

Remembering Practices in the Face of Death

By Lorraine Hedtke MSW, CISW

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When I meet with people who are facing death or are grieving, I am not primarily focusing them on the pain of loss. Nor do I concentrate on helping people complete their unfinished business. I do not assess their stage of acceptance or how much denial they might be experiencing. I do not even want to assist people to accept the "reality" of death.

Rather than inviting forward a belief in death as a finality, I want to promote on-going interaction with those who precede us in death. Instead of letting go of relationships and moving on from our memories, I support practices of actively remembering our loved ones. In this article, I will offer examples of therapeutic questions that incorporate these practices. Using a narrative framework, I encourage the making of connections to traverse the separations between death and life. Case examples provided are drawn from my clinical work in hospice settings, private practice and my teaching about death and dying.

The Story of Loss

The bereavement field has traditionally focused our attention on what has been lost or on the pain of missing and has delineated stages and tasks to describe how grief should manifest. This has guided clinicians, and often lay thinking as well, to think about clients as living within a rigid trajectory of grief. The danger in this is that we can promote iatrogenic injury by entrenching a person in stories of sadness and loss when we expect a person to dwell in emotions like sadness, anger, and denial for a certain period of time in prescribed ways. These beliefs consequently act as unnecessary beacons that permeate the culture and evaluate those who mourn differently as abnormal. "Tell me about missing your spouse," or, "How were you and your loved one able to say goodbye?" or, "How are you doing at accepting the reality of your loss?" are questions that rely on the assumption that these stages are important steps in the recovery from the affliction of grief and potentially can induce harm even though they may appear helpful.

The psychological models that foster this way of thinking assume that if we face our pain and indulge our emotions, we will prevail and move forward to a new and better place - a place adjusted to life without our loved one (Bowbly, 1980, Kubler-Ross 1969; Tatalbaum 1980; Parkes 1972, Worden 1991). In these models, emotional stages and tasks are seen as essential recovery processes which promise a cure from grief when one's individual status is reclaimed. In a culture that prefers that we individuate and stand on our own, the restoration of the individual self as a whole entity is revered as paramount and this has long been reflected in traditional models of bereavement.

Our Relationships Create Us

Recently, there has been an emerging shift in thanatology. A few cutting edge authors have offered challenges to previously understood meanings about death and grief. Klass, Silverman and Nickman's, *Continuing Bonds* (1996) is one such account that stretches the model of individual grief. Robert Neimeyer (1998) and Thomas Attig (2000) have included pivotal work to incorporate meaning making, cultural stories and relational aspects of the dying experience.

The thinking promoted in narrative therapy and social constructionism takes the field of death, dying and bereavement further still. It suggests that we place relationship in the foreground rather than the life of the individual (Gergen 1994). Our families, friends, colleagues and community all participate in the creation of the stories by which we know ourselves and our identity is shaped. In these stories, we construct the membership of our relational world (Gergen, 1994; Cottor & Cottor, 1999). These stories and memberships transcend the physical reality of death. How common is it for us to hear about similar personality traits between our children and our dead grandparents. We look to these legacies to give meaning and richness to our existence.

Therefore, when a person dies, we don't have to assume that their relationships die. The deceased can continue to be thought of as a spouse, a parent, a child, a friend, a co-worker and a community member and as such their "voice" continues to influence our present day choices and actions. There are no endings to these relationships except those that we arbitrarily create. With a narrative lens, I can support this continuation of relationship in story. Recently, a man whose wife's death was only hours away, asked me, "How do I write an end to a love story?" My response was quite simple, "You don't have to." I went on to invite him to promote their love story and connection. My hope is that their relationship will continue to grow over the years to come. The questions are designed to generate and encourage practices of remembering, inclusion and on-going relationship. If their relationship is ongoing then the necessity for him to complete unfinished business and "end their love story" becomes redundant.

How Do You Want To Be Remembered?

As I speak with a dying person and other family members, I am curious about how people wish to be remembered. What stories, strengths and attributes do they want carried forward from their lives? Where might they want others to continue to learn from their lives? It is my desire to find many voices through which the deceased will continue to live. In these questions I am seeking to emphasize an appreciation of continuity rather than an acceptance of finality.

I met with a young woman of fifty this week whose cancer will lead to her physical death very soon. With her family present, we spoke about the stories that will be important for her to have carried forward. I asked about her son's future children. What will she want them knowing about her life and how would she hope to have the lessons of her life guide them? I asked who, besides her son, would tell them these stories. As she was just coming to understand that her physical life was ending (her physician had only told her the day before, "There is nothing more we can do,") these questions invited hope that her connections

would live on. Even though she might only have days left, I intentionally focused on the hopefulness of the future and the reality that she would not be forgotten.

