

Grief and Culture in Japan:

Narratives of Self-Help Groups for Family Survivors of Suicide

Tomofumi Oka, PhD, Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan

**Grief Conference, on April 20-21, 2023
at the University of Tampere, Finland**

Hi, everybody. My name is Tomofumi Oka.

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I'm a professor of social work at Sophia University, Tokyo, Japan.

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To begin with,
I would like to say “thank you” to . . .

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Dr Nur Atikah Mohamed Hussin and
her colleagues for this wonderful
opportunity . . .

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**Grief Conference, on April 20-21, 2023
at the University of Tampere, Finland**

to speak at this important conference
on grief.

Grief and Culture in Japan:

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Today I will talk about
“grief and culture in Japan,” . . .

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and then focus on the “narratives of self-help groups for family survivors of suicide.”

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Before discussing this topic,
let me introduce myself.

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I will tell you about my work
with these self-help groups.

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As a community social worker, . . .

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I have been interested in
self-help groups for many years.

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These have included self-help groups for alcoholics, . . .

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people with physical or mental disabilities,
single fathers, and parents of sick children.

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One day in 2008, about 15 years ago, . . .

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a woman, Ms Tanaka, who had lost her son to suicide, wrote a letter to me.

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She had started a self-help group
for family survivors of suicide.

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However, because there were almost no self-help groups for these family survivors in Japan at that time, . . .

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she felt that professionals lacked sympathy for their group.

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These professionals did ***not believe*** that family survivors could independently lead their self-help groups.

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She knew that
I was an expert in self-help groups, . . .

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so she wanted me to help her group
obtain social legitimacy.

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However, I had little knowledge about grief and suicide, . . .

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so I suggested that she ask for help from “grief care professionals.”

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Back then, there was a growing number of these professionals in Japan, . . .

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following enactment of the Basic Act
on Suicide Prevention in 2006.

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Through this Act, . . .

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more and more professionals were
getting financial support from
local governments, . . .

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and they became supporters of people who had lost family members to suicide.

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Surprisingly, however, Ms Tanaka said that these supporters were ***not helping*** her group.

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Rather, that they were *hurting* family survivors of suicide.

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I was wondering, “Do supporters hurt people? Is that possible?”

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She said that indeed they could.

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She pointed out various things, . . .

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including their discriminatory attitudes towards family survivors of suicide and their superficial kindness.

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But the most relevant issue
to this conference is . . .

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that these family survivors *detest*
the conceptual or theoretical
frameworks used by professionals.

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Ms Tanaka is now a charismatic leader of family survivors of suicide in Japan.

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She conveys this strong negative feeling by saying “*Grief care is evil.*”

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Why does a woman who lost her son to suicide *detest* bereavement interventions?

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I should stress that she represents many family survivors of suicide in Japan.

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Many family survivors of suicide I met agree with her.

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So, why do they *reject* bereavement care?

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I want to answer this question
in my talk today.

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My answer is that this is a *cultural* matter.

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Japanese professionals invoke strong negative feelings in family survivors, . . .

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because they are ***not aware*** of cultural factors in bereavement intervention.

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In this presentation,

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I will summarize the narratives of these family survivors into ***three main voices***.

First Voice: the dead are alive.



First, “*The dead are alive.*”

First Voice: the dead are alive.



The relationships between the living and the dead vary in different cultures.

First Voice: the dead are alive.



Many traditional Japanese families have *Buddhist altars* in their homes.

This is Ms Tanaka's
Buddhist altar.





You can see many
flowers.

And some fruits and
sweets.



This photo was ***not taken*** on a special occasion.



It captures an ordinary moment in life.

First Voice: the dead are alive.



The Buddhist altar is *a spiritual channel* between the living and the dead in the family.

First Voice: the dead are alive.



The living greet the dead at the altar every morning and offer a bowl of rice.

First Voice: the dead are alive.



Some ask the deceased to protect them from bad luck . . .

First Voice: the dead are alive.



when, for example, they or their family members travel or take exams.

First Voice: the dead are alive.



When they receive gifts of food
from visitors to the house, . . .

First Voice: the dead are alive.



they often put them on the family altar
before eating them.

First Voice: the dead are alive.



From the viewpoint of grief care professionals, . . .

First Voice: the dead are alive.



the dead are gone. They no longer exist.

First Voice: the dead are alive.



The professionals do not talk about those who are not alive any longer.

First Voice: the dead are alive.



Professionals focus on the person's *inner experiences*, . . .

First Voice: the dead are alive.



whereas the family survivors think of their *relationships* with the deceased.

First Voice: the dead are alive.



Talking about the bereaved *person's experience* is different from . . .

First Voice: the dead are alive.



thinking about the family's *relationships*
with the person in heaven.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



The second voice is “*Grief is love.*”

Second Voice: Grief is love.



The family survivors notice that from the professionals' viewpoint, . . .

Second Voice: Grief is love.



their grief is considered to be
a kind of ***poisoned state*** of mind
in the disease model of grief.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



So, for example, in Japan, when grief therapists tell family survivors to express their grief in group therapy, . . .

