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# 'We Need Some Light': Seeing Identities After Grief in *Next to Normal*

Kathy S. Roberts

Cedarville University, [KRoberts123@cedarville.edu](mailto:KRoberts123@cedarville.edu)

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Complete normalcy is a myth. People like to believe that there is a middle-class template for absolute normal, but there are too many deviations in nature for such a perfect formula to exist. Instead, normalcy in the context of family means “healthy” or “functional” for a family who may or may not be of standard composition. *Next to Normal*, a 2010 musical with lyrics by Brian Yorkey and music by Tom Kitt, portrays a family who appears normal, but a closer look indicates that the family is crumbling in a variety of ways. The family attempts to heal itself through a variety of tactics and treatments, all of which prove insufficient. However, the musical ends optimistically with the characters believing they will find “some light” to shine into their darkness. According to grief theorist Dennis Klass, the light that the Goodman family in *Next to Normal* seeks is a healthy continuing bond with Gabe. Since the musical occurs in a postmodern context, this solution is one of many possible solutions and requires the Goodman family to look inside themselves for healing.

*Next to Normal* has a small cast which allows the show to explore the psyches of the characters. The main characters are the members of the Goodman family. Diana, the middle-aged mother, has suffered from a variety of mental disorders for sixteen years. Throughout the show, she receives numerous treatments including medicine, abstaining from medicine, therapy, hypnosis, and electroconvulsive therapy. Dan, her middle-aged husband, loyally helps her, keeps their family functioning, and pretends that all is well. They met in college as undergrad architecture students. After they discovered that Diana was pregnant, they eloped. The baby, Gabe, died of an intestinal obstruction when he was eight months old. The couple had another baby, Natalie, shortly after his death. However, Natalie’s life was overshadowed by Gabe’s death. Diana tells her psychotherapist, “We had Natalie to . . . And I know she knows. I couldn’t hold her, in the hospital” (Yorkey 47). In the show, Natalie is sixteen years old and

navigating life on her own because her parents are effectively absent in her life. Natalie is a perfectionist who attempts to graduate high school early with a full scholarship so that she can enter college early to escape her detached parents. She meets Henry who is a stoner, musician, and “philosopher king” (xviii). They start dating, and Henry supports Natalie in ways that her parents neglect. He also introduces her to drugs which she experiments with to cope with her troubling life. The musical indicates parallels between their relationship and that of Natalie’s parents; their lives might emerge as disastrous as Dan and Diana’s.

The remaining character, Gabe, is the most difficult to interpret. Although he died when he was eight months old, on stage he is almost eighteen years old – the age he would be if he had never died. Throughout the show, his mother interacts with him as if he were a living person. For example, in the first scene, all of the Goodman family members are preparing to leave for either work or school. Diana tells Gabe, “You’re going to be late, and you’ve got a huge day.” Gabe responds, “You have no idea what I do all day.” Diana proudly tells him, “Jazz band before school, class, key club, then football” (Yorkey 11). Based on Diana’s interactions with Gabe, the audience assumes that he is a regular character; however, none of the other characters can see him. Additionally, Gabe moves fluidly around the stage which indicates to viewers that his being is different from the normal humanity of the other characters. The audience is not completely sure if Gabe is dead until after the seventh song when the Goodman family and Henry are sitting at the table having just finished dinner. Diana walks in carrying a lit birthday cake and exclaims, “Okay . . . It’s someone’s birthday!” After an awkward pause, Dan goes to Diana and sings, “He’s not here . . . / He’s not here. / Love, I know you know. / Do you feel / He’s still real? / Love, it’s just not so. / Why is it you still believe? / Do you dream or do you grieve? / You’ve got to let him go. / He’s been dead / All these years . . . / No, my love, he’s not

here” (31). After this revelation, the audience must determine the nature of Gabe’s being. This is just one topic of many that *Next to Normal* offers for the audience to ponder. Most critics and theatregoers cite mental illness as *Next to Normal*’s preeminent theme.

Yorkey and Kitt intended for *Next to Normal* to be a statement about the true nature of mental illness. In an interview with Bryan Reesman, Kitt expressed, “What’s most important to me about *Next To Normal* is that people see that we’re honoring that struggle [mental illness] and hoping to shed some light on it” (Reesman 15). Kitt says that the greatest thing he learned from working on the show was “to see [mental illness] in its true form, which is that it’s a disease” (15). Like many people, Kitt used to think that people with mental illnesses were just acting up and needed to try to stop the behavior. The show taught him “to look at it as a disease that afflicts people and that there is no rhyme or reason to it and there is no silver bullet” (15). Kitt hopes that the show will inform people about this revelation. While *Next to Normal* humanizes mental illness for audiences, it also allows people who suffer from mental illness to feel solidarity from watching the performance. *Next to Normal* offers them hope for society’s future treatment of it because the show raises public awareness. Yorkey states that working on the show has opened his eyes to the pervasiveness of mental illness. He tells Reesman, “Every time I’m at the show I meet someone who’s bipolar or who grew up with a bipolar parent. Literally every time I’ve met someone at the show there’s been someone there who says, ‘This is my story.’” (15). He continues to say, “I could easily say that I wasn’t expecting that. In developing the show we met so many people who responded to what was onstage because it told their story that they hadn’t seen told, particularly not as a musical” (15). *Next to Normal* has made progress in alleviating the social stigma and misconceptions surrounding mental illness by bringing it into the public sphere through art.

In the only scholarly article on *Next to Normal*, Scott Wallin, scholar of performance studies and their connection with psychosocial disabilities, explains that art has long used madness as a metaphor and archetype. He writes that art has used the trope of madness for centuries to “efficiently perform a kind of shorthand: [the techniques] strengthen narrative or clarify character in ways that have little or nothing to do with the actual individual, social, and political experiences of people who live with psychosocial disabilities. At the same time they universalize what are in actuality diverse and multifarious experiences” (Wallin). While art has traditionally portrayed mental illness in flat or negative ways as a literary device, *Next to Normal* attempts to ‘normalize’ people with mental disorders by showing that, like physical ailments, anyone can develop a mental disorder. Wallin cites *Next to Normal* as “one of the first major theater productions in the United States to present madness through a contemporary biomedical model” (Wallin). The biological model states that all people have physical bodies which are prone to illness, including mental illness. Modern physicians have worked to promote the biological side of mental illness so that the public realizes, “Anyone can become sick regardless of his or her moral values and choices. In this respect, the medical model “normalizes” emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that are considered deviant” (Wallin). By emphasizing that mental disorders are not the result of the person’s choices, the biomedical approach reduces the social stigma surrounding mental illness. However, Wallin notices that *Next to Normal* reduces Diana’s psychosocial disability to a mental illness because it reduces her problems to an objective, organic disorder and reduces the social stigma surrounding it. Wallin argues that *Next to Normal* would be more effective in reducing the social stigma surrounding mental illness if it presents Diana from an ecological perspective rather than the biomedical model.

