

# *Contemplating Post-Graduate Grief: Re-evaluating Our Relationship to the Future*

Anna Rumjahn and Tanya Behrisch

E-mail: [anna\\_rumjahn@sfu.ca](mailto:anna_rumjahn@sfu.ca), [tanya\\_behrisch@sfu.ca](mailto:tanya_behrisch@sfu.ca)

Received February 2025

Accepted for publication August 2025

Published November 2025

## **Abstract**

This paper illuminates pedagogical opportunities to support graduate students to envision and prepare for the complex experience of completing an advanced degree such as a doctoral or master's program. We explore how paradoxical feelings of grief and joy often co-arise upon the crossing of a threshold such as defending a thesis, and how graduands are often ill-equipped to handle these due to a dominant ontology of linear time and phases of progress that culminate in abstract ideals of arrival and completion. These ideals are at odds with the lived experiences of the authors and other graduands. We propose integrating contemplative practices and futures literacy early into graduate programs in order to prepare graduands for the confusing array of feelings often accompanying graduate degree completion. Adopting an ethic of ambivalence allows for conflicting feelings to co-arise and be held simultaneously.

**Keywords:** *ambivalence, paradox, grief, contemplative practice, impermanence*

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## **Contemplating Post-Graduate Grief: Re-evaluating Our Relationship to the Future**

Grief, when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be. Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it. (Didion, 2007, p. 189)

This paper seeks to investigate some philosophical underpinnings that support grief's nature, textures, and dynamics in education. More specifically, we attend to what we call "post-graduate grief": the diverse, individual contours of grief that a student may feel following the conclusion of a graduate program in a post-secondary institution, bringing awareness to processes such as grieving, emptiness, acceptance,

letting go, and healing.<sup>1</sup> In the past few decades, there has been a growing body of scholarship around grief in disciplines such as psychology (Granek, 2010), counselling and family therapy (Moxley-Haegert & Moxley-Haegert, 2019; White & Denborough, 1998; White & Epton, 1990), and spirituality (Levine, 1989). Additionally, various literary figures and philosophers have mediated on the concepts of grief, loss, and mourning (Barthes, 2009/2010; Didion, 2007; Lewis, 1966). Whilst there are a

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<sup>1</sup> The authors have previously published an article which explores and characterizes their experiences post-graduate grief through narrative inquiry, as well as the contemplative practices of writing and dialogue. See Behrisch et al. (2025) "Healing in Relation: Honoring Post-Graduate Grief as an Opportunity for Relational Scholarship" for more.

few sources of research around supporting grief in the classroom with students (Eftoda, 2021; Stylianos & Zembylas, 2018), explorations of graduate students and early-career scholars in traversing the experiences of post-graduate grief through the concept of ambivalence remains scarce.

We, the authors, wish to address this theoretical gap in educational research by expanding the philosophical foundations of post-graduate grief. This is done in three parts. Firstly, we contrast a linear temporal ontology with cyclical time, emphasizing how human experience is embedded within, and contains, temporal cycles. Acknowledging that post-graduate grief is situated in these cycles, it requires a philosophical way of living that includes practicing presence and adopting equanimity towards one's future beyond graduate school. An approach like this has hitherto been less explored in educational scholarship but has been at the heart of many ancient wisdom traditions, including Hellenistic philosophy, Daoism, and Buddhism. This then dovetails with Pierre Hadot's (2008/2023) explorations of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and spiritual exercises which offer the perspective of a will to consent to grief through understanding the nature of existence. By perceiving time as a human construct, we may move from a linear ontology of time towards one based in natural cycles of birth and decline. Finally, educational implications are explored using "futures literacy" which aims to strengthen learners' ability to expect change without trying to control or minimize it, and to dwell with ambiguity in humble ways (Barcinas & Fleener, 2023; Fleener & Barcinas, 2022). Through this paper, we honor the organic, dynamic, and natural processes of experience as relational, because education ultimately engages in truly human activity.

