

# The origami of remembering

by

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*When so much of work in the realm of grief has focused on 'letting go' and 'saying goodbye' to those who have died, the ideas in this paper offer an alternative path. When working with people who are living with grief, finding ways to honour and 'keep alive' the relationship with the person who has died can be sustaining and hopeful. In this paper, Lorraine introduces the metaphor of 'origami of remembering', using it to describe the process of folding and re-folding the stories of people's lives and how they are linked to those who have passed away.*

Keywords: *grief, dying, re-remembering conversations*

In the field of death and grief, we are at a turning point. No longer can we comfortably use the metaphors that were offered through a modernist paradigm. It no longer makes sense to see us as distant from those who have died or as having gone through a series of tasks or stages to achieve a utopian-like peace without them. As practitioners, and as people, we crave a new way of making sense out of death and grief.

When I am speaking with a person who is living with grief, I assume that keeping a precious connection alive is more sustaining than encouraging a person to 'move on' from their loved one who has died. This practice can be a resource for strength, resiliency, love and hope for those still living. Barbara Wingard (2001) beautifully explains this in this fashion:

*Finding ways to bring people with us, those who are no longer living, can make a big difference in people's lives.*

*When we reconnect with those we have lost, and the memories we have forgotten, then we become stronger. When we see ourselves through the loving eyes of those who have cared for us our lives are easier to live (p.43).*

This approach to death offers us the possibility to continue to have access to stories, connections, love and meaning. Regardless of death, a person we love who dies can continue to be part of our membership club in this new way of thinking. Their stories about us can be affirmed. Their views of us can contribute to our preferred stories about ourselves.

Much of my work with people who are dying and their loved ones has been influenced Myerhoff's (1978, 1980, 1982, 1986) concepts of 're-remembering' and 'membership'. This idea was then introduced to narrative therapy by Michael White (1989, 1995, 1997) and has since been elaborated by others, including Russell & Carey, (2002), and Hedtke & Winslade (in press). In short, these metaphors give credence

to the relationship, rather than to the individual, as the source of meaning and identity in our lives. According to White (1997):

*The image of membered lives brings into play the metaphor of a 'club' – a 'club' of life is evoked. This metaphor opens up options for the exploration of how a person's club of life is membered – of how this club of life is constituted through its membership, and how the membership of this club is arranged in terms of rank or status. (p.22)*

These relationships and meanings continue to take shape after a person has died.

This view of how we create meaning, and identity, is a shift from what has previously been thought in psychology. Whereas identity was previously constructed as an individual essentialised journey, postmodern thought views identity as co-constructed through our 'membership clubs'. Ken Gergen states: *The constructionist view does not consider identity... as an achievement of mind, but rather, of relationship* (1994). Thus, when one person dies, their identity and membership club continues on. Identity can, and does, continue to take shape and undergo revision following death.

## Origami

Lately, I have come to think of the re-introduction and ongoing re-inclusion of a person's membership following their death, as a deliberate craft similar to origami. The ancient Japanese art of folding paper has fascinated me since childhood.<sup>2</sup> I never quite mastered anything more complex than the simple making of a cup out of glossy paper squares, but nevertheless, I delighted in testing the waterproof capability of my work. The skill and patience that was required to fold, unfold and refold the paper to construct dragons or butterflies or horses was beyond my childhood grasp.

Now, as I speak with people after their loved one has died, I recall the beauty of the folding metaphor. I like to think of each person's life as having the posthumous potential to become an elaborate folded work of art. With each retelling of the stories of someone's life, especially when these are being told to a new person – someone who never met the deceased – it is as if the deceased person's stories are being folded into seams and creases that give contour and texture to

the lives of the living. As the stories of the deceased continue to influence our lives in the present, it is as if our folding and unfolding brings the person into three-dimensional life. The stories that are folded into being may indeed hold water. They may even do more than this – they may make the lives of the living worth living.

