TRAFFICKING IN THE WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES

This article begins on a Los Angeles freeway, the 91 headed west, to be exact. Traffic has become a readily available metaphor as we build our new life here in Southern California. In the idle drive time, while we await movement from the slow moving cars in front, we can speculate on the stories that are happening in all these vehicles. Or, we can read the monikers on California licence plates and make up fanciful stories about their aetiology. Occasionally, in a fit of defiance of the dominant discourse and the LA freeway system, we explore the merits of Narrative theory and practice.

Today we want to explore further the ramifications of the subjunctive mood and mode of thinking about possibilities that it enables. We are interested in its usefulness for the purpose of conducting conversations about death, grief and bereavement. Some things can be more easily talked about in the subjunctive than in the indicative mood after a person has died. How are conversations with the bereaved different when we speak imaginatively in the 'as if ...' frame that would be impossible within the harshness of a realist indicative way of speaking? What aspects of relationship are affirmed and strengthened when we speak hypothetically? Could possibility open doors (or perhaps move unyielding traffic) to a more livable reality when we enlist a subjunctive auxiliary verb or two? This article will explore these questions.

Remembering the Subjunctive

The Oxford English Dictionary (2nd Edn, 1989) describes the subjunctive as,

'... employed to denote an action or a state as conceived (and not as fact) and therefore used to express a wish, command, exhortation or a contingent, hypothetical or prospective event' (Vol XVII, p35). It is the way we speak when we are talking (trafficking) in possibilities rather than actualities. In English, it is usually signalled by shifts in the use of auxiliary verbs such as 'would' and 'were' or in the use of unusual conjugations of the verb 'to be' or 'to have'. Here are some examples (subjunctive verbs italicized).

- *Had* we taken the other freeway, we would be there now.
- If it *were* not for all this traffic, this would be the quickest route.
- If we *were* not to make the airport in time, we would have to pay extra for rebooking the flight.
- If it *please* the court, I represent the defendant with regard to this charge of alleged traffic violation.
- What *might* it be like to live in LA if there was a good train system?
- *Be* that as it may, we are still stuck in traffic.

The subjunctive has in recent decades received a bad press. W Somerset Maugham announced in 1949 that, 'The subjunctive mood is in its death throes, and the best thing to do is to put it out of its misery as soon as possible,' (Maugham, 1949, p323). He has been joined by many other commentators and grammarians. But the grammatical traffic is not all going in one direction. There is also a counter-story. The subjunctive has been identified by a number of recent writers as the virtual zone where we envisage and entertain possibilities, which may later be realised. It is where we suspend realistic perspectives and

say to each other, 'Suppose ...' It has therefore been referenced by anthropologists such as Victor Turner (1986) as the liminal zone where people make changes during rites of passage. Jerome Bruner (1986) introduced the subjunctive into his account of narrative psychology. He argues that the 'subjunctivizing' of reality is necessary for the process of constructing narrative accounts of the events of our lives. Perhaps he too was caught in a traffic jam when he wrote:

To be in the subjunctive mode is, then, to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties. (p26)

Mikhail Epstein (2001) proposes a central role for the subjunctive in the 'philosophy of the possible'. The subjunctive mode of thought is necessary for his proposed project of 'possibilising reality' and Epstein finds it, far from dying out, proliferating everywhere. It is evidenced in virtual thinking of all kinds in the modern world, including the growth in insurance policies, in credit ratings, in computer modelling, in futures markets, in the conduct of the Cold War. Even the growth in terrorism owes much of its effect to its subjunctive threat. In Narrative therapy Michael White and David Epston (1990) have drawn explicitly from Turner and Bruner in extrapolating the therapeutic value of the subjunctive mood.

The narrative mode of thought, on the other hand, is characterized by good stories that gain credence through their lifelikeness. They are not concerned with procedures and conventions for the generation of abstract and general theories, but with the particulars of experience. They do not establish universal truth conditions but a connectedness of events across time. The narrative mode leads, not to certainties, but to varying perspectives. In this world of narrative, the subjunctive mood prevails rather than the indicative mood. (p78)

Here, we are most concerned with the value of thinking in terms of the subjunctive in the domain of remembering conversations with those who are struggling to maintain a sense of relationship with their deceased loved ones.

