When Words Fail: Maternal Grief in the Case of the Tempi Train Disaster[2]

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Abstract

Words seem inadequate to speak about the experience of loss, especially when it concerns the unimaginable and unbearable pain of losing a child—an event that overturns and violates the natural order of things and disrupts the strongest human bond.

How can a psychotherapist accompany a grieving mother? How can one hold her immeasurable sorrow and anguish? How can experiences that exceed language's capacity to name them and psyche's capacity to contain them find expression? How can a therapeutic space be created that opens cracks in the darkness and in the belief that "life no longer has meaning"? All these questions become even more complex in the case of the tragic multi-fatality train disaster in Tempi—an accident that plunged Greek society into collective trauma and made us confront the tragic omissions of a state that failed to function institutionally and to guarantee safety and protection for its citizens.

The birth of a child reminds parents of their own mortality. The life of a child signifies the vastness of life itself, a promise of continuity, an extension of the self projected into the future, while at the same time carrying within it the inevitability of an end.

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The death of a child—even in adulthood—shatters this expectation and constitutes a violent disruption of the "natural order of things". Life appears to lose its normality and predictability. The stable reference points of life—the deeply rooted expectation that children will outlive their parents—collapse, and the strongest human bond is ruptured, leaving behind a trauma that is exceedingly difficult to heal.

The disruption of this primary and fundamental bond is marked by intense and long-lasting emotional pain, a profound sense of emptiness, and a disturbance of parental identity. It reaches the limits of human endurance and radically alters the way parents perceive themselves, their relationships, and the world around them.

It is worth noting that there is no word in the Greek language to describe a parent who has lost a child. The death of a child, regardless of age, remains incomprehensible, inconceivable, unbearably painful—a burden so heavy that it often remains unspeakable, beyond the capacity of words to contain it.

The Israeli writer David Grossman, after the tragic loss of his son in the Lebanon War in 2006, writes poignantly in his book *Falling Out of Time* (2014):
"He died in August, and when the month ended I wondered—how can I enter September while he remains in August?" Through the form of a poetic dialogue between parents, a town, and a "Walker", the author attempts to express unspeakable grief, the search for meaning in loss, and the possibility of reconnecting with life—"outside time", where death and memory meet. All the characters in the work—resembling a chorus from ancient Greek tragedy—share the same wound: the loss of their child. Their voices compose a polyphonic lament that transcends the individual and becomes a collective experience.

Parents who have lost their children often describe the inadequacy of language to convey the experience of loss. The trauma of losing a child exceeds the limits of language; it becomes an experience that cannot be contained in words and resists symbolization. Meaning collapses, words withdraw, and silence becomes the way in which what cannot be spoken is carried within.

The book begins with a woman serving soup to her husband. Her hands are "tender", the soup is warm, yet both husband and wife feel frozen.

"For five years
we unspoke
that night.
You fell mute,
then I.
For you the quiet
was good.
and I felt it clutch
at my throat. One after,
the other, the words
died, and we were
like a house
where the lights
go slowly out,

until a sombre silence
fell -

Parents who experience the loss of a child often confront three central challenges.

-First and foremost, they face the loss of a unique and irreplaceable person whose distinctive characteristics formed an integral part of the family system. The absence of the child disrupts relationships and overturns the dynamics of the family, leaving a void that is difficult to fill. Grief does not only concern the loss of the child as an individual, but also the loss of the role and function the child held within the family system—as son or daughter, sibling, or emotional link between family members. The loss profoundly affects the relationships that were organized around the child's presence and challenges the identities of the remaining family members. Each person must renegotiate who they are after the death of the child, redefine their relationships, and seek new ways of connection and meaning, while keeping the bond with the child who has died alive, without negating the continuation of their own lives.