One of the advantages of the origami metaphor is that it allows a dimensional appreciation of personal identity without recourse to the traditional 'depth' metaphors that have been popular for some time in psychological theory. Instead of assuming hidden essential depths to the individual psyche, the folding metaphor evokes the idea that layers of experience and their meanings are built up through processes of social construction. As events and experiences are remembered, each conversation becomes a new fold and adds an extra layer of meaning.

Our identities take shape as we build community throughout our lives and the process can continue long after death. The inclusion of those who are deceased in our present communities creates certain folds that give structure and meaning to our lives. It is this process of folding relationship back on itself to thicken the meanings of our lives that this brief article addresses.

By way of example, I would like to share a conversation that took place during a workshop at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference that took place in Liverpool, UK, in July 2003. The conversation is with Polly Kaiser, a psychologist who lives and works in the Northwest of England, who volunteered to introduce the group to someone who had died.<sup>3</sup>

## Re-membering Ollie<sup>4</sup>

*Lorraine:* Polly, can you tell us who you wanted to speak about?

*Polly:* My paternal grandmother. Her name was Ollie.

*Lorraine:* So who was Ollie to you before she died?

*Polly:* Well, she was my father's mother. She was also a twin, a first-born twin. And she had two sons herself and the first was my father. She lived in Detroit. And she was a feeder – she enjoyed feeding people, offering hospitality ... and she was very strong ...

*Lorraine:* You mean strong as in muscular?

*Polly:* Yeah. But also in character. She was a very active person. Around the time of the second world war she divorced my grandfather and moved to the desert in Arizona with two kids.

*Lorraine:* What was it you enjoyed about her?

*Polly:* Well ... she was there for us ... She had a concern for people and this showed in the ways she would feed us, she took us shopping, bought me clothes. I remember that she despaired of ever getting me to wear a dress!

*Lorraine:* When she expressed her concern for you, how would she show it?

*Polly:* She would tell us directly.

*Lorraine:* When did Ollie die?

*Polly:* In November 1996. I remember this specifically because she died just before my birthday. We scattered her ashes on my birthday and every year I remember her when my birthday comes around.

*Lorraine:* What did that mean for you that Ollie died close to your birthday?

*Polly:* Every birthday I remember her. Also, the following February after she died, I became pregnant; it was a long-awaited child and a difficult pregnancy. I very much had the sense through my pregnancy that Ollie was looking after me; that both my grandmothers were with me. Some people said to me that maybe Ollie was being reincarnated as my child. I didn't care much for that idea, but I did have a sense of her presence.

*Lorraine:* Since your baby was born, how has Ollie continued to be a presence?

*Polly:* My daughter's middle name is Olivia, so I've incorporated Ollie in my daughter's name. My husband met Ollie and I'm glad about that. We speak about her sometimes. I had another grandmother who was fun-loving. I have inherited things from both of them, but sometimes my husband says to me that he would like to see more of Ollie in me because she was the active one who got things done!

With these types of questions, I want to know about the relationship between Ollie and Polly. I want to know more than names and dates. The questions are about establishing

what type of membership they represented in each other's lives and how this has changed over the years since death. There is an inherent assumption in the questions that relationship continues after death, and that the shared experiences of the past can continue to be folded into life.

When we inquire in this fashion, we create an origami of relationship and we intentionally place the folds in locations that improve connections and enable increased agency for the people involved. Certain folds, like Polly's naming her daughter Phoebe Olivia, create the potential for new meanings that can shape identity for Polly, and young Phoebe, as well as influence how Ollie's life continues to be storied. These folds are not haphazardly placed; they are chosen to shape and define connection. However, often we create these folds in our day-to-day lives with little reflection. During re-remembering conversations, we have the opportunity to highlight particular memberships and decisions around particular memberships. Doing so often provides opportunities for the creation of further folds through which the relationships between those living and those who have died can be strengthened.

Certain actions can become building blocks for new identities and for introducing members of our club of life to each other. In Polly's story, young Olivia never knew her great-grandmother during her life. Yet, through Polly's re-remembering, young Olivia may come to know of their shared sparks and strength. Young Olivia may even find that her great-grandmother's voice and wisdom become part of her own resources as she faces challenges in her life over the years.