How the Subjunctive Revitalizes Our Stories of the Dead

In typical modern texts and practices, bereavement has often been handled as if it was an illness not unlike the common cold. Psychological models have developed for mapping the essential path to recovery through the experience of grief. The maps specify a definitive path that the process might take from initial recognition and symptom management to eventual recuperation and recovery. The psychological discourse that has shaped the way problems are conceptualized, and then intervened in, has impacted the tenor of grief counselling. Conversations are geared towards recognition of feelings of loss and sadness, managing lifestyle changes, and accepting the reality of death. In short, they are conversations that celebrate the realist assumption of the indicative mood. The conversational (or therapeutic) direction culminates in the bereaved person moving on with their lives and readjusting to a life without the deceased person (Worden, 1982/1991).

Our focus is on a different set of possibilities. They are grounded in the idea of re-membering, that is, in deliberately seeking to explore and to renew the possibilities for the deceased person's ongoing membership in the club of life of the bereaved, even after death has removed their physical presence. This ongoing membership is necessarily subjunctive. It takes place in imaginative work done in the minds of bereaved persons and in their conversations with others. This shift can create places of hope through which a sense of relationship can survive the physical death. In the subjunctive, we are allowed the flexibility of continuing to be in love with a deceased spouse, of growing with a child who has died, and of drawing upon the teachings of a parent or grandparent as we face life challenges. When we only live in the reality of the indicative mood, these precious possibilities are buried alongside the coffin.

Re-membering is not primarily about reminiscence or nostalgia. Nor is it a solitary act of wistfully reflecting on past connections. When we live in the world of possibility, we are building a future from our imagined as well as our real past. The

subjunctive allows us to move between what was, what could have been and what will be with a snap of verb conjugation. It affords us further chances to make right the relationship that went astray or to continue to celebrate the birthday of a long dead parent. The subjunctive defies the modernist emphasis on what is hard and real and instead asks what can be made real if we dwell a little in the land of as if ... It is about exploring the ways in which a relationship with a dead loved one can be re-invigorated in the virtual world of liminality where we can speak about what 'might be' as well as about what 'is'. In this sense, it is less about accepting reality and more about creating reality and this constructed reality becomes a resource for strength, resiliency, love and hope for those still living. Barbara Wingard (2001) explains it 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 (p43).

While we want to be open to all possibilities, the process of re-membering is clearly a selective one. It may invoke bad memories. But it also allows for the deliberate editing of what we re-member. The use of the subjunctive allows us to edit out some problematic stories while editing in preferred stories. As Barbara Wingard suggests, we want to be alert to open stories that bring strength and make lives easier rather than accentuating duress. Here are some examples of the kinds of questions that we might ask in the course of therapeutic conversation that can open up the subjunctive mode of thinking with persons who are bereaved.

- What might it mean to your loved one to hear you say these things about her?
- What difference would it make to him to know that you were holding onto that legacy?
- What would she say about the work that you are doing now?
- What would it mean for his life that this honouring of his people is being given this new shape?

None of these are 'realistic' questions. They do not reference any real memories. Rather, they are efforts to update the story of a person's life after they have died in present day terms. They introduce the voice of the deceased in conversations where they can participate only through the ventriloquism of those who re-member them. In this sense, they emphasise ongoing membership even after death. But it is a form of membership only available to them if those who re-member them are prepared to dwell sometimes in the subjunctive mode of thought and edit into existence the aspects that are the most accessible, affirmative and strengthening.

Membership

Subjunctive possibility flows more easily when we begin our conversations with dying and grieving persons from the contextual metaphor of membership. Barbara Myerhoff's (1978, 1980, 1982, 1986) concepts of 'remembering' and 'membership' served as a porthole into the legacy of immortal stories and meaning of a person's life. This idea of membership was picked up and mined for therapeutic value by Michael White (1989, 1995, 1997) and has since been elaborated by others, including Russell & Carey (2002), and Hedtke & Winslade (2004). In short, membership gives 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. (p22)

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 essentialized 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. These important connections and constructions are sewn together by the subjunctive verbs of possibility. We find many places where remembering the connection to a person after death is valued in literature and film.

'My Architect'

In order to illustrate some of the possibilities that can emerge from re-membering conversation we would like to refer to a documentary movie. It is a movie that is itself a detailed example of a re-membering exercise and is useful viewing for those interested in exploring the dimensions and possibilities of re-membering.

