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The Spirituality of Polish Women in the Context of the Loss of a Loved One

Epistolographic Narratives

Duchowość kobiet w kontekście straty bliskiej osoby
Narracje epistolograficzne

Abstract: The main issue raised in the article concerns the spirituality of Polish women in the context of the loss of a loved one. Spirituality is an integral part of human life, and contemporary researchers focus their attention on the importance of this sphere for the elderly or in the face of their death. This article examines the significance of the spiritual sphere following the loss of a significant person, based on the author's research. A qualitative approach was used; texts written in the form of letters were analysed. Categories were generated inductively, and three of them – discussed in this article – provide a certain picture of experiencing spirituality in the face of a loved one's death.

Fifty-five letters written by women of different ages to deceased loved ones were examined. The analysis aims to explore various aspects of experiencing the loss of a loved one in the context of spirituality, across three dimensions: existential, religious, and relational. In the religious dimension, faith becomes an important element supporting the experience

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of mourning. The authors refer to a loving God, religious symbols, practices, and festivals. In the existential dimension, there is an awareness of the fragility and transience of human existence. In the relational dimension, the belief in the continued presence of the deceased is evident, along with the need for closeness and the continuation of the relationship after death. This provides comfort in suffering and helps in coping with the difficult experience of loss. Together, these aspects constitute a spiritual dimension.

Keywords: spirituality, religiosity, relationship, death, letters, mourning.

Theoretical Foundations

Spirituality is currently the focal point of research across many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. However, its definition remains a subject of debate, with ongoing debates and inconsistencies. In everyday understanding, spirituality is often closely associated with religiosity, largely because it frequently—though not necessarily—refers to realms beyond empirical experience and acknowledges a transcendent reality. Today, spirituality is also seen as a phenomenon that surpasses religiosity and, in some cases, as an alternative to religion or even a form of contestation of traditional religious systems.¹ Mariusz Nita emphasises the universal nature of spirituality in contrast to organised religiosity,² while Paweł Socha argues that:

Spirituality can be defined as a psychological process encompassing the human drive to transcend the limits of existence, motivated by the desire to overcome death and the various constraints imposed by physical, psychological, or social imperfections.³

- 1 D. Motak, *Religia – religijność – duchowość. Przemiany zjawiska i ewolucja pojęcia*, „*Studia Religiologica*”, 43 (2010) pp. 201–218.
- 2 M. Nita, *Duchowość w badaniach nad zdrowiem: konkurujące duchowości i podwyższony status uważności*, „*Journal of Religion and Health*”, 58 (2019) pp. 1605–1618.
- 3 P. Socha, *Na tropach duchowości – czym jest i czym może być duchowość?*, „*Nomos. Kwartalnik Religioznawczy*”, 43/44 (2003) pp. 10–11.

No longer confined solely to religious connotations, the concept of spirituality now appears in a wide range of discussions and interpretations.

In contemporary thought, spirituality has become increasingly independent of religion. As a result, one can be deeply spiritual without being religious, just as one can be highly religious—and strictly adhere to the doctrines of one's faith—while lacking any real sense of spiritual depth.⁴

Non-Religious Spirituality as a Source of Meaning

Non-religious or religion-independent spirituality can provide a source of meaning and purpose in a person's life. Through such spirituality, individuals may find happiness and fulfilment in living a morally upright life while coexisting harmoniously with others—without relying on religious principles or the ethical norms that these principles produce.⁵

In this article, spirituality is treated as an overarching concept that frames the analysis of the collected research material. This perspective informs the discussion of the religious, existential, and relational dimensions of human spirituality—elements identified inductively through an initial analysis of letters written by women to deceased loved ones and constituting components or aspects of spirituality. The motivation behind this research was to explore, through an original research method, different ways of experiencing the loss of a loved one, including reasons that may remain hidden, unspoken, or even unconscious. Using letters as a research tool is particularly justified in this context, as they provide a medium for open, sincere, in-depth, and reflective expression of emotions. This method allows access to aspects of grief and spirituality that might not surface through other research approaches.

4 J. Sójka, *Duchowy wymiar zarządzania*, w: *Fenomen duchowości*, eds. A. Grzegorzczak, J. Sójka, R. Koschany, Poznań 2006, s. 122.

5 J. Baniak, *Wielowymiarowość i konteksty kulturowe duchowości religijnej a inne formy duchowości*, „Humaniora. Czasopismo Internetowe”, 2 (2013) issue 2, pp. 13–37.

The Concept of Religion

The term *religion* refers to a set of beliefs, commandments, and prohibitions that govern the relationship between humans and God.⁶ It is defined as ‘a system of beliefs, rituals, and teachings associated with a reality beyond empirical experience, one that transcends the natural and observable world.’⁷ This system consists of interconnected elements, such as beliefs and judgements about the supernatural, the emotions linked to it, and behavioural tendencies that manifest as religious worship, such as the observance of specific rituals and practices.⁸ Religion and religiosity play a significant role in an individual’s life.⁹ Faith and religious commitment can be reinforced by negative emotions such as sadness, loss, grief, loneliness, bitterness, or despair. As Dymitr M. Ugrynowicz observed:

The constant accumulation of negative experiences, without the possibility of eliminating their causes, leads a person to seek ways of freeing themselves from these emotions, and often to turn to religion for support.¹⁰

The role of religion in a person’s life is most commonly associated with providing a deeper sense of meaning, strengthening a sense of security, alleviating fears, and facilitating a sense of community.¹¹ Religion helps individuals understand the nature of suffering and loss. It is a foundation for making sense of life events and interpreting them logically and coherently.

- 6 S. Kuczkowski, *Psychologia religii*, Kraków 1993.
- 7 D. Krok, *Religijność a jakość życia w perspektywie mediatorów psychospołecznych*, Opole 2009, p. 19.
- 8 W. Prężyna, *Funkcja postawy religijnej w osobowości człowieka*, Lublin 1981; Z. Golan, *Pojęcie religijności*, in: *Podstawowe zagadnienia psychologii religii*, eds. S. Głaz, Kraków 2006, s. -71–79.
- 9 A. Zych, *Pomiędzy wiarą a zwątpieniem. Wprowadzenie do psychologii religii*, Kraków 2012.
- 10 D. Ugrynowicz, *Wstęp do religioznawstwa teoretycznego*, Warszawa 1977, p. 83.
- 11 E. Zimnica-Kuzioła, *Główne stanowiska w psychologii religii – wprowadzenie*, „Kultura i Wartości”, 1 (2012) pp. 57–70.

