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Grief, Dōgen, and the Ethical Responsibility to the Other Now Gone

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Abstract

When a living other transforms into a recently-gone other, how does the relationship between two people change? After the sudden and unexpected loss of a lifelong friend, my grief not only focused on the physical loss and the loss of future opportunities together, but also raised questions about what this meant for the state of our relationship and for my own self-understanding. 13th century Japanese philosopher and Sōtō Zen founder Dōgen teaches that death is one with life and experienced every moment as life-and-death. For him, life is a series of ever-changing moments, and it is in this impermanence that one finds learning. Drawing on Gadamerian hermeneutics, I explore what it could mean to ethically relate to a beloved deceased other and how Dōgen's teachings could help deepen understanding of grief as part of a continually evolving self-in-relation-with-other.

Keywords

Gadamer, Dōgen, grief, philosophical hermeneutics, responsibility

Thus a genuine conversation is never the one we wanted to conduct.

(Gadamer, 2013, p. 401)

K and I had known one another as part of a close-knit group of high school friends. In our youth, we hiked and camped together, went to concerts, and talked about everything from our dreams and fears, to the more mundane. In the last decade or so, although work and life commitments

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meant that we did not see each other as often as we would like, we still supported one another in whatever way we could. There was always a mutual understanding that each of us would be there for the other. So when K's distraught brother called to relay the news of his unexpected death on June 7, 2022 — K's birthday — there was an abrupt and forced change upon my relationship with my lifelong friend. He had died two days prior in a freak storm while kayaking off the west coast.

K's friendship was an important part of my own self-understanding, which until that phone call consisted in part of things such as "his slowest hiking buddy," "where K can drop by any time when he's in town (he had a spare house key at one point, though he always called before dropping by)," and more recently, "temporary keeper of his canoe until he finds storage space"[1]. All of a sudden, none of these things applied to me any longer. Without the anchor that was our friendship, I felt unmoored. Since then, grief continues to come and go. It is not considerate. It gives me no schedule or forewarning and shifts forms inexplicably. It is a trickster (Beamer, 2017). I continue to work "through the conflicting things, memories, and emotions that sideswipe you when you least expect them" (Moules, 2017, p. 2).

One question that arose early on and which I continue to think about is that of my ethical responsibilty toward K. What is my responsibility to my beloved friend who is now gone? In "Friendship and self-knowledge: Reflections on the role of friendship in Greek Ethics," Gadamer (1999) claims that it is through friendship that one comes to a place of deeper understanding and self-understanding. I feel confident that K and my friendship had the hallmarks of what Gadamer considers an excellent (*teleía*) friendship, and that if K were here, he would agree (and then laugh, so as to keep you guessing). Yet, Gadamer goes on to say that this recognition comes in part through a "sense of reciprocity in play between friends, such that each sees a model in the other" (p.138). In thinking about an ethical responsibility to my friend, it is this reciprocity that I struggle with most. After all, in his new state, K no longer has need of the worldly offerings that I can contribute, and I feel I have lost a sense of purpose. If reciprocity is necessary, then I feel like I've been left alone holding the ball mid-play. Yet, I feel compelled to carry *(tragen)* (Derrida, 2004) our friendship on my own.

George (2020) states that Gadamer maintains that not even the experience of the possibility of our own death can "dissolve the possible validity of the other's claim" (p. 116). George suggests that the context is about the possibility of the death of the self, for example by suicide. However, is it possible that the reverse argument can also be made? Could the requirement of reciprocity in friendship necessarily mean that this possible validity of the other's claim continues on after the death of that other? When my friend died, he did not stop being my friend. He just stopped living. The friendship remains intact as well as any promise or pledge I have made to that friendship. As long as the friendship continues, I feel that there is a responsibility to listen to what my friend has to say even after his death. Even after he has fallen silent.

Silence after all, isn't devoid of meaning. A gifted writer, my friend has left letters, travel logs, magazine articles, and even a puppet play. Other artifacts I have of his include photos, his copy of Leonard Cohen poems, and the canoe which still hangs from the ceiling of my garage for now. These are what constitute what Moules (2017) calls the "archives of lives." Reading them in silence, I continue to learn. He continues to share with me and teach me anew, especially about

living with nature, humility, openness, and about overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In so many ways, with and without words, my friend continues to speak to me, to make his claim.

Risser (2019) discusses silence and the meanings it holds and describes three types of silence—"silence as withdrawal of the word," "silence as giving voice to words," and "silence as the beginning of the word" (p. 3). I can think at least of the first and third types of silence that apply here. First, I wonder if the silence that death ushers could be considered the ultimate withdrawal of the word? Until days before his death, K and I were in regular communication. Only a few hours before his brother's call, I had texted to wish him a happy birthday and to ask about his weekend. No response would ever come. In his absence, in the silence, however, K remained and remains present in my life. More than ever, this silence speaks. Even after words have been withdrawn. It then remains both my pleasure and my responsibility to listen — the latter a requirement for learning (Risser, 2019) — from his life and now his death, one that was and continues to be intertwined with mine.

