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Patrick Phillips
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A conversation with Sandy Broyard, Sam Feldman and George Cohn

This conversation between Sandy Broyard, Sam Feldman and George Cohn took place on April 24, 2012. The “article” focuses on a single question: “What is grief, and how might we recover from loss?” The conversation is presented as a Q&A in the interest of living through the words of people who have suffered grief, and who have, each in their own way, recovered from the loss of a life partner. The purpose of this piece is to “sit in” on a conversation on loss and recovery. Through it we share how we as human beings can be resilient in life and discover how people we may know have responded to death and who, after loss, have engaged in vibrant life.

Patrick Phillips  What is grief?

Sam Feldman  Grief, to me, was an atomic blast of loneliness and a black cloud over my head, not a gray cloud, but a black cloud, and feeling totally dismembered as if half of my body had been lost and ravaged.

[Pause]

Sandy Broyard  Sam, I would agree with that. Your words describe something that is a very physical reaction. I certainly had that when my husband died. It’s an emotional experience, but it’s also a physical experience. There were moments when I couldn’t catch my breath, where I felt like my insides were going to vomit out of me. I couldn’t predict when I was going to be normal or presentable. There’d be times when well-meaning friends would want me to come to dinner or do something, to make me feel better. But, I’d realize as I was going out the door I couldn’t do that. I physically couldn’t do it, because I was shaking and trembling...

SF  That’s another issue—the triggers that bring you back to when your grief started, and the period of grief. It was a combination of a physical and emotional experience for me of tremendous, tremendous loss.

George Cohn  What Sandy and Sam are talking about is somewhat different than my experience with grief. I have not lost a mate but a very dear friend. He was a house officer, married with a young child, when he took his life. He did it in a way that was bereft of the fact that we did not know he was that seriously depressed. He was so caught up in his own problems, problems which he did not share with any of his two close friends. The experience of the feelings I had after I had heard he had taken his life was catastrophic because we had shared life together as house officers and as residents... I lost parents when I was in my fifties. Nothing compared to this. They died after I lost my good friend. Their death was nothing compared to what it felt like to lose this close friend.

PP  What’s the difference between bereavement and bereft?

GC  I think bereavement is the process of healing from your grief and moving on. It’s quite different. The word “bereavement” has a completely different connotation from grief. My bereavement groups are for healing, for moving on in your life, for not being depressed, and for starting to live again.

SF  I think bereft and bereavement are quite different. You can feel bereft, but you can’t feel bereavement because that’s moving forward.

GC  Bereft is something being sapped from you. It seems to be something that’s sucked out of you that you can’t put back in. I agree with Sam about bereavement being different from bereft. It’s a feeling that something cannot be replaced. You can make it over again. You can do it again. You can start again. With bereavement, yes, you can get to a point where you can resolve it yourself. Life has to go on.
SB  Bereft and bereavement are not the words that were front and center when my husband died. I was 53 and that was twenty years ago. In the first couple of years of losing my husband I had a lot of trouble with the idea that when people suffer a terrible loss there will be something good that will come into your life. You will learn something, or you will be spiritually much more or in touch with yourself.

Those attitudes really bothered me. They bothered me tremendously... I remember reading a book by some kind of guru who had this horrible anecdote about a mother who had to identify her six year old daughter who had been dismembered by a shark, and this guru said that this was such an incredible opportunity for her spiritual growth. I thought that’s just total B.S.

SF  The part that you bring out, Sandy, so well is that it is such an individual thing, and each person has his or her own ownership of it, and trying to impose a formula on anyone in handling their grief and their life is not very productive, because it is such a personal thing. It’s like the Kubler-Ross thing of the stages of healing was the way of thinking 20–25 years ago. But, there is no one-size-fits-all in this whole arena. And, the more we realize that each person has to do it in his or her own way I think the better the healing process will be.

PP  Is there a consistency? Are Time and Reconnection ideas/concepts that are universal?