An ecological perspective of psychosocial disorders focuses on the holistic person and the numerous factors which influence her whereas the biomedical model emphasizes the physicality of her disorder. Wallin notes that *Next to Normal* portrays Diana as a normal person topped by “a compilation of mental illness symptoms” (Wallin). The show encourages the audience to view her primarily as a patient whose disorder affects all her roles in life rather than a woman influenced by a complex set of factors. Since the show uses the biomedical model, it reduces Diana’s psychosocial disorder to being solely intrapersonal, stemming from her mother’s genetics. For example, Diana tells her psychotherapist, “When I was young, my mother called me ‘high-spirited.’ She would know. She was so high-spirited they banned her from the PTA.” Doctor Madden responds, “Sometimes there’s a predisposition to illness, but actual onset is only triggered by some . . . traumatic event” (Yorkey 39). The “traumatic event” he refers to is her infant son’s death. Wallin believes that not only does this portrayal of Diana suggest that she is inherently flawed because of her genetics, but it is unrealistic in terms of how many psychologists today view their patients and encourage patients to view themselves. Wallin writes that the ecological perspective is one of the most effective perspectives of psychosocial disorders because it

. . . considers that a person's health is influenced by multiple factors on various registers: intrapersonal (biology and psychology), interpersonal (social and cultural), the physical environment, the community, and public policy. These factors interact with one another to produce a cumulative effect. The most effective support for people with psychosocial disabilities recognizes this matrix of influences and seeks intervention that takes all of these factors into account. (Wallin)

Wallin believes that Diana’s issues are more complex than the musical addresses and that she would be more likely to heal if the treatment addresses her holistically.

Though mental illness is the explicit subject of *Next to Normal*, the characters are also heavily influenced by their unresolved grief from Gabe's death. The show indicates that Gabe's death was the traumatic event which triggered the manifestation of Diana's genetic disposition toward mental illness. After Doctor Madden tells Diana this, she responds, "I never know what to say when I have to go over all this. It starts to sound like some story I tell that's about some other person entirely" (Yorkey 39). Diana lost her identity after her infant's death. Doctor Madden's next question for Diana is, "Why don't you tell me about the last time you truly felt happy". The text describes her response, "*(She has no answer for him.)*" (40). Diana never experienced happiness in the sixteen years after Gabe's death because she never properly grieved. Her husband also failed to grieve properly. While Diana's arrested grief manifests itself in various mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and delusional episodes, Dan's arrested grief manifests itself differently. Dan's failure to grieve shows in his stoicism and his refusal to address their son. For example, in the second act when Dan is helping Diana regain her memory after the shock therapy, Diana stumbles upon the music box they played for Gabe when he was a baby. Dan tries to prevent Diana from remembering the night their son died. He reasons with Diana that, "You think this will help, / but it won't" (81). When Diana continues to seek information from Dan about their son, Dan asks her, "Why would you want to remember the things that hurt you?" Diana responds, "I want to remember everything, Dan. How did he die?" (82). These lines suggest that they have different tactics for dealing with their son's death. Diana needs to verbally process the event with another person whereas Dan desires to forget and move on as if it never occurred. As a married couple who suffered the death of their son, they should have supported each other as they mutually grieved. However, Dan chose to ignore the tragedy; his actions left Diana floating in her emotions with no one to support her through the

grieving process. Part of this was due to their young age and inexperience when Gabe died. Diana explains to Doctor Madden, “We were both undergrads. Architecture. The baby wasn’t planned. Neither was the marriage. I had always expected to be too busy. But when the baby came it all seemed to make sense. Until . . . Until . . .” (46). Later, Diana and Dan both admit that they were young and mishandled the situation when they sing, “And I was a child / Raising a child . . .” (82). Regardless of the reasons, Diana and Dan’s current problems have roots in their improper grieving of Gabe’s death.

Attachment theorists explain that a bereaved person grieves the death of a loved one by reorganizing her bonds with the deceased person. When a person experiences a physical or psychological threat, including separation from someone she relies upon for support or protection, she subconsciously activates her attachment system. Psychologists Nigel P. Field and Charles Filanosky define an attachment system as “an inborn motivational system aimed at maintaining proximity to supportive others at times of need” (Field 2). After a threat or trauma, the attachment system initiates a behavioral plan to reestablish the proximity that is threatened. A person’s initial response after a loved one’s death is to search to recover the deceased. In the initial phase of mourning, the bereaved person’s attachment system does not register the person’s death as irrevocable, thus, the bereaved person experiences emotional turmoil and disorganization as her search efforts return empty. Eventually, the bereaved person reaches her capacity to tolerate the emotional turmoil caused by attempting to reconnect with the deceased person. The bereaved person then accepts the impossibility of connecting with the deceased person as she had previously and remodels her attachment to the deceased person so that it is internal rather than physical. This is an example of healthy grieving; one organization that assists people in grieving healthfully is Bereaved Parents.

Bereaved Parents is a self-help group for parents of deceased children. Dennis Klass, a psychological advisor to Bereaved Parents, shares his years of experience in a long-term qualitative study about how a parent's bond with his or her deceased child transforms throughout the grieving process. Each Bereaved Parents group is comprised of parents in various stages of the grieving process and led by a person who has been through the program. The idea behind the group is that grieving parents with similar pasts can share their experiences and advice to support each other. This method is called "folk psychology" (Klass 149). The group members dialogue to understand themselves and rebuild their lives. Social support is key to progressing through the grieving process. The goal of grief is not to sever the parent's bond with the child but instead to integrate "the child into the parent's life and social networks in a different way than when the child was alive" (147). The child remains alive to the parents; Bereaved Parents helps them actualize a healthy inner representation of the child in their social world. Bereaved Parents defines an inner representation as, "The part of the self-actualized in the bond with the person, characterizations and thematic memories of the person, and the emotional states connected with the characterizations and memories" (150). Bereaved Parents explains that it is important for parents to continuously adapt their child's inner representation to their changing social contexts because, "A child, living or dead, plays many roles within the family and psychic system. The role can be as simple as the child being the one who will live out the parent's ideal self or as complex as the child being the parent's surrogate parent" (150). The parents' connection with their child, regardless of how brief, was significant enough to meld to the parents' identity. Parents cannot ignore the influence their child had on them but instead must learn to adapt the child's inner representation into a new reality. Bereaved Parents helps parents transition with their child through different inner representations and social contexts.

Bereaved Parents believes that grief is not a linear process with the goal of attaining closure. Klass defines grief as, “The processes by which persons move from equilibria in their inner and social worlds before a death to new equilibria in their inner and social worlds following bereavement” (Klass 149). Equilibrium is difficult to measure, but people can sense it subjectively. Psychologists who work with Bereaved Parents believe that it typically takes three to four years for parents to sense that they have reached an equilibrium they can trust. Parents need to construct meaning of their child’s life, death, and his life and death in their present world. Parents must ask the question, “Who is this child to [me]?” throughout all stages of the grieving process because the child’s inner representation and the role he fills changes as the parent grieves him (148). Psychologists struggle to rigidly define the stages of the grieving process, but the members of Bereaved Parents loosely refer to four stages of grief as “Newly Bereaved”, “Into Their Grief”, “Well Along in Their Grief”, and “Resolved as Much as It Will Be”. These stages outline what happens in the inner and social worlds of parents who grieve healthfully. Generally, parents can function ‘normally’ in the world once they exhibit the behaviors described in the fourth stage. The Goodman family is arrested in their grief somewhere between the first and second stage and will achieve healthier family dynamics if they successfully grieve Gabe.

