

**“Exploring Twin Bereavement:
What it Tells Us About Grieving and Healing from Deep Personal Loss”**

**Mary R. Morgan, LMSW
Columbia University School of Social Work
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I would like to talk today about twin loss – about what happens when one twin dies and the other must survive alone. What issues and challenges do these twins face in their bereavement experience and in their lives as singletons? Why is it more important now for us as social workers and therapists to understand twins, their unique bond and their bereavement experience? And finally, what can we learn from them about our universal experience of grieving the loss of a loved one?

Let me start with some background. Using statistics from the CDC, I can report that in the United States in three decades from 1980 – 2009, twin births rose 76 percent. Given the latest statistics from 2013, there are one million more twins in the U.S. than there were in 1980 – one twin is born in every 30 births. Twins make up approximately 3.3 percent of our country’s population. The reason for this rise is twofold. First, more women are giving birth at an older age and twins are more often born at the end of a woman’s reproductive cycle. Second, this

increase is also attributed to the rise in infertility treatments: in-vitro fertilization and other ovulation stimulation drugs. Twins have now become a more integral part of our population, and as such, their unique challenges and special needs will more and more impact our healthcare systems.

Within our natural lifespan, we all can expect to be touched and emotionally wounded by the loss of a loved one. Many people who are listening here are all too aware of this fact. As social work students and therapists, we find that loss in general is an important factor in our clients' experience. Loss from a death and particularly a significant personal relationship can be a deeply dispiriting and potentially despairing and prolonged experience. We need to be aware and truly present for our clients in this suffering, as our culture offers little support or respect for the length of, and the natural up and down path of the bereavement journey. We work in a society that asks the bereaved to get up and move on with their lives and to repress and deny their grief. It's only recently that the psychological community has begun to recognize and address the problems spawned by unresolved grief and the importance of the grieving process. Here at CSSW, Dr. Katherine Shear's research and that of her close colleagues carries the torch and her

Center for Complicated Grief makes a major contribution to addressing this issue. In her introduction to the important work of the Center on her website, and in her support of the grieving and healing process, Dr. Shear states that “Grief is a natural experience - that is a form of love - and that we each have the capacity to adapt to even the most difficult loss.” I was touched and grateful for this insight and her perspective and want to add that I believe it is this challenging grief in the presence of great loss that calls forth our healing.

The experience of twins and twin loss offers another contribution to our therapeutic community. Over the 25 years since I became a therapist I have come to realize that twin loss acts as a magnifying glass for some of the deepest emotional challenges all people may face in grieving a personal and profound loss. Two years ago after I wrote a book about my own experience of losing a twin, and about the issues of twin bereavement, I received many letters from non-twins who found that my story had touched their own loss of a loved one, helping them to understand feelings and challenges they had experienced but were often ashamed to admit and had been unable to share.

To help explore these mirrored twin bereavement issues and to better understand the twin grieving process, I'd like to take a moment to look back at the beginning of twinship with an eye to the development of twin identity and the twin bond. Recent sonogram and MRI studies conducted mainly in Italy, conclude that twins begin their relationship and identity formation in the womb. From their cellular origin, the twins are ushered into the womb in relationship, both to the mother and to each other. Whether fraternal or identical they develop in relationship. They share the mother's blood, the smells of her womb, and the sound and feel of her heartbeat. They share an identical experience of the mother's outside environment, her emotions, and her behavior, all of which we are only just beginning to conceptualize as important to twin's development and sense of their world. From their conception, all twins share a powerful connecting imprint. And, from this primal experience they begin to show both individual and close interactive patterns of behavior and temperament. A 2010 study at the University of Padua clearly shows through MRI and sonogram the amazing fact that twins reach out to each other with intention within 14 weeks of age. In another womb study, one pair of twins was observed engaging in repetitive stroking of each other's faces through the thin membranes that divided them. As toddlers, these same twins

re-created this scene by stroking each other's cheeks through a piece of cloth, which they held between them. More research needs to be done to fully analyze the powerful significance of an in-utero relationship and developing bond between twins and its effect on their identity. We do know, however, that many reports from twins whose twin has died in-utero or in the early pre-verbal stages of life indicate that a significant and prolonged experience of loss can result in the surviving twin.