SF  Time is very flexible for each person. I’m not sure they are universal. Maybe they are, but I’m not sure about it. Being involved in the men’s bereavement group with anywhere from six to twelve men every other week, everyone’s story is unique. There are some similarities. You’re right.

PP  How do we engage that interconnectedness, that social, human, symbolic referencing that we do with another person that’s gone. That needs to be reconstituted in our soul, in our body. How does that occur?
**SB** I still think, and Sam you would probably agree with this, when you have such a major loss in your life you’re really isolated in the beginning. Nobody really knows or can know the extent of what you’re feeling and experiencing, and that’s all right.

I had a good friend. She was also a social worker, and she used to say, “This must be hard, Sandy.” And that was enough. She would just acknowledge that it was hard. That was very comforting.

**SF** A lot of people say that friends and family are great distractions after a major loss. I didn’t find it that way. I felt it was such an inward thing that was inside of me that external things did not help at the beginning.

**GC** I think there’s a major issue here that we’re not addressing, and that is that death is a part of life. When you’re alive, you don’t think in terms of death. And there’s no training for the process. You sort of go on, live your life, go on and do what you’re supposed to do. Then suddenly, there’s a loss. Someone dies who is very close to you. You’ve had no training, no experience, and no one has told you what you’re supposed to do and how you’re supposed to react to all this. You’re suddenly supposed to find out for yourself. I agree with both Sandy and Sam; it’s an individual process—how well you’re brought up to live your life and experience death. My experience is different than that. My grandmother had four sisters and two brothers, and I was a little boy and I went to a funeral home for every one of those deaths. So I was inculcated with death at a very early age—except, when it happens with someone you’re close to, it’s entirely different than with all the training you could possibly have. You still have that feeling as if someone has sucked something out of your life that you can’t get back in.

**SF** I agree with you completely, George.

**SB** I too.

**PP** As you were saying George, there is no dress rehearsal for death, but it is part of our lives. I’m trying to understand what happens that allows you to live, move on within new connections. What is that, and how did it occur in your lives?

**SF** For me, the loneliness drove me to seek companionship. So, I started seeking female companionship. That is very common with men, mainly to assuage their loneliness.

**PP** Was that very hard, at first?

**SF** It was terrible. Terrible. Because everyone who I was with I would sit across from a dinner table and compare them to Gretchen. It was awful. It was terrible. It was painful.

[Long Pause]

**SB** I kind of assumed that I would find someone. But, my husband was so unusual. I have male friends, and I’m not with anyone in particular right now. Since he died, and it’s been twenty years, I’ve had a number of relationships. None of them have evolved into long term relationships, and that’s because my husband was a hard act to follow. For a number of years I felt I’d have to have that in order to feel okay about myself—I would have to have an “other” in my life. But, my life was very rich and very full before my husband died, and I think that’s just who I am... I think I’m fortunate in my own personality, in who I am, because I have things that I love to do that I’m passionate about. I discovered fly fishing. I moved to the Vineyard permanently. I’ve always been a dancer... So, I feel very fortunate in those ways.

**PP** Having read your book [Sandy] there’s this River Styx thing that happens when you take the ferry from Woods Hole to the Vineyard—[but going from death to life.] And that you have an internal will that’s both guided by and released from this grief is profound.

**SB** I’m not sure it’s profound. It’s who I am. I think everyone is born having this profound experience of living. I don’t judge. Even people who have “failed” lives, or what we consider a difficult life, their experience is profound. Even if they are frozen in their feelings, that can be a horribly profound experience. I think people and their lives are so endlessly, amazingly interesting. The trajectory of a person’s life and unique stories are incredible—how people manage or don’t manage, how they fall down, how they can’t go on, and how they do go on.