Second Voice: Grief is love.



they often use the phrase
“*vomit your sadness* and
recover your mental health,” . . .

Second Voice: Grief is love.



as if ***grief is a poison*** to be eliminated from their mind.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



In Japanese culture, it is not desirable to express one's feelings directly, . . .

Second Voice: Grief is love.



so I guess this is why we often use
the phrase “to *vomit emotions*.”

Second Voice: Grief is love.



In Japan, the “process model of recovery from grief” is well known.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



It is used by many professionals who want to help family survivors of suicide.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



However, many leaders of self-help groups for family survivors say . . .

Second Voice: Grief is love.



that the process model of recovery
from grief is ***harmful*** to them because . . .

Second Voice: Grief is love.



in this model, grief is treated as an illness that they must recover from.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



I know that
the disease model of grief is obsolete
among current bereavement therapists.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



However, in Japan, where bereavement therapy is not common, . . .

Second Voice: Grief is love.



professionals tend to treat grief
as *pathological*.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



Local government bureaucrats are
influenced by such professionals . . .

Second Voice: Grief is love.



And they often view family survivors as *psychologically* unwell.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



So, although bereaved families are ready to actively participate in policy-making,

Second Voice: Grief is love.



local government officials are wary of them, seeing them as potentially having mental health issues.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



They do not invite them to join committees or other forums discussing social policies.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



In these circumstances,

Second Voice: Grief is love.



self-help groups for family survivors of
suicide assert . . .

Second Voice: Grief is love.



that ***grief is love***, an essential part of their feelings and existence.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



Ms Tanaka said grief is
“an essential part of her body.”

Second Voice: Grief is love.



Her notion is the *opposite* of the pathological model of grief.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



For the bereaved who spend every day
in grief,

Second Voice: Grief is love.



this voice affirms their way of being and enhances their sense of self-esteem.

Second Voice: Grief is love.



To fully understand this way of thinking, . . .

Second Voice: Grief is love.



we need to understand Japan's culture of accepting grief in a positive light.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



The third voice is “*Live with grief.*”

Third Voice: Live with grief.



Another reason why family survivors reject the process model of recovery from grief is

...

Third Voice: Live with grief.



they believe recovery is impossible.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



A man told me that he lost his daughter to suicide, and she was his only child.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



He says he simply cannot recover.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



He could only recover if his daughter were to come back to this world.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



So, recovery is impossible,
but they will *live with grief*.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



This idea might sound very pessimistic
and full of despair.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



However, it agrees with Buddhist teachings deeply ingrained in Japanese culture.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



In Buddhism, *suffering*, including grief, is fundamental to human existence.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



People can lead meaningful lives by accepting that suffering is an inevitable part of life.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



In addition, grief has been considered essential in Japanese culture.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



The greatest philosopher in modern times in Japan, Dr Kitaro Nishida, left us the following words: . . .

Third Voice: Live with grief.



“The beginning of philosophy is
grief in life.”

Third Voice: Live with grief.

Dr Nishida: “The beginning of philosophy is ***grief in life.***”

The famous philosophical phrase in the West is different: “the beginning of philosophy is ***a wonder.***”

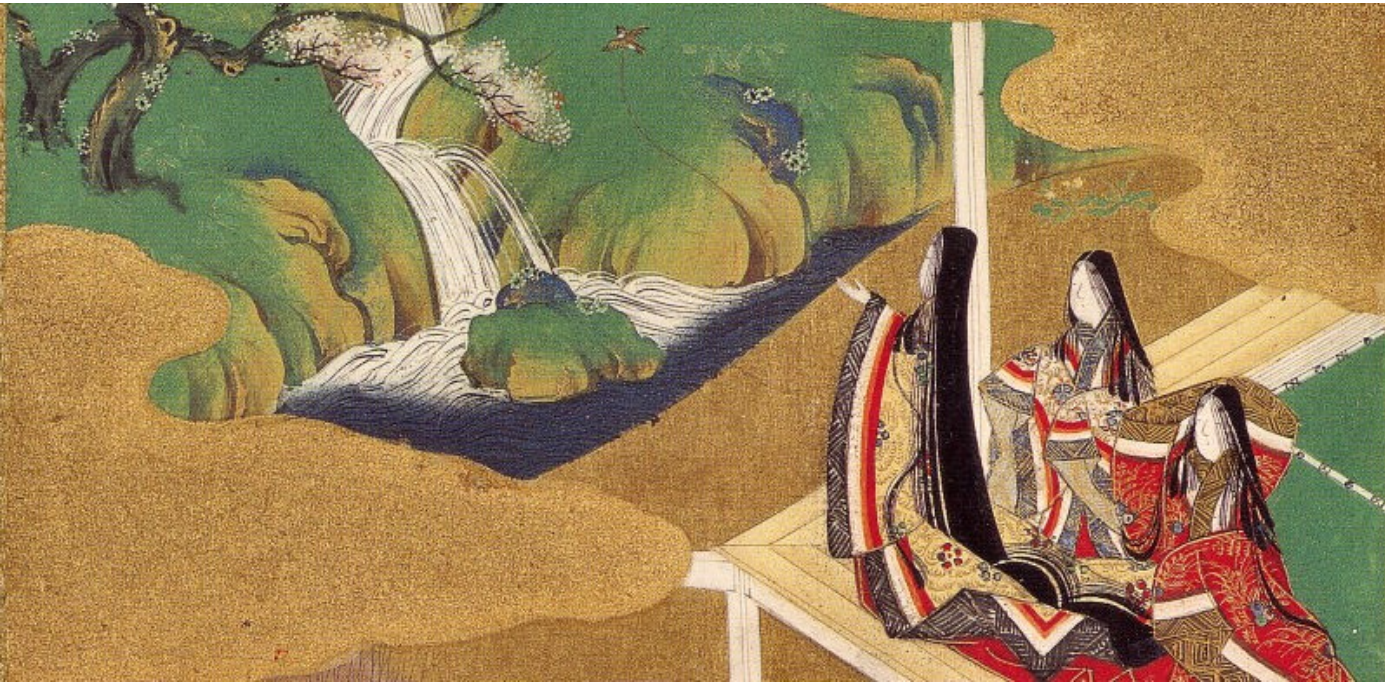
Third Voice: Live with grief.

