

OF BIRDS AND BUTTERFLIES: The Continuity of Life after the Death of a Sibling

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This article was first written in fall 2012 when I was granted sabbatical leave to develop a new area of research on sibling loss and to write a narrative manuscript on grief for publication. I completed the manuscript at the end of sabbatical and submitted it to a journal for publication. Much to my surprise and dismay, I received an email rejecting the manuscript twenty-four hours after I had submitted it. I was told the content was not a fit for the journal. I had read several other narratives about loss due to death in the same journal, so I was stunned by their reply. Moreover, I was deeply hurt by their response that felt like a rejection of my grief and of my brother. I put the manuscript away and did not touch it for years.

Adrian was my only sibling. He was my younger brother by nine years. He died eleven years ago at the age of thirty-one. The doctors believe that my brother acquired a mutation of the H1N1 virus (also known as the swine flu). He died after being in ICU for ten days. My family and I were still reeling from my father's 2007 death due to prostate cancer when my brother died. In fact, Adrian died five days short of the two-year anniversary of our father's death and was buried the same date our father was buried. Heartbreakingly, within a two-year time frame, the family I was born into went from four to two.

I write this paragraph in July 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. March and April were difficult months for me. Given my experience with Adrian's infection and death, I assumed that there was a strong likelihood that my husband or I could acquire the virus and die. It created immense panic, anxiety, fear, and despair. I

was extremely worried that my daughter would be orphaned. I did everything possible to reduce the likelihood of infection. We stayed home, we washed our hands religiously, cleaned and disinfected the house, left our shoes at the door, cleaned all the groceries, and stopped seeing friends and extended family.

At the end of April, I started to realize that I had let hope disappear from my life and I needed to create boundaries on the amount of information I took in about COVID-19. I started to read books and articles that reminded me that this experience was not unique (it simply was new to me) and people have survived other difficult times. I also received poetry from a close friend that helped me reconnect with hope and reminded me of the power of transformation. His poetry reminded me that it was up to me to let hope thrive or to let fear dictate my life.

I thought Adrian had an awfully bad cold. He would be sick for a few days and then feel better for a few days. This went on the entire month of June. In July he was feeling sicker. He had fevers and was having problems breathing. He did not have health insurance and didn't think he was that seriously ill. By the end of July, it was apparent that he was extremely sick. We took him to the emergency room on a Saturday and the doctors said he had pneumonia. They gave him some medication and told us to take him back to the doctor on Monday. He never made it to the doctor. An ambulance picked him up from my mother's home and took him to the emergency room. From there he went to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) and never left. Adrian lived in ICU on a ventilator for ten days.

I was at the hospital everyday along with my mother. There were days I had no one to take care of my five-year-old daughter so I would bring her with me to the hospital. My mom and I would take turns watching her so that one of us

could be with Adrian. A few days after Adrian had been in ICU, my daughter and I went outside of the hospital to get some sun and to play. We were playing a game on the lawn when a yellow and black butterfly flew past me. I froze and watched it as it turned around and flew past me again. I crumbled to the grass and began to sob. My daughter came running up to me and asked, “Mom, why are you crying?” What could I tell her? I knew with certainty in that moment that Adrian was not going to survive.

Drawing on knowledge from previous losses and understanding about how our ancestors communicate with us, I knew that butterfly was my grandmother collecting her grandson.

I could tell my daughter was concerned so I replied, “I am feeling very sad about Tío Adrian being sick.” She knelt next to me in the grass and asked if we could pray. I nodded my head. She held my hand and prayed, “Hi God. This is Maya and her mom. Tío Adrian is very sick right now. We pray that you take care of him and make him better. Amen.” It was the first time my daughter led a prayer. She hugged me and we held each other until I had the courage to get up and see my brother again.

That evening Adrian went code blue which meant the hospital staff needed to resuscitate him because he had gone into respiratory arrest. His lungs had hardened, and he was unable to breathe. The doctor attending to Adrian made a hole in one of Adrian’s lungs to help soften the lung tissue and assist with breathing. It worked for that evening. Adrian coded another two times. The last time there was nothing they could do to bring him back.

Adrian died on August 3, 2009.