- The Loss of a Sense of Personal Agency and Strength. Parents often experience a deep sense of helplessness, as their fundamental role of caring for and protecting their child appears irreparably damaged by the child's premature death. Parenthood is intertwined not only with providing care and nourishment but also with protecting the child from danger and ensuring the continuity of life. Thus, when a child dies prematurely, parents may experience the collapse of the meaning of their parental identity. It can feel as though they have broken the promise they implicitly made—to protect their child, to keep them safe, and to secure the continuation of their life. They are often overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, inadequacy, despair, self-reproach, and a profound sense of failure in their parental role.

- The Loss of a Part of the Self**.** According to Freud, the loss of a child inflicts a deep narcissistic wound on the parents, shaking the ideal image of the ego and destabilizing the psychic core of parental identity. A child is not merely a separate object of love for a parent; the child is inseparably linked to the parent's sense of self and becomes part of their identity. When a child dies, parents lose not only the child but also all the dreams and hopes they had invested in them. It is as though the future symbolized by the child's existence vanishes—a part of the continuity of the self and the family. As a result, the framework of self-evident certainties that once structured family life collapses. Past, present, and future are no longer connected through a coherent narrative, and a deep existential void emerges—one that concerns not only the absence of the child but the collapse of the very sense of continuity and purpose.

Dennis Klass and his colleagues (1996) use the metaphor of amputation to describe the permanent void left in a parent after the loss of a child. A part of the self is lost—one that may adapt over time but can never be regenerated. The American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay (1952) poignantly captures this sense of emptiness and irreparable loss: "Where you used to be, there is a hole in the world, which I find myself constantly walking around in the daytime and falling into at night. I miss you like hell".

Sigmund Freud (1961, p.386) wrote to his friend Ludwig Binswanger:
"We find a place for what we lose. Although we know that after such a loss the acute phase of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. Whatever may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains

something else. And that is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating a love which we do not wish to relinquish".

The loss of a child is considered by many scholars to be one of the most severe forms of grief, with effects that often exceed those associated with the loss of a partner or a parent (Sanders,1989). Parents who experience such a loss show increased vulnerability to post-traumatic stress and significant difficulties in regulating their emotions, which may affect their daily functioning and relationships (Bonnano et al., 2002).

Grief itself constitutes a major stressor that can lead to both physical and psychological disturbances, such as severe depression, anxiety, and sleep disorders. The loss of a child is also associated with an increased risk of psychiatric hospitalization and long-term mortality among parents, indicating that its consequences extend beyond the psychological level to physical health as well (Li et al., 2003, 2005; Rostila et al., 2012). Furthermore, these parents often experience prolonged and highly burdensome grief, which in some cases may be accompanied by suicidal thoughts or behaviours (Zetumer et al., 2015).

Clinical Vignette

Martha sought help at the Family Therapy Unit following the tragic Tempi train disaster, in which she lost her son Manos, who was working for the railway company.

Death found Manos at the beginning of building his own family. His son is now only five years old. As his mother says: "He did everything quickly—his studies, his military service, his master's degree, marriage, a child... as if he somehow knew he would leave so early".

An Unbearable, Unspeakable Pain

It is extremely difficult for me to write about our first meetings... about the pain that filled the therapy room... about the mother's gaze, which seemed to say: *"What is the point of all this?"* I will isolate a few moments from those early sessions. "As time passes, I feel worse. I keep waiting for him, and he never comes. Only when I go to the grave do I find some meaning. Everything else is difficult to do. I cannot realize that our child is gone. We raised him, we made sacrifices so that he would want for nothing... Why did we do all that? Where did all our efforts go? Everything is erased... You struggle your whole life, you make dreams, and everything collapses. I can't bear it. Why don't I go to my child? Why do I go on living?

I wonder whether I failed to protect him. Before my father died, he told me: "Take care of your children above everything else". What mistake did we make in life that we were punished like this? Why us? Why my child? It is so unfair... so young... why did all this have to happen?"

When life takes such an unpredictable and violent turn, people desperately search for an explanation—an answer capable of taming the chaos they experience and gathering together the scattered fragments of their existence. If death itself is already a great enigma, as Freud once suggested, then violent and premature death is an even deeper and more painful one. The need for a "why" expresses a desire for control over something incomprehensible—a fantasy that if one could understand, perhaps one could change it, perhaps one could escape this devastation.

