

## **Seven G.**

Seattle, Washington

*Inherent Grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance*

Acrylic and Oil Paint on Canvas

In this series, I wanted to explore and demonstrate the topic of inherent grief, and the feeling of missing something indescribable. I was inspired by the 5 stages ascribed to bereavement (mourning someone who has passed), and decided to interpret them to this separate feeling, attempting to demonstrate the intense emotions that come along with the feeling that you are inherently incomplete, and are mourning this lost part of you.

I knew I wanted to make a series of paintings as soon as my idea formed, due to the medium being the most natural form of artistic expression for me. I was able to think on how each stage could be reinterpreted, in order to translate this complex and somewhat unknown feeling into a concept that people were already familiar with, like the five stages. The color choices and poses came to me as I worked, and I was able to take reference pictures of myself for the process. This resulted in a series of abstracted self-portraits, which to me is the perfect way of putting a little bit of myself in the artwork without making it simply *paintings of me*.

In the end, my goal is to invoke empathy in the audience for the intensity of the emotions displayed. It's not meant to be a definition of traditional grief, but rather a communication from me to you, attempting to present these feelings that are so hard to describe.

Grief, Longing, and Love:  
The Inexplicable Want for Something You  
Never Had



Seven G

The Oxbow School

OS48

*Author's Note: Writing this paper was a labor of love for me. I care deeply about the feelings that people don't care to bring to the surface, and doing the work to ensure that everyone can become seen. This feeling in particular is one I've spent a good deal of time struggling with myself, and I'm happy I got to shed some light on it. Though there is no right or wrong answer to the questions that I pose, I hope that my take on the matter serves to help those who may be struggling as well.*

Grief as a feeling and as a phenomenon is highly limited in American society. Despite affecting almost everyone in one shape or another, with over 50% of Americans reporting some sort of major loss in the last 3 years, grief continues to be bound by the constraints of common definitions. These definitions and the lack of recognition do not stop the fact that feelings of grief, depression, and indescribable longing are rising in teens and young adults (NPR)— even if they report there being seemingly nothing for them to grieve. Mental health inclusivity and awareness has come a long way, but I believe there is still work to be done surrounding how we understand grief and loss. The first step? Understanding that grief stemming from death is not all there is, and working to bring other kinds of intense sorrow up beside it. When that begins to happen, we can begin answering key questions. Such as: What causes the need or want to grieve in humans? How can we broaden what we consider grief, and what we are *able* to grieve? Why is the feeling of “grief” so limited in society, so micromanaged?

To start, I want to make clear the kind of feeling I am describing. To clarify the feeling this paper discusses, I offer this paragraph of my own definitions. The feelings I am attempting to tackle are not ones often brought to the surface, especially not in the dictionary, so finding adequate descriptions for this phenomena that many individuals share can prove a challenge. I offer this: the

feelings we explore today are ones best captured in phrases, of which I have chosen two. “Inherent grief” is the feeling that you always have and always are grieving something, though you have not suffered any great loss and are unsure where it comes from. “Inherent longing”, along the same track, is feeling as though you are longing for something missing, though you do not know what that thing is or how you might go about getting it. Though these definitions may not sound as though they have anything to do with grief, the aim here is to understand that these feelings are best described in the way that they relate to grief, which is why we need to understand how we can broaden what grief is.

When defining and exploring grief, the field of psychology is the most pertinent place to start. When scouring books and the internet, many reputable resources on psychology are eager and able to offer up insights into the grieving process. The information on the 5 stages, possible risks, anxiety and depression complications, and best ways of moving forward are endless. With a caveat: endless when it comes to *death*. The information present is geared towards those who are suffering from the loss of an important person in their lives, with much information being specifically targeted towards these people. The titles “death of a parent,” “death of a child,” and “death of a spouse,” took up the majority of the links and book titles I found in my research. When I fine-tuned my filters to look for research and insight (more specifically, definitions) that acknowledged grief as a feeling larger than just the result of death, the resources became sparse. The most helpful definition that I came across comes from The American Psychological Association. It defines grief as such: “Grief is the anguish experienced after significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person.” (While this offers a good starting place to launch investigation, the more helpful part of the definition is this: “Grief may also take the form of regret

for something lost, remorse for something done, or sorrow for a mishap to oneself'. This begins to broaden the understanding of grief, leading it away from death and loss, and into more general terms. However, beyond this I could find no mention of "inherent grief." The psychological sources that cared to weigh in on non-death grief stopped at their definitions, offering very little past the acknowledgement that humans also have the ability to grieve relationships, jobs, belongings, etc. That however, is not what I was looking for. Non-death grief research still comes from something lost, something tangibly lost in the person's life. Inherent grief has no such obvious root cause, hence why it is so scarcely brought up. Only in the anonymity and informality of the internet, or in quiet one-on-ones with loved ones, do people begin to express this feeling, far away from the spotlight of psychological research.

