left behind when a husband works 60 hours a week, then remains preoccupied and "absent" when he is home.

- \* The adoptive child who grieves the unknown biological parent.

- \* The ambiguities and losses surrounding divorce and remarriage and miscarriages and abortions--common occurrences, for which grief goes largely unacknowledged.

In a 1987 survey of 140 parents whose children had recently gone off to college, Boss found that the more strongly the parents perceived their child as still present, the more distress they experienced over the child's departure.

You will find yourself thinking about the issues discussed in this book long after you put it down and perhaps wishing you had extra copies for friends and family members who might benefit from knowing that their sorrows are not unique.

But you won't find diagrams or a five-step process on how to deal with these ambiguities. Rather, this book's value lies in its giving a name to a force many of us will confront--sadly, more than once-- and providing personal stories based on 20 years of interviews and research.

Boss found that most cultures live with unresolved grief in two ways: denial (there's nothing wrong with Grandpa, so stop pampering him) and going overboard (acting as if the person is already dead). Boss suggests that people strive for a balance between optimism and realistic thinking. How a person should do this is not evident, presumably because each scenario is so individual. But the book explains that the process involves tempering your "hunger for mastery" and clear answers, and asks that individual family members respect each other's grieving methods.

Finally, Boss suggests that people strive to find what meaning they can in situations that defy easy resolution.

"Viewing the world logically, as a fair and just place, can stand in the way of tolerating ambiguous loss," writes Boss. She mentions a woman who dealt with her husband's Alzheimer's by removing her wedding ring. This gesture helped the woman acknowledge what she had lost--her husband--and what she still had--a human being she cared for. When her husband died, she placed the ring back on her finger, saying, "Now I am really a widow, not just a widow waiting to happen."

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