

ANTHROPOLOGY OF THRESHOLDS

Volume IV

MOURNING

An Essay on the Anthropology of Absence and Fidelity

Chapter I — The Ordeal of Absence

1. An Experience Too Quickly Reduced

Mourning is often spoken of as a psychological process to be worked through, expected to conclude within a reasonable time, or as a painful emotion one must learn to manage. This description is not false. It is merely insufficient, as the purely biological or functional descriptions of birth, parenthood, and old age were in the preceding volumes of this collection. For mourning is not first a pathology to be treated nor an emotion to be dispelled: it is a fundamental anthropological experience, touching on what it means to be constituted by one's bonds to another.

2. Reformulating the Question

To ask what mourning is, or how to mourn, invites clinical or practical answers, useful but failing to reach the anthropological root of the phenomenon. To ask instead what becomes of a person when a beloved being disappears, or how absence continues to inhabit an existence, opens a space in which rupture, fidelity, and transmission — the very matter of this volume — can finally be heard.

3. The Guiding Hypothesis

We like to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals, to whom relationships are added from the outside onto an already-constituted identity. The death of a beloved being belies this representation with a force few other experiences equal: it is not merely an external presence that disappears, it is a part of the one who remains that finds itself transformed. We are not merely individuals who have relationships; we are also, and perhaps first, constituted by them.

To mourn is not to forget the one we loved; it is to learn to love them otherwise, in their absence.

4. The Fourth Movement

This volume closes a set the three preceding ones progressively built. Being Born showed a being who receives an existence they did not give themselves. Parenthood showed this same being having

become the one who transmits a freedom they do not possess. Old Age showed how they learn to abide as the roles and strengths that defined them withdraw one by one. Mourning shows what happens when it is no longer one's own strengths that fade, but the presence of another by whom one had let oneself be constituted. These four experiences share a trait none shares with the social and institutional mediations the following volumes of this collection will address: they are not first actions one performs, but events that reconfigure the one who lives through them, far more than they live through them while remaining identical to themselves.

5. Four Paradoxes

This hypothesis unfolds into four paradoxes, which the following chapters will each take up in turn. The first is that one must accept the loss without erasing the bond: the disappearance is real and irreversible, but it does not, contrary to common belief, command the severing of what united. The second is that absence can become a form of presence: the deceased continues to inhabit memory, gestures, places, sometimes even the very decisions of the one who remains. The third is that continuing to love allows one to continue to live: attachment that survives death is not necessarily an obstacle to healing, it can be its condition. The fourth, finally, is that mourning is intimate yet requires a community: we live through it personally, but rarely, and perhaps never, alone.

6. The Course of This Volume

The chapters that follow will each take up one thread of this inquiry. Chapter II will dwell, with Jankélévitch, on the irreversibility of disappearance and on what it radically changes in the world of the one who remains. Chapter III will explore, with Levinas, the paradox of an absence that becomes presence through the trace it leaves. Chapter IV will examine, with Freud, the work of time and the two errors that equally threaten it. Chapter V will follow, with Ricœur, the three possible ways of dealing with the bond that remains. Chapter VI will dwell, with Louis-Vincent Thomas and the cross-cultural comparison of funeral rites, on the anthropological necessity of ritual. Chapter VII, finally, will confront this anthropology with the contemporary metamorphoses of mourning, with Philippe Ariès: its individualisation, its psychologisation, the public effacement of death, and the unprecedented question of digital memory.

One thing alone must be understood from now on, and the rest of the volume will do no more than unfold it: mourning is not the loss of a bond, but its most demanding transformation.

Chapter II — The Rupture of the Familiar World

1. The Unchanged Yet Other World

When a beloved being disappears, the world changes in nothing objectively: the same streets, the same house, the same objects remain in their place. And yet nothing is the same. Certain places change meaning, certain gestures become impossible, certain habits cease to have an object, certain words no longer find their addressee. Mourning is therefore not merely the loss of someone; it is the obligation to inhabit a world this loss has silently transformed, without any of its visible features having moved.