Dr Nishida: “The beginning of philosophy is ***grief in life.***”

In the West: “The beginning of philosophy is ***a wonder.***”

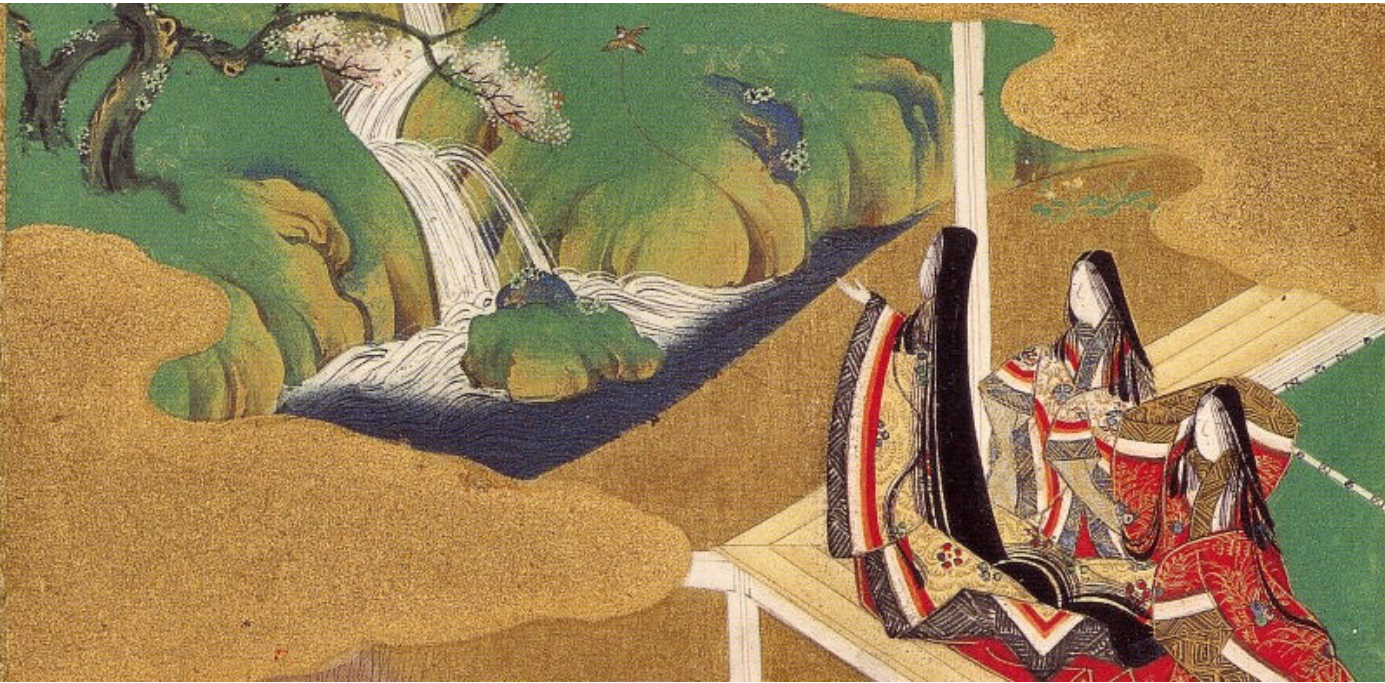
Nishida’s words came from the anguish of losing his daughters to illness.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



