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The psychological transitions of life: A reading of grief processing. An analysis of the book by M. Recalcati “The light of dead stars”.

Lombardo C.^{1*} , La Torre A.² , Corsaro M. K.² ¹ Department of Health Sciences, University of Catanzaro “Magna Graecia”, Catanzaro, Italy² University of Messina, Messina, Italy

ABSTRACT

Background: The text “The light of dead stars” is a piece of writing that gives hope, in phases of life when nostalgia, sadness and even grief can turn into gratitude.

Methods: Massimo Recalcati in his book focuses on the relationship between human life and the traumatic experience of loss, explaining that the trauma of loss is often repeated in human existence, not only with the death of an important person, but also with all other “death” losses that leave a void within the human being.

Results: The book opens a reflection not on the phenomenon of death itself, but on the condition that affects those who remain, forced to confront the passing of their lives and the suffering of the condition of mourning. This essay analyses different meanings linked to the theme of death and the experience of those who undergo it. The author distinguishes the outcome of mourning into two possible fates: chronic melancholy and nostalgia, where he distinguishes “regret” and gratitude.

Conclusions: This book is useful for mental health professionals who find themselves working with patients who have to grieve. It offers theoretical insights and clinical reflections useful in overcoming treatment obstacles and facilitating the outcome therapeutic.

Keywords: Grief; Mourning Process Abandonmen; Mental health

* *Corresponding author:* Clara Lombardo, Department of Health Sciences, University of Catanzaro “Magna Graecia”, Catanzaro, Italy.

E-mail address: clara.lombardo@unicz.it

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Introduction

Mourning represents an experience that takes on different states of mind for those who experience it, unlike death which represents separation par excellence, the loss of a person, of a “love object”. Engel describes mourning as an organic disease, which can have in its course a curative outcome, complications or resolve without *restitutio ad integrum* (Engel, 1961; Carmassi, et al., 2016).

The book “The light of dead stars” edited by Feltrinelli Editore in 2022, opens a reflection not on the phenomenon of death itself, but on the condition that affects those who remain, forced to confront the passing of their lives and the suffering of the condition of mourning. This essay analyses different meanings linked to the theme of death and the experience of those who undergo it; how would an individual's existence be if he did not possess the awareness that one day his life will come to an end? It is as if his every thought and moment oscillate in a continuum between life and death, a limit that denies all individual freedom.

Thinking about death and looking at the meaning of a physical death, of a body that disappears, of a death that drags one into nothingness, and conceiving life as marked by abandonment or “separation”, is a concept to reflect on. Death divides, creating not only a detachment between two people, but also between the deceased who drags away with him a part of the other, a significant part of the “love object”.

Massimo Recalcati in his book focuses on the relationship between human life and the traumatic experience of loss, explaining that the trauma of loss is often repeated in human existence, not only with the death of an important person, but also with all other “death” losses that leave a void within the human being. The author distinguishes the outcome of mourning into two possible fates: chronic melancholy and nostalgia, where he distinguishes “regret” and gratitude.

Regret and Gratitude

Nostalgia-regret takes the form of a remembrance of a happy but lost past, signalling the continuation of grief for what we have lost and will never be given back to us, while nostalgia-gratitude does not remain imprisoned in regret, but becomes an important psychic resource. Nostalgia-gratitude is that astrophysical phenomenon of the light of dead stars, that is, something that is no longer with us, but that never ceases to illuminate our life and its becoming.

Recalcati, in fact, defines life as “a one-way trip”, one must seize every moment with

vitality because there is no turning back. The past becomes a “magnet that captures the individual”: this is the basic condition of all mourning, since the presence of the lost object is still present in the individual and in our memory (Recalcati, 2022).

Mourning is identified as an intrapsychic process, characterized by feelings of abandonment and loneliness that can become unmanageable in the face of a traumatic event (Lazarus, 1969). In the panorama of psychological Thanatology, the psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler Ross elaborates multiple studies succeeding in describing five stages of mourning (Ross, 1976; the first ed. is of the 1969). Denial is the undeniable expression of disbelief, of astonishment at the event, we could call it the defence mechanism of choice, there is a need to survive that dimension of shock (Pop-Jordanova, 2021). Anger is the emotion that defines the struggle against reality, which is followed by bargaining, the beginning phase in which there is a coping with the trauma of loss. Anger is replaced by sadness, which as it becomes deep and pervasive, connotes a depressive phase, driven by a sense of helplessness, and the phase of acceptance, thus coming to an awareness of what happened, processing it and giving it meaning. Light is the living remnant of a dead body that can come back to illuminate our lives, guiding us on a path towards the future once again. The text “The light of dead stars” is a piece of writing that gives hope, in phases of life when nostalgia, sadness and even grief can turn into gratitude. The individual regains his lost self, his sense of the world around him (Arendt, 2015).

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