

Bereavement care: a widower's use of stories/bibliotherapy

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Implications for practice

- Grieving persons often seek words for their losses; bibliotherapy can be a useful response
- When choosing prompts, be alert to culture, language and developmental maturity
- Personal disclosure can enrich bereavement care; it can also undermine bereavement care: what is the difference?

In my work and personal life I have learned that stories are contagious...that self-disclosure invites self-disclosure. My hope for this essay, like that of Frederick Buechner, 'is that if I tell [my story] anything like right, the chances are you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours' (Buechner, 1991). I further hope, as Henri Nouwen asserted: 'Someone might read what I wrote and discover something there that I myself did not see but which might be just as valid as my original thought. It seems important to allow this to happen' (Durback, 1989).

In July 2020, during a world pandemic, my wife of 41 years called from another room in our apartment *come quick*. Her wail was of pain, pain in her chest.

Abstract

This essay is both personal and professional. I write as a grieving husband and a family and grief educator. For each role, I use literary resources (bibliotherapy) as prompts for grieving, coping, and perspective.

In these pages I will interweave my personal grief-writing process with literary resources utilized as a grief educator. My intent is two-fold: to illuminate how words, especially metaphors, have informed and helped me as a widower AND to shed light on bibliotherapy as a resource for grief and bereavement care. Attention to the therapeutic process will also be addressed. Limited commentary, research or theory will be included in this practice-focused article so that readers can ponder use of bibliotherapeutic practices for bereavement care, especially for widows and widowers.

Grief was sudden
Cardiac arrest doesn't stand in a queue
Waiting for a vaccine
She died as she cried
Pain in her chest
Panic in mine
I held my dying wife seeking life
Grasping for what was happening
Only to discover
She was already going somewhere else

Her death occurred at a time the two of us had reveled in our pleasure of being together, 41 years of marriage, an anniversary of accomplishment, pride, and a shared future. We had taken a passionate weekend away, returned home, and a day later IT happened. As I held her close, we searched each other's eyes. We knew, I'm confident, what was happening. We didn't have to wait nine minutes, nine days, nine weeks, or nine months for her to slide down the canal of life to whatever is next. She was already on the way.

(Written weeks after my wife's death)

Similarly, Joan Didion wrote about the death of her husband: 'Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends' (Didion, 2005). Bibliotherapy (also referred to as poetry therapy or therapeutic storytelling) is a creative arts therapy modality that involves storytelling, the reading or writing of specific texts with the purpose of healing. The use of stories drawn from literary resources (poetry, memoir, fiction, drama, song lyrics, vignettes from film clips, and related sources) can be powerful prompts for reflection and validation (see McCullis, 2012, Chavis, 2011). Bibliotherapy can also be a catalyst for discernment of future stories...lives not after loss, but lives lived with loss.

Grief scholar Thomas Attig clearly affirmed that stories are the heart of the matter: 'Many, if not most, of the persons who share their stories of bereavement and grieving tell me they looked for books or speeches about what they are experiencing' (Attig, 1996). Pastoral counselor Andrew Lester confirmed that research in narrative theory, both in psychology and theology, indicates that human personality is storied: 'We construct our sense of identity out of stories, both conscious stories and those we suppress' (Lester, 1995).

The languages and places of loss

Grieving widow Barbara Abercrombie asked: What are the right words? She followed that provocative question with:

'The language of condolence, no matter how well intended, irritated me. My husband had not gone to a better place as if he were off on a holiday. He had not passed like clouds overhead, nor was he my late husband as if he's missed a train. I had not lost him as if I'd been careless, and for sure, none of it was for the best. He had died.'

As a lover of words, she collected a rich variety of poems and prose about loss as reality, not as euphemism.

'I needed writers who turned their stories of loss and mourning into the narrative of and clarity of memoir, not attempting to advise how to fix or heal grief, but telling how it felt, how they managed to get through it'.