Existential Concerns in Psychological Thought

The issue of existential concerns has become a central theme of existential and humanistic psychology. One of the most influential figures in this field is the eminent psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl, author of *Homo Patiens*, who portrays the human being as inherently entangled in the inescapable realities of their existence. Frank considers the search for meaning to be a fundamental aspect of human life¹²: ‘A person is truly human only insofar as they, as a spiritual being, are something greater than their physical and psychological existence.’¹³ Frankl also probes into the role of suffering in human life, arguing that: ‘If life as such has any meaning, then suffering must also have meaning. Human existence is incomplete without suffering and death.’¹⁴

He further asserts that how people interpret, cope with, and experience suffering can contribute to a deeper sense of life’s meaning. In his theory of logotherapy, he maintains that every situation holds a deeper significance, stating that: ‘There is no situation that is truly meaningless.’¹⁵ Similarly, Pope John Paul II observed that if a person fails to find meaning in their suffering, the experience becomes even more intense and therefore more difficult to endure.¹⁶ Psychologist Kazimierz Popielski expands on this idea through his concept of noetic cognition. He focuses on how individuals ‘can shape their personal way of being and achieve optimal personal growth—one that is distinct from the kind of fulfilment that stems from material possessions or external socio-environmental influences.’¹⁷ He describes suffering as an opportunity for a person to ‘become more fully and deeply themselves.’¹⁸ Thus, suffering is an unavoidable aspect

12 V. E. Frankl, *Homo patiens*, trans. R. Czernecki, J. Morawski, Warszawa 1984.

13 Ibidem, p. 47.

14 Idem, *Człowiek w poszukiwaniu sensu*, trans. A. Wolnicka, Warszawa 2009, p. 111.

15 Idem, *Homo patiens*, p. 118.

16 Jan Paweł II, *List apostolski „Salvifici doloris” do biskupów, kapłanów, rodzin zakonnych i wiernych Kościoła katolickiego o chrześcijańskim sensie ludzkiego cierpienia*, February 11, 1984, issue 9, https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/wp/jan_pawel_ii/listy/salvifici.html, accessed: 25.10.2024.

17 K. Popielski, *Noetyczne jakości Życia i ich znaczenie w procesie „bycia i stawania się” egzystencji*, „Chowanna”, 1 (2008) p. 17.

18 Ibidem, p. 19.

of human existence. From an existential perspective, life's difficulties extend beyond the search for meaning and the experience of suffering to include fundamental concerns such as fear of death, life evaluation, and loneliness.¹⁹

As social beings, humans undergo educational and socialisation processes through various social groups.²⁰ From the perspective of the social sciences, primary groups have the most significant influence on shaping personality and helping us adapt to society. The most important of these are the family and the local community, followed by peer groups and others. Members of these groups are connected by personal relationships,²¹ with emotional bonds being particularly important in the family. More broadly, it is mutual relationships and emotional connections, rather than purely biological ties, that determine who is regarded as a close person. Emotional states—especially those triggered by the death of loved ones—affect not only the individual but also the social groups to which they belong. Increased emotional tension can also heighten the need for communication and connection.

One of the most intense influences on individuals comes from crises, particularly situational crises. These differ from other life events due to their unpredictability, suddenness, shocking nature, intensity, and catastrophic impact.²² Among such crises are the death of a loved one and the experience of loss. According to these authors, a crisis is defined as 'The perception or experience of an event or situation as unbearably difficult, depleting one's emotional resources and disrupting mechanisms for dealing with challenges'²³

It is worth considering which types of events cause the most significant disruptions in life. According to the Social Readjustment Rating Scale²⁴ devel-

19 A. Fabiś, *Troski egzystencjalne w starości. Ujęcie geragogiczne*, Kraków 2018; A. A. Zych, *Przekraczając smugę cienia*, Katowice 2013; I. D. Yalom, *Patrząc w słońce. Jak przetrwać groźbę śmierci*, trans. A. Dodziuk, K. Wolański, Warszawa 2008.

20 E. Aaronson, J. Aaronson, *Człowiek istota społeczna*, trans. J. Radzicki, Warszawa 1998.

21 B. Szacka, *Wprowadzenie do socjologii*, Warszawa 2003.

22 R. K. James, B. E. Gilliland, *Strategia interwencji kryzysowej*, trans. A. Bidziński, K. Mazurek, Warszawa 2004.

23 Ibidem, p. 26.

24 T. Holmes, R. Rahe, *Narzędzie do pomiaru stresu – Skala Oceny Przystosowania Społecznego (SRRS)*, 1967.

oped by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe, which measures stress levels experienced by people, the death of a spouse holds the highest score (on a scale from 0 to 100). Other highly stressful events include the death of a close family member, which is ranked similarly to imprisonment, while divorce and marital separation are rated even higher. This raises important questions about how difficult life situations impact an individual's functioning and influence interpersonal relationships.

For Karl Jaspers,²⁵ death represents a liminal situation—an experience that confronts a person with the tragic nature of existence, which leads to a deeper awareness of their being and a revelation of truth about themselves and the world. Similarly, Søren Kierkegaard discusses the finitude and limited nature of human life, and thus the awareness of death: 'A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis.'²⁶ In response to this existential reality, people create culture to provide a sense of 'transcendence over nature'. One of the core functions of culture is to offer symbolic interpretations of reality—including worldviews and religious beliefs—that ensure order, stability, and a sense of meaning, value, and security in life.²⁷ This notion aligns with Terror Management Theory,²⁸ which suggests that cultural systems help individuals cope with the fear of death.

Thoughts about death occupy a central place in the human cognitive framework and can be triggered by death-related experiences—for instance, when losing a loved one or being present with someone who is dying. Irvin Yalom also notes that death anxiety can lead to existential distress, destabilise

25 K. Jaspers, *Filozofia egzystencji. Wybór pism*, ed. S. Tyrowicz, introduction H. Saner, epilog D. Lachowska, trans. D. Lachowska, A. Wołkowicz, Warszawa 1990.

26 S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, eds. H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, (Kierkegaard's Writings, Vol. 19), Princeton, New Jersey 1983, p. 13.

27 T. Pyszczynski, J. Greenberg, S. Solomon, *A Dual-Process Model of Defense Against Conscious and Unconscious Heath-Related Thoughts: An Extension of Terror Management Theory*, „Psychological Review”, 106 (1999) issue 4, pp. 835–845.