We further learn about the formation of identity and the twin bond from looking at the development of twins after birth. Ricardo Ainslie's significant research presented in his 1997 book "The Psychology of Twinship," talks about the significance of the twin's early environment. He explored, in case studies, the way that parents and/or caregivers and siblings help to create the twin relationship by their conscious and unconscious perceptions and attitudes and their resulting interactions with their twins.

Let me share an example. A young woman in one twin bereavement group I led in 2002 told the group that her mother had

joined her twin's names and called them both Miranda Sandra. Though similar in appearance, they were not thought to be identical, and, with a bit of effort she said, one could tell them apart. No one in the family, however, treated the twins as individuals and they grew up inseparable, identifying themselves as part of a unit. As a 35-year-old woman, Sandra decided to move her job from Upper Manhattan to a location downtown in order to be closer to Miranda, who worked at the World Trade Center. Tragically, Miranda was subsequently killed in the 9/11 disaster.

So we see the twinship experience presenting twins with challenges to their psychological development. Many twins being born at the end of the mother's reproductive cycle come into a home environment with stretched resources. In this context twins will turn to each other for the comfort and nurturing that is not readily available. They often act as each other's transition object, and unlike the blanket or teddy bear singleton toddlers choose, the other twin does not get old and wear out; nor do the twins have the same developmental need to separate from the other twin as they do from the mother. Twins also tend to meet each other's social

needs and can have, as a result, less outside interactions than other children do in early childhood. This makes it difficult for them to obtain a sense of themselves as separate individuals, and hence to form and consolidate their own identities.

Identical twins Barbara Schave and Janet Ciriello, in their study and resulting book “Identity and Intimacy in Twins,” point out that there exists in twins, as in all humans, a driving force to differentiate and individuate. At the same time, in twins, there also exists a deep desire to remain close so they may continue to share their intimate emotional lives, and in so doing, reaffirm their shared sense of self. Working within the context of this conflicting challenge, twins often attempt to separate and individuate in later stages of psychological development, for example, in early adolescence. A significant number of twins reach early adulthood, like Miranda-Sandra, without having fully achieved this important task.

From his case studies, Ainslie found that the twinship bond, so closely related to a twin’s sense of identity, is manifested across a spectrum of possibilities from an enmeshed psychological interdependency to a significant closely bonded

but less intertwined psychological closeness. At the end of the spectrum is a much less common group of twins who have highly conflicted and/or disconnected relationships and a conscious or unconscious desire to abandon the relationship altogether. Personally I would suggest that these latter twins, though conflicted, may still retain a deep subconscious connection, given the formative experience of twinship in the womb.

It is important here to address the issue of identical vs. fraternal twins in relation to identity and the twin bond. In the past, and even today, many people assume that only identicals share this magical bond that provokes such universal fascination. People identify this bond with identical twins' extraordinary behavioral and physiological similarity, and with the fact that they develop from one fertilized egg that splits instead of the two separate fertilized eggs that produce fraternal. A couple of years after my twin brother Michael's death in 1961, I was still experiencing fear and denial about his death, and was essentially stuck in the bereavement process. One day, my psychiatrist seemed unusually brusque, certainly less patient with me than he previously had been. He launched into an explanation about twins and genetics, stating that because I was a fraternal and not an identical

twin, not to mention a different gender, my genetic relationship to Michael was similar to the one I shared with my other siblings and therefore my bond to him was no greater than theirs, and neither was my loss. They had dealt with their loss, he said, and were moving on with their lives. It was time for me to accept Michael's death and move on with mine. My therapist's clean, cold words closed any opening I had been trying to make to my heart, separating both of us from that fragile, inner place. I felt more isolated. I felt like an ersatz twin. My denial increased and I further repressed my grief.

Years later when I finally began to research the twin literature available in the late 1980's I found that studies showed that many fraternal twins were seen to have deeply bonded relationships. Though not found with the enmeshed identity that identicals can share, research showed that the nurturing environment for twins sets the tone and quality and intensity of the twin bond beyond the issue of whether twins are fraternal or identical. I was relieved to read that other male and female twins carry out their separate gender roles while at the same time maintaining a strong underlying connection and a deep ongoing loyalty to each other. The womb

research of the last 15 years supports the earlier findings that most twins develop a unique bond which originates in the womb.