It is January 2, 2021. In the last few weeks, we have had a constant stream of text messages and phone calls letting us know of family and friends that are positive with COVID-19. The experiences run the spectrum with some loved ones being asymptomatic and others so severely ill that they require hospitalization. A family friend and my mother's neighbor and comadre died a few weeks ago from COVID-19. My brother's best friend has COVID-19. He is at home struggling with fever, body aches, and a horrific cough. His father is intubated and in ICU. Not sure if his father will survive. The list is lengthy and heartbreaking.

Several hundred people arrived at the small city cemetery located in my parent's neighborhood to bury my brother. We gathered and milled around the entrance. There were people from all aspects of Adrian's life: neighbors, childhood friends, classmates, teammates, church friends, fraternity brothers, and family. My friends and colleagues were there as well, two of which had traveled from out of state to support me. There were also many of my parents' lifelong friends and peers that were heartbroken for my mother's loss and the loss of my young brother.

It was a hot morning, and we all began to perspire as we lined up for the funeral procession. It was a long procession line with a banda ahead of Adrian's casket. The musicians began to tune their instruments letting the mourners know that the service would soon begin. I stood with my family behind Adrian's casket and announced, "Adrian was an American citizen born to immigrant parents from Mexico. However, Adrian lived his life as a Mexican national and this was embodied in his love for music and how he lived his life." The banda began to play "El Rey" ("The King"). It is a classic ranchera song by Jose Alfredo Jimenez about a man who lives life on his terms, irrespective of the rules or

expectations of others; with or without money, with or without a woman, he is in charge of his life, and he asserts, we will be sad the day he dies regardless of what we thought of him.

When the song ended the last of the mourners joined the processional line and the banda began to play a second song titled, “Que Me Entierren Con La Banda” (“Bury me with a Banda Playing”). This is a contemporary Mexican corrido which was one of Adrian’s favorite types of music. This particular song makes reference to the desire to live life fully with friends, music, and parties. This song challenges the notion of all work and no play. The last request made in the song is to be buried with banda music playing in the background; a request my brother made known to one of his fraternity brothers over drinks one evening.

With the banda playing and leading the processional, we began our long walk to the far end of the cemetery. Adrian was buried next to our father. We arrived at the plot and there were not enough chairs for the crowd so many mourners stood and sought shade from a large tree close to the plots. An array of Adrian’s friends shared stories, his fraternity brothers held a solemn rite of commendation, more music, and my husband eloquently spoke about my brother’s life. I was the last one to speak at the service.

I looked out into the faces of the mourners. They were visibly hot and uncomfortable in their formal funeral attire; yet, it became quickly apparent to me as I stared at them that they were filled with sadness and love for me, Adrian, and my family. It was their looks of tender support that gave me the courage to speak. I acknowledged to the funeral-goers that “I am an American citizen born to immigrant parents from Mexico and I am a Chicana. Maybe the generational difference between us led Adrian and I to identify differently

regarding our ethnicity. I am the radical Chicana, and he was the passionate Mexican.” I went on to share, “I am a psychologist and a professor in an ethnic studies department. It has been my honor to work with colleagues from an array of disciplines and areas of expertise regarding the Mexican and Chicano experience in the United States. It is from one of my colleagues that I learned that in Meso-American mythology the soul is in the heart. So, when we die, the belief is that our souls transform into winged creatures. Birds. Butterflies. These have always been a part of my family’s life, my father’s life, my life. So now, to honor that tradition and that connection to our ancestors—and to celebrate the passing of my brother’s soul—we release these butterflies.”

My cousins, Annette, Brigitte, and Miriam, joined me at the podium. In their possession was a small box. They faced the crowd and removed the box’s lid. I could feel the people around me holding their breath, their faces still, and their bodies taut with anticipation. We watched as the first butterfly unfolded its wings, slowly, as though it was not sure whether it wanted to leave its darkened home, or perhaps it was temporarily stunned by the light and air to which it was being exposed. Then, it fluttered towards the blue sky, followed by others, one by one at first, and suddenly, in a radiant, shimmering, cloud of color. I watched them go, tears of pain and sorrow mingling with bittersweet joy on my face.

The Continuity of Life after the Death of a Sibling

When we suffer trauma or bitter disappointment or violent shock, the soul may leave the body to escape. This produces the phenomena that psychologists call dissociation and shamans call soul loss (Moss, 2012, p. 61).

