

Latitudes of loss:

On the vicissitudes of empathy

ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine loss, the vicissitudes of empathy, and the existential complexity of one's subjective life in relation to the lived experiences of others. I focus specifically on some observations I made about the dynamics of empathy and the experience of grief during a recent trip back to the island of Yap (Waqab), Federated States of Micronesia. In so doing, I argue for the significance of recognizing that empathy is rarely an all or nothing affair. Nor is it necessary that it be based on some set of homologous experiences shared between individuals. It is, instead, a process that is temporally arrayed, intersubjectively constituted, and culturally patterned. Even in the face of mutual misunderstanding, possibilities still exist for moments of empathetic insight to arise. [*empathy, intersubjectivity, funerals, grief, loss, fieldwork*]

This article is about the vicissitudes of empathy. It concerns the existential complexity and temporal dynamics of individuals' subjective lives in relation to the lived experience of others. In it, I highlight a range of intersubjective experiences that might variously be classified as empathetic. This range varies from moments of connection to moments of disconnection, from feelings of mutual understanding, attunement, and compassion to feelings of confusion, misalignment, and singularity when confronting the, at times, impenetrability of others' and our own subjective lives. I focus specifically on some observations I made about the dynamics of empathy during a recent trip back to the island of Yap (Federated States of Micronesia) in August and September of 2009. There, over a little less than a month, I had the unfortunate occasion to attend four of the ten funerals that happened to occur on the island during that time.¹

As will become evident as I go on, central to my experience of those funerals was my own very recent personal experience with loss. Although it is not easy for me to write of such things in a public forum, I think that it is important for me to do so to demonstrate the dynamic and complex nature of empathy as it plays out in the actualities of everyday life. To get at the existential facticity of empathy and empathetic-like processes, it is, I believe, necessary to draw, at least in part, on individuals' own intersubjective entanglements with the various social worlds of which we are all a part. To bracket the visceral and emotional emplacement of our being in such contexts is to efface the very thing that we wish, in this particular instance, at least, to capture: the experiential density of our variegated possibilities for being-with-others (see Jackson 1998).

It is by now a truism that anthropologists make sense of their experiences in the field in light of existential residues that carry forth from their experiences elsewhere, and vice versa. As Renato Rosaldo has convincingly argued in his powerful and moving piece "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage" (1993), there may be particular ways of being-in-the-world that are foreclosed to people who have not first had access to similar such experiences in the context of their own lives. The extent to which moments of empathetic alignment and mutual understanding are necessarily based on an intersubjective assessment of homologous experiences, however, is something that I examine more closely in the context of this article. In fact, I attempt to demonstrate that although relatively homologous lived experiences of different individuals may in some instances make moments of

empathetic alignment possible, there may yet also be times when such experiences hinder our abilities to gain insight into one another's lived realities. Homologous experiences may reveal aspects of another's existence to us in one instance, but they may also serve to conceal aspects of it in another. In this light, empathy is never an all or nothing affair. It is, instead, a process that is arrayed through time. In fact, empathy cannot be adequately understood, I argue, without close attention to its temporal unfolding. Once the temporality of empathy becomes the focus, it is possible to see that, in some cases, it is precisely experiences of misunderstanding that potentiate possibilities for new horizons of mutual understanding to arise, even if fleetingly so.

The problem of empathy seems, in some ways, to be a necessary and self-evident aspect of ethnographic fieldwork. However, as my colleague Douglas Hollan and I have argued, "Although many anthropologists seem to presume the importance of empathy in social life and fieldwork, only a handful have been explicit about defining or invoking it or related concepts" (2008:385).² First used to translate the German term *Einfühlung* (lit. feeling into), the English *empathy* has long been understood in Western philosophical and social scientific traditions to refer to an act whereby an individual is able to gain some access, no matter how mitigated that access might be, to the embodied subjective experience of another. According to Theodor Lipps, who famously used the term in developing his theory of aesthetic appreciation, *Einfühlung* is tied to the subject's (largely involuntary) ability to project his or her own feeling states into the perceptible movements and qualities of an aesthetic object. Although understandings of "*Einfühlung*," and its English derivative "empathy," have since Lipps's time been imbued with a variety of differing meanings, a common thread running through these various articulations of the concept is the idea that empathy has something to do with cultivating a shared horizon of understanding between interlocutors in which some access is provided to their respective subjective states.

In a recent book, *From Detached Concern to Empathy: Humanizing Medical Practice* (2001), Jodi Halpern makes clear, however, that empathy is never based simply on shared feeling states. Empathy is, instead, a necessarily imaginative, cognitive, affective, and communicative process that "involves discerning aspects of a [person's] . . . experiences that might otherwise go unrecognized" (Halpern 2001:94). It is, in other words, a process that is informed by the work of the emotions to focus attention to determine the saliency of particular events, images, and interactions that later inform a person's understanding of and commitments to certain beliefs and practices.

As Hollan (2008) points out, empathy is an intersubjective and imaginative process that does not simply begin and end with the one who is trying to empathize. Instead, empathy entails the imaginative work of not only the empathizer

but also the empathizee, who also participates in the process of being understood by another. Empathy, as an intersubjective process, Hollan correctly observes, involves not only the experience of understanding another but also the experience of being understood. And it is precisely this intersubjective dialogical process that distinguishes empathy from projection, which requires only that an individual be able to attribute his or her "own feelings or ideas to another, whether or not those attributions match up well with the other's feelings and ideas or not" (Hollan and Throop 2008:386).

As Halpern suggests, dialogue often provides an important nexus through which individuals are able to begin the work of cultivating a shared horizon of meaning, through the articulation of experiences of understanding and of being understood. That talk and storytelling may provide such an important vehicle for mediating and affording empathetic understanding is clearly a significant insight, one that has been explored quite thoughtfully, for instance, by Cheryl Mattingly (2008) in her work on narrative mind reading. A focus on narrative and empathy also harkens back to Jerome Bruner's (1986) assertion that narrative offers a primary way for subjects to mediate between a landscape of action, on the one hand, and a landscape of intention, on the other hand (see also Mattingly et al. 2008).