My search of the twin loss literature, however, has turned up almost no in-depth or completed research studies on twin bereavement. One notable exception is British researcher and therapist Joan Woodward's 1988 book, "The Lone Twin: Understanding Twin Bereavement and Loss." John Bowlby's Attachment Theory forms the basis of her research with further understandings from Alice Miller and Jean Baker Miller. My following conclusions, though complementary to Woodward's, are derived mainly from my own experience, and as a psychotherapist specializing and working in the field of twin loss. I have worked with lone twins, individually and in groups and through conducting workshops. Over the past 15 years I have been in relationship with hundreds of bereaved twins. From my personal and professional experience and that of other bereaved twins and from the experiences of other involved professionals I have come to the conclusion that the death of a twin results in a long, complex, emotionally challenging and often despairing and life-altering experience.

Together we meet twinship now at the point of loss. When one twin loses the other, it feels like the end of their lives. This is true for it is the end of life as they have known it since the moment of their conception. As one twin explained her feelings to me, “The day my twin died, the lights went out.” Another twin said, “ After Daphne died, it was as if I couldn't breathe. I never thought about breathing, I just took it for granted that Daphne and my breath were part of being alive.” Seeing themselves in the context of another person the “I” for twins is experienced within the frame of “We.” This intrinsic perception affects not only how they see themselves, but other as well. It affects the meaning they ascribe to themselves in the world. In twin loss the “We” is broken; physically destroyed. Twins are often left feeling half a person. They become off-balance and often lose their grounding. Many bereaved twins are literally lost within and unable to make sense of or negotiate their world. The twin that remains for them is both a psychological and physical memory, accompanied now by crippling pain. Not only are twins bereft but their sense of self can be severely threatened and drastically challenged. Shock, numbness, depression, anxiety and fear, the possibility of suicidal ideation or suicide, the feeling of inability to cope and of loss of meaning and life – all the psychological effects of deep personal loss are magnified in twin

loss. Twins share a unique experience of loss and yet each experience, as with singletons, is deeply personal. How profoundly each bereaved twin is affected depends a lot on the meaning they ascribe to their relationship and who they believe they were as individuals before their twin's death. To go back to Daphne's perception, I add my own: when our twin dies we must begin to breathe again, we must begin again with our lives, starting with what truly feels like the end.

I lost my twin brother Michael in 1961, 54 years ago. He mysteriously disappeared off the Asmat coast of New Guinea while collecting indigenous art for a New York museum. He was never found. It took 27 years for me to essentially complete my bereavement journey. I deeply believe my isolated and protracted grieving pattern does not need to happen today. It is one of the reasons that I decided to work with bereaved twins and, it is why I feel so grateful to be asked to share my work and experience with you.

I want to talk here about the healing process for twins – their needs, and some of the special challenges that twins meet when they grieve. Early in this paper I offered the opinion that in loss it is our grieving process that calls forth our

healing – when we are mired in painful grief this is hard to believe... Upon receiving a physical wound we can easily observe how nature responds and our bodies begin to heal. The wound of deep loss is hidden. Its primary effects are emotional. The resulting grief is easily misunderstood as it feels like a deepening continuation of the loss wound. Helping our clients to understand and to trust that this challenging grieving journey is the path of healing, becomes, I believe, an essential job of grief counseling. For example, it is important for twins to understand that the feelings of numbness, pain and fear, sadness, anger and guilt, even moments of happiness - the whole range of human emotions – are common healing steps along the path. And it is important for them to know that the up and down emotional waves of grieving are a natural characteristic of the healing journey. I believe the body-mind can only take in so much of the loss at once. It needs time to integrate each part of the trauma allowing for the next and deeper level of integration. Like so much of the grieving experience, twins' misunderstanding of the healing process is magnified.

So many of the twins that I have talked to and treated tell me that their family, friends and the therapists who treat them do not know about, nor do they fully appreciate, the depth of the twin loss wound and the resulting feelings of

extreme isolation, depression, disconnection and despair. In my experience I have also found that they are not aware of, and do not therefore appreciate, how long it takes for twins to surmount their conflicted feelings and to have the courage to actively join their bereavement process. Neither do they understand twin's deep confusion about their identity.

Human beings heal from loss - in connection: making connection to ourselves and our true feelings, and to others in whom we can trust and with whom we can share. Twins are greatly helped by making connection to other lone twins who instantly understand and relate to their experience. In grief counseling, they are able to move forward with a non-judgmental therapist, with patient listening, and a sense of the therapist's belief in their unique and personal experience as true. British therapist and researcher Joan Woodward points to the particular importance of this validation for lone twins who so often have had the significance of their loss denied. Twins require a therapist's willingness to take the time to learn about the twin bereavement process. This is essential in order to bridge the gap between twin and the non-twin therapist. It breaks the isolation that pervades twin loss, helping to engender trust.

