



# How to Console Yourself and Others: Ancient and Modern Perspectives on Managing Grief<sup>1</sup>

» HAN BALTUSSEN

## PREFACE: REFLECTING ON DEATH, GRIEF AND CONSOLATION

When Emily Dickinson in one of her letters wrote ‘That *Bareheaded* life – under the grass – worries one like a wasp’, she expressed the general human worry about what happens to us after death. Such is our plight: we are aware of our mortality and anticipate it.

The need for grief expression in words is apparent across history and different cultures. In the past fifty years or so, the modern study of grief in the twentieth century, and more recently in the ancient world, has intensified considerably. Different views have been put forward to explain this: the rise of the social sciences, secularisation and the need for guidance in ritual, the Second World War and its subsequent ‘age of anxiety’ accompanied by the rise of Prozac. All these factors may have played a role, but my project has taken its cue primarily from more recent changes in public grief expression, and – in the context of resolving mental disorders – the increasing critique of medicinal approaches, leading to a use of the Arts in resolving grief.

Perhaps, like retirement, death is a topic most of us prefer to deal with later – and with increased longevity this is perhaps a luxury we can afford. But unlike retirement, death has a way of imposing

itself more frequently, disrupting our daily routines when family or friends are taken. As the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) broadcaster and linguist Ruth Wajnryb commented a few years ago:

we live with disturbing uncertainty, from one moment to the next everything can turn around: you change lanes at a bad moment and there goes your spine, you have a biopsy and await the results and then you have to rethink your life expectancy. The stock market dissolves your super. A cyclone sweeps away your home, family, community. Life, as you know it, is tenuous at best.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, unless disproportionately unfortunate, we lack enough familiarity with the subject to get used to it or be prepared for a new mishap. In modern testimonies one may quote the well-known example from C.S. Lewis’ *A Grief Observed* which opens: ‘No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear’, or Joan Didion’s memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking*: ‘Grief, when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be.’<sup>3</sup> Such comments can easily be paralleled with ancient ones that express dismay at how hard it is to find words when dealing with grief.<sup>4</sup>

These brief sound bites stand for a range of remarkable documents that chart a constant concern for coping with sorrow by way of a literary response. They encapsulate a humanistic

ABOVE

Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *Apollo and Daphne*, late fifteenth century.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.



ABOVE

Joan Didion at the Brooklyn Book Festival. Photograph by David Shankbone, 2008.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

value that continues to evoke a strong reaction of recognition and sympathy long after they were produced. Consolation and grief management is a fascinating topic at the core of what the humanities deal with: human experience, how it is expressed in the miracle of language and what we might learn from it. In other words, my focus is not on loss per se, but on what we can do to cope with it. The term

provoke. How did they manage grief and sorrow? Has this changed over time? Can we learn anything from the documents that offer consoling thoughts and strategies, given that they are dealing with a universal and defining marker of humanity? To answer these and other questions I had to venture into unknown territory: to cross disciplinary boundaries, read

THE STRUGGLE TO CONTAIN EMOTIONS BY RATIONAL MEANS IS AS OLD AS HUMAN DOCUMENTS ALLOW US TO TRACE

‘grief management’ is a modern one, but it does essentially apply in many cases to ancient material.

The ancients knew about loss in as many forms as we do: loss of child, parents, pets, property, dignity, and country. It is said that Alexander the Great was inconsolable over the death of his horse, that Cicero bemoaned his exile, as did the poet Ovid, and the famous physician Galen needed all his composure to cope with the loss of his carefully collected store of medication, recipes as well as quite a few of his writings, after a fire in Rome (92 CE). *The struggle to contain emotions by rational means is as old as human documents allow us to trace.* Thanks to a range of surviving written sources we know that humans have long found a need to *express* their grief, or as Shakespeare put it, ‘to give sorrow words’. But in addition they have pursued ways to use language as the cure. This centrality of *language* is at the core of my project: how reading and writing can assist in coping with grief.

This topic, then, is about human experience and takes a deliberate interest in the subjective. Since the Enlightenment Western culture has attempted to create an objective science of the subjective, but even Isaac Newton (1642-1727) understood that science only covers certain aspects of reality, writing, ‘I can calculate the motions of heavenly bodies, but not the madness of crowds’. In the nineteenth century Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) proclaimed: ‘Science does not tell us how to live’. Here I will simply assume that the subjective plays an important role in our lives and that rational analysis of literary sources, ancient and modern, can provide insight into the trends, importance and value of emotional responses to difficult circumstances.

