

# Grief and Advocacy: An Applied Anthropologist's Role in Massive Organizational Change<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

*Based on nearly 20 years of workplace organizational ethnographic research and consultation (largely healthcare), I have come to recognize the triad of change-loss-grief as widespread, if not universal. By contrast, the official, often enforced, position is that massive organizational change—including, but not limited to downsizing, restructuring, and re-engineering—is a purely instrumental rather than an also expressive phenomenon. People are regarded as disposable commodities, and the only thing that counts is the short term economic “bottom line” in the form of shareholder maximization. Advocacy of the process of grief—recognition that there is indeed a personal and group loss that merits mourning—attends to the experience of organizational loss, and offers the reclamation of dignity in highly dehumanizing circumstances. I offer an extended vignette of this process.*

## Introduction

One of the hallmarks of the ethnographic method is that one makes “findings” in the most unexpected places. Most of the time, one could not have imagined, let alone planned, where he or she would have ended up. This is certainly true for my repeated “discovery” of the triad of change-loss-grief in American workplace organizational settings since the early 1990s (Stein 1990, 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 2001, 2004-in press). This paper is about my effort to give voice to (that is, to advocate) grief in the face of coercion from superiors and peers who insist that there is nothing to grieve about, that the highest and only social good is the economic “bottom line” that enhances short-term shareholder value.

For example, mid-level managers and employees are admonished to “Be grateful that you still have a job” and that “It’s nothing personal, just business.” Shareholders are characteristically viewed as the only constituency or “stakeholders” that count. Managers and workers alike are disposable commodities; their dehumanization reduces the anxiety, guilt, and shame of those who eliminate them by a surreal act of the computer. This paper is about my stumbling repeatedly onto corporate violence of a psychological, structural, and symbolic kind, and of managers’ and employees’ experience of profound personal loss in the face of what is officially called “managed social change.”

My study encompasses, but is not limited to, the massive social dislocations that go by such terms (euphemisms, Stein 1998b) as downsizing, reductions in force, RIFs, rightsizing, restructuring, re-engineering, outsourcing, deskilling, and managed health-care, that together have dominated American organizational life since the mid-1980s. It is a story of broken and

betrayed trust in the American – and increasingly international – workplace. It is a study in political violence done in the guise of economic necessity or some other instrumental expediency. Its subject is a “culture under siege” (Robben and Suarez-Orozco 2000) while appearing superficially “normal.” In a different metaphor, it is an example of the widespread symbolic or psychological “violence in the workplace.” It has not become the cynosure that workplace guns, knives, and bombs have, but it is no less real and brings no less grief.

It is an instance of socially induced suffering (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997), of the forms of subjectivity that arise in its wake (Das, Kleinman, Ramphel, and Reynolds 2000), and of the effort to build a personal, social, and occupational world in the face of having been treated as disposable waste (Das, Kleinman, and Ramphel 2001). Finally, it is a study in unconscious as well as conscious dimensions of this massive psychological trauma (Volkan, Ast, and Greer 2002). Following some theoretical and methodological considerations, I present an extended vignette and interpretation. The vignette serves as an exemplar for countless other experiences and narratives. Finally, I address the process of advocacy of grief-work in the wake of cataclysmic organizational change.

I should add as a historical note that in 1994, at the invitation of Dr. Ann Jordan, I wrote and published one of my earliest applied organizational studies in a NAPA bulletin. It was called “Change, Loss, and Organizational Culture: Anthropological Consultant as a Facilitator of Grief-Work” (1994a). The observations, interpretations, and modest interventions described in this paper derive from informal research, from both formal and informal consultation in workplace organizations, and from participation in national and

international conferences at which these issues were prominent on the programs (e.g., International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations; Midwinter Conference, American Psychological Association Division 13, Consulting Psychology).

