



Book Review

Mors et Vita: Keeping DEATH alive through Sorrow's profiles

Richard J. Alapack (2010). *Sorrow's Profiles: Grief, and Crisis in the Family*. London, UK: Karnac Books. Soft cover (376 pages). ISBN-13: 978-1-85575-621-2

by Larise du Plessis

Alapack's *magnum opus* on profiles of sorrow is both gut wrenching and profoundly real, yet untainted by dogmatic realism. It is a heartfelt conversation. The book is not written for the unfussy 'thinker' or for the frail-hearted and it takes courage to engage with the text. This is not an easy read; it is dense and cuts uncensored to the core of human existence. Refreshingly, it is at once erudite as well as down-to-earth.

In this review I first outline my broad impressions and position as reviewer. This is followed by a discussion of the content of the book, extracting the essence from each of the book's five parts. Finally, I conclude the review with a reflection.

Throughout the review I attempt to allow Alapack do most of the talking. However, because we are standing in relationship by virtue of his book, I also answer back where I can. This is my personal voice, not the voice of current intellectual debate. I simply undertake to ask relevant and, I hope, enriching questions. I also do not claim to present a comprehensive review of the compass and complexity contained in the pages of this book. Instead, I only hope to present an authentic voice in response to Alapack's scholarly dialogue. What he values is self-evidently true.

Alapack's warm 'hearthead' narrations and hermeneutic reflections at once arouse and crush me (see Tarnas', 1996, p. 420, description of the existential situation). Alapack's book can be compared to a pot of slow-brewing coffee. Thus, it is not instant coffee, which is sipped in haste, but a sensory *tour de force*, rich, fragrant and colourful. To

continue the coffee analogy, this narrator lovingly harvests the beans – they are red, bright, glossy, firm, and just right. He reveres them for their life. Then he slowly allows the beans to mature. When he brews them, their aroma suffuses the house. He drinks slowly, with affection, sharing with others, in conversation, experiencing a moment when time stands still, a moment to savour, always. The use of this analogy does not mean that Alapack's contribution to knowledge in this book is weak or half-formed. On the contrary, from an existential hermeneutic perspective his contribution furthers understanding in a manner that is difficult to achieve.

Alapack declares that the crux of his argument in this text revolves around the question: Is death reduced to Death by Western rationalism and 'livelihood'? However, through my reading I found a different crux, one that is more welcoming, gentler and not as cynical. I found this crux in an insight revealed near the end of the text: "If we learn to love, we may learn how to think" (Alapack, 2010, p. 321). In this section, with reverence for the insights of Martin Heidegger who, according to Alapack, gave Death a life of its own, Alapack demonstrates how Death can be lived. He affirms "echoes of Heidegger have haunted this entire book. His works also provide the conceptual framework for grounding my findings and putting them into a Big Picture" (Alapack, 2010, p. 203).

With Death as both an ontological and existential idea, Alapack's challenge is situated in the question: How do we keep Death alive? It is not possible to reduce his book to a brief academic review without falling prey to the very notion of logical reductionism that he disapproves of in his book. This would result

in the removal of the considerable heart contained in the book. Such an approach would prescribe that I trample across his soul with my feet. With economy and artful precision in his use of words, Alapack succeeds in articulating his ideas masterfully. The read left me with the reassuring sense that he is an adroit communicator who is able to convey exactly what he intends to convey. Unswervingly, Alapack conveys the message that to grieve takes courage. The reader should be forewarned that to engage with this book, with its raw take on the lifeworld of humans, also takes guts.

Alapack's book is rich in poetry and prose. Lines worth quoting abound. The text contains psychology, philosophy, theory, literature, history, therapy, and human connection. He speaks of political and cultural contexts. He makes himself vulnerable through sharing intimate conversations with his children and grandchildren. He composes his argument by drawing on the 'lifeworlds' of great thinkers - spirits like Alfred Lord Tennyson, T. S. Eliot, Emily Dickenson, Rumi, Lorca, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Levinas, C. S. Lewis, Albert Camus, Mahler, Munch, Van Gogh, Atom Egoyan, and Billy Bob Thornton. These spirits are summoned to play the symphony of 'sorrow', which Alapack (2010) describes as "... a large umbrella, whose various spokes include narratives, parables, stories, a therapeutic dialogue, and presentations of the essential Vision of major thinkers" (p. 321).