The similarities between ancient and modern responses to grief can be exploited, I believe, by trying to answer questions these similarities

up on modern theories and observe contemporary events. One finding is that *something seems to have been lost in modern times which was still with us up until the early modern period.* In the early seventeenth century authors were still familiar with Plutarch’s ideas on the therapeutic use of reading; for instance, Philemon Holland translated the *Moralia* and commented on how ‘young men “may take profit by reading poemes”’:

he must enter into his owne heart and examine himselfe when he is alone, how he was mooved and affected ... whether he find any turbulent passions of his minde thereby dulced and appeased whether any grieffe or heaviness that trouble him be mitigated and asswaged.<sup>5</sup>

So in what follows I will highlight one particular thread of my wider project on grief, in two sections and a conclusion: in Part 1, I discuss the benefits of a comparative approach by applying modern tools to ancient sources; in Part 2, I clarify the nature of the ancient consolation genre, in particular its universal features, in the hope that this increases our appreciation of the wisdom of those who lived before us. Cicero famously said that those who do not know their history will remain children. In other words, he is suggesting that historical awareness is about maturity, and that one should build on the past to understand the present and contribute to the future. In the case of grief, we have an opportunity to tap into a reservoir of human experience that fills the historical gap and helps to counter (in C.S. Lewis’ phrase) ‘chronological snobbery’ regarding historical material and its presumed *inherent* inferiority.<sup>6</sup> Our primary aim is to consider how we gain a proper understanding of these expressions of grief and loss.

## PART 1. STUDYING ANCIENT EMOTIONS: THE BENEFITS OF A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

Modern grief studies show how the subjective element in emotional responses affects self-assessment and how emotions are 'moving targets'. As we will see in the two case studies in Part 2, this applies to the understanding of bereavement. Modern grief studies based on *empirical* research are only sixty years old and recent debate over the best methods has made for something of a 'hot' topic. The first *empirical* research into acute grief in the famous Lindemann study (as recent as 1944) showed the great variety of symptoms and responses to grief, thereby breaking with the attitude of the stiff upper-lip or the advice to 'just get on with it'.<sup>7</sup> Further work in the 1970s by Bowlby on the mother-child attachment showed its impact on later experiences of attachment, separation and loss.

The benefits of a comparative approach for a study of grief are considerable. New methodological perspectives and hindsight are always a useful part of historical analysis, if used correctly, but modern methods and concepts assist in gaining greater clarity on meaning, context and development of the topic. They help us recast certain interpretations that further illuminate texts in ways that are not just literary. Here I am not merely following the influence of the social sciences upon historical studies since the 1960s, but also specifically the growing debate outside academe on the nature of emotions. In the public sphere I am thinking, for instance, of the appearance of a range of so-called self-disclosure documents, memoirs that reflect on the loss of an intimate, such as C.S. Lewis,

Bermann's book *Companionship in Grief*.<sup>8</sup>

But we should not overlook the public responses to Princess Diana's death, the war in Iraq and the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre. In the US, President Bush was accused of not knowing why mourning is appropriate.<sup>9</sup> These factors have triggered a broader public awareness of the importance of dealing with grief. Earl Spencer's speech at Diana's funeral was not only a well-planned emotional eulogy, but also a quite subtle and subversive critique of the press and the royal family:

Diana was the very essence of compassion, of duty, of style, of beauty. ... she was a symbol of selfless humanity, a standard-bearer for the rights of the truly downtrodden, a very British girl who transcended nationality. Someone with a natural nobility who was classless ....<sup>10</sup>

BELOW

Princess Diana during a visit to Bristol, 1987.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.



In his emotive praise of the 'people's princess' (as Tony Blair called her) Spencer combines his eulogy for Princess Diana with implicit criticism of the royal family's background (German), lack of compassion and inherited nobility. There is good

MODERN GRIEF STUDIES BASED ON EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ARE ONLY SIXTY YEARS OLD AND RECENT DEBATE OVER THE BEST METHODS HAS MADE FOR SOMETHING OF A 'HOT' TOPIC

*A Grief Observed* (1961); Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005); Abigail Carter, *The Alchemy of Loss* (2008); Megan O'Rourke, *The Long Goodbye* (2011). What we have here are not diaries with sentimental outpourings of emotions, but well-crafted accounts of grief. That there was a real increase of these in the past decades is not just my perception, as is clear from Jeffrey

reason to believe that the death of Princess Diana prepared the way for public emotional outpouring. With her death something unprecedented occurred and things had changed permanently.