Many bereavement challenges present themselves along the path, all affected by the intensity of the twin bond, the special twin relationship, and each twin's sense of personal identity. I want to mention a few important challenges here. With the bereavement task of letting go the living twin life that is no longer physically manifested with the reframing of the twin identity, what is left of the twinship? This important question brings me back to a 20-year-old woman who sat in my office. A year before, her twin sister had died in a car accident. Now, this young woman was reaching out for help. In tears, she ignored the Kleenex box I held out to her. "I don't ever want to heal," she sobbed, "if it means I am no longer a twin." The young woman released her grip on the chair and put her hands over her face. I waited quietly. She looked up and in barely a whisper she asked, "Are you still a twin?" I took the huge question in. "Yes, I am," I replied. "When I was finally able to acknowledge the death of my twin brother and allow myself to grieve, I found that I did not lose my twinship as I thought I would. In healing from my loss I did not abandon my twinship. I found that the relationship that I had to him lives on in my heart. I am, and will always remain a twin."

The fear twins experience of having to abandon their twinship - their primal identity and bond - must be addressed before the physically manifested relationship can be let go as past. And so often there is an accompanying fear that challenges the great loyalty most twins feel to each other – the fear that they will literally abandon the other twin if they acknowledge their death and the twin’s permanent physical separation. The path to this inner acknowledgement can also be complicated by deep feelings of survivor guilt.

Grieving is a transformative process. I believe the core of effective healing from loss entails listening for, and bearing witness to, through experiencing and sharing, the emotional history of a person’s relationship to their loved one. This process honors and bears witness to the loved one’s life. This active grieving allows the departed life to complete itself and for the bereaved to place the completed life in the past. At the same time, understanding that in twin death a twin’s identity can be severely challenged, the twin needs to develop and/or support his or her sense of self as separate. I have found, from my own experience, that it is very helpful for twins to engage in experiences that afford them time to listen and get to know themselves – to find out more about their special likes and dislikes, their individual

needs, challenges and special gifts, and to learn to respect, enjoy and address them. I believe we take in loss over time at different levels of our psyche. In meeting the challenge of developing and supporting an individual identity, the twin is more able to accept in the deepest part of themselves that their twin has died, allowing another step of major grieving and healing.

For some twins there is an important need to acknowledge the significance of their twin bond, both to themselves and to how it affects the way they experience their lives. For this group of twins, this acknowledgement is necessary before they can move to grieve and integrate their twin loss. One young man explained to me that he was never told he was born a twin. His twin died at birth and the death was not acknowledged in the home by his parents. He found out about his twin brother when he was in his early twenties from an older cousin. This man spent years feeling a painful and deep sense that he had lost something and that somehow he was not complete. Twins whose twin died at an early age and whose parents refused to talk about the twin's death or the precious nature of its short life fall into this same category. The grieving process for the whole family is disallowed.

Without acknowledgement of the twinship and the twin bond the remaining twin cannot connect to or heal from this major trauma to his or her life.

Finally I'd like to mention one more important and particularly difficult challenge most twins face in their healing journey. It manifests especially when twins are beginning to move forward with their lives and are able to reconnect to the outside world again and begin to form new relationships. At this point, most lone twins find themselves consciously and/or unconsciously looking for another twin, both in their friendships and in their love relationships. We call this experience "projection of twinship onto other relationships," or most commonly, "twinning." Twins engage in "twinning" as they grow and begin to develop other relationships and try to separate and individuate. But when problems arise, however, they are able to go back to relating to their real twin. In bereavement they meet their relationships with great expectations for a high degree of intimacy and sharing, and for mutual understanding and acceptance that is rarely found in singleton relationships. The singleton friend or love partner is at best confused by these expectations and at the worst put off and backs out of the relationship. The remaining twin can feel abandoned and re-traumatized. Twins need to become