2. Jankélévitch: The Irreversible

The philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch devoted to death and time an attentiveness that allows us to understand why this transformation is so radical. Most of the losses we live through leave open some form of repair: a misplaced object can be found again, a broken relationship can sometimes be mended, a failed project can be taken up again in another form. The death of a beloved being leaves room for none of these outcomes. It institutes an absolute never again, with no appeal, no possible negotiation with passing time.

What distinguishes mourning from every other loss is the absolute irreversibility it institutes.

3. Death in the Third Person, Death in the First Person

Jankélévitch distinguishes two radically different ways of relating to death. There is death thought from outside, as a general fact affecting humankind in general — the one statistics, biology, and abstract discourses on the mortal condition concern themselves with. And there is the death of someone one loves, which can never be reduced to a particular case of the former: it strikes someone irreplaceable, in the whole of their concrete singularity, and it is this very singularity that makes the loss so absolute. One may know, in theory, that all human beings are mortal, without this knowledge in any way preparing one for the disappearance of a particular, beloved person, whose absence resembles no other.

4. What a "Never Again" Changes

This never again is not a mere pathetic formula: it has a very concrete content, which must be named to gauge its full import. Never again will this suspended conversation be able to resume. Never again will this misunderstanding be able to be cleared up. Never again will this project formed together be able to come true as it had been imagined. It is the accumulation of these definitive impossibilities, more than sadness itself, that constitutes the most difficult part of mourning: not a feeling, but a permanent restructuring of what remains possible within a life.

5. Accepting the Irreversible Without Erasing the Bond

One must, however, guard against a hasty conclusion. To recognise the irreversibility of the disappearance does not mean that, in return, the bond uniting one to the deceased must be severed. One might think that the only coherent response to an absolute never again would be an equally absolute farewell, definitively cutting all bridges with what has been lost. It is precisely this equivalence the next chapter must question, by showing how absence, despite its irreversible character, can itself become a form of presence.

6. Toward the Trace

The next chapter, with Emmanuel Levinas, will address this paradox directly: how someone who is no longer there can continue, through the trace they leave, to inhabit the memory, the gestures, and sometimes the decisions of the one who remains — without this persisting presence in any way contradicting the irreversibility this chapter has just established.

Chapter III — The Paradox of Present Absence

1. A Presence That Is Not a Presence

One must proceed here with particular caution, so as not to confuse what this chapter seeks to think with an easy consolation. To say that the deceased remains present in some way does not mean that they would continue to exist somewhere, nor that grief would be soothed by a mere memory. What is at stake is describing a more precise and more demanding structure: how an absence, recognised as irreversible in the sense established by the previous chapter, can nonetheless continue to act, to orient, to oblige the one who remains — without this amounting to denying death itself.

2. Levinas: The Trace

Emmanuel Levinas developed, regarding the face of another in general, the notion of the trace to describe what remains of a presence after it has withdrawn. The trace is not a sign someone would have deliberately left to make themselves known — like a deliberate imprint — nor a mere memory that recollection would preserve at its discretion. It is that by which the other continues to concern me, to oblige me, even as they have absented themselves from all actual presence. Applied to mourning, this notion allows us to think what the deceased's loved ones often feel without being able to name it: the person is no longer there, and yet they continue to orient choices, to weigh in decisions, to make themselves felt in precise absences rather than in a vague, diffuse nostalgia.

The trace is not a memory one chooses to keep; it is an obligation that continues to exert itself after presence has ceased.

3. What the Trace Is Not

It is important to specify what this notion excludes, so that it does not dissolve into vague sentimentality. The trace is not a diminished presence, as though the deceased continued to exist a little, in an attenuated form. Nor is it a mere psychological effect, reducible to the activity of the survivor's memory. It designates a relation that has truly changed in nature without having been extinguished: the one who has left no longer acts themselves, but what they were continues to require a response from the one who remains — a fidelity, a following-through on what they expected or hoped, a way of continuing to take them into account in one's existence.

