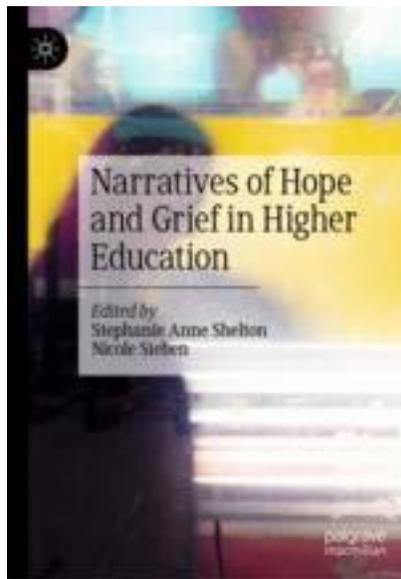


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Review of Narratives of Hope and Grief in Higher Education Edited by Shelton, S. A., and Sieben, N.

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Overview

The Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) is one of the deadliest viral outbreaks of the century. Nearly a year after its onset, more than 108 million cases have been confirmed and 2 million deaths recorded worldwide (Wood et al., 2021). Governments have introduced measures such as social distancing and travel restrictions, which substantially impacted daily life (e.g., limited funeral options, social isolation, infection, job loss; Eisma & Tamminga, 2020). Researchers report that the pandemic has had an extensive impact on the world of higher education and looming effects on the mental health of graduate students (Chirkov et al., 2020). In addition, COVID-19 has shifted the teaching practices among university professors resulting in dislocation, social seclusion, and detrimental effects on their physical and emotional health (Gates et al., 2020). Many professors have further reported experiences of loss, along with uncertainty concerns linked to job security, teaching, and research (Gates et al., 2020). Grief, loss, and doubt have threatened the well-being of individuals within academic circles of higher education. The heightened effects of COVID-19 leave many academicians, teachers, and researchers grappling with every day and long-term grief in a variety of forms.

As a first-year doctoral student during the COVID-19 pandemic, I began reading *Narratives of Hope and Grief in Higher Education* edited by Stephanie Anne Shelton and Nicole Sieben. This book offers an authentic portrayal of the sorrow and strength that exists within the academy. Shaped from their own heartache, the editors weave together personal narratives of grief and hope from various scholars across the field of academia. Each chapter focuses on a unique aspect of grief and loss. Narratives range from personal tragedies such as losing a loved one, to campus shootings, to experiences of racism (Shelton & Sieben, 2020). This collection goes

beyond the notions of individual sorrow by incorporating students, teachers, and researchers who cope with and process grief from multiple angles (e.g., politically, academically, professionally). Different than other resources examining grief, this book serves as way to support those in the field of academia who have felt the effects of sorrow to create a sense of solidarity among academic circles.

The examination of grief is not a new concept; however, honest conversations, acknowledgement, and resources for faculty, staff, and students experiencing grief within higher education is warranted. As the editors noted, there is an absence of open, vulnerable discussion of grief in the academy and its broad reaching effects (Shelton & Sieben, 2020). This is especially true as much of academia continues to work through the novel COVID-19 pandemic with the steadfast expectations to continue to teach, conduct research and other scholarly activities, and provide service to one's field. As an out-of-state graduate student and the daughter of a nurse on the frontlines, I have found that support resources are lacking. This became clear through the grief-stricken phone conversations with my mother as she detailed the horrors of freezer trucks, ventilators, and N95 masks – a part of her daily routine. Separated by thousands of miles, I was left with nowhere else to turn but crying into my pillow and continuing to meet strictly enforced deadlines. It is through this book that the editors examine grief as a reality in higher education and assert the possibilities of finding hope and healing under the layers of sorrow.

This book is inspired by Shelton and Sieben's (2020) personal experiences of grief and its relation to their positions in higher education after they each lost their father. From their experiences, the editor's note how higher education remains detached and unresponsive to hurt, identifying a need to support others' sorrows (Shelton & Sieben, 2020). The book

begins with Shelton and Sieben’s rationale behind these narratives, which underscores its timeliness and significance. Following this, the editors divide the book into five parts, each detailing different stories of grief and hope experienced by those in the academy.

Part One

The first part focuses on the sorrow and strength of losing a loved one. A doctoral student named Shelly Melchior shares an impactful story titled “A Qualitative Reckoning,” which describes her efforts to make amends with her mother within their complex relationship. However, these efforts were cut short once her mother was diagnosed with cancer. Shelly found healing through her qualitative research courses and work with undergraduate students. Knowing what resources are available to students in higher education is important. This story serves as a way to help students in academia recognize and identify the support systems that exist within their educational community and to not admonish themselves for accessing them. These narratives are relevant today for those doctoral students touched with grief and mental health issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic given the increase in looming effects (Chirkov et al., 2020) as well as other sorrowful experiences.