Ancient parallels exist for cases like these: Julius Caesar's funeral in 44 BCE generated a lot of public interest as well as anger at his assassins as a result of Marc Antony's funeral speech; in 19

CE the very popular grandson of Augustus and designated heir of Tiberius, Germanicus, died unexpectedly under suspicious circumstances; his death caused a huge public display of mourning in Rome and the empire. The account in Tacitus shows how important eulogy was in honouring his memory, especially by implying that the exact opposite was true of Tiberius (*italics mine*):

His funeral, ... was *honoured by panegyrics and a commemoration of his virtues*. Some, thinking of his beauty, his age, ... likened his end to that of Alexander the Great. Both had a graceful person and were of noble birth, and died in a foreign place, ... [But] Germanicus was gracious to his friends, temperate in his pleasures, the husband of one wife, with only legitimate children.<sup>11</sup>

Let me give one more contemporary example to drive home this point on the way in which public tributes play out in different cultures. As soon as the death of Apple's CEO Steve Jobs became public, Apple was flooded with tributes and condolences. It seems curious that a businessman's death generated such a worldwide response of grief and sorrow. The most striking and typically twenty-first century aspect of this, I think, was the role of the so-called social media in generating attention and tributes. This was even more important for the truly iconic tribute by a Hong Kong graphic designer, which went 'viral' on the Internet.<sup>12</sup> An ingenious way of creating a tribute via both the Apple logo and Jobs' silhouette, it also signified

Jobs' *permanent absence* by incorporating this in the 'bite' of the apple.

What we have here, in modern terms, is *the attempt at memorialisation of the deceased* – an age-old convention already found in ancient Greece and Rome.

Of course, the case of Steve Jobs is also *atypical*, because of the emotional investment users make in Apple *products*, a feeling

which they seem to have redirected back to him at his death. One American commentator wryly noted (and Harry Potter fans may find this amusing) that Apple products can be viewed as Steve Jobs' Horcruxes which contain a little part of his spirit or soul. One hopes of course that the parallel with Voldemort ends there.

Among current theories of grief management we find emphasis on the great variety of ways in which people may mourn (less so in antiquity), the idea that grief may escalate into a morbid

state of depression or worse (complicated grief; again not recognised in antiquity, although certainly described in medical sources), the ways in which grief lingers or is suppressed by social pressure.<sup>13</sup> When death is unexpected, the experience of grief is usually worse, but anticipated grief (a concept already known in antiquity) is only marginally different.

One new interesting result from modern research (with no exact parallel in the ancient world) is the way in which grief has been looked at from an evolutionary point of view as being normal for *all* animals, including non-human animals, both as grief *in* animals and as grief *for* animals (pets).<sup>14</sup> Even here we find parallels in antiquity: Achilles' horses are said to mourn for their driver, Patroclus (*Iliad* 23.280-84), while we have several

poems in which masters pine for their pets.

The irony is that these recent trends have begun to attack the clinical and medicalised approaches that had been on the rise throughout the twentieth century.



Horwitz and Wakefield, in *The Loss of Sadness* (2007), argue that the psychological profession has gone too far in the medicalisation of depression (and grief is considered a special case of depression). Their specific aim is to criticise the use of standard diagnostic criteria (in the handbook for psychological disorders, DSM-V) which they believe has led to an overgenerous definition of depression and hence caused normal sadness to be declared depression. *This is where it gets interesting* for my purposes: at the same time that these professional studies in psychiatry are advocating non-medical approaches to depression and grief, new possible alternatives are being trialled which include various activities originating in the Arts. A pioneering collection edited by S. L. Bertman has led the way in looking at how drama, film, writing *and* reading prose or poetry, can play a role in grief work.<sup>15</sup> So let me illustrate what kind of texts I have looked at before making the case for aligning this with the 'Bertman approach'.

For a long time the ancients had little to assist them in times of distress apart from rituals, music and lament. (I omit for the moment a curious incident of a medicinal cure, *Helen's potion* in Homer's *Odyssey* 4.224-28, where Helen presents her husband Menelaus and her guest Telemachus, who are struck by a bout of grief, with a special concoction which is *nepenthês*, "grief-assuaging".)

#### RIGHT

Tribute to Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple.

COURTESY OF JONATHAN MAK.



#### ABOVE

Achilles tending Patroclus wounded by an arrow. Tondo of an Attic red-figure kylix, c.500 BCE. Altes Museum, Berlin.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.



FAR LEFT

Statue of Gilgamesh on the University of Sydney Camperdown Campus.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

LEFT

Bust of Cicero, Musei Capitolini, Rome.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

When did this change? The earliest example of the expression of grief can be found in the Gilgamesh epic (some 4000 years ago), when the arrogant king Gilgamesh loses his dear friend and alter ego Enkidu: ‘Hear me, o elders of Uruk, I mourn for Enkidu, my friend. I shriek in anguish like a mourner ... after you died, I let a filthy mat of hair grow over my body, and donned a skin of a lion and roamed the wilderness.’<sup>16</sup> The symptoms of despair, self-neglect and restlessness expressed here look all too familiar. But note that there is no internalised self-analysis or self-directed consolation. Grief is played out through lament and action, and only fades after the king has gone through some of the grief stages now associated with the famous model of Kübler-Ross.<sup>17</sup>

A thousand years later we find Achilles in a similar emotional state when his friend Patroclus dies. This time the situation is slightly more complicated: Achilles has been boycotting the war effort, Patroclus proposes to go to battle in his place, and Achilles lets him. This engenders a sense of guilt that complicates his grief:

A black cloud of grief came  
shrouding over Achilles.