This information (or lack thereof) helps to lead us to the start of the problem, and what needs to happen if we are to examine a broader sense of grief. We can't very well examine why grief is so micromanaged or why we feel the need to grieve things at all if no definition for this seemingly nonsensical longing and struggle can be found. Even though nowhere to be found was a psychological definition or explanation (or even acknowledgement) of non-death grief, after further research, I extrapolated that this may be largely due to the constraints offered by the English language. The feeling I was aiming to zero in on turned up in many other languages, ranging from Portuguese, German, to Welsh. Each of these languages (and presumably others, though these are the ones I choose to focus on today) has a word to sum up these broad and complex feelings I'm attempting to understand. These words have no direct English equivalents, though bilinguals have done the best they can to translate.

Starting off first with a word that gained rapid popularity on the sides of TikTok dedicated to different fictional worlds and franchises, there is *Hiraeth*. It is a Welsh word that took a brief

step into the spotlight amongst teens and young adults who were trying to explain why they felt such loss for fictional worlds and characters, such sadness that they would never be able to be a part of these places. The word is connected to a deep pain, ancient and ever present in poetry spanning Welsh history. In the early Welsh verses, an unknown poet is desperate to understand the meaning of this "cruel *hiraeth*" that breaks his heart and wakes him in the night. Imbued with grief, it's often seen as an ode to the loss of a homeland, a language or traditions. "It's a kind of longing for a person, a place or a time that you can't get back to, a kind of unattainable longing," (Marian Brosschot, 2021, as cited in Crossley-Baxter, 2021). It was also said that, "Hiraeth is the music you play constantly in your head hoping that you do not forget – it's a place of comfort that you always return to," (Eric Ngalle Charles, 2021, as cited in Crossley-Baxter, 2021). The literal translation of the word comes from its roots. It is formed from "hir", meaning long, and "aeth" meaning sorrow or grief. Despite the literal translation, translators still say that it's relatively impossible to translate, because it has so many cultural overtones. Even with this cultural barrier, the quotes given to us are rather perfect to sum up the inherent grieving that English seems to have no word for, as it combines elements of homesickness, nostalgia and longing. Over all, it encapsulates the longing for something you cannot return to, or in our case, *never existed or never was*. All in all, it is a poetic encapsulation of such a confusing feeling.

Looking at other languages, German offers us a word that has been likened to *Hiraeth*. German helps us to address the longing piece of this inherent struggle, with the word *Sehnsucht*. It is a word of both positive and negative connotations, indicating great loving and longing, but also deep sorrow at missing and yearning for something you cannot name or visualize. It is made up of two other words. *Sehn*, from *sehnen* (to yearn) and *Sucht* (addiction or craving). Though the origin of *sehen* is unclear, the Brothers Grimm wrote in their dictionary that it means "to grieve,

to grasp, to demand something, especially related to the pain and desire of love.” While *sucht* does not come - as some German speakers might suspect - from *suchen* (to search), but from *siech*, which means sick. The word *Sehnsucht* does not offer us explanation though, only acceptance, as it attempts to make space for these feelings in German culture. It does not help us understand *why* this grief abounds, but it does continue to offer insight into why we do not make this same space in American society. Before we can jump into that though, our last word must be explored.

*Saudade* is a Portuguese word with many meanings. It speaks to a larger cultural attitude in the country, related to this research, but the word itself is meant to capture a feeling. Though I feel that both *Hiraeth* and *Sehnsucht* steer fairly close to capturing “inherent grief” and “inherent longing”, the Portuguese word encapsulates it the best. For our purposes of defining it, the translation offered by BBC’s article is this: “*Saudade* is a longing, an ache for a person or place or experience that once brought great pleasure. It is akin to nostalgia but, unlike nostalgia, one can feel *saudade* for something that’s never happened, and likely never will.” They go on to clarify that, “at the heart of *saudade* lies a yawning sense of absence, of loss. *Saudade* is a vague and constant desire for something... other than the present.” This deeply interesting word helps us to address the mystery of grief in American society. We do not have this eloquent word to express our feelings to one another, but the extension of that is the fact that we do not have the cultural attitude surrounding it either. That fact is laid out for us by the definitions we just explored in psychology. Grief is automatically linked to death in America, with no space being made for whatever our version of *Saudade* might be. We can then begin to answer the question of how we can broaden what we consider grief, and what we are able to grieve. *Saudade* gives us that answer; we can grieve it all, as many are already doing. But we reach a roadblock when we get to “why is the feeling of “grief” so limited in society?”

*Saudade* comes from Portugal's larger acceptance and even *embrace* of melancholy, something that happiness-addicted America surely lacks. The same goes for *Hiraeth* and *Sehnsucht*. Though their cultures are different, they can help to lead us to new questions. English clearly does not have proper words to describe these complex feelings, but did the lack of wording inspire the lack of acceptance, or did the societal norms simply never foster the creation of such words found in Europe? Though there isn't a right answer, I suspect that without the cultural embrace of sadness, how could we ever have the words, or the space to expand the feelings of grief? How could we help the people currently suffering and struggling with their longing and melancholy to instead embrace it? The answer is unfortunately, not moving to Portugal.

