Everyone experiences ambiguous loss if only from breaking up with someone or having aging parents or kids leaving home. As we learn from the people who must cope with the more catastrophic situations of ambiguous loss, we learn how to tolerate the ambiguity in our more common losses in everyday life.

Human relationships are often traumatized by ambiguous loss, but this unique kind of loss is just beginning to be discussed in professional texts and training courses. Even veteran therapists may miss it. What I learned from experience is that I could not recognize ambiguous loss in others until I had first recognized my own. For me it was immigration, addiction, divorce, and aging parents. Other family histories may contain more catastrophic ambiguous losses through genocide, slavery, holocaust, mysterious disappearances, Alzheimer’s disease, and mental illnesses. Rife with ambiguity, losses that cannot be clarified or verified become traumatic, but they can be discussed in community with others to gain meaning and hope. As a colleague said after reflecting on his own experience, “It’s not easy, but an untenable situation can be maintained indefinitely. I can stand not knowing.”

Overall, what has become clear to me is this: Ambiguous loss is a relational disorder and not an individual pathology. With ambiguous loss, the problem comes from the outside context and not from your psyche. It follows, then, that family- and community-based interventions—as opposed to individual therapy—will be less resisted and thus more effective. It should come as no surprise that when a loved one disappears, the remaining family members yearn to stay together. They resist therapy if it means more separation. Separating family members for individual therapy may only add to the trauma of ambiguous loss.

Four Questions about Ambiguous Loss:

How does it differ from ordinary loss? Ambiguous loss differs from ordinary loss in that there is no verification of death or no certainty that the person will come back or return to the way they used to be.

Why does it matter? Ambiguous loss freezes the grief process and prevents closure, paralyzing couple and family functioning.

How does one ease its effects? One can begin to ease the effects by finding meaning, tempering mastery, reconstructing identity, normalizing ambivalence, revising attachment, and discovering hope.

What are the types of ambiguous loss? There are two types of ambiguous loss situations. Type one occurs when there is physical absence and psychological presence. These include situations when a loved one is physically missing or bodily gone.

(continued on page 3)
At the end of my writing workshops, I distribute a poem on a separate sheet of paper to each of my writers. Sitting in a circle, we take turns reading a couple of stanzas. Invariably we marvel at how this randomly chosen poem—selected through my scientific process of flipping pages of a poetry book till they stop on a random page—relates back to the emotional themes we wrote about and read out loud to one another during the writing session. Through teaching, I have learned to appreciate poetry and am fascinated by poets who—utilizing the art of brevity—aptly describe deep emotions.

Outside of my writing workshops, I often find myself perusing my collection of poetry books to understand a particular feeling. Sometimes I share one that brings me joy with friends via email; at other times I may send one to a friend with the hope that it will lift them up from a rough patch in their life.

Three poems sent to Caroline Kennedy when she turned 50 inspired her to create an anthology of poetry centered around the stages of a woman’s life. In She Walks in Beauty—A Woman’s Journey Through Poems, Kennedy pays personal tribute to the human experience by dividing the collection of poems by well-known poets and authors of relatively new verse into sections signifying notable milestones, passages, and universal experiences in a woman’s life. Each section begins with an introduction in which Kennedy explores and celebrates the most important elements of life’s journey.

Kennedy writes in the chapter titled Death and Grief: “Poetry has been called ‘the language of the human heart,’ and we turn to it when our hearts are breaking. The shock of loss and the pain of grief are physical as well as emotional, and sometimes hard to put into words. Poetry reminds us that these feelings are not unique to us, and by sharing them we can be comforted by our common humanity.” She Walks in Beauty is a priceless resource for anyone—male or female—who wishes to explore and understand the many facets of a woman’s life.

Equally as insightful is United States Poet laureate (2001-2003) Billy Collins’ Horoscopes for the Dead. As a poet, Collins strives to write poetry that all readers can appreciate and in Horoscopes for the Dead he writes with irony and eloquence about the everlasting themes of love and loss, life and death, youth and aging, solitude and union.

Why read poetry? Because as Kennedy states in her introduction, “Poems distill our deepest emotions into a very few words—words that we can remember, carry with us, and share with others as we talk and weave the cloth of life.”

Caroline Kennedy will appear at the Fox Theater in Redwood City on Tuesday, September 27 at 7 PM. For more information, call Kepler’s Books at 650.324.4321 or visit keplers.com.

Catastrophic examples of such ambiguous losses include kidnapping and missing bodies in the context of war, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, genocide, or natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and tsunamis. More common examples of this type of ambiguous loss are situations of absent parents due to divorce, giving up a baby to adoption, and physical contact with parents and siblings due to immigration.

In the second type, there is physical presence and psychological absence. In this type of ambiguous loss, the person you care about is psychologically absent—that is, emotionally or cognitively missing. Such ambiguous loss can occur from Alzheimer’s disease and other dementias; traumatic brain injury; AIDS, autism, depression, addiction, or other chronic mental or physical illnesses that take a loved one’s mind or memory away.