**GC** I think something we are addressing is that everyone has their own coping skills. And the question is how grief interferes with one’s ability to have coping skills. Those who have problems with coping skills will try to find ways of assuaging the feeling they have. So, they take up a drug or alcohol and they begin to use that to modify or temper the feeling that they have. But, they don’t understand. That becomes more destructive than the original processes. It’s very, very difficult... Sam wanted to found a group with men who have lost. All of them have different coping skills that have been brought out. They use their own individual skills to the best of their abilities.

**SF** It’s about people who share their own experiences. Sharing your experiences seem to help you in moving on.

**PP** So shared experience and interconnectedness is very important in your own experience—the capacity to learn to cope, to learn to reengage.

**GC** The fact of the matter is that with men having a bereavement group is they come to realize that they are not alone. They come to realize that there are other men there who can begin to share their feelings. It’s very difficult for men to share their feelings openly. Women can do it very easily. It’s a lot more difficult for men. It’s not perceived as manly to cry. But it is manly to cry, to get the
feelings out. What the bereavement group
has taught us is that men can express
this, and that men can go beyond the
group and find a life for themselves with-
out their mate.

SF One of the shocking things for many
of the men in the group, and was cer-
tainly so for me, is when they start dating
they’re not the only ones involved. It’s
their family. It’s their children, their
in-laws, their grandchildren. Many of the
men in our group have had a particular
problem with their daughters when they
She’s so different from mom. She’s not up
to mom. How can you do this to us, Dad?”
And, “You’re disrespecting mom.” That is
a common theme that has come up in our
meetings which I never expected.

PP Is that associated with the protector
motif, the provider, the solid continuity
provider for family?

SF My experience has been that when a
widow has a relationship or gets married
her children cheer. When a widower has
a relationship the sons say “Yeah, dad,
go for it.” And the daughters say, in many
cases, “It’s awful.” “You’re doing the
wrong thing.” This bereavement, this
healing, spreads out concentrically in the
family and that has been very interesting
to me to see how many people it really
affects. It often affects the people where
the person works and their relationships
with others. It’s a big deal. It’s not just
415,000 men a year, and 975,000 widows
being created a year. It’s the 1,300,000
people and the 3 or 4 million people who
are affected on an annual basis just in
this country.

PP In the interest of time... is there
something important I have missed that
you’d like to share before we call it a
conversation?

SF I think it’s important that men know
that they are not alone. And, the national
organization that we have created,
NationalWidowers.org, is a very impor-
tant resource for men whose spouses
or significant others have died. If you take
a look you will see many of the things
we have discussed on that site. We have
also started a peer to peer program. All of
our meetings are peer-led. They’re not
led by professional therapists or psychia-
trists. They are led by people who have
gone through the experience. We are hav-
ing a peer-to-peer program on a national
basis where people can give us their
names and telephone numbers and we’ll
have someone who has gone through
the experience speak with them on the
phone and let them know that they
are not alone and that they will be
helped through the process. There’s also
a women’s group very similar to ours
that has been organically created called
the WConnection.org. They are doing
wonderful things and are trying to be a
national organization to help women.

SB Well, I just think it’s important to
keep breathing and to find ways to
continue to be present in your life, to stay
connected to your community, to be loyal
to one’s friends and to be very forgiving
to one’s self and not to expect a lot in the
early stages of grief. To be gentle and
kind to one’s self. There’s a beautiful
poem by Wallace Steven’s, “Waving Adieu,
Adieu, Adieu.” It’s about staying still. It’s
enough to stay still when saying good-bye.
For me, it really speaks so deeply about
just being present and being still.

GC I think the points that Sam and
Sandy have made are very valid. I also
think that everyone should understand
that death is a part of life. That when we
make out a will, we don’t ever expect
it to be enforced. You sit in the attorney’s
office and you say “This is not going to
happen to us. We’re just going to go on...”
People should be aware of the fact that
death can be beautiful, that it can be a
blessing for someone to die a very grace-
ful, peaceful, quiet death.
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