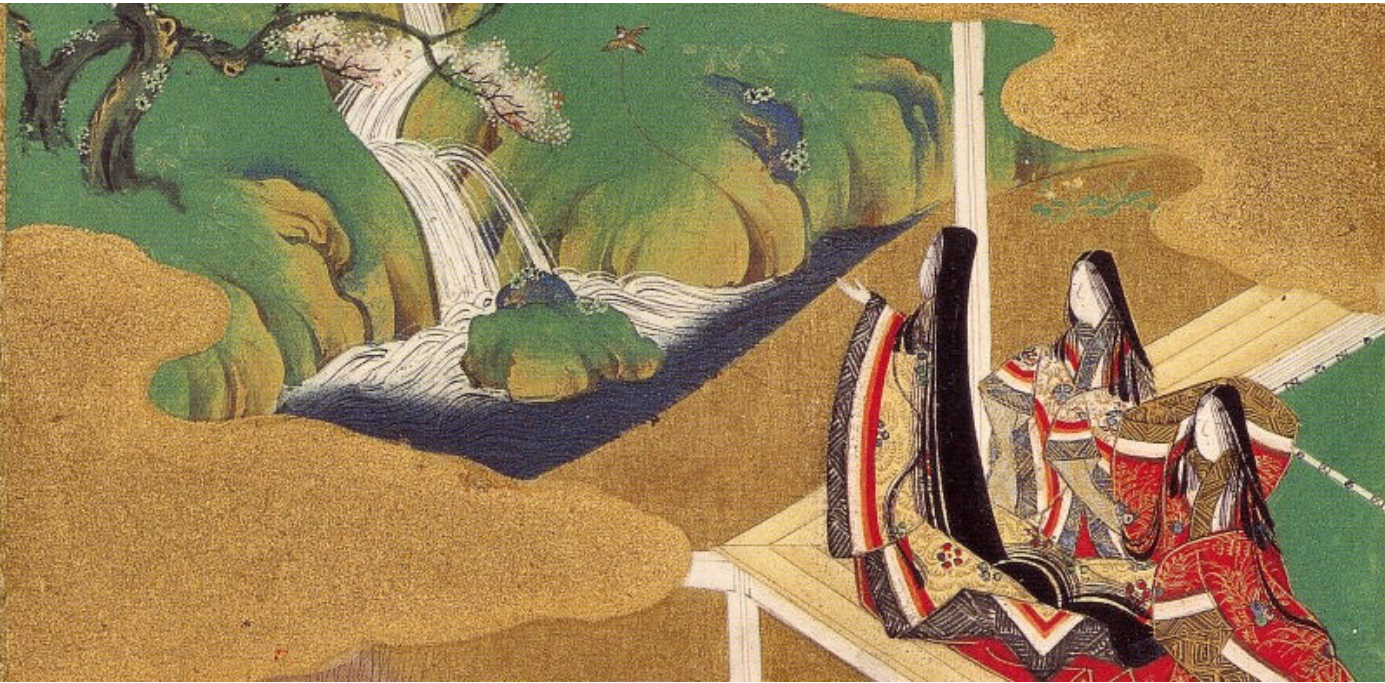
Ancient Japanese literature also shows the value of grief.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



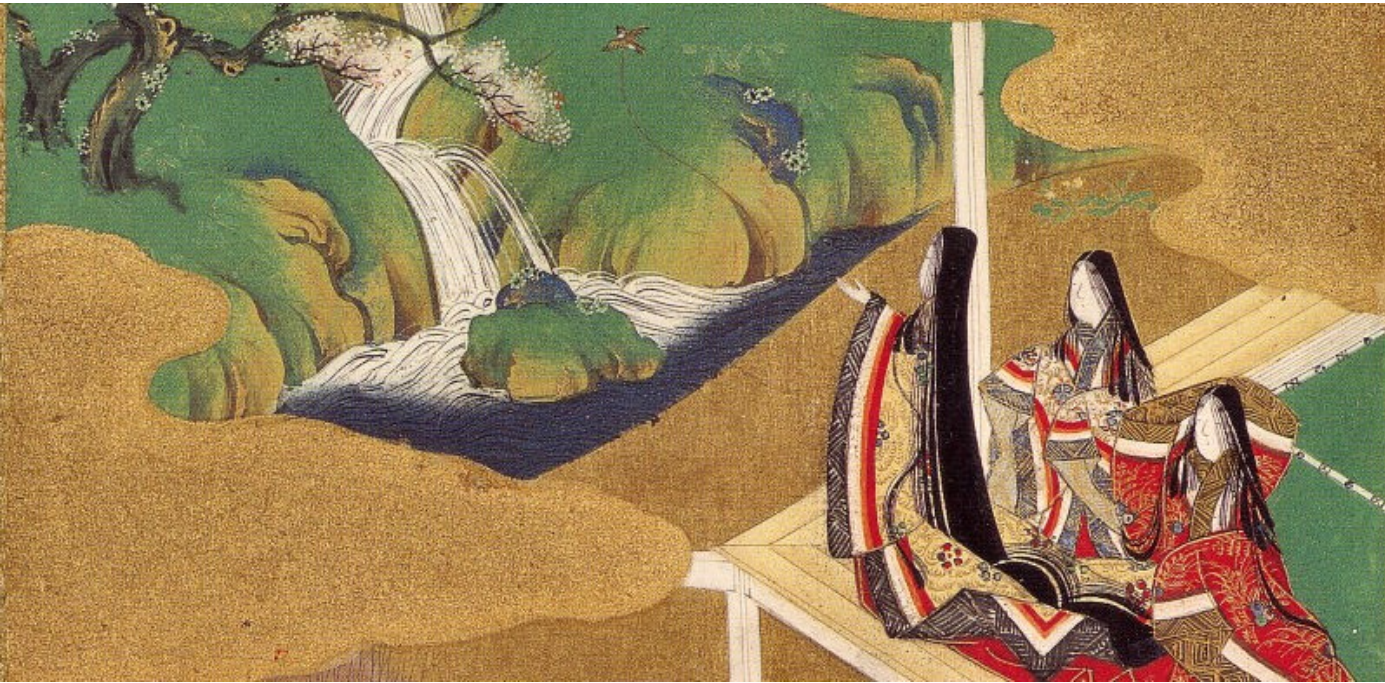
An archaic word, *kanashi*, means “grief” and “love” simultaneously.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



