

# AMBIGUOUS LOSS AND THE HEART AND SOUL OF THERAPY

Presentation by Heather Bunting  
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# Overview of Presentation

- Ambiguous loss – what is it?
- Research conducted
- Ambiguous loss and the heart and soul of therapy
- Resources



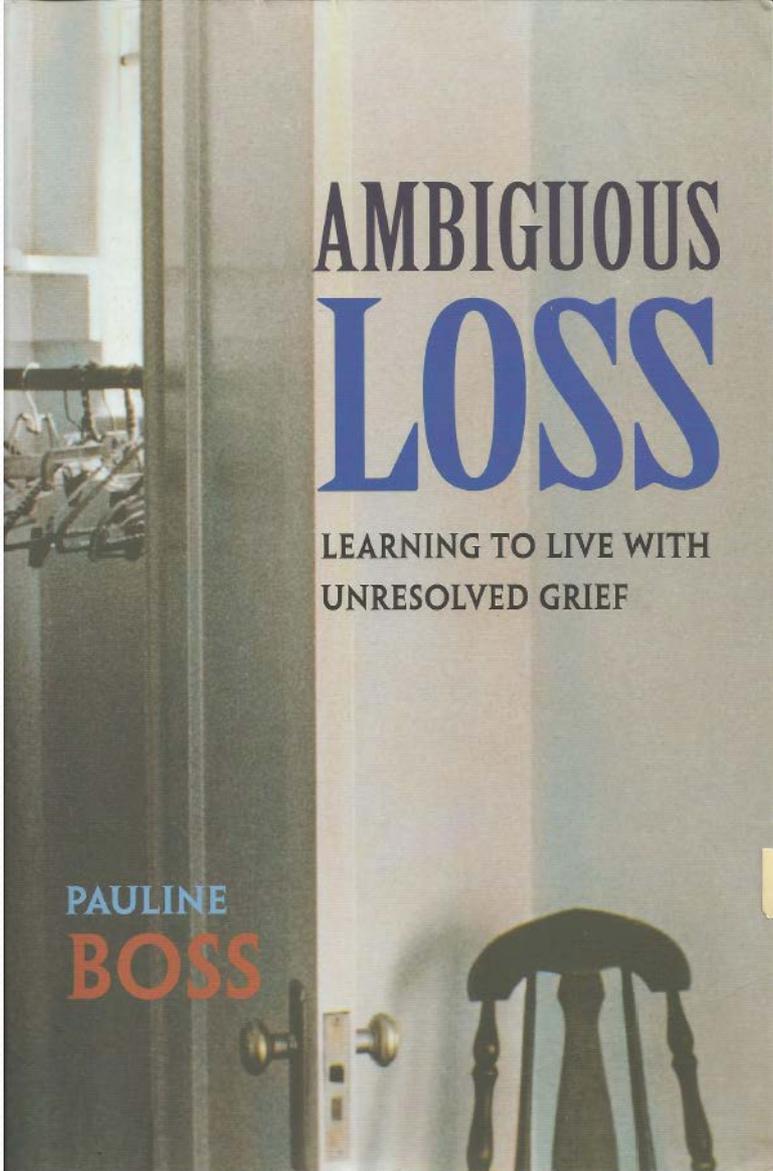
# AMBIGUOUS LOSS

# What is Ambiguous Loss?

It is a different sort of loss. Clients may present as having depression but when ambiguous loss is in the picture you are looking more at grief – unresolved grief – because this type of loss is difficult to resolve.

# Who Coined the Term and Why?

- Dr. Pauline Boss, Emeritus Professor and Clinical Supervisor of Marriage and Family Therapy, University of Minnesota.
- Brought up in an immigrant community which consisted of people who had migrated from Switzerland hoping for a 'better' life – but found that the loss of their family and homeland wasn't necessarily 'better'.