Both hands clawing the ground  
for soot and filth,

He poured it over his head, fouled  
his handsome face

And black ashes settled into his  
fresh clean war-shirt.

Overpowered in all his power,  
sprawled in the dust,

Achilles lay there, fallen

Tearing his hair, defiling it with his own hands.<sup>18</sup>

Achilles’ behaviour is that of women mourners, but more extreme, so much so that it frightens his companion who interprets it as potentially suicidal. In this case we can see how he is brought down by the powerful mix of several emotions: pride, guilt and grief. The classical commentary on the *Iliad* by Walter Leaf, admittedly written when textual criticism dominated scholarship, focuses mostly on conventional literary and linguistic analysis (grammar and morphology), saying things like ‘the word “clean” translates the peculiar *nektareôî* = probably *euôdes* nice-smelling, since herbs were used to preserve garments ... the cloak may be a present from Thetis’.<sup>19</sup> Leaf is of course not primarily interested in ancient fabric softeners, but in determining the correct text and explaining word meaning, occurrence and origin. I believe a psychologising reading leads to a richer and more rewarding insight into the emotive effect of such a passage, provided it is viewed within the wider development of attitudes and responses to grief.

This can be further illustrated if we move to fifth-century BCE Athens to find examples of grief strategies that exploit rhetorical techniques. Their

major difference from the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the *Iliad* is that these are rational approaches to grief, aiming for a deliberate effect of consolation with the help of persuasion. No longer just about moaning and self-pity, they search for the right word or turn of phrase to change the outlook or at least mood of the addressee. The earliest evidence of this ‘therapeutic turn’ comes from the mid-fifth century: the sophist Antiphon, a teacher of rhetoric, is said to have offered sessions in which, according to two sources, he composed tragedies both by himself and with the tyrant Dionysius. While he was still involved in poetry he designed a method for the cure of grief (*peri alupias*), on the analogy of the treatment of the sick by doctors and, getting himself a dwelling in Corinth near the market-place, he advertised that he was able to cure those suffering from grief through [the power of] words (*dia logôn*); and discovering the causes of their sickness by inquiry he gave consolation to sufferers.<sup>20</sup>

It is striking how Antiphon’s interest in poetry is brought into connection with rhetorical skills and knowledge of causes. The second passage points also to his power to drive out grief with the use of language: ‘Antiphon developed great powers of persuasion ... and he announced a course on “grief-assuaging” lectures [*nêpentheis akroaseis*], asserting that no one could tell him of a grief so terrible that he could not root it out of the mind.’<sup>21</sup> The crucial term is *nêpentheis*, linking it to the unique occurrence in the Homer passage I mentioned earlier (Helen’s potion, *Od.* 4.222). So hereafter it is not just ritual, but reason, that deals with the emotions, especially when it comes to consolatory writings. Philosophical views would begin to dominate ways of thinking, but while their influence has been studied in great detail, their efficacy has not. In Part 2 I look at two cases, with philosophical influence clear in one, and absent in the other.

WHEN DEATH IS UNEXPECTED, THE EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF IS USUALLY WORSE, BUT ANTICIPATED GRIEF IS ONLY marginally DIFFERENT

RIGHT

Antonio del Pollaiuolo, *Apollo and Daphne*, late fifteenth century.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



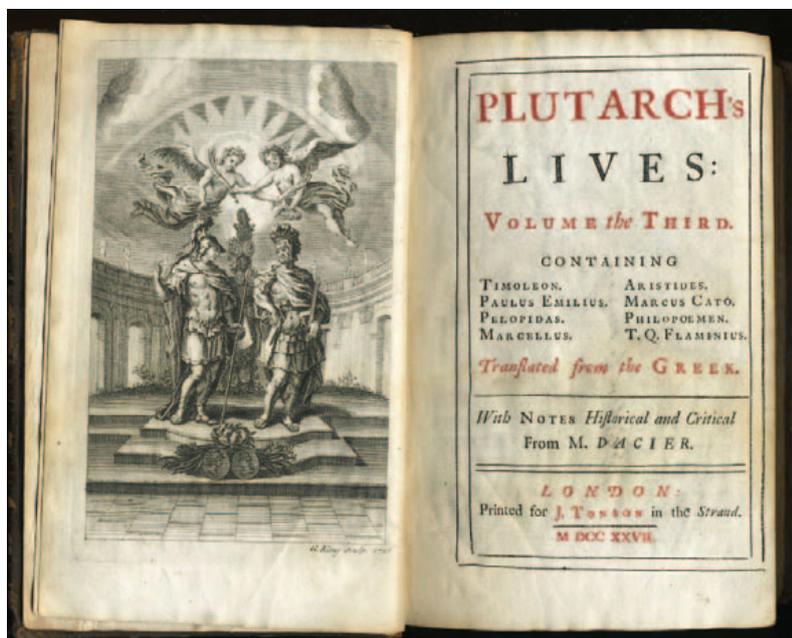
## PART 2. THE POWER OF THE WORD: GRIEF WRITINGS (AND READINGS)