All that said, I focus this article on the existential complexities and the dynamics of empathy that arise in concrete social situations in which diverse personal, interpersonal, historical, and cultural influences are always at play. Although most certainly based on shared existential and biological aspects of the human condition (see Duranti 2010; Iaconi 2008), empathy, for anthropologists, must always be understood in the context of particular cultural meanings, beliefs, practices, and values. From a cultural standpoint, it is significant not only to explore how empathy is both recognized and enacted by individuals in its marked and unmarked forms but also to examine the specific contexts, times, and situations in which empathy is possible and valued and those in which it is not (see Hollan and Throop 2008).

As Hollan and I have argued (Hollan and Throop 2008), empathy and empathetic-like acts may be imbued with deep ambivalences on the part of empathizers and empathizees alike. It is, in fact, quite wrong to assume that gaining empathetic insight into another's subjective life is always and necessarily a positively valued practice (see Hollan and Throop in press; Robbins and Rumsey 2008). In Yap, for instance, where the moral person is understood to be an individual who ideally embodies the virtues of self-governance, emotional quietude, and mental opacity, empathy and empathetic-like processes can carry with them more than their fair share of ambivalent feelings (see Throop 2010). Also, although dialogue and narrative are most certainly significant for understanding others' hearts

and minds, empathy may be culturally and morally understood as an activity that does not necessarily traffic in the explicit content of talk and those overt forms of expression that are often implicated in narrative practices (see Throop in press).

In light of such insights, an important goal of this article is to foreground the very dynamic and, at times, fleeting ways that empathy is realized, recognized, and enacted within the ever-shifting attunements, memories, emotions, desires, fantasies, and interests that constitute, for all individuals, the very fabric of our conscious life in time. I also hope to show that while our various modes of being with others are clearly patterned by personal, interpersonal, and cultural assumptions concerning the regulation and control of empathy and empathic-like attunements, empathy itself at times escapes the limits of our personal, interpersonal, and cultural emplacement, spilling over, even if fleetingly, to new horizons of intersubjective understanding.

Finally, in an effort to capture the complexities and vicissitudes of empathy, I have explicitly set out to write this article in a form that is meant to bear a family resemblance to Gregory Bateson's (1972) notion of a "metalogue." That is, what follows is not only a narrative about the problem of empathy in the context of loss, mourning, and ethnographic efforts at sense making but it is also, by design, a narrative that is meant to evoke those self-same problems, ambivalences, and struggles with empathy in those who read it. It is in this respect that a reader's engagement with the narrative that follows can be compared to an interaction in which not only do the "participants" engage in a conversation that concerns a particular problem "but the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the same subject" (Bateson 1972:2).

The phone call

Tuesday, April 14, 2009, at 4:50 a.m., I awoke to the sound of my cell phone ringing. Rolling over, reaching with my eyes still closed, I felt around on the floor next to my bed until my hand brushed against the phone. Lifting it from the floor, I opened my eyes and looked at the display to see who was calling. "Oh no, it's Keith," I said, my own voice seeming to emanate from an elsewhere of which I was not yet a part. Struggling to find my bearings, I wondered aloud, "What time is it there anyway?" 7:50 a.m., Ottawa time. A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, I knew something was definitely wrong.

Sitting up in the half-light of my bedroom, still unable to focus properly, I looked up to where a map of Yap was hanging on the wall next to my bed. It was almost imperceptible in the darkness against the background of the wall. So far away from Canada, I thought, randomly, it seemed. And yet, how many times had I worried about what I would do if anything horrible happened to one of my Canadian

family members or friends while I was living on the actual topography that was now represented cartographically on my wall. In the end, it seemed, it made no difference. Here I was in Los Angeles, bracing myself for the worst, and I felt no closer to my Canadian family and friends than if I had still been living in the western Pacific.

Taking a deep breath, I answered the phone. "Is he OK?" I asked, not bothering with the useless formality of a greeting. "He's gone, Jason," Keith said simply, before beginning to cry quietly into the phone. Keith's brother Kirk had been doing poorly the past few days, and I had been preparing myself for this. Still, it seemed unthinkable. And yet, at that very moment the unthinkable, the unspeakable, the unhearable was somehow made manifest in my friend Keith's few brief words and his accompanying tears. No matter how much it hurt, it was now simply the truth. My worst fears had been concretely realized in the cold, soulless fact, so hard to understand, and yet now impossible to dispute, that one of my best friends for the past 25 years, a man I had known since we were both 13 years old, had passed into the great mystery that awaits us all. After over a year of struggle, just 38 years old, Kirk Ellard had finally succumbed. His battle with testicular cancer was now over.

"They say he has cancer"

It had been four years since I was last in Yap. Waiting at the gate in Guam to board the plane, I noticed a fifty-something Yapese man in a wheelchair. I looked to see if I recognized him or the young man who was helping him onto the plane. No, neither looked familiar, I thought, and I returned to reading my book and waiting for my row number to be called. Boarding the plane, I passed by the two men, who were now seated and talking quietly together. I wondered where they had come from. Perhaps they had been visiting family and friends in Guam or Hawai'i or Oregon. Strange, but for some reason, at the time, I did not think it possible that the man in the wheelchair was sick.

I found my seat, sat down, and almost immediately shut my eyes. I was exhausted from so many hours of traveling and from the hectic schedule I had been keeping in an attempt to finish up a few papers and the index for my forthcoming book before leaving Los Angeles. The quick, hour and fifteen minute flight from Guam to Yap was uneventful, and I managed to get a little bit of sleep. The landing was about as smooth as landings go in the western Pacific, where most islands have runways that seem, in the wake of the strong jolt that accompanies landing or the breakneck speeds necessary for takeoff, to be far shorter than what Federal Aviation Administration regulations must normally require. And yet, it was not smooth enough to keep me from waking with a jump from my sleep. Looking out the window as the plane taxied along the runway, I felt the still-tangible residues from a dream I had just before waking. In

it, I was talking with Kirk at my father's house, about what, I cannot quite recall now. As I turned to look for my passport, the echoes of Kirk's voice and its cadence, interrupted only by his always-contagious laughter, remained perceptibly present.