Structure

The book contains twenty three chapters, including illustrative end notes, which are structured into five parts. In this section I attempt to provide insight into the writer's voice through a selection of extracts from the text. My selection and presentation do not follow the book's structure slavishly.

In the introduction, Alapack generously establishes the scholarly and personal panorama of the book. He declares that he seeks "personal and in-depth knowledge of sorrow's profiles" (Alapack, 2010, p. xii). In this section, the question of how we live our Death forms a central theme. Alapack does not seek "... to explain, conquer, or defeat grief; I (he) orchestrate(s) no quick-fix that would overcome regret, or liquidate longing" (Alapack, 2010, p. xii). I agree with his reflection that "In attempting to capture a wide range of sorrow's profiles, I do not just stretch the envelope with a variety of narrative forms - I burst it ... My writing is deliberately and consciously outside the academic norm ... I'm either one step ahead or behind. You will judge" (Alapack, 2010, p. xv). I believe that Alapack finds himself within a core of healing and whether that core is ahead or behind depends on where the reader has chosen to be

positioned. The text is not lobbying for a single epistemology to triumph over all else, although at times the possibility occurred to me that it might actually be doing exactly that. When considering existential matters, existential-phenomenological-hermeneutic worldviews should, at the very least, be situated on the leading edge. Alapack (2010) desires that his words may "... both pluck your heart strings and challenge your brain" (p. xv), and in my case they definitely did.

Although they are appositely titled, it is superfluous to this review to catalogue Alapack's chapter headings. Instead, I have briefly highlighted the five parts that contain the book's twenty three chapters. Part one talks to the general pattern and typical processes of grief. In this section, Alapack illustrates three phases of grief, illuminating that extraordinary 'moment' of mourning. In part two, he provides three concrete studies of death in the family, while part three provides a re-visioning of death. This re-visioning forms the foundation of part four where alternative approaches when intervening in the grief process are considered. Alapack entertains grief across a broad front not limited to death. For him, grief includes divorce, disasters, and racism. Sorrow does not stand alone. Finally, in part five he untangles death's kindred phenomena - mercy, revenge, regret, and longing.

Essences:

It seems impossible to do Alapack's formidable perceptiveness justice. Theorising about themes extracted from the five parts would be presumptuous, and confining his grasp to an anaemic theoretical model would be insulting. In this section, while remaining cognisant of my interpretive bias, I attempt to portray Alapack's perceptiveness as essences gleaned from the five parts. I decided to present these essences in this manner so as to preserve his gritty nuance.

Alapack starts part one by describing authentic grief work and building a case for its complexity. There are no short-cuts, quick-fixes, coping strategies, sedation, or sprinting offered to overcome grief. The transformative grief process is complex and unique. Its complexity derives from the failure of logic and the fickle malleability of meaning, and it is as unique as our fingerprints.

Alapack conceptualises the grief process as occurring along a continuum that is structured in three phases. He describes the first phase as 'the algebra of loss', the second is about 'overbinding', and the third is 'recovery'. In his exposition, he indicates where his view concords with mainstream literature and where the views are his own. His take on the progression of

grief is, to me at least, agreeably radical. It is in no manner subordinate to any formulaic, linear, reductionist cause-and-effect or one-size-fits-all conceptualisation. Instead, like crisp morning air, he refreshes when he speaks of sanctioned rituals, symbols and ‘moments’ that evoke embodied emotions; of overbonding through the missed touch and longing. The essence is captured by the phrase “Absence is a mode of presence” (Sartre, 1956, pp. 61-63, cited in Alapack, 2010, p. 35).

