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The Subjectivity of Grief: The Downfall of the Kubler-Ross Model in *The Things They Carried*

Death is an inevitable part of life. Not only will people themselves die one day, but they will also have to deal with the deaths of loved ones. Experts have tried for years to explain the best way to come to terms with this fact of mortality. In 1969, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross designed a grieving model, in which she outlines steps for how people handle death. Postmodernists would reject this model, as human life is subjective. How can five simple emotions completely grasp the entire spectrum of emotions that encompasses a person's grieving? Although some may identify with the emotions set forth in the Kubler-Ross Model, not everyone sticks to the order of the model, or even feels those emotions. It is impossible to suggest that every person will grieve in the same way, with the same emotions, in the same order. Tim O'Brien depicts this idea in his novel *The Things They Carried*. For the soldiers in this story, death is constantly at their feet. From experiencing guilt to committing suicide, how each deals with death is unique to his own character, showing that grief is subjective to each person, and a simplistic psychological model cannot be used to explain the intense emotions that come with death.

The Kubler-Ross "Five Stages of Grief"

The Kubler-Ross model was developed as an attempt to better explain the reality of death. Originally, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' work was meant to help terminally-ill patients cope with the idea of their approaching deaths. She said in her book *On Death and Dying* that "Death is still a fearful, frightening happening, and the fear of death is a universal fear" (4). In order to better understand death, she interviewed terminally-ill patients and found that most experienced similar emotions in a similar pattern (Newman 627). Generally, these patients ended in a stage of acceptance, where

they were aware and at peace with the idea of their deaths. Kubler-Ross then developed the five stages into a model to help those in the medical field better understand and communicate with their terminal patients (627). During this time, death was a taboo subject within American society.

Kubler-Ross saw an opportunity with her model to help American's in general better understand death and to "achieve peace—our own inner peace as well as peace between nations—by facing and accepting the reality of our own death" (Kubler-Ross 14). This is how Kubler-Ross' stages have moved from their original purpose in helping dying patients accept their own deaths to a type of grieving model for those left behind after those people have died.

The emotions that people experience with death have been simplified into five general emotions within the Kubler-Ross model: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Each stage has characteristics that better define these emotional responses. Denial, the first stage, is a "temporary response" that acts as a "buffer after unexpected shocking news" (Kubler-Ross 34). The person who faces death, whether their own or of a loved one, experiences a "disbelief...an inability to recognize or accept" (Cutter, 205). During this stage, people believe they are fine when truly they are not. The person may briefly talk about death, but will quickly change the subject and try to be "brighter, more cheery" (Kubler-Ross 35). Those grieving will experience a fixation and awareness with the person lost. They will remember times together through day-dreams "in which the survivor enjoys the presence of the dead one in his imagination" (Cutter, 205). When the grieving realize that those images cannot be real, it is proposed that they move into the next step, anger. For this stage, anger is used as a broad term, but it also encompasses "rage, envy and resentment" that can be "displaced in all directions and projected onto the environment at times almost at random" (Kubler-Ross 43). As the anger wears off, the next stage, bargaining, is where people "become more strategic, willing to make a deal with fate" (Kastenbaum 217). This is the stage where a person wonders if he or she had done something beforehand, would the outcome have been different (217). This bargaining for some involves God, as they believe that making a deal or an agreement

with God “may postpone the inevitable happening (Kubler-Ross 71). In the next stage, depression, life “becomes darker and more complicated” for the grieving because he “cannot smile it off anymore. His numbness or stoicism, his anger and rage will soon be replaced with a sense of great loss” (Kastenbaum 217, Kubler-Ross 75). This depression leads to withdrawal from normal activity and interaction with others and is the low point for those in mourning. The last stage can be brighter for the grieving, as they come into an acceptance of the death. Kubler-Ross said that this stage can only be reached when the person has been given enough time to sort through his or her emotions and is no longer angry or depressed (101). When examined with more depth, the five stages that Kubler-Ross presented in her model combine a better range and scope of other emotions. However, in order to make the model simpler, she condensed those emotions to fit under broader umbrella terms which make it easier to understand, and also easier to make grieving more general.