Grief writing was and still is an accepted way to help deal with times of trouble. It is an ancient Greek tradition to see the treatment of psychological problems as analogous to physical problems. Plato also alluded to the possible use of the word in influencing the mind (*Gorgias* 456b, *psychagogia*).<sup>22</sup> This is of course an attempt to make more concrete what is invisible and difficult to control. Another problem for Greeks and Romans was how to guard oneself against such contingencies as the loss of life, of health, of material possessions. This was as pressing in antiquity as it is today, although our lives are more secure than those of Greeks and Romans. Offering consolation is an act of empathy and is always embedded within a belief system, philosophical or religious, necessary to cope with the prospect of a short life, and the experience of losing someone close. The ubiquity of death and disease made loss a permanent factor in their lives.

My first case study, Cicero, was ill-prepared for what Fate had in store for him. A politician and orator, he lived in the tumultuous last days of the Republic. We know about his grief responses from three types of documents, but only one has been studied seriously. I propose that we can improve

a period of grief that lasted several months, as is clear from his letters to Atticus. He had lost his public status due to political turmoil, his wife to divorce, and now his beloved only child. In other words, he had lost his pride in his work as a politician and the safe haven of his family home.

The loss of his daughter tipped him over the edge and landed him in a depression: an earlier study and my own findings confirm that his symptoms fit the type of grief nowadays called pathological or abnormal. In one letter he writes: 'For after trying everything, I have nothing, in which I can find peace. For while I dealt with that, about which I have written to you before, I – as it were – fostered my pain. Now I reject everything and find nothing to be more bearable than



LEFT  
*Plutarch's Lives,*  
 Vol. 3.  
 SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA  
 COMMONS.

our understanding and appreciation of Cicero's predicament by including *all three* types of his writings as part of his grief work, provided we take note of the modern convention of viewing grief as a *process*; this allows us to identify grief stages and take self-consolation more seriously in the process of healing. The first stage, acute grief, can be lined up with Cicero's *Letters* to his friend Atticus; the second stage, in which he moves from lament and lethargy to grief work, is reflected in his *Consolation to himself* which unfortunately survives in fragments only; finally, there is the reflective third stage, in which he tries to describe

solitude.<sup>23</sup> These letters give us invaluable insight into Cicero's darkest moments of despair, revealed to a much-trusted friend. In breach of the social code of his time and class, Cicero admits that he is inconsolable, and even that he is fostering his grief. He has withdrawn from Rome's political scene to stay in the country. Cicero's special situation and resulting isolation explain his responses to the agony of grief: he has to figure a way out himself, and does so first by reading, and next, by writing. But these are not random scribbles: after a telling silence of some weeks, Cicero gets going, does research and involves Atticus in finding

IT IS AN ANCIENT GREEK TRADITION TO SEE THE TREATMENT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS AS ANALOGOUS TO PHYSICAL PROBLEMS

in philosophical terms how grief can be placed within a wider framework of emotions. These *Tusculan Discussions* are fictional conversations in deliberate emulation of Plato, named after the villa in Tusculanum where they supposedly took place.

Cicero lost his daughter just after she had given birth in February 45 BCE. He was plunged into

materials.<sup>24</sup> Then he reveals his purpose: *he has written a self-consolation* – which he claims is an unprecedented thing. Remarkably, the orator has somehow addressed himself and made an effort to cope with his loss. The use of persuasion or encouragement, based on a strong belief in the therapeutic value of the word, is to be expected:

the addressee is asked to *re-conceptualise* his situation, that is, to re-evaluate his views on the circumstances or events which led to the emotional state under consideration. In essence, this is not far removed from recent modern approaches to anxiety, distress and bereavement called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). In this method patients are also encouraged to reconsider their interpretation of circumstances or events and to change their perspective by imagining different outcomes, in particular the preferred outcome. In modern terms, Cicero is 're-learning the world'.<sup>25</sup>

no public or private context to communicate his grief along conventional lines. He did receive letters from other senators, but these contain the standard exhortations, basically saying 'count your blessings in these difficult times and get on with it'. What he did instead is read everything on the subject in Atticus' library, and when he considered this unhelpful or ineffective, write his own consolation, to *himself*. But this was not all. Cicero underestimated the effect his reading and writing had: 'You exhort me and say others want me to hide the depth of my grief. Can I do