### **Mourning and Organizational Change**

For most people in Western industrialized (and post-industrial) society, work is part of who they are as well as being what they do. It is far more than a job and a paycheck. Work is a central part of the meaning of one's life. Manfred Kets de Vries writes:

Most people work for more than just money; they have *intrinsic* motivators as well, one of which is the need for belonging. A sense of belonging to a larger unit is important in the establishment of a person's identity. To be a part of an organization, to pursue a lasting career, offers that opportunity (2001: 279, emphasis in original).

He continues:

Given the amount of time people spend at work, companies can be regarded as symbolic families. The people one interacts with on the job often become part of one's inner world and are therefore important for one's overall well-being (2001: 279).

More than as "family," the workplace also often functions unconsciously as a surface of the self, as a metaphoric skin without which one feels the threat of separation if not annihilation (Diamond, Allcorn, and Stein in press). When one is involuntarily separated from this symbolic family and social skin by one's own layoff or that of others, one experiences profound loss. This triggers the process of grief and the need to mourn. Complicating the loss, one experiences a betrayal of trust and an assault on one's sense of self-worth or value.

Over the last 15 years, during the course of my presentations on "managed social change" and symbolic "violence in the workplace," people have offered personal testimonials to the harrowing experiences of being fired (euphemistically, "terminated") during RIFs. How the firing took place is at least as devastating as the fact that one was fired (Stein 1998b, 2001). Further, every few months, I receive a phone call or e-mail "out of the blue" from someone who has read on the Internet or in a publication something I had written about the organizational triad and wants to tell me how much my

writing had validated his or her own experience – often for the first time.

If my memory serves me right, my first bitter taste of this process was the political intrigue and final closing in 1985 of the family medicine residency training program and clinic in Shawnee, Oklahoma. Since 1979, I had been the behavioral science curriculum coordinator; I spent at least a half-day in the clinic every two weeks consulting with family medicine residents and presenting the noon conference. The program became embroiled in the local medical community and the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center politics. The final "end" – the closing of the program – was long in happening. In the last months at the clinic, instead of focusing on patient care, I devoted my attention to the uncertainty over the future and the anxiety of the medical and administrative staff.

I continued going to Shawnee even after all the family medicine residents had been transferred to the Oklahoma City program. I mostly listened to reminiscences and forebodings. After the program was entirely closed, I continued visiting with a number of its staff who had come to work in the family medicine department in Oklahoma City. They had, after all, become friends as well as colleagues. From time to time I would drop by their offices or work areas, and we would visit. Much of the time, our thoughts would gravitate to the subject of the lost clinic and program, to stories about working there. For several years our visits were more intense and frequent in the early summer, around the anniversary of the program's closing. We not only mourned the demise of the program, but kept wondering about the mysterious circumstances around it. We asked, "Did it have to happen?" It then began to occur to me that what I was doing was facilitating a process of grieving over a lost symbolic object and severed relationships. It was here that I began to formulate my initial rough ideas about organizational loss and grief. Further, my own countertransference to our shared organizational loss became an avenue to my listening to and helping others deal with theirs (Stein 1994b).

Ten years later I was invited by the CEO of The University Hospitals in Oklahoma City, Timothy Coussons, M.D., to serve as a long-term consultant to help humanize the several waves of downsizing layoffs that the hospitals were about to undertake. Although we worked at the same institution only a couple of city blocks apart, he had learned of my organizational work by reading an essay in a Chicago-based health economics journal. Over the next several years I

learned more about massive organizational change, loss, and grief, than I had bargained for in this “applied” anthropological work.

### Vignette and Discussion

In this section of the paper, I want to focus on a single text, one that, although not statistically representative, is thematically representative of the numerous workplace biographies I have heard and witnessed. In early October 2003 a man I will call John wrote a poignant, articulate letter to me. From an instrumental point of view the writer of the letter had found a new job after his firing – arguably a better one than he had before. From an expressive viewpoint, however, he languished in a grief no one wanted to hear or acknowledge, what Kenneth Doka (2002) calls “disenfranchised grief,” losses that culturally do not merit acknowledgment and mourning and are hence unsupported socially.