Martha continues:

“I see him in front of me all the time. I talk to him constantly. I talk to him as though he can hear me, sometimes silently, sometimes out loud. I say: what a pity. He will never see his child grow up... He will never hear his child call him father. I keep thinking about his final moments. Did he suffer? I hope he didn’t feel anything. He was in the third carriage. If he had been in the fourth, he might have survived”.

Here we see how sometimes everything hangs by a thread. Small coincidences and random events determine crucial outcomes. The image brings to mind the Moirai of Greek mythology—Lachesis, who measures the length of life, and Atropos, who cuts the thread, determining the inevitable end.

In another session Martha confided: “The pain keeps me tied to him. As long as I suffer, I keep him alive. If the pain decreases, it will be as if I abandon him”. This sentence condenses the desire to keep the beloved deceased alive through pain. Pain becomes the final thread connecting the living with the lost loved one. Clinging to suffering functions as an illusion of continuity, making the acceptance of loss feel like a betrayal.

At this stage, I feel that my role is simply to be there and listen. I absorb part of her suffering, trying to endure it and remain connected to her. Her silences are more frequent than her words. Words seem insufficient; the pain is mute. The therapist becomes a witness and companion to the grief. How can someone integrate into life the loss of a child- something forever lost? How can voice be given to something that resists language? Words seem powerless, incomplete. Yet without them, how can pain be metabolized?

Is it or isn’t it. The Illusion of Presence.

Martha once described the following incident:

“I was on the balcony—I used to wait for him there when he came back from work.
I was sitting there absent-mindedly when I saw him... ‘Manos!’ I said.
It was a young man who looked like him. Maybe a little taller... but even his walk was like my child’s. He was exactly like my Manos.
I wanted to run after him... to catch him... to see where he lived...
to ask if I could see him sometimes... just to comfort myself”.

Contradictory, confused, and endless thoughts follow: “Sometimes I say: why did God take him? But then I think-how can I blame God? I see drug addicts playing with death and I think: my child loved life, and he is gone. Then I say: what fault is it of those people? They are suffering too. And then I think: I wish he had never taken that job. And to think that we celebrated when he was hired. Who could have known what would follow?”

Here we observe the oscillation between presence and absence, disappearance and reappearance. Manos exists and does not exist—alive and dead, present and absent. Martha’s inner world is filled with splits and contradictions. The sense of normality—sitting on the balcony

waiting for her son to return from work—collides with the rupture caused by his violent death. How can she bridge the gap between the lived experience of her son being alive and returning home, and the current reality that he no longer exists? How can her psyche contain the harsh reality that her son, Manos, is dead? The image reminds me of one of the most moving scenes in n Homer's Odyssey, where Odysseus descends into Hades and encounters his mother, Anticleia, but cannot embrace her. The body has disappeared; only the shadow remains.

"Three times I rushed forward, longing to embrace her, and three times she slipped through my hands like a shadow, like a dream and flew away. Each time, the pain kept cutting deeper into my heart, until I cried out to her, speaking words that flew like birds: My mother why won't you stay so I can take hold of you, I long for you?" (English adaptation of the translation of Maronitis)

Like Anticleia for Odysseus, Manos is present as an image but absent as a body. He exists in memory and perception—recognizable and familiar—yet inaccessible, unable to respond to his mother's need for contact.

Through the resemblance of a stranger, Martha momentarily reconnects emotionally with her deceased son while simultaneously confronting the irrevocability of his loss (she knows now she will never again await him on the balcony).

