# Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 2 March 2018

## ‘Good’ Grief? Rituals of World Repairing

Podcast with **Douglas Ezzy** (5 March 2018).

Interviewed by **Breanne Fallon.**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/good-grief-rituals-of-world-repairing/

**Breann Fallon** (**BF**): *How do we deal with death and grief in our contemporary contexts? Do we avoid talking about death and grief? Is there a possibility for ‘good’ grief? What role do symbols and rituals play in managing bereavement? To talk about this topic, I have with me today Professor Doug Ezzy of the University of Tasmania. He's editor of the* Journal for the Academic Study of Religion *and President of the Australian Association for the Study of Religion. His research on contemporary religion includes religious diversity, contemporary paganisms, and Christianity. His books include* LGBT Christians*, with Bronwyn Fielder,* Reinventing Church *with Helen and James Collins,* Sex Death and Witchcraft: Teenage Witches *with Helen Berger, and* Qualitative Analysis*. Thank you very much for joining us today,*

**Doulas Ezzy** (**DE**): Thank you. It’s pleasure.

**BF**: *To begin, I was hoping you could give us some context for this discussion about death and grieving in the contemporary world. Do we avoid it? Are we focussing on something else instead? What sort of context do you think we're sitting in?*

**DE**: I guess, for me, the first move to make is I'm struck by the way in which we're not talking about the grief or the sadness associated with climate change. When I look forward, over the next few decades, they seem to me to be a time of dramatic loss. We’re already experiencing quite profound losses. You can talk about refugees and migration as a consequence of climate change or, more broadly, about species extinction – the rate of species extinction at the moment is extraordinary. And, you know, also the costs associated with the values of neoliberalism. So there's a whole bunch of things that will lead to dramatic losses and I don't see many responses, in our contemporary culture, to

those things. It seems strange, or odd, or bizarre. Why are all these sad losses happening and we're not responding to it? They just get noted, maybe. And then we move on. Like, for me – one quite personal one – I'm a Tasmanian, I was born there, I go back generations. For me, I have a profound sense of a relationship with Tasmania as a place. And there was some seaweed along the East Coast of Tasmania – a really large kelp forest that would cover large areas. And in the last few years they've gone. And that's a product of the warming waters. And for me that's really sad, because I used to swim in them, we used to fish in them. And they're gone. So there's this: "How do I make sense of that? How do I respond to that?" And that very personal experience is reflected in so much broader, cultural experience of loss and change that we're not responding to. So, while I don't think we're a death-denying society, which some people sort-of talk about, I do think that there's something odd going on with the way that we're not responding to grief and loss.

**BF**: *Right, so, when you say there's something going on with the way we're not responding to it, do you think we're focussing on something else? Success perhaps?*

**DE**: Yes. That's right. So, I think that we're part of a culture that has a sort of a "heroic success" mythology. And I think you see that both in religious culture and in business culture and – to a lesser extent – also in medical ways of understanding the self. So, for example, here in Australia, Hillsong is a really big, popular, Pentecostal Church. And my friend and colleague, Helen Collins, did a content analysis of their music. And what she found was that, in Hillsong, they never sing about grief, loss or sadness. The songs of Hillsong are all about love, and joy, and the Power of God leading you to a successful life. If you compare that with the Australian hymnbook, Jesus is there present with you, walking through the valley of death and through your difficult times. So our religious cultures tend to be ones that celebrate success and overcoming and joy. And they are afraid, or shy away from sadness and death and loss. You see the same sort of thing in economic business narratives where you talk about autobiographies, with Mary Burgan's study of American bestselling autobiographies. And all the men's stories in those biographies are stories about success. And there's not much space for ambiguity or loss, or those sorts of things. And also in the business papers it's all about success and overcoming and achievement. (**5:00**) So I think, while there are experiences and stories of loss – we still bury people – all those sorts of things are still there, I don't think we've got very many constructive cultural resources for dealing with the experiences of loss that I see coming, that are already here. There's something strange going on there – the tension between the two.