The social scientist in me reflects on the first statement and I can hear the “uh-huh” go off in my head. What I called “fog” after Adrian’s death is actually

dissociation. Yes, I lost touch with the reality around me and mentally escaped to cope with the loss and pain of Adrian being gone. I now have a nice psychological term to describe my experience. And one that validated the linear training I received in graduate school where there is always a beginning, middle and an end. Adrian died, I experienced dissociation, and now I am moving forward with my life consciously. The end.

My heart skips a beat as I further consider the notion of soul loss. As I contemplate the possibility of losing soul upon Adrian's death, I experience a strong visceral reaction. I flashback to the end of July 2009 and can see myself sitting next to the entrance of Adrian's room in ICU. It is the evening that Adrian went code blue for the first time. Word spread quickly through text and phone calls that Adrian might not survive the night. We are bombarded by family and friends that want to say good-bye to Adrian. It is all too much for my mother. She cannot be in the room with him, so I am her replacement. I sit and greet people as they arrive in ICU. I am calm and show them to the window. Adrian is not allowed visitors in his room to protect him and to protect visitors from the virus. This goes on for hours. In retrospect, I comprehend that this is the beginning of where I start to lose touch with reality and begin to lose a part of my soul: how is it possible that my "little brother" Adrian is going to die?

What I realize in that flashback is that soul loss more appropriately explains my life since the death of my brother. I did not simply check out mentally from the world and my life, I lost a part of me when Adrian died. Moss (2012) contends that, "When soul goes missing, we not only lose energy but also lose memory, identity, personal gifts and skills, and the ability to feel deeply and to choose and act from the heart" (p. 63). This description accurately describes what occurred to me after the death of my brother. I lost memory. I lost myself. I lost my heart.

The surge has taken a major toll on the hospitals in Los Angeles. People with COVID19 are being treated in tents outside of many hospitals because they are filled. I found out this week that one of my compadres lived in one of these tents for two days in the rain and cold of December. His son brought him home because he could no longer tolerate seeing his father in those conditions. It is unclear if my compadre will survive at home without medical attention.

As I sit here processing this information, I am filled with gratitude that this was not Adrian's experience. While the hospital staff were not able to save my brother's life, they were able to place him in a bed, in an ICU room. He received medical care that allowed him to be "comfortable" given his symptoms. We were able to visit with him and be with him the entire ten days that he was hospitalized. Family and friends came to visit Adrian and to support me and my mom. I am horrified and sad that this is not an opportunity provided today due to the current conditions created by the ongoing surges.



When Adrian went code blue for the final time, I was in the room with him along with my mother and his girlfriend. When the blue light and alarm sounded announcing the need for resuscitation to hospital staff, we exited Adrian's ICU room, and watched the staff try to revive Adrian through the room's window. We did not talk to each other. We did not hold each other or comfort each other. We stood transfixed at the window and watched the monitors showing his heart rate and oxygen intake.

At some point, hospital security arrived and asked that we leave the ICU. It is unclear to me why they asked us to leave. We were not disturbing them, and we were not making any noise. We simply stood there in shock observing the

resuscitation efforts. We also did not resist when asked to leave. We quietly followed the security guard out of ICU and into the waiting room. Family and friends were there praying and waiting. The bravado we experienced in ICU crumpled. We fell into the arms of loved ones and began to sob.

Approximately thirty minutes later the attending doctor came out to talk to my mom and inform her that Adrian was probably brain dead due to oxygen deprivation. He wanted her permission to stop resuscitation efforts. After consultation with Adrian's girlfriend, consent was given, and we were allowed to see Adrian. Adrian's complexion was blue. My "little brother" was blue. I suffered major soul loss.



In her book, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion (2005) shares her experiences after the death of her husband. Her husband had a heart attack at the dinner table and died in her presence. She goes into shock and in the initial weeks and months after his death she is primarily focused on what needs to be attended to. These tasks are the only thoughts she is capable of during this time. This, too, was my experience. These needed tasks were my lifeline and my final gift to my brother.