28 T. Pyszczynski, J. Greenberg, S. Solomon, *A Dual-Process Model of Defense Against Conscious and Unconscious Heath-Related Thoughts: An Extension of Terror Management Theory*, „Psychological Review”, 106 (1999) issue 4, pp. 835–845.

an individual's sense of meaning and raise fundamental questions about the nature of human existence:

Struggles with life's ultimate concerns, daily challenges, and existential worries may lead to personal growth—but they may also result in failure and an inability to accept one's own mortality.²⁹

Methodological Assumptions

The study aims to explore and understand aspects of women's spirituality that emerge when confronting the loss of a loved one. This objective led to several research questions: What dimensions of spirituality do the narrators reveal when faced with the death of someone close? What meanings do they assign to the loss? What reflections arise in their letters? What emotions does their confrontation with the deceased evoke? How do the narrators perceive their relationships with those who have passed away? These questions naturally point towards a qualitative research approach, which allows for a better understanding of the experience of loss and the meanings that women attribute to the spiritual aspects of that experience. This perspective corresponds with Graham Gibbs' approach to qualitative research, which emphasises that: 'a key commitment of qualitative research is to see things through the eyes of respondents and participants.'³⁰

Such an approach requires viewing events, norms, and values through the eyes of the participants themselves. Dariusz Kubinowski also notes that the focus of qualitative research is on people, which means that it inevitably reckons with the limitations of human perception and reason, as well as the influence of human weaknesses, emotions, and subjectivity.³¹ The research material consisted of letters written by individuals who had personally experienced the events they described.³² Letters, as a cultural phenomenon, can be

29 A. Fabiś, *Rozwój duchowy jako atrybut dojrzałości w starości*, „Exlibris. Biblioteka Gerontologii Społecznej”, 2015, Issue 1(9), p. 14.

30 G. Gibbs, *Analyzing Qualitative Data*, London (UK) 2007, p. 7.

31 D. Kubinowski, *Jakościowe badania pedagogiczne. Filozofia – Metodyka – Ewaluacja*, Lublin 2010.

32 Ibidem.

interpreted in multiple ways: as a social and symbolic act, a verbal communication, an intermedial channel of expression, or even as a historical artefact that has accompanied human society throughout history.³³ Each letter is thus embedded in a specific cultural and temporal context. In the analysed letters, the narrators addressed their mother, father, brother, grandmother, grandfather, a beloved partner, or a close male friend—so their relationships were anchored either in family ties or intimate emotional bonds. A total of 55 letters written by women aged 22 to 71 were collected. The data was gathered online, and the original spelling has been preserved in the excerpts cited in this article.

A request was sent to potential participants, inviting them to write a letter to a deceased person who had been significant in their lives. Participants included female students and attendees of the University of the Third Age, who were also asked to share the invitation with friends and acquaintances. Using this snowball sampling method, the research team reached additional letter-writers. The introductory section of the research form outlined the purpose of the study and assured participants of their anonymity. The study was conducted between October 2019 and December 2022. The invitation read as follows:

Dear Sir/Madam,

We kindly invite you to write a letter to a deceased person who was important in your life. The form, length, and content of the letter are entirely up to you. We guarantee complete anonymity (please do not include your name). We encourage you to express yourself openly and sincerely. By submitting the letter, you agree to its use for research purposes.

Thank you.

The Research Team

The collected data was analysed using the *Atlas.ti 8* software. The coding process was inductive, beginning with line-by-line initial coding. This was followed by focused coding, which involved applying the most analytically significant codes:

33 A. Całek, *Nowa teoria listu*, Kraków 2019.

to search through large volumes of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely.³⁴

From the large number of generated categories, three key themes were selected that offer a distinct perspective on how women experience spirituality in the face of loss. As Kathy Charmaz writes:

analytic categories and the relationships we draw between them provide a conceptual handle on the studied experience. Thus, we build levels of abstraction directly from the data and, subsequently, gather additional data to check and refine our emerging analytic categories.³⁵

The result of this analysis is the coding tree presented below (Figure 1).

Analysis of Collected Data and Discussion

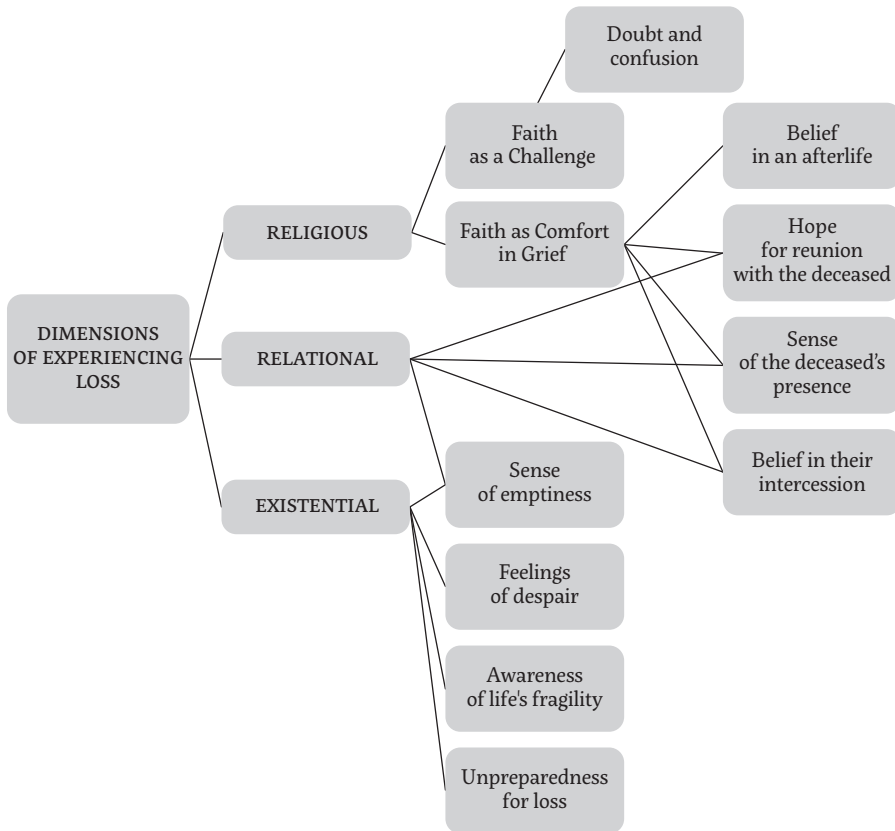
The analysis of the letters centred on three main dimensions and one overarching category (as shown in the coding tree, Fig. 1). These dimensions were religious, existential, and relational, each of which generated subcategories during the analysis. The overarching category is the spiritual dimension, which integrates the three individual dimensions. The subcategories within the religious dimension include 'faith as a challenge', which manifests as 'doubt' and 'confusion'. However, this dimension also provides comfort in coping with loss through 'belief in an afterlife and hope for reunion with the deceased' as well as 'the sense of the deceased's presence and belief in their intercession.'

In the existential dimension, inductive analysis produced subcategories such as 'a sense of emptiness', 'feelings of despair', 'awareness of life's fragility', and 'realisation of unpreparedness for loss'. The relational dimension overlaps with the subcategories and codes of the first two dimensions but mainly

34 K. Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*, London 2006, pp. 57–58.

35 Eadem, *The Power of Names*, in: *Sociology of Health and Illness*, eds. P. W. Davies and B. D. Smith, Évora 2006, pp. 3–4.

