ABSTRACT:

RECONSTRUCTING THE LANGUAGE OF DEATH AND GRIEF

While death is a biological event, the ways in which we make sense of it are shaped by the social discourses of the worlds in which we live. A narrative and social constructionist therapeutic approach opens new practices of conversation with those who are dying or bereaved. These practices emphasize the ongoing story of relationship. Stories are encouraged to bring forth and develop positive connections following death to support a position of agency, hopefulness and legacy. From this perspective, grief too becomes an evolving and creative opportunity for story development rather than an unpleasant task to be worked through as quickly as possible.

RECONSTRUCTING THE LANGUAGE OF DEATH AND GRIEF

While death is a biological event, the ways in which we make sense of it are shaped by the social discourses of the worlds in which we live. When I approach death and bereavement with a narrative and socially constructed perspective, I am keenly aware that my way of thinking and speaking is different from the dominant fashion. I often hear and see reminders of this difference through the modernist tentacles that wrap themselves around many people's thoughts and shape their story of death. These traditional trappings spell out "the story" of how we are supposed to die and grieve in the world of medicine and psychology. In recent history, this story has emphasized finality and a forever good-bye. Even when the acceptance of the finality of death is mediated by the idea of a need to progress through a series of stages or tasks, the goal remains the same: eventually people need to accept the reality of loss, come to terms with it and move on in life leaving their dead loved one behind. Common metaphors urge the performance of the task called "completing unfinished business" before it is too late and the words of completion are forever lost to the vast silence that is eternal death.

This is not my world. It is not my place of joining with a story of death. Nor do I find these metaphors professionally helpful following the death of a loved one. I believe that thinking in narrative terms offers a new approach to death and bereavement. Narrative constructions of death and grief might not yet be readily understood or embraced in predominantly modernist hospitals and those who practice with a modernist orientation, but that does not prevent these new practices from resonating with anyone whose loved one has died. In a narrative practice with death and grief, remembering, inclusion and building on-going connection are valued and supported. The focus is on the

practical and hopeful tasks of constructing effective conversations to reestablish and strengthen membership[1] with those who are about to die and with those who are long dead.

I shall speak here about some of the influences that have shaped my thinking about this work and the clinical implications of this generative way of understanding. Along the way, I shall illustrate these ideas with a series of stories, showing how a different way of speaking can have a strong impact by easing people's passage through times of transition.

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 with a rigid trajectory of grief. The danger in this is that we can promote iatrogenic injury (O'Hanlon 1993; Gergen 1999) by entrenching a person in stories of sadness and loss when we expect a person to dwell in emotions like sadness, anger, denial for a certain period of time in prescribed ways. "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?" These are questions that rely on the assumption that these stages are important steps in the recovery from the affliction of grief.

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 (Bowlby 1980, Kübler-Ross 1969; Tatelbaum 1980; Parkes 1972, Worden 1991). In these models, emotional stages and tasks are highlighted as an essential recovery process which promises a cure 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 (Attig 1996; Bowlby 1980; Worden, 1991). I have found these approaches lacking when looking to promote on-going connections between the living and their deceased loved ones and to foster a community made up of living and dead members. Re-membering is about continuing to include those who have died in such membership with those who carry on their legacies.

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Comment:

Language

The rituals we create around death and grief are not born in a vacuum, but are reflections of our thoughts and meanings produced in language (White 1995). The way in which we language often shapes and molds the experience into what is considered normal or pathological. Within the constraints of dominant discourse, it can appear that there is little option but to think this way (Gergen 1999). Thus cultural and linguistic patterns of grieving come to be thought of as natural and normal. By corollary, those who function outside of these culturally sanctioned patterns come to be thought of as abnormal and suffering from complicated grief responses. Being described as abnormal, if we do not fit the cultural prescribed preferences of grief, offers a person a disenfranchised social position from which to make sense of the death and grief. These deficit-oriented,

pejorative labels only serve to denigrate and marginalize large groups of people who have experienced a very normal aspect of life; that is, the death of someone they cared about.

