

Exploring Grief, Loss and Continued Rituals in Voicemails for Isabelle

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to analyze grief and loss through media representation. It chooses the recent Netflix movie, *Voicemails for Isabelle* (2026), since the movie shows an interesting practice of continued rituals that follow after the loss of a loved one. The movie becomes an entry point to explore sibling relationships, loss of a loved one, and the process of mourning that comes with that loss. By focusing on Freudian notion of mourning and Kübler-Ross's stages of grief, the paper tries to make sense of the continued rituals and what it entails for the person who attempts to recover from the loss and carry on with their life. Most significantly, the theme of meaning-making as a process of grieving emerged through the analysis, where events from life (with loved ones) become important symbols to manage present life and decisions.

Keywords: Death, Loss, Grief, Sibling, Continued rituals, Stages of grief

Introduction

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines grief as the anguish experienced following a significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person. APA further distinguishes grief from bereavement, which refers to the objective state of having experienced a loss, and mourning, which encompasses the social, cultural, and behavioural expressions through which grief is experienced and communicated.

In contrast to clinical definitions that describe grief as a psychological response to loss, Carl Jung viewed grief as a profound and transformative human experience. Rather than viewing grief as a condition to be cured or avoided, Jung believed that it constituted an essential stage of psychological growth and self-discovery (Jung, 1958). He famously stated, "Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering" (Jung, 1954), suggesting that attempts to suppress or escape grief may lead to greater psychological distress. From the Jungian perspective, grief is not something to be overcome as soon as possible but an experience that calls us to confront our feelings and gain a deeper understanding of our life. In this sense, emotional pain is not only something to be suffered. It can also become an opportunity for psychological growth and for the integration of loss into one's own personal journey. Jung believed that real healing doesn't come from dodging emotional pain but from confronting it, experiencing it, and ultimately, incorporating loss into your life.

According to J. William Worden, grief is a multidimensional response encompassing emotional, cognitive, behavioural, physical, social, and spiritual reactions (Worden, 2018). He viewed grieving as an active process of adapting to loss and emphasised that there is no universally accepted or "correct" way to grieve, as every individual's experience is shaped by personal, relational, and cultural factors (Worden, 2018).

Therefore, grief can be understood as a natural response to the loss of someone or something of personal significance. It extends beyond emotional pain and affects multiple dimensions of an individual's life, often reshaping their perception of themselves and the world.

Although each scholar offers a distinct perspective, they collectively recognise grief as a natural response to significant loss. The American Psychological Association provides a clinical definition of grief, Carl Jung emphasises its role in psychological growth and transformation, while J. William Worden highlights its multidimensional and deeply personal nature. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that grief cannot be confined to a single definition or predictable pattern. Rather, it is a highly subjective experience, shaped by an individual's personality, relationships, cultural background, life experiences, and available support systems. Consequently, two people experiencing similar losses may grieve in profoundly different ways, illustrating the unique and deeply personal nature of bereavement.

Grief After the Loss of a Loved One

Although people experience grief after many different kinds of loss, including the end of a relationship, declining health, loss of employment, or a change in identity, the death of a loved one remains one of the most profound experiences a person can face. Bereavement following the death of a loved one is often accompanied by emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and physical responses, including sadness, shock, anger, guilt, loneliness, intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbances, fatigue, and social withdrawal. These reactions vary in intensity and duration across individuals.

Pereira and associates (2024) found that the grieving process is influenced by factors such as the relationship with the deceased, the cause of death, and the coping strategies employed. Individuals grieving the loss of a spouse, child, or parent often report greater emotional distress than those grieving more distant relationships (Pereira et al., 2024). Age, personality, cultural beliefs, previous experiences of loss, attachment style, and social support further contribute to the highly individual nature of bereavement (Worden, 2018; Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

The findings further indicate that grief is influenced by numerous personal and contextual factors, including age, personality, previous experiences of loss, cultural and religious beliefs, attachment styles, and the availability of social support. Consequently, no two individuals experience bereavement in exactly the same way. Even when faced with similar losses.

Coping with Grief and Loss

Coping with grief refers to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural efforts individuals make to adjust to life after the loss of a loved one. Rather than eliminating grief, effective coping enables individuals to acknowledge, process, and gradually integrate the loss into their lives. Among the approaches discussed in contemporary literature, meaning-making and continuing bonds are particularly significant.