It is now [October 2003] more than four years since I last spoke with you. It was in late January of 1999 that I told you of my being *exiled* [his emphasis] from my company. After telling you some of my story, you suggested that I should write about my experience. This is the first piece of writing I have done in four years.

My exile was executed in a chillingly, callous manner. The official explanation to me was that I was not a “team player.” I was told to leave the building immediately, lest the police be called. I was not allowed to gather my belongings, including my books, papers and photos of my family and friends. I was told my belongings would be catalogued and returned to me.

Others were told that they were forbidden to talk about me. To inquiries about me, the official response was, “John no longer works here.” There would be no discussion of the circumstances of my exile. My name was not to be uttered, nor my accomplishments and contributions ever acknowledged, or even mentioned. In effect, I was “painted out” of the organization’s history. Stalin, who airbrushed Trotsky’s picture out of any official representation of the Russian Revolution, perfected this technique. As an organizational sacrifice, I was not killed. I was terminated. I had simply become a non-entity. I had metamorphosed into a “bug” (allusion to Franz Kafka’s story, “The Metamorphosis”).

Friends told me that after I left, it was as if I never existed in the land of the corporation. The person who replaced me, after asking, “What happened to John?” was told, “Don’t ask.” My name was never spoken, and one person said, it was as if one day the sea parted, I fell in, and I was never to be heard from again.

I lost more than a job. My world stopped making sense. I was forever asking myself, and others, “How did this happen?”; “Why did this happen?”; “What did I do?” I simply could not explain what happened to me. My sense of unreality was fed by the silence of many around me. I was expected to “get over it,” to “deal with it,” to “get on with my life.” But if I was to “move on,” I needed to talk about what happened. Lacking an audience to hear my story, I was deprived of what Rafael Moses calls the *balm* of narcissistic injuries – acknowledgment.

My dreams mirrored my reality. Repeatedly I dreamt of being with former colleagues, people I thought of as friends, who “turned away from me” whenever I asked them what had happened to me. I found some solace when I read Primo Levi who wrote in *Survival in Auschwitz* of his own reoccurring dream, where he is telling others of his camp experience, and they are completely indifferent, as if not there. Levi asks: “Why is the pain of the everyday translated so constantly into our dreams, in the ever-repeated scene of the *unlistened-to-story*?”

I can attest to the assertion made by a variety of authors that being treated with *indifference* is the cruelest form of punishment. Indeed for me, there has been no greater pain than being ignored, rejected, unwanted, deemed insignificant, and the like.

Although I did receive some support from a few people . . . I often ask myself if the people who I thought were my friends ever wondered how I was, if I was surviving, if I was employed again, or even if I had committed suicide. I wonder what sort of euphemisms, rationalizations, justifications, or excuses they might make for not dropping a note or making a phone call to inquire about me and wish me well. (quoted with permission, 16 October 2003, all emphases in original)

John’s story can be read and heard as both singularly unique and as an exemplar of narratives voiced by many victims and survivors of corporate violence.

Here I will discuss several themes common to both. To begin with, there is a loss of a “world,” not merely a “job.” Moreover – and common to RIFs and related disruptions – one is literally severed from the job and workplace. One is virtually thrown out with little or no warning or preparation. A third theme is the terrifying feeling of being transformed from a living human subject into a dead object, from a person to a non-person, a thing, a bug. Coupled with this is the withdrawal by others, a condemnation to the void of silence. No one is willing to listen to, to validate and give witness, to one’s story. It is as if it never happened. Another theme is the evocation of Holocaust imagery and narrative as a trope with which to represent and comprehend one’s own experience.

