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A Sublime Death: Shock and Awe

By Olivia L. Moskot

Abstract: Death has the almost paradoxical capacity to appear larger than life. It chills with its permanence and astonishes as it stands before us—great, terrible, and vast beyond comprehension. The obscurity of death cries out for grief to answer, and it is that very sensation of astonishment that triggers and also lingers over the process of grief that has gone unexamined for too long. I believe there is a familiar name to put to that sensation that will aid future research. That is, we may be justified in calling that sensation awe. In this paper, I thoroughly examine the relationship between death, grief, and the experience of awe and ultimately argue that understanding the power of death to leave the living struck with awe has the potential to change how we respond to our own grief as well as the grief of others. Rather than perceiving grief as a disease or infliction that we fear we will never recover from, or some kind of proof of irrationality leaving us feeling horribly unqualified to revive ourselves, grief becomes a call to expand the mind and turn outward. When one comes to accept and appreciate the role of awe as a natural response to the large, obscure, powerful nature of death, and the subsequent grieving process as a process of accommodation, it becomes evident that healthy, rational grief does not demand that we forsake our loved ones, but rather it invites us to broaden the conception of our loved ones as well as ourselves.

Death has the almost paradoxical capacity to appear larger than life. It chills with its permanence and astonishes as it stands before us—great, terrible, and vast beyond comprehension. The obscurity of death cries out for grief to answer. It is that very sensation of astonishment that triggers and also lingers over the process of grief that I believe has gone unexamined for too long. I believe there is a familiar name to put to that sensation that will aid future research. That is, we may be justified in calling that sensation awe. The phenomenon of awe is surprisingly under researched, its study usually confined to aesthetic and religious scholarship. Even psychological research pertaining to awe is lamentably sparse. Dacher Keltner, however, has been involved in publishing psychological research pertaining to awe since 2003, and I find his work is indispensable when examining the complexity of awe.

Keltner describes awe as an emotion triggered by a stimulus so vast that it requires accommodation.¹ From this, we understand, first, that awe is an emotion triggered by encountering something vast. Later, I will suggest that this vastness can be either physical (like a towering mountain) or conceptual (like the idea of infinity). Second, we come to understand that the vastness triggering the experience of awe must be profound enough to require processing. In other words, the triggering stimulus the subject encounters will (and must) require her to adjust her frame of mind in order to make room for the reality of its existence. This adjustment period is what Keltner refers to as accommodation. Altogether, a vast stimulus that requires accommodation is the impetus for awe. In this essay, I will argue that death, particularly the death of a loved one, is a stimulus vast enough to require the accommodation process that is grief.

I will not be the first to consider grief a form of accommodation—Berislav Marušić and George A. Bonanno use the concept of accommodation to explore grief as well. Marušić describes grief as a rejection of death, which lessens as one comes to accept the loss of a significant other. According to his account, it is through grief that a person accommodates, or makes room for, the reality of death.² And Bonanno suggests that “our reactions to grief seem designed to help us accept and accommodate losses. . . so that we can continue to live productive lives.”³ These strike me as particularly apt insights, but neither Marušić nor Bonanno considers that a large portion of grief’s process is our overcoming the shock and lingering awe into which death casts us. This is precisely what I will be investigating through this essay: the role of death as a vast stimulus that propels affected individuals into a state of awe, which grief attempts to accommodate. In the coming sections, I will show how and why death can be considered a vast stimulus and also how understanding grief as doing the work of ‘awe management’ changes our understanding of the grieving process as a whole. I will then examine two first hand accounts of death and grief that demonstrate how this new insight into the interplay of grief and awe could influence the ways in which we talk about death. I do not, of course, mean to suggest that awe is the only

¹ Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, “Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion,” *Cognition and Emotion* 17, no. 2 (2003): pp. 297-298.

² Marušić, Berislav. “Do Reasons Expire? An Essay on Grief.” *Philosophers' Imprint* 18: 1, 2018: 2

³ George A Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019), 8.

emotion at work within the grieving process, but I am directing attention toward its integral role in grief and proposing that paying heed to such will lead to a more well-rounded understanding of grief.

