Walking through the valley: Margaret Gower's grief journey in Gail Godwin's *Father Melancholy's Daughter*

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Before Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's 1969 seminal work, *On Death and Dying*, most people knew very little about the mental, psychological, emotional, and spiritual effects of impending death on terminally ill patients. Her years of research and subsequent publications gave the world one of the first models of grief that did not attempt to oversimplify the complex process. She noted that many patients went through the same five phases when they found out they were dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Shortly before she died, Kübler-Ross co-authored *On Grief and Grieving*, a book that relates the five stages of dying she establishes in *On Death and Dying* to those grieving the loss of a loved one. The same stages of grief terminally ill patients experience (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) also apply to the people they leave behind. Depending on the individual and the circumstances of the loss, some skip stages, some change the order, some keep returning to certain stages, some move quickly, some take years.[1] Kübler-Ross's work quickly became a constructive text for understanding the dying and forced a culture that would rather avoid thinking about death to confront common fears and misconceptions about dying.

Gail Godwin may have been familiar with Kübler-Ross's work with dying patients, but when she published *Father Melancholy's Daughter* in 1991, *On Grief and Grieving* was fourteen years away from publication. Although Godwin could not have read Kübler-Ross's last book before writing her novel, her protagonist, Margaret Gower, experiences each of the five stages of grief after her mother deserts her. While the stages of grief that Margaret undergoes are typical, the circumstances that surround and affect each stage are unique to her situation. By showing both the universality and individuality of Margaret's grief journey, Godwin both presents a picture of grief with which readers can identify and respects the unique and personal nature of every grief process.

When Margaret Gower is six years old, her mother Ruth leaves the family for a short vacation, which becomes an extended absence, which becomes a semi-permanent living situation, which does not end until she dies in a car accident. After a living through a year of her absence, her husband and child are left to wonder whether she would have ever returned to them. To keep Ruth's memory alive, Walter and Margaret share stories, relive moments from the past, visit her grave every Sunday, and rely on each other for companionship.

Margaret's immediate reaction to the news that her mother has gone on vacation corresponds to the first stage of grief: denial. As a "temporary defense," denial is natural and healthy, so it is understandable that Margaret cannot initially believe her mother is gone.[2] Thinking "she hadn't heard him right," she asks Walter for clarification: "You mean she's not in the house?"[3] One manifestation of denial is questioning the reality of the situation.[4] Even after Margaret's father explains when Ruth left, why Ruth left, with whom Ruth left, and where Ruth is going, Margaret can still picture what Ruth would see if she were watching them from the upstairs window, where Margaret had assumed she was. Although Margaret is intelligent enough to realize that her mother cannot be in two places at once, she still thinks, "It was as though she, who was 'past Washington by now, depending on the traffic,' was also still here."[5] Her inability to picture her mother as gone is a normal part of the denial stage. Kübler-Ross distinguishes between denying the event happened and the inability to fully realize the significance of the event.[6] She argues that the denial stage of grieving is focused more on the latter.[6] Margaret fits this definition because she is unable to completely comprehend the consequences of the information her father gives her.

But because the grieving process is not always simple, Margaret's next actions defy the easy explanation of denial. Godwin introduces her readers to the fluidity of the grieving process by describing Margaret's temper-tantrum-like actions following Walter's news. Margaret's actions are a perfect example of anger, the second of Kübler-Ross's grief stages. She is shocked at the news of Ruth's departure, but becomes angry that Walter withheld the news for as long as he did: "all the time he had been walking along mouthing those 'ah's and 'nnn's and 'ow's so enthusiastically, he had been saving up this thing to say."[3] According to Walter, Margaret "turned into a little whirling fiend and started slinging [her] backpack at him and hitting his Legs."[5] She "tore up [her] phonetics paper," which she had so proudly been showing off only minutes before, "and stamped on the pieces."[5] Margaret acts out in anger only moments after her initial feelings of denial, illustrating that grief is not a simple, orderly process; she experiences the stages of denial and anger almost simultaneously. When Margaret reacts violently against her father and her paper, she is expressing her anger at "this unexpected, undeserved, and unwanted situation."[7] According to Kübler-Ross, "anger is a necessary stage of the healing process" even though in Margaret's situation it proves uncomfortable for her father.[7]

By the time Margaret narrates another flashback of her past, the reader has learned that Ruth dies in a car accident before returning to her family. Even though the reader is aware of the devastation looming in young Margaret's future, the young Margaret herself is unaware of this impending doom. Thus, her feelings and actions must be understood as her response to Ruth's abandonment, not Ruth's death. Margaret is aware only of the desertion, which she continues to believe is temporary— another manifestation of denial.[4] Even though she has already acted in anger, Margaret retreats again to a state of denial later that same evening. To reassure herself of the temporariness of Ruth's absence and to justify her denial, Margaret eavesdrops on her father as he admits the vestry into their house for their monthly meeting. In the hopes of learning more about her mother's disappearance and deciphering whether she should be alarmed, Margaret carefully listens to and analyzes the way Walter greets "each vestry member at the front door and how he would explain about Ruth's Vacation."[8] After being "somewhat reassured by the vestry's reaction," Margaret begins searching her mother's room for more calming evidence.[9] When she finds Ruth's favorite dress still hanging in the closet, she reassures herself that "the trip to New York couldn't be that important to her if she'd left her best dress at home."[10] According to Kübler-Ross, the way Margaret "explore[s] the circumstances surrounding the loss" and allows "the finality of the loss" to begin to sink in represents a movement away from the denial stage of grief.[11]