I dealt with the hospital and Adrian's medical bills. When it was time for Adrian's body to be picked up at the hospital, I was informed that the family would not be allowed to view or escort his departure from the hospital. I insisted that we be given the opportunity. They only permitted one of us to be with him as he was removed from ICU; I was the lucky one. I remember being shocked that he was in a body bag. The same mortuary had wrapped my father in a shroud when he died and I had assumed Adrian would have a

similar experience. I stood as his body was rolled out of the room and began an internal conversation with him; “It’s going to be okay Adrian. I’m going to take care of everything. You don’t have to worry. I will take care of everything. Bye bro. Bye Adrian.”

Adrian was assigned a social worker a few days after he was admitted into the ICU. Adrian was unemployed and uninsured when he was hospitalized. The social worker’s job was to assist us in filling out forms so Adrian could obtain public health insurance known in California as Medi-Cal. It was unclear at that point whether he qualified since he did not directly meet the necessary criteria to receive public assistance. Adrian died shortly after I started filling out the paperwork and I did not give them much thought after that point. A few weeks after his death, the social worker contacted me while I was at work. She identified herself and offered me and my family condolences. She continued to speak and informed me that she wanted to move forward with Adrian’s paperwork. I remember being surprised and asking her if it was not a moot point since Adrian was dead. He no longer met the criteria. She gently told me that he did qualify. I asked her to clarify. Apparently, his death made him eligible for insurance. I remember being confused and asked for further explanation. I hung up on the social worker after her explanation. I was enraged. My brother did not receive public health insurance while he was alive because he was not a parent or in the age groups that qualify, but he qualified in death.



I helped plan and organize Adrian’s funeral. I handled Adrian’s financial matters. I dealt with his girlfriend when she decided she no longer wanted to stay in communication with our family. I sorted and organized his belongings. I distributed these items to family, friends, and the Goodwill. I attended to the

tasks that needed consideration after his death. These responsibilities provided me a reprieve from experiencing my grief. These tasks allowed me to ignore the excruciating pain in my heart, initially.

It began immediately after Adrian's death. I was sitting with my family outside of the ICU waiting for the mortuary to arrive to pick up Adrian's body. It started in the right foot with a tremble. I pushed my foot down to calm the movement. It worked for a few minutes. Then my knee began to shake and tremble. My whole leg began to move, and I could not control the movement sitting down. I stood. It stopped. I sat. It started again with both legs trembling. As the night progressed at the hospital, the shaking increased and included my arms. By the end of the night as I tried to go to sleep the shaking occurred on and off and included my organs. I was shaking on the inside and outside of my body. My body tried to absorb and release the shock of my brother's death to no avail.

This was the beginning of any array of physical maladies that I experienced after Adrian's death. My body consistently ached for about a year. There were mornings that I would awaken with the sensation that someone had beaten on my back all night. I had a difficult time with pain in my pelvis and kidneys. I experienced headaches and tension in my face. I also held my breath without being aware of what I was doing; it always came as a surprise when I suddenly needed air. None of these ailments were unique to me. Many individuals facing grief have similar experiences (Didion, 2005).

My immediate family, my daughter and husband, probably suffered the most from my grief. While I was able to think and attend to my brother's matters and my mother's needs during this time frame, I was not as efficient with my own family. When I was at home, my energy level was low and I was unable to concentrate. I lived on autopilot for an exceptionally long time.

For two weeks after Adrian's death, I took our five-year-old daughter to Starbucks for breakfast and lunch. For some reason, I could drive to the Starbucks—which was around the corner from our house—but I could not drive to the grocery store or share with my husband that we needed food. I also traumatized a barista at Starbucks when I cried after she handed me a cup of coffee. I started to cry because I realized that Adrian would never drink another cup of coffee again. While I realized it was trivial, particularly given that Adrian was not a big coffee drinker, I think in that moment I understood that Adrian would no longer engage in everyday activities such as drinking a cup of coffee; the aspects of daily and ordinary life had ended for him. It was devastating to consider.

Our daughter entered kindergarten shortly after Adrian's death. My memory of her early schooling is limited and the few memories I have are linked to Adrian. One of Maya's first accomplishments in school was winning a Student of the Month award. I remember sitting in my car crying after the assembly because I could not share this proud moment with him.