4. Places, Gestures, Decisions

This trace lodges itself in very concrete supports, which mourning suddenly renders meaningful in a way they were not before. A place the deceased liked to frequent becomes a place where their trace is particularly felt. A gesture they used to make becomes, when one repeats it or deliberately refrains from repeating it, a way of continuing to relate to them. A decision made after their death may find itself oriented by what they would have wished, not through some imaginary consultation, but through a real fidelity to what their presence had brought about in the one who carries on without them.

5. An Absence That Obliges Without Contradicting the Irreversible

We can now hold together what Chapters II and III had left in tension. The irreversibility established by Jankélévitch remains entire: nothing of what has been lost will return, no interrupted conversation will resume. But this irreversibility does not abolish the trace: it is, on the contrary, its very condition. It is precisely because the deceased will never themselves return that their trace becomes the only place where the relation can still continue, in a transformed rather than interrupted form.

6. Toward the Work of Time

A question remains, however, that this chapter has not yet posed: how does this trace evolve with the passing of time? Does it remain identical, or does it itself transform over the years separating one from the moment of loss? The next chapter, with Freud, must examine this work of time, and the two symmetrical errors that threaten it.

Chapter IV — The Work of Time: Two Errors to Avoid

1. A Founding Text, Today Debated

Sigmund Freud proposed, in a text that remains foundational despite the criticisms levelled at it today, a description of the work mourning accomplishes over time. For him, normal mourning consists in progressively, painfully withdrawing the psychic investment that bound the subject to the deceased, in order to be able, once this work is accomplished, to reinvest that energy elsewhere. Freud opposed to this process melancholia, in which this detachment fails: the loss is not recognised as such, and the subject comes to identify with what they have lost rather than separating from it, at the cost of a suffering that finds no further outlet.

2. A First Error: Believing That Healing Means Forgetting

The most common reading of Freud has long suggested that successful mourning must conclude in a form of complete detachment, in which the memory of the deceased would progressively cease to weigh on the survivor's existence. This reading commits a first error, which the preceding chapters of this volume now allow us to identify with precision: it confuses the end of suffering with the erasure of the bond. Yet Chapter III showed that the trace of the deceased is not a residual pain destined to disappear, but an obligation that can continue to structure an existence without thereby paralysing it. Healing does not mean forgetting; it can mean, on the contrary, learning to carry a memory that no longer hurts in the same way.

3. A Second Error: Believing That Fidelity Forbids All Transformation

But there exists a symmetrical error, to which certain contemporary critiques of Freud, reacting against the first, may themselves succumb: believing that remaining faithful to the deceased would require changing nothing, indefinitely maintaining the relation in the exact state in which death froze it. This position joins what Freud described under the name of melancholia, in inverted guise: instead of denying the loss, it refuses any evolution of the bond that could nonetheless remain faithful without remaining identical. A photograph one can no longer move, a room one refuses to rearrange, habits maintained not out of attachment but out of terror of betrayal, can become the symptoms of this second error, less commented upon than the first but just as real.

To heal is not to forget; to remain faithful is not to refuse the bond's transformation.

4. The Work of Time as a Work of Transformation

Between these two errors emerges what the work of mourning actually accomplishes when it unfolds healthily: not the erasure of the bond, not its freezing, but its progressive transformation.

The relation that bound one to the deceased can no longer be exercised in the same way as before — it no longer receives a response in return, it is no longer nourished by new exchanges — but it can continue to exist in a different form, in which the trace evoked in the previous chapter progressively occupies the place presence once occupied. This work takes time, because so profound a transformation cannot be accomplished all at once; but this time is not that of a progressive forgetting, it is that of a metamorphosis of the bond itself.

5. Toward Fidelity

It remains to specify what it concretely means to remain faithful to someone with whom the relation has thus changed in nature. The next chapter, with Ricœur, will distinguish three possible ways of dealing with the bond that remains, and will show why only one of them allows one to avoid both forgetting and petrification.

Chapter V — Three Ways of Dealing with the Bond

1. What to Do With the Bond?

A question silently runs through all the preceding chapters, and it must now be formulated explicitly: what is to be done with the bond that survives the death of the one it united? Three answers, and three only, seem possible. One can sever the bond, by striving to forget. One can refuse the loss, by living as though it had not occurred, frozen in a past one refuses to leave. One can, finally, transform the bond, by maintaining a fidelity that does not require denying the absence. The preceding chapters have already ruled out the first two paths; it remains to understand precisely what the third consists in.