My personal experience with these feelings and these questions is what drove me to write this paper and make my artwork. Because of the lack of space and acceptance of these feelings, I felt for a long time that I was utterly crazy to feel anything even close to grief. I have a beautiful life, and though not without its own challenges, I always have. I felt that it wasn't fair of me to plague some therapist with my imagined sorrow. However, that didn't stop me from looking for explanation, comradery, and help. While these things may be few and far between, that does not mean they do not exist, and I've managed to find my own version of each in my lifelong search.

Acceptance and acknowledgement is arguably more important than explanation, but past finding words to describe *how* I might feel, I wanted to find *why* I would feel this way. I wasn't very successful. I was revisiting the questions I posed at the start of the essay: What causes the need or want to grieve in humans? Why have I struggled with this loss I never suffered? Why have others? I searched the far reaches of the internet, finding no shortage of teenagers and adults who empathized with or expressed similar feelings, entirely unprompted. Reddit, Quora, TikTok, and YouTube are only some of the places where you can find people struggling with this grief they



feel is entirely unearned. However, despite finding people with the same wish for answers, there was nothing of consequence to be found. I eventually found my way to a conclusion (I won't call it an answer), but that journey began in my discovery of the Enneagram.

The Enneagram is a personality typing system, and one of its more famous "types" is the Enneagram type four, of which a hallmark is melancholy and sadness. It is said that type fours "enjoy" being sad, and the focus of their life is what they are missing, and what they have lost (even if they never had it to begin with). Whether you choose to put any stock in the Enneagram, it has been a very useful community and tool to find an entire category of people who share these difficult to describe feelings. I turned to the Enneagram for answers, but the only *explanation* offered by the Enneagram is that this longing and grief is inherent to all type fours, and their lifelong struggle is to find a way to accept and move forward through it. No info or science to speak of, simply that this pain is one that a certain group of people have built in. That has been the commonality in the few spaces where this feeling is recognized; it is simply inherent, *and*, it needs to be accepted, not fought or explained away. It is a hard reality to accept, when it is so easy to feel as though no one else can empathize, and our society might never change. I wasn't satisfied with ending my search here, so I turned to the media to try and find adequate representation of my grief.

Thankfully, since media and music surrounding sadness and tragedy continues to rise in popularity, we get talented artists like Mitski to help us communicate these struggles to a society less understanding than Portugal. Mitski writes a lot of grief in her various songs, but I choose to focus on her 2016 album *Puberty 2*, which has within it her song "Crack Baby." She writes: "Crack Baby you don't know what you want/but you know that you had it once/and you know that you want it back," capturing a feeling of being adrift amongst a desire for something that she can't

quite name. Her lyrics hardly tell us why the feeling exists, and she doesn't explain to us why she feels this way, but it does the important work of making space for the feeling and helping to broaden her audience's attitude. After all, as my humanities teacher said, "if you can't validate the feeling, of course it's going to feel even bigger?" Mitski has made comments about much of her grief-themed music as well, noting that it isn't about any specific person or thing, just a general feeling of loss and longing. Who's to say? Perhaps Mitski is a type four, or has spent some time in Portugal, but I suspect she's just one of the many to feel this feeling, and happens to be in a position to talk about it.

All that searching led me to my "possible solution." My search for someone else's answer to my plight was unsuccessful, but I would say I still found a conclusion that satisfied me. It isn't an answer, and I don't think it needs to be, but beyond accepting the feeling, in order to fully understand it, there is a certain correlation between love and grief that needs to be drawn. A famous quote by Jamie Anderson reads, "Grief is just love with no place to go." And it is within that idea that I draw my conclusion. All the words we examined come out of a deep love for something, since you cannot grieve if you do not love (even if both feelings don't feel as though they have a cause). Even though the world offers us no cause or solution to this feeling of "inherent grief," I find it more than likely that perhaps those of us overflowing with this sadness, are overflowing with love. All that love unspent manifests as the intense sorrow we've been attempting to define this entire paper. It wells up in your eyes and gathers in the lump in your throat. It lives there and it waits to be released. It may not satisfy the burning need for answers that some may hold, but it serves to remind us that not everything has a cause, not everything has an end.

From the limitations of the English language, to the limitations of English-speaking society itself, we've examined the constraints that complex feelings live within. However, no matter how

much great science might exist, how many eloquent non-English words, personality systems, or talented musical artists, none of them can quite deliver the answers we want. The cause of this grief is unclear, though its correlation to love and longing is clear. The path to accepting and voicing it in America however, is not. This is not a hopeless ending though. If nothing else, the paper has proved that a feeling so readily dismissed is in fact tangible, voiceable, and real. It has proposed the idea that deep love is in fact the source of our deep sadness. People and institutions are doing the work to make that clear, and that's all this paper aims to do. To offer an inquiry into what we consider to be grief, and to begin to broaden that definition, giving this feeling respect and further curiosity, so that our non-*saudade* society might find a way to make space for it amongst our increasingly sad generation .

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Sanders, Catherine M. *Grief: The Mourning after Dealing with Adult Bereavement*. New York City, J. Wiley, 1989.

This source proved ultimately not to be very helpful in my research. This book is addressed to the professional and personal caregivers who work with bereaved people, making it less helpful for my purposes. It is essentially a practical guide, but the book is also intended to provide a framework for further research. I will take away what I learned in the psychology section of my paper.

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