Figure 1. The spirituality of Polish women in the religious, existential, and spiritual dimensions



reveals the interpersonal and relational aspects of existence and religiosity—whether between the narrator and God or the deceased person. The letters analysed were addressed directly to deceased loved ones (although written with an awareness that they might be read by others). They provided an opportunity for the writers to express their thoughts and articulate their emotions through the distinctive form of communication that a letter provides.

The letter-writers are at different stages of grief, as varying amounts of time have passed since the death of their loved ones. In their accounts, they often mention the burial site, and frequent visits to the cemetery become not only moments of reflection or spiritual experience but also a substitute for visiting the loved one—a way of being with them, of being close to their physical

remains. These writings reveal a spiritual connection between the authors and the departed, along with a persistent longing to maintain an ongoing relationship—both emotional and spiritual—which serves as a form of compensation for the loss of interpersonal contact. Such an attitude indicated a widespread phenomenon in Polish tradition: the practice of regularly visiting graves and maintaining a sense of ‘communion’ with the dead. These visits often stir a range of emotions – from tenderness and contentment to sadness, longing, and even resentment or pain. For example:

[Dad] I now try to visit your grave regularly—I wish I could feel that you know this and that it makes you happy. (Katarzyna, 22).

Even though my heart aches, I sit here looking at the place where you’ve come to rest. (Miroslawa, 23).

Spiritual connection with the deceased – and simple, everyday conversation – still feels possible. The strong desire for contact, the exchange of thoughts and emotions, and even the desire to sustain a close, intimate bond persist. It becomes a way of compensating for a relationship and dialogue that are no longer physically possible.

The Religious Dimension

In theological literature, spirituality is often expressed through a deep religious life. Religious spirituality is defined as ‘the believer’s personal spiritual life, one that involves entering into a personal relationship with God.’³⁶ According to Radosław Chałupniak, religious spirituality ‘is what elevates us above the ordinary concerns of “what we shall eat and what we shall wear”. It gives meaning to our lives, forms the core of our vocation, and demonstrates a sensitivity to what truly matters – even if it is invisible to the eye.’³⁷ This sense of spirituality can be clearly seen in the letters analysed—through both personal expres-

36 J. W. Gogola, *Teologia komunii z Bogiem. Kompendium teologii duchowości*, Kraków 2001.

37 R. Chałupniak, *Duchowość kapłańska: dar i zadanie*, „Katecheta”, 2016, issue 2, p. 23.

sions of faith and efforts to make sense of life in the face of death. It is often death itself that prompts introspection of one's beliefs and religious identity, igniting a heightened awareness and contemplation of existence itself.

Faith becomes a central part of how grief is experienced. It can soften the trauma of loss—a function that even atheist philosopher André Comte-Sponville acknowledges:

When we lose a loved one, religion offers not only comfort but also a necessary ritual—a ceremony, even if modest—like a final act of kindness in the face of death. It helps us confront it, come to terms with it (both psychologically and socially), accept it since it had to happen, and, at the very least, endure it. Keeping vigil, delivering a eulogy, singing hymns, saying prayers, using symbols, gestures, rituals, sacraments... These are ways of making the unbearable a little more bearable—ways of humanising and civilising the horror of death.³⁸

The letters clearly contain elements of Catholic tradition (although some also appear in other religions), such as heaven, angels, the soul, immortality, and intercession. The letter-writers express these beliefs in various ways:

I hope you're dancing in heaven. I hope you're singing in the angelic choir. I hope the angels know what they have. I bet heaven's a better place since you arrived. Since you left us. (Iga, 22).

You were a wonderful person with a kind heart—I know God saw that, and now your soul is at peace. (Paulina, 71).

And above all, thank you for interceding with God on our behalf. (Izabela, 23).

Losing a loved one causes pain—that much is certain—yet faith often provides the letter-writers a way through it. Prayer brings comfort, soothes longing,

38 A. Comte-Sponville, *Duchowość ateistyczna. Wprowadzenie do duchowości bez Boga*, trans. E. Aduszkiewicz, Warszawa 2011, pp. 24–25.

and eases their sorrow. For some, the experience of loss can become a test—a step toward either doubt or a deepening of religious life—and may increase sensitivity to spiritual matters:

I still pray for your peace, even though I'm not a particularly religious person. (Łucja, 21).

Please tell me—what is heaven like? Is it as wonderful as they say? I remember you were always a person of deep faith, and I envied you for it. (Beta, 62).

An example from one of the letter writers, who recently lost her aunt, reveals a wealth of emotions, introspection, and almost fairy-tale-like visions of the afterlife. She writes to a personal God, one who is as close and approachable as a best friend—someone she can talk to, contemplate with, and make requests of, which she does through her letter. She believes in ongoing communication and connection made possible through God. There is comfort in knowing that God watches over her and can convey her longing and other feelings. Beyond that, she places her hopes for a fulfilling earthly life in God's good plans.

Dear God, if you see her walking through your heavenly gardens, please tell her I'm thinking of her. That she means as much to me now as she did when I was ten—and give her a hug. Hold her tightly, and be sure to tell her it's from me. And one more thing, dear God—I hope this letter finds you well and in even better spirits. I hope you're smiling and that your head is full of ideas for the rest of my life. (Marianna, 36).

a) Faith as Comfort in Grief

Faith, as seen in many of the letters analysed, helps ease the pain of losing a loved one at least in two ways. First, there's the belief in eternal life after death, which is self-evident for Catholics. Second, there's a sense that a connection with the deceased continues. Thus, although the authors of the letters are aware of the reality of death and the finality of earthly existence, they do not speak of death as the absolute end. On the contrary, they look forward to a better form of existence in the afterlife.

I am fully aware that where you are, you are receiving the best care, and no earthly medicine could ever replace that... (Irmina, 22).

It has been ten years since God welcomed you into His arms. (Ksenia, 23).

Religious women write about a loving God, the Lord of life and death, who will allow them to reunite with their loved ones in the future. At the same time, many also sense the presence of the deceased in the present. Their faith teaches them to accept God's will and they do so with humility, despite the pain and deep longing that remain. They trust that their departed are in a good place now—which shows both their love for the dead and, perhaps, their hope that they too will be welcomed to the same place one day. Interestingly, no one mentions purgatory or hell, as the deceased are presumed to have been judged favourably.

According to a 2005 CBOS study called 'Poles' Attitudes Towards Death',³⁹ 78% of Poles describe the reality after death as an afterlife that is eternal and lasting. That same hope fills the letter-writers, who express a hopeful anticipation of being reunited with their loved ones in the next life. Faith and personal bonds are tightly woven together here as subcategories such as hope for meeting again in 'heaven', or the belief that the dead are still present and even interceding on their behalf all centre around relationships between beings, the essence of which is relationality itself:

I hope that one day we will meet again – up there somewhere. (Monika, 22).