## Grief in Education

Often pathologized as something to "get over" or practice in a private domain, grief has not been easily accepted in modern Western culture. Appearing as a disembodied experience (Fuchs, 2018), we are taught to process difficult and often paradoxical feelings of grief that co-arise with joy, through suppression, denial, and severance from these difficult sensations. Suppressing naturally arising feelings leads to separation from self and denial of what arises unbidden following the completion of a long and often arduous journey such as a graduate program. We invite a conversation about the interconnected and interdependent co-arising feelings of grief and joy following graduate school completion into education. Paradoxical emotions that often follow graduate school have been experienced by both authors. We hope to illuminate paradoxical feelings experienced by students following their completion of a graduate degree. Morse and Blenkinsop (2021) describe paradox as "a vibration of irresolvable lived experience—that [holds] within it seemingly contradictory possibilities at the same time. ... for most people this possibility of existing in an irresolvable both/and condition appears as unusual" (p. 66). If we are allowed—and even encouraged to—experience life after graduate school in ways that acknowledge "all parts of reality to be interconnected and to interpenetrate each other, arising together, co-emergently, moment by moment" (Bai, 2015, p. 138), we can hold space for grieving while enjoying the fruits of our hard-won degrees. Otherwise, our experience and acceptance of naturally arising paradoxical feelings is challenged by current disembodied and categorically separate ways of being.

In educational institutions, grief is typically dealt with by allied professions such as psychologists, school counselors, and social workers—which may or may not be embedded within a school's

infrastructure or local community. However, there is a slim sector of the education system that has hitherto received less attention vis à vis grief. For those who complete graduate degrees (doctoral, masters, diplomas, and so on), there are unique experiences of loss following separation from supervisors, theses, academic communities, and the graduate programs themselves. With rituals such as graduation, convocation, and securing professional roles in a respective discipline, these milestones frequently keep grief veiled, ignored, or misrecognized in educational systems and research. Attending to this lacuna in the literature, our recent co-authored article sought to honour the loss, grief, or sorrow that may follow one's graduate journey (Behrisch et al., 2025). This opportunity for relational scholarship met at the intersection of slow scholarship (Hyttén, 2017), contemplative practice, and narrative inquiry. Suggestions for philosophical interpretation and opportunities for educational change within systems remained unexplored.

### **Rehabilitating our Relationship to Cyclical Time**

Modern education mirrors modern culture's dominant linear temporal ontology. Linear time embodies unidirectional stages of progress and development, always approaching increasing sophistication, complexity, and superiority to previous stages of the journey. By continuing to uphold a linear temporal ontology, modern culture—and by extension post-secondary institutions—perpetuate a fallacy of discreet unidirectional stages of growth and progress. This fallacy denies impermanence, decline, mortality, and re-generation. These are fundamental realities for humans and our more-than-human kin in the natural world. An ontology of linear time upholds the fallacy of culmination, finality, and arrival upon graduate degree completion. This does not

reflect or honor what arose for both authors of this paper following completion of their graduate programs.

Social philosopher Krznaric (2021) identifies that while modern humans are educated to view time as linear, we are part of Nature. Thus, we are embedded within, and contain, temporal cycles such as diurnal rhythms, seasons, tides, our pulsing blood, menstruation, birth, adolescence, menopause, death, and breath. Denying our cyclical transience robs us of language, insight, tools, and acquiescence to the noble beauty of our mortality and impermanence. This has had devastating consequences for modern humans who remain unequipped to accept uncertain futures and conflicting feelings. We are taught to “future proof” ourselves against unpleasantness. Careful planning, risk mitigation, and skill building are thought to protect us from unwanted futurities that may include paradoxical feelings of grief, confusion, and joy at finishing a graduate degree. However, scholars have illuminated the futility of these moves by modern humans to control a future that will forever elude their control (Bauman, 1990; Fleener & Barcinas, 2022; Matthews, 1994). They propose acquiescing to this futility—and to our impermanence—by adopting an ethic of ambivalence towards the future. By adopting equanimity with respect to the future, we may relate to and anticipate grief that often accompanies these vulnerabilities, in addition to our innate dark sides, mortality, and our impermanence. “Arrival” at the finish line following the one's PhD or master's defense and “completion” of a degree can be tempered by sadness and a sense of loss when we allow ourselves to acquiesce to naturally arising feelings.