If one is to accept that a person becomes awe-struck when encountering a vast enough stimulus, she ought to first know what is meant by the term ‘vast.’ What does it mean, in this context, for a stimulus to be vast? And what, more specifically, makes the death of a loved one a vast stimulus? Colloquially, one tends to understand vastness in terms of physical broadness or largeness, and these qualities transfer fairly directly to the awe-specific usage of the word. Keltner and Haidt state that vastness “refers to anything that is experienced as being much larger than the self, or the self’s ordinary level of experience or frame of reference.” In these words, vastness reads like Edmund Burke’s notion of the sublime, which is widely recognized as the “most systematic early treatment of an awe-like aesthetic emotion.”⁴ Thinking of vastness in terms of the sublime comes with benefits. For example, if vastness and Burkean sublimity are, for all intents and purposes, synonymous concepts, then we can use what we know about Burke’s sublime to inform our notion of vastness. When Keltner and Haidt note that power and obscurity are particularly important to Burke’s idea of the sublime in that they “endow stimuli with the capacity to produce the sublime experience,”⁵ we can take that to mean power and obscurity are also facets of that which we consider to be vast.

It is also worth considering whether people, generally speaking, might associate other less obvious facets of the Burkean sublime with awe provoking stimuli. That is, what goes into making something feel vast may not have anything to do with largeness at all. For instance, Burke also asserts that nature, literature, and art are the types of stimuli that most often arouse awe. And this suggestion seems to be consistent with current research that suggests that awe is “relatively asocial” and most often “elicited by information-rich stimuli, particularly panoramic nature views and novel art and music.”⁶ This means that awe-inspiring stimuli can often be aesthetically provocative rather than simply tall or wide. As mentioned in the introduction of this piece, something can be physically vast and incite awe, but something can be conceptually vast and produce the same effect.

To better understand how something conceptual can produce feelings of vastness, one can turn to a philosophical distinction made by Immanuel Kant and expounded upon by Friedrich Schiller. Kant proposes two distinct types of sublimity that Schiller characterizes in terms of the theoretical and the practical:

The theoretical sublime presents nature as an object of knowledge and indicates that we “can think more than we know”; it describes for instance the mixture of fear and awe we experience when conceptualizing infinity... The practically sublime, by contrast, concerns nature as an object of feeling, specifically as a source of danger and fear.⁷

⁴ Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, “Approaching Awe, pp. 300.

⁵ Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, “Approaching Awe, pp. 300-301.

⁶ Michelle N. Shiota, Dacher Keltner, and Amanda Mossman, “The Nature of Awe: Elicitors, Appraisals, and Effects on Self-Concept,” *Cognition and Emotion* 21, no. 5 (July 19, 2007): pp. 950.

⁷ Stanford encyclopedia

From this, and various passages in Schiller's essay "Of the Sublime," readers can gather that that which is theoretically sublime provokes the feeling that something is a conceptual threat while that which is practically sublime evokes the feeling that something is a physical threat. But sublimity, which we are considering synonymous with the type of vastness that inspires awe, cannot be conjured by something that simply poses a threat to us. No, we must be able to experience the threatening stimulus from a place of safety. As Schiller puts it, "Inner mental freedom is absolutely required in order to find the fearful sublime and to have pleasure in it...we must consider ourselves secure, if the fearful is to please us."⁸ Thus we see, sublimity is distinct from terror in that one is able to preserve a sense of mental freedom and, therefore, security in the face of an otherwise fear-inducing stimulus in the case of the former but not the latter. Again, from investigating and employing Schiller's work in this section, we remember that there are two types of things that can produce the sublime: physical and conceptual threats. When considering these ideas in terms of vastness, the language shifts only slightly. That which is vast enough to inspire awe must be physically or conceptually 'large' enough to pose a threat while still being conquerable by one's mental faculties.