The first stage of the grieving process is the “Newly Bereaved” stage in which the child’s death is an “awful truth that seems unreal” (Klass 151). The parents initially respond with dissociation rather than denial; they know that their child is dead because their greatest reality is that a portion of their self has been severed. The mourning process aims to have parents find equilibrium between dissociation and integration. During this stage, “Parents often have intimations of the future bond they will have with the child” (151). For example, in a poem in

the Bereaved Parents newsletter, a mother describes a recurrent dream with the child, however, the child disappears whenever the mother reaches out to touch the child. The mother interprets the dream to mean that the child is still with her. In the poem, the mother first writes about how the child is in her dream then switches perspectives to say that she is in the child's dream. This illustrates that, in the initial stage of grief, the bereaved parent and deceased child still connect with a bond that they struggle to negotiate. Additionally, the example evidences that the deceased person is (or at least the bereaved person imagines him to be) an agent capable of acting to some degree to accomplish his will. During this stage, parents often connect with their child through a linking object such as a toy. Parents can remember the child's presence through the linking object even decades later.

In *Next to Normal*, Diana shows signs of being in the "Newly Bereaved" stage because Gabe is still a free agent. In the initial stages of grief, the bereaved person struggles to relate to the deceased person as anything other than an agent because that was the only way she knew him. Diana has not progressed past this stage because Gabe is still an agent seventeen years after his death. Diana does not project her thoughts onto him but rather interacts with him as if he is an agent. For example, in the first scene, Diana and Gabe converse until they hear Dan in the background. Diana tells Gabe to leave the back way. Gabe asks, "Why does he hate me?" Diana playfully answers, "Because you're a little twat." Gabe responds, "You can't call me at twat" (Yorkey 8). Throughout the show, Gabe seems to have his own emotions, opinions, and agenda. For example, he sings to his father, "Are you waiting, are you / wishing, / Are you wanting all that she / can't give? / Are you hurting, are you / healing, / Are you hoping for a life to / live? / Well, so am I" (34). Those lines along with others throughout the musical indicate

that Gabe is an agent rather than a projection of Diana's or an inner representation which she has integrated into herself.

Additionally, the show indicates that Diana is arrested in her bereavement through her reaction to the linking object. The linking object is a music box which she and Dan played to Gabe when he was a baby to put him to sleep. The music box appears twice in the show, and both times it causes Diana to strongly remember Gabe. The first time, Diana is looking through a box of Gabe's possessions and pictures at the suggestion of Doctor Madden. He intends for her to acknowledge the possessions so that she will begin to grieve Gabe. Doctor Madden asks Diana, "Wouldn't you like to be free from all that? Finally? Wouldn't you like to go home, clear out his room . . . maybe spend some time with your daughter? And let you son go, at last?" (Yorkey 50). Rather than releasing Gabe, the linking object causes her to fantasize about him. After she hears the music, Gabe appears in a tuxedo, and they begin waltzing. The next scene reveals that her dancing and singing with Gabe caused Diana to attempt suicide in order to reunite with him. The second time Diana interacts with the music box is after she loses her memory from the electroconvulsive therapy. Dan shows her photos to recreate her memory, but he intentionally conceals all traces of Gabe. However, Gabe appears and hands the music box to Diana. She opens it and hears the music which sparks her memory. Gabe disappears and Dan enters. Diana asks Dan to explain the music box to her, but he tells her it is nothing. She senses the void and begins to remember, "We played it for the baby. Sometimes it helped him sleep." Dan interrupts, "Diana - ," but Diana remembers further, "Him. We did have a boy" (80). These realizations lead Diana to fully remember Gabe; the next song, "How Could I Ever Forget?" is her remembering all the events surrounding his death. She wants to know more about her son, so she asks Dan to tell her more. He only wants to forget Gabe and the pain he feels from his death,

so he smashes the music box in attempt to erase Gabe's inner representation. Dan destroys the linking object so that Diana will stop remembering their son. This many years after Gabe's death, both parents should use the linking object to fondly recall their son, however, neither progressed to that stage in the grieving process. Dan refuses to acknowledge the linking object in an effort to forget Gabe, and Diana either depends on the linking object or it causes her painful memories. These responses indicate that Dan and Diana are arrested in the first stage of the grieving process.

Also during the "Newly Bereaved" stage, parents feel a bitter sense of isolation and need their social world to empathize with the pain of their loss. Parents experience disequilibrium and disassociation both in their psychic world and social world. In their psychic world they must transition the deceased child's inner representation, but in their social world they need the community to empathize with their pain. Bereaved people often feel that the rest of the world continues on unaffected by the death of their child while their life is completely devastated. Klass writes, "It often seems to them that neither the child nor the child's death has social reality, for they find that people do not mention the child's name in their presence, that inquiries about how they are doing imply that it doesn't hurt as badly as it does, that the child can be replaced by a new baby" (152). Newly bereaved parents need people around them to acknowledge their child's death so that they do not feel isolated as they negotiate the imbalances in their new reality.

In *Next to Normal*, Dan and Diana should have consoled each other after Gabe's death, but instead they isolated themselves. As a married couple, Dan and Diana should find communal solidarity in one another even if it is absent in the larger community. Since the musical does not show characters other than the Goodman family, Henry, and the doctor, scholars can only

conjecture as to the community's support of Dan and Diana during their grief. It is likely that the community neglected to support them well because Dan and Diana are still arrested in the grieving process. However, regardless of the community's reaction, Dan and Diana should have supported each other in their grief. Instead, they isolated themselves and failed to even mention Gabe's name. The text indicates this after Diana sees the music box for the second time. She remembers that they had a son who died in infancy, but she cannot remember more. She asks Dan, "What was his name? Tell me" (Yorkey 82). He avoids her question and instead sings, "It's gonna be fine. / It's gonna be fine. / Gonna go back to the doctor, / 'Cause we caught it just in time. / We'll take the pills and pay the bills" (83). Diana persists in asking him for their son's name while he refuses and insists that everything will be fine as long as they erase her memory again. This scene results in him smashing the music box and her deciding that the situation is not worth her staying. In addition to Dan and Diana not discussing Gabe's death with each other, they also do not discuss it with Natalie. This is evident when Diana tells her therapist, "We had Natalie to . . . And I know she knows. I couldn't hold her, in the hospital?" (47). Evidently, Dan and Diana never told their daughter about her older brother who died before she was born. Perhaps they thought they could replace Gabe with Natalie, but it resulted in them neglecting Natalie because they had not grieved their previous child. Near the end of the show, Diana progresses in this area by telling Natalie, "Seventeen years ago your brother died of an intestinal obstruction. He was eight months old. I'm sorry we never talked about that. We wanted to give you a normal life, but I realize I have no clue what that is" (94). This confession opens communication between mother and daughter and is one step they take to progress in the grieving process. Diana and Dan are arrested somewhere between the first and second stages of the grieving process.