# AMBIGUOUS LOSS

LEARNING TO LIVE WITH  
UNRESOLVED GRIEF

PAULINE  
BOSS

# Definition

- Loss of relationship
- Physically present but Psychologically absent
- Psychologically present but Physically absent

## Physically present but Psychologically absent

- A child is born with a severe mental disability
- A loved one is in a protracted coma
- A loved one ends up in a vegetative state due a severe brain injury
- A loved one has an intractable psychotic condition
- In cases of infidelity
- In cases of father-absence
- Living with a workaholic
- Living with someone with drug addiction

- A loved one with Alzheimer's



Alice 1 final.MP4



Alice 2 final.MP4



Exie final.MP4

# Poetry encapsulates:

**“To die and part is a less evil; but to part and live, there, there is the torment.”**

The poet, George Landdowne

# Physically absent but psychologically present



# Harold Holt ...

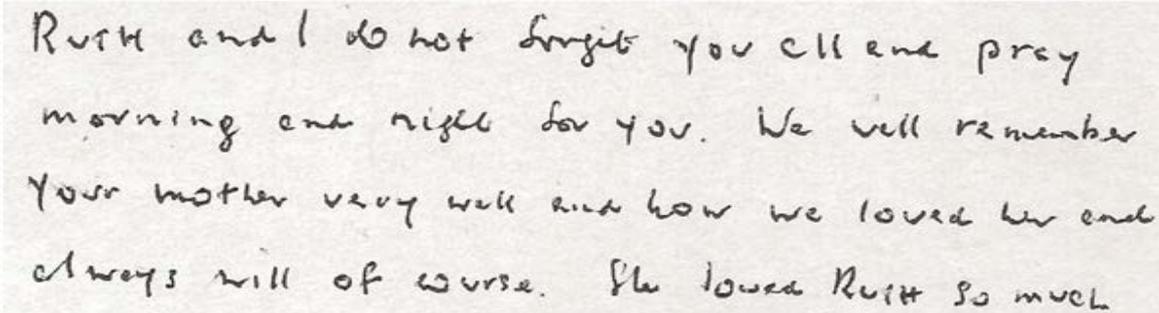
- Went for a swim when holidaying with his family for Christmas 1967.
- Disappeared never to be seen again.
- His wife had helicopters searching for days.
- Lots of conspiracy and other stories proposed.
- Commonwealth and Victoria police determined that it was an accident.
- What would it have been like for the family?
- Memorial service.
- 26 years later story in The Sydney Morning Herald.

# Other examples ...

- Family members of people who go down in air disasters eg family members of Malaysian Airlines plane, flight MH370.
- Soldiers killed at war and bodies not returned to families.
- People caught up in religious cults lost to families.
- People who leave religious cults and are lost to families.

# My story of ambiguous loss

- I left a religious cult when I was 19 years old.
- About 25 years later my daughter received a card with the following words:

A photograph of a handwritten note on a light-colored card. The text is written in cursive and reads: "Ruth and I do not forget you all and pray morning and night for you. We will remember your mother very well and how we loved her and always will of course. She loved Ruth so much".

Ruth and I do not forget you all and pray morning and night for you. We will remember your mother very well and how we loved her and always will of course. She loved Ruth so much

- The fact that my mother prayed for me all those years later – to her I was physically absent but psychologically present.

# The experience of ambiguous loss

- In an article about ambiguous loss experienced in the case of chronic illness, Boss & Couden, 2002 state:  
**“When people are unable to obtain clarity about the status of a family member, they are often immobilized: decisions are put on hold; roles remain unclear; relationship boundaries are confusing; celebrations and rituals are cancelled. Couples and families may remain immobilized until they are able to perceptually reconstruct the meaning of the ambiguity surrounding their loved one's absence or presence.”**

# Research

- Masters thesis
- Research Question: Do parents of children who are addicted to recreational drugs experience ambiguous loss?
- Interviewed 7 mothers and 3 fathers – ‘children’ ranging in age from 22 to 43.
- Three types ambiguities were found to be experienced by these parents: some support for physical presence but psychological absence, feelings of ambiguity within the parent about their child, feelings of ambiguity towards their child.

