

Light after loss:

The role of museum and heritage learning in guiding grief and nurturing empathy



Kuindzhi Moonlit night on the Dnieper, 1880
Tretyakov Gallery

Katya Provornaya,
Group for Education in Museums

What is loss?

Loss, grief and *bereavement* are strongly associated with death.

**However, there are types of loss that have no formal rituals –
they are harder to process.**

Still birth

Loss of a job

Environmental loss / climate crisis

Loss of home

Forced migration

Loss of a meaningful relationship

Loss of health

The diversity of loss

Socially neglected loss – not recognised as loss by society

Socially unspeakable loss – losses “which the mourner has a difficult time talking”

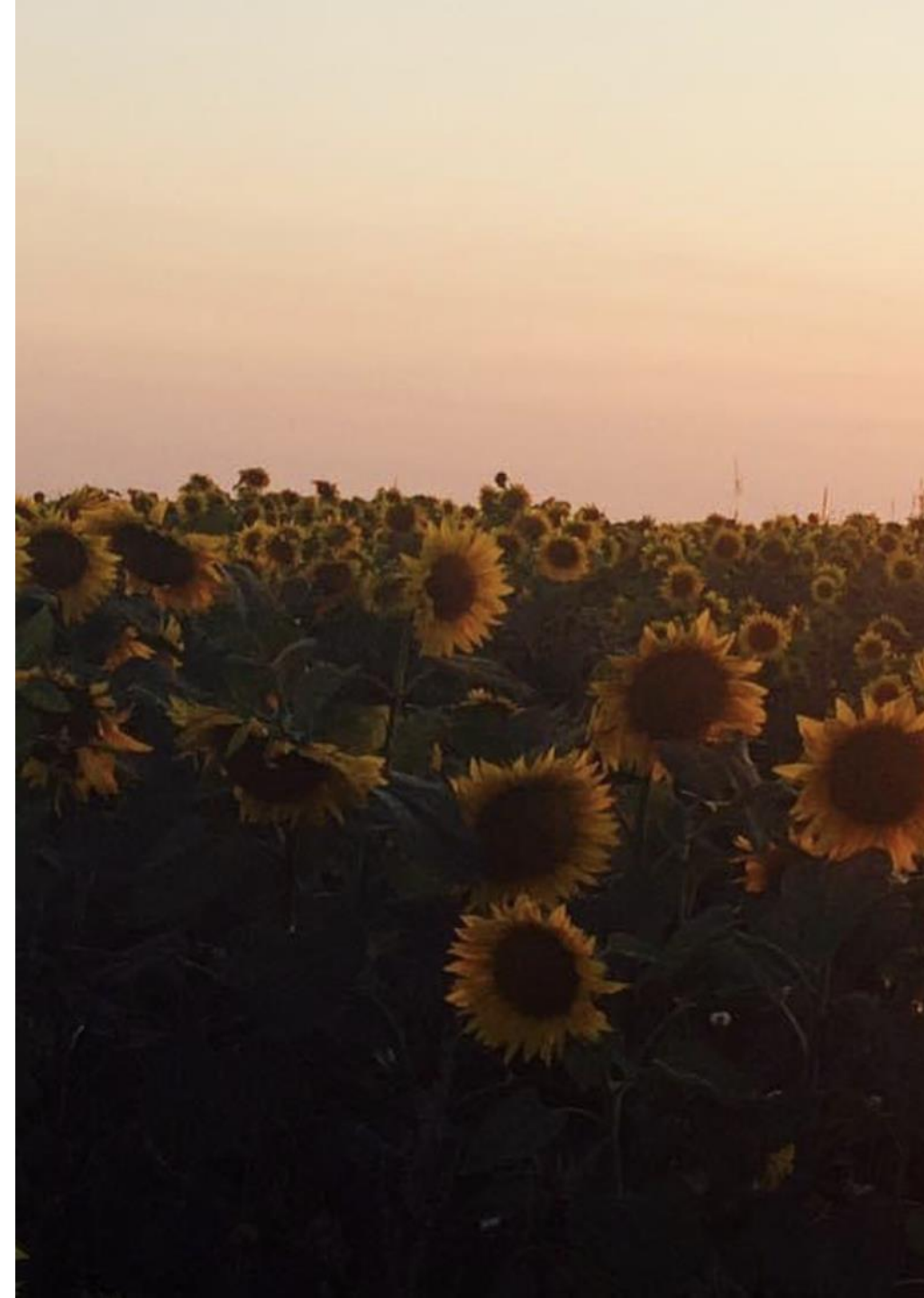
(W.J. Worden)

Ambiguous loss (unresolved loss) – remains unclear and without resolution.