Stepping off the plane into the warm, familiar humidity of a Yapese night, I made my way through immigration, got my bags, and emerged from customs to greet my adopted Yapese brother, Falngin,³ who was waiting for me, smiling. As I walked over with my bags in hand, he greeted me with an offer of betel nut. I smiled this time, and nodded affirmatively. I put my bags down and reached to shake his hand, "Ke urogom boche?" [How are you?] he said. "Maenigill" [Good], I replied. "Kemus go gur?" [Only you?] I asked. He raised his eyebrows twice (a conventional Yapese nonverbal gesture that indicates no) and answered playfully, "Do you not recognize Gurwaen, over there?" Turning my head to look, I saw a young teenage girl sitting up against the wall talking to a friend. She was his daughter. "She's almost a woman now," he continued half-jokingly. "Yes, she is," I countered with a laugh. Falngin still smiling, then added, "It has been too long, Jason. It's good that you came back."

Sitting down on one of the benches that line the airport's open-aired waiting area to prepare our betel to chew, I was just about to ask Falngin how the rest of the family was doing when a man I recognized as Tamag, from the village just north of my Yapese family's, walked up. "Sirow" [Excuse me], he began, "Falngin, I just heard that Changaer is being taken to the hospital, he is bleeding from the mouth, I don't think it is good." Falngin looked up briefly and nodded, before looking down again to finish preparing his betel nut. "I will join you shortly at the hospital," said Falngin, "I have to take these two back to the village, but I will come soon." Tamag thanked us both, apologized for interrupting our conversation, and then began walking briskly toward his truck.

Once Tamag was out of earshot, I inquired quietly, "Who is Changaer? What happened?" "Did you not see Changaer on the plane?" Falngin asked, with a mouth now full of betel nut. Looking toward the parking lot, under his breath, he added, "The one in the wheelchair." "Oh, yes, him," I muttered, my mouth now full of betel nut too. Continuing to avert his gaze, Falngin went on, "Changaer was on his way back from Manila. He was being treated at St. Luke's hospital." "What's wrong?" I asked. "They say he has cancer."

And there it was, just like that, the familiar sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. It had only been four short months since Kirk had died and that word, that horrible word, *cancer*, still bore with it the deep stinging pain of a suffering born from loss. Interlaced with the weight of a quarter century of memories of my friend and the vivid recollections I had of that phone call, my trip home, and the funeral,

the pain carried forth in its wake the palpable presence of Kirk's absence from this world.

And yet the thought struck me—loss is not a negation. Neither, it seems, is absence. On the contrary, in individuals' experience of them, both modes of inexistence can be understood to reveal a special kind of presence or intimacy that is mediated through pain. A painful presencing forth of that which was once the extended tendrils of our being's attachment, care, and love for that other person who is now gone from our world. Indeed, as Jean-Paul Sartre once wrote, "Absence . . . is a bond of being between two or several human-realities which necessitates a fundamental presence of these realities one to another and which, moreover, is only one of the particular concretizations of this presence" (1984:371). For Sartre, in other words, absence can only itself be realized existentially as an intersubjectively generated form of presence.

In the case of absence due to loss, in the wake of our loved one's inexistence, our being, which was once so immersed in that person's presence that it, in turn, forgot a part of its own existence, becomes once again visible but now in a new way. The presencing forth of an absence is an existential modality of now no longer being with the one who we have lost. Just as a focused immersion in a given activity can bring about modes of self-forgetfulness—think here of the musician who loses herself in the music she is playing—so too in our being's immersion in a care-filled relation with another is there evidence for an existential modality in which a form of self-forgetting also occurs.

Love is, in at least one of its aspects, then, a giving over of a part of our being to another, or perhaps more accurately, the self-estrangement of our being in its intimate entanglement with another. When the other is gone, is no longer here, immersed within the arc of our existential expanse, that aspect of our being that was once concealed in its very connectedness to the other, is now, in that absence, palpably revealed, painfully so, in suffering and sorrow, as a presence of absence. In presencing forth, loss, pain, and sorrow were for me, at that very moment, feelings that I did not wish to see vanish.

Over the din of my thoughts and feelings about Kirk, I tried my best to listen as Falngin continued to speak of Changaer's struggles over the past few months. No matter how much I wanted to, however, I could barely focus on his words. Too much, too soon, was all I could think.

The visit

Mary, my adopted Yapese mother, and I returned to the village after attending our municipality's monthly Sunday church service to find that Falngin had, as he had promised, stopped by Mary's house to see me. Hearing us approach,

Falngin looked up and greeted us. After taking a minute to prepare his betel nut, Falngin apologized for not having a chance to call on Friday. He had meant to stop by to visit, he explained, in a matter-of-fact tone that did not at all prepare me for the news that was about to come, but he was unable to make it because Changaer had died.

And there it was, again just like that, a sinking feeling in the pit in my stomach and a virtual flood of images from Kirk's funeral and my visit home to say goodbye to him. I tried my best to keep my composure and listen. Feeling my eyes begin to water, I looked down to prepare a betel nut of my own. What was the meaning of the feeling in the pit my stomach? What was the meaning of my watering eyes? Were these embodied reactions an intersubjectively triggered recognition of Kirk's absence? Or were these visceral experiences not also interlaced with an empathetic recognition of the sadness associated with the passing of a person who was so close to my Yapese brother? How could I ever know? Such were some of the thoughts that coursed through my mind as I tried my best not to cry.