The Grave

Martha visits the grave frequently. She tends to it and speaks to her son there. This way she maintains a form of continuity in the relationship. At the cemetery she meets other people who are also mourning. Talking with them helps her; they are united by pain. A woman who has lost her daughter once told her: *"I am afraid I will lose her image"*. Martha shares the same fear—the fear of the gradual erosion of memory, of the moment when the face will begin to fade. I am reminded of the words of another patient who had lost her brother in a car accident: "As I move forward and change, it feels as though I am leaving him behind. As strange as it may sound, I am afraid of the future. What will it be like in ten years? How much will I have changed, and how many things will he not have witnessed..." (Thanopoulou, 2025). The fear concerns not only the loss of the other but also the transformation of the self over time without the deceased loved one as witness to the life that continues.

Sometimes, at their children's graves, parents revive the memory of their children by recounting stories from the past. At other times they return to narratives from the period when their children—now deceased—were still young. It is as if they unconsciously return to the protected territory of childhood, where death does not yet have a place, where one does not die.

Martha once remarked: "Who would have thought that our dead son would connect us with so many other people?" This sentence encapsulates a paradoxical truth of grief. Death isolates mourners and separates them from the world of "normality"—an isolation that is not only social but also existential, since the world can no longer be experienced as it was before the loss. Yet at the same time, death creates a community of those who remain behind and share the experience of loss, allowing a fragile but deeply human form of encounter and solidarity.

The Photograph of the Dead Son and the Closed Casket

Martha was the only member of the family who wished to see the photograph of her dead son. She confessed that a part of her felt relieved; she said: "That's him. It is my child. The photograph helped me understand how he died".

He had sustained multiple injuries and was partially burned from a point of his body downward. He had not died from the collision itself but from toxic fumes. And yet the family was not given his body. They were given a closed coffin.

For grieving parents, the inability to receive and see the body of their child can be profoundly painful. Since the time of Homer, the care of the dead body and the honouring of the dead have functioned as ways of taming the brutality of death and facilitating the mourning process. It is telling that the Greek verb for burying (*kidevo*) derives from the verb *kedomai*, meaning "to care for". The body of the child becomes the only material bearer of the truth of death. When parents lose access to the body, they lose not only their child but also the possibility of farewell. They are deprived of the opportunity to touch the body, to caress it, to care for it one last time, to bid a last farewell.

The closed casket — the invisibility of the dead body — prolongs doubt, pain, and confusion, making the acceptance of death more difficult. When the body cannot be seen, the loss cannot be fully confirmed. How can one mourn what one has not seen? How can one believe in a death that has not taken form?

As Martha says: "Sometimes we wonder whether the coffin actually contained our child… or someone else".

The Visit to Manos's Workplace

Martha and her husband later visited the workplace where Manos had worked, together with other parents who had also lost children while they were on duty. On the walls there were photographs of the deceased employees. Among them she saw her son. Everyone present seemed frozen, awkward, unsure of how to behave. One woman—who was not one of the parents—was crying. Later she approached them and apologized. She confessed that she had been responsible for organizing the work shifts on the day of the accident. She felt guilty.

This woman seemed to carry a deep personal sense of responsibility for events that were beyond her control. In her reaction we can see a profoundly human moment of emotional connection—one that stands in sharp contrast to the cold and distant rhetoric of political leaders who avoid responsibility and fail to acknowledge the human pain involved.

Reflections on the Tempi Tragedy

When the death of a child occurs within a context of a collective disaster or social negligence, as in the case of the Tempi tragedy, individual trauma inevitably intertwines with the collective.

Parental grief ceases to be solely a private experience and transforms into a vehicle of collective sorrow, memory, and moral claim. Parents not only mourn their own children but, often against their will, assume the role of witnesses to a societal failure. Their grief acquires a political dimension, and the memory of their children becomes a moral demand for accountability, justice, and the restoration of the principle of protection.

The Tempi tragedy challenged fundamental aspects of our collective life. We were all outraged by the dysfunctions of the state apparatus, the chronic omissions and negligence of political leadership, and the endless game of shifting responsibility. In this sense, the Tempi accident can be viewed as a symptom of deeper institutional collapse, which explains why such a large portion of society identified with it. The questions that arose—how did it happen? why did it happen? could it have been prevented? —were not only about uncovering the causes but also reflected a profound existential anxiety. Tempi confronted us with the rawest and most violent face of death. The dismembered, charred, and deformed bodies of young people haunted our collective imagination and became symbols of institutional decay. Society faced not only the loss of youth but also the rupture of the very framework of trust that underpins social bonds.