With this focus on terror, it may be even more complicated to truly comprehend conceptual vastness, particularly in terms of art, music, and literature. Perhaps it may help to bring the example of infinity back into the picture. Infinity feels threatening as a concept that is unconquerable by the human mind. Art, music, and literature can contain similar unconquerable, mind-blowing characteristics. From the chills induced by a simple chord progression to a painting that brings us to tears,⁹ the aesthetic world has a strong foothold in that which is strangely, beautifully vast. On this note, René Descartes said "When our first encounter with some object surprises us and we find it novel—i.e. very different from what we formerly knew or from what we supposed it should be—this brings it about that we wonder... and are astonished at it."¹⁰ Conceptual vastness such as this can be just as difficult, if not more difficult, to reckon with than physical vastness. Even if something can be overcome by one's mental faculties it does not necessarily follow that the conquest will be simple or easy. Hence the need for an accommodation process.

Without accommodating for the initial shock of the vast stimulus one has encountered, it is possible for an experience to remain fearful or confused in the mind of the beholder and never fully transform into something worthwhile or awesome. Consider walking from one end of a wide canyon to the other on a tempered glass bridge. For some, the experience would be simply terrifying. For others, the experience would be thrilling. One of the many causes of the disparity in reactions, even in the face of the same stimulus, is the different mental states of

⁸ Schiller 93

⁹ Ivo Strecker and Markus Verne. 2013. *Astonishment and Evocation the Spell of Culture in Art and Anthropology*. 1st ed. New York: Berghahn Books: 13. While this paper does not explore the relationship between art and awe, Strecker and Verne take on this question in depth—and they do go further into the complex circumstances that lead to emotional responses to art such as those aforementioned.

¹⁰ René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (Jonathan Bennett, 2017).

the individuals. Those unable to overcome their feelings of fear may feel that they have no control or security in the face of what they perceive to be a great physical threat. Those who can lean into their mental faculties and ascertain the likelihood of their safety in the presence of the threat will likely be more able to negotiate their way beyond the fear toward a more holistic interpretation of the situation both emotionally and mentally. From all of this, we better understand how an experience can be sublime or vast, and even how individual responses to vast stimuli can vary. But what, more specifically, makes death a vast stimulus?

Death, while ordinary enough as a concept, could not be further from ordinary experientially. While it's true that many people are informed at a relatively early age that all living things eventually die, the actual experience of death (particularly facing the reality of one's own impending death or facing the actual death of a loved one) carries with it an enormous emotional and existential toll. And while most everyone encounters death regularly enough through news clippings, literature, and film—here again, it is the concept of death that one encounters, rather than the experience. Even as one cries real, sympathy-laden tears over the pages of a Nicholas Sparks novel, one need only turn back to the book's beginning to find the heroine restored to perfect health. If the obituaries generate feelings of sadness, one can always find the comics nearby. However, when one has experienced the real laughter and hugs of a loved one before the occurrence of their death, there is no comic relief powerful enough to wipe their name from memory nor any pages one can return to that contain the loving touch of their hand. So, while the concept of death may lurk casually enough among humankind, a real-life, personal encounter with death forces all to acknowledge its true power—a power which is absolutely vast enough to inspire awe in even the most callous of us. Thus, our need to mentally accommodate for the vast stimulus that is death—in other words, the need to grieve.

This brings us to what is entailed within the concept of accommodation. The word 'accommodate,' as it is used in awe theory, "refers to the Piagetian process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience."¹¹ This appears in descriptions of awe when one is confronted with something that is just too much for her to comprehend. Yet, there it is. And so, she must find a way to take in or comprehend it. This powerful, obscure thing, whatever it might be, "triggers the sense that one's default schema needs to be updated."¹² How one goes about updating this schema is not likely to look the same for any two individuals, but, regardless of the approach, it will require increasing one's openness to new positions or possibilities. For example, Piercarlo Valdesolo and Jesse Graham's empirical research on awe show that those who were confronted with an awe-eliciting stimulus experienced a "decreased tolerance for uncertainty, which, in turn, increased [their] tendency to believe in nonhuman agents and to perceive human agency in random events."¹³ This research may explain why

¹¹ Michelle N. Shiota, Dacher Keltner, and Amanda Mossman, "The Nature of Awe: Elicitors, Appraisals, and Effects on Self-Concept," *Cognition and Emotion* 21, no. 5 (July 19, 2007): 304.