The second stage of the grieving process is “Into Their Grief” which Bereaved Parents characterize by complex relations between the parent and the inner representation of her child. Psychologists define inner representation as, “The part of the self-actualized in the bond with the [deceased] person, characterizations and thematic memories of the person, and the emotional states connected with the characterizations and memories” (Klass 150). An inner representation is the result of the bereaved person’s attachment system attempting to reconnect with the deceased person. Their bond used to be physical, but now the bereaved person must transition her bond with the deceased person in a way that maintains their unity yet accounts for his lack of physical presence. The result is an inner representation of the deceased person which appears in a variety of forms ranging from a relationship with an agent to a fond memory of the deceased person. At this stage of grief, parents must separate different inner representations of the child from one another. To do this, parents must first come to terms with negative inner representations or ambivalences in their attachment with their child. For example, some parents feel guilty about their insufficient parenting or unsavory circumstances surrounding the child’s death. These negative attachments create more difficult grief, and Klass observes that, “Separating these inner representations from each other can be simply a matter of purging a representation of its negative content and holding the child in an idealized way” (156). A parent has greater difficulty separating the child’s various inner representations based on the degree that the parent’s psychic and social worlds revolve around the inner representation of the child.

*Next to Normal* indicates that the characters struggle to separate different inner representations of Gabe. The show indicates this through Gabe’s numerous roles. Not only are viewers confused about the nature of Gabe’s being and what role he occupies in the show, but Gabe himself defines his roles in numerous ways. For example, in his solo, “I’m Alive”, Gabe

tells the other characters, “I am what you want me to be, / And I’m your worst fear – you’ll find it in me” (Yorkey 40). Later in the song, Gabe defines himself in a variety of ways including, “I am more than memory - / I am what might be, I am mystery,” “when I appear it’s / Not so clear if / I’m a simple spirit or I’m flesh and blood . . .,” “I feed on the fear that’s behind your eyes,” “I am flame and I am fire, / I am destruction, decay, and desire,” “I’m your wish, your dream come true, / And I am your darkest nightmare, too,” and “I’m the perfect stranger who knows you too well” (41, 42). In addition to the numerous ways Gabe defines himself, the other characters also assign him a variety of roles. For example, in the song “Superboy and the Invisible Girl”, Natalie calls him, “Son of steel,” “a hero, a lover, a prince,” and “forever your son” (36, 37). Diana views Gabe as a twat who may snort coke, a jazz musician, a high school football player, a romantic interest (“I Dreamed a Dance”), her husband’s rival (“I am the One”), an ideal son, and a guide for other worlds (“There’s a World”). The characters’ different identities for Gabe indicate that they experience many different inner representations for him.

As parents separate the different inner representations of their child, they often experience complex and strained social relationships. Parents reflect the complexity of their internal grieving in their complex social relations. Klass writes, “Differences can be seen in the way the child is integrated into various parts of the parent’s self, and thus into the different social systems in which the parent participates” (154). A bereaved parent’s social relationships can either aid her in the grieving process or it. Klass explains, “To a great extent, the degree to which parents in this study feel integrated in the social system, the degree to which they can find social support in their grief, and therefore the ease with which they can resolve their grief, is the degree to which their inner representation of their dead child is integrated into their social world” (150). Bereaved parents need their social world to recognize the reality of their child’s death and

empathize with them. An example of a social system is the parent's work. One parent might view work as a refuge while another parent may experience greater turmoil at work. For example, some parents may view work as refuge from the emotional difficulties of home; work provides them with tasks and an environment where they can be normal people. Other parents find it difficult to function well at work. For example, work may remind them that they should have spent more time with their child, or it may feel like an artificial environment away from the reality of their home-life. These differences in social grieving can cause prolonged conflicts in marriage. For instance, a parent who experiences work as a powerful reminder of her deceased child may think that her husband does not value their deceased child if he perceives work as a refuge. Additionally, as parents separate the ambivalent and negative inner representations of their child from the positive ones, it is common for them to experience marital conflict from their guilt of inadequate parenting, their anger at their spouse's parenting, and the lack of communication between the spouses as they grieve differently.

Dan and Diana's strained relationships and arrested grief indicate that their social systems failed to support them in their grief. Viewers can assume that Dan and Diana lacked sufficient social support immediately after Gabe's death based off the fact that they are still experiencing significant complications from it seventeen years later. Since the show does not include characters from their community aside from Henry and the doctors, viewers can only conjecture about the Goodman's social system, however, the lack of other characters implies that the community does not play a significant role in the Goodman's lives. While a person's social system includes community members, the person is more directly influenced by his or her spouse. Dan and Diana should have supported each other in their grief, but instead they isolated themselves. Dan shut down, refused to sufficiently acknowledge Gabe's death, and tried to

power his way through life by pretending that nothing was wrong. Externally it appeared as if he was healthy, but internally he was crumbling under the pressure of maintaining that façade. He reveals this in the beginning of the musical when he sings, “Who’s crazy? The husband or wife? / Who’s crazy? To live their whole life / believing that somehow / things aren’t as bizarre as they are? / Who’s crazy – the one who can’t cope, / Or maybe the one who’ll still hope? / The one who sees doctors / or the one who just waits in the car?” (Yorkey 17). Even though Dan secretly wonders if he needs to address his unresolved grief, he is too proud to admit it and take action. He is the type of bereaved parent who finds refuge at work which contrasts with Diana who needs to directly confront the issue. Dan fails to provide social support for Diana in the form of explicitly sharing her pain. He fully supported her in her mental illness by taking her to countless treatments, however, he could not bring himself to share in her grief. Diana expresses her frustration at his stoicism when she sings, “Why stay? / So steadfast and stolid / And stoic and solid / For day after every day . . . / Why stay? / Why stay?” (84). At the end of the musical, Diana leaves Dan to live with her parents. Audiences could interpret this to mean that Diana left to seek a social system that would empathize with her pain. Gabe’s death caused prolonged marital conflict for Dan and Diana because they needed to grieve differently and support each other in those different forms of grieving, but each spouse failed to support the other.

The “Into Their Grief” stage requires the parents to separate their child’s inner representations from one another then ends once the parents integrate their child’s inner representation into their “good self”. This can be especially difficult for parents whose child is important to their self-functioning; these parents integrate the child’s inner representation into their self-system early in the grieving process. For example, one father reports that he struggled with alcoholism, and his daughter was the person who urged him to quit. After her death, he

struggled to get over the pain of losing her. “About six months after her death, he was standing at the grave when he heard a voice, ‘Dad, why are you acting this way? This is what you were like when you were drinking.’ Within a week K. was his constant inner companion, helping him control his rage and maintain his hard-won sobriety” (Klass 155). Eventually, her inner representation became part of his “good self” which motivated him to help other people with similar struggles. A person’s “good self” is the best version of himself which means that he is not only healthy but also helps others and gives back to the community. Parents are usually ready to progress to the next stage once their child’s inner representation has become part of their “good self”. Before that point, parents may experience a “double connection” which is a bond with both their dead child and their immortal child (156). This is a natural occurrence that comes from the parent sorting out the numerous inner representations of the child. By the end of this stage, the parent should transition from a “double connection” with her child to having released the physical child and bonded with his inner representation. Klass writes, “They still feel the amputation, but they also feel the new bond. Thus, the disassociation they have felt early in the grief is transformed in a way that allows them to let go of the earthly child and keep the heavenly” (156). Many parents end this stage when they are ready for their child to become part of their “good self”. This usually means that the parent releases the deceased child as an agent and incorporates the child’s inner representation into her self-system.