Not only has K's death turned out to be the withdrawal of the word, but it has also been a "silence as the beginning of the word." His absence, his silence, has birthed new conversations. Despite knowing each other for many years, until now I have had few opportunities to share experiences and dialogue with his parents and brother. In our shared grief, we could have all retreated inward. Yet, in their generosity and openness at their most difficult hour, they have shared with me their memories, their questions — their own horizons of understanding — and I in turn have strived to do the same. Of course, it is not the same as having my friend beside me. But these new relationships, these new conversations are also important not only for us to maintain our connection with K, but now for their own sake. New friendships and new responsibilities begin to emerge. Even yesterday, I had the privilege to meet and talk with Melissa, K's faculty advisor and I have a difficult time believing that this is mere coincidence. Finally, another type of conversation that could only have been born out of this silence is represented by what I share with you here today. My friend's death thrust these questions upon me as I tried and try to make sense of an all too early and abrupt exit of someone who was so fully immersed in the act of living. I never intended to have these conversations. Yet here I am.
However, I am still troubled by this lingering issue of reciprocity. If, like Gadamer says, true friendship requires mutual recognition that confirms the self-understanding of each person, it is difficult to say what the living can do for the dead. In life, this was easier. We had concern for one another's well-being. We trusted one another so that we could listen to one another, support each other, and simultaneously cultivate both the self and the friendship. My friend no longer has need of what the living world has to offer. Now that the well-being of the other is something that I cannot be concerned about — at least in a way that we, the living, can understand — can there even be a relationship? Does reciprocity as a condition for friendship create an argument against responsibility to the other after their death? Am I even understanding this as Gadamer intended? But if I am, I suggest that this is only true if I consider self and other as two separate beings, the common view in western philosophical traditions.

Buddhist teaching, on the other hand, does not see the self and other as separate, but rather as interdependent and infinitely connected (Iino, 1962). Specifically, it is the writings of Eihei

Dōgen, 13th century Japanese philosopher and founder of Sōtō Zen Buddhism, that provide another way to understand the relationship of self and other.

Before I go any further, I must make clear that I do not consider myself a Sōtō Zen Buddhist. Although my family and ancestors have affiliations with a local Sōtō Zen temple near my hometown, I would consider us "funeral Buddhists," practitioners who turn to the temple for guidance and support mostly regarding the rites of death. This is quite common in contemporary Japanese life. Although we did not participate in any organized religious activities, the values with which my parents raised my sister and me are steeped in the teachings. When I read Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō (正法眼蔵, Treasury of the True Dharma Eye), I begin to understand my upbringing and myself. Therefore, my experience and understanding of Sōtō Zen Buddhism is limited (as is my understanding of hermeneutics), and I approach this as a novice and from a philosophical rather than religious perspective.

Shōbōgenzō is a collection of essays (known as fascicles) that illuminate Buddhist teaching and practice. It addresses not only philosophical questions, but also lays out practical instruction on topics such as the principles of zazen meditation and personal hygiene. Genjōkōan (現成公案), the third installment in the 95-fascicle version, was written for the lay Buddhist practitioner and is seen as the foundation for the subsequent teachings (Okamura, 2010). The term Genjōkōan is variously translated into "the reality of our own lives" (Nishijima & Cross, 1994); "actualizing the fundamental point" (Tanahashi, 2013); "manifesting absolute reality" (Cook, 1989); as well as my personal favourite, "manifesting suchness" (Waddell & Abe, 1972). I refer here to the Nishijima and Cross translation, as it is one of the two readily available complete translations. Genjōkōan begins with:

> When all dharmas are [seen as] the Buddha-Dharma[2], then there is delusion and realization, there is practice, there is life and there is death, there are buddhas and there are ordinary beings. When the myriad dharmas are each not of the self, there is no delusion and no realization, no buddhas and no ordinary beings, no life and no death. The buddha's truth is originally transcendent over abundance and scarcity, and so there is life and death, there is delusion and realization, there are beings and buddhas. And though it is like this, it is only that flowers, while loved, fall; and weeds while hated, flourish. (Nishijima & Cross, 1994, p. 27)

For Dōgen, the Buddha's true reality is comprised of a myriad and infinite intersecting and interpenetrating singularities. Although we see one another as separate and autonomous, he says the Buddha teaches us that, in reality, there is no separate self and other because one cannot speak of the self without implying the existence of everything else. The separation is therefore an illusion borne of our ordinary humanness, our limits of experience and understanding. If we accept this and practice to overcome this ordinariness, to rid ourselves of self to attain realization, then this too is an illusion because such a task is impossible (Okamura, 2010).