THUS CICERO, AUTHOR BY NATURE AND THERAPIST BY NECESSITY,  
WAS ABLE TO 'BOOTSTRAP' HIMSELF OUT OF HIS GRIEF

This tripartite model of explanation allows us to try to unearth Cicero's emotional state of mind in pragmatic terms, not in terms of theoretical ideals. How he has moved on from his terrible personal tragedy can hardly be retrieved from his stylised philosophical account written long after his acute grief. Our renewed attention to the value of the emotions not only in our own psychic lives, but also in ancient belief systems, encourages such an approach. The remarkable neglect of Cicero's letters may be caused by the fact that most readers found his laments and cries of woe rather painful and embarrassing and in stark contrast to his noble image as orator and politician. The tradition may even have started in 1354, when Petrarch rediscovered the letters to Atticus and was appalled at the Cicero he found there; in the 1960s we still find similar comments. Such judgments of Cicero's grief are based on anachronistic notions of the appropriateness of grief expression.<sup>26</sup> The crucial point here is that Cicero ignores philosophical advice and goes his own way in creating a document intended for both himself and *other* Romans as a source of consolation.

I once likened Cicero to C. S. Lewis since both sought solace in their reading and writing. The same holds for many other writers I have mentioned, such as Joan Didion, who used their professional skill as a comfort zone, and managed to 'write the wrongs' in a way that suited them.<sup>27</sup> As examples of self-consolation such activities would in modern terms be accepted as valid therapeutic tools. But Lewis had great difficulty in getting his brutally honest self-disclosure published, while Cicero had very little choice when he had

so better than by spending all days in writing? Though I do it, not to hide, but rather to soften and to heal my feelings, still, if I do myself little good, I certainly keep up appearances'.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps he was not allowed to admit it – yet there is at least the admission that writing distracted him somewhat. And, after his consolation, Cicero launched into a phase of furious writing, concentrating on philosophy. To this phase belongs his *Tusculan Discussions* and I would argue that this also included a further act of (skill-based) therapy, namely *translating* Greek philosophy – a demanding and technical task which had a lasting influence on the philosophical tradition in Latin.<sup>29</sup> Thus Cicero, author by nature and therapist by necessity, was able to 'bootstrap' himself out of his grief, and regain social and intellectual respectability through his reading and writing.

My second brief case study concerns the philosopher, writer and priest Plutarch who, around 90 CE, was forced to write a letter of consolation to his wife when he heard about the death of their two-year-old daughter. He happened to be travelling, hence the letter, and we therefore get an interesting look at a piece of writing addressed to someone else, using philosophical ideas, and written in a manner which also betrays something of the author's own emotional state.

The letter is elegant and well-structured, but I will concentrate on one passage, which sums up much of Plutarch's strategy in offering solace to his wife.<sup>30</sup> He leads into his advice by using some standard elements known from rhetoric: they offer exhortation and praise to

cheer up the addressee. But a more important component of the strategy is to make elaborate use of good memories. This may seem a sentimental passage, but it is more than that:

she was the daughter you wanted after four sons and she gave me the opportunity to give her your name. There is special savour in our affection for children at that age; it lies in the purity of the pleasure they give, the freedom of any crossness or complaint. She herself too had great natural goodness and gentleness of temper: her response to affection and her generosity both gave pleasure and enabled us to perceive the human kindness in her nature. She would ask her nurse to feed not only other babies but the objects and toys that she liked playing with, and would generously invite them, as it were to her table, offering the good things she had and sharing her greatest pleasures with those who delighted her.<sup>31</sup>

Despite his use of some standard elements Plutarch clearly succeeds in adding a personal touch, appealing to a shared experience of special significance for both parents as well as *shared grief*. The lively portrayal of the child is both moving and generous as a tribute to the child *and* the mother. Rather than assume this shared experience would be readily available for recall, he gives a striking characterisation of the child, ‘picturing’ her in words as a last tribute and as a lasting image for the mother to treasure. This

as we have it is a revised version of the original note sent to his wife. But we would be projecting modern notions of appropriate mourning onto Plutarch to require a desperate scream of agony.

## CONCLUSION

I have looked at a number of similarities between antiquity and today to illustrate how grief stands out as specially fit for a comparative approach across historical periods. The cases of Cicero and Plutarch allow us to explore details of ancient strategies of consolation, which prove strongly influenced by rhetorical and philosophical ideas not dissimilar to a number of modern bereavement counselling approaches. As two male aristocrats who try to cope with the loss of their daughters, they are just a small slice of the existing literature. Their strategy appeals to the universality of loss and becomes fruitfully fused with a kind of narrative psychotherapy – again an approach which has found new advocates in recent sociological studies of grief.<sup>32</sup> Consoling himself, Cicero seems to ignore or deny philosophical advice and the role of writing per se, but we can see this as a cultural difference which misreads the effect of this activity. Plutarch uses writing to console his wife *and himself*. Both cases confirm the therapeutic role of language.<sup>33</sup>

Are there lessons to be learned? Broadly speaking, grief management has come a long way, but there still is no one method to apply

WE WOULD BE PROJECTING MODERN NOTIONS OF APPROPRIATE MOURNING ONTO PLUTARCH TO REQUIRE A DESPERATE SCREAM OF AGONY

striking passage contributes to the value of the letter as a *memento* of the child, to be read and re-read long after her death. Such a vivid evocation with (potential) emotional impact is typical of a literary technique called *ekphrasis*.