Dan and Diana have not progressed past the second stage of the grieving process as indicated by them having not yet integrated Gabe into their “good selves”. Dan and Diana still experience numerous inner representations of Gabe and have not yet settled his inner representation into part of their healthy personhoods which are capable of bettering their community. Throughout the show they try to ignore Gabe or use a variety of treatments to erase

the symptoms of their grief, but they will never feel healthy until they transition Gabe's inner representation into part of their "good selves". For example, after the electroconvulsive therapy, Diana lost her memory but can still discern that part of her is missing. She sings, "What happens when the burn has healed / But the skin has not regrown? / What happens when the cast at last come off / And then you find the break was always in another bone?" (Yorkey 89). Gabe confirms this when he sings, "They've managed to get rid of me – I'm gone without a / trace, / But sear the soul and leave a scar no treatment can erase. / They cut away the cancer but forgot to fill the hole; / They moved me from your memory – I'm still there in / your soul" (76). The family tries to eradicate Gabe through medication, therapy, electroconvulsive therapy, drugs, and ignoring him, but he insists, "You say forget, but I remind you. / You can try to hide, you know that I will find you. / 'Cause if you won't grieve me / you won't leave me behind . . ." (43). After seventeen years, Gabe is still an agent and will not be released until his parents transition his inner representation into part of their "good selves". Diana approaches that point near the end of the musical when she tells Natalie, "We'll live with what's real, / Let go of what's past, / And maybe I'll see you at last" (94). Diana finally tells Natalie about her deceased brother and apologizes, "I'm sorry we never talked about that. We wanted to give you a normal life, but I realize I have no clue what that is" (94). This action indicates that Diana is beginning to stop fixating on her own pain long enough to address the needs of people around her. It is a small step, but it suggests that Diana is beginning to transition Gabe's inner representation into her "good self". This positive step occurs shortly before the characters sing about their hopes for the approaching light; the show reveals the promise of light after Diana progresses with the grieving process.

The third stage of the grieving process is “Well Along in Their Grief” in which parents reach a new equilibrium of both letting go of the pain of their loss and holding on to their child’s memory through a bond with his inner representation. Bereaved Parents describe the goal as, “Letting go of the pain in exchange for a clearer, comforting inner representation of the child” (Klass 159). The group encourages parents to transition from identifying with the child’s pain to instead “identify with the energy and love that was in the living child” (160). By identifying with the child’s love and energy, the parent is able to incorporate the child’s inner representation into her “good self”. One mother describes this moment for her as, “Finally, I had to admit that his life meant more than pain, it also meant joy and happiness and fun and living. . . . My memories of S. became lighter and more spontaneous. Instead of hurtful, my memories brought comfort, even a chuckle . . . . I had sudden insights into what was happening to me, the pieces began to fit again, and I realized S. was still teaching me things” (160). Though bereaved parents eventually transition to the point where they more strongly experience joy for their child’s life rather than pain from his death, they acknowledge that they will always have some degree of pain from their loss. One of the clichés in the bereavement community is, “Grief is the price we pay for love” (160). One father writes in the organization’s newsletter, “If the price I pay for loving D. is the pain and sorrow I now have, I still think I got a bargain to have had him for 13 years” (160). The parent’s bond with her deceased child is often explicitly linked to her healing. For example, one mother explains that she numbs herself from the pain of her son’s death by playing computer games for hours. “I hear him, almost pulling at my chair, saying, “Come on, Mom, get your ass up; get going, Mom: get your ass out of here; get doing something.” So I want to just sit still and do nothing, but I feel like he is the one pushing me to get involved in this group, to do something, to get out of my lethargy” (164). By this stage in the grieving process,

parents have incorporated their child's inner representation into their "good self" and begin to function healthily in the community. Their children are still alive to them in the sense that they motivate the parents' thoughts and actions, and the parents desire the community to remember and interact with the children.

The characters in *Next to Normal* are not ready to progress to the third stage of the grieving process, but they are aware that they must proceed in that direction to heal themselves. Diana and Dan are arrested in the first and second stages of the grieving process, but they are slowly progressing toward transitioning Gabe's inner representation into their "good selves". The end of the musical indicates that the characters are becoming open to the possibility of grieving as a way of healing. They begin to allow themselves to be vulnerable which opens them for healing. For example, Natalie stays with Henry and helps her dad, Dan agrees to therapy, and Diana moves in with her parents but continues some form of treatment. Dan inquires about her, and Doctor Madden responds, "I think she's working on it. And she's aware of the risks" (Yorkey 103). In addition to the actions that the characters take toward grieving, they sing a song entitled "Light" which expresses their desire for light to illuminate their dark world. In the song, they acknowledge the reality of pain, that the end result can be worth the pain, and that they desire to keep striving for the light. Some of the lyrics include, "Day after day, / Give me clouds, and rain, and gray. / Give me pain if that's what's real - / It's the price we pay to feel. / The price of love is loss, / But still we pay / We love anyway" (Yorkey 102). The Goodman family begins to acknowledge their pain in the presence of one another and desire to act for their healing. Their full healing will come after they complete the fourth stage of the grieving process.

Bereaved Parents calls the last stage of the grieving process "Resolved as Much as It Will Be". In this stage, parents settle into the advice that experienced Bereaved Parents told them at

the beginning of their journey, “It will always hurt, but not the way it does now” (Klass 164).

Klass writes that parents in this stage are able to laugh and comfortably cry at meetings,

“Occasionally they still cried, but that was fine with them. Their sadness was part of them; they could recognize it and not be afraid of it” (165). By this point, the parents have transitioned their child’s inner representation so that their bond involves the child as part of their ongoing life.

Parents need to make their and their child’s life count for something, so they illustrate their child’s positive influence on them by championing a cause or bettering themselves. One veteran of Bereaved Parents advises newer members, “We do need to find a positive outlet for all the anger and pain. Find a charity, or a cause that has personal meaning; get involved with Bereaved Parents; plant a garden; get into shape; do something that illustrates the positive effect that your child had on you - even if you are the only one to see it” (167). As the parents become more comfortable with their bond with the child, they rely less on the community recognizing the child, and they naturally integrate the child into their social life. For example, Bereaved Parents has a steady turnover in facilitators. Facilitators lead the group while they need to spend time with the inner representation of their child. When they become comfortable with the bond, they move on to allow another Bereaved Parent to assume the role. One former facilitator explains that he needed to work with Bereaved Parents because it was his connection time with his deceased child. Now he tells the group, “I can’t say exactly when it changed or how, but now he is there all the time. He is just there; he is part of me. It isn’t my connection with Bereaved Parents that connects him to me” (167). A parent who has completed the grieving process is able to healthfully function with her child’s inner representation motivating her “good self”.

Bereaved parents who reach the “Resolved as Much as It Will Be” stage have attained ‘normalcy’ in the sense that they are now able to function healthfully in society. The goal of the

light in *Next to Normal* is for the Goodmans to successfully complete the grieving process so that Gabe will become a healthy internal continuing bond. In the show, Dan and Diana progress out of their arrested grief because Natalie spurs them on to stage three of the grieving process.