One of the most important contemporary perspectives is **meaning-making**, which refers to an individual's attempt to understand, interpret, and derive purpose from the experience of loss. In her review paper *Meaning-Making as a Coping Mechanism in Grief*, Manya Singh (2025) explains that bereavement often challenges an individual's existing beliefs about life, relationships, and the future. Singh explains that bereavement often challenges an individual's beliefs about life and identity, prompting questions about the meaning of the loss. Although definitive answers may not always exist, the search for meaning helps individuals reconstruct their understanding of themselves and gradually integrate grief into their life story.

Another significant coping mechanism discussed in the literature is the concept of continuing bonds. In their review, The Role of Continuing Bonds in Coping with Grief: Overview and Future Directions, Root and Exline (2014) challenge earlier assumptions that healthy grieving requires individuals to emotionally detach from the deceased. Instead, they argue that maintaining an ongoing psychological and emotional connection with the loved one can facilitate healthy adjustment. Continuing bonds may be maintained through memories, rituals, cherished belongings, or living according to the values of the deceased. Root and Exline argue that these ongoing connections often provide comfort and facilitate adjustment rather than hinder recovery.

Taken together, the literature suggests that coping with grief is not a process of forgetting or replacing the deceased but of gradually adapting to a life permanently changed by loss. Whether through constructing new meaning, maintaining continuing bonds, or developing healthier coping strategies, individuals navigate grief in ways that reflect their unique experiences, relationships, and personal beliefs. Consequently, coping should not be viewed as reaching an endpoint where grief disappears but as an ongoing process of learning to carry both the pain of loss and the enduring significance of love.

Stages of Grief

One of the most influential theories in the study of grief is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' Five-Stage Model, introduced in her seminal work *On Death and Dying* (1969). Although the model was originally developed from interviews with terminally ill patients facing their own mortality, it has since been widely applied to understand the emotional experiences of individuals grieving the loss of a loved one. Kübler-Ross proposed that grief may involve five emotional stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). While these stages have become widely recognised, Kübler-Ross emphasised that they were never intended to represent a rigid sequence through which every individual must pass. Rather, they describe common emotional responses that may occur in different orders, recur over time, or may not be experienced at all.

Denial acts as an initial buffer against overwhelming loss, while anger reflects frustration at the perceived unfairness of the situation. Bargaining is characterised by "what if" or "if only" thoughts as individuals attempt to regain a sense of control. Depression represents deep sadness and acknowledgement of the permanence of the loss, whereas acceptance involves gradually adapting to life without the deceased while continuing to cherish their memory. Kübler-Ross emphasised that these stages are neither universal nor experienced in a fixed order.

Despite this clarification, the stage model has often been misinterpreted as a universal framework for grieving. Although it remains one of the most widely recognised theories of grief, it has received considerable criticism from researchers around the world.

Recent research by Avis, Stroebe, and Schut (2021) suggests that the model lacks strong empirical support as a universal explanation of bereavement. Also, it fails to adequately capture the complexity and diversity of individual grief experiences. Contemporary research suggests that grief is shaped by multiple factors, including personality, attachment, culture, social support, and the circumstances of the loss.

In conclusion, many researchers recommend that the model be recognised primarily for its historical significance while encouraging the use of more contemporary theories like the Dual Process model (Stroebe & Schut, 1995) or the Continuing Bonds Theory (Klass, D., Silverman, P. R., & Nickman, S., 1996) that acknowledge grief as a dynamic, individual, and non-linear process (Avis et al., 2021).

Freud's Understanding of Mourning and Melancholia

Sigmund Freud's essay *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) presents one of the earliest psychoanalytic explanations of grief. Freud distinguished between mourning, which he considered a normal response to loss, and melancholia, a pathological condition characterised by persistent sadness, self-criticism, and difficulty detaching from the lost object.

According to Freud, mourning is a gradual process in which individuals withdraw their emotional attachment, or libidinal energy, from the deceased and eventually reinvest it in life and new relationships. Although painful, this process allows individuals to adapt to the reality of loss.

In contrast, melancholia involves an unconscious identification with the deceased, causing the individual to direct feelings of anger, guilt, and disappointment towards themselves. As a result, self-esteem declines, and the person may experience profound hopelessness and self-reproach.

Although Freud's theory has been criticised for emphasising detachment from the deceased, it laid the foundation for later psychological theories of bereavement and remains an influential contribution to understanding grief.

Depiction of Grief in Art and Cinema

Grief has been a central theme in art, music, cinema, and literature across cultures and generations. Art serves as a powerful medium for individuals and society to explore themes such as loss, memory and healing. Throughout history, artists have often displayed grief as not just an emotional response to the death of a loved one but as a deep personal journey one experiences in their life.