There are other subtle techniques used in this letter, but I put those aside to make one small point about such refined writing in relation to deeply upsetting news. Some modern commentators have accused Plutarch of insincerity because of the literary nature of the letter’s composition: instead of raw emotion we get a finely constructed piece of writing. Does this make his emotion less genuine? I have argued elsewhere that this is not a fruitful way to approach the work. It is possible that the letter

to every individual case. This strikes at the heart of the paradox of grief and the notion of empathy: we all consider our grief unique, while sensing that we know what the other is going through. What does emerge is that grief is a process that requires an activity of some sort, and the choice has to be a personal one.

So there is good reason to investigate the issue of grief from an interdisciplinary angle. Recent shifts in classical studies focusing on emotions and modern attitudes towards death may well mean that the taboo is gradually lifting. The evidence that reading and writing clearly play a significant role in grief resolution seems to be confirmed from both ends: for

the purpose of grief work, we are what we read, and we can indeed 'write the wrongs'.

Secondly, the use of modern tools has clearly improved traditional analysis of consolation writings. As a bonus, we have also found that the benefit of insight can sometimes go the other way. The consistency in grief statements and viewpoints in consolation writings suggests that humans respond in very similar ways, yet benefit from being offered words.

Thirdly, as to emotion and history, I have tried to emphasise the element of universality in grief documents. But this is *not* an essentialist reading of the emotions – or a claim for only one core notion of grief across time. Rather, I wish to point to the *relationship* between the occurrence of death and the response to it: what matters is the dynamic at the core of a culturally embedded process. Unlike technological progression, emotions are not linear and are therefore more open to comparative analysis, provided we defuse some of the risks of such an approach. In matters of the heart, the chronological gap may collapse to a certain extent. The modern vantage point does not justify a position which is assuming intrinsic inferiority of previous generations. Grief is a special case, because it deals with the finality of life and confronts us with our own mortality.

Finally, the similarities between grief management across time create an opportunity to explore its 'literary capital' for the benefit of the bereaved within the context of the healing Arts. Further work is certainly required here.

I end with a quotation from Nabokov who offers a curiously ambivalent thought (after Epicurus?), both critical and consoling: 'Common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Although the two are identical twins, man, as a rule, views the prenatal abyss with more calm than the one he is heading for.'<sup>34</sup>



HAN BALTUSSEN FAHA is Hughes Professor of Classics at the University of Adelaide. His main research focus is on intellectual history, in particular ancient philosophy and medicine. He is currently preparing a monograph on ancient consolations and a brief history of the Peripatos after Aristotle.

- 1 This is a revised version of the A. D. Trendall Lecture presented in Adelaide on 19 October 2011. I am grateful to the Australian Academy of the Humanities for the opportunity to present my work and to the Australian Research Council for funding this project 2007-2010 (DP 0770690).
- 2 Quotation taken from her broadcast 'Words as tranquillisers' <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/linguafranca/words-as-tranquillisers/3187468>> (transcript at ABC, Lingua Franca). [accessed 17 April 2012]
- 3 C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 5; J. Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), p. 26.
- 4 E.g. Cicero, *Fam.* 12.30: 'I am writing to you, but I have nothing to say'; Seneca, *Agamemnon*: 'There is no limit to weeping, Cassandra, because | what we are suffering has vanquished limit itself'; Jerome, *Consoling Heliodorus* 1: 'the greater a subject is, the more completely a person is overwhelmed and cannot find words to unfold its grandeur'.
- 5 Quoted in Katherine A. Craik, *Reading Sensations in Early Modern England* (London: Palgrave, 2007), p. 1.
- 6 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of my Early Life* (London: G. Bles, 1955), pp. 207-8.
- 7 E. Lindemann, 'Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 101 (1944), 141-48. The past few decades have seen renewed and lively debate about grief and how to deal with it, many building on John Bowlby's studies (J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*: vol. 1. *Attachment*; vol. 2. *Separation: Anxiety and Anger*; vol. 3. *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (London: Hogarth Press; Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1969-1980), but also offering new theoretical approaches, especially regarding cultural differences and types of grief. In other words, we have become more sensitive to the usefulness of mourning (A.V. Horwitz and J. C. Wakefield, *The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow into Depressive Disorder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)), to the psychological mechanisms underlying grief responses, to the different causes of loss, and to the culturally distinctive factors involved in processing and resolving difficult emotions (see especially C. M. Parkes, P. Laungani, and B. Young, (eds.), *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997)).