Natalie is both the motivator and motivation for Dan and Diana to heal themselves. Bereaved Parents believes that a surviving parent needs their social system to empathize with their pain and encourage them to heal. As the most prominent figure in Dan and Diana's social system, Natalie is in a position of influence where she can motivate her parents to heal themselves. She urges them to continue with the grieving process when she suggests, "We need some light. / First of all, we need some light. / You can't sit here in the dark, / And all alone - / It's a sorry sight" (Yorkey 101). Natalie has suffered the most from Dan and Diana's arrested grief, and she stands to gain the most from their healthy functioning. As the "invisible girl" overshadowed by the "super boy", Natalie was not properly nurtured by her parents because they were preoccupied with ignoring the pain from their unresolved grief. She prepares to attend college and deepen her relationship with Henry, both of which would benefit from a supportive relationship with her parents. Natalie does not suffer from unresolved grief in the way that her parents do because she never knew Gabe, but she is fully aware of the situation and suffers the consequences. Additionally, earlier in the show, the text portrays Natalie as her mother's first step in healing. Diana progresses in the grieving process when she articulates Gabe's death and confesses her failure to Natalie, "Seventeen years ago your brother died of an intestinal obstruction. He was eight months old. I'm sorry we never talked about that. We wanted to give you a normal life, but I realize I have no clue what that is" (94). Through her position and her actions, Natalie urges her parents to continue with the grieving process.

If the Goodman family successfully grieves, they will find the light that they seek at the end of the show. The characters believe that the light will illumine their dark situation and allow them to lead healthier lives. The text exemplifies this optimism in the lyrics, “The wasted world we thought we knew - / The light will make it look brand-new” (Yorkey 103). The characters seek some form of healing and clarity for the pain caused by Gabe’s death and the complications from their arrested grief. The text does not explicitly say what the light symbolizes, only that it will improve their lives and allow them to live healthily. By remaining ambiguous about the identity of the light, the creators of *Next to Normal* allow viewers to interpret it as they think best. Based off the musical until this point, viewers can logically interpret the ending to mean that the Goodman’s are availing themselves to the grieving process. For example, the lyrics indicate that they are opening themselves to people around them to be more transparent about their problems. All of the characters unite with the chorus, “When we open us our lives, / Sons and daughters, husbands, wives - / And fight that fight . . . / There will be light” (104). In addition to the explicit lyrics of the last song, the dialogue during that scene also indicates that the characters are willing to become vulnerable with one another to heal themselves. For example, Diana seeks further treatment while living with her parents, Dan agrees to begin therapy, Henry reassures Natalie that he will help her with her problems, and Natalie promises Henry that she will stay with him. After the show portrays the characters’ weariness of struggling in isolation, the last song expresses their desire to revitalize their efforts at healing. For example, Diana sings, “Day after day . . . / Wishing all our cares away . . . / Trying to fight the things we feel . . . / But some hurts never heal. / Some ghosts are never gone, / But we go on. / We still go on” (101). Additionally, Gabe joins the family in their desire for openness and quest for healing. Gabe sings, “And when the night has fin’ly gone, / And when we see the new

day dawn, / We'll wonder how we wandered for so long, so blind" (103). Gabe desires the light as much as any of the other characters. This indicates that the light cannot be the eradication of Gabe, because he would not desire his demise. For example, earlier in the show Doctor Madden tells Diana, "Isn't it time to let [Gabe] go?" (43). Gabe responds, "No, no, no - / I'm alive / I'm alive / I am so alive, / If you climb on my back, then we both can fly" (44). Gabe is opposed to disappearing and insists that he can be healthy for his parents if treated properly. Since Gabe wants to remain alive but also draw in the light, it is plausible that the light that he and the family seeks is a healthy continuing bond.

There are two types of continuing bonds: internal and external. Field describes an internalized continuing bond as the deceased being an "internalized secure base . . . a role model, and a reference point in decision-making" (Field 14). Internalized continuing bonds assist a person in grieving because they involve "the mental representation of the deceased as a secure base that may serve to facilitate integration of the loss" (2). For an internalized continuing bond, the bereaved person has a relationship with her inner representation of the person rather than the deceased person who has agency. This is the goal of the grieving process, according to Bereaved Parents. They suggest that bereaved parents transition their bond with their child from a relationship with an agent when the child is alive to ending the grieving process with a healthy internalized continuing bond with the child integrated into the parent's "good self". However, while the parent transitions her child's inner representation, she may experience internal and external continuing bonds and both simultaneously. While an internalized continuing bond is a relationship between the bereaved person and her inner representation of the child, an externalized continuing bond is a relationship between the bereaved parent and her deceased child as an apparent agent. For example, externalized continuing bonds manifest themselves in

the forms of illusions and hallucinations. During an illusion, a bereaved person re-experiences the deceased as someone who resembles her. A hallucination occurs when the bereaved person misconstrues internally-driven stimulations as coming from an external source. While both internal and external continuing bonds are common during the grieving process, researchers find that internal continuing bonds are healthy while external continuing bonds are often maladapted. Adult attachment literature argues that, “Externalized continuing bond expressions involving illusions and hallucinations of the deceased [are] indicative of unresolved loss” (2). Field and a team of psychological researchers tested this hypothesis and discovered that people who feel responsible for the person’s death feel greater grief, and the type of loss a person experiences is more important than her attachment style. The researchers also concluded that people with internalized continuing bonds experience positive personal growth while people with externalized continuing bonds experience negative personal growth. People who grieve improperly experience prolonged external continuing bonds whereas the goal of grieving is to achieve an internal continuing bond with the deceased person.

Bereaved Parents advocates for parents to interact with continuing bonds as part of their healing journey. Bereaved Parents realizes that as parents transition their child’s inner representations into their “good self”, they will likely experience unusual occurrences with the inner representation of the child. It is not uncommon for parents to interact with the inner representation of the dead child. Klass writes:

As grief becomes resolved, the phenomena that indicate active interaction with the inner representation of the dead child – a sense of presence, hallucinations (though the parents might argue that “hallucination” is an inappropriate word here), belief in the child’s continuing active influence on thoughts or events, or a conscious incorporation of the characteristics or virtues of the child into the self - are no longer occasions for the parents’ concern about their own sanity. The phenomena are accepted as a positive part of everyday living. (169)

While *Bereaved Parents* assures parents that interactions with their child are not reason for alarm during the grieving process, popular culture has not always encouraged those interactions. However, society is becoming more accepting of parents interacting with their deceased children in these special ways.