2. Ricœur: Memory Between Duty and Peril

Paul Ricœur devoted to memory and forgetting a reflection that directly illuminates this third path. He distinguishes a duty of memory, by which we recognise ourselves bound not to let what deserves to be preserved disappear, and the perils that threaten this duty when it goes awry: memory can freeze into rumination, incapable of integrating the loss into a life that continues, or let itself be swept away by a forgetting that erases even the obligation itself. Between these two perils, Ricœur situates a true work of memory, which consists neither in indefinitely repeating the past nor in purely and simply freeing oneself from it, but in integrating it into the ever-ongoing narrative of a continuing existence.

3. Fidelity as Work, Not as State

This analysis allows us to specify what creative fidelity — to use the most apt expression one could give it — demands of the one who remains. It is not a state one reaches once and for all, after which mourning would be closed and the question resolved. It is a continuous work, which must constantly readjust the place the deceased occupies in present existence, never yielding either to the temptation to erase them or to that of being enclosed within them. This fidelity resembles less the guarding of a motionless treasure than the pursuit of a conversation that has changed form without having been interrupted.

True fidelity is not the preservation of a motionless past; it is the continuous work by which a bond carries on while changing form.

4. Why the Third Way Is the Most Fruitful

We can now understand why this third way, more demanding than the other two, is also the only one that allows us to hold together everything the preceding chapters have established. Severing the bond would deny the trace whose reality Chapter III demonstrated. Refusing the loss would deny the irreversibility Chapter II established as the proper mark of mourning. Only the transformation of the bond respects both the irreversibility of the disappearance and the legitimate persistence of the trace — and it is this simultaneous holding of both requirements that makes this way anthropologically the most fruitful, though the most difficult to inhabit over time.

5. Toward Rituals

This work of fidelity, however interior it may appear, is, however, never accomplished within individual consciousness alone. No human society has left its members to face this task alone: all have elaborated collective forms intended to accompany and support it. The next chapter, with Louis-Vincent Thomas and the cross-cultural comparison of funeral rites, will address this anthropological necessity of ritual.

Chapter VI — Rituals as Anthropological Necessity

1. A Universality That Must Be Taken Seriously

No known society, however different from others in its beliefs and customs, has renounced surrounding death with funeral rites, socially recognised periods of mourning, symbolic gestures, and places of memory. This universality must not be treated as a mere ethnographic curiosity: it signifies something anthropologically decisive, which the French anthropologist and sociologist Louis-Vincent Thomas, whose work on death remains unjustly underestimated, helped to bring to light with particular rigour. Human beings do not know how to bear death alone. Rites are not

archaic survivals modernity might legitimately move beyond; they are mediations without which the work of fidelity described in the previous chapter would risk remaining a purely private task, with no support or collective recognition.

Human beings do not know how to bear death alone; that is why no society has ever let them try.

2. What Rites Accomplish

Funeral rites fulfil three functions Louis-Vincent Thomas analysed across a multitude of societies. They acknowledge the loss, giving it a public form that interior pain alone could not give it. They confer upon it a social form, organising shared gestures, words, and timeframes that structure what, without them, would remain chaotic. And they reinscribe the living within a community, at the very moment loss might otherwise isolate them. A mourning deprived of all ritual recognition has none of these three supports, and must face alone what most cultures have always regarded as an eminently collective ordeal.

3. Mourning as a Collective Matter: The Example of African Lineage Societies

Particular attention must here be given to societies in which this collective dimension of mourning remains fully alive, and which Western analyses have too often neglected in favour of their own categories. In many lineage-based societies of sub-Saharan Africa, mourning is not the private affair of one bereaved individual, but that of an entire extended kinship group, gathered in family council to collectively determine its duration and customary expressions. The deceased continues, throughout this time, to occupy an active place in the community's symbolic life, whose disappearance must be addressed by the whole social body, and not merely borne by those who most directly loved them.