- 8 Jeffrey Bermann, *Companionship in Grief: Love and Loss in the Memoirs of C. S. Lewis, John Bayley, Donald Hall, Joan Didion and Calvin Trillin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 9 E. L. Doctorow, 'The Unfeeling President', *East Hampton Star*, 9 September 2004.
- 10 Quotation taken from <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2007/may/04/greatspeeches>>. [accessed 18 April 2012].
- 11 Tacitus, *Annals* 2.73.
- 12 Image by J. Mak at <<http://news.discovery.com/tech/apple-logo-steve-jobs-111007.html>> [accessed 17 October 2011].
- 13 Such effects can have a serious impact on people's lives. For example, we now know that grief which is not tolerated (dubbed 'disenfranchised grief' by K.J. Doka (ed.), *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice* (Champaign, Ill.: Research Press, 2002)) may lead to mental and physical damage.
- 14 J. Archer, *The Nature of Grief: The Evolution and Psychology of Reactions to Loss* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).
- 15 *Grief and the Healing Arts: Creativity as Therapy*, ed. by S. L. Bertman (New York: Baywood Publishing, 1999).
- 16 Quoted in Horwitz and Wakefield, *The Loss of Sadness*, p. 30.
- 17 Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969): denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.
- 18 *Iliad* 18.22-27. Both quotations are taken from Horwitz and Wakefield, *The Loss of Sadness*, p. 30.
- 19 *Homèrou Ilias (The Iliad of Homer)*, edited with general and grammatical introductions, notes, and appendices by Walter Leaf and M.A. Bayfield. 2 vols., (London: Macmillan, 1895-98). 2, p. 271.
- 20 Ps. Plut. *Lives of Ten Orators* 883-4 (= T6(a) Pendrick; transl. Dillon 2003, modified. Philostratus, 244-9 CE) 1.15 [498 Olearius] = T6(d) Pendrick). The doubts about these testimonies as unreliable retrojections (Pendrick ad loc.) are not conclusive (see H. Baltussen, 'Personal Grief and Public Mourning in Plutarch's *Consolation to his Wife*', *American Journal of Philology*, 130,1 (2009) 67-98).
- 21 Philostratus, 1.15.
- 22 See C. P. Segal, 'Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 66 (1962), 99-155 for a seminal analysis of the psychagogic powers of Gorgias. Anthony Kenny in 'Mental Health in Plato's *Republic*', in *The Anatomy of the Soul. Historical Essays in the Philosophy of Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), p. 1, declares Plato 'the inventor of mental health'.
- 23 *Letters to Atticus*, 12.8.
- 24 Compare Joan Didion: 'I was taught from childhood to go to the literature in time of trouble, [so I] read everything I could get my hands on about grief: memoirs, novels, how-to books, inspirational tomes, *The Merck Manual*. Nothing I read about grief seemed to exactly express the craziness of it' (online interview, 2 October 2005, at <<http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/books/14633/>>). [accessed 18 April 2012]
- 25 I borrow the phrase from Thomas Attig's *How We Grieve: Relearning the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) which, according to the blurb, 'rejects the grief stages and phases offered by Kübler-Ross, Engels, Lindemann, Bowlby, and the medical profession as static and too automatic. Instead he considers grief to be an individualized process'.
- 26 Although Erskine has recently offered a fair account of Cicero's grief experience, his analysis does not go far enough. See A. Erskine, 'Cicero and the Expression of Grief', in *The Passions in Roman Thought and Literature*, ed. by S. Braund and M. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 36-47.
- 27 A phrase used in a recent newspaper article, 'Writing the Wrongs', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8-9 October 2011, Spectrum p. 21. I owe this reference to my colleague Dr Jacqueline Clarke.
- 28 *Letters to Atticus*, 12.10.
- 29 I defend this interpretation more fully in H. Baltussen, 'Cicero's Translation of Greek Philosophy: Personal Mission or Public Service?', in *Complicating the History of Western Translation: The Ancient Mediterranean in Perspective*, ed. by S. McElduff and E. Sciarrino (London: St Jerome Press, 2011), pp. 37-47.
- 30 I am concentrating on the emotive part of the strategy; for the rational component, see Baltussen, 'Personal Grief and Public Mourning'.
- 31 Translation by D. A. Russell, in *Advice to the Bride and Groom and Plutarch's Consolation to his Wife*, ed. by S. B. Pomeroy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 59.
- 32 Or 'narrative psychotherapy', see for example Tony Walter, 'A New Model of Grief: Bereavement and Biography', *Mortality*, 1, 1 (1996), 7-25.
- 33 An argument of this kind was made in a traditional manner by the Spanish scholar Pedro Laín Entralgo in 1958. I am keen to update and expand it by making use of modern views on grief.
- 34 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966 [1947]), p. 17.