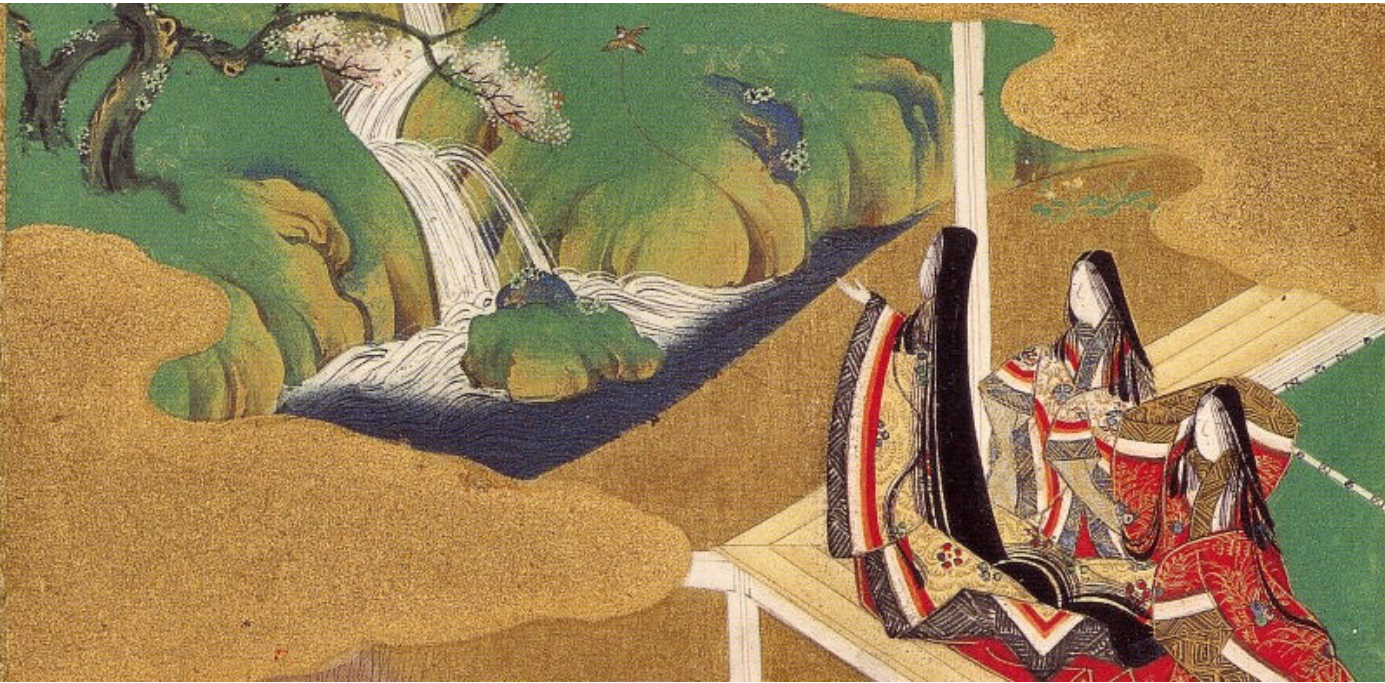
It means ancient Japanese considered “grief” and “love” inseparable.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