(Abercrombie, 2020)

Bereft widower Julian Barnes chose metaphors as he described his experiences:

'Grief reconfigures time, its length, its texture, its function: one day means no more than the next, so why have they been picked out and given separate names? It also reconfigures space. You have entered a new geography, mapped by a new cartography. You seem to be taking your bearings from one of those seventeenth-century maps which feature the Desert of Loss, the (windless) Lake of Indifference, the (dried up) River of Desolation, the Bog of Self-Pity, and the subterranean Caverns of Memory'.

(Barnes, 2014)

Both Abercrombie and Barnes followed in the tradition of CS Lewis whose account appeared 60 years earlier.

'I thought I could describe a *state*; make a map of sorrow. Sorrow, however, turns out to be not a state but a process. It needs not

a map but a history, and if I don't stop
writing that history at some quite arbitrary
point, there's no reason why I should ever
stop. There is something new to be
chronicled every day. Grief is like a long
valley, a winding valley where any bend
may reveal a totally new landscape'

(Lewis, 1961)

Others anticipate dying or losses. Still, the mysteries of loss and grief remain. Examples include these voices of acknowledgement that by naming, seem to seek openness to death when it comes. Both WS Merwin and Jane Kenyon followed in the literary footsteps of 13th century poet Rumi who 'welcomed' whatever came. 'A joy, a depression, a meanness/some momentary awareness comes/as an unexpected (or expected) visitor/Welcome and entertain them all' (Rumi, 2007). Jane Kenyon called such a day otherwise – 'one day it will be otherwise' (1996). Merwin wrote the first line of his poem *For the Anniversary of My Death* (Merwin, 1993), 'Every year without knowing it I have passed the day...'. Reflecting on their spirit of looking ahead, I have attempted to add Mary Oliver to their mix as I embrace widowhood with curiosity as she did with death – 'I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering/what is it going to be like' (1992).

My hope for clarity at times like this
Did not arrive as desired
I was and am willing to embrace
Grief, my old friend,
My expected companion
I have not asked you to leave
Or rest in another room for a while
While I search for words
Words I believed would carry me
Through the dark nights
The now lonely days
Grief, you are welcome here
Help me find comfort with silence
Ted, take a breath
Allow silence to hold you
Let the truth come
Embrace your grief
Embrace yourself
You may have no words.

(Written 18 months after my wife's death)

I found reassurance for that attitude from these words by Rachel Naomi Remen: 'The way we deal with loss shapes our capacity to be present to life more than anything else. The way we protect ourselves from loss may be the way in which we distance ourselves from life' (Remen, 2022).

When asked how I am doing, I have often been at a loss for words of response. Am I to describe the last five minutes, today, this week, or the months since my wife's death? Am I to give my emotional weather report or a catalogue of actions, decisions, and problem-solving? For many, grief is expressed via specific accounts of memories, adjustments... the stuff of shared life with a partner or spouse.

Grieving husband Michel Faber asked: 'Hey, listen: Can I let your plants die? I never knew their names and at another time: today, I found a use for tamarind. You bought a pot of it, never got around to it' (2016).

Judith Sornberger wrote to her now dead husband to inform him:

'After you died I broke down and called
the plumber to end the upstairs toilet's
ceaseless weeping.
So much had gone undone your final summer
As chemo and retching replaced
housekeeping.
After you died I broke down and called the
plumber'.

(Sornberger, 2018)

Similarly, Jeanne Lohmann's loss and grief was elicited by household metaphors, reminding her of past and future:

'Filling the cracks with plaster, she
paints them so they almost don't show,
finds others breaking through
as the house settles.
...while she cried "Oh no!"
to the falling bricks
the power went off, and there was no water.
Aftershocks keep coming,
rock her bed,
open new separations in the walls'.

(Lohmann, 1996)

A colleague and I have speculated that many grieverers are concerned about and desire support from grief counselors for tasks, thoughts, and experiences (basic needs) that many grief counselors do not presume to be critical matters of grief care. The adage to meet the person where they are, has, for me, been reinforced. Some grief accounts are about the big pictures, others convey specific adjustments and losses. Some are preoccupied with basic needs; others focus on losses to come. I'm reminded of the candor of psychoanalyst Peter Lomas: 'The limitation of technique is at no time more apparent than when the therapist is faced with naked grief...when the therapist can say nothing that would not seem presumptuous or trivial' (1999). For me, listening to understand before listening to respond is paramount. Paul Rosenblatt asserted: 'At our best, we write, teach, and speak about grief and bereavement in ways that invite and evoke another's metaphors and meanings used for their own losses, knowing, in so doing, they will likely teach us something also' (Rosenblatt & Bowman, 2013).