Mourelis (2025) observes that Tempi seems to have created a crack through which it became apparent that our society resembles a Truman Show (as in the1998 film) — a counterfeit, deceptive normality. Even traveling by train is no longer guaranteed. The collapse of the meaning of safe transportation extends to the questioning of other certainties: the idea that “all is well”, the capability of the state and its practices, the credibility of political discourse and practice, the reliability of institutions, and the meaning of common good. Nothing is in the place it was before. The disturbance in meaning was caused by the action of an exceptionally reliable “we”, a social subject created by Tempi: the relatives of the deceased and the survivors.

Tempi revealed the incapacity of institutions to provide meaning, safety, and care in the face of death. When political authority—as an institutional entity—fails to fulfil its role and remains under constant scrutiny, the symbolic framework organizing collective trust is fractured. This crack allowed rumours, conspiracy theories, uncontrolled emotional reactions, and a diffuse sense of collective delirium to emerge as attempts to make sense of a trauma without institutional containment.

According to Petrou (2023), the work of mourning is always grounded in collective, social, religious, cultural, and political records, spaces, and processes. Grief is never solely an individual matter or a strictly private ordeal. Death is not simply a family affair. It is a social event that affects, in multiple ways, the organization of any society and the bonds between its members. Like any passage, death must be socially legitimized and validated; it must be integrated into society to become part of its history, as evidenced by public records, cemeteries, and countless prehistoric necropolises. In this sense, institutions must receive personal pain into their fold and, through collective actions and discourse, affirm the necessity of grief and the continuity of life—communicating something socially significant and essential for life and death, for the succession of generations (Petrou, 2023).

From this perspective, the Tempi tragedy represents not only a field of collective mourning but also a critical moment of assuming collective responsibility: for the functioning of institutions, for the meaning of public space, and ultimately for what it means to belong to a society that is obliged to protect and care for its citizens, both in life and in death.

Closure

The loss of a child constitutes a rupture, a profound existential fracture that permeates identity, relationships, and meanings within the family. Parents, siblings, and relatives are called upon to redefine not only their relationship with the lost child but also their relationships with each other—to reconstruct the family narrative through the void left by absence.

Parents gradually need to find ways to integrate the child's memory into their narrative so that absence transforms into a different kind of presence—a symbolic, internal connection.

One emblematic character in Grosman's *Falling Out of Time*, who struggles to find words for the death of his child, says at the end:

"Yet still it breaks my heart,
my son,
to think
that I have—
that one could—
that I have found
the words"

Through the dialectical tension and oscillation between silence and speech, the possibility of narration gradually emerges. Words are found for that which seems unutterable. They return, fragile, inadequate yet necessary, and grief begins to take shape through language and symbolic organization. The act of finding words for the unspeakable anguish of a child's death is deeply wrenching—the heart breaks—but speaking of the deceased child entails acknowledging the reality of death, an acknowledgment that intensifies psychic pain. The immediate experience is transformed into narrative, which is simultaneously unbearable—as if the beloved were lost a second time—and a source of consolation. Through language, absence is metaphorically transformed into presence. The lost child becomes present in speech, memory, and relationship. Moreover, the very moment in which speech returns, even if fragmented or imperfect, signifies that life continues to move forward despite irreparable loss. In this context, narration functions as a bridge: it does not erase pain but enables coexistence with absence and the preservation of psychic continuity.

The address "my son" indicates that dialogue with the absent person continues. The child remains a conversational partner; the relationship is not completely severed by death.