The question is then what marks recovery or healing in the grief-process Alapack’s heart-full approach suggest that at times grief-work need not cease, but that healing occurs in the embrace of sorrow – another essence. In deepening this idea, Alapack distinguishes between ambivalence and ambiguity. While ambivalence jams grief-work, ambiguity brings healing and is a “phenomenon of maturity”. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, pp. 96-155., cited in Alapack, 2010, p. 47). Ambivalence is “based on a splintered ego that targets itself for emotions it would prefer to disown, deny or suppress” (Alapack, 2010, p. 47).

For Alapack, life is lived in the “Moment” and our stories and lives are a succession of “Moments”. (Throughout the book Alapack employs “Moments” to advance arguments.) Transformative “Moments” are considered in part two. In the chapter “Vigilance for life on a Death watch” Alapack reveals his innermost self through recounting (and reliving) his mother’s dying and Death. He also recounts the conversation he had with his daughter when she first encountered Death. Further, he talks of a home that shatters when a brother or sister dies.

In the next part, after setting out a Heideggerian context, Alapack puts forth a re-visioned myth for the faces of sorrow. Re-visioning forms the essence of part three, where he positions the ‘life of Death’ within psychology, Christianity and philosophy. He asserts “... the question is simple: what have we to lose in suspending belief and acting as if there is nothing? Nothing? Our gain is the capacity to create meaning, be honest, be resolute, and act humanly” (Alapack, 2010, p. 154). This re-visioned myth clearly calls for an alternative approach to intervening in the grief-process. This alternative approach is presented in part four. However, prior to this Alapack honours the many complexities in grief intervention. This is encapsulated in the following quote: “As I indicated in Chapter ten, Heidegger demonstrates that there is no ‘cause’ of Death except Life itself. Like that will definitely happen but indefinitely in terms of time and mode; the only surprises about the next oil disaster will be time, place, manner, and magnitude” (Alapack, 2010, p. 195).

Alapack’s book makes it clear that sorrow does not

stand alone. In part five he untangles sorrow’s kindred phenomena, and the extract below concerns his discussion of regret. He says:

I have dragged regret from pillar to post. I delve into it thoroughly, not only because it is incredibly common in everyday life, but also because it is largely neglected in mainstream psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis. More importantly, and as mentioned previously, it holds that middle position of supplanting grief but being qualitatively different from depression. (Alapack, 2010, p. 299)

Finally, Alapack (2010) “rakes through the ashes” (p. 317) of the completed substance of his book. He refers to this process as Unconcluding reflections. Here, amongst many heartfelt reflections, he answers the earlier question regarding the resolution of grief with the following conclusion: “Sorrow, I have argued, is the optimal resolution” (Alapack, 2010, p. 299).

Reflecting on Alapack’s reflections

Western science

Although Alapack is ill at ease with dualism and Western rationalism with its implicit reductionism, within this book it is possible to accuse Alapack himself of dualism. This dualism occurs when he contrasts Western thought with ‘hearthead’ approaches. This thought unsettles me. Although Alapack says that he draws distinctions, these distinctions come with a sting. I question why there is no place in his here-and-now lifeworld for more tolerance of other views. I wonder why there is not even a striving towards integration, if not reconciliation. It is possible that my reading of the existential debate is naïve and that I am misguided in labelling Alapack’s words towards the other as harsh. I can understand his wrath with certain non-in-depth worldviews, especially if these worldviews go about their business without questioning. However, I am unable to understand his failure to gently embrace them. He appears to provide no space, time or depth for others to enter his life-circle. To use a common phrase, this is somewhat like the pot calling the kettle black. While there may be good reason to take this stance, his case is weak when he dismisses brief grief-work with pithy one-liners. This contrasts starkly with the depth and tolerance radiating from the remaining text.