Not seeming to notice my reaction, or perhaps thinking it best to ignore it, Falngin continued with his story. After dropping me off in the village, he had returned home to pick up his wife, Lelu, and both of them had left immediately for the hospital. When they got there, Changaer was sitting in his room with his wife standing beside him. Lelu, who was closely related to Changaer (he was her maternal uncle), walked into the room. She came back out almost immediately, however, because Changaer was not doing well at all. Changaer's wife had told her that she should probably wait outside until they had managed to get Changaer back into a comfortable position. Apparently, Changaer had been in considerable discomfort for more than an hour, and it took all the energy he had left to get back into his bed. As his wife tried to help him, Changaer began calling out in pain. He tried shifting positions, but the pain would not stop. Hearing the screams, Lelu went inside to hold her uncle's hand in an attempt to comfort him. As his screaming became more desperate, Lelu called out for someone to get a nurse.

Falngin ran to the nursing station, and when he arrived back with some help, Changaer was still crying out in pain. After a few minutes of repositioning his body, the nurse managed to find a more comfortable position for him, and Changaer was finally able to quiet down. Exhausted from the pain, he closed his eyes to rest a bit. A few minutes passed. Lelu continued to hold her uncle's hand, and Changaer's wife wiped the sweat from his brow. It seemed that Changaer was now sleeping. When the doctor entered the room a few minutes later, Falngin stood back to give him some space. He approached Changaer and took his pulse. When he turned and announced that Changaer was dead, Lelu let out an audible gasp. It was too late, the doctor explained. There was nothing more they could do.

The request

It was sometime after two in the morning when Falngin and Lelu were finally able to leave the hospital and return to the village to get some much-needed rest. Falngin could not sleep, however. Every time he felt himself on the verge of drifting off, the image of Changaer's dying face would come to him. "Kug taamdag ngaak" [I was scared of it], he explained to us. I nodded silently, thinking of the images of Kirk's open casket that still often haunted me in that relaxed twilight of consciousness that comes just before sleep. Falngin sat quietly for a few minutes, looking down. Could those be tears in his eyes? I wondered. In the seven years I had known him, this was the closest I had come to seeing him cry. I was at a loss for what to say, what to do. At that moment, I recalled the faces of my own friends searching for the right thing to say to comfort me when they heard of Kirk's death.

Wanting desperately to break what felt at that moment to be a suffocating silence, I asked Falngin how Lelu was holding up. "She is okay," he said. Thankfully, I thought, the question seemed to distract him enough to give him the necessary composure to carry on with his story. And yet, as I think back now, a chance for composure may not at all have been what he wanted from me at the time. Perhaps, just perhaps, an opportunity to cry, to share his feelings of loss, was what he, or at least some part of him, had wanted, instead.

Empathy is, it should be recalled, as much about one's efforts at understanding another as it is about another's desire to be understood. It is also inherently and complexly temporal in nature. Indeed, my two very differing assessments of Falngin's existential condition as he sat quietly at the brink of tears that day on our family's veranda arose over time: first, in the context of my own feelings of vulnerability in our immersive engagement and copresence as we sat talking together that afternoon, and, then, again later in the retrospective remove of my memories of that day as I worked on writing these paragraphs at my computer in Los Angeles. These differing temporally arrayed assessments, and the differing possibilities for revealing aspects of Falngin's experiences that are enfolded within them, are reminders of the always ongoing, necessarily partial, and open-ended nature of attempts at empathetic alignment with others.

Continuing with his story, Falngin explained that he did not manage to sleep at all that first night. The next morning, exhausted, he left for Changaer's house, where he was expected to help with digging the grave. The funeral was to be held on Tuesday morning, and there was also quite a bit of work to do to prepare the house for the mourners. Falngin and a group of other men ended up spending the better part of the day digging and most of the late afternoon and evening constructing a partially aboveground cement tomb. It was at this point that Falngin told us of Changaer's

rather odd request: In the event of his death, Changaer had asked that his family keep the funeral to no more than two hours in length.

Although this might not sound too odd from the perspective of some North American or European sensibilities, when understood against the backdrop of local expectations, it can be seen as truly remarkable. Indeed, in precolonial times, Yapese funerals traditionally lasted as long as it took the body to decompose, often weeks, sometimes more than a month. The increasing influence of Roman Catholicism over the last hundred years has resulted in a shortening of the time devoted to funerals in Yap, but it is still quite common for them to last for three or more days. Moreover, when a body is taken home from the hospital, the mourners are expected to stay night and day near the deceased until the burial occurs, and this says nothing of the days of preparation for the funeral itself.

But, for some reason, Changaer did not want any of this. He wanted something different. And, in an equally striking moment, that night at the hospital, shortly after he had passed away, Changaer's wife announced his wishes to the family. Taken aback by the request, the other family members spent the better part of an hour discussing possible plans for the funeral before reaching what they all felt was a suitable "compromise." Instead of only two hours, the funeral would last six. It would begin at 8 a.m. and would end by 2 p.m. Although not as short as Changaer ideally would have liked, his funeral would still set a stunning new precedent. According to everyone I had the opportunity to speak to, at least, Changaer's six-hour funeral would be the first of its kind in Yap.

Falngin explained that, although perhaps a bit odd, Changaer's idea seemed to him to be a good one, especially given how much time and energy people were devoting to funerals these days. It seemed, at times, Falngin observed, that people were simply spending their lives going from one funeral to the next. (And this was, indeed, how it felt to me during my visit given that I ended up attending another three funerals after Changaer's in less than four weeks.) So much time was spent preparing for and attending funerals these days, he lamented, that people ended up devoting more time to taking care of the dead than they did the living or the sick. Whereas only a handful of people were at the hospital when Changaer died, there would be quite the crowd at Changaer's house for the funeral, Falngin assured me.

Quite curious now to hear more about Changaer's possible reasons for wanting to have such a short funeral service, I asked Falngin why he thought Changaer had made the request. "Where did he get the idea?" I inquired. Falngin sat for a second, thinking, and then began to speak. "I'm not quite sure. It might have something to do with his sickness," he ventured, tentatively and rather obliquely. "What about it?" I asked, hoping for something a bit more

substantial. Falngin then explained that, before going to Manila, Changaer had been sick for quite some time. He had at first used local medicines, but they had not worked. Feeling awful and increasingly worried about the seriousness of his condition, he decided to go see a woman who still practices a traditional type of divining called "bei" that is done with palm leaves. Bei? I was taken aback. Could this be true? Of course, I had heard rumors of such practices in years past, but never had I heard a story concerning someone I actually knew. Falngin must be joking, I thought. "Riyuul?" [True?], I asked. "There are still people who practice bei?" "Arrogon, baaq" [Yes, there are], Falngin replied assuredly, without hesitation.

