

# A Tribute, Not a Memorial

## Understanding Ambiguous Loss

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### Abstract

In this paper, I discuss ambiguous loss, why it is so traumatizing, what to do to lower the distress when someone disappears without a trace, and why a tribute is more appropriate than a memorial. The paper is dedicated to the family, friends, and colleagues of Jim Gray.

### 1. Introduction

On January 28, 2007, after sailing out of San Francisco Bay, Jim Gray went missing. What followed was an unprecedented search by the best minds in science and technology. When he was not found, there was the realization that this was a problem that had no answer. As Donna Carnes said, her husband's disappearance at sea was "a strange, singular, very painful mystery" (Silberman, 2007, p. 135).

It is because of the mystery that we honor rather than memorialize Jim Gray today. By having a tribute, the uncertainty is not denied. Paradoxically, acknowledging what we don't know helps focus on what we do know: that Jim Gray's contributions to the world, to science, to friends, and to his family are immense, and continue to influence us all every day.

### 2. Ambiguous Loss

With Jim Gray's disappearance, we live with what is called ambiguous loss—an uncanny loss, because neither life nor death is confirmed. A loss is ambiguous when a person goes missing without assurance of status as dead or alive. Catastrophic examples include people who have disappeared, been kidnapped, or are lost at sea or in war. More common examples of physically missing persons can be found for example with divorce (the non-custodial parent), adoption (birth parents, birth child), incarceration, military deployment, and immigration (see Boss, March 2002, 2004).

Whether catastrophic or ordinary, people experiencing ambiguous losses are deprived of the physical access to someone they care about. As a result, their loss is made more complex—there is the loss of the missing person's physical presence, but also the loss of knowing why they went missing, and where they are, dead or alive. Because the physical transformation that validates death and the beginning of mourning is a privilege denied, there is also the loss of volition in being able to say farewell one's own way. Without a body to bury, family, friends, and colleagues must find a way to live with not knowing. How might they do this? With no

solution in sight, it is useful to hold two opposing ideas at the same time: "He is gone, but also here. He is absent, but also present. He is in all probability dead, but maybe not." Such thinking strengthens resiliency in the face of unresolved loss. The goal is not closure, but rather, moving forward despite unanswered questions—not an easy task in a culture of science and technology.

### 3. Technology, Science, and Ambiguity

There are many forces that advance knowledge, and the challenge of ambiguity is one of them. We are challenged by unanswered questions, but as scientists and engineers, we are accustomed to finding answers. When there is no exact solution, another kind of thinking is needed—one that considers less-than-perfect answers. Is this what Jim Gray meant in 2005 when he called for unifying approximate and exact reasoning? (In "A Call to Arms," Gray and Compton wrote: "The greatest of these [research challenges] will have to do with the unification of approximate and exact reasoning. Most of us come from the exact-reasoning world—but most of our clients are now asking questions that require approximate or probabilistic answers.")

When likelihood can be assigned, but there is never a sure answer, the new challenge is to temper our can-do assumptions of mastery and study the dual reasoning. There will always be a few problems that resist an absolute answer. The loss of Jim Gray is one of them.

To increase tolerance for ambiguity, it is helpful to first understand why it is so stressful and traumatic. People feel stuck for several reasons: First, the ambiguity confuses people, personally and professionally. The loss is so bizarre that traditional grief and coping strategies used after a death in the family simply don't work. Second, the ambiguity makes people feel helpless. As we live in a culture that values the mastery of problems, an unresolved loss is viewed as a failure, and thus there is guilt and self-blame. Third, the rituals and supports that exist when there is a verified death are denied, so people don't know what to do or what role to play and how to act with one another. They may resist the grief process or feel guilty if they begin. Having no rituals and traditions for this inexplicable situation, they often deny the ambiguity—by acting as if the missing person is clearly dead—or clearly alive. Neither extreme is useful because each ignores the reality of not knowing. Fourth, not having the necessary data to clarify the loss, finding the lost person can become an obsession that takes over one's life, especially if it is

continued at the expense of all else. Fifth, people experiencing ambiguous loss, as well as those who observe them, often see the lack of closure as personal weakness and failure to see reality. What they fail to see is that the pathology lies in the uncanny ambiguity, and not in the person who experiences it.

#### 4. How to Move Forward Despite Ambiguous Loss

Moving forward depends on developing more personal and professional comfort with ambiguity. As with a bridge buffeted from all sides, resiliency means holding up under conflicting forces. With ambiguous loss, this means more than being tough, but also being able to absorb the pressure from conflicting ideas. Such thinking inherently produces some tension, but less than from holding on to rigid absolutes.

Moving forward requires being able to make sense of a situation. In the absence of facts, meaning is based on personal perceptions; thus there are multiple meanings. While different interpretations are understandable with ambiguous loss, more patience is needed for the differing views. To prevent conflict from erupting, remember that the ambiguity is the culprit, not the differing perceptions.

The goal therefore is not closure, but rather, an increased comfort with ambiguity. This requires a tempering of our needs for mastery and control. We temper the cultural assumption that if we work hard and well, problems will be solved—or conversely, that if we can't solve a problem, it is our failing. Sometimes, a problem simply defies solution—and this is one of those times.

Moving forward requires the management of conflicted emotions. This means expecting the negative feelings that typically follow a person's disappearance—anger, especially. Knowing that the ambivalence is caused by the ambiguity, and not personal weakness, helps decrease the tendencies toward shame, blame, and guilt. With anger and frustration acknowledged, normalized—and sometimes even laughed at due to the absurdity of the situation, the tension following ambiguous loss is lowered to a manageable level.

Ultimately, when hope that a missing person will be found begins to fade, moving forward depends on discovering something new to hope for—personally and professionally. Human connection helps. Sharing stories helps. Gatherings like this one can help family members, friends, and colleagues to begin to imagine new hopes and dreams that, in some way, can integrate the influence and contributions of Jim Gray. What each person hopes for may differ, but for all, hopes and goals need reassessing over time.

#### 5. Conclusion

While we live with the extraordinary stress caused by the ambiguous loss of Jim Gray, I encourage you to balance the

ambiguity with what is absolutely clear: that Jim Gray's monumental impact on the field of computer science, his family, friends, colleagues, and those he mentored is still present. It may be that the paradox of absence and presence reflects reality more than the absolutes we tend to seek.

The dilemma for all of us is to bring clarity to ambiguous loss. Failing that, and we will all fail in some measure here, the critical question is how to move forward despite the ambiguity. For each of us, the answer will be different. But in this case, having one final absolute answer is less critical than asking the question.

#### 6. Background Note: History of Research and Theory Development on Ambiguous Loss

Grounded in stress theory and the management of stressors, in this case, ambiguity, the research on ambiguous loss began in the 1970s with families of soldiers missing in action in Vietnam and Southeast Asia. Since then, research continues with families and communities where people vanish without a body to bury. See website: [www.ambiguousloss.com](http://www.ambiguousloss.com) plus summarizing references below. The ambiguous loss theory has been applied for example to designing interventions to help people cope with having a missing loved one after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, after the kidnappings in Kosovo during the 1990s, and after loved ones were swept away in the tsunami of South Asia (December 2004), among others. Today, the study of ambiguous loss continues at the University of Minnesota (Department of Family Social Science, College of Education and Human Development) as researchers from around the world increasingly inquire and consider utilizing the theory and assessment of ambiguous loss for their particular populations and situations.

#### 7. References

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