Throughout most of the text Alapack is a giant and speaks with noble wisdom on sorrow’s profiles. This is why I feel a need to understand, a need for clarity, direction – the contradiction is intolerable. So, I ask

again: When he so beautifully questions the protean faces of grief and sorrow, why does he dismiss Western reductionism and refuse to engage? It is perhaps possible that he provides a useful deconstruction of the grief-process and Death within this paradigm. Perhaps there is no place for coping, quick-fixes and mind-only approaches, even if coping is living the thing itself in the only way a person is able. Perhaps I am not yet ready to understand this.

Entering into a debate on the social construction of the word science and the meaning it holds would be tedious and misplaced in this review. However, it would be remiss of me not to challenge Alapack's notion of science and his venomous elevation of science as arch-culprit and vehicle of callous reductionism. I ask myself if we really need a culprit and whether there is always an enemy or someone to blame. Surely this way of thinking is more us-and-them dualism. If not Death, is the enemy rationality slain at the altar of dogma? Know thy enemy. Make love, not war. Peace.

However, I also wonder if perhaps I have missed the point. I wonder if Alapack's description of so-called Western reductionism, inherited from the Ancient Greeks, is his Achilles heel. I understand and mostly agree with his position of rebellion. However, I fear that this opposition may be Alapack's undoing, his fall from grace into a dualistic juxtaposition where he finds himself transformed into the thing he so feverishly seeks to avoid. It saddens me to view Alapack's work in this light, with his efforts sullied and the book's voice of authority weakened. Perhaps Alapack contrived the tension I am experiencing with the express aim of tearing at me with a philosophical gust. That way I can mould my own conclusion and continue to chisel away at my worldview. If this was indeed his intention, then it has been masterfully achieved.

In chapter eleven, while proposing an alternative approach to intervention, Alapack clarifies his apparent discontent with the Western rational approach. At this point I perceive a distinct glimpse of his soul. He does not dismiss the one-dimensional place of cognitive-behavioural, self-help quick fixes, or psychopharmacological remedies. He also does not align himself with Freud, his followers, or revisionists of psychoanalysis. In fact, he affords everyone a place, not as a resolve or healing, but as a crutch, often a much-needed one.

Alapack unfailingly takes umbrage with one-dimensional and exclusionary ways. He says "I concur with Kierkegaard that natural scientific reductionism cheats us out of passionate wonder ... In this book I do not walk the well-beaten path of mainstream rationalistic natural science psychology.

But I do not kill positivism's sacred cows either. I did not even slice the 'sacred' out of them. Surely, I have confronted them and tried to dialogue with them. But by and large, I just left them to chew contentedly in the barn" (Alapack, 2010, p. 31). However, it is also clear that Alapack does not tolerate the idea that all views are equally fine. Is Alapack relenting? Is he giving in? Is acceptance germinating? Read and discover.

On non-ritualistic quick-fixes

Alapack abhors what he terms cookbook fixes. However, prior to chapter eleven he appears to be prescribing yet another cookbook approach – as if there is only one way. Relating as a psychologist to Alapack's ideas, I am compelled to ask him "Are you bankrupt in your viewpoint on Cognitive and Behavioural practice?" I also ask "Are the rationalists (perhaps cut-off from their emotions) wrong and simply unable or unwilling to fathom the depths of sorrow?" I challenge Alapack to walk in their moccasins. He should at least join in the world of different fingerprints, for without this he would not be able to draw his distinction. Perhaps these thinkers deserve honour for preparing the soil for his harvest.

It continues to feel wrong to allow Alapack his harshness towards the faceless 'them'. I am not an 'anything goes' kind of a person, but somehow his one-liner criticisms feel unresolved, leaving me with disquiet. I wonder if this is perhaps contrived tension. I shall leave it there, lest I be guilty of hypocrisy.

On Collective culture

What Alapack (2010) says of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche I can say of his own narrative: "he privileges the singular, the unique individual, the one with courage and human power" (p. 252). This leads me to ask "What about cultures that are driven by the collective and people who are not individuated?" The question remains open as he firmly places responsibility for Death and Life where it belongs, with me and you. If you are unwilling to accept this responsibility, then do not read Alapack's book. However, perhaps this provides you with an urgency to read the book.