¹² Paul K. Piff et al., "Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 6 (2015): pp. 896.

¹³ Piercarlo Valdesolo and Jesse Graham, "Awe, Uncertainty, and Agency Detection," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 1 (2014): pp. 170.

religion is one of the two areas that have produced the most scholarship on awe as well as research on why grief, as an accommodation process for a specific awe-inducing stimulus, seems as complicated and ambiguous as it does. Altogether, we gather that accommodation is about making room for ideas and emotions that are too much for us when we initially encounter them. How one goes about making that room, or expanding one's self, will vary from person to person and from situation to situation. But, whatever the specifics end up being, accommodation will involve reaching out for some sort of answer to bridge the gap between one's current state of mind and the vast stimulus challenging that state. When a person succeeds in making room for a vast stimulus, the feeling of shock and awe begins to wane.

It may be true, however, that a person sometimes will not appropriately accommodate for a vast stimulus and instead will just gradually acquire enough distance between themselves and the stimulus that they are able to distract themselves or forget about the triggering stimulus for some time. This may account for why some people experience grief in what is so often referred to as 'waves.' In this case, the accommodation necessary to make room for the shock and devastation of death did not take place completely. Thus, when one re-encounters the memories of a loved one who has passed, for example, they also re-encounter the shock and awe of that person's death because they have not yet mentally and/or emotionally made room for the magnitude of that experience. This process of experiencing grief in waves may repeat itself until some sort of accommodation has been made. Once a person has accommodated for the shock and awe of a loss, they will likely still experience a diversity of emotions at the memory of their lost loved one, but I argue that they will also likely feel that the grieving process does have some sort of conclusion—personal and messy though it may be.

Up until this point of the essay, I have set up one of the more prominent psychological discussions of 'awe' and have proposed how death and grief might fit into that framework. And, after this, it may seem plain to the point of uninteresting that awe plays a significant role within the phenomenon of death and grief. Nevertheless, it remains true that the relationship between awe, death and grief has gone unexamined until now, not only within scholarship but also within death and grief narratives. However, the latter may only be true in name as, through my own narrative readings on death and grief, I have seen the presence of awe time and again appear prominently. Though these narrative authors do not call what they are experiencing by its name, what they are describing often fits into the definition of awe. To demonstrate my findings, I will take readers through passages from the personal accounts of grief written by C. S. Lewis and Simone de Beauvoir. First, showing how these authors, even if unintentionally, portray death as vast, and, then, second, how they describe grief as a sort of accommodation. To be vast in this particular use of the word, readers will remember, is to be large, powerful, and obscure enough to require accommodation.

In the very first line of C.S. Lewis' reflections on the loss of his wife in *Grief Observed*, there appear descriptive words one might associate with the experience of the vast or sublime. There, Lewis writes, "No one ever told me that

grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid.”¹⁴ The language in this line indicates that Lewis is feeling a sense of submissiveness to death—its vastness has made him afraid or at least something like afraid. The ambiguity of what exactly he is feeling points to the obscurity of grief, as well. So, here, in the very first line of the account, readers already see Lewis associating the stimulus of his wife’s death with the power and confusion inherent to that which generates awe and requires accommodation.