Physical loss – leaving without goodbye (suicide, divorce, infertility, young adults leaving home)

Emotional loss – goodbye without leaving (coma, dementia, depression, homesickness, addictions)

(Pauline Boss)





Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, Peter Bruegel, c 1560
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

*About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window
or just walking dully along*

From
Musee des Beaux Arts
W. H. Auden

What is grief?

Many losses trigger grief, a complex experience comprised of “**thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and physiological changes that vary in pattern and intensity over time**”.

Stages of grief

(Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, 1969): *denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.*

Denial

Anger

Bargaining

Depression

Acceptance

Tasks of Mourning

Four Tasks of Mourning enable people to engage with their experience of loss and adapt to it:

To accept the reality of the loss

To adjust to a world without the deceased

To process the pain of grief

To find a way to remember the deceased while embarking on the rest of one's journey through life

William Worden

Grief that is harder to express

Disenfranchised grief that people experience when they “incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported” (Doka, 1986).

Growing around grief model (Tonkin): grief is not a health condition that needs to be cured, but rather a lifelong process which can help people explore the unknown dimensions of their “selves” as they “continue the process of integrating the loss with their lives, and moving forwards.



“Moving on, as a concept, is for stupid people, because any sensible person knows grief is a long-term project. I refuse to rush. The pain that is thrust upon us let no man slow or speed or fix.”

***Max Porter,
Grief is the Thing with Feathers***

How can museums help?

- Museums and heritage sites are seen as key places where public remembrance and commemoration take place on different levels (learning, collections, exhibitions).
- Museums can potentially substitute the missing rituals and help people and communities accept their losses and process their emotions.
- Embedding work around loss and grief can help museums raise public awareness about lesser known and tabooed topics and make society more inclusive and empathetic.



*Exhibition “Living with Death”
Leeds City Museum (May’24 – Jan’25)*

Collective grief in the digital age

THE FIRE WALL

Case Study: The Fire Wall

the Museum of Sonoma County (US)

SEARCH

Submitted by: Claudia Grebe Craig Location:
Chanate Road Facing Hidden Valley Elem,
95404



Source: The Museum of Sonoma County

Collective grief in the digital age



Artworks on display, The Fire Wall



The remains of the night

Object-based learning as a language for expressing the experience of grief

Object relation theory – Melanie Klein

Object Relations Theory suggesting that every child experiences loss through a separation from the mother (the breast) and this experience is projected on to their adult life



Melanie Klein
Source: Wikimedia Commons



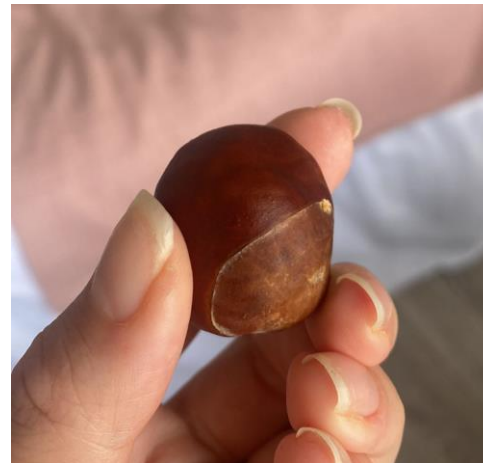
COLLECTION

A postcard

Yerevan, Armenia

I am a 70-year-old woman from Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. I visited Zagreb back in 1967 and the city is very close to my heart. When I found out from a local newspaper that there exists the Museum of Broken Relationships, I was sad and happy at the same time. This is a postcard that was inserted through the slit of my door a long time ago by our neighbours' son. He had been in love with me for three years. Following the old Armenian tradition, his parents came to our home to ask for my hand. My parents refused saying that their son did not deserve me. They left angry and very disappointed. The same evening their son drove his car off a cliff...