Apparently, after spending some time reading the knots that had been tied in the palm fronds, the diviner had asked Changaer if a stream ran through his property. He acknowledged that one did. She then asked him if sewage from the house was running into the stream and whether he dumped garbage into it. There was, and he did, he replied. "There is the problem," she announced, "you have angered the spirits [*moqoniyaen*]. There is an evil spirit [*marilang*] that lives in that stream. It is a house for spirits [*tabinaew ko moqoniyaen*], and the spirits are angry with you." The only thing that Changaer could do to save himself at this point, she declared, was to leave Yap and to seek treatment off island. She predicted that, if he did so, he might at first get worse, but he would be away from the spirits' reach and would eventually be healed.

It was true, said my mother Mary, who had been listening carefully to the conversation. She had been present when Changaer had recounted the story. She went on to add that the woman had also asked Changaer if there was a large tree on his estate and whether he had tried to burn it for gardening. He replied that he had. She said that this was also a house of the spirits (*tafean ko kaan*) and that these spirits too were angry with him. Changaer, in fact, told her that he had tried to burn the tree a few times, and each time the fire died out before killing the tree as he had intended.

During the entire time my Yapese mother was talking, I could not help but think about how off-base had I been in imagining what had "really" been going on for those who were closest to Changaer at the time of his death. At the time, lost in my own suffering, struggling to work my way through my own loss in light of Changaer's passing, I had been attending only to what I took to be the most salient facts of Changaer's illness, hospitalization, and death on the basis of my own recent experiences with bereavement. In fact, the sadness, suffering, and worry informing his family's reactions to this tragedy appeared to be also layered with concerns about the anger of spirits, a tonality of fear-based grief that seemed markedly different from my own. In retrospect, what I had taken to be moments of empathetic attunement with those who were suffering as a result of Changaer's passing might well have been, in the words

of Emmanuel Levinas (1998), an instance of my reducing the irreducibility of another's self-experience to the self-sameness of my own being (see also Throop 2010:269–283). Moments of empathetic connection, it seems, may be quite often fleeting and elusive.

Perhaps picking up on my surprise at hearing this news, Mary, my mother, looked over at me and proclaimed that she did not believe in “superstition.” The problem with “superstition,” she explained, is that if you do believe in the spirits, then the spirits will be able to harm you. Also, was it not the case that the diviner had been wrong? Changaer had left the island and he had still died. Was this not proof enough that one should not believe? It seemed to me that Mary was working as hard to convince herself as she was trying to convince me. The problem with Changaer, Mary concluded, was that he believed, and it was his belief that made him so vulnerable.

The funeral

On the day of Changaer's funeral, I woke up early and started getting ready. It was raining. Mary was already up having coffee, sitting under the shelter of the outdoor kitchen on a bamboo bench smoking a cigarette. It was still dark, more so than usual given the rain and the cloudy skies. Fitting day for a funeral, I thought, before wondering if there had been time to set up a proper shelter for mourners to sit under if the rain continued all morning. After showering, I went out to join Mary in the outdoor kitchen. She said that she had already made her coffee and that I should go make my own. By the time I was ready to sit down to join her, Mary was finishing up her coffee and getting ready to go feed the family pig. It took her the better part of an hour to finish with her morning chores, gather some betel nut for us to take along for the ride to the funeral, and be ready to go.

Getting in the car, I asked her what route we should take. She suggested that we go the long way through the municipality of Fanif instead of by the more direct route through town. The drive is a scenic one and one that I was hoping to get a chance to make before leaving Yap, so I did not mind her suggestion one bit. As we wound our way around the west coast of the island and caught glimpses of the turquoise waters of the Philippine Sea, I was very happy to discover that the road was still in good shape. The Japanese contractors who had been building the road when I was in Yap in 2002 had done an excellent job. The winds must have been strong last night, I then thought, as we rounded the north end of Fanif, where a number of branches and a few small trees had fallen down across the road. Seemingly also lost in thought, Mary silently looked out the passenger window as we turned onto the road that would take us to the municipality of Maap and the funeral.

Mutually copresent, and thus still intersubjectively engaged, we were yet each lost in the ongoing flow of our own private reflections.

As we approached Changaer's house, we saw twenty or so cars already parked on both sides of the road. Turning our car around at the small canteen at the top of the hill, we found a parking space on the west side of the road, facing south. We collected our things and walked downhill through another parking area that might have had another 10 or 15 cars in it, before getting to a long driveway that overlooked the area where the men were to gather. We both looked down into the large, covered sitting area, which must have been built well prior to the event. Neither of us could see Falngin. I spotted my friend Filaen', however, and smiled to myself. Four years had passed since I saw him last, and it was good to see him again, despite the circumstances. Mary gestured toward Changaer's house and took her leave without speaking. I watched as she headed down the hill to where the women were gathered under a large, blue tarp. It was there that the coffin would be laid out for the mourners to see.

As I made my way down toward the men's area, I spotted Falngin, who had already spotted me. He made a quick gesture for me to come sit beside him (politely, with his hand, palm facing down). Already sitting to his left was Jim, a man who lived one village over from us in our municipality of Dalipebinaw. Immediately next to Jim, sitting on a can of paint, was our eldest brother, Yow. Across from the main wooden building was a small (16 by 8 foot) outdoor tent that had been borrowed from one of the cooperatives in town. Sitting under it was Filaen', who seemed to be enjoying the comfort of a blue Budweiser camping chair. He looked somewhat thinner than I remembered him, his gray hair just as messy, if not a bit grayer, than before. Behind him was our other brother Luke and a few other familiar faces from our municipality.