Students completing a graduate degree program over 3-10 years leave with a new doctoral or master's degree. From a modern educational standpoint, they have “finished” their journey;

they are more educated and “developed” than when they entered or were at various stages of their degree. “Finishing,” defending, and graduating means they are “done.” However, when we consider our lives within a cyclical temporal ontology rather than a linear one, we understand that we are never “done” or “finished.” We are always undergoing multiple parallel processes which overlap, and which often drift into conversation with each other. The graduate school experience is not undertaken in isolation from other personal and biological cycles. Transformative changes that transpire in a graduate program do not adjourn the moment one defends or submits their thesis, or the day one walks across the stage at their graduation ceremony or convocation. These processes continue to unfurl in us long after they are set in motion during a graduate program.

Upon defending their doctoral thesis, Tanya felt relief and joy at being welcomed into the exclusive club of PhDs by their internal examiner. The following vignette illustrates their joy being clouded by an emergent and unexpected sadness which was difficult to articulate within their university’s dominant ontology of linear time.

I had successfully “arrived” within an elite circle of PhD holders; I should feel happiness and relief, right? The dominant ontology of linear time and discreet endings estranged me from my inner feelings of melancholy. This estrangement subtly undermined the validity of my feelings and their paradoxical co-arising with expected feelings of triumph, arrival, and joy. “Part of our self-estrangement is our political denial of mortality, our disability to confront non-negatively our fermenting tendency. The endless throwing-forward of teleology, progress toward veiled goals,

misdirects from the mulchy interdependence of growth and rot (Horn, 2021). I explored my unique experiences of post-graduate grief—a darkness akin to Horn’s “rot” noted above—in an earlier paper. There, I identified the strange emotional rupture that emerged when faced with linear time’s denial of impermanence and the ongoing non-discreet phases of life. Post-graduate grief forced me to grapple with profound interior alchemical changes that I had undergone and *continued* to undergo long *after* completing my doctoral degree (Author 2).

There was no educational preparation for the unexpectedly dark and confusing feelings that accompanied a post-graduate experience, as expressed by Didion in the epigraph. This gap in post-secondary education bids an opportunity to re/position graduate school within a cyclical temporal ontology—one which honors students as organic living, learning, declining, and dying beings within natural cycles, which allow for growth and triumph, melancholy, confusion, grief, letting go, rot, regeneration, and re-emergence.

### A Will to Consent to Grief

If “grief, when it comes, is nothing we expect it to be” (Didion, 2007, p. 189), can philosophy offer us remedies in anticipating the incertitude of the future? Hadot (2008/2023) meditated on such matters in his last published monograph, *Don’t Forget to Live*. Written in his final years, he felt himself encountering the realities of death: a lived opportunity for philosophical meditation. His thorough treatment of Goethe excavates two important ideas: *memento mori* (don’t forget that you will die) and *memento vivere* (don’t forget to live in the present). Exploring these using his

well-known framework of *exercices spirituels* (spiritual exercises), Hadot continues to demonstrate the importance of forming oneself in the art of living. His perspectives address existential challenges with the leitmotif: “the joyous consent to life and to existence in the world, or the joy of existing” (Hadot, 2008/2023, p. 126). We contemplate this recurrent theme of Hadot vis à vis post-graduate grief situated within cyclical time. By focusing on this idea of living in the present, we consider what value can be discovered from existing in the immediacy of each moment that grief brings us.