For the majority of history, people have believed that continuing bonds were a healthy and normal aspect of grieving. Grief scholar Craig J. Vickio argues that most cultures and the majority of historical Western thought believe that it is healthy and even necessary for a survivor to foster a bond with her deceased loved one. For example, Vickio writes, “Much of the nineteenth-century Western society harbored a ‘romantic’ view that strongly advocated maintaining ongoing ties with the deceased” (Vickio 162). Vickio believes that this notion recurs in modern society through the mediums of film and popular press. For example, in Disney’s *Pocahontas*, the title character tells her dying lover, “I can’t leave you.” John Smith responds, “You never will. No matter what happens to me, I’ll always be with you – forever” (162). Current popular culture desires for loving relationships to continue into eternity, and historical western thought also believed in continuing bonds. Only relatively recently in historical thought have thinkers suggested that the bereaved should complete the grieving process and sever the bond with the deceased person in order to move on with her life. For example, in his article entitled “Mourning and Melancholia,” Sigmund Freud writes that a bereaved person needs to realize that the loved one no longer exists and remove all attachment from the person in order to accurately sense reality. Freud believes that a sign of the bereaved person rejecting reality is that she turns to “hallucinatory wishful psychosis” (Vickio 161). This thought prevailed until the last couple of decades when psychologists began returning to the notion that forms of attachment with the deceased can be the most healing for the survivor. For

example, grief counselor W. Worden originally believed that mourners needed to withdraw emotional attachment from the deceased person. However, later in his career he reassessed his beliefs and now states, “The challenge facing mourners is to *relocate* – not relinquish – their relationship with the deceased” (163). Another contemporary psychologist who advocates for continuing bonds is V.D. Volkan who writes, “A mourner never altogether forgets the dead person who was so highly valued in life and never totally withdraws his investment in his representation. We can never purge those who have been close to us from our own history except by psychic acts damaging to our own identity” (164). While Worden, Volkan, and countless other mental health professionals contend that bereaved people need to maintain bonds with the deceased, some psychologists still assert that attachment is unhealthy. The public generally does not keep up-to-date on current psychology, so much of the public still holds the idea that continuing bonds are unhealthy. However, the idea that continuing bonds are healthy is beginning to trickle down into society. This mixing of ideas leads into conflicting advice for bereaved people.

Today’s mixed opinions about continuing bonds is reflected in *Next to Normal* through Diana and Dan’s confusion about how to grieve. Diana and Dan are around forty years old which means they lived through the paradigm shift in grief theory. When they were young, many psychologists promoted severing bonds with the deceased to attain closure after grief. However, in present day, the setting of the musical, most psychologists advocate for the bereaved person to foster continuing bonds with her deceased loved one in order to heal. Since their peers also fall within this paradigm shift, the people within Dan and Diana’s social system likely offer conflicting advice about how they should grieve. Dan and Diana are confused as to whether or not they should form a continuing bond with Gabe. People unaware of grief theory’s

resurfacing advice of continuing bonds suggest that Diana ignore Gabe's death and move on with her life, but she cannot because bereaved people need a bond with their deceased loved one. Dan also seems to adopt this idea that a survivor should sever all relations with the deceased person as evidenced by his stoicism. Since Diana's need conflicts with the advice of her peers, she forms a maladapted continuing bond. This is evident in the fact that after seventeen years, Gabe is in an external continuing bond with her rather than an internal continuing bond. The light that she and Gabe seek could be a healthy continuing bond with one another.

In *Next to Normal*, Gabe is in an external continuing bond with his mother, and his father proceeds with his grieving process once he acknowledges Gabe's existence. A bereaved person who has an external continuing bond with a deceased person experiences the deceased person as if he is an agent. Gabe fits this description in *Next to Normal* because he is a character who aged as if he never died. For example, Doctor Madden treats him as an independent agent when he tells Diana, "Let's say he's eighteen now – isn't that when kids move out? Isn't it time to let him go?" (Yorkey 43). Diana struggles "to let him go" because, by this point, he is his own person rather than a memory. Viewers can see this in scenes such as the one where Diana waltzes with Gabe. He tells her, "There's a world out there. / I'll show you just where, / And in time I know you'll see / There's a world where we can be free - / Come with me. / Come with me" (52). Diana experiences Gabe as an external continuing bond throughout the show, and/but Dan acknowledges him as an agent near the end of the musical in the reprise of "I am the One". Gabe repeatedly sings to Dan, "I know you know who I am" (99). Dan tries to ignore him with the lines, "No. . . Can't you just leave me alone? . . . Why didn't you go with her? . . . Let me go. . . . Let me go" (99). The song climaxes with insisting, "But you've always known who I am". Dan finally acknowledges his presence, "Gabe. Gabriel," and Gabe receives the acknowledgement of

their new bond by saying, “Hi, Dad” (100). Viewers could interpret this sequence to mean that Dan is succumbing to Gabe’s influence by being drawn into an external continuing bond with him. However, this is unlikely given the characters’ movement toward grieving throughout the musical and the nature of Dan’s arrested grief. Diana desired to talk about her son’s death but lacked to social system to support her in her grief, thus her continuing bond with Gabe became maladapted into an external continuing bond. Contrastingly, Dan denied his need to grieve his son, thus, to proceed with the grieving process, Dan must first acknowledge his deceased son. For that reason, Dan’s interaction with Gabe in this scene is not him promoting an external continuing bond but rather proceeding out of his arrested grief.

Gabe is in an external continuing bond but desires for his parents to grieve him so that he may transition into an internal continuing bond. Throughout the show, Gabe proclaims his aliveness but also emphasizes that he will leave if his parents grieve him. This is most evident in Gabe’s solo, “I’m Alive”. For example, in the beginning of the song, Gabe explains his nature and his relationship to his parents as, “And I need you / To need me / It’s no surprise - / I’m alive . . . / So alive . . . / I’m alive” (Yorkey 41). Gabe’s aliveness indicates that he is an independent agent who feeds off his connection with his parents. He no longer exists physically, so his existence depends on his bond with his parents. His parents try to ignore their bonds with him because they are maladapted and bring them pain. Gabe sings to them that he will not disappear if they ignore him. He indicates this in the lines, “I’m alive – I’m right behind you. / You say forget, but I remind you. / You can try to hide, you know that I will find you. / ‘Cause if you won’t grieve me / You won’t leave me behind” (43). Gabe explicitly tells his parents that they will be able to transform their relationship with him if they grieve him. After Diana loses her memory from the electroconvulsive therapy, Gabe informs the audience that erasing memories of

him will not make him disappear; his existence is stronger than memory and requires more attention before it will be transformed. He indicates this in the lines, “The memories are gone. / The aftershocks live on. / But with nothing to remember, is there nothing left to grieve?” (76). Gabe suggests that grieving is the only way to make their relationships positive. He sings, “If you try / To deny me / I’ll never die / I’m alive . . . / So alive” (44). He supports his claim not only by his assertions, but also by resiliency throughout the show. For example, the shock therapy erases Diana’s memory, but she can still discern that she is not whole. Dan will not tell her why she feels this way, but he leaves Gabe’s return or permanent disappearance up to fate. He tells Diana, “If the memories are meant to come back . . .they will” (75). The memories go come back because the Goodmans cannot heal and Gabe’s being cannot be released until his parents transition his inner representation from an external continuing bond into an internal continuing bond.