See you someday, Grandma. (Beata, 23).

I live the way you would have wanted me to so that I may meet you after I die. (Paulina, 71).

The place where the deceased reside after death is most often described as heaven or remains unspecified. Catholic women take communion with the dead as a given, which is why in their letters they talk to their loved ones,

39 R. Boguszewski, *Stosunek Polaków do śmierci*, 2005, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2005/K_098_05.PDF, accessed: 7.06.2023.

ask them for help, and even expect them to act on their behalf. Faith in God intertwines with personal appeals for divine grace. The narrators believe that the dead intercede with God for them, which strengthens their faith but also ensures a sense of connection and continuity in their relationships with their departed loved ones, for example:

I believe you are at peace in the radiance of glory. Life took you away from me, but death did not triumph. Shine brightly, explore the world, stay by my side. (Miroslawa, 23).

And above all, thank you for interceding with God on our behalf. (Izabela, 23).

And for asking God to grant us blessings. (Żaneta, 23).

Take care of Grandpa Staszek up there, in heaven. Visit him, tell him how much we love and miss him. We really do. (Maria, 23).

The letters express a certainty that the dead are still present in the narrators' lives. Wiktorija (22) states plainly: 'I feel your presence with me all the time.' These messages blend the religious with the purely human, one might say: the earthly with the heavenly. The need for closeness—whether through a sense of being watched over by the deceased or interpreting even the smallest sign as evidence of their presence—brings solace and relief from grief. It also helps in coping with loss and creates a sense of continuity in the relationship:

I believe you are already at peace in the radiance of glory. Your life was taken away, but death did not triumph. Shine brightly, explore the world, stay by my side. (Miroslawa, 23).

I close my eyes and feel the warmth of your hands wrapping around mine... I hear your voice telling me that you live only for us I imagine you looking down at me and smiling I don't even need to write it—you surely feel it. (Paulina, 71).

Just so you know, I have my coffee with you every morning, looking up and wishing you a good day. (Irmina, 22).

Thus, belief in an afterlife and in a future reunion with the dead makes it easier to accept the fleeting nature of human life—something that

becomes especially evident in times of crisis, such as the loss of a loved one (Kubacka-Jasiecka, 2010).⁴⁰

b) Faith as a Challenge

The letters also convey feelings of resentment towards God, fate, and even the person who has passed away. There's often an inner dialogue or dispute: a questioning of God or the departed in an attempt to make sense of losing someone close. Intense thoughts, conflicted emotions, and vehement expressions emerge throughout. Anger coexists with relief, and even gratitude that the loved one is no longer suffering.

I don't understand why this was 'God's plan'. (Dominika, 23).

Sometimes I resent God for taking you away from me so soon. (Beata, 23).

My grief is tangled with gratitude to God for finally healing you, and the clash of these two feelings tears my heart apart. (Irmina, 22).

The Existential Dimension

Existence relates to the individual's being, their place in the world, and the roles they play, and touches on the fundamental human quest to search for and find meaning in life⁴¹:

Essence is the most important, creative, causal, determining 'inside' of things. But at the same time the essence is separate, independent and self-sufficing -- not merely 'an element' of things, sharing equally in their transience and temporality.⁴²

40 D. Kubacka-Jasiecka, *Interwencja kryzysowa. Pomoc w kryzysach psychologicznych*, Warszawa 2010.

41 *Słownik języka polskiego*, PWN, hasło: egzystencja, <https://sjp.pwn.pl/sjp/egzystencja;2556109.html>, accessed: 7.08.2023.

42 Z. Bauman, *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Cambridge 1992, p. 22.

Spirituality is a constitutive characteristic of the human condition. Jan A. Kłoczowski argues that the term 'spirituality' has two key functions. On the one hand, it refers to the immaterial side of human life, and on the other, it denotes a 'new religious attitude.'⁴³ For this reason, the search for meaning in existence often relies on faith in something more enduring than our life. This could be religious faith, spirituality, or the desire to find meaning in future generations or in leaving something of ourselves behind (such as knowledge or achievements). In existential terms, *being with someone* comes to the fore—and, when a loved one dies, that sense of shared existence transforms into a painful '*non-being*', or loneliness. This sense of abandonment, and the search for meaning after such a loss, are powerful existential experiences⁴⁴—and they appear throughout the letters.

a) A Sense of Abandonment and Emptiness

The feeling of emptiness overlaps with the relational dimension of grief, as its core lies in the absence of someone dear and the rupture of a relationship. This emotional void often manifests as psychological pain and suffering, which may show up as loneliness and the sense that life has lost its meaning or is harder to bear without the one who is gone:

The emptiness left after your departure is indescribable. Every day, I look at the bed where you used to sleep not so long ago. (Paulina, 71).

Your death has left a great void that no one else can ever fill. (Iga, 22).

Grandma, I am happy, though I miss you terribly... I miss our conversations, your loud laughter, the sight of you in the garden... I miss our singing together... (Aneta, 22).

In coming face-to-face with the death of a loved one, the letter-writers grapple with reflections on the meaning of life. Death is a reminder that life will

43 J. A. Kłoczowski, *Czym jest duchowość? – kontekst religijny i kulturowy*, in: *Fenomen duchowości*, eds. A. Grzegorzczak, J. Sójka, R. Koschany, Poznań 2006, pp. 13–20.

44 A. Fabiś, *Troski egzystencjalne w starości. Ujęcie geragogiczne*, Kraków 2018.

eventually end—and this is inevitable. It also brings into sharp focus the incapable truth, whether previously acknowledged or avoided, that certain experiences with the deceased will never happen again. The irreversible loss of the possibility to share time, plans, and thoughts with someone—both now and in the future—can feel overwhelming.

It was only after you died that I realised how much we missed out on by not keeping in touch, even though we lived so close to each other. (Grażyna, 23).

If only you were still alive... (Beata, 23).

What also hurts is knowing you won't be at my wedding – and that you'll never meet my children, your grandchildren. (Dominika, 23).

b) Awareness of Life's Fragility

The direct experience of loss forces us to see just how fine the line is between life and death – how easily life can slip away, including one's own:

Your sudden death made me realise how thin the line is between life and death—how fragile human life truly is. (Milena, 23).

It was the beginning of a realisation – that more people I love will die too, and I'm simply not ready for that. (Marcelina, 22).

Moments of crisis often bring thoughts about life's fragility. The realisation that time cannot be reversed—and that planning a future with a lost loved one is no longer possible—can feel terrifying. In their letters, the women express that grief makes them more aware of the passing of time, and casts their past choices and decisions in a new light. Many wish they could turn back time—just to do things differently or to truly treasure the moments that they shared with their loved ones.