Subjectivity and the Self

Although the Kubler-Ross model gives individuals a more positive way to come to terms with death, it goes against the postmodernist idea of the Self. Postmodernists believe that the Self is a person who is “fragmented, multiple and dispersed” (Elliott 145). Life today causes people to be torn in different directions. They are busy with their careers, families, and social lives. They are not whole beings, but rather are shaped by their surroundings. The downfall of the Kubler-Ross model is that it does not take into account that people’s emotions are jumbled around in different directions. Putting those emotions into a specific order would mean that the person who is going through the stages of grief already has his or her emotions gathered into a neat little pile from the different corners of life where they have been inserted. This is not possible as people rarely ever follow anything completely word for word. Michel Foucault wrote that a person “has to move around in order to gather information, that he has to move things relative to one another in order to make them useful” (Faubion 475). People are used to jumping around and living in a state of

disorganization, and asking them to stop that and change in order to do something as difficult as grieve the loss of a loved one is asking for the impossible. Grieving should not mean a complete change in how a person lives.

Because people's lives are unpredictable and they have to jump around in order to live, each person's experience here on earth is subjective and relative; this is another downfall of the Kubler-Ross model. The Postmodernist theory of relativism suggests that each person has a unique look on life and will live that life differently than another person. The same can be said with grief. One person may grieve completely isolated, not wanting to share feelings and emotions, while another person may grieve by talking it through, sharing experiences. It is therefore difficult to say that people will follow the same model in their grief, because it is impossible to ask each person to conform and act differently to who they are as an individual. A postmodernist would suggest that in order for subjectivity to occur, "we must abandon the traditional assumption that the subject conforms to the object" (Hicks 34). The Kubler-Ross model suggests that people should conform and grieve according to the layout of the model. The model, however, should be changed and rearranged for each individual who has need of it, therefore losing the objectivity of the Kubler-Ross model and gaining the subjectivity of postmodernism.

Subjectivity in *The Things They Carried*

The downfalls of the Kubler-Ross model dealing with individual grief can be seen throughout Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*. As soldiers in the Vietnam War, the characters in this novel deal with death constantly, and how they deal with those deaths are subject to each of their personalities. Those characters show that grief cannot be determined by a model.

Tim's response to the young soldier he kills is guilt, which does not fall under of the umbrella emotions on the Kubler-Ross model. In the chapter "The Man I Killed," Tim does begin in the denial stage of the model. He imagines the young man's life before the war, that the young man was "a citizen and a soldier" who "hoped in his heart that he would never be tested" (O'Brien 93).

The Kubler-Ross model suggests that Tim has these day dreams as a way to cope with what he has done, killed a man. Although Tim had no relationship to this man prior to the war, he still grieves the man's death. However, the next emotion that Tim feels is not present on the Kubler-Ross model. Tim lives in guilt for killing the soldier. He says that for him "it was not a matter of live or die. I was in no real peril. Almost certainly the young man would have passed me by. And it will always be that way" (99). This statement comes years following that event, and Tim still has guilt, and has no way to rid himself of it, as "it will always be that way" (99). He says that even years later, "I haven't finished sorting it out. Sometimes I forgive myself, other times I don't" (100). This guilt that Tim feels, and others may feel when grieving, is not a present emotion on the Kubler-Ross model because guilt itself is a complicated emotion. It has characteristics of almost every stage except for acceptance. Tim's original denial and day dreams shows that he is guilty because he ended a simple man's life. There can also be some anger at himself. He bargains a bit, as he said that "Almost certainly the young man would have passed me by" (99). He also has some depression, as he sits by the man's body and Kiowa urges him, "Come on man, talk" (97). Guilt is not a simple emotion that can be placed on this simplistic model. It is complicated and deep, and the absence of it on the Kubler-Ross model shows that it cannot be accounted for how and when a person may deal with guilt.