I also remember an incident with one of the other kindergarten mothers. We were standing in line in front of Maya's classroom waiting for the teacher to arrive when she approached me. "Hi. How are you this morning," she asked. I turned and smiled, "I'm okay." She shared, "I met your mom yesterday when she picked up your daughter from school." I nodded my head and smiled. She continued, "Do you have brothers or sisters?" I froze. She was the first person to ask me this question after Adrian's death. Evidently, sibling survivors "loath" this question (DeVita-Raeburn, 2004). How exactly does one answer this question? I could not reply. My eyes filled up with tears. I finally choked out, "I had a brother and he died during the summer." Suddenly, there were tears in her eyes as well. She shared, "My parents died in a car accident last year in Mexico." Neither one of us said anything after that. It wasn't necessary. We just stood next to each other feeling the pain of our loss.



Unbeknownst to me due to my deep grief, the death of my father and brother took a significant toll on my marriage. Their deaths brought to the surface my communication weaknesses and highlighted the flaws within my marriage. People that know me are always surprised when I tell them that I have a difficult time talking and sharing with my husband. I am a vivacious outgoing person and have no problem discussing intimate issues with family, students, colleagues, and friends. However, this trait does not carry over into my relationship with my husband.

The shock I experienced after Adrian's death deprived me of energy or the ability to speak about my grief. My coping mechanism after he died was to go through the motions of life and not talk about my bereavement. During that first year after his death, I was able to talk about Adrian, share stories about

him, and discuss his stay in the hospital, but I could not talk about my feelings regarding his death. I simply could not allow those emotions to emerge because I felt that I would go insane. So, instead I checked out. At the time, it seemed like the most practical thing to do to survive.

I survived and my marriage took a major hit. My complete emotional withdrawal and my inability to communicate what was occurring to me to my husband negatively impacted our marriage. My husband felt lonely and rejected. He felt excluded from my life and my bereavement. What I could not share with him at that time is that it was impossible for me to open up. I was simply at a loss for words because I did not have the vocabulary or capacity at that time to describe my experience. Moreover, the pain from my grief overwhelmed my ability to properly ascertain anything around me. I was not able to see what was occurring in my marriage and my husband, also, struggled communicating his feelings.

My husband and I separated. We were forced to confront the reality of our marriage. While it was evident that we loved each other deeply, neither one of us felt emotionally safe in the relationship. We also had an extremely difficult time sharing what we were feeling. The separation forced us to make conscious choices. If our goal was to stay married, we were going to have to talk and share with each other. With the assistance of couple's counseling and frank conversations regarding the direction and vision we had for our marriage, we reconciled after a few months.



As a college professor I spend much of my time teaching and developing relationships with students in my class. Many students come see me during my

office hours to discuss coursework or their personal lives. Shortly after my father died, one of my students, Maria, came to discuss a paper she was writing for my class. She entered my office and sat in the chair next to my desk. She placed her backpack on her lap and pulled out a folder which covered with pictures of a little boy. I smiled at her and asked, "Who is the little boy?" She lovingly caressed the binder and told me, "It's my little brother." She adjusted the chair she was sitting in and looked me directly in the eyes. She said, "My brother died earlier in the year due to cancer." My heart was heavy when I said, "Oh Maria. I am so sorry for your loss. I lost my dad a year and a half ago. And it's been hard. I can only imagine what you and your family are experiencing." Tears came to her eyes and she tried to keep them at bay, but within seconds they were streaming down her face. I held her hand and silently cried with her.

Six months after this encounter in my office, my brother died. My brother conveniently died before the semester started. This allowed me to be with him at the hospital while he was in ICU and when he died it provided me the necessary time to plan and attend his funeral services without worrying about work. The classes I taught that fall were classes I had taught prior semesters so not much prep work was necessary. Many of my friends and colleagues asked if I wanted to take the semester off. Financially it was not an option. More importantly, the normalcy and the routine that work provided was a necessary survival tool.