Artists use symbolism, visual imagery, dialogue, silence, and personal narratives in providing the audience with an opportunity to experience the complexity of bereavement from different perspectives (Rogers, 2007). Such representations encourage empathy while highlighting that grief is neither linear nor universal. The use of these artistic techniques can be observed in numerous films and literary works that explore the emotional pain of loss. For instance, in *Goodbye* (2022), visual imagery and family interactions are used to portray the different ways in which each family member copes with the death of their mother. The film also employs silence during moments of mourning and emotionally charged dialogues to convey feelings of shock, denial, guilt, and acceptance, allowing the audience to witness the deeply personal and varied nature of grief. Similar examples are seen in *A Man Called Otto* (2022), *Up* (2009), *After Life* (2019) and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016).

In contemporary cinema, the portrayal of grief has gradually shifted from emphasising emotional detachment and "moving on" towards recognising the continuing emotional bond between the bereaved and the deceased. Many films depict how letters, messages, voicemails, etc. from the deceased become meaningful symbols that help individuals preserve a connection with their loved ones while adapting to life after loss. Contemporary films and books also depict continuing rituals, such as visiting a loved one's favourite place, celebrating birthdays, preparing their favourite meal, writing letters, speaking to the deceased, or listening to old voice messages (e.g. *Love Again* (2023), *You Have Reached Sam* (2021)). These rituals are increasingly understood as meaningful ways of maintaining an enduring bond with the deceased while gradually adapting to life after loss, rather than as signs of an inability to let go. Such portrayals closely align with psychological concepts such as the Dual Process model, the Continuing Bonds theory and the Meaning-Making theory.

Recent films and psychological literature have increasingly acknowledged sibling bereavement, as historically it has received less scholarly and cultural attention than the loss of a parent, spouse or child.

Since siblings often share lifelong memories, family experiences, and identity formation, their loss can profoundly influence an individual's sense of self and belonging. This experience has also been portrayed in films such as *Ordinary People* (Redford, 1980), which examines survivor's guilt and the psychological consequences of losing a sibling, and *Manchester by the Sea* (Loneragan, 2016), which similarly explores the enduring effects of family loss and grief. Such portrayals reflect a growing recognition of sibling bereavement as a significant yet historically under-represented form of loss.

Also, contemporary grief theories, particularly the Continuing Bonds Theory (Root and Exline, 2014), suggest that completely severing emotional ties with a deceased loved one is not always necessary for healthy adjustment. Instead, maintaining symbolic connections through continuing rituals can provide comfort, preserve cherished memories, and facilitate adaptation to life after loss.

In the movie *Voicemails for Isabelle*, we get to witness the loss of a sibling and also how Jill continues to leave voicemails for her sister who is no longer with her, which is an act of maintaining a continuing bond with her deceased sister and transforming an everyday act of communication into a ritual of remembrance, connection, and healing.

Analysing 'Voicemails for Isabelle'

Voicemails for Isabelle (2026) is a poignant film that explores the emotional complexities of grief following the loss of a loved one. The film offers a nuanced and psychologically rich portrayal of bereavement that closely aligns with contemporary theories of grief. Rather than focusing solely on the immediate emotional impact of loss, it illustrates how grief unfolds through everyday experiences, memories, and continuing rituals. Furthermore, the film centres on sibling bereavement, an aspect of grief that has received comparatively less attention in both psychological literature and cinematic portrayals than the loss of a parent, spouse, or child. These elements make *Voicemails for Isabelle* a valuable text for examining grief through a psychological lens.

The story follows Jill, who struggles to cope with the death of her sister, Isabelle. Before her passing, the sisters shared a close and supportive relationship, serving as each other's source of comfort and strength. During Izzy's eulogy, Jill reflects on how, despite the countless possibilities of life, she and Isabelle existed in the same place and time and "got to be sisters." She recalls simple childhood memories, including eating pancakes together, losing their little baby teeth, and painting each other's toenails. These seemingly ordinary experiences emphasise that sibling relationships are built through years of shared rituals, memories, and mutual growth, making the loss of a sibling not only the loss of a loved one but also the loss of a shared past, a lifelong companion, and the only person who experienced many of those childhood moments alongside you. Jill, unable to let go of this bond, continues leaving voicemail messages for Isabelle, using them as a way to express her thoughts and maintain a connection with her sister. As the story unfolds, the film portrays her journey through grief, illustrating how love, loss, and healing can coexist and how complex grief actually is.