In grief and loss studies, there has been a shift from the belief that successful mourning requires detachment from the deceased. Scholars such as Klass, Silverman, and Nickman (1996) and Neimeyer (2001) argue that maintaining ongoing bonds with the deceased can play a positive, adaptive role in the grieving process. This perspective acknowledges that death ends a life but not necessarily a relationship. Instead of saying goodbye or seeking closure, the deceased may be simultaneously present and absent (Hall, 2014).

As Barnes (2014, p. 135) notes: "Those who have not traversed the tropics of grief are unable to comprehend that someone is dead; death may mean that they are no longer alive, but it does not

mean that they have ceased to exist". In losing a loved one, we lose physical presence but retain a symbolic representation, which allows the continuation of the relational experience. Elements that characterized the relationship—shared routines, special moments, beloved habits—become sources of memory and consolation, sustaining the bond with the deceased (Thanopoulou, 2025). The dead continue to affect the living, and mourners often continue to interact, consciously or unconsciously, with the deceased in deep and fundamental ways.

As T.S. Eliot poetically expresses in *Little Gidding V*, the fifth poem of *Four Quartets*:

"*We die with the dying. See, they depart, and we go with them. We are born with the dead. See, they return, and bring us with them. The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree are of equal duration. (...) History is a pattern of timeless moments*".

Nick Cave, who experienced the loss of two sons, confesses in *Faith, Hope and Carnage* (conversation with Sean O'Hagan, p. 45):

"That perhaps grief can be seen as a kind of exalted state where the person who is grieving is the closest they will ever be to the fundamental essence of things. Because in grief, you become deeply acquainted with the idea of human mortality. You go to a very dark place and experience the extremities of your own pain – you are taken to the very limits of suffering. As far as I can see, there is a transformative aspect to this place of suffering. We are essentially altered or remade by it. Now, this process is terrifying, but in time you return to the world with some kind of knowledge that has something to do with our vulnerability as participants in this human drama. Everything seems so fragile and precious and heightened, and the world and the people in it seem so endangered, and yet so beautiful. To me it feels that, in this dark place, the idea of God feels more present or maybe more essential. It actually feels like grief and God are somehow intertwined. It feels that, in grief, you draw closer to the veil that separates this world from the next. I allow myself to believe such things, because it is good for me to do so".

Myrsini Gana reflects:

"Grief is a smooth round pebble I always carry in my pocket. It is so smooth because millions, billions of people have touched it; no one, ever, in the history of our species has escaped it. I put my hand in my pocket and rub it gently, and sometimes I put it in my mouth. I must, like Demosthenes, learn to speak with this pebble in my mouth, speak around it, speak as if it does not exist while it is there, now speaking through it. Sometimes I want to swallow it, but I know that if I do, it will take the place of my heart". (Gana, *To Vima*, 28/11/2025)

The pain of loss is not healed by forgetfulness or time, but by memories, recollections, and stories preserved for the next generation. Stories are the passage through which what we loved remains alive. As Galeano writes: "Stories never say goodbye; they say we'll meet again" (Thanopoulou, 2025).

A word Manos often said was "unbelievable". Now Martha repeats it: "It seems unbelievable to me that he is gone". I remember him happy and optimistic, as if that side of life left with him. My husband saw him in a dream; he was smiling and saying: "Go out more often, forget the difficulties. There is only one life".

In the words of Ritsos:

"Dead children never leave their homes,
they wander there, entwining themselves in their mother's skirts
while she prepares the meal and hears the water boil
as if studying
the steam and the time. Always there—
And the house takes on another narrowness and wideness
as if catching a quiet rain
in midsummer, in deserted fields.
Dead children do not leave. They stay at home
and have a special preference for playing in the locked hallway
and every day they grow inside our hearts, so much
that the pain beneath our ribs is no longer from deprivation
but from growth. And if women sometimes let out a cry in their sleep,
it is because they bear their belly again
(…)
Absence lives, therefore, with us or alone, its own life,
gesturing imperceptibly, remaining silent, decaying, aging
like a proper existence, with the mute smile that slowly wrinkles
the mouth and eyes, measured by our time,
losing colors, multiplying its shadow—"

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