POSSIBILITIES

In *My Architect, A Son's Journey*, Nathaniel Kahn sets out to discover who his father was before his death and what meaning learning about his father might hold for him. The movie starts with Nathaniel reading his father's obituary from 1974. It mentions that the elder Kahn is a newsworthy architect with an international reputation and he is survived by his wife and their one daughter, but no mention is made of Louis Kahn's other two 'illegitimate' families. Nathaniel Kahn is the offspring of one of these disenfranchised families and he is only eleven when his father dies. The obituary, in effect, writes Nathaniel out of the visible membership of his father's life. Nathaniel explains as a way of contextualizing his journey that he was 'haunted' by his father's death as well as driven by a desire to understand the man whom he did not know well. 'For years, I struggled to be satisfied with the little piece of my father's life I'd been allowed to see. But it wasn't enough. I needed to know him. I needed to find out who he really was. So I set out to see his buildings and to find whatever was left of him out there. It would take me to the other side of the world, looking for the man who left me with so many questions'.

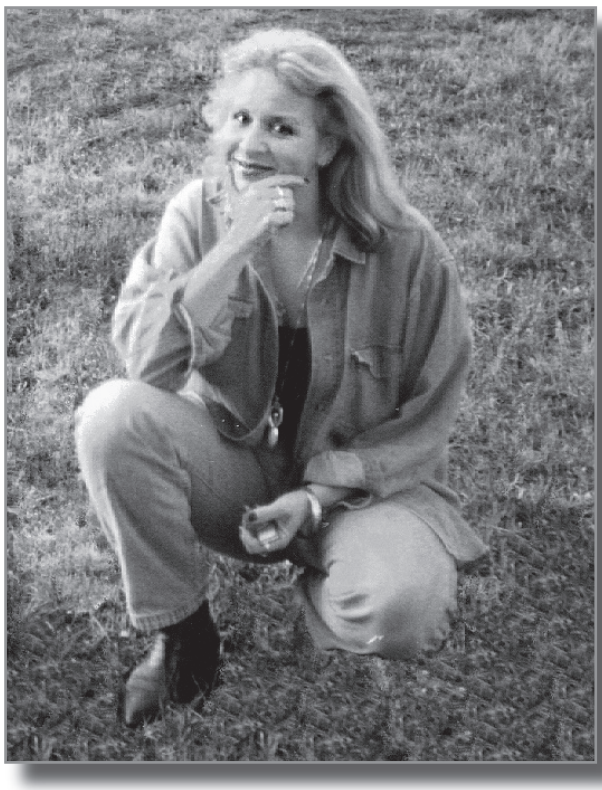
Twenty-five years after Lou's death, Nathaniel embarks on a remembering journey to discover who his father was and what his memory might mean to himself now. The membership that had been cancelled in the negative meaning of having a child outside of marriage needed restoration. Nathaniel had to breathe life back into his father and to legitimate the place he held in Nathaniel's life. Throughout the documentary, Lou is introduced to us through the embracing of the subjunctive form. We meet Lou through the innovative ideas in his architecture. Nathaniel interviews many people who knew his father – former colleagues, cab drivers who drove him, his two sisters, both from different families, aunts, and the people who live and work in the buildings his father designed. He even talks with the stranger who was with his father when he died of a heart attack in a bathroom at a busy New York train station. We see Lou's membership and where it lives on. As his father was a public identity, Kahn has access to old film footage and newspapers clippings, letters he had written to others.

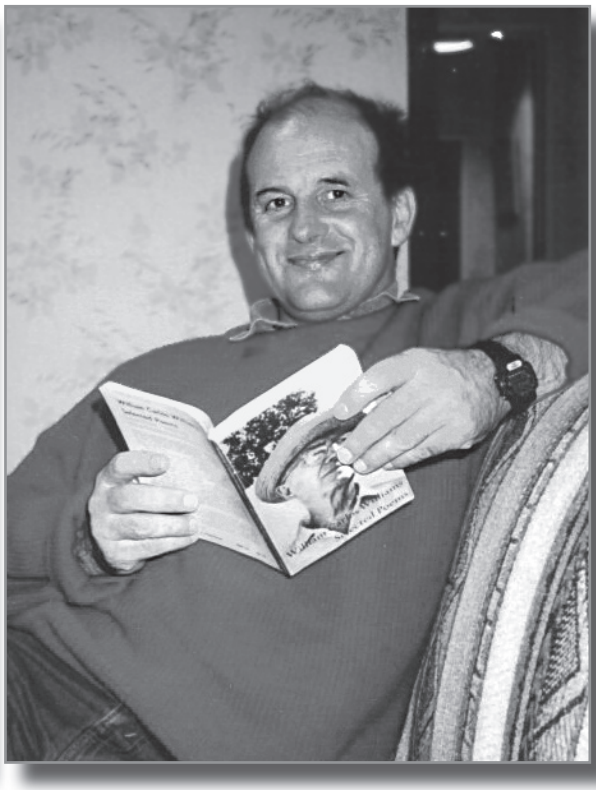
Nathaniel, however, does more than bring his father's history to life. Through the interviews and the piecing together of small snippets of a man's life, he learns about the places of his father's success, and also about the places where his father did not fit. He constructs a detailed life for his father from the viewpoint of twenty-five years on. Nathaniel tells how he re-remembered 'the roughness of the scars on his face' or seeing his hands the few times his father sat on his bed to tell a night time story. He shares a crudely sketched children's book about crazy boats that his father drew for him. This gives way to his adult connection to a magnificent musical boat, and its Captain, that was designed by his father.