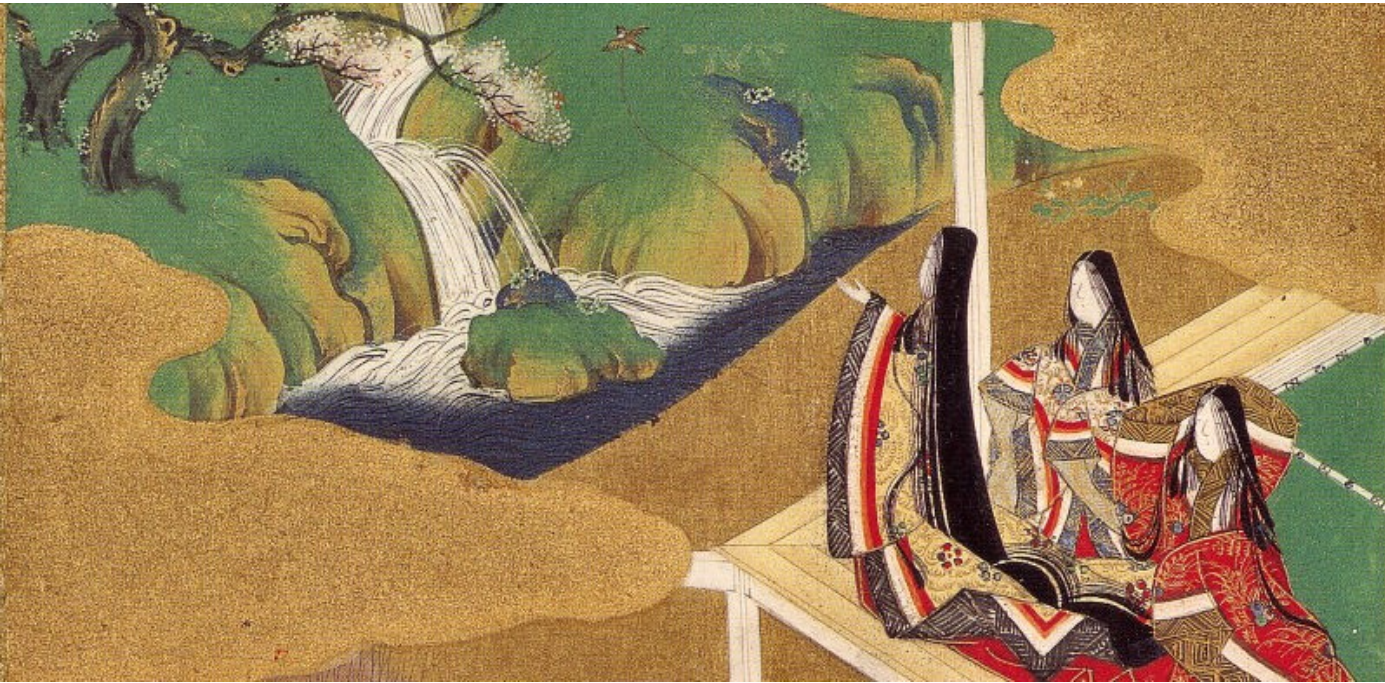
How was this possible?

Third Voice: Live with grief.



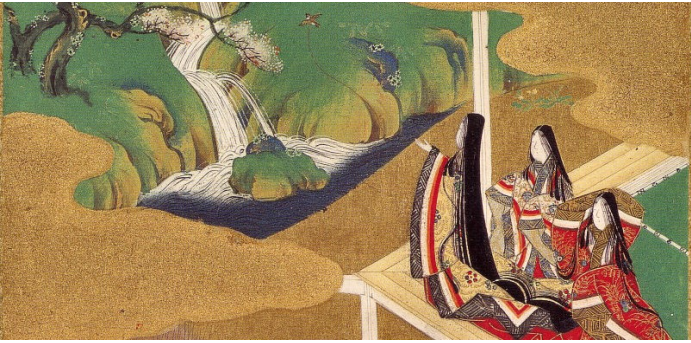
This overlap between the two concepts
one thousand years ago . . .

Third Voice: Live with grief.



has been explained by a professor of Japanese literature, Dr Seiichi Takeuchi, as follows:

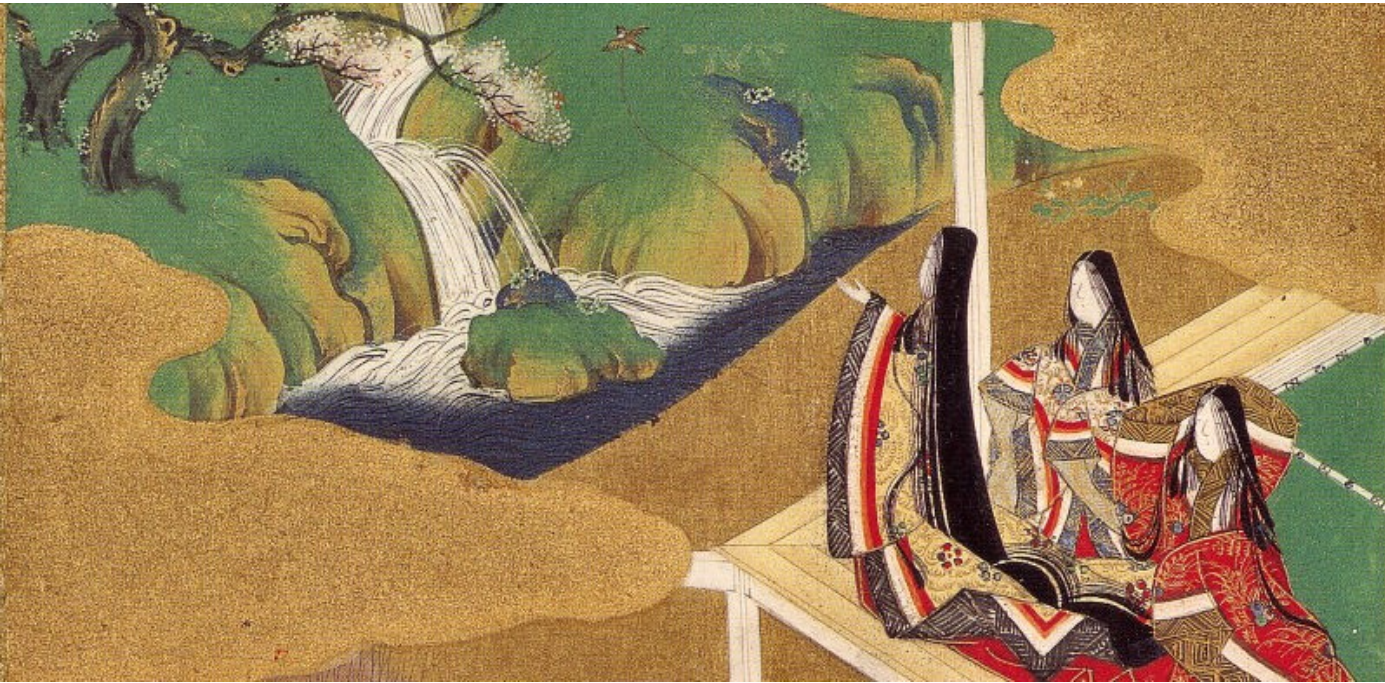
Third Voice: Live with grief.