**BF**: *There seems to be . . . you're talking about in those business magazines, in particular, sort of a real focus on the "I" and the individual person. And I was wondering if that sort-of played into this?*

**DE:** Yes. Look, there's broader story there about how we understand ourselves in the "contemporary West" – In inverted commas – that tends to be very individualistic. And I think that, when we look to indigenous cultures; or the Buddhist concept of co-dependent arising; or social theory, like the interactionist tradition; or hermeneutics that talk about a more relational distributed understanding of the self. And so, I think that moving away from the heroic narrative, is also moving towards a more complex understanding of what it means to be human. So for me, my sociology, I can now call it a relational theory of religion. And there's a whole bunch of people writing about that at the moment. I particularly like Graham Harvey's *Food, Sex and Strangers*, but there's bunch of other people who are trying to think about religion more as a relational practice and achievement, rather than about "individuals who believe". So, we'll get on to thinking about that loss and sadness. But certainly, for me, I think we need to think more in that way, and to think about religion in that way. Because, when we think about religion as a relational practice rather than individuals believing, then I think symbols – including symbols of sadness – play a different role. They're not about individuals believing in a symbol that represents something – which is the sort of modernist and individualistic understanding of religion – rather, I think, about religious symbols as things that draw people into relationships. And so, for me, the interesting thing about how symbols operate in religious practice, is about what relationships they draw people into, rather than what beliefs or objects they represent.

**BF**: *Yes. So do you have a key example of that that you, maybe, wanted to share with us?*

**DE**: So, I could talk about Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, where he does like the *churinga* is the key ritual object that aboriginal Australians in the rite that he talks about in *The Elementary forms of Religious Life*. The *churinga* is the symbol that he focusses on. And he says that the Aboriginals are mistaken or misguided because the *churinga* is fabricated, and therefore not real. And he thinks they're delusional because they believe in the *churinga*. I think that completely misunderstands what's going on there, with the *churinga*, for the Aboriginal. It's not that they believe in the *churinga*. It's that the *churinga* is an important part of their ritual, that articulates their relationship to the land. And I think Durkheim misunderstands the role of the *churinga* in the ritual. He says it really represents the tribe. And it probably does represent the tribe. But it articulates the relationship between the individual and the tribe, and the individual and the land. And when we understand symbols as articulating relationships and ethical responsibilities, they make sense. It doesn't really make sense to say they're delusional – they're belief is wrong – because the symbol articulates relationship, so it's not true or false in that sort-of modernist way. Rather it's significant, or not significant, because it articulates relationship and draws people into relationships. So that's how I think about symbols.

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**BF**: *You gave another really interesting example this morning. For those of you who are listening, we're at the Australian Association and New Zealand Association for the Study of Religion Conference at the University of Notre Dame. And, this morning, you talked about* The Velveteen Rabbit. *And for me, having read the book, it was just a really fabulous example of what you're talking about.*

**DE**: So my dear friend, Professor Allan Kellehear, wrote a book called *Experiences Near Death*. And in that book he devotes a whole chapter to *The Velveteen Rabbit*, which is a children's story from 1922, by Margery Williams (**10:00**). And in the story – for those of you who don't know it – there's a young boy who has a toy rabbit that he really loves. And the young boy gets scarlet fever and is ill for a number of weeks, and the adults decide that the toy rabbit is infected with germs and needs to be destroyed. And, in the story, rather than the rabbit being destroyed the rabbit becomes real, and goes and lives with the rabbits at the end of the garden. And it's a beautiful story, because it's a story about how a symbol – not really a religious symbol in this case, but a symbol – draws the child into a sense of confidence and love. It's like the rabbit allows the young boy to feel like he's still loved. And I think that's really important and interesting. Rather than: does the rabbit really become real? I think that's the wrong question to ask. You completely misunderstand what's going on for the child and the relationship. Are we tricking the child? Deluding them with thought police? That's to misunderstand. The rabbit articulates the confidence that the child will continue to be loved and cared for. And so, when you see the rabbit in that way, the idea that the rabbit becomes real is a story that draws the child into living more confidently and hopefully in the world. So the symbol operates to draw people into relationships. And I think that's how symbols operate.

**BF**: *Yes. I think that it's a really amazing example of what you're talking about in this idea of the rabbit being part of . . . I think the words you used were "world-repairing"*

**DE**: Yes

**BF**: *Were they the words you used?*

**DE**: Yes. So, I think the idea of world-repairing . . . I'm still trying to think through exactly what that means. Because, I think symbols' subjunctive, if you like, which is the concept that Seligman and his associates, in *Ritual and Its Consequences* – they talk about the way in which religion has a subjunctive aspect to it. And I think symbols can be thought of that way, in the sense that they create an "as if", and by performing and relating to them in that way they draw you into possible worlds. So, if you think of somebody whose parent dies, for example, the ritual and the symbol of believing in the afterlife, burying them in the earth – or whatever it is – is world-repairing in the sense that it allows