# Findings

- Physical presence but psychological absence. This was found to be sporadic with comments from parents such as:
- *“You’re talking to someone who’s brain is not normal, where there’s no logic.”*
- Parents internal feelings of ambiguity:  
*There’s been times when I haven’t seen him for three months because I just can’t.*
- Ambiguity towards the child:  
*“I don’t trust him for anything which you feel horrible about as a parent, I can’t tell you.”*



Ambiguous loss and  
the heart and soul of  
therapy.

# Why a true understanding of what our clients are experiencing is important

## **It's different to other losses:**

- In cases where there is psychological presence but physical absence: No certainty, no death certificate, no ritual, no wake, no funeral, nothing to bury. Question of identity – am I still his wife/her husband?
- In cases where there is physical presence but psychological absence: Stressful, chaotic, confusing; sadness, anger, fear, guilt, powerlessness, anxious about the future, exhausted, lack of support.
- This very distressing loss may be misdiagnosed – eg as depression – rather than ambiguous loss and the grief that that engenders.
- Grief is not an illness. It is a normal reaction to loss and should not be pathologized.
- Physical, psychological and social manifestations of grief.
- Clients need to make sense of the ambiguity.
- Then they can make meaning – link it to their social world, to their cultural and religious beliefs, to the multi-generational past and their hopes for the future.

# The heart and soul of therapy

- We do many things in counselling.
- On the PACFA website it says “While the work of Counsellors and Psychotherapists with clients may be of considerable depth, the focus of Counselling is more likely to be on specific problems, changes in life adjustments and fostering clients’ wellbeing. Psychotherapy is more concerned with the restructuring of the personality or self and the development of insight.”
- But the heart and soul of therapy, I suspect, lies more in what Carl Rogers talks about – empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence.
- Counselling people suffering from ambiguous loss is long term work and challenges us to draw on our own experiences of loss.
- People need to find hope for their future.

# The heart and soul of therapy cont'd.

- Boss & Carnes (2012) said:

**“Overall, when doing clinical work with ambiguous loss, the goal is to change perceptions toward a new narrative that is less burdened with negative attributions, which invoke guilt, shame, remorse, or desire for retribution.**