Sitting at the other end of the covered seating area was one of the chiefs from the municipality of Okaw. On the other side of the structure (facing the back side of the hill that leads down to the small stream I had heard so much about) was the contingent from the municipality of Maap, which was Changaer's municipality. It included Changaer's cousin Giltamag, whom I knew quite well. Sitting outside of both structures, up on the hill, were a number of men whose faces I recognized from the municipality of Rull. And not long after I reached the seating area, Ayuw and few others from Gagii arrived and stationed themselves near our Dalipebinaw contingent. In the center of the structure were two men I did not recognize but who seemed to be the senior-most representatives of Changaer's clan. As I was sitting down, one of the two men was in the midst of thanking everyone for coming, for putting in the hard work of digging the grave, for enduring the rain, and for giving help, gifts, and donations to the family. Reading off a list of the

donations to date, he then told us that the family had collected a total of \$4,202, 32 traditional cloth skirts (*beagiy*), 18 boxes of bread and donuts, and some baskets of food (the amount of which I did not manage to catch).

When he was finally done speaking, many of the men, who had been listening intently, continued to sit in silence, lost in thought, it seemed, looking down or off into the distance. At times, their private ruminations were broken when someone would ask his neighbor for betel nut or when someone told a joke. Here and there, men began to talk together in voices strategically deployed so that only their closest neighbors could hear them. All the while, the young men walked around offering donuts, other baked goods, and coffee to those who had just arrived. Very much approximating Yapese ideals of masculinity and the associated virtues of emotional quietude and mental opacity that are entailed in them, no one cried.

Perhaps an hour after arriving, however, I heard the faint sounds of the first *dollolow*. The high, melodic, and painful women's lament, as it echoes forth and sonically fills the distance between the men's and women's mourning areas, always seems to bring a lump to my throat, and today was no exception. I noticed, as I had in the past, that once the women's laments began, for a few moments the men seemed to quiet down a bit to listen, almost as if they were being pulled back, despite themselves, to those viscerally imbued memories of their childhood when they too were expected to be in the women's mourning area, sitting alongside their mothers as they sorrowfully lamented the loss of the deceased. Not too long after this pause, however, the din of conversation resumed and eventually rose to a new level as if, it seemed, to drown out the sounds of loss and human heartbreak that risked bringing everyone so dangerously close to tears.

Joking also often picked up in frequency when the laments began, and on this day too the sound of laughter drowned out the painful sounds of suffering coming from below. More often than not, the jokes consisted of teasing someone for wanting to go down the hill to join the women. Such joking, I observed, was most often directed at individuals who had been quiet and lost in thought for some time. Joking about a man's desire to go down the hill to join the women was thus perhaps a strategy to ensure that the individual in question did not dwell on sorrowful memories that could lead him to tears. It might also have served as a collective reminder to everyone else who was present that they should be sure not to express their grief openly like women do. And yet there may also have been a deeper, less conscious, and more ambivalent tonality to such joking. Might it not also be possible that these jokes gave voice to an otherwise inexpressible longing to return to those moments in childhood when it is still considered acceptable for boys to grieve alongside their mothers? But, alas, how could I ever know?

After sitting together for more than four hours, a few of the men who were closest to the deceased left the men's area to say their final goodbyes. The rest of us stayed behind and continued sitting in silence or talking quietly, chewing betel nut, and drinking coffee. At some point, the decision was made, I am not sure by whom, for us to begin walking down the hill. As we rounded the back of the house, we entered another large covered area, half of it filled with sand, gravel, and, much to my surprise, a large, motorized cement maker. From our vantage point, we could see the women—maybe 60 or 70 of them seated beside Changaer's house all under the large, blue tarp.

Perhaps equally surprising to me, however, was the aboveground cement grave that had been built immediately next to the house, with wooden beams and a wooden frame around it. In Yapese communities today, there are many deeply held beliefs, as there were traditionally, about the potentially polluting qualities (*taqay*) associated with death. Such concerns have motivated long-standing regulations that dictate that bodies should be buried well beyond the confines of the village, as well as the various traditionally mandated ritual, ascetic, and medicinal means that individuals once used to purify themselves after being exposed to the dangerous polluting powers associated with death (see Egan 1998; Lingenfelter 1977; Throop 2010:77–78). Given such concerns, why had Changaer's family decided to bury him so close to their house? A few seconds after this question first arose in my mind, I recalled Mary telling me that Changaer's house was built well outside his village's boundaries so that it could be closer to the main road. As I was later to learn, in recent years, families who had houses that were located outside of village boundaries were increasingly choosing to have their loved ones buried nearby. What could be motivating this desire to bury the deceased so close to home in the face of long-standing cultural sanctions against just such a practice? Lost in thought and looking away from the grave, I then noticed, about ten feet away from it, Changaer's coffin.

Not long after we took our position behind the cement maker, a number of the men walked over slowly to the coffin, picked it up, and carried it to the grave. Taking their time, they placed it on top of the wooden beams. I looked around for the padre. He was nowhere to be seen. Once the coffin was in place, the men lowered it into the ground. People then started walking toward it with flowers they had picked to place on it. Handing me one of his flowers, Falngin motioned for me to follow him to the grave. I walked behind him and placed my flower on the coffin, as both men and women alike approached to say their final goodbyes. As I looked down, I unexpectedly caught a glimpse of Changaer's face staring back at me through a glass window that had been carved into the top of the coffin and that was now partially covered by flowers. I could not look long, as I felt a rush of tears welling up in my eyes. Even though I had

not known Changaer personally, seeing his face through the small glass window of his coffin triggered a complex flood of memories: Kirk in his open casket, a glimpse I had caught of Changaer's wife consoling her young daughter, as we had first made our way around the back of the house toward the grave, as well as images from my talk a few days before with Falngin on our family's veranda. As I walked back toward the cement maker, I recalled Falngin telling me about his inability to sleep and how Changaer's face had haunted him. And now, it seemed, Changaer's face was haunting me too.