If you love someone so deeply, you cannot do enough for them, however much you do.

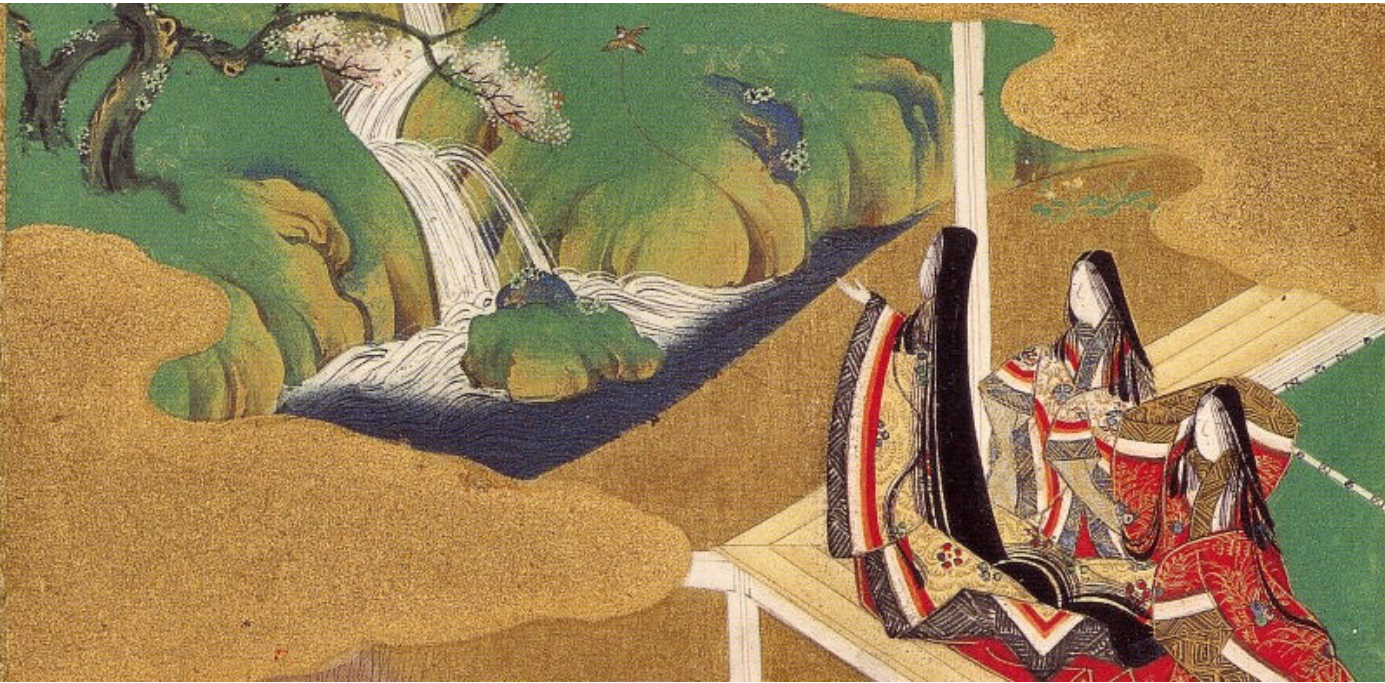
Therefore, whenever you love, you have sadness or grief. Love and grief cannot be separated.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