Such connections can be constructed and folded into shape in purposeful conversations, even long after someone has died. Descriptions of identity links can be sought out in conversations in order to further develop the 'origami of relationship'. The seeking out of intergenerational connection, assumes that our loved one's membership will continue to have meaning for years to come, as Polly explains:

*Lorraine:* Polly, your daughter, how has she come to know her namesake?

*Polly:* She knows her as GG – she knows her pictures, she knows some of her stories, perhaps not as well as I would like.

*Lorraine:* Are there things about Ollie that you would like your daughter to have?

*Polly:* Yes and I think she's got some of them. She's very determined for example.

*Lorraine:* What would Ollie say about her great-granddaughter's determination?

*Polly:* I think she would like it. I had a sense of Ollie as having survived different things. Going to the desert in the wartime with two young children wasn't easy.

*Lorraine:* So if your daughter faces life challenges, what would you like her to know about her grandmother's ability to rise to them?

*Polly:* I hope she will have her strength to see her through.

When we fold origami structures through the generations there can be a wealth of stories to draw upon. Here we see how a trait such as 'determination' connects Ollie with her great granddaughter. This deliberate fold can serve to strengthen and enhance Phoebe's determination. By placing 'determination' into a storyline that links generations it is possible that this will alter the young Olivia's relationship to it. It may even become a celebrated resource that she can call upon when she is older.

Telling and re-telling these stories is not simply idle chatter to fill one's mind and thoughts until grief subsides. Rather, these conversations intentionally invoke meaningful aspects of life that can be linked together in ways that shape further actions and understandings. According to Myerhoff (1982):

*To signify this special type of recollection, the term 're-membering' may be used, calling attention to the reaggregation of members, the figures who belong to one's life story, one's prior selves, as well as significant others who are part of the story. Re-membering then, is a purposive, significant unification, quite different from the passive, continuous fragmentary flickerings of images and feelings that accompany other activities in the normal flow of consciousness. (p.111)*

The practice of re-membering is not about reminiscing over the past, nor is it only about the 'dead'. As we see with Polly, her daughter and her grandmother, it is very much about the vibrancy of the present.

We might look to maintain conversations between the deceased and the living person, perhaps in forms that are different from when they were alive, but conversations

nonetheless. We might encourage the 'bereaved' to seek advice, guidance, strength and comfort from the stories of the deceased. The deceased person's membership can continue to enliven our own 'club of life'.

*Lorraine:* What is it like talking about her?

*Polly:* It's quite moving. It feels like she's here now.

*Lorraine:* What would you hope that other people in this room who are listening would take away from hearing your stories of Ollie?

*Polly:* I hope that they will remember her as a strong caring woman, determinedly caring for her family. It's funny, I've just remembered something else. It was when my brother took me to see her house. I just remember seeing her house and having a sense of her as the centrepiece of the family ...

## Links to others

Through re-membering practices, we foster relationships. A key aspect of this involves ensuring that an audience is found to affirm and appreciate the particular relationship that is being re-membered. A respectful audience can assist to keep relationships alive and to honour the aspects of a relationship that are meaningful to us. This process increases choices – choices about how we view ourselves and about how we maintain connection with those who have died. With the assistance of an audience, our preferred identities can be highlighted, rehearsed and brought forward.

As I sit with people following the death of their loved one, I want to know about who else tends the stories of the deceased. Who knew him or her in life and what has their connection been? If a person's partner has recently died, I might enquire about a mutual friend that they knew. I might ask questions about what the person who died meant to both of them, about how the shared membership took form. I would seek out stories of how the memberships may have changed over the years in meaning. I might too, be interested in knowing about who else this spouse might introduce his/her beloved to in the future, and how this introduction might take place. With each step along the way, we would take time to value and appreciate the folds being created in our conversations and in their daily lives. With each new fold, we can see the impact of the introduction and renewal of

certain memberships. With each fold, we can view the renewed influence of the deceased's membership.