Hadot’s (1981/1995, 2002/2005) writings has a core focus on *being* in the world; the notion that philosophy is concerned with the art of living in every instant. The textures and waves of grief, emptiness, and sorrow that come at the end of one’s post-graduate program cannot be fully resolved through a purely theoretical or intellectual endeavour. Rather, these are embodied somatic, emotional, cognitive, relational, and spiritual experiences; they demand us to attend to our being in the present moment. Grief reveals to us “the most problematic aspects of experience: on one hand, to the becoming of being, its perpetual metamorphosis; and, on the other, to all that is distressing and terrifying in reality” (Hadot, 2008/2023, p. 131). Programs offered by higher education institutions are typically organized by coursework, clear expectations, and well-defined assessments or examinations. These offer students structure, safety, stability, and a certain level of predictability, contributing to a “throwing-forward of teleology, [and] progress toward veiled goals” (Horn, 2021, p. 236). Consequently, this prevents them from recognizing or anticipating feelings of anguish, terror, and surrender that also often accompany a graduate degree. However, relationships, routines, and reality are constantly changing before, during, and after the graduate experience, despite the level of fixity an educational institution provides. Goethe’s

“organic and holistic conception of the universe” (Robbins, 2005, p. 113) through his conception of *delicate empiricism*, emphasizes the importance of immersing oneself in both the creative *and* destructive movements of the cosmos. Can we find intelligence and wisdom in *who* we are becoming during these dynamic movements that constitute post-graduate grief? By sharing our respective stories and lived experiences with each other in a previous publication about the nebulous grief associated with graduate degree completion, we practiced contemplation about the future—futures left largely or entirely unremarked within the academy. Engaging in this relational process with attention and presence, there are “things that can come into existence (and, perhaps, pass out of existence again) as a result of meetings between forms of life with the other forms around them in their surroundings” (Shotter, 2005, p. 135). Our collaborative authorship co-created the slow emergence of familiarity, kinship, trust, and ultimately, *healing*—nested within the dynamic web of interconnectedness. It opened new organs of perception within us as the experience of grief was well contemplated (Robbins, 2005; Shotter, 2005). Thus, attending to grief is concerned with one’s being and becoming; an opportunity for process, change, and the emergence of new possibilities.

Hadot’s explorations of living with joy offer the perspective of a will to consent to grief through understanding the nature of existence. He describes the joy of existence as “an immediate, almost unconscious feeling . . . being-there (*Daesin*) rejoices in its being-there” (Hadot, 2008/2023, pp. 127-129). Goethe gives many examples of natural phenomena and what it feels like to experience the joy of being, characterized by willing participation, pleasure, and aesthetic appreciation. The relationality that was cultivated between the three authors (see Behrisch et al., 2025) through dialogue and writing processes

afforded space for these features, as well as gratitude, tenderness, and compassion for oneself and each other. By breaking away from the desire to remain firm in one's identity, Anna surrendered to transience of their post-graduate grief experiences. The practice of *being*, allowed her to engage with the spiritual exercise of joyful consent to life, remaining undecided and ambivalent about the future. By interacting with others during this process, Anna acknowledges that this was partly shaped by being *responsive* to the others and otherness in her surroundings, giving uniqueness and complexity to every relational encounter. But one must be *within* these interrelational spaces—dynamic and constantly emerging—treating it with careful attention to truly make sense of post-graduate grief. Goethe's (1814) poem, "Blessed Longing," captures a butterfly's encounter with a flame, its attraction invites us to ponder on the act of renunciation in order to "achieve a higher level of existence, to commune with God/Nature" (Hadot, 2008/2023, p. 134). By relinquishing linear temporal ontologies and being intensely drawn to stay in the present—ready to be responsive with what may emerge next—we give way to experiencing the future through exercising our capacity for ambivalence about a future horizon that forever remains beyond our control.

### **Receptive Encounters with Grief Through Ambivalence**

For Mathews (1994), ambivalence invites us into a "receptive encounter" (p. 165) with the dark side, and with opaque conflicting emotions such as post-graduate grief co-arising alongside joy; cultivating a capacity for ambivalence becomes an ethical imperative. It enables us to embrace not only our feelings of darkness, such as unexpected post-graduate grief, but gives us power and scope to relate to ecological loss and our own mortality.