All day I had been thinking of Kirk, his funeral, and the haze of pain and loss I experienced for the days and weeks after it. The tears, the faces I had not seen in 20 years, the eulogy I had to give, which took all the strength I had to force out of my being. Then there was the image of Keith, Kirk's brother, also my closest of friends, comforting his mother, who was so emotionally devastated from the loss of her son that she had not been able to speak properly for days. She had been so distraught that the family had feared that she might have suffered a stroke. I recalled how I had felt as I put my suit on the morning of Kirk's funeral and how the last thing I wanted to do was to talk to anyone who was not part of my most immediate and intimate circle of family and friends. I remembered how hard I had struggled during the wake to focus on conversations that seemed so absurd given that I was engaging in them only a few feet away from Kirk's casket, open for all to see.

People I had not talked to in 20 years asked me about my work, my life in Yap and Los Angeles, about anthropology and the classes I teach, all things that matter deeply to me and yet, at that moment, were absolutely and insufferably meaningless. I remembered trying to be polite but wanting desperately to be left alone. At moments, the sadness closed in on me and my own subjectivity engulfed me with such force that the individual with whom I was talking, or, more often the case, who was talking to me, became merely a shadowy presence, no longer, it seemed, fully a person. And most horrible of all was that moment, that indescribably painful moment, when a flood of memories, tears, numbness, and a loss of balance overtook me as I held Kirk's hand for the last time to say my own goodbye.

I assumed that the men who were with me all morning at Changaer's funeral were feeling a loss no less searing, no less existentially troubling, than mine had been. A brother, a father, a friend, an uncle was gone from them, just as my friend Kirk was gone from me. And yet, they were able, unlike me, to keep their composure, their dignity, and were able to somehow collectively suffer in a virtuous way by Yapese standards, just as I supposed I had, in my own way, suffered virtuously by the standards of my own community back home.

To recognize such possibilities for differing modalities of suffering and loss speaks precisely to just how complex and tenuous empathetic connections can be. How was it

exactly that I had come to know that Changaer's family and friends were feeling a loss as painful as my own? At what point exactly did that moment of intersubjective insight manifest itself? And what of the still striking differences in the ways that my Yapese friends were expressing their loss? Were the intimate details of my own suffering the metric by which to measure the tonalities of loss being experienced by those who had gathered to mourn Changaer's passing?

As thoughts of Kirk's funeral were pouring through my head, I was brought quickly back to the present of Changaer's funeral by the jarring sound of an engine starting. I looked over and saw that one of the young men had begun trying to start the cement maker. After more than a few unsuccessful tries, the engine started chugging along, and the men quickly began filling the cement maker with water, sand, and gravel. The loud sound of the motor, the sounds of shovels, and the quick activity that surrounded the making of the cement stood out in sharp contrast to the hours of quiet talking and inactivity that had characterized our morning together at the top of the hill.

Not long after the first few bucketfuls of cement were carried to the grave and poured over the coffin, the cement maker's motor began to stutter. A few of us looked over at the machine, and one of the men went over to check the throttle. The second he touched it, the cement maker stalled. Everyone looked at it, stunned perhaps as much by the weight of the silence breaking forth from the last sputterings of the engine as by their collective concern about what we would do if the cement maker did not restart. As I watched, unsure of what would happen, someone behind me asked almost inaudibly, "Changaer?" He then chuckled quietly to himself, perhaps to ward off the spirit whose name he had just invoked. A few of the older men walked over to the machine, and before long, the engine was up and running again.

Oddly, it was only at that moment that I realized that we were there to pour the cement on the grave. We had not come for the laments or the service (the padre had already left), and, apart from listening to the list of donations, our participation in the funeral, it seemed, was going to be singularly focused on sealing and securing Changaer's final resting place. What would have happened if the men had not been able to get the cement maker going again? I wondered to myself, my own mind now rushing back yet again to images of the morning at Kirk's graveside.

I could not help but think how much harder it would have been to be responsible for digging and filling in the grave at Kirk's funeral. It was hard enough to bear the coffin, feel the weight of his body within it, and see it being lowered slowly into the ground. It was rainy that day too, and I recall how terribly horrified and desperately sad I felt when I caught a glimpse of some water that had accumulated in the grave. I could not bear the thought of my friend being put into that cold, wet place. I had wanted to scream

for everyone to stop, to wait for a sunny, warm day, so as to make his final resting place a comfortable one. At the time, I knew this was a ridiculous wish, but I felt it all the same.

And here were Changaer's brothers, his son, his friends doing much more than I and my friends had done at Kirk's funeral. They had dug the grave, built the cement encasement, crafted the small cement gravestone on which someone had carved Changaer's name and dates with what appeared to be a small stick or a finger, carried the coffin, made the cement, and finally filled and sealed up Changaer's final resting place beside his house and beside the stream that was rumored to have brought him the sickness to which he finally had succumbed.

A day seldom went by after his passing that I did not think of Kirk. And I often found myself thinking back to that last day at the funeral home and at Kirk's gravesite. Watching as the final few buckets of cement were poured over Changaer's grave, I just could not imagine having Kirk buried next to my house. And yet, at that very moment, I recognized explicitly, for the very first time, that a part of me would have very much welcomed the possibility for such an option. To have him close, to have him in a place that he knew and that had brought him happiness and comfort—that part of me that wanted my friend warm, dry, and safe as he was lowered into his final resting place would have been very satisfied and comforted by such a possibility, indeed. Perhaps, I thought, this might also have been the reason why, despite local concerns about the dangerous and polluting qualities associated with death, Changaer's family had wanted to have him buried so close to home.

And now, reflecting back again on that moment, it seems that it reveals how close attention to the vicissitudes of empathy can disclose as much about the possibilities and limits of self-understanding as it can about capacities to connect with and understand others. Indeed, in the space between a private recollection of the sight of Kirk's coffin being lowered into the ground and my on-again, off-again attempts to connect to the suffering of those who were gathered for Changaer's funeral came a possibility for revealing an aspect of my own being that was previously concealed to me. Somewhere in the midst of being lost in my own memories, in my fleeting moments of connection and disconnection with other mourners, in seeing Changaer's face staring back at me from his coffin, and in hearing those unexpected sounds of the cement maker, there arose a prospect for insight into a modality of existential loss that had been previously foreclosed to me and that yet now allowed me, it seemed, a new potential opportunity for empathetic insight and connection with Changaer's family.