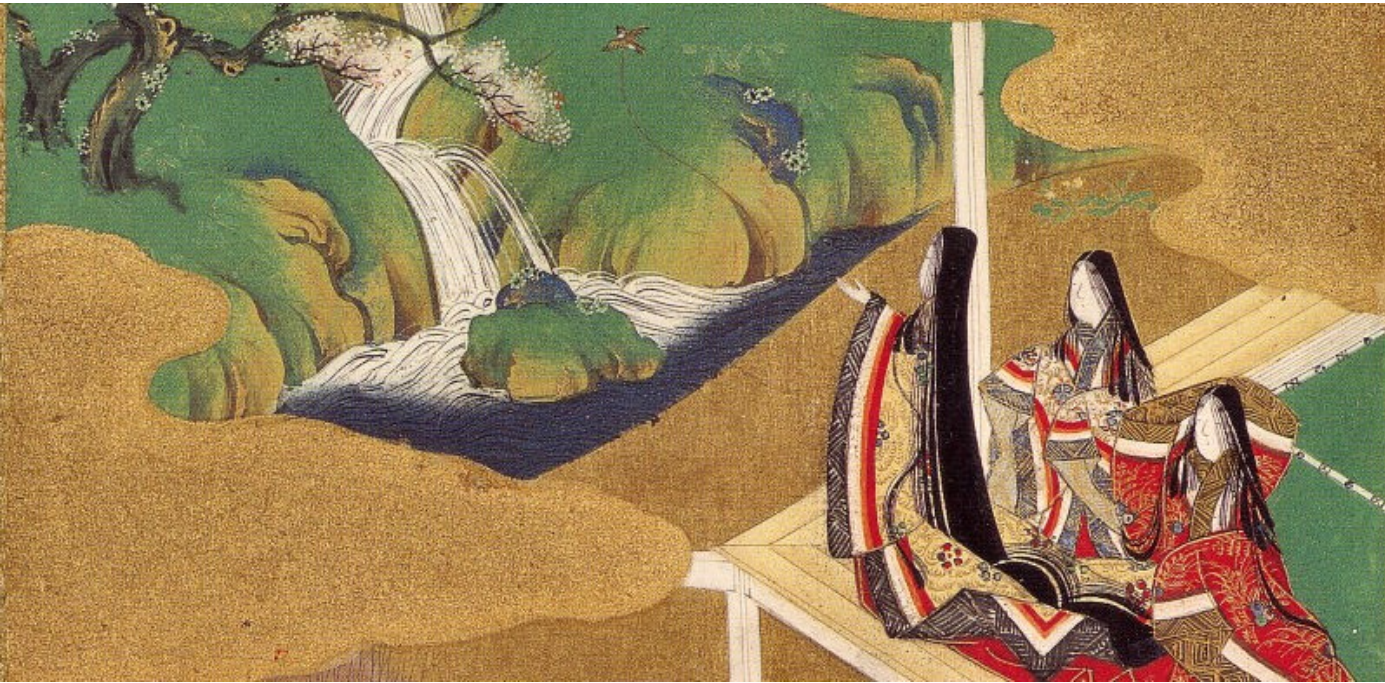
My point here is that
grief varies in different cultures.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



According to some cultural and religious values, . . .

Third Voice: Live with grief.



people appreciate *suffering*
as a fundamental human experience.

Third Voice: Live with grief.



We should respect the diversity of perspectives on grief in life.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



So today, I have talked about the voices about the grief of family survivors of suicide in self-help groups.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



In their viewpoint, *the dead are alive, grief is love*, and we should *live with grief*.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



I am not saying that all Japanese family survivors share these voices.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



This presentation focuses on self-help groups for family survivors of suicide, . . .

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



and I present their voices only.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



However, self-help groups are excellent
representatives of Japanese family survivors

...

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



because they are independent of professionals.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



They don't need to compromise with professionals and conform to their opinions.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



So, although Japanese professionals tend to follow Western support methods without considering cultural differences, . . .

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



Japanese self-help groups are developing their paths through trial and error.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



I'd like to end with an example of a group therapy technique, which uses a "talking stick."

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



In the group session, a stick or something lightweight is passed around, . . .

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



and nobody but the member holding the stick is allowed to speak.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



A group facilitator uses the stick to encourage the group members to listen to the speaker . . .

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



and prevent others from interrupting.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



However, this is useful in a culture, where people want to talk rather than listen.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



In Japan, many people are reserved.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



They are often too shy to talk in a group of strangers.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



Family survivors who experienced group therapy with a “talking stick” often say . . .

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



the “stick” makes them nervous and uncomfortable.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



They felt group pressure to talk in the group even though they were not ready to do so.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



This example shows that . . .

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



even one therapy technique can function differently in different cultures.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



Also, each culture views life, death, and relationships with the deceased uniquely.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



Considering the cultural diversity around bereavement, . . .

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



we cannot expect to develop a universal approach to use in all cultures.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



Yet, in Japan, many professionals seem to rush to establish ways to support family survivors of suicide.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



They learn a lot from English literature and hastily introduce many theories and practices from overseas.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



They hold training sessions for public employees to spread these theories and practices nationwide.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



Unfortunately, these theories are often simplified so that people accept them.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



This causes conflicts between professionals and self-help groups for family survivors of suicide . . .

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



because their thoughts on grief are very different.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



To conclude, we should respect ***cultural diversity*** among people suffering grief.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



Japanese self-help groups for family survivors of suicide have different values on grief to Japanese professionals.

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



Their voices include: “the dead are alive,”
“grief is love,” and “live with grief.”

Concl.: Cultural diversity in grief



Considering these as alternative viewpoints will help ***enrich*** the bereavement interventions offered.