Part Two

Writing serves as a key component in the lives of those in the academy, helping students, teachers, and researchers shape their personal and professional lives. In part two, stories consist of navigating grief and narrating hope through writing. At the beginning of this section, Angela Kinder Mains uses autoethnography to cope with grief in her narrative titled “The Art of Bereavement: An Autoethnographic Reflection on Transformational Learning Following the Loss of a Spouse.” In her story, Angela describes an unexpected strength as

she kept her family connected when her husband Jer grew weak from an aggressive form of lymphoma. Later, this autoethnography becomes a critical aspect in Angela’s life, that helped her process the loss of her husband and empowered her to keep moving forward. By dedicating a section to writing, Shelton and Sieben (2020) unite academic circles in higher education while offering a way to express grief and hope through a common interest.

Part Three

In Part Three, grief is humanized within politicized moments centered on gun violence, systemic racism, and refugee camps. In “I Refuse to Be a Bystander,” Crystal L. Beach recounts her experiences as a survivor of the Virginia Tech campus shooting in 2007. Crystal shares how this event has both traumatized and empowered her as a teacher in the field of education. Including these stories helps demonstrate that grief is not just associated with losing a loved one, but also involves moments that personally, professionally, and academically matter (e.g., struggling through the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic). Along with this, there are many sociocultural and political factors (e.g., race, class, gender) that often compound grief and also are not widely talked about. Sharing stories that stray from the typical notions of grief help build community and compassion in the academy that can benefit the healing process.

Part Four

For many, the journey of loss and heartbreak seems never-ending. In Part Four, the editors share narratives that come with grief and the questions of uncertainty. Lyndsey Nunes’ “Love You to PIECES” demonstrates the grief and questions that followed her after the suicide of Randi – her mentee. This unexpected death prompted endless questions, confusion, and heartbreak. It was through her grief that Nunes found ways to support her current

students and move toward resilience. Struggling with grief as an instructor is not widely talked about. In fact, Shelton and Sieben (2020) mention how the institutional structure of higher education does not seem to allow for space to mourn as the responsibilities of deadlines, conferences, and courses remain in effect. No matter the grief a person is experiencing, there should be spaces within academic circles that provide encouragement and support (e.g., speaking with colleagues, grief counseling/services) and forgiveness of duties and deadlines. This section of the book serves as a way to empathize with those in the professorate experiencing grief and feeling as if there is no end in sight.

Part Five

After losing their fathers in the same year, Shelton and Sieben (2020) emphasize the importance of narratives in finding hope in grief. During this final section of the book, the editors reflect on the contradictions that exists between higher education and grief. As Shelton and Sieben (2020) struggled to sort through sympathy cards, they found themselves constantly reminded of their professional obligations. After sending an email explaining this loss, Shelton received a response from the Graduate School expressing their condolences but requiring that alternative lesson plans be sent as soon as possible (Shelton & Sieben, 2020). In this instance, the editors realized that higher education was not a space equipped to support grief in meaningful ways. No matter the circumstances, business continued as usual. Students still needed to be taught, even if tears rolled down the instructor's face. It was clear that many people in the world of academia were unsure of how to approach the idea of grief. By sharing their own authentic stories, the editors encouraged others to not only listen but do the same – share their experiences.

Rather than supplying answers, this book served as a critical resource that acknowledged and emphasized grief as complex and messy. It humanized grief and shared the ways in which hope shined through, even during the most difficult circumstances. Engaging in this book while coping with COVID-19 as a doctoral student has helped me realize hope. The grief of social isolation, infection, and separation from my mother was humanized as I tearfully flipped the pages and listened to the stories of others. It is through these narratives that I witnessed pain, power, and persistence. I learned strategies from academicians, teachers, and researchers who journeyed down the roads of grief before and applied their ideas to my own life. Writing has become a way to express my grief, discover hope, and encourage me to keep moving forward.

Conclusion

It is impossible to universalize grief and hope, being that it looks and feels different for each person. Nevertheless, having a resource to turn to that helps navigate through this journey using a wider lens is necessary in the field of higher education. This is especially true as we grapple with various forms of grief that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., limited funeral options, social isolation, infection, job loss; Eisma & Tamminga, 2020). No longer is it acceptable to assume that those in the academy should carry on without addressing these underlying issues. Academics, teachers, and researchers must come together by creating awareness of solidarity and support. Sharing narratives that activate hope in the center of grief is one step in the right direction. This text should be a must read for those entering the academy so as to begin this important line of communicating and acknowledging one's grief and the construct of hope to begin the healing process.

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