The return

On the way back from the funeral, Mary and I sat in a silence that was only broken occasionally by her pointing out

some new building or landmark: a new bar, a new addition to the Seventh Day Adventist school, a few new houses rebuilt after Typhoon Sudal. As we got back to the seaside section of Fanif municipality, with the ocean once again in plain view, she turned and looked at the water before saying, "You know, today was a good funeral." After pausing for a second, she continued. "I think that it might be good if Yapese funerals were always this way. Sitting, day after day, night after night, it's too much," she said. "Only one day and that's it, it would be so much easier on everyone," her voice trailed off as she continued to look out the window at the sea.

Changaer's funeral had been the first of its kind, and it seemed that, for Mary, at least, it had been a success. "Why do you think that they really chose to do the funeral this way?" I asked, wondering if Mary might say something more about the spirits who the diviner had diagnosed as responsible for Changaer's disease or perhaps something about his family's decision to bury him so close to their house. "It is just the way Changaer wanted it," she said quite simply. About five minutes passed, and we had almost reached the short dirt road that would take us home to the village when she added, "Maybe he did not want to give his family any more suffering." Yes, I thought, there had been already more than enough suffering for everyone.

Closure

A knowing look, a glance avoided, the touch of a comforting hand on a shoulder as one alternates through memories, fantasies, moments of distraction and absorption, yearning for human connection at one moment, feeling that others are infringing on one's vulnerability in the next—it is within the complexity of such subjective and intersubjective realities that anything that might be termed "empathy" must be emplaced. Empathy is, in this light, very seldom, if ever, an all or nothing affair. Nor is it unambiguously valued. It would thus be a mistake to think of empathy as simply a process whereby individuals unproblematically come to replicate the perspectives, thoughts, and feelings of others in the context of their own subjective lives. It is equally a mistake, I believe, to see homologous experiences between individuals as the necessary basis for generating possibilities for mutual understanding.

Elsewhere (Throop 2008), I have examined some of the basic phenomenological dimensions through which empathy may be differentially articulated, understood, and recognized in various cultural contexts, including what I have termed a temporality dimension, an intentionality dimension, a discernability dimension, and an appropriateness or possibility dimension. Although my articulation of these four phenomenological dimensions of empathy was intended to help unpack the various culturally patterned ways that individuals express, experience, and encode

empathetic acts in particular contexts, I well recognized that such an approach did not speak specifically to “personal orientations to empathy, nor to the dynamic ways that empathy may be employed, enacted, and/or resisted in real-time interaction” (Throop 2008:421). In this article, I have attempted to speak to this lattermost concern.

The structure of consciousness, as William James (1890) most memorably asserted, is comparable to the life of a bird that continuously engages in a series of alternations between its “flights” and its “perchings.” In the flux of subjective life, as human beings engage in interactions with others who sometimes share and sometimes do not share our cares and concerns, our attention is constantly shifting, as emotions, moods, and memories significantly shape our expectations of what is most notable, noticeable, and valuable in light of our ongoing emplacement within the world that surrounds us. In the process, some aspects of our experience with others is foregrounded, whereas other aspects are relegated to the background of our awareness, and this is a process that proceeds and changes through time (Throop 2003, 2010). All the while, our memories, emotions, moods, desires, and fantasies are constantly, and differentially, woven into the very fabric of our interactions with others, who are similarly imbued with a subjective life that is no more or less dynamic and complex than our own. And it is within the variegated existential arc of our intersubjective engagements with others that moments of empathetic resonance are just as likely to arise as moments of dissonance, distancing, confusion, and displacement. It is certainly quite true, as Rosaldo (1993) has argued, that homologous experiences between individuals may provide important opportunities for empathetic insight. One should never forget, however, that they also might forestall them. And yet, even when our expectations are challenged and empathetic-like alignments seem to dissolve, there are always possibilities that such moments of misunderstanding may reveal what were previously concealed aspects of our own or another’s being.

In this article, I have tried to foreground a range of intersubjective existential realities that are entailed in human ways of being with one another. I hope that in the process I have made it clear that it is very seldom a simple matter to say at what point, in what way, and for whom a particular experience or interaction can be deemed to be empathetic or not. That said, even in those moments when empathy clearly has failed, differing modes of intersubjective engagement still remain that do not foreclose possibilities for new moments of empathetic connection to arise (see Duranti 2010; Jackson 1998). If our conscious life can, indeed, be compared to the flight of a bird, then our intersubjective lives and our moments of empathetic resonance might be compared, as Robert Desjarlais has suggested, to a flock of sparrows “weaving and skirting around one another, in the twilight, coming close at times, in synch

with one another’s patterns of flight, then swerving away at others” (personal communication, November 2, 2009). Even though keeping track of such complex patterns of flight may, indeed, be quite daunting, it is nevertheless our charge, as anthropologists and as human beings, to still try.

Notes

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1. Over the past ten years, I have conducted over 18 months of fieldwork in Yapese communities.

2. And yet, after a period of relative neglect, empathy has been “rediscovered” (Stueber 2006) in a number of fields, including philosophy (Kögler and Stueber 2000), medicine (Halpern 2001), evolutionary science (de Waal 2008), neuroscience (Decety and Ickes 2009), psychology (Farrow and Woodruff 2007), and psychoanalysis (Bohart and Greenberg 1997). Much of this renewed academic interest in empathy seems to be generated by the recent neuroscientific discovery of “mirror” neurons (Iacoboni 2008). For a more detailed discussion of the surprising lack of explicit interest in theorizing and researching empathy in anthropology, see Hollan and Throop 2008, in press.

3. All Yapese names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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C. Jason Throop
Department of Anthropology
University of California, Los Angeles
341 Haines Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095
jthroop@ucla.edu