Nathaniel asks of his father's former colleague and lover, Ann Tyng, 'Do you think about him a lot now?' She replies, 'He's kind of there, you know. Don't need to think about him. He's here, well he's there ... The ideas you work on together, connect you always.' Such conversations are not about recapturing the past so much as about giving voice to current forms of connection. We see this repeated many times in the film through the newly shared places that intersect the lives of the living and the dead.

An article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* appeared while Nathaniel was making the documentary quoting him saying, 'I wanted to hug my father's buildings'. We would say that he was creating membership by exploring the possibilities that arose through exploring nuanced aspects of his father's life. As he 'hugged' the buildings, he was folding into himself a relational story that became accessible for Nathaniel and for all of us watching the documentary. In a moving scene, we see Nathaniel gracefully roller blading around the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, designed by his father. In the background we hear the lyrics to the song *Long May You Run*. He says, 'For the first time since he died, I felt that I was getting closer to my father'.

There is a lovely piece in the director's questions, where Nathaniel responds to the question, 'What surprised you the most (about making the film)?' Nathaniel's response speaks to the import of his subjunctive journey that has brought the possibility





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of keeping his father alive in a very real form.

'You sort of wonder after we're gone, what's left? And, I think I wondered in starting this film, how much would I really find of my father out there? How much was really left? I know there's buildings. But how much emotion? How much is really left? And I think what shocked me is how many people are still actively engaged in a relationship with him. They talk to him as if he's still here. They think of him everyday.' Nathaniel speaks to how he managed the more than 200 hours of film footage. He uses language that his father's membership inspired, 'Finding the structure of a film is not unlike finding the structure of a building'. He explains how both need to make sense and almost have a linear progression but that this is problematic too, as aspects of story, like design elements of a building, are edited out.

Nathaniel Kahn's genre of communication is in movie format. Our concern is about the principles that can be carried over into therapeutic conversations from his work. Kahn is doing the work of re-membering for himself through the research interviews that he records. As counsellors, we can facilitate for our clients acts of re-membering through the asking of questions that open up similar lines of inquiry. We can invite people to recreate relationships from the past and to incorporate them into the current membership clubs of their lives, often in creative ways. We can help people recruit those who have died into relationships that continue to be resources or continue to offer instruction and inspiration for living.

It is in the asking of such questions that the subjunctive comes into its own. It gently opens the door onto the world of the possible without

shining the harsh light of realism too quickly onto this sometimes delicate world. At the end of the film, Nathaniel comments, 'On this journey, my father became real to me; a man, not a myth. Now that I know him a little better, I miss him more than ever.'

As did Nathaniel Kahn, many people often start after a death by looking at what was and reminiscing over photos, stories and memories. To make meaning out of life, they might sort through previous conversations, shared times, absences, illness and death. Gradually the conversation might shift to the present life of the bereaved person. At this point we can ask, subjunctively, how the voice of the deceased might continue to have meaning and how this voice can continue to be heard. Time spent dwelling in this subjunctive exploration of membership frequently pays dividends in the bereaved person's membership club. What was imagined subjunctively 'as if' it were real becomes knitted into real life. Its imagined effects are thus realized. The result is often not just about recovering from the 'illness' of grief. It can be about much more than this, as it was for Nathaniel Kahn. Trafficking in the subjunctive (we are still enjoying that metaphor even though that particular traffic jam has long since dissipated) often produces a renewed sense of resourcefulness for living.

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Editor's note: Lorraine Hedtke and John Winslade will be presenting workshops in Australia in August 2005. For details, contact 0402 257 652 dwnewman@optusnet.com.au (Sydney) and 0408 535 812 narrative@cliftoncentre.com (Melbourne).