I needed a distraction from my thoughts. I kept rewinding the events of that summer before Adrian died. I tried to comprehend how he could have obtained the virus and how it was possible that it could have killed him in such a short period of time. I would start from the beginning – the bad cold he caught in June, our family camping trip to Santa Barbara, the ambulance arriving at my mom's house to take him to emergency, watching the emergency room staff

try to help him breath, my brother struggling with the intubation tube, the decision to put Adrian in a medically induced coma¹ so he would not pull out the intubation tube, the three times he went code blue, ALL the visitors, and his final death. I would rewind and review; rewind and review.²

While work interrupted this thought process, it also brought up some awkward social moments I had not anticipated. For example, the first class I taught that fall had several students that had taken previous courses with me and whom I had established a relationship with. When I stood in front of the classroom to begin class, those students looked at me expectantly with wide smiles on their faces. I shared, “My brother died a few weeks ago and I am having a hard time. I don’t know if I am going to make it through the semester given how I am feeling right now, but I am going to try my best.” The faces of the students who knew me went from smiles to looks of sympathy and concern. Their looks unglued me. The tears swelled in my eyes; I was mortified. The last thing I wanted to do was cry in front of students. I quickly turned and asked, “Can you please give me a moment to compose myself?” I took several deep breaths and gave myself a small pep talk, “You can do this, Chris. It’s okay. Take a deep breath and calm down. It’s going to be okay.” After a few minutes I was composed and able to review the course syllabus with the class.

The next class was worse because there was a student that looked like my brother and his name was A. Rodriguez. My brother’s name was Adrian Rodriguez. I could not take my eyes off him and had to control a wild urge to caress his face. It became rather apparent that I was staring, and I apologized, “A. I am so sorry for staring. As I shared at the beginning of class, my brother recently died, and you look a lot like him. I was not anticipating having this experience. I am sorry.” He nodded his head and gave me a wide a smile of support. Throughout the semester I invariably called him Adrian. Sometimes I

caught the error and other times students had to tell me I used the wrong name.

The college campus I work in is a Hispanic serving institution which means there are young Latino men on our campus. I never gave it much thought until Adrian died. On my return to work and in the subsequent years after Adrian's death I experience psuedosightings.³ A consistent pattern emerges when I walk around campus; invariably I believe one of the young men on our campus is my brother. Each time I do a double take and make sure I get a good look at the man because I am almost one-hundred percent it is Adrian. Of course, each time, much to my heart's dismay, it is not my brother. One of the more emotional moments occurred once at the food court while I was waiting for my lunch order. All I heard was "How you doing bro?" and my heart constricted. I held my breath and turned around to see who was speaking. It was a young college student speaking to a food court employee. I took a breath in and began to cry. The disappointment was bittersweet because at least for a few seconds I experienced the thrill of hearing my brother speak.

The last time I talked to Adrian was in the emergency room before they moved him to ICU. The emergency room staff was struggling to stabilize him and his breathing. One of the nurses asked me an array of questions regarding his condition and the medication he was taking. I remember continually looking over her shoulder to see how Adrian was doing. He kept fighting with the hospital staff regarding the breathing apparatus they were using to help him breath. He kept telling them it made him feel worse and made breathing difficult. They phoned the specialist on call to determine next steps for Adrian. While they were on the phone I went to his bedside. He was sitting up with his head against the pillow struggling to breath. He told me, "I feel bad, Chris."

Those were the last words he said to me. A few minutes later I was ushered out of the room so the hospital staff could sedate and intubate him. The whole time he was in ICU he was in a medically induced coma and we never spoke again.

Adrian started visiting me shortly after his funeral. His soul comes to visit me in the form of a hawk. For the first year, there were always two hawks that consistently came to see me. They would fly over our home and take laps overhead. I would see them as I drove on the freeway. Other times I would see them in random locations, and it was always two of them. I originally believed that it was my dad and brother. I shared these sightings with a friend that is a healer in the Chicana/o/x community. She smiled and corrected me, “I don’t think it’s your dad and Adrian. I think it’s you and your brother.” I remember looking at her quizzically with a frown between my eyebrows. “What are you talking about? I am right here,” I replied. She shook her head and said, “I believe your soul left your body when Adrian died. You went seeking him out. You wanted to make sure he was okay. The second hawk is you. Adrian is with you and making sure you are close to your body. He wants to rest assured that when you are ready to come back home you can locate your body.” Apparently, she and Adrian understood soul loss.

Notes

¹ Adrian was given propofol, the medication Michael Jackson used to sleep, and which led to his eventual death. Jackson died six weeks prior to my brother.

² Joan Didion (2005) describes a similar experience reviewing her husband’s medical records and her attempt to comprehend if there was something, she could have done to prevent his death.

³ This refers to false sightings of loved ones that have died. It tends to occur out in public and the individual looks remarkably similar and/or speaks like the person that has passed away (White, 2006).

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