I have another difficulty with the book. My impression from his words is that only those who have undergone a protracted journey have experienced a valid grief-process. Westerners, whose fingerprints take them to quick-fixes, are portrayed as cop-outs. I would have liked Alapack to have been more inquisitive about these people, to have explored their opinions and gravitas without assuming the opposite. However, after having glimpsed Alapack's soul I like to believe that he would not judge so

harshly. Perhaps this is my misunderstanding. Perhaps it was intended for me to misunderstand in order to understand.

Alapack questions and declares

During the course of the book, Alapack asks many questions. He wonders whether his book adequately embodies:

1. "A balance between life-filled narratives and thought-rich reflections, including their political ramifications. Only you will decide". (Alapack, 2010, p. 323).

To which my answer is an unequivocal yes.

2. "An alternative to our de-personalised behavioural technology." (Alapack, 2010, p. 323). "I desire to present a psychological ... psychology, warm, passionate, and tender ..." (Alapack, 2010, p. 323), "intimately, and individually" (Alapack, 2010, p. 319).

To my mind he has also achieved this desire.

3. "(A)n intellectually challenging and heartfelt approach to the faces of sorrow?"

In this case, Alapack provides his own answer: "Piggybacking on Amedeo Giorgi's (1970; 2009) demonstration that approach, method, and content are dialectically related, I add style-of-communication to his triad and affirm that the question of adequacy addresses at least four interconnected issues: a) my underlying Vision; b) my sources of information and insights; c) my methods for gathering the relevant lifeworld data; and d) the written forms with which I communicate my knowledge" (Alapack, 2010, p. 318).

Reflecting on these thoughts Alapack points out that "one can truly use a plethora of ways to make knowledge-claims. Nobody needs to be hamstrung by the narrow medical model and psychology's 19th century natural scientific approach. Kierkegaard affirms that the natural scientific method, when it encroaches upon the sphere of the spirit, is dangerous and pernicious" (Alapack, 2010, p. 318).

Final words

In conclusion, Alapack's thoughts on Eliot's poem echo mine on *Sorrow's Profiles*: he "...articulate(s)

the absolute difference between a genuine concrete lifeworld option and the empty possibility of purely abstract, speculative mental gymnastics" (Alapack, 2010, p. 300).

In this book Alapack provides a valuable contribution to the understanding of grief. It should be read by every psychotherapist, psychologist and doctor, and by anyone with an interest in healing regardless of epistemology. Everyone will relate to it. Intelligent researchers will find his method refreshing and worthy of stirring the enquiring mind. This book is truly about the human condition.

Alapack is a master at argument. To advance, shape and direct argument he uses four cards picked from his voluminous sleeve: exactness; provocation; suspense and faith in the reader. The work's complexity and density of ideas notwithstanding, Alapack writes consummately with a rare ability to embody his ideas through exactness of phrase. He says what he wants us to hear. Irritation then enters the fray as he provokes and agitates. The reader is left discomfited. He uses the dogmatic and the self-contradiction as currency for provocation. With irritation and anger come confusion, guilt and sorrow. The reader rehashes the ideas just stirred. Then anger ferments and confusion boils. Alapack does not readily answer what he has stirred. Doubt shifts the balance first this way, then that. Nagging irritation hangs, always there, scratchy, uncomfortable, agonising. No time to reflect, ideas swirl. Understanding is suspended; suspense energises.

Finally, there is resolution, bubbling through the mire. Brewing. Alapack trusts his reader to click, to make the connections.

Alapack's words set the stage and direct the actors. We take it in, in the moment. Like music, ideas are ephemeral – contrasts and wispy patterns only discernible after the moment. This makes for ever-growing and living understanding. This is unique understanding, real understanding, and not a barren, stillborn abstraction. This understanding bankrolled by irritation. Through this method Alapack made up my mind and I drew the right conclusion. His faith is vindicated.

Mors et vita. Complexity lost, complexity found. Simple, not simpler.

Bravo.

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