Further on, Dōgen says:

> To learn the Buddha truth is to learn ourselves. To learn ourselves is to forget ourselves. To forget ourselves is to be experienced by the myriad dharmas. To be experienced by

> the myriad dharmas is to let our own body-and-mind, and the body-and-mind of the external world, fall away. There is a state in which the traces of realization are forgotten; and it manifests the traces of forgotten realization for a long, long time. (Nishijima & Cross, 1994, p. 27)

Although we can never attain absolute realization, here Dōgen calls on us to learn ourselves by forgetting ourselves. Only by immersing ourselves in practice and letting our "body-and-mind…fall away" (身心脱落) can we take an infinitely small step toward this unattainable absolute realization. He teaches that what we consider "self" and "other" is only an illusion, and that in reality, we are all "self-and-other." If there is no such distinction, any thought of reciprocation would be moot. In this view, what would constitute an "excellent" friendship both in life and death?

If there is no point in waiting for recognition (because there is no separate other to recognize), love and concern for a friend can only be given freely for their own sake, and not for want of something in return. If we expect something in return, it becomes what Gadamer, citing Aristotle, calls a friendship of utility (Gadamer, 1999). However, our fallibility or ordinariness means that we are bound to struggle in giving freely without expectation of reciprocation. If the other is living, we may feel hurt and shame in being ignored or rejected. In life, a true friendship provides recognition and reciprocation leading to understanding and self-understanding not out of utility, but because of our mutual practice of love and concern for one another. If such a relationship in play suddenly and inexplicably ceases and the friend's new state makes it impossible for them to respond, the living must learn to understand this new reality. I wonder if this struggle to understand the new reality is at least in part what manifests as grief?

I turn once again to Dōgen. Amongst his writings is a short chapter called Shōji (生死). The word shōji is comprised of two characters, shō, which means "birth" or "life" and ji which means "death." It begins: "Because in life-and-death there is buddha, there is no life and death. Again, we can say: Because in life–and-death there is no 'buddha,' we are not deluded in life-and-death." (Nishijima & Cross, 1999, p.197). Here too, like the self is twinned with the other, life and death are considered as one. For Dōgen, such a duality only exists because of our sentience and the limits of our own understanding. He goes on to say that in true reality "appearance is just non-appearance" (p.197) and "disappearance is just non-disappearance" (p.198). Impermanence then is at the heart of true reality.

If we return again to the Genjōkōan, he writes:

> The firewood, after becoming ash, does not again become firewood. Similarly, human beings, after death, do not live again. At the same time, it is an established custom in the Buddha-Dharma not to say that life turns into death. (Nishijima & Cross, 1994, p. 28)

Here he says that after death, we do not live again. Although this seems obvious, I believe that Dōgen is showing us that if we can accept this, we will be better able to see clearly the impermanence of reality. If the present cannot be re-lived, if the dead do not reappear, then it becomes ever more important that we immerse ourselves in the present, letting "body-and-mind…fall away." Accepting, however, does not come easily, and will never be fully achieved.

The grief, the struggle to understand continues to be a complicated and messy process that has no clear endpoint.

When I consider the loss of a beloved friend with Dōgen's unified concepts of self-and-other and life-and-death, I start to glimpse his life, his death and my ethical responsibility in a new way. If the separation between self and other is an illusion, an ethical responsibility to a deceased friend becomes just as much an ethical responsibility to oneself. Here I see a connection to Gadamer's claim about self-love (*philautia*) (Gadamer, 2009). Although he acknowledges the negative connotations to this term (which is perhaps now more relevant than ever), Gadamer claims that in order to be a true friend to another, "friendship must exist first and foremost with oneself" (Gadamer, 2009, p. 8). When the duality of self and other becomes a unified self-and-other, love for a true friend becomes synonymous with love for the self, and reciprocation is no longer needed.

On the never-ending path to accepting this new reality, accepting one's experience of grief when it appears is also part of that reality. Both for love of the friend and love for oneself, immersing oneself fully in that experience of grief may reveal new understandings. When the feelings of grief disappear for the moment, rather than clinging to the grief, we should equally immerse ourselves in that moment, so that we continue to see new aspects of this reality and gain further understanding of it. It would be folly to ignore grief or to see "overcoming" grief as an attainable goal. Nor would it be an ethical way to be.

What could this look like in our day-to-day unrealized reality? This is only a conjecture, as I, in my ordinariness, can only experience a fraction of a fraction of this "suchness." I believe that it is putting daily into practice the learnings from the friendship. For me this means practicing patience and openness when I teach; compassion when I encounter those in need of assistance; humility when I get a little ahead of myself as I'm wont to do. It is about maintaining important relationships and cultivating new ones, like those with K's family or with all of you here. It is sharing with others what I have learned from him, and being open to continue learning from others. It is letting my whole self fall away into the practice of living, just like my friend did so well, and being grateful for this life, warts and all. It is hard and messy work. But it is the only way I know to try and fulfill the responsibility—the promise—to our friendship and to continue our conversation, both in words and in silence.

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[1] This article was presented on June 2, 2023 at the Canadian Hermeneutic Institute. The same day, K's brother emailed me to let me know that he was ready to take the canoe.

[2] The universal truth according to Buddha.