It is plausible for the light at the end of *Next to Normal* to be an internalized continuing bond with Gabe because Brian Yorkey and Tom Kitt created Gabe to urge his parents to address their grief. Many critics struggle to describe Gabe to audiences, but Ben Brantley seems to come closest when he describes Gabe as, “As the teenage son who is both angel and demon to his mother, Mr. Tveit [actor playing Gabe] is contrastingly (and necessarily) as charismatic and ineffable as a figure in a dream, the kind who seems to have the solution to everything until you wake up” (Brantley). Gabe possesses such radically different personality traits because his being is maladapted in an external continuing bond but desires for his parents to grieve him so that everyone will be healthier. Bryan Reesman attempts to illumine this quandary by asking Yorkey and Kitt in an interview, “Was your intention to give the son a devilish presence? He comes off as the villain here” (Reesman 14). Yorkey responds for the pair by saying:

I think he's definitely the antagonist. I think Ben Brantley in his review said he's angel and devil both to his mother. That's really true. The thing about the character of Gabe is that he has a very specific job to do. The song "I'm Alive," which seems like a great, rousing pop song, is laying out why he's there. He's really there to get them to deal with this thing that they're not fully dealing with. Michael and I always said that he haunts the house the way that grief and loss and sadness haunt this house and mental illness haunts this house. This family hasn't totally faced up to that. They're trying to take care of it by dampening it down and keeping a lid on it, and what ultimately happens at the end is that they have to rip themselves apart to start healing. (15)

Gabe haunts the house to get his parents to address their unresolved grief. He is more than a symbol of their unresolved grief; he is an agent stuck in a maladapted, external continuing bond with his parents who can only be released into a healthy continuing bond once they grieve him. His character is a demon because he is stuck in a maladapted bond, but he is an angel when he urges his family to grieve him so that he can become an angel in their “good selves”. All of these changes must occur within the characters, so it is fitting that the light they seek originates within them. While continuing bonds have always existed within people’s psyches’, psychologists have recently emphasized that people should look inside themselves for healing.

The characters’ internal quest for healing reflects their postmodern culture. Psychologists argue that today’s postmodern consciousness has a fragmented subject which is characterized by “‘dissociation’, ‘arbitrariness’ and ‘virtuality’” (Kawai 440). Psychologist Toshio Kawai traces the historical progression of the modern consciousness to postmodern consciousness. The modern consciousness began with historical achievements, such as the Enlightenment, which liberated the individual from “community, nature, and God and resulted in the birth of individual space” (437). After modernism, three events transitioned people into a postmodern consciousness: “The establishment of the observing unique point in perspective, the establishment of absolute cogito and negation of animistic things in Descartes, and the liberation from established church in Luther” (438). During modernity, subjectivity was located in the

group, but it shifted to the individual in post-modernity. The most common psychological disorders during the time of the modern consciousness were anxiety and alienation. People with a post-modern consciousness lack a central point, a unique personality, a partner, a goal, and their object of desire is arbitrary. Psychologists formerly related a dissociated consciousness with psychological problems or enduring conflicts, but now this is the post-modern conception of the Self.

Kawai believes that modern therapy tactics will no longer work on post-modern patients. Patients with a modern consciousness experienced nostalgia for the residue of the reality of the pre-modern world, but post-modern patients have no memories of reality. Kawai suggests that some patients with a post-modern consciousness will not respond to traditional neurotic treatment, so psychologists should try therapy involving “no direct and substantial reality, union on a formal and abstract level, pure self-reflection” (447). Kawai’s closing statement regarding the treatment of one of his patients exemplifies his idea of how to treat psychological disorders in people with a post-modern consciousness: “My patient felt depersonalized, only because she wanted to get out of her world and reach a direct reality that was in truth already over. When she could remain in her world and accept her attitude, there was already a solution. In her own pathology she was already healed” (447). Kawai suggests that in our postmodern society patients with psychological disorders need to look inside themselves for healing.

The postmodern approach to psychotherapy is exemplified in the recovery model. In his article on the retrieval of the self, psychologist Joseph Fardella explains that the recovery model is the latest treatment reform in mental healthcare and emphasizes the client’s role in her recovery. The client is a self-determining agent of change who needs to understand that she is not her symptoms. This movement stresses the importance of language in the mental health

field. For example, the person undergoing treatment is referred to as a 'client' because the term has interactive connotations rather than 'patient' which is associated with passivity. Advocates of this movement believe that the recovery of the self always requires more than just medical protocols of care. They also encourage the client to determine what her path to recovery will entail. Michel Foucault contributes to this new movement with his theories regarding the power of language and power relations. Foucault describes how language and the terms people use determine how an individual perceives her identity and who possesses the power in a given situation. Foucault's view of power allows for the client to have autonomy which means that she can determine how and to what degree she changes. The client feels ownership for her recovery and so is more likely to succeed.

The recovery model suits Diana's postmodern consciousness because it places the responsibility for her healing on herself. Diana's consciousness fits Kawai's definition of lacking a central point, a unique personality, and a goal. For example, when Doctor Madden asks Diana to tell him her history, she responds, "I never know what to say when I have to go over all this. It starts to sound like some story I tell that's about some other person entirely" (Yorkey 39). Because Diana's consciousness is disassociated from herself and not rooted in a central truth outside herself, the modern forms of therapy will be ineffective for her, so she must use a postmodern form of therapy such as the recovery model. The recovery model emphasizes the client as the agent of her change which corresponds with the Bereaved Parents' assertion that the bereaved person is responsible to transition the deceased person's inner representation within herself in order to attain healing. This indicates that Diana's postmodern consciousness will likely respond well to the grieving process as advocated by Bereaved Parents. Instead of seeking the solution to her grief outside of herself, Diana needs to look inside herself to transition Gabe's

inner representation into a healthy continuing bond. Once she does this, Diana will attain normalcy in the sense that she will be healthy. She will never revert back to the woman she was before Gabe was born, but she will be a new person with his inner representation assimilated into her “good self”. In his article, Fardella quotes one “ex-patient” who articulates this idea of healing well:

The goal of the recovery process is not to become normal. The goal is to embrace our human vocation of becoming more deeply, more fully human. The goal is not normalization. The goal is to become the unique, awesome, never to be repeated human being that we are called to be. Martin Heidegger said that to be human means to be a question in search of an answer. Those of us who have been labelled with mental illness are not de facto excused from this most fundamental task of becoming human. (116)

People who experience grief will never return to their state before their loved one passed away, but by taking ownership for their healing, they can become “more fully human”.

Because *Next to Normal* is set in a postmodern context, a healthy continuing bond with Gabe is just one possible interpretation of the light. The text is unclear about what exactly the light is that the family seeks, however, it does describe the light as coming from within the characters. For example, the last lines of the show are, “Day after day . . . / We’ll find the will to find our way, / Knowing that the darkest skies / Will some day see the sun - / When our long night is done . . . / There will be light. / There will be light . . . / When we open up our lives, / Sons and daughters, husbands, wives - / And fight that fight . . . / There will be light” (Yorkey 104). The characters do not know what they are fighting for or what the light will show them, but they trust that, “Won’t anything be better than before?” (74). Throughout the musical, the family tried pharmacology, therapy, illegal drugs, alcohol, success, humanism, ignoring their problems, and the façade of normalcy to cope with their problems. In the spirit of postmodernism, once one solution failed, the family moved on to the next one. They should be pessimistic after so many attempts at healing, but the show ends optimistically because the

family has not surrendered to their circumstances. They sing, “But we go on. / We still go on. / And you find some way to survive. / And you find out you don’t have to be happy at all / To be happy you’re alive” (101). The family is uncertain if continuing with the grieving process to transition Gabe’s inner representation into an internal continuing bond will bring them one step closer to normal, but they are willing to “fight that fight” in hopes that they will eventually find light.

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