Yet another theme is the coercion one has and feels from others – superiors, colleagues, friends – to let go of the past and move on without first receiving the necessary affirmation of having been listened to. There is no bridge, only rupture. Memory itself is discounted. The story is too disturbing to be heard. Further, the story touches anyone who was in contact with the writer, a “touch” of which they anxiously try to rid themselves, lest they be “contaminated” with the same fate. They are admonished not to speak further of him, to kill him in their memories. Partly from fear of sharing his fate and from feelings of guilt and shame, they withdraw from him and from any memory of him. Personally and organizationally, he is obliterated. It no longer matters to them whether he is dead or alive.

Such is the power of projective identification and its counterpart in the victim or survivor, introjective identification. Riddance and haunting presences are the twin facets of this scapegoating and sacrifice. As if all this is not enough, personal factors in one’s developmental, family, and ethnic history are reawakened and played out on the stage of current workplace atrocity (Terry 1984). Still, despite the wide diversity of individual biographical experience, the narratives are strikingly similar. In sum, this is the experience of American corporate *desaparacidos* in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Robben and Suarez-Orozco 2000).

### **Toward a Reclamation of Dignity: Storytelling, Grief-Work, and Advocacy**

In the face of the sheer magnitude of corporate violence, how can an applied anthropologist be helpful? How does one advocate, and for what? The first requirement is to be able to acknowledge what most others in the organizational and wider American culture

are denying and turning away from: that cultural atrocities are indeed occurring, that one’s loss is indeed profound, that one is worth being listened to. Next, perhaps, is the difficult cultivation in the applied anthropologist of the ability to emotionally take in and contain (Bion 1977) the horrors one may hear, to sit still with what one learns, to tolerate chaos. One must be able to bear the story and its emotions, to bear witness to the suffering. From this it follows that one should be receptive to, even encourage, storytelling among victims and survivors, asking perhaps, “What was – and maybe still is – this like for you?”

By serving as a “container” (Bion 1977) and a “holding environment” (Winnicott 1965) to others’ hitherto unarticulated thoughts and effects, and by helping them to emotionally process their experiences and memories, one helps them to grieve – at least to begin to grieve – loss and complicity alike. One story and storytelling is not enough. The applied anthropologist can encourage the client to tell, retell, and rework the story until it no longer needs retelling. Such storytelling cannot be preordained, prescribed, or programmed. One must be ready and available to listen. Perhaps it goes without saying: more likely than not, such listening and responding will unlikely be part of an applied anthropologist’s formal role(s) or job description. It may be developed as one’s informal task, if not an activity undertaken despite one’s official organizational role(s).

There are numerous venues or settings in which this might occur. None are automatically “right” for a particular person or organization. They are always negotiated. For instance, where possible, an applied anthropologist might work with the upper management of an organization to sanction an institution-wide process. This process might not only include attending to the emotions, but creating a job-fair for terminated employees. One might organize formal or informal “focus groups” (a widely used cultural form) to help people to process their experiences of dislocation. Likewise, one might work with small, receptive organizational clusters of people or self-selected individuals. As in all applied anthropology, one must do one’s work within a culture’s own (emic) contexts.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has, I believe, illustrated the virtue of the ethnographic method in attempting to address a widespread social problem: the triad of traumatic organizational change, the experience of profound personal loss, and the process of grief. As so often

happens in the work of applied anthropologists, I learned how to help by carefully attending to the lived realities of those with whom I worked and consulted. Although it may seem strange to say that I advocated for grief, that is, in fact, what I did. I acknowledged that among those undergoing massive organizational change and loss there was indeed much to mourn as a way of constructing the bridge between past, present, and future. The encouragement of storytelling and the presence of an attentive listener helped facilitate this process. As the international American war on terrorism continues, we have yet to address the amount of suffering that we continue to inflict on our own in the guise of good business.

### Notes

1. This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology in Dallas, Texas, on April 4, 2004, for a panel on "Trusted Anthropology." I dedicate this paper to Dr. Ann Jordan.

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