Furthermore, Lewis not only describes experiences with his wife’s death in terms commensurate with vastness, but also compares them to stimuli more commonly reported to induce awe, such as those found in nature or art. Lewis writes “I look up at the night sky. Is anything more certain than that in all those *vast times and spaces*, if I were allowed to search them, I should nowhere find her face, her voice, her touch?”¹⁵ Here, Lewis not only actually uses the word vast to describe the emotional response he had to the loss of his wife, but he also directly points to feelings of obscurity and mystery contained within that loss through the imagery of the night sky (which implicitly includes the vastness of eternity/infinity). He uses nature imagery to convey the darkness and endlessness provoked by the death of his wife, clearly demonstrating the state of dumbfoundedness in which the vast stimulus of death has left him. And, remembering that people “typically experience awe in response to asocial stimuli like natural wonders, panoramic views, and beautiful art,”¹⁶ one can clearly see Lewis illustrating the phenomenon of awe through the above passage even without naming it. And this is not the only passage in which Lewis describes grief through metaphors that take readers to a traditional Burkean expression of the sublime. Lewis states that grief is “like a long *valley*, a winding *valley* where any bend may reveal a totally new *landscape*.”¹⁷ And, evoking within his readers the feelings of shock and confusion that his wife’s death has caused him to feel through reference to the arts, he writes, “we think of [death] as love cut short; like *a dance* stopped in mid-career or *a flower* with its head unluckily snapped off—something truncated and therefore, lacking its due shape.”¹⁸ With a reminder from Kelter and Haidt that “the most common experience of awe for contemporary Westerners in egalitarian societies is the response to natural and human-made objects,”¹⁹ it is no wonder that Lewis represents the vastness of death through such images as these.

Simone de Beauvoir also alludes to the vastness of death through her narrative depicting the difficult and emotional end of her mother’s life. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

[I]t was when I was at her bedside that I saw Death, the Death of the dance of death, with its bantering grin, the Death of fireside tales that

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994): 3.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994): 15. My emphasis.

¹⁶ Paul K. Piff et al., “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 6 (2015): pp. 883.

¹⁷ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994): 60. My emphasis

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49-50. My emphasis

¹⁹ Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, “Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion,” *Cognition and Emotion* 17, no. 2 (2003): pp. 309.

knocks on the door, a scythe in its hand, the Death that comes from elsewhere, *strange and inhuman*: it had the very face of Maman when she showed her gums in a wide smile of *unknowingness*.²⁰

Here, Beauvoir not only portrays death as a figure who dances and tells stories—both actions being references to the arts—but she also capitalizes the first letter of ‘Death.’ This act of deification simply and swiftly adds power, obscurity, and religiosity to her portrayal of death. All of this together creates an overall characterization of a sublime death—artistic, animate, obscure, and powerful. What’s more, in describing her mother’s relationship to death before its eventuality, Beauvoir states:

She clung ferociously to this world, and she had an animal dread of death. She had told my sister of a nightmare that she often had. ‘I am being chased: I run, I run, and I come up against a wall; I had to jump over this wall, and I do not know what there is behind it; it terrifies me.’²¹

Beauvoir brings in nature imagery again in this passage, describing her mother as having an *animalistic* fear of death and a *ferocious cling[ing]* to life. And, through the imagery of the wall, her mother’s nightmare reveals how terribly large death seems to her, the other side of death left completely obscure. Through these passages, and those from C.S. Lewis, readers see death characterized as sublime and vast enough that it inevitably calls for mental accommodation. Again, this accommodation is necessary because the death of the loved one is such a massive happening that one cannot possibly comprehend it with their current mental apparatus.

As mentioned previously, accommodation can be a rigorous and complicated ordeal. Imagine, for instance, when a child attempts to put a square peg into a triangular hole. When the square doesn’t fit, the child might believe that the peg is somehow broken, that the peg is simply at the wrong angle, that he isn’t applying enough pressure on the peg, that he needs a different set of holes altogether, or that the peg was never meant to go into a hole at all... the list could go on. This is not unlike the accommodation process that a vast, awe-inspiring stimulus requires a person to undergo. The often clumsy nature of this process is evident in the following passage from Lewis in which he refers to his late wife by the initial H.