**Paradoxically, what we hope for is motivation for personal change despite having a problem that resists change.”**

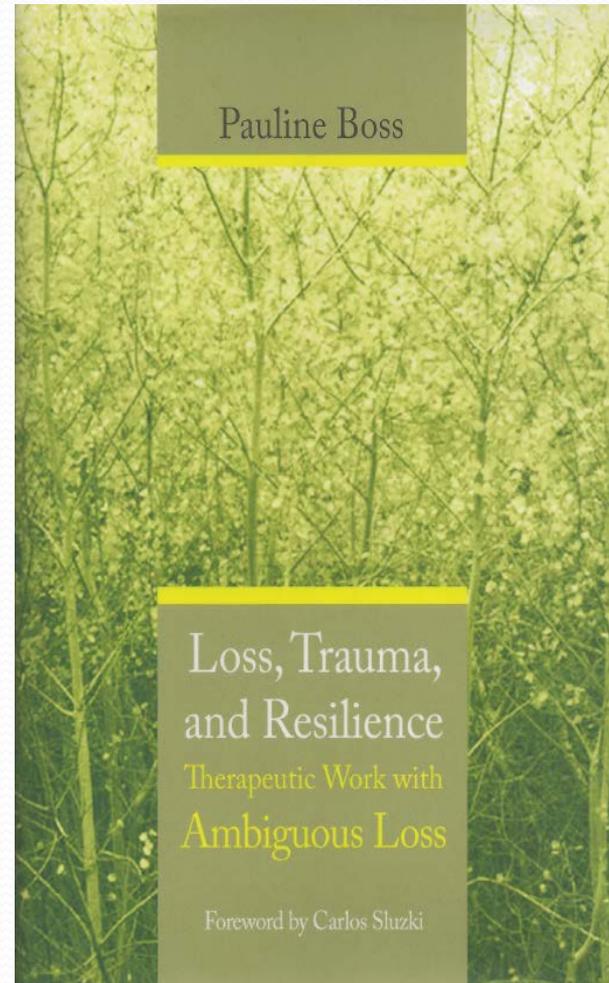
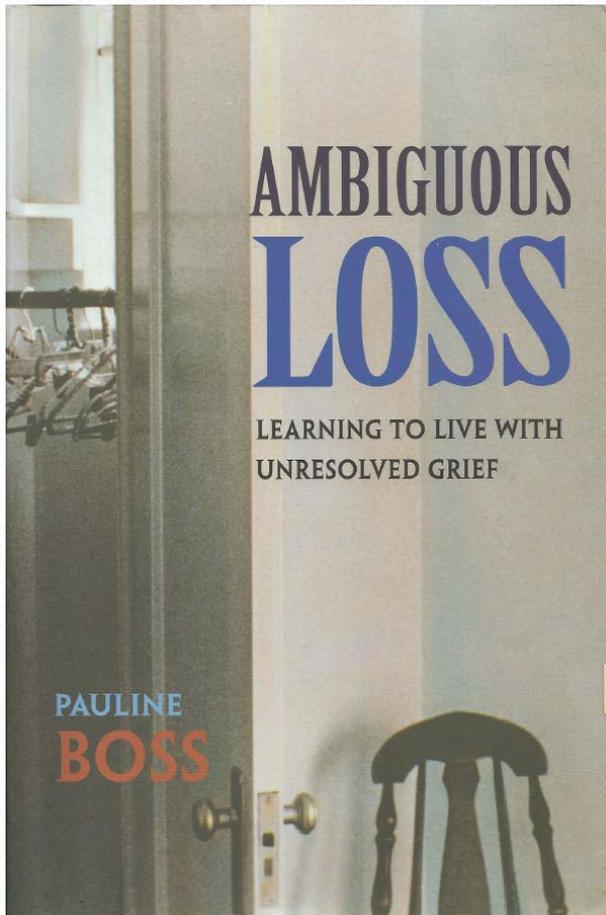
I believe that journeying with these clients who need support over a long period of time, for whom there are no clear cut and easy answers, and who challenge us in the process to be mindful of ambiguity in our dealings with them, is approaching the heart and soul of therapy.

# Summary

- I hope you have enjoyed learning about Ambiguous Loss. I have given you a snapshot only!
- The research bears further research.
- Working with clients who are suffering from ambiguous loss challenges us to sink down into the heart and soul of therapy.
- A list of resources follow should you wish to study this topic further.
- Thank you for your interest.

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# Resources



# YouTube Interviews with Pauline Boss

- Ambiguous Loss – Interview with Pauline Boss – Part 1  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hapJ13SiaM4>
- Ambiguous Loss – Interview with Pauline Boss – Part 2  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oW7UnpvoxZY>
- Ambiguous Loss – Interview with Pauline Boss – Part 3  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KR-s2oyxv1M>
- Finding meaning as an important step in coping with ambiguous loss  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAFfE3fvcYA>
- The importance of adapting family rituals to minimize disruption when dealing with ambiguous loss  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9B5oT9MshIk>

# Journal Articles etc.

- Abrams, M.S. (2001). Resilience in ambiguous loss. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 55(2), 283-291. EBSCOhost AN 4765495
- Boss, P. & Carnes, D. (2012). The myth of closure. *Family Process*, 51, 456-469. DOI: 10.1111/famp.12005
- Boss, P. & Couden, B.A. (2002). Ambiguous loss from chronic physical illness; clinical interventions with individuals, couples, and families. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58(11), 1351-1360. DOI: 10.1002/jclp.10083
- Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Boss, P. (2006). *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic work with ambiguous loss*. New York USA: W.W. Norton & Company.
- *Exile*. (2011). BBC Production. British psychological thriller television series dealing with the topic of Alzheimer's.
- *Still Alice* (2014) American independent drama film written and directed by Richard Glatzer and Wash Westmoreland and based on Lisa Genova's 2007 bestselling novel of the same name.