When a loved one dies, we are repeatedly asked, "Was it expected?" A simple question like this has many implications for the cultural production of grief. I would suggest that this common question establishes a ranked category to inform questioners about the implied severity of the death. We assume "an expected" death to be far easier to accept as there has been some time to adjust to the reality of death or to perform our necessary leave taking.

This subtle form of languaging death, although initially appearing innocuous, is in fact quite important. The implied meaning is that the expectant griever should have less to feel poorly about and is more equipped to return to normal functioning than the unexpectant griever. The sting should not be as bad for some reason - even if the expected death that occurred was that of a long time cancer sufferer -- if we have been afforded time to prepare and face death.

These practices can appear to be compassionate gestures by well-meaning friends, like saying, "I'm sorry" to someone whose loved one is dead. However, when uttered and responded to, these words bind the griever to an unspoken agreement about how they will proceed with their grief. This process is both produced and sanctioned to not take too long, not be too messy, not dwell on our loved one's memory, and not include public displays of extreme emotion. A focused tacit conspiracy actively dismembers the stories and meanings and intimate connections of our loved one's life. The rules are: say good-bye, move on and resume life as soon as possible.

Our Condolences

The dominant ideas about death in both lay and professional discourse produce disenfranchisement from relationship. Such disenfranchisement can be not only disrespectful to the dead person, but can also produce unnecessary misery for the living. Many taken-for-granted practices around grief promote in effect the dismembering of relationships, thereby disqualifying some people's grieving responses and privileging others. As people endeavor to make meaning of their lives around the death of a loved one, they inevitably encounter some of these discursive practices.

We only need to look to the depiction of death and grief in condolence cards to understand the pervasive discursive preferences. I often speak at workshops about the heavily dismembering language found in sympathy cards. Words are gingerly sprinkled over the silhouette of a nature scene with etheric wisps of clouds floating by. The often rhyming messages are clear: Time will heal; We're sorry for your loss; Your loved one is in a far better place; This is sorrowful/tragic/painful. The words and images are crafted to appeal to either male or female genders in color and graphic outlay as well as have been tailored for specific kinds of death from parental, partner, child, friend and pet.

As with so many of the words around death, these messages promote dismemberment. They specifically call forth a way of grieving that has been outlined in dominant culture as the correct way. The words speak poignantly about letting go and moving on (practices that dis-member our loved ones) and feeling whole again in time. They leave little room for those who might be experiencing relief that their loved one's death has freed them from pain or that their loved one may taken their own life. Practices of remembering, appreciating and story telling are not usual. We do not see cards that are

preprinted with “I remember a time when....,” or “I loved this about your deceased family member”. This change in focus would require cards to incorporate a relational vantage point and acknowledge the connection between the dead and the living. Presently cards are aimed at the individual who is still alive.

In order to have grief recognized, must we be able to sign on to the cultural preference that “I” am more important than relationship? To dismember the path of our dead partner or loved one, the individual must disavow relationship and act almost as if the relationship was not important, or at least not more important than the “I”. Speaking about a dead partner is discouraged and heaven knows that talking to a dead partner is taboo. Anniversaries, birth dates, death dates go by without acknowledgment. Bereavement cards for a one-year anniversary or five years beyond the initial period of death are not made.

I recently spoke with a woman whose husband died two months ago. She shared with me the most beautiful of cards that a well-meaning friend had sent her for Christmas. On the cover was an attractive scenic photograph and inside nothing was preprinted. The card read; “I recall years ago we were all together for a New Year’s Eve celebration. Your husband asked you to dance and as he did so he bent over to kiss you. From across the table, I was moved to tears as this moment between you was so love-filled.”