This paper examines Jill's experiences through a psychological lens to understand how individuals, particularly those experiencing sibling bereavement, navigate the grieving process as sibling relationships are often among the longest-lasting relationships in an individual's life, shaped by shared childhood experiences, family memories, mutual support, and identity formation. The movie also highlights how people apply different coping mechanisms, such as continuing bonds, meaning-making, and aspects of Kübler-Ross' model of grief, to cope with a profound loss.

One of the most prominent psychological concepts reflected in the film is the theory of continuing bonds proposed by Root and Exline (2014). Rather than suggesting that individuals must completely detach from the deceased; the theory argues that maintaining an emotional connection can facilitate healthy adjustment. Jill's voicemails become a symbolic continuation of her relationship with Isabelle, her lifelong companion with whom she shared childhood memories, family experiences, and emotional support. By continuing to leave voicemails, Jill preserves her sister's presence in her daily life and expresses emotions that she finds difficult to share with others.

In the context of sibling bereavement, these voicemails represent more than a coping strategy; they reflect Jill's attempt to preserve a relationship that shaped her identity and sense of belonging. The loss of Isabelle therefore signifies not only the absence of a loved one but also the disruption of a shared history and lifelong companionship.

The film also illustrates the process of meaning-making. As discussed by Neimeyer (2016) and further highlighted in the literature reviewed by Singh (2025), meaning-making enables bereaved individuals to reconstruct purpose, redefine their identity, and integrate loss into their lives rather than remaining overwhelmed by it. This process is reflected in Jill's decision to establish a business in memory of Isabelle. Instead of allowing grief to remain solely a source of suffering, she transforms her sister's memory into a source of inspiration and motivation. Through this journey, Jill reconstructs meaning from her loss, demonstrating that while grief continues to be a part of her life, it can also foster resilience, purpose, and personal growth. The protagonist opening up her own business can also be termed as 'posttraumatic growth' as per Pereira, Moreira, & Neto (2025).

Jill's emotional journey also reflects Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' Five-Stage Model of Grief (1969). Initially, Jill exhibits elements of denial through her persistent habit of leaving voicemail messages for her sister, despite being fully aware of her sister's death. The voicemails were not ordinary messages but conversations in which Jill shares her daily experiences, frustrations, and achievements, as though Isabelle were still an active presence in her life and was listening to them. For example, when Jill discovers a positive turn of events, she immediately leaves Isabelle a voicemail, excitedly describing it as "the ginger lining". Her instinct to share this moment reflects how deeply Isabelle remained woven into her everyday life. This behaviour also reflects her difficulty in emotionally accepting the permanence of the loss and her desire to preserve the familiarity of their relationship.

As the narrative progresses, Jill experiences emotions that resemble anger, bargaining, and depression. Her frustration becomes evident in scenes where she feels emotionally disconnected from those around her and struggles to move forward with her own life. She repeatedly revisits memories of Isabelle and continues to rely on the voicemails as a source of comfort, reflecting an internal struggle between holding on to the past and accepting the present.

Jill's emotional dependence on Isabelle is further revealed when she encounters challenges while pursuing her dream of becoming a baker. In one voicemail, she tearfully asks her sister, "How am I supposed to do this without you?" This dialogue illustrates that Isabelle was not only a sibling but also Jill's source of reassurance, guidance, and emotional support. In the same voicemail, Jill expresses her disbelief and pain, stating, "We were supposed to die together. We made a deal, like Noah and Allie in *The Notebook*. You're a bird, I'm a bird." These statements reflect her struggle to accept a future in which Isabelle is absent. Rather than representing a single emotional stage, this scene demonstrates how grief involves overlapping feelings of longing, anger, disbelief, and bargaining.

The film also employs visual symbolism to portray Jill's emotional struggles during her grieving process. Following Isabelle's funeral, Jill returns home and notices a withered plant that had been left unattended. This visual imagery may be interpreted as reflecting Jill's depressive emotional state, symbolising the emptiness, hopelessness, and emotional exhaustion that often accompany profound loss.

Just as the neglected plant has been deprived of care and vitality, Jill herself appears emotionally drained and disconnected from her surroundings. Rather than relying on dialogue, the film uses this subtle visual metaphor to illustrate how grief permeates everyday life and affects an individual's emotional well-being. The concept of continuing bonds is also shown through the use of Taylor Swift's song Marjorie, and specifically the lyric, "And if I didn't know better, I'd think that you were listening to me now," reflects Jill's experience of continuing to communicate with Isabelle. Similar to the voicemails she leaves for her sister, the song captures Jill's emotional hope that Isabelle's presence, guidance, and support continue to exist in some form. This does not suggest that Jill is in denial but rather showcases her hope that her sister is there to listen to her as always.