Margaret's conversations with Ruth over the phone also help to move her away from the denial stage of grief, but the lack of

communication between her and her mother becomes a source of anger. Although Margaret had previously "been able to receive [the tone of] these latent communications… in another medium than words," she now cannot understand her mother's subtextual messages.[12,13] Ruth still tries to communicate with Margaret "on more than one level," but Margaret can no longer understand.[12] Margaret buckles under the pressure of her mother's demands for forgiveness and permission, only visible in "the tone behind her words."[12] During the first few phone calls, Margaret admits that she "had broken down… and asked her when she was coming back."[12] Ruth cannot give the concrete answers Margaret desires; instead, she says she "wished [Margaret] were a little older" so they could "talk about all this better."[12] Although Margaret does not understand why, this statement makes her nauseous and eventually leads her to stop asking Ruth when she is coming back. Ruth and Margaret's failure to effectively communicate after Ruth leaves is a circumstance specific to Margaret's situation and affects the way she grieves.

The first phone call between mother and daughter begins a pattern of frustration and anger that many of their later conversations follow: Ruth tries to please Margaret but speaks in a subtextual language her daughter cannot understand, and Margaret makes futile attempts to find the words that will bring her mother home.[13] In this first long-distance conversation, Margaret cannot talk to her mother, even though a part of her wants to. When Ruth asks her a question, Margaret feels "very constricted in [her] chest" and is "suddenly very angry."[14] Margaret does not fully understand her anger, but she knows it makes her and her mother uncomfortable. During most of the conversation, she feels that "a contrary demon" prevents her from speaking.[14] Even though Walter tries to make up for his daughter's sullen quietness, Ruth can sense Margaret's anger.

This anger does not abate in subsequent conversations. Margaret is torn between her need for her mother and the anger she feels at being abandoned: "As much as I needed for her to come back, I dreaded our sessions on the phone; I grew to hate them."[12] The unresolved anger and tension between Ruth and Margaret continue to escalate, Ruth growing "colder and more impatient" and Margaret becoming "more sullen and resentful and monosyllabic."[12] Margaret resigns herself to the idea that Ruth is not coming back right away and stops begging her to come home. She is now fully entrenched in the anger stage of grief.

Like many who are grieving, Margaret again begins to experience two stages at once. Although she still feels angry, her actions show that she has also entered the bargaining stage. Bargaining is a helpful coping method because it "allows us to believe that we can restore order to the chaos that has taken over."[15] The strongest examples of Margaret's bargaining occur on the first two major holidays Ruth misses— Christmas and Easter. When Ruth sends Margaret and Walter Christmas presents from New York, Margaret leaves them sitting under the tree as part of the "magic bargain" she makes "when the presents started to arrive."[16] According to this bargain, if Margaret does not open her presents early, but instead leaves "them lying untouched in their sinister out-of-town papers, right up until Christmas morning… until Christmas *AFTER MASS*, then [Ruth] would have to come back."[16] Because she has not yet left the magical thinking of her youth behind her, Margaret holds herself responsible for everything that happens in her world, including whether or not her mother will come back.[17] For this reason, she feels "a pang" when Walter starts to unwrap his gift early.[16] Margaret worries that his "inability to hold out until Christmas morning, Christmas morning *after Mass*" would "cancel [her] bargain."[16] Although Margaret firmly holds to her resolution and does not open her Christmas presents early, she does not tell either of her parents about her secret bargain. Therefore, Margaret is appalled and embarrassed when Walter guesses her secret and tells Ruth, "She hasn't opened them yet. I think she's been having a little game with herself. You know, hoping you'd be back in time to open them with her."[18] Margaret immediately responds "I was not!" and wonders "How had he known this? And, even if he had guessed it, why had he betrayed me?"[18] In this instance, Margaret is angry at the failure of her bargain and at her father for exposing her to Ruth.