4. An Unexpected Contemporary Reinvention

A contemporary phenomenon deserves mention here for its anthropological significance, which far exceeds its mere topicality. In several Western societies where mourning has become largely privatised and institutionalised, African and South American diasporas reintroduce, sometimes to the great surprise of funeral industry professionals, collective and public forms of expressing mourning: wakes organised in halls, processional accompaniment of the hearse to the place of worship or the cemetery, speech directly addressed to the deceased in forms reinvented to adapt to the new context. This phenomenon must not be read as a mere folkloric preservation of customs of origin; it manifests, at the very heart of the societies that had most radically privatised

death, the persistence of the anthropological need this chapter seeks to describe: that of a mourning borne collectively rather than alone.

5. What Contemporary Privatisation Risks Losing

This comparison allows us to gauge what contemporary Western societies, by reducing mourning to a strictly private matter and largely entrusting it to specialised institutions, risk losing without always realising it. This is not merely a question of custom or cultural sensitivity: it is the question of whether the work of creative fidelity described in the previous chapter can truly be accomplished with no ritual or communal support at all, or whether its absence does not compel each person to bear alone a task human societies had almost always deemed collective.

6. Toward Contemporary Metamorphoses

This question opens directly onto the final chapter of this volume, which must more broadly examine the contemporary transformations of mourning in the West: its growing individualisation, its psychologisation, the public effacement of death itself, and the entirely unprecedented question posed by digital memory, where traces of the deceased may now remain indefinitely accessible.

Chapter VII — The Contemporary Metamorphoses of Mourning

1. A Structure Tested Rather Than Abolished

As with each of the three preceding thresholds of this collection, two symmetrical temptations must be resisted when facing the contemporary transformations of mourning: lamenting a past in which death would always have been better accompanied, and seeing in every recent evolution an unquestionable progress. The six preceding chapters allow us to ask, of each contemporary phenomenon, the same question: does it modify the concrete forms of irreversibility, trace, transformation, fidelity, and ritual, or does it alter their very structure?

2. Ariès: From Tamed Death to Forbidden Death

The historian Philippe Ariès traced, across the long span of Western societies, a radical transformation in the collective relation to death. For centuries, what he calls tamed death made the agony a public moment, surrounded by the community, integrated into the ordinary rhythm of existence without being hidden or euphemised. Contemporary societies have progressively instituted what Ariès names forbidden death: moved from the home to the hospital, entrusted to specialised professionals, withdrawn from the gaze of children and often of loved ones themselves, reduced in its public manifestations to their most discreet possible expression. This historical shift

is not a detail among others; it constitutes the general framework within which the more specific phenomena this chapter must now examine are inscribed.

3. The Individualisation of Mourning

The previous chapter already showed, by contrast with African lineage societies, the extent to which contemporary Western mourning has become largely privatised: it tends there to become the affair of an individual rather than that of a social body organised to receive it. This observation does not say that Western societies have lost all solidarity in the face of death; it says that this solidarity has changed form, becoming more informal, more dependent on the quality of personal bonds than on a structured collective framework imposed on all regardless of circumstance.

4. Psychologisation: A Risk Rather Than a Pure Progress

Mourning is today most often described in psychological vocabulary, as an inner process from which one expects stages, a reasonable duration, signs of resolution. This approach, in continuity with what Chapter IV established regarding Freud, has allowed real advances in understanding and accompanying the suffering loss occasions. But it also risks, when it becomes the only available framework for thinking mourning, obliterating the social, symbolic, and sometimes spiritual dimensions Chapters V and VI brought to light — as though creative fidelity and ritual support could be reduced to a mere variable among others within an individual psychic process.