aware that this need is a natural ongoing tendency given their twin roots – that it stems not only from their twin nature but also from their gifts as people, capable of opening to intimacy and empathy and understanding. However, for twins to find real meaning and gratification in their relationships after their twin has died, the “twinning” tendency must be put into perspective and its unrealistic expectations must be released. This presents twins with a lifetime challenge, one that is particularly difficult for identical twins with an enmeshed sense of self. As a fraternal, opposite sex twin I still deal with this challenge today, especially in my closest personal relationships, I have to check in, be aware, stop, and breathe, in order to re-balance my expectations – a sense of humor always helps. One thing that has made it possible for me to meet this challenge is to have been able to develop my own independent life; it has allowed me to feel a true sense of self outside of my marriage. Slowly, and sometimes with a sense of great risk of abandonment, I developed the trust that my husband and I could lead our individual lives and not lose our love and our relationship. Like grieving, this has been an up and down process. Now our marriage is made more intimate by sharing our emotionally fulfilling, separate experiences and by feeling pride in each other’s

endeavors. It has been worth the time for I can believe now my husband loves me – I love him – he will not be and is not my twin.

Twin bereavement, with its unique mirrored images and seminal bond, and with its challenges of developing an individual identity, indeed magnifies and illuminates the universal experience of loss, especially some aspects of it that may not be addressed in bereavement counseling. Let me share a few, not uncommon, examples from the singleton world:

“I have no sense of who I am or how to live on my own,” Margaret tearfully admitted, six months after the death of her husband and the subsequent end of her forty-five-year marriage to a loving, controlling man who ran their social and financial life.

My client Molly, in losing her only child, told me that her life held no meaning. “Little Tim was everything to me; I am nothing now that I am not a mother.”

Harold and Sam grew up as inseparable brothers one year apart. They shared a room and went to the same high school. They cheered each other on as members of the varsity tennis team. When Harold died in a car

accident at 16, Sam dropped off the team and refused to apply to college, saying he and Sam had not decided where they wanted to go. As he spoke, Sam's voice shook with fierce despair. "Without Harold, I have no sense of what I want now," he said. "Nor do I care."

Exploring the world of twin bereavement helps us as therapists, as well as members of families and communities, to understand the importance of being sensitive to not only the process of healing the trauma of loss, but to how loss commonly effects the deeply bereaved's altered sense of self and their ability to cope in the outside world. Like the grieving twins, Margaret, Molly and Sam will need to take the time to open to and develop who they are as individuals outside of their significant lost relationship. This presents a necessary challenge for them and their therapist.

Finally I would like to mention the sensitive subject of whether deeply bereaved people can heal. I need to narrow this question and answer it from my own experience within the field of bereaved twins. Given that my experience shows unequivocally that bereavement is a natural healing process,

and given the active, trusting partnership with that process, I deeply believe that twins can essentially complete their bereavement and heal. By healing I mean being able to move forward to an active engagement of one's life and to be able to find meaning and relationships in life beyond one's twinship. The emotional history of a twin relationship is as deep, as mutual, as powerful and complicated as the twinship was and will be reflected in the journey of bereavement and its challenges. Nature, as we mentioned, helps us to remember and to meet the different feelings that are present in the experience of and loss of twin life. In engaging fully in the healing process the pain that has been held in the memory of those relational experiences begins to slowly subside. At the same time, the memories move to become present for us in a positive way and can act as a loving reminder of the gift of our twinship. In letting go the physical twin relationship into the past, the essence of that relationship begins to transform. Our twinship, through many pain-free memories, and through the love that transcends death, can be profoundly present for us in our lives. Free from the boundaries and stigma of death, our twin is now available to us in our hearts, sharing their special gifts and

supporting us to feel free to explore, to express and to help bring into being the fullness of who we are.

Healing does not mean that twins never feel sad or stop missing the other twin. How could we not miss someone so integral to our lives? When these far fewer moments of sadness and missing present themselves, if we allow them and can release them with loving attention, they offer a deeper integration of the loss, beyond the major work of our bereavement, which has essentially been completed. We can now meet these feelings with the support of the precious twin relationship, which will always belong to us and resides in our hearts.

I would like to close with a personal story. This past year brought to our family a deeply hurtful reminder of Michael's loss and the unknowable trauma of his mysterious death. With all the healing work I had done over the years I felt I could handle this re-membering of his tragic loss without going backwards into pain. I was wrong. However, when I went back to how he might have died in my mind, an amazing thing happened. Michael

was not there. It was immediately obvious to me that his essence or spirit had left his death experience and had long ago moved on – it was I that was still there. Then when my husband held me as I cried, another - miraculous thing - happened. I could feel Michael holding me too. Michael was free! I felt his life so much bigger now than his death. And, I was free. Free to release the reawakened sadness – to feel his love and to move forward without the aching loss and despairing pain.

