

GROWING OUR LOVE STORIES AFTER DEATH
Insight Magazine, Australia

Philip Bradbury talks to Lorraine Hedtke about how to retain our loved ones in our lives after they have died.

Philip: *You are challenging the popular belief that we must "let go" and forget those who have died. Why do you consider this practice to be disempowering?*

Lorraine: I start with the premise that we don't want to be forgotten after we die. Encouraging people to let go supports a devaluing of human life and relationship that grew out of individualistic preferences of western European psychology. I haven't found this to be helpful practice. In fact, I have found the opposite, that to "let go" of the memory or to distance ourselves from our deceased loved one is injurious. To cut ourselves off from these connections goes against our grain and in effect, it buries the relationship at the time we bury the body, doesn't it? The physical death does not end the relationship. Supporting practices that are commonly encouraged in bereavement models like "letting go" severs us from the stories and love we have built in our connections.

Philip: *What would you suggest as a better alternative to "letting go" when dealing with death?*

Lorraine: In my clinical work, I strongly encourage people to build upon the relationships they have with their deceased loved one. I want them to continue to grow the love stories and foster connections with their deceased spouse, child, parent, friend or sibling, for example. I encourage people to continue to maintain and even enhance connections through remembering practices and rituals. I find that some of these practices feel much more like a common sense approach that affirms the fostering of a loving and positive story regarding relationship.

Philip: *Can you give an example, a story, to explain what you're talking about here, please.*

Lorraine: I am working with a family right now where the beloved grandfather is dying. He has lived in the family home for the past ten years and has played a critical role in the raising of the two grandchildren who are 7 and 12 years old. As we spoke, the kids told me about the endless times they will recall over the years that they loved about being with their grandpa -when he traveled with them, when he made them laugh, when he bribed them with candy, when he comforted them. I asked them about how they might introduce new friends over the years to their grandpa long after he is dead. What might they want others to know about what they have gained from this connection?

We spoke about how unusual it is to live with such a close relationship with a

grandparent and how fortunate they were. The elder daughter spoke about how she wanted to be able to share these stories with her grandfather before he died. We came up with some suggestions how the kids could teach the parents what it might mean to remember and let the grandfather hear all the wonderful stories of "I remember when.."

This is very different from speaking only about how sad they are that their granddad is about to die. This way of thinking allows the good stories to come forth, even in the face of something very trying like death, and opens layer upon layer of opportunities for telling and retelling of stories. With each retelling, the story can grow more rich in description and beget additional stories and details about the positive impact of this man's life.

You see how this is different from "letting go"? To encourage these grandchildren to feel sad and move on would be a terrible waste of a beautiful connection they share with their grandfather. It would be a tragic waste of all his stories and lessons and moments of compassion that he has hoped to impart to his children and their children.

***Philip:** You talk of people living on in our lives after they have died. How does this idea work for people who do not believe in life after death?*

Lorraine: Because I base my work in narrative -that being the belief that we live our lives through stories --these are practices that can transcend religion. I have found this way of thinking to be useful for deeply religious people as well as for people who describe themselves as a-spiritualistic. Either way it is comforting to know that our lives have mattered and our stories will continue on having important meaning for those who are still living. If our stories are indeed much stronger than our biology, then there is most certainly an afterlife here on earth. I'll get back to you about other forms of afterlife later.

***Philip:** What are some things we can do to make our deaths more "healthy" for those left behind after us?*

Lorraine: Tell people about how you want to be remembered. Tell them how you want to have your stories tended to after you are gone. Just like getting our legal affairs in order before we die, we can will our stories and our many legacies on following our death as well.

***Philip:** What are some things we can do to make our lives more "healthy", following the death of a loved one?*

Lorraine: Like with our own dying, I think it is important to think about how our loved ones want to be remembered. Which stories do we want told and how can we grow these stories? I also encourage people to actively keep their loved ones memory and voice present. Too often others want to silence that voice, by

encouraging people to "move on" or keep busy and not talk about the person who has died. Keep them present in all that you do. Ask others about them. For example, Who knows things about our loved ones that we don't know? It is one of the things I enjoy about funerals -that often we get to know new aspects and stories about a person through the sharings.

***Philip:** You work a lot in the medical system (hospitals, hospices etc.) where the focus is on healing or sewing things up -physically or emotionally. How do they treat your different views?*

Lorraine: Yes, I have worked for years in medical hospitals. I often wonder when I speak about the importance of developing ongoing relationships with our dead loved ones, if the doctors and medical personnel think I am batty. They have been known to look at me like I am speaking a foreign language at times and I imagine that I am. The medical system is very efficient at curing (or attempting to do so) and then moving on as if nothing was ever out of place. It is not surprising that our current models of grief and bereavement were born out of such ways of thinking.

***Philip:** What changes have you seen in the medical system since you have been working there?*

Lorraine: Although I lecture and consult internationally, I primarily work in the US. There has been so many changes in health care that have not advantaged health care consumers with the advent of health maintenance organizations. I see this impacting too more and more on international markets where commerce is dictating practical matters of medicine. It is a poor fit that can breed alarming results.

***Philip:** You obviously have a huge passion for your work. What changes would you like to see in our society when it comes to death?*

Lorraine: Thank you. I do love the work that I do. I hope that eventually those who go around talking to their dead husbands or wives won't be thought of as odd, or worse. Many indigenous cultures throughout the world already act in ways that are not discontinuing their connections to their deceased ancestors. I hope that we can see more of these practices influencing our patterns of interactions.