

PART I

THE THERAPIST'S EXPERIENCE OF LOSS

IN THIS section, our authors explore grief and loss from three different vantage points. In our first chapter, Kerry Malawista and Linda Kanefield approach the experience of loss through the lens of artistic representation, fictional narrative, and neurological and psychoanalytic understanding. They suggest that rather than moving through “stages” or “phases,” mourning is more like a Möbius strip—a form both simple and elegant that has no beginning or end but rather weaves around itself in a continuous loop. With this perspective, there is no clear endpoint to grief nor any specific goal for mourning. Instead, the mourner finds herself in a transitional space, a state Malawista and Kanefield refer to as the “middle-distance.”

As we discussed in the introduction, the realm of the middle-distance provides a psychic holding place where the mourner can gradually assimilate and integrate the reality of the loss while still maintaining a phantom presence of the loved one. For the mourner, life progresses without the deceased, yet at the same time the memory of the loved one remains right alongside, always in one’s peripheral vision. One need only turn one’s head slightly to catch a glimpse—a reminder that can bring a stab of pain or a cherished memory. We will return to this notion of the middle-distance as a way to capture the mourner’s dual experience of the loved one as simultaneously present and irrevocably lost.

Judith Viorst describes the primary themes uncovered over the course of sixteen interviews with analysts who were invited to discuss their personal experience of terminating with long-term patients. All but one of her interviewees acknowledged that ending treatment invariably elicits feelings

of loss. She highlights that this is an intimate relationship from both sides of the couch. Each analyst organizes and makes sense of these feelings in a unique way that then affects their clinical decisions during the termination. Each participant is subject to a range of feelings that can complicate the process of ending treatment. She brings the hopeful idea that during the termination phase both patient and analyst have new opportunities to mourn.

In the next chapter, Sandra Buechler describes the oft-unacknowledged reality that we really do miss our patients when they go, whether they plan to leave or end treatment abruptly, or, in some instances, when they die. She introduces the idea that when a treatment ends we lose the opportunity to become the person we glimpsed in ourselves with that particular patient. What was unique and only possible within this distinct patient-therapist dyad is now gone. It will never again be the same two people in the room together in quite the same way. Our imagined future is forever altered by the loss.

Buechler addresses the question that each of our authors in this section touches on in one form or another: How are we to behave in the face of such a loss? She writes that, within our profession, there is a general reluctance to acknowledge the gratifications we receive from our patients or the benefits we as therapists gain from our work. We are taught to be wary of allowing our own needs into the room. Buechler demonstrates how this complicates the grieving process. Though we may not admit it, the loss of a patient is inextricably linked with the loss of a certain kind of personal satisfaction, or as Buechler calls it, "joy."

CHAPTER 1

FROM THE FARAWAY NEARBY

Perspectives on the Integration of Loss

KERRY L. MALAWISTA AND LINDA KANEFIELD

GEORGIA O'KEEFE'S 1937 oil painting *From the Faraway Nearby* depicts the remains of an elk's skull and antlers above a range of pink and white mountains in the desert. The painting, like its title, captures the dualities of life: the haunting idea that something can be both distant and, at the same time, dangerously close. O'Keefe's painting is filled with contradictory images—light, representing life, and bones, the marker of death. It denotes the dual experience of something that is simultaneously present and immediate yet absent and elusive. Curiously, the canvas lacks a middle-distance, an artist's term for the space between the foreground and the background. In O'Keefe's painting, objects appear either starkly nearby or eerily far away. As we view the painting, we are jarred and confused by the absence of the middle-distance. Visually, we try to make sense of the odd perspective: we seek to comprehend whether we are near or far from the juxtaposed images of life and death. The absence of this middle-distance on the canvas unsettles us, and we try to create a middle realm that would allow the apparent contradictions inherent in life and death to coexist and comingle more quietly.

As in the painting, so it is in life: a middle-distance is necessary. Experientially, we need to navigate a middle-distance to absorb and integrate death. At times, the middle-distance is the perch from which we safely encounter our lost loved one. From this perspective, we can glimpse the past in the distant background, evoking a time before the death. Without the middle-distance, we are assaulted by the starkness of our loved one's absence in the foreground. At other times, from this perch we can see the possibility of calmer, more serene times in the future, when we are no longer