Had someone asked me *What's new, Ted?*
My recent and easy response could have been
I cleaned the oven this week.
Meandering bereavement takes many paths
Even to kitchen ovens
To do this simple chore marked another
threshold
It was also a salute to my wife
A remembrance of so many things
She did, gave, and brought to me
The marriage we shared.

Douglas Dunn's book *Elegies* is often mentioned as a classic of poetic grief expression. Written after his wife died, Dunn drew on his considerable poetic skill as he came to grips with her death. He tells the reader that the ties between places frequented by his wife could trigger his continuing grief. A brief section demonstrates that aspect of bereavement.

'We stood here in the coupledness of us.
I showed her this – a pool with leaping trout.
With all the feelings of a widower
Who does not live there now,
I dream my place.
I go by the soft paths, alone with her'.

(Dunn, 1985)

A common place of mourning for spouses or partners is the shared bed. A Scottish poet declares that connection, even while she rails at one of her poetry colleagues:

'But tonight you are three months dead
and I must pull down the bed and lie
in it alone.
Tomorrow, and every day in this place
these words of Sorley MacLean's will
echo through me.
*The world is still beautiful, though you
are not in it.*
And this will not be a consolation
but a further desolation'.

(Lochhead, (2016)

Writers such as these informed my experiences of loss, especially shared places. My living story for 41 years was in a shared place with my wife, our family, and friends. That place, our home, elicited my grieving; it contained a hovering presence... and absence. Here was my attempt to give words to that aspect of my grief, drawing on a related account by poet Laure-Anne Bosselaar, 'I needed for months...to remember our rooms'. (Bosselaar, 2015)

I live in our rooms, not my rooms
nor my place
For years, first in one home, now another
We lived in our rooms
How could it not be?

These are rooms in which we
blended histories
Tears too, many tears, oh the stories
Joy-filled and sad
Stories are placed, ours in these rooms
Each nook and cranny evoke memories
Now strange without her physical presence

Becoming bereaved

'The old concept of the need to "accept reality" when a person dies does not allow much room for becoming and limits the range of stories that can be recognized. This approach appears to treat identity as a cloak that must be worn'.

(Hedtke & Winslade, 2017)

Hedtke and Winslade assert that the question 'who are your becoming?' treats identity as fluid and in process, rather than as static and given. Yes, a widower, but more. I was struggling with the labels used for me – widower, single, a solo man. When shared with a friend, he suggested a reframing that blended my past with my emerging future story. 'Ted, you have never been single. Anyone who has a collection of friends and supportive family in their lives is never single. Ted, you have always had a collective of caring people in your life. I am presently part of your collective. You are not single'. Janet Yolen reframed her grieving story into a becoming reality:

'Grief is not getting easier,
But becoming more ordinary,
Grief is not a one-time thing,
Not several days, weeks, months,
But is a visitor who has moved in for good,
And occasionally helps around the house.
Grief is not unwelcome here,
For it reminds me of how much I have lost,
And how blessed I was
To have so much to lose'.

(Yolen, 2011)

Widow Sheryl Sandberg posted an account of becoming on Facebook:

'A childhood friend of mine who is now a rabbi recently told me that the most powerful one-line prayer he has ever read is: "Let me not die while I am still alive". I would have never understood that prayer before losing Dave. Now I do.

I think when tragedy occurs, it presents a choice. You can give in to the void, the

emptiness that fills your heart, your lungs, constricts your ability to think or even breathe. Or you can try to find meaning...I want to choose life and meaning'.

(Sandberg, 2015)

Similarly, Cathy Phelan-Watkins looks toward an ambiguous but attractive future. After looking back at her historical landscape, she looked forward:

'There is now instead a pool. A deep dark unsettling. Everything lies in those waters and the smallest stone no discernable shape or certainty going forward, but I am not overwhelmed by that. In fact I find the lack of definition, positive'.