‘Where is she now?’ That is, *in what place is she at the present time?* ...if H. is not a body—and the body I loved is certainly no longer she—she is in no place at all. And ‘the present time’ is a date or point in our time series... If the dead are not in time, or not in our sort of time, is there any clear difference, when we speak of them, between *was* and *is* and *will be*? Kind people have said to me, ‘She is with God.’ In one sense that is most certain. She is, like God, incomprehensible and unimaginable.²²

Here, it is clear that Lewis is attempting to accommodate for the discrepancy

²⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. Patrick O’Brian (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1964): 105. My emphasis

²¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. Patrick O’Brian (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1964): 15.

²² C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994): 23. Original emphasis.

between his late wife's existence and her new absence, but the accommodation does not come easily or immediately. One might even argue that it does not occur at all. Nevertheless, effort toward accommodation, whether successful or not, is necessary, for H. no longer exists in time as she had before death. To understand H. and time as they relate to each other now requires accommodation. Furthermore, Lewis' own experience with time has also changed as a result of the death. He says, "Up till this I always had too little time. Now there is nothing but time. Almost pure time, empty successiveness."²³ Both Lewis' thoughts on his wife's timelessness as well as his own new relationship with time seem demonstrative of a state of shock and symptomatic of a state of awe. To this point, empirical research by Melanie Rudd, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Jennifer Aaker shows that "awe offset[s] the feeling that time is limited."²⁴ And this is extremely evident in this particular passage of Lewis. After all, between Lewis and his wife, one with all of the time in the world and the other without time entirely, how is accommodation ever to occur?

Time is not the only concept that becomes obscured by the astonished, hazy state in which H.'s death has left Lewis. In fact, Lewis goes as far as to question humanity itself as he struggles toward accommodation:

If H. 'is not,' then she never was. I mistook a cloud of atoms for a person. There aren't, and never were, any people. Death only reveals the vacuity that was always there. What we call the living are simply those who have not yet been unmasked. All equally bankrupt, but some not yet declared. But this must be nonsense; vacuity revealed to whom? Bankruptcy declared to whom? To other boxes of fireworks or clouds of atoms. I will never believe... that one set of physical events could be, or make, a mistake about other sets.²⁵

Readers see here that Lewis begins again with a struggle to accommodate, or the sense of timelessness death has caused him to experience, with the negotiation of present and past tense—her absence in the present erases her presence in the past. This frustration with accommodating for the disruption of time, thus leads to an upset in the very fabric of his universe. Lewis doubts the reality, or at least the substantive nature, of all living beings. And then, just as swiftly, he doubts his carefully constructed doubts. Lewis even goes as far as to re-evaluate that which is most fundamental to his sense of being, in his quest to accommodate the death of his wife, writing: "Sooner or later I must face the question in plain language. What reason have we, except our own desperate wishes, to believe that God is, by any standard we can conceive, 'good'? Doesn't all the *prima facie* evidence suggest exactly the opposite?"²⁶ Those familiar with the works of C.S. Lewis are also familiar with his deep religious convictions, making the pervasive, permeating nature of the accommodation process that much more striking. One might read and wonder, what does it take for a person going through grief to achieve transformative or fruitful accommodation? Or, for that matter, what does

²³ Ibid., 33.

²⁴ Melanie Rudd, Kathleen D. Vohs, and Jennifer Aaker, "Awe Expands People's Perception of Time, Alters Decision Making, and Enhances Well-Being," *Psychological Science* 23, no. 10 (August 10, 2012): pp. 1135.

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994): 28-29.

²⁶ Ibid., 30.

it take for a person to accommodate for the death of a loved one at all?