For more information about ambiguous loss, read Ambiguous Loss and Loss, Trauma, and Resilience by Pauline Boss, PhD. Also by Dr. Boss, Loving Someone Who Has Dementia—How to Find Hope While Coping with Stress and Grief.
Life after Suicide: Healing Support for Survivors

By Jeannine Parsons, MFT Trainee

Sunday, June 13, 2005 started out as a pretty good day for me. I had tickets for the Giants and Indians game. It was a beautiful day for baseball. After returning home, I had a message on my answering machine from my best friend Heather’s mom. She was tearful and said she had sad news to share with me. When I spoke with her, she told me that Heather had committed suicide on Saturday night.

The news devastated me. It felt like something had been ripped out of me. My emotions were all over the map—I felt sadness, guilt, and anger. I had known Heather since we were in the fifth grade. We remained best friends even after we both went off to college in different states. Never in a million years did I think she would do something like this. And yet, many of the signs were there. She had bipolar disorder, and in the midst of a difficult divorce, Heather, a devout Christian believed that divorce was shameful.

Two weeks before she died, I visited Heather in Kansas because she wanted to see me. She was anxious. I asked her if she was thinking about killing herself; she said yes, but that she would never do it. I had a lot of reasons to believe her. Her mental illness had always been well controlled. With no previous suicide attempts, she took her medications, and went to the hospital when things got bad. She also had a five-year-old daughter whom she adored. As the weekend progressed, there were other little signs. She wanted to give away clothing items, and asked if I would take her two cats. After I returned home, we spoke and she sounded better. I felt relieved. It did not occur to me that these little signs were clues.

While I do not blame myself for her death, I wish I had known more about the warning signs of suicide. After her death, there were very few people with whom I could talk to about it. Most people do not want to talk about suicide. I found the most comfort in talking to her family, since we all knew and loved her and we were not afraid to talk to each other about how she died.

But where does one go if one does not have someone to talk to? At the Community Grief and Counseling Center, we have created a Suicide Loss Support Group where individuals can share in a safe place with others finding their way through similar experiences. The group is facilitated by professionally trained therapists or supervised Marriage and Family Therapist Trainees/Interns to help survivors cope with the tragedy of suicide loss and the process of recovery. For more information, please contact Becky Games at 408.559.5600, ext. 5460.

Profile

Steve Lo, MFT Trainee

By Ana Hays

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania seven minutes later than his older twin brother, Steve Lo relocated to California 26 years ago. “I feel more like a native Californian than an East Coaster as I’ve lived here longer,” said Steve. “And sure I was a Pirates fan growing up, but I’m a Giants fan now.”

Involved in community service while at the University of Colorado in Boulder and after graduation, Steve feels passionately about giving back. “I’ve traveled to many parts of the world, and in particular Asia,” said Steve. “Visiting various countries, I saw a lot of poverty and illiteracy, and this created a desire in my heart to make a difference in the world. Several friends and I started a non profit—Reach Potential—as a way to help at risk kids and families in the South Bay. Witnessing the needs of the kids and their families helped me to decide to go back to school for my masters in counseling psychology degree at Santa Clara University.”

What brought Steve to the Community Grief and Counseling Center? “When I started at Santa Clara University,” said Steve, “I attended a practicum fair where I met Laura Larson, grief counselor and intern supervisor at the Center and we discussed hospice and grief care. As I wasn’t ready for a practicum yet, I contacted Vicci Wild, director of volunteers at Hospice of the Valley and went through the volunteer training program to become a volunteer. I’ve seen the impact that grief and loss have on people’s lives and found that grief is a personal journey that everyone has to take. Everyone handles it differently. Having experienced grief and loss myself, I know the value of what it means to have people accompany you on your grief journey. And I am excited to be that person for someone else.”
CALENDAR of Events 2011/2012

Hospice of the Valley Events

The Kent Kirkorian Memorial Golf Tournament
Friday, September 23
Cinnabar Hills Golf Club, San Jose

Silicon Valley Capital Club Charity Gala
Benefiting Hospice of the Valley
Friday, October 28, 6:00 pm
Silicon Valley Capital Club, San Jose

Run to Remember
At the Silicon Valley Turkey Trot
Thursday, November 24
Guadalupe River Park/Arena Green, San Jose

At the Community Grief and Counseling Center, we are able to offer sliding scale fee services to community children and adults because of generous corporate grants and donor contributions. When you choose to donate, the caring you read about in our grief support newsletter becomes your caring. If you would like to make a contribution to the Center, please visit hospicevalley.org/ccgc. Thank you!

Community Grief and Counseling Center Events

Getting Through the Holidays
Wednesday, November 2, 7:00–9:00 pm
Hospice of the Valley

Wings of Remembrance
Sunday, December 4, 2:00–4:00 pm
Hospice of the Valley

Support Groups
Beginning the week of September 12

Weekly
Mondays: Partner Loss, Parent Loss, Teen Group
Wednesdays: Kids Group, Senior Partner Loss, Suicide Loss
Fridays: Child Loss (Women’s Group)

Twice Monthly
2nd and 4th Mondays: Step by Step (Second Year Partner Loss)
2nd and 4th Wednesdays: Healing Hearts (Second Year Senior Partner Loss)

For more information please visit our website at hospicevalley.org, or call 408.559.5600 ext. 5460.

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Serving the communities of Santa Clara County.