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you to live with that grief and loss. The grief and loss is still sad and still hurts, but it's bearable somehow. And I think symbols operate to work with our emotions, with those parts of ourselves that it's really hard to articulate. Because we're not all cognitive and rational. We can't always explain things, and what we believe. There are emotions, there are experiences that are powerful, that shape us in really important ways. And the way we work with them is symbolically, not necessarily cognitively. Yes, I mean you can go to therapy. And for some people that works. Great. But other people, we need symbols that allow us to work with those parts of our lives that we find it hard to articulate. So, the example that I gave in my talk was: I showed a picture of a toy rabbit that was given to my son when he was born. And the toy rabbit, for me . . . . It's sat there on my bedside table now for abut ten years. My daughter created a little bed in a cardboard box. And the toy rabbit, for me, articulates or symbolizes my relationship with my children. I only really realised this when I wrote this paper. I'd been thinking about this rabbit and thinking, "Oh it's just a toy, I'll get rid of it." But actually, no. It's important to me. Reflecting on it, it articulates a bunch of things about the way that I relate to my children. So it's important to me. So I think rabbits and toys, religious symbols, crosses or Buddhas – or whatever they are – they help us. The trick here . . . . There's an awkward tension between what might sound like a moral project and what is a descriptive project. Because religion is a moral act. And if religion is a moral act, then I'm not necessarily saying "I think you should do . . ." I'm not making moral claims here. What I'm trying to do is describe what I see as a moral practice within religion. And I think religion, and religious symbols, articulate the possible (**15:00**). And when we don't do that, that creates certain sorts of problems for us. If we don't articulate the positive possible worlds, then we get drawn into angry or despairing or frustrating possible worlds.

**BF**: *You gave some sort-of interesting examples to help us think about this, this morning. The one that really struck me – as somebody who didn't live though it – was Diana's death. Because I've never really understood the fascination with that, because I wasn't alive. So, for me, that one has always been something I've never been able to understand – until you talked about it this morning. And the process of that grieving sort-of started to make a bit more sense to me.*

**DE**: Oh good. Why did it make sense, can I ask?

**BF**: *I think, for me, it was what you said about . . . you know, there's that image with all the flowers in front of . . . I think it's Kensington Palace. And just the act of laying the flowers. Those people didn't really know Diana, but then they've gone to do that. And that act of . . . . They never knew her, but the act of laying the flowers would have made them – as you said – deal with that. And there's kind of sense to it.*

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**DE**: Yes, so there's whole literature on Diana and whether she was a goddess, or a false goddess. And there's all sorts of critiques of her as a problematic representation of femininity, and that sort of stuff. But for a lot of people, the laying of the flowers, or the remembering of Diana . . . Diana becomes a symbol of their own experience of grief, or their own experience of loss of someone they've loved, or the way that they understand themselves as a woman. And so the practice allows themselves to articulate a really important experience of grief. Sometimes it has good outcomes, sometimes it has problematic aspects to it. But I think, for people who study religion, it's really important to understand symbol as something that operates to articulate relationships and helps people articulate emotions, as well. I think it's really interesting.

**BF**: *Yes. I think it's really fascinating, this idea of the ritual. There may be some people out there who kind-of have a problem with focussing so much on actions and not thought. Is there anything you want to say to them?*

**DE**: Look, I don't want to say beliefs are irrelevant. I think, for some people, beliefs clearly operate in really important and powerful ways – particularly in some forms of Protestant traditions, but also in other religious traditions. But I think the focus on belief often misunderstands a lot of what religious people do. Their religions become important because of the way they fit into our lives – the practices and the symbols and the rituals allow us to find ourselves, to build relationships. And the beliefs are sort-of secondary, or part of what's going on, but they're not primary. So I think this idea of religion as believing in something and then "perform", misunderstands what's going on. I think that we find ourselves in relationships, we work out etiquettes and ways of relating to each other, and they're articulated by symbols. And then we articulate beliefs and their legal frameworks, on top, that justify what we're doing. So that's the way that I'd see them.

**BF**: *Yes. And I think you've given us so much to think about in terms of how we understand religion, and particularly in a modern context. The thing that really came up, to me, when you were talking this morning, was the idea of sort-of avoiding death by social media. Like keeping a person's Facebook profile going after they die. This sort-of really complex way that we deal death in a modern context.*

**DE**: Indeed.

**BF**: *We've run out of time. So is there anything you wanted to just finish off with?*

**DE**: Um. No. Thank you very much for the opportunity. And it's been great.

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**BF**: *Thank you so much for talking to us today.*

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If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader transcription project, please get in touch. Thanks for reading.



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