When we spoke of this, she actually did not recall this exact event, but she said, “Oh, that was just like Frank.” We spoke at great length about this. I inquired about whether she was surprised by this card and who else might know him to be such a loving husband. As we reflected, we nurtured a wonderful story of remembrance of him as a

loving and kind man who adored her. We even spoke about how he might have been a teacher to others in his many examples as her loving partner. It was not a pre-scripted moment of sympathy that birthed these stories, but the very simple act of a friend re-membering her husband and acknowledging their connection. This act offered to renew Frank's membership in a vivid and wonderful way.

Remembering practices that I find helpful are usually not found in bereavement cards. If we look to perpetuate relationship, then we must look to find the paths that promote relationship rather than the renewal of individual status (Silverman & Klass 1996). I encourage people to speak about their dead partner, to share stories about him or her, to ask others about what they recalled that they enjoyed about them, to actively create rituals and celebrations for holidays and anniversaries. As part of developing the connections further, I invite people to introduce their dead loved one with people who may never have had the chance to know them during life.

Over Christmas, one family decided to hang the stocking of their deceased loved one. This decision came with much angst for them as they all loved Christmas. The Christmas Eve ritual of opening the stockings had always brought joy to their five children and thirteen grandchildren. Concerns were expressed that they might feel sad if the father/husband/grandfather was not there to open his that night. As we discussed this, they came to the creative solution all to place notes of things they liked about him in his stocking for the weeks preceding the night. On Christmas Eve, after the others had opened their stocking, they sat to dinner. One by one, the slips of paper were carefully pulled out as the stories were recounted. With each retelling, his presence was brought to life and more stories came forward!

How Do We Want To Tell The Story?

Thinking about death using a narrative lens allows, not just for a hopeful story to grow, but also creates critical reexamination of standard notions of grieving. The difference is dramatic in contrast, although often at first glimpse looks to be common sense. Throughout our lives, our stories shape and construct us (Burr 1995; Gergen 1994, 1999; White 1995; White & Epston 1990). They invite us into positions and bring us forth - whether we are storied as gifted and bright or as possessing a short attention span; agile or clumsy; giving and compassionate or stingy. Various personality attributes are constructed, languaged, produced, performed and reproduced through story. It is these stories (and their supporting details) that are available to grow and live on long after someone has died. We come to know how grandfather had an entrepreneurial drive and how resourceful and spirited great Aunt Nell happened to be. In the maintenance and growing of legacy, we continue to form connections and relationships with those who have died. The relationships with deceased family members grow even further when we story how young Jane has the same uncanny knack with animals that her great grandfather possessed. Stories long outlive our biological death.

In narrative, we can employ the power of story to transcend and promote the remembering of those who have come before us. In the flexibility of stories, relationship can even develop new qualities and enhanced dimensions following death. From this perspective, grief becomes an evolving and creative opportunity for story development and change. With this lens, I can support this continuation of relationship in story (White 1989, 1995, 1997).

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. My 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.

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 the narrative themes and plots play forth often whether we are present or not. As we choose the stories we want to tell, we produce different nuances and strengths for our relationships to develop over the years (Cottor & Cottor 1999).

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 are always many other stories 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. The questions additionally defy an implied inevitable story as the only rendition that can be told about this man's life. 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 believe these questions invite hope. I want the father's voice of strength, and this new found hope, 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 for 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.

New Beginnings

My 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 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 to remind people. Questioning people whenever possible about how

they wish to be remembered, and how they hope to grow their relationships over time opens a new dimension to the field that has had a proclivity to discuss the "bad" aspects of death and dying. Narrative practices can bring us to new ways of understanding death, dying and bereavement that restory the field. How wonderful to know we can 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 death or their loved ones' deaths, many people, in my experience, find these ideas uplifting and encouraging.

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Biography

Lorraine Hedtke is a clinical social worker in private practice in Tucson, Arizona. She consults and teaches about narrative therapy and death and bereavement nationally and internationally.

[1] I am using the term "membership" to suggest that people constitute our communities, or the club, of our lives and that these members co-produce and authenticate the stories that shape our lived experiences (Myerhoff, 1980; White, 1989, 1997).