To this, both Simone de Beauvoir and C.S. Lewis offer what seem to be optimistic passages that suggest accommodation (at least of some sort) is possible. Beauvoir writes:

With my father I had stayed by him until the time he became a mere thing for me: I tamed the transition between presence and the void. With Maman I went away almost immediately after having kissed her, and that was why it seemed to me that it was still her that was lying, all alone, in the cold of the mortuary.²⁷

Accommodating for the death of her father may have been easier for Beauvoir than accommodating for the death of her mother because she had more information and experience with her father's death by means of her presence and time. Studies show that those who encounter awe elicitors (such as the death of a loved one, in this case) may experience increased motivation to take in new information so as to better update their mental frameworks.²⁸ Thus, it may be the case that the more information one has, the more likely she will be to successfully accommodate for the awe-triggering stimulus. Another method of accommodating for grief may be turning outward. We see what this might look like in the following passage:

...comparatively speaking, her death was an easy one. 'Don't leave me in the power of the brutes.' I thought of all those who have no one to make that appeal to: what agony it must be to feel oneself a defenceless thing, utterly at the mercy of indifferent doctors and overly worked nurses. No hand on the forehead when terror seizes them; no sedative as soon as pain begins to tear them; no lying prattle to fill the silence of the void.²⁹

Here, we see Beauvoir sympathizing with others, people with whom she does not even have a personal connection. She turns her grief outward to those she knows exist in the world alongside her and suffer a somehow worse death than her mother. Paul K. Piff et al. state that "by diminishing the emphasis on the individual self, awe may encourage people to forego strict self-interest to improve the welfare of others."³⁰ And when they do, it may be that they achieve accommodation through a broadening of their perspective. Their pain is only a small percentage of the pain in the world. Their loss is only one of many losses. And, thus, through this realization, their mental framework expands and there is room to perceive the loss they have experienced—at least in some small way.

After all, it is not possible that any one of us should ever entirely understand death—at least, not on this side of mortality. This does not mean, however, that accommodation is a lost cause. Take into consideration how Lewis

²⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1964): 97.

²⁸ Paul K. Piff et al., "Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 6 (2015): pp. 896.

²⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *A Very Easy Death*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1964): 94.

³⁰ Paul K. Piff et al., "Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 108, no. 6 (2015): pp. 897.

ends his own narrative on grief as he imagines wherever his wife might be. He imagines her in a sort of heaven with a comforting religious figure and writes: “She said not to me but to the chaplain, ‘I am at peace with God.’ She smiled, but not at me. *Poi si torno all’ eterna fontana.*”³¹ This is a beautiful, touching example of the kind of accommodation that *is* possible when confronted with the awful, sublime death of a loved one. If full knowledge about the stimuli that triggered the awe process is necessary for full accommodation to occur, then the accommodation process of grief may be doomed to fail. But it doesn’t seem that this is at all what is required. After all, what Lewis offers in this final passage of his book is not full knowledge, but evidence that a transition has occurred even in the absence of full knowledge. He makes peace with his God. He grants his wife the independence in her death that she would very likely wish for him in his continued life on Earth. And, above all, Lewis has turned outward in his grief as Beauvoir turned outward in her own. Lewis imagined that his wife was smiling a smile that was no longer for him, but for herself and the other inhabitants of heaven. Even his imaginings were turning outward. Thus, he ends his narrative with a quote from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*: ““Then she turned herself back toward the eternal fountain.””³² Lewis never turns away from his wife, but allows her to turn away from him and toward whatever it is that eternity might be.

Understanding the power of death to leave the living struck with awe has the potential to change how we respond to our own grief as well as the grief of others. We can understand the shock as a natural response to the large, obscure, powerful nature of death. And we can understand the grieving process as a process of accommodation. Rather than grief being a disease that we fear we will never recover from, or some kind of proof of irrationality leaving us feeling horribly unqualified to revive ourselves, grief becomes a call to expand the mind and turn outward. It does not demand that we forsake our loved ones, but rather it invites us to broaden our conception of our loved ones as well as ourselves. While the implications of awe being an ever-present part of the death and grieving experience require far more insight and research than what I have begun to do through this article, it appears to me that awe promises to illuminate grief scholarship in promising new ways and offer new hope where hope otherwise seemed lost.

³¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1994): 76.

³² Don W. King, *C.S. Lewis, Poet: The Legacy of His Poetic Impulse*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2001): 244.

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