An object from the Museum of Broken Relationships Collection
Source: brokenships.com



“the object can act as repository for projections of different and difficult states of mind” (Lanceley)

I picked up this conker in a park near my grandma's house in Ukraine – and brought it all the way to the UK with me

Museum learning as a catalyst of empathy and activism

Empathy is an ability to sense other people's emotions. (Arnolde-de Simine, 2014)

Museums of the 21st century are expected “create visions and missions that address the big problems and the big questions” (Sandell): such as **climate change, human rights, global security and public health.**

Case Study: The Anchorage Museum – Supporting Communities displaced by climate change

(Alaska, US)



This is not the first time this community has had to relocate. In 1949 the Bureau for Indian Affairs (BIA) built schools in all Alaska Native communities after decades of forcing children to leave home to attend boarding schools. The BIA chose the site that is now Newtok.
PHOTOGRAPH BY KATIE ORLINSKY, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

*Relocating communities in Newtok (Alaska) due to land erosion,
Source: The National Geographic*

Museum learning as a catalyst of empathy and activism



Murals by Thomas Chung and some of his painting students from the University of Alaska.



Empowering communities through participatory learning

Case Study: Songs for Ukraine

Royal Opera House (London)

“When you sing together, you breathe together. And when you breathe together, that fosters collaboration, synergy and it deemphasises strife. What could be more fitting for the present day?”

William Spaulding, Chorus Director.



Songs for Ukraine

Source: Royal Opera House

The Museum of Loss

A Digital Space for Shared Stories of Displacement

Concept

The Museum of Loss invites displaced women residing in the UK to share personal objects they brought with them and tell their stories of loss, grief, love, hope and resilience. These objects become symbols not just of memory, but of strength and growth, as they reflect the journey of moving forward while honouring the past.

Why It Matters

This project encourages empathy and cultural exchange by creating a space where women can express their experiences of loss and grief, while also celebrating how they've grown around these challenges. It fosters collective reflection, mutual understanding, and emotional support, helping communities to find strength in their shared stories.



Conker

Eastern Ukraine, c.2020

Even though I now live in London, I still keep it with me. These memories wrap me around like a warm blanket: memories of playing in the autumn leaves, my grandparents' gentle voices in the background, and the feeling of home that I still carry with me, despite all the changes life has brought.

[Read more](#)



Clay jug

Ukraine, c 1986

This small ceramic pot was made in a village near my childhood home in Ukraine. I remember the delicate process of watching the potter shape it by hand, smoothing its surface with care, and painting it with intricate designs that represent the natural beauty of our land. The pot is simple, but it holds a world of memories.

[Read more](#)

Museum of Loss

Lost Home – Reained Meaning

Women Sharing Their Stories Through Objects

About

Explore

Submit an object

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[Read more](#)



Bottle of olive oil
Palestina, c.2023

This bottle of olive oil was pressed from olives grown in the hills of my family's land in Palestine. It carries the essence of the earth that nourished my ancestors for generations. I remember the smell of the olive harvest each fall, the sight of my grandmother's hands working the olives, pressing them into oil.

[Read more](#)



Kuchi Jewelry
Afghanistan, c 1970

This necklace has been in my family for generations. It's made of silver, with turquoise stones set in intricate designs that tell the story of the Kuchi, the nomadic tribes of Afghanistan. My grandmother gave it to me when I was a child, telling me it was more than just jewelry—it was a symbol of the strength and endurance of Afghan women.

[Read more](#)

Nest steps

- Secure partnerships
- Seek funding
- Launch pilot programme

Supporting the museum community

- By late April 2021, 8% of museum staff were made redundant as a result of operational changes caused by the pandemic.
- One to One Mentoring Programme – supporting the museum learning community through the turbulent time full of loss.

GEM

We connect &
learn together



A large field of sunflowers stretches across the frame, with the sun setting on the right side, casting a warm, golden glow over the scene. The sky is a soft, hazy orange, and the sunflowers in the foreground are silhouetted against the bright light.

Thank you!

Get in touch: katya@gem.org.uk