Our relationship was never perfect—we only saw each other now and then. If I could turn back time, I'd have made more effort to improve things between us. (Daria, 23).

Believe me when I say I would give anything to spend just one more day with you—even if I couldn't say a single word, just to have you near. (Irmina, 22).

That sense of finality often leads to imagining what life might have been like if their loved one were still alive. They find themselves caught in difficult, existential questions—about the present, and how the future will unfold without the person they've lost.

I often wonder what your life would be like now. (Wiktoria, 22).

I used to think a lot about what it would be like if you were here—what kind of relationship we would have, and whether we would argue. (Izabela, 23).

c) Unpreparedness for Loss

The death of a loved one brings not only the loss of the person but also the loss of shared experiences, moments, routines, and rituals. Although we are, on some level, aware of the transience of human life, the reality of death often comes as a shock. Facing the death of someone close inevitably changes one's current life:

Critical life events ... that suddenly and drastically alter the course of a person's life can bring back a sense of disorientation—forcing a person to redefine themselves and seek new meaning in life, taking into account their changed circumstances.⁴⁵

The women taking part in the study express difficulty in coming to terms with these changes, as they mean adjusting to a new reality. They express a new-found appreciation for what they once considered ordinary and familiar:

There will always be someone missing. You. (Sylwia, 23).

45 A. Brzezińska, *Psychologia rozwoju człowieka*, Sopot 2016, p. 273.

It is also difficult to face one's mortality, though the letter-writers tend not to confront that subject directly. What does come through clearly, however, is the fear of how sudden and unexpected death can be. Most admit they were unprepared for such a loss: it is hard to fully grasp the reality of a loved one's passing, and even harder to cope with it:

It was the first time I had encountered death. No one in our family had ever died before. I just couldn't comprehend it. (Monika, 22).

I feel like I won't be able to cope with losing more loved ones. (Marcelina, 22).

d) Feelings of Despair

Some of the women reassess how their lives have unfolded, their relationships, and whether they have ever really been happy. The letters are permeated with strong emotions—pain, longing, sorrow, and even anger—which may point to difficulties accepting the death of a loved one, self-blame, or existential questioning.

I actually wondered whether to end my own life because life just keeps f.... beating me down and tearing me apart. (Elzbieta, 23).

The day of your funeral was probably the hardest day of my life. (Marcelina, 22).

I'm so angry with you. I really am. (Irena, 23).

I still can't make sense of any of this... and I don't think I'm the only one... So what happened? ... I couldn't believe what I was hearing! Of course, I started crying, but it still didn't sink in. How could you do this?! (Antonina, 27).

Many of the women also write of the injustice they feel in the face of the death they are grieving. One of the ways people cope with traumatic experiences, including the death of a loved one, is by searching for meaning. This often involves questioning why such a tragedy has happened to them personally. They ask, *Why me? Why did this happen to me?*⁴⁶ The letters convey a kind

46 D. Kubacka-Jasiecka, *Interwencja kryzysowa*.

of spiritual suffering that accompanies loss—the destabilising effect of grief, which can strip away a person’s sense of security and love, both of which are fundamental human needs⁴⁷:

I just want to know WHY?! WHY NOW? IS IT MY FAULT?! (Elżbieta, 23).

Why did fate decide that you should lie here at the cemetery? It wasn’t supposed to be this way. You were such a good person. (Miroslawa, 23).

So much time has passed, yet with each day, it only gets harder to accept. (Grażyna, 23).

Although many letters are filled with intense turmoil and grief, they also contain moments of calm, acceptance, and reconciliation with the death of a loved one. For many of the writers, visiting the cemetery becomes an important source of emotional support. There’s a sense that:

Those who are buried there can, in a way, still ‘participate’ in the lives of their loved ones, their communities, and their nation. Even after death, a person remains a social being—a presence in relation to others.⁴⁸

This idea of the cemetery—not just as a religious space, but as a symbolic threshold between life and the afterlife—comes through in the letters:

When I’m at the cemetery, standing by your grave, I always find myself talking to you in my thoughts. A lot. (Wiktoria, 22).

Now, as I stand over your grave, tears roll down my cheeks as I’m remembering you. (Beata, 23).

When I visit you at the cemetery, I reminisce, I miss you, and then I walk away. (Aneta, 22).

These flowers and candles—that’s all I can give you now. Why did fate decide that you should lie here at the cemetery? (Miroslawa, 23).

47 A. H. Maslow, *Motywacja i osobowość*, trans. P. Sawicka, Warszawa 2014.

48 P. Rabczyński, *Kulturowa i religijna funkcja cmentarza*, „Roczniki Teologiczne”, 69 (2022) issue 9, pp. 175–191, DOI: 10.18290/rt22699.10.

The Relational Dimension

A person may die, but their words, their characteristic gestures, and the emotional atmosphere they created around them remain. These become symbols of their presence that were once cast into the world and have lingered there, even as their physical body ceases to exist.⁴⁹

The death of a loved one influences our thoughts, behaviour, and way of functioning. It also provides an opportunity for reflection—an occasion to reassess our lives, evaluate past actions and reconsider our relationships, particularly with those who have departed but left their ‘traces’ in the present. This relational dimension forms the backdrop to and is interwoven with the previously discussed existential and spiritual dimensions. However, it also warrants attention in its own right.

The letters analysed bring to light various facets of relationships with deceased family members, regardless of how much time has passed since their death. The narrators express a deep-seated need to talk to and remain connected with their lost loved ones. This desire goes beyond recounting recent events or discussing the circumstances of death: it is a testament to a lasting bond between the living and the dead. These conversations—indeed, dialogues—with the departed, act as direct communication and as a way of continuing past rituals and connections:

I feel an inner need to stay in touch with you. (Dagmara, 23).

Just so you know, I have my coffee with you every morning, looking up and wishing you a good day. (Irmina, 22).

I wish I could spend a few hours with you, tell you about my life, about what’s been going on, about what I’ve achieved. I hope you would be proud of me. (Alicja, 27).

It is as if nothing has changed since the moment of death—as if the deceased still takes part in the lives of some of the narrators and rituals help to keep

49 A. Kępiński, *Lęk*, Kraków 2002.

that bond alive. During such imagined conversations, they ask questions, seek advice, work through doubts, and hope for guidance from their lost loved ones regarding their life paths:

Dad, will I choose the right man? I never had you as a role model to follow when making that choice... I ask myself this question over and over again. And as it happens, I do have a boyfriend—I've been with him for three years. (Katarzyna, 22).

I know that when my wedding day comes, I will feel an emptiness. An enormous emptiness that only you could fill. You were irreplaceable... despite everything! (Zofia, 23).