Depression, also complicated and deep, is difficult to get through, and sometimes is never overcome. Such is the case with the character Norman Bowker. Upon returning home, he cannot express his emotions to anyone. He isolates himself, rationalizing that if his previous girlfriend was not married or if his father was not so preoccupied with watching baseball, "it would have been a good time to talk" (105). He imagines in his head the conversations he would have, especially about Kiowa's death and how he could have saved the soldier. Norman also faces a bit of guilt, but he mostly shows signs of depression as he is unable to return to previous life and he feels like he "almost got killed over in Nam...I sort of sank down into the sewage" (115). Norman eventually

commits suicide because he is unable to move past that depression. This goes against the Kubler-Ross premise, as it is assumed that those who go through the stages of grief will eventually reach that culminating acceptance of the death. Norman however becomes stuck in his depression and sinks into it, just as Kiowa sunk into the sewage and drowned. His inability to move past that depression and accept Kiowa's death shows that a person does not always accept death as the Kubler-Ross model promises.

The postmodernist theory of the self and subjectivity is shown best by Lieutenant Jimmy Cross's reactions to Kiowa's death. Just as Foucault suggested, Jimmy Cross does not grieve Kiowa's death in the order suggested by the Kubler-Ross model. He does experience the emotions of denial, bargaining and depression, but he does not experience them in that order. He begins his grief in the bargaining stage, skipping over the first two stages. He thinks that if he had "exercised some field discretion...moved to higher ground for the night...radioed in false coordinates," Kiowa would have still been alive (121). He wonders if he had done something differently, whether the outcome would have been different as well, just as the Kubler-Ross model suggests a person who is bargaining will do. Instead of moving to the next stage of depression as the model claims a person will do, Jimmy back tracks and experiences denial. He decides that he should not have to take the blame for Kiowa's death, "because it was one of those freak things...and nothing could ever change it anyway" (128). Instead of accepting that he had at least a small role in Kiowa's death, Jimmy decides to be "impersonal. An officer expressing an officer's condolences" (128). This distancing of himself from the cause of Kiowa's death is Jimmy denying that previous thought that he might have done something more to prevent the death. This denial does not last long though, because Jimmy remembers that "when a man died, there had to be blame" (129). As he realizes again that he holds some of the blame for Kiowa's death, it causes Jimmy to enter into the stage of depression. He isolates himself from the regiment, he sits in the muck with his eyes closed, "he let himself slip away" (129). Jimmy's changing emotions throughout this chapter show that human emotions are

unpredictable, and the Kubler-Ross model cannot account for those changing emotions and cannot set out an exact path for a person who is grieving to follow.

Individual or Collective?

These examples in *The Things They Carried* show that grief is subject to the person grieving, which was the original plan that Kubler-Ross had for her grief model. She wrote that her model would “come back to the individual human being and start from scratch to attempt to conceive our own death and learn to face this tragic but inevitable happening with less irrationality and fear” (Kubler-Ross 11-12). She attempted to say that grieving is individual and the best way to understand death is to look at “the individual human being.” Her process to help individuals accept death is the problem. She takes something as individual as grief, and attempts to form a general explanation for that grief. Joseph F. Rychlak, previous two time president of the American Psychological Society’s Division of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, says in his book *The Human Image in Postmodern America*, “Just because individuals have a common predication process does not mean that they need to form a group consensus on the contents produced by this [common] process” (10). This idea shows that Kubler-Ross’ attempt to group individual emotions into a collective model does not work and should not be done.

Although Kubler-Ross’ attempt to further explain death was done originally to help people cope and grieve, she did not fully take into account the subjectivity and individual feelings that grieve entails. The loss of a friend, or even a complete stranger, is a hard concept to grasp, as seen in *The Things They Carried*. How a person grasps that concept is unique and disjointed, and the use of modeling cannot encapsulate those deep and painful emotions.

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