It undoes the dualistic tendency to see the world as either fixed or broken. It is both. "Our task is to maintain—and perpetually to renegotiate—the dynamic ambivalence [sic], which is the lifeblood of a healthy morality, a living spirituality" (Mathews, 1994, p. 166). Often following the completion of a graduate degree, the future is ambiguous and indeterminate. Both authors experienced an emotional paradox involving the co-arising of joy and grief. By adopting ambivalence, joy, and grief are not placed in opposition to one another as in a dualism where grief cancels co-arising joy and joy invalidates co-arising grief. Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) defines ambivalence as "the coexistence in one person of profoundly opposing emotions, beliefs, attitudes, or urges (such as love and hate, or attraction and repulsion) towards a person or thing" (para. 1). Ambivalence allows the Western mind to contemplate a paradoxical situation.

The simultaneous co-arising of feelings of joy and grief then becomes possible and navigable. Nurturing and maintaining a stance of ambivalence following graduate degree completion offers graduands license, language, and emotional scope to hold contradictory feelings of joy and grief simultaneously as "this capacity, ... is, first and foremost, powerful because ambivalent and ambivalent because powerful" (Bauman, 1990, p. 145). As authors, we see a tremendous educational opportunity to develop curriculum in ways that build capacity for ambivalence and undecidedness around the future. We invoke Mathews' (1994) view of 'enlightenment': "the ability to tolerate without bitterness and despair" (p. 166) our failures, including our inability to understand co-arising paradoxical feelings around the future.

## Educational Implications: Cultivating Ambivalence through Futures Literacy

Adult education scholars Fleener and Barcinas (2022) advocate developing “futures literacy,” which strengthens learners’ ability to anticipate change without trying to control or minimize it, to dwell with ambiguity and to face uncertainty with a greater degree of equanimity. Strengthening these proficiencies, “strategies and skills ... facilitate[s] and support[s] deeper, more meaningful relationships with the future” (Fleener & Barcinas, 2002, p. 183). The authors of this paper encourage building futures literacy into existing graduate degree programs. Learning early to flex, adapt, anticipate, and acquiesce to natural phases of inner growth, decline, grief, and regeneration better prepares future graduands to embrace the future after their degree, instead of continuing to rely on the dominant abrupt ending that bookends graduate programs. The authors see futures literacy in educational practice as cultivating the ability to sit with, exercise, and perceive ambivalence within situations that are typically dualized.

Philosopher Bauman (1990) describes how our dominant ontology flattens and bifurcates our complex reality into simplistic “cozy antagonisms,” artificial oppositional hierarchies such as familiar/unfamiliar, friend/enemy, male/female, useful/useless, past/future, good/bad. These disallow room for ambiguity, which he terms “undecidables.” Rather than create a third category for the aberrant, strange, and ambivalent, these undecidables are flattened into the left-hand side inferior order of dualisms because they defy control by the superior more powerful order on the right. Like the call by Fleener and Barcinas’ to build adults’ literacy around our ambiguous future, Bauman advocates developing our capacity to remain undecided and ambivalent—to resist falling into our habitual Western dualisms. He rallies modern humans to exercise

ambivalence in the face of our complex realities. We believe ambivalence and undecidables are an essential part of becoming future literate and to navigating paradoxical feelings arising following graduate degree completion. They undo the modern West’s “cozy” dominant dualist ontology because their existence suggests a much more complex ontology than the dualist ontology we have been educated to perceive.

Undecidables are all *neither/nor*, that is, simultaneously, *either/or*. Their underdetermination is their potency; because they are nothing, they may be all. They put paid to the ordering power of the opposition. Oppositions enable knowledge and action; undecidables paralyze. They brutally expose the fragility of the most secure of separations. (Bauman, 1990, p. 146)

French philosopher Dufourmantelle (2018) contrasts the Modern Western mindset to the Chinese mindset. While Western ontology clings to discreet stages of development and linear time, Chinese ontology allows for slow transformations to occur in parallel with other processes.