What Is Different?

Narrative therapy supports the deconstruction of stories that people get stuck in and the construction of stories that are more helpful. I work with a strong preference to support people in taking up positions of agency in the process of choosing and promoting their own legacies.

We all make sense out of our lives through stories and act in accordance with them. Often, the stories develop a life of their own and drag us along in the narrative that has been produced over and over again. As I am talking with this dying woman, it might be easy to discuss "ain't it awful" stories about death and have this be the dominant theme of her dying. I am looking however, to effectively promote hope for her and her family in a situation where time is of the essence. Constructing new stories in the presence of her family provides alternatives to the story of despair about her death.

These ways of working are strong departures from traditional methods. The questions that I use to promote remembering can be useful when family members are present. They are also highly effective when some family members are not present through death or estrangement. If our stories are stronger than our biology, then narrative themes and plots play forth often whether we are present or not.

When I met with a father who had struggled with depression throughout his life, I assumed that the story of him as a depressed person would serve little ongoing value to his son. Therefore I asked him what he would hope his estranged son would know about how he has stood up to the voice of depression. There is always another story that can be chosen and brought forward. Before he died I was concerned to unearth stories that would promote agency for both of them. I asked him what was the story that his son did not know about him that would help guide his son when he too faced challenges? How had the father been courageous in facing these times when depression had tried to get the best of him? How might he hope that his son would describe his father as he faced what lay ahead with his illness?

These questions were invitations for this father to reflect upon his own life and on his continuing relationship with his son. Embedded within the questions are assumptions that defy finality or letting go. I am even inviting the father to consider that, despite his imminent death, he will continue to teach and guide his son. His son can have his father's stories, hopes and words available to him throughout his life, as can his children and even their children. I want the father's voice of strength to be available for his son and the nuggets of the father's wisdom to grow into larger narratives that the young son will have access to in the years to come. As the stories are embellished over the years, such narratives might even outgrow the confines of the reality of his father's life and the difficult relationship between this father and son.

Which Memories Do You Want Emphasized in the Coming Years?

Recently in a conversation with a 62-year-old gentleman, we were discussing his upcoming death in the presence of his sister. We spoke about what he hoped she would recall about his life after he was no longer physically here. He responded by speaking about the caliber of their relationship. "I hope she will recall the good parts." "What parts are you hoping that she will define as the 'good parts'?" I wondered.

He elaborated about the strength of their love over the years and how this sustained him through hardships. This was particularly true for him when he served in the military and was stationed twice in the Viet Nam war. He tearfully recalled how critical it had been to have her letters remind him of the sane life he could return to after the fighting. They had not previously discussed the meaning of this and I knew we were talking about very important stories that could become a powerful place of remembering for them. "If you were able to write a letter a few years from now, what would you be saying to encourage your sister if she were facing hardship?", I asked. "I want her to trust that things will work out for the best."

In this comment he opened up a new meaning for his sister that could outlive his death. We sought to strengthen and affirm the legacy embodied in these words. They contained an important meaning for his sister that she could not only rely on to guide her, but also continue to speak about with her children and his children and even with people who had never even had the opportunity to know this man while he was alive. She had the chance to hear her brother's preferences about how he wanted their relationship characterized. She also found peace in her brother's answers, as she was not thinking that he would live on following his death and had been feeling shaken by this belief.

Conclusions and New Beginnings

Inviting practices of remembering in the face of death, whenever possible, opens new dimensions to a field that has had a proclivity to discuss the "bad" aspects of death and dying. Narrative therapy invites those in thanatology to revise their approach to include themes of strength, resilience, hopefulness, appreciation and on-going connections.

My approach to working and questions are designed to invite ongoing remembering practices. They are not designed to evoke sadness or loss. They are not intended to bring forth missing of the future events between the dying person and their loved ones. It is my hope that this way of working with death and dying brings comforting reminders that our lives are not inconsequential. To know that they will not be forgotten is a source of peace for the dying as well as for the living. The significance of a person's life continues even if the person is not around as a physical reminder. How wonderful to know we continue to teach and have a voice even after death! Moreover we can have agency and determination in how we die and others can gain from this. Death does not have to be a solitary act of futility without benefit to those around us. As they face their own or their loved ones' death, it is my experience that many people find these ideas uplifting and encouraging.

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About the Author

Lorraine Hedtke has been a social worker private practice since 1986 and consults with hospices throughout the country. She teaches narrative family therapy and about death and dying nationally and internationally.