Within this relational dimension, we also see reflections on past experiences, disbelief over the loss of a loved one, over their absence, reminiscence about shared moments, and a lingering sense of longing:

When I'm at your house, I still expect you to walk out of your room any moment and tell us about something interesting you've just learned. Or that you'll grab my ankle as I walk up the stairs—just like you always used to do. (Marcelina, 23).

As a little girl, I never thought there would come a day when you wouldn't be there anymore—that I wouldn't be waiting for you by the gate every day when you came home exhausted from dialysis, that all that would be left in your place on the sofa would be just an imprint where you used to sit. (Felicja, 22).

This act of revisiting past experiences is not only a way of coping with grief and holding on to cherished memories but also a means of maintaining a bond with the deceased and feeling their presence. It is part of the grieving process, but it can also be seen as a way of 'resisting the social tendency to remove death from social consciousness'.⁵⁰ In the women's letters, we also see instances of self-

50 K. Pękala, *Żyj i pozwól umrzeć. Czy można oswoić żałobę?*, in: *Jesień życia? Wiosna możliwości! Przewodnik po późnej dorosłości*, eds. M. Mularska-Kucharek, E. Czernik, Łódź 2016, pp. 179–196.

reflection: coming to terms with their past actions, justifying their past behaviour, or even explaining themselves to the departed:

We lost so much time that we could have spent together—learning from each other, talking, and, most of all, simply enjoying ourselves. (Daria, 23).

We never got to say goodbye. What were your last hours like? Did you suffer terribly? We had so many plans. Will I ever understand why you had to go through that? (Mirosława, 23).

A recurring theme in the letters is gratitude towards the deceased, as well as expressions of love, pride, and appreciation:

I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for what you left behind for those who know how to read between the lines. For your sense of humour, openness, and understanding of the world—not the world we see, but the one we feel. For the world of energy, presence, depth, and love. You saw what others didn't, what they still refuse to see. You were open when others shut themselves off from knowledge they couldn't grasp. You left behind something that only a few can truly understand. (Dorota, 24).

I never even got the chance to thank you or to tell you how much I love you, how much you brought into my life, and how much I owe you. (Kinga, 22).

Thank you for teaching me how to be a good person. (Klaudia, 22).

I have so much respect for everything you achieved, for the knowledge you had. I only wish I could be half as intelligent and ambitious as you. I know you loved us all and, in some way, you're still watching over us. You can be proud of the strong, loving family you built. (Marcelina, 22).

Relationships and a sense of emotional connection define closeness within a family, and the letters show how much that closeness is longed for. They also describe bonds that formed or intensified only after the loved one's passing:

I wish I could learn everything, sit down over a cup of tea and talk, hear fascinating stories from your life. (Dagmara, 23).

In a way, I only truly got to know you after your death—through letters and stories from those who liked, respected, and loved you. (Zofia, 23).

And yet, I feel as if I knew you personally. (Dorota, 24).

The women also describe feeling their loved one's presence, especially in dreams—which bring comfort and the sense that the relationship continues:

When I lay down at midday, I had a dream that you came to visit us after work, just like you used to in Skrzyszów. You were wearing that blue shirt and brought us a crate full of treats. You had those dark-rimmed glasses on. Leon jumped up to greet you. I didn't want to wake up... I wanted that dream to become reality. (Zofia, 23).

In every letter, the writers address the deceased with love and respect:

We all love you and think about you all the time. (Paulina, 71).

Remember that you were—and always will be—my most wonderful grandmother, and I miss you terribly. (Sabrina, 23).

I love you dearly, your granddaughter, Sandra. (Sandra, 29).

It is unmistakably clear that the recipients of these letters were emotionally significant to the narrators. The relationships they shared did not end with death; on the contrary, they lived on. What stands out is the hope of one day being reunited, often captured in the words: 'See you again.'

See you someday, Grandma. (Beata, 23).

See you again, my dear Lesiu. (Angelika, 23).

The letters strongly illustrate that connections with the deceased are not only a fundamental part of the grieving process but also a vital aspect of life itself. They act as a bridge, providing a sense of continuity in relationships and compensating for the physical absence of a loved one—without severing the connection entirely.

In scholarly literature, traditional grief models that emphasise the necessity of 'letting go' or 'cutting ties' with the deceased are increasingly being challenged. The conventional view of 'healthy grieving' is now undergoing revision, with grief more often considered in the context of an individual's coping style. Urszula Bielecka, in her discussion of myths surrounding healthy and pathological grief, identifies different ways of experiencing loss—ranging from intuitive to mixed and instrumental coping styles.⁵¹ Many people feel the need not only to analyse the past and seek closure but also to maintain a sense of relationship with the deceased, a process that can carry therapeutic value. As Bogusław Stelcer explains:

By keeping the deceased in their memory, the bereaved work through their grief to the point where the memory becomes less painful—and no longer stands in the way of pursuing their own personal growth and life goals.⁵²

The letters analysed in this study are powerful evidence of this kind of grieving.

Summary

Despite differences in how loss is experienced, the time that has passed since the loved one's death, and the age of the women involved, the letters analysed share a number of common features. They contain reflections on the meaning of existence, the fragility and transience of life, and the human search for the meaning of suffering and death—phenomena that 'in themselves remain a mystery to human reason.'⁵³ The letter-writers also contemplate the passage of time and express a sense of unpreparedness for the loss and the life changes that follow the death of a close relative. For those faced with the inevitability

51 U. Bielecka, *Mity na temat zdrowej i patologicznej żałoby*, „Psychiatria i Psychologia Kliniczna”, 12 (2012) issue 1, pp. 62–66.

52 B. Stelcer, *Żal po stracie – dynamika adaptacji do nieuniknionych zmian*, „Sztuka Leczenia”, 3–4 (2015) p. 48.

53 P. Hornik, *Ukryty sens: Viktor E. Frankl i Antoni Kępiński o cierpieniu i śmierci*, Kraków 2024, p. 160.

of suffering and feelings of injustice towards fate, spirituality becomes a form of existential support. Faith and religious belief help blur the boundary between life and death, allowing the bereaved to believe that the soul continues to live on—and that one day they will meet their loved ones again in a ‘better place.’ This belief provides solace in coping with grief.

Faith in the afterlife and connection to tradition—such as visiting the graves of the deceased, praying and trusting in divine protection both for the dead and the living—help to soften the pain of loss. At the same time, faith also presents a challenge for those who remain. Existential pain is linked to an increasing awareness of mortality and the impermanence of the present world, while difficult experiences encourage reflection and contemplation on both earthly and eternal life. Importantly, death does not bring an end to the relationship. Bonds with the deceased continue. Ongoing conversations, reflections, and emotional reckonings help the bereaved cope with their loss. Maintaining a connection with the departed—through conversation, contemplation, and assigning deeper meaning to memories—enriches the spiritual lives of those left behind.