Margaret's first bargain not only fails to bring Ruth home, but also alienates her further. Despite this unsuccessful outcome, Margaret again thinks in bargain language when Easter approaches. While trying to convince Ruth to make the Golden Easter Egg, a duty that has always belonged to the rector's wife, she holds herself responsible for Ruth's actions.[19,20] After months of tense phone conversations, anger, and confusion, Margaret still believes her words have the power to make Ruth come home: "It was like in a fairy tale. If I came up with the right password, the magic kingdom was mine. If I didn't, I would lose everything."[21] But even though Margaret finds the right words and keeps her side of the bargain, Ruth does not return home. Finally, Margaret stops making bargains, stops trying to convince her mother to come home, and starts realizing how much she misses her. For example, she describes a "dull ache" that has become inseparable from the corner where she said goodbye to her mother.[22] Margaret describes this ache as "always there, even when I was preoccupied with other things."[22] The sadness that surrounded a Christmas without Ruth slowly gives way to the solemnness of the Lenten season. Margaret appreciates this time of the year because "it was okay to be sad, it was *comme il faut* to go around looking pensive and downcast."[22] Even a child as resilient and precocious as Margaret is not immune to the stages of grief. From the time Ruth deserts Margaret until Walter dies sixteen years later, Godwin gives the reader no indication that Margaret has begun to accept her mother's abandonment. Margaret remains in the first four stages of grief, primarily depression, for over sixteen years.

After Ruth left, Margaret took over the duty of helping Walter fight his bouts of clinical depression, and as she gets older, Margaret often finds herself fighting the "absence of all energy and desire" and feeling "pregnant with nothing, angry at nothing: simply impotent and without desire."[23] Ultimately, Margaret begins to wonder if she herself will eventually succumb to the Black Curtain of depression: "I breathed in and out and waited for the feeling to pass. It always did. Though maybe as I got older it would last longer, and one morning I would awake to find myself behind the Black Curtain like my father."[23] Had Margaret looked at the statistics of motherless daughters, she would have been further disappointed: psychologists have now proven that "the loss of a mother before the age of 17, by death or separation [is] highly associated with clinical depression."[24] Margaret struggles with feelings of depression into her early adulthood.

Walter's sudden death and her renewed relationship with Madelyn Farley are the catalysts that force Margaret to confront and cope with the emotions she has repressed since Ruth's abandonment. According to Zlater, this kind of delayed mourning is normal for motherless daughters. Walter's death is "another traumatic event in the life of the mourner" that triggers "a release of feelings that have been repressed or denied or both for many years."[25] When her father dies, Margaret spends weeks alone in the house, reflecting on her life and the lives of her parents. During this time, readers see Margaret beginning the process of grieving her father, but also moving forward in grieving her mother. For example, before Walter died, he and Margaret had often read Ruth's letters in an attempt to keep her memory alive, to keep themselves an intact family. While this may have been helpful for Margaret at the

time, she now needs to remove herself from their story and realize that she is a separate person. When Margaret now reads the love letters from Ruth to Walter, she feels she is "finished with something."[26] She recognizes that these letters represent "their story," not hers, because she has finally reached the stage in the grief journey where she can detach herself from her parents' story enough to realize that it does not have to define her.

The other catalyst that triggers Margaret's move toward acceptance is her reunion and frank conversations with Madelyn Farley. Margaret acknowledges that she and her father had "hollowed out a place for [Ruth] and kept it raw and deep with… unanswered questions."[27] When Margaret meets Madelyn again for the first time since she left with Ruth, Margaret is determined to "get everything [she] could out of Madelyn Farley concerning this complex woman who had been [her] mother" because there were yet "knots to be untied" and "secrets to be revealed."[28] She openly asks the questions she and Walter had long pondered, to which Madelyn responds, "Look, I have the uncomfortable feeling I'm going to be breaking down some illusions, but you've been asking straight questions and I'm going to give you straight answers."[29] Talking with Madelyn allows her to accept her mother as a complex individual, capable of both good and bad, which in turn enables her to accept Ruth's abandonment in a way she was previously unable to do.

The sense of "emotional detachment and objectivity" that Margaret exhibits in regards to her parents' relationship and her new knowledge about Ruth is specific to the acceptance stage, the final stage of the grieving process.[30] This stage does not mean that Margaret likes the situation; rather, acceptance is "about acknowledging all that has been lost and learning to live with that loss."[30] At the end of the novel, Margaret is just beginning to accept the loss of her parents. As Kübler-Ross is careful to point out, "[a]cceptance is a process that we experience, not a final stage with an end point."[31] Margaret is not finished grieving the loss of her mother or her father, but she is finally able to recognize her losses for what they are and admit the reality of her life.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, while affirming that most people move through the same five stages of grief, is also clear that these five stages are not always experienced in a uniform, methodical way: "People often think of the stages as lasting weeks or months. They forget that the stages are responses to feelings that can last for minutes or hours as we flip in and out of one and then another. We do not enter and leave each individual stage in a linear fashion. We may feel one, then another, and back again to the first one."[32] *Father Melancholy's Daughter* is the story of one individual character, her specific situation, and the growth that results from her journey through the grieving process. The brilliance of Godwin's portrayal of grief is that she does not oversimplify Margaret's progression through Kübler-Ross's stages. Instead, she carefully depicts a nuanced grief journey shaped by the complex and specific circumstances of Margaret's situation. As Father Melancholy himself said, "[a] vivid story can be far more illuminating than a dreary fact."[33] Godwin's unique characters make her story vivid, and in doing so illustrate a difficult and often ignored subject better expressed in story than textbook.

References

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[32]Kubler-Ross, E. Pg 18.

[33]Godwin, G. Pg 57.