Another significant aspect portrayed in the film is secondary loss. When Isabelle's voicemails are accidentally deleted, Jill experiences a renewed wave of grief, as the recordings represent one of her last tangible connections with her sister. In that moment, Jill's reaction suggests that she is not only mourning the loss of the voicemails but also experiencing the emotional impact of losing Isabelle all over again. Their disappearance therefore signifies the loss of a cherished connection to her sister, illustrating how bereavement can be reactivated when meaningful objects or memories associated with the deceased are lost. This scene demonstrates that grief is not a one-time event but a dynamic process that can resurface when individuals experience subsequent losses linked to their loved one.

However, the recovery of the voicemails later in the film represents the restoration of an important symbolic connection with Isabelle. With Wes' help, Jill is able to regain access to the recordings that carried her sister's voice and preserved their relationship beyond Isabelle's physical absence. This moment does not erase the grief associated with losing Isabelle, but it provides Jill with a meaningful reminder of their bond and allows her to reconnect with a part of her sister that she feared was permanently lost.

In the final parts of the film, elements of post-traumatic growth are portrayed to demonstrate how individuals can experience personal development while continuing to grieve. Pereira, Moreira, and Dias Neto (2024) highlighted that grief is not only associated with distress but can also involve processes of adaptation and post-traumatic growth, where individuals develop new perspectives, strengths, and ways of coping following the loss of a loved one. Jill's journey after Isabelle's death reflects this understanding, as her experience is not limited to emotional suffering; she gradually begins to rebuild her identity and make choices that align with her own aspirations. Her decision to leave a toxic work environment, return to her hometown, and pursue her passion for baking reflects a process of rediscovering purpose and personal agency. Although her initial attempts are challenging and she faces setbacks, Jill continues to move forward with support from those around her. This growth does not represent the disappearance of her grief but rather her ability to integrate the loss into her life while developing greater resilience, confidence, and a renewed sense of direction. Through Jill's journey, the film illustrates the idea that grief and growth can coexist, as individuals can experience positive psychological change while still maintaining a meaningful connection with the person they have lost.

Ultimately, Jill reaches acceptance when she leaves her final voicemail for Isabelle, stating, "So this will be my last voicemail to you... I just want to tell you not to worry about me, okay? I'm gonna be alright." Unlike her earlier voicemails, which were driven by a desire to maintain an active conversation with her

sister, this final message reflects Jill's recognition of Isabelle's physical absence and her growing confidence in moving forward. By speaking about Wes and reassuring Isabelle that she will be okay, Jill demonstrates that she is beginning to embrace life while still carrying her sister's memory with her. This moment reflects the idea that acceptance does not mean forgetting the deceased but integrating the loss into one's life.

Importantly, the film demonstrates that these stages are not experienced in a fixed sequence but emerge repeatedly throughout the grieving process, reinforcing the contemporary understanding that grief is dynamic and non-linear.

Although Freud suggested that healthy mourning involves gradually adapting to the reality of loss, Voicemails for Isabelle aligns more closely with contemporary perspectives that emphasise continuing bonds/rituals and meaning-making as important components of healing. Overall, the film demonstrates that grief is not about forgetting those we lose but about finding meaningful ways to carry their memory forward while continuing to live and grow.

Conclusion

Grief is far more than just an emotional response which a person experiences after the loss of a loved one. It is a deeply personal and evolving journey that changes a person's identity, relationships and understanding of life. Through the portrayal of different psychological concepts such as the Continuing Bonds theory, the Five Stages of Grief, model, meaning-making, post-traumatic growth, secondary loss, and the non-linear nature of grief, Voicemails for Isabelle demonstrates that healing does not require forgetting the deceased or severing emotional ties. Instead, it portrays how individuals gradually learn to integrate loss into their lives while preserving the love, memories, and values they shared with those they have lost. By centring on sibling bereavement, a form of loss that has historically received comparatively less attention in both psychological research and cinema, the film broadens our understanding of the diverse ways in which grief can be experienced. Jill's journey illustrates that bereavement is not defined by a sequence of stages with a fixed endpoint but by an ongoing process of adaptation, where sorrow, resilience, hope, and personal growth often coexist. Ultimately, by exploring grief, loss, and continued rituals in Voicemails for Isabelle, the film presents bereavement as a deeply personal, evolving, and profoundly human experience. It reminds us that healing is not measured by the absence of grief but by our ability to find meaning while carrying the memory of those we have loved.

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