5. Digital Memory: A Presence That No Longer Fades

Finally, an entirely unprecedented phenomenon deserves to be named for itself. Preserved messages, photographs become infinitely accessible, digital profiles sometimes kept active after the death of their creator, compose a form of persistent presence of the deceased that no generation before ours has known. This situation does not merely extend the trace described in Chapter III; it profoundly alters its conditions. The Levinasian trace inscribes itself within a living, selective memory, which transforms along with the one who carries it; the digital trace, by contrast, remains fixed, indifferent to the work of transformation Chapter IV described as necessary, sometimes even in tension with it. How does one experience an absence when the deceased's images, words, and messages remain as accessible as when they were alive? This question, to which this volume cannot yet provide a complete answer, directly foreshadows the work this collection will later devote to the digital transformations of human existence.

6. What Remains

What these transformations change are the historical, social, and technical conditions under which mourning is today lived through. What they do not change is the very structure this volume has

patiently uncovered: an irreversibility no technology can undo, a trace that continues to oblige beyond presence, a work of time that must avoid both forgetting and petrification, a fidelity built rather than preserved, and a need for community no privatisation fully manages to dissolve, as the practices diasporas continue to reinvent attest. The forms change; what remains, remains.

Conclusion — Inhabiting Absence

This volume set out from a question that resists any quick answer: what becomes of a person when a beloved being disappears? The most immediate answer speaks of loss, of emptiness, of a lack one must learn to fill or, failing that, to forget. But the inquiry conducted across these seven chapters leads elsewhere. Mourning is not merely what disappears with the one we loved; it is also what continues, in a transformed form, to make them exist within the life of the one who remains.

Six figures have accompanied this journey, and each, we can now see, led toward one and the same intuition, under a different name each time.

Jankélévitch showed a fidelity despite the irreversible: recognising that nothing will return, without this recognition requiring the severing of what united. Levinas showed a fidelity to the trace: what is no longer present can continue to oblige, to weigh, to make itself felt in the places, gestures, and decisions of the one who remains. Freud, reread in light of what completes and sometimes corrects him, showed a transformed fidelity: neither the forgetting that erases, nor the petrification that refuses time, but a patient work that changes the bond without severing it. Ricœur showed a creative fidelity: memory as a task rather than a content, as a narrative ever taken up again rather than a fixed monument. Louis-Vincent Thomas showed a fidelity sustained by ritual: no human being carries this work alone, and the societies that best understood this organised it collectively rather than abandoning it to each person separately. Ariès, finally, showed a fidelity put to the test by the contemporary forms of death, without this trial altering what it tests.

Mourning is not the work by which we cease to love the one who died; it is the work by which love learns to remain faithful when presence is no longer possible.

This fidelity, as we have seen chapter after chapter, lodges itself in neither of the two positions one might be tempted to oppose to one another. It is not the rupture that would seek to forget in order to heal more quickly. Nor is it the motionless preservation that, fearing betrayal, would let nothing change at all. It inhabits an in-between more demanding than either of the two outcomes it refuses: neither abandonment, nor the statue. It is in this in-between, and nowhere else, that what this volume has called creative fidelity is lodged.

This volume thus closes a set the three preceding ones built step by step. Being Born showed a being who receives what they did not choose. Parenthood showed this same being having become the one who transmits what they do not possess. Old Age showed how they learn to abide as the roles and strengths that defined them withdraw one by one. Mourning shows, finally, how they learn to remain faithful when it is no longer a function or a strength that fades, but the very presence of another by whom they had let themselves be constituted.

To receive. To transmit. To abide. To remain faithful.

These four movements are not merely the titles of four volumes. They trace one and the same truth, declined according to the thresholds where it best lets itself be glimpsed: the human being is never sufficient unto themselves, neither at their beginning, nor in their transmission, nor in their decline, nor in their loss. They receive, they give, they abide, and they continue to love what is no longer there to answer them. This, perhaps, at bottom, is what must be understood by inhabiting absence: not settling into a lack, but continuing to live within it a relation that has changed form without having ceased to be real.

And this is perhaps why, of all the thresholds this collection will have crossed, this is the only one no one crosses on their own account. One is born for oneself. One becomes a parent for another. One grows old within oneself. But one mourns someone — and it is by this other, to the very end, that one continues to be called to answer.

A poem accompanies this threshold in *Le Pédoncule des seuils*, the companion collection of poems that accompanies this series.

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