Heartfelt expressions of love and remembrance for the deceased are also evident. The emotional spectrum is vast: intense agitation, suffering, longing, a sense of abandonment and emptiness, and even feelings of resentment towards the deceased or God. Through this analysis, it becomes clear that family and close relationships are of great importance to the authors of the letters. While death is undoubtedly a profoundly difficult experience, it does not signal the end of those significant bonds. Grieving, as shown in these letters, is a transformative spiritual process—one in which the religious, existential, and relational dimensions intersect and, together, offer a means of coping with the suffering brought by loss.

Our reflections also highlight an area that remains largely overlooked in educational practice. Issues relating to thanatology remain a taboo in many highly industrialised societies, including Poland.⁵⁴ It is therefore worth considering the inclusion of themes related to death and dying in lifelong learning

54 D. Sereżyńska, M. Modrak, *Oczekiwania osób terminalnie chorych względem siebie, najbliższych, instytucji oraz Kościoła i Boga*, „Rocznik Naukowy Kujawsko-Pomorskiej Szkoły Wyższej w Bydgoszczy. Transdyscyplinarne Studia o Kulturze (i) Edukacji”, 6 (2011) pp. 153–174.

to better equip individuals to cope with the complex process of losing a loved one. This is precisely the role of thanatopedagogy—a subdiscipline of pedagogy defined as:

a science of education shaped by an awareness of mortality—inherent in the human condition—which is based on the fundamental principle of respecting the dignity and freedom of every human being, as well as the inviolability and intrinsic value of human life.⁵⁵

Grieving healthily can lead to a deeper understanding of life, personal growth, and stronger social skills.⁵⁶ Marcin Białas argues that education is, at its core, about preparing people for life; therefore, death presents a challenge for educators, but one that is not at odds with the goals of education. On the contrary, without proper education about death, individuals may ultimately struggle to cope with life. This kind of preparation should be a lifelong process, one that connects spiritual, existential, and intellectual dimensions of human experience. Ultimately, the more fully a person engages with life—in all its aspects—the better prepared they are for death, as they experience life in its fullness, rather than reducing it to the pursuit of happiness or the endurance of suffering.⁵⁷ This view also finds support in religious thought. Father Mariusz Sztaba stresses that one of the responsibilities of educators in the thanatological education of future generations is to teach the ‘art of dying’—intended as a form of support for families in times of bereavement.⁵⁸

Małgorzata Kuleta and Monika Wasilewska further observe that the death of a family member does not only have profound and painful consequences

55 J. Binnebesel, *Tanatopedagogika w doświadczeniu wielowymiarowości człowieka i śmierci*, Toruń 2013, p. 251.

56 J. Binnebesel, Z. Formella, H. Katolyk, *Tanatopedagogiczny kontekst wielowymiarowości żałoby*, „Białostockie Studia Prawnicze”, 28 (2023) issue 3, p. 217, DOI: 10.15290/bsp.2023.28.03.10.

57 M. Białas, *Fenomen śmierci w procesie wychowania*, in: *Rodzina w sytuacji straty*, eds. D. Opozda, M. Parzyszek, Lublin 2017, pp. 110–116.

58 M. Sztaba, „Dostrzec w śmierci wielką nadzieję”. *Pedagogiczne implikacje „ars moriendi” Josepha Ratzingera – Benedykta XVI*, in: *Rodzina w sytuacji straty*, p. 45.

for individuals but also affects the entire family system—potentially even having negative repercussions across generations. This suggests that we need systemic responses to bereavement, comparable to those offered in individual cases of crisis-related loss. Grief must be processed to the bereaved to maintain their physical and psychological well-being. In such cases, the family system can regain stability, especially when we understand grief in its wider social and cultural context.

Psychoeducation is crucial here. It mainly involves presenting the grieving process as a 'normal' experience with recognisable stages and teaching healthy ways of responding to the loss of a loved one. This should take place 'through the stimulation and guidance of emotions, facilitating communication, and strengthening interpersonal bonds in a safe environment, as well as by teaching family members effective strategies for coping with the crisis triggered by bereavement.'⁵⁹ It is therefore difficult to disagree with Józef Binnebesel's assertion that:

one could argue of course that, in today's world, the topic of death should be avoided, as it may provoke misunderstanding and fear. However, ignoring the subject does not solve the problem, as death was, is, and always will be part of life. The role of pedagogy is not to create artificial educational constructs but to take practical action that responds to the realities of life.⁶⁰

Examining these connections between life and death, analysing human existence in all its dimensions, suffering and the search for meaning in difficult experiences, can thus serve a greater purpose. It may also offer a practical approach to grief prevention and emotional support.

59 M. Kuleta, M. Wasilewska, *Rodzina w żałobie – wpływ doświadczenia utraty na funkcjonowanie rodziny jako systemu*, „Państwo i Społeczeństwo”, 3 (2007) pp. 73–85.

60 J. Binnebesel, *Tanatopedagogika w doświadczeniu wielowymiarowości człowieka i śmierci*, p. 238.

Streszczenie: Główna kwestia poruszana w artykule dotyczy duchowości polskich kobiet w kontekście straty osoby bliskiej. Duchowość jest integralną częścią życia człowieka, a współcześni badacze skupiają swoją uwagę na ważności tej sfery dla osób w podeszłym wieku, czy też w obliczu własnej śmierci. Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na ważności sfery duchowej po stracie osoby znaczącej, na podstawie przeprowadzonych badań własnych. Zastosowano podejście jakościowe, przeanalizowano teksty wywołane w postaci listów. Wygenerowano indukcyjnie kategorie, a trzy z nich – przeanalizowane w niniejszym artykule – stanowi pewien obraz doświadczania duchowości w obliczu śmierci bliskich. Badaniu poddano 55 listów napisanych przez kobiety w różnym wieku do bliskich zmarłych. Celem analizy było poznanie różnych aspektów przeżywania straty osoby bliskiej w kontekście duchowości w trzech wymiarach: religijnym, egzystencjalnym i relacyjnym. W wymiarze religijnym dla badanych wiara staje się istotnym elementem wspierającym przeżywanie żałoby. Osoby odwołują się do kochającego Boga, do symboli, praktyk i świąt religijnych. W wymiarze egzystencjalnym osoby uświadamiają sobie, jak krucha i ulotna jest ludzka egzystencja. W wymiarze relacyjnym dostrzegalna jest wiara w stałą obecność zmarłego przy autorkach listów, podobnie jak potrzeba bliskości, a także kontynuowania relacji nawet po śmierci bliskiej osoby, co daje ukojenie i ulgę w cierpieniu, a także pozwala poradzić sobie z trudną sytuacją straty. Całość tworzy wymiar duchowy.

Słowa kluczowe: duchowość, religijność, relacje, śmierć, listy, żałoba.

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