This fashion of speaking with, and about, those who have died, however, is not a one-way street. It does not only benefit the storyteller. In creating an audience, or an outsider-witness group, to the telling of relationship stories, we, as witnesses, are touched, inspired and changed. Our lives and relationships are enhanced through the act of becoming an audience to relationships that otherwise might go unnoticed. We may, for example, find moments of inspiration in hearing of another's love story that touches and benefits the love stories we live out in our daily lives.

Again, to reference Myerhoff (1980):

*A story told aloud ... is of course more than a text. It is an event. When it is done properly, the listener is more than a mere passive receiver or validator, he [or she] is changed.* (p.27)

As audience members, we become inextricably bound to the storyteller, as they are to us. As outsider-witnesses, we share in the re-remembering. We are touched and reinvigorated by the stories of the deceased person's life. We are able to take up the opportunity of a new membership drive as we place the person's membership card in our wallets in loving and kind ways.

In Liverpool, when I asked how people in the audience were moved by meeting Polly's grandmother, there were many lovely comments of which these are only a few:

- *I had a real sense of her.*
- *I thought of my own grandmother as you talked and the qualities that she had that I might have forgotten about. I found myself remembering them.*
- *I was thinking of the year 1945 and what it was like to be a woman at that time.*
- *Your story also made me think of my grandmother whose husband was in a psychiatric hospital and in a way she had to have perseverance during a time when women were not regarded as strong.*

As audience members, we too might have experiences of increasing agency or choice and might find ourselves honouring our preferred stories of identity. We are not only benefactor(s) of hearing a good story, but can share in the re-remembering by being moved or enlivened through coming to

know the person who has died. The process of folding the story to tell it back to the teller enhances the importance of the original relationship. And so these stories are folded – backwards and forwards – with each step along the way, creating new shapes and possibilities. With each crease we more richly describe preferred stories of identity and perhaps create entirely new shapes. Every re-telling places new folds in the multi-dimensional 'origami of identity', and in doing so constructs, celebrates and creates new clubs of life.

Each storytelling, re-telling and refolding, acts as a definitional ceremony (White 1997; Russell 2002; Russell & Carey 2002). Through the recounting of a person's life, we actively participate in defining their (or our collaborative) preferred identities. We ceremonially mark the creases and shape the folds that create and define our 'identity origami'. Definitional ceremonies are not only grand large scale rituals that might be performed around a memorial service, or as a conversation at the narrative therapist's office. Small scale definitional ceremonies also occur in day-to-day moments when we notice and bring to life the stories of our deceased loved ones. Whenever we share a small sentence or two of recollection and remembrance, whether it is with a family member, a co-worker, a neighbour or a friend, we are continuing to define and celebrate our relationships with those who have died and to add subtle new folds to the shapes of our identities.

## Fame

In this fashion, we all are simultaneously ordinary and famous. Fame does not need to belong exclusively to the movie stars and the affluent. This assumption usurps the importance of relational identity and re-remembering practices. If we think of fame as the product of bringing what is unique about the identity of a person alive in other people's consciousness, then even so-called 'ordinary' lives can achieve fame. Fame, in this sense, is an experience of identity that comes from being known and recognised by others. We are all famous to those who love us.

This rendition of fame assumes we all have something unique to contribute to the meaning of life. As news of a person's unique story spreads, others' lives become linked around certain themes. As Polly showed us, Ollie's 'fame' continues to live and was proving significant in the lives of an audience in Liverpool. Re-remembering practices

enhance the significance of such audiences and we all have the possibility, like Ollie, of being famous in the eyes of those we might meet long after we have died.

## Notes

1. Lorraine Hedtke can be contacted c/o her website: [www.rememberingpractices.com](http://www.rememberingpractices.com)
2. Joseph Wu, an Origami master, defined this folding by saying: *Origami is a form of visual/sculptural representation that is defined primarily by the folding of the medium* (usually paper) (1999).
3. This conversation is recorded here with Polly's permission. To ensure accuracy of everyone's membership, Polly reviewed this article prior to publication.
4. I'd like to acknowledge John Winslade's efficient transcription of the interview.

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