‘Silent transformations’ constitute what European metaphysics has the most difficulty understanding, while ... Chinese culture regards them with intelligence ... In ancient Chinese texts, transformation is an attitude, a state of body and mind, a harmony based on the ‘natural’ pattern of things that mature and flourish, interacting with their surroundings. (Dufourmantelle, 2018, pp. 38-39)

We advocate attuning students to natural patterns described above by Dufourmantelle, rather than suppressing them through denial.

In order to cultivate attunement, we suggest that post-secondary educators consider implementing contemplative practices such as mindfulness exercises, movement meditation, artistic expression, and deep listening into their courses to develop “attentiveness, awareness, compassion, concentration, presence, wisdom, and the like” (Komjathy, 2017, p. 51). This pedagogical approach invites students to cultivate a disposition of presence, as well as ambivalence, towards the variety of emotions that arrive unbidden upon completing a graduate program. Contemplative pedagogy serves as “an emerging experiential and experimental educational methodology that explores contemplative practice and contemplative experience, especially with respect to their relevance and application to education and perhaps to larger existential and sociopolitical issues” (Komjathy, 2017, p. 159). Contemplative practices can be integrated as pedagogical practices that deliver planned curriculum content within the relational classroom. These offer avenues to highlight the notion of cyclical time and to cultivate an ethic of ambivalence and acceptance around a non-linear future and experience of paradoxical feelings of grief and joy.

Hadot contends that the “philosophical life consists not merely in talking and writing, but in communal and social action” (Hadot, 2008/2023, p. 144). Contemplative approaches can foster an ethic of ambivalence and futures literacy around students’ future degree completion. Integrating these approaches and futures literacy early in graduate programs may support students in learning to dwell in the present instant as a philosophical exercise, “without letting ourselves be distracted by the weight of the past or the mirage of the future” (Hadot, 2008/2023, p. xvii).

This fosters adaptability in learners to navigate life’s challenges, such as the arrival of paradoxical feelings of post-graduate grief, when, and if, it arises parallel to the more expected experience of joy. As mentioned in the epigraph, “grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it” (Didion, 2007, p. 189). Being able to dwell fully in the present moment and to approach the future with ambivalence become valuable life tools for graduands. This honors our wholeness as people, even when we are confronted with confusion.

### Concluding Thoughts

Post-graduate grief has been continually veiled, overlooked, and misrecognized in current educational systems and scholarship. We, the authors, have sought to give philosophical treatment to the diverse, individual forms of grief that a student may feel following the end of a graduate program in a post-secondary institution through the concepts of temporality and ambivalence. Our explorations emphasize a need to live in the present, as well as cultivating an ethic of ambivalence to then engage in receptive encounters; it requires unlearning dualistic tendencies to flatten time into before/after, as well as unlearning a linear ontology of time. The graduate experience is filled with deep inquiry, navigating new relationships, and adapting to unfamiliar territory. These processes feature also in the post-graduate experience. Henceforth, embracing and adopting futures literacy through contemplative practices and pedagogy allows us to imagine and co-create educational spaces that are essential to the individual and collective flourishing of graduands, re/turning them to holistic, embodied, and relational ways of being following graduate program completion.

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### Author Bio

**Anna Rumjahn** is a PhD candidate in the Educational Practice and Theory: Philosophy of Education program at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. She completed her Master of Education in educational management and leadership from the University of Sydney, Australia. During her early career in elementary education, Anna welcomed the challenges of teaching in a pandemic, shaping her identity through cultural responsiveness and contemplative practices. She continues to carry these forward in her collaborative engagements in post-secondary education. Anna is interested in philosophy as a way of life, Daoist philosophy, contemplative inquiry and practices, and the role of wisdom traditions in education. In Anna’s quest to lead a life well lived, the importance of embodying wisdom in daily life creates a reflexive and symbiotic relationship with her research.

**Tanya Behrisch** is an independent scholar and practicing oil painter. Her work is published in cultural studies and arts-based research journals and her art is displayed publicly and held in collections world-wide. She will soon publish a book titled *Making Friends with Strangeness—Practices of Mastery in a World of Abundance* (Peter Lang Publishers). She leads a team of 50 professionals at Simon Fraser University in Work Integrated Learning.