(Phelan-Watkins, 2018)

Grief educator Lucy Hone drew on a concept from Rachel Remen, called a giveaway, by extending the notion of becoming bereaved to include links to the loved one.'

Recognizing your loved one's giveaways, I've come to believe, is an essential part of adapting to their loss. It gives theirs and our life meaning. What was your loved one's legacy?'

(Hone, 2017)

A young widow's legacy was music. She and her husband had met in a venue in which live music was routine. Connecting for the first time in such a setting led, after their courtship and marriage, to a regular outing to live music events. Too soon, off time, he died. A few months after his death, she shared with a friend her realization that she had not only lost her husband but also live music in her life. Her friend gently reminded her that music had been important before her husband's arrival, had been important in their marriage, AND that it could still be important to her. After some discussion of the importance of music, the friend suggested they go to the club for a musical evening.

Immediately, the widow pooh-poohed the suggestion. Not only would the music and club be a reminder of her loss, but the young widow also remembered that was where they met. She was not ready for any advances suggestive of a future relationship. The friend offered acknowledgement

of the objection, but suggested they go to the first show...and leave at intermission. Enjoy music again and leave before attendees easily interact. The offer worked; they went to the venue and music was restored to her life.

Accounts like these informed my grieving processes. This personal writing is an example:

Whatever it was I thought my seventies
would amount to I was wrong. I have
entered empty time. Sadness can take over
unless, unless they hear the poet say:

Be excessively gentle
stay clear
of those vexed in spirit
seek joy that can dwell
in slow time
Respect your heart,
you loved,
grief follows
after death arrives
Remember you loved
give thanks
whatever it was
you dreamed
in your thirties
morphed
again, then again
you adjusted
Look back, remember
whatever it was
Let the past
be your teacher

(adapted from a poem by John O'Donohue)

Dual process

The dual process model became, for me, a valuable framework for my own grieving. In the Stroebe and Schut model oscillation between times, venues, and persons that support one's grieving and times, venues, and person that support restoration can be healing (Stroebe and Schut, 1999). Nel Noddings wrote:

'...joy as a seemingly real quality of this lived world can invade us even in pain and periods of deep grief. It does not seem to be the case that joy and grief can occur simultaneously, but they can occur alternately; that is, the pervasive emotion may be grief, and yet joy can slip in momentarily. So, it may happen that even in the deepest grief, filled with guilt and sorrow and regret and despair, I may still see and feel joy there-in-the-world, trembling at my fingertips. Grief is not thereby lessened; indeed, it often intensified'.

(Noddings, 1984)

Perspectives like these prompted this affirmation of my dual process:

I will color this time
With more than a black arm band,
A past marker of death
I will reach for brilliant, bold, bright colors
Subdued
Beiges, blues, and blush
I yearn for an array of color
Similar to the rainbow of flowers
Sent so soon after her death
Reminding me of the colorful life we shared
...and I can still have'.

(Bowman, 2021)

Attention to therapeutic processes

As stated in the abstract and first pages, personal and professional processes have intersected throughout this essay. The use of bibliotherapy as a bereavement care practice does not require self-disclosure by the care provider. Even so, the selection of literary prompts can come close to self-disclosure and potential countertransference. It is, therefore, important to ask what are the merits and limitations for grief and bereavement care when personal accounts are shared verbally or in written form. And are there guidelines for uses of literary selections?

Here are guidelines I found useful:

- 1 Listen, listen first to the 'client'. Your choices should be responsive to the grieving person and their losses.

'The effectiveness of bibliotherapy depends on the facilitator's ability to choose material that speaks to the individual participant's needs and interests; to make accurate, empathic interpretations of the participant's responses; and, through literature and dialogue, to draw out deeper self-understanding. In short, a good bibliotherapist is a skilled listener'. (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1994)

- 2 Avoid the use of readings to manipulate a 'desired response'.
- 3 When choosing prompts, be alert to culture, language and developmental maturity.
- 4 Avoid sharing that 'causes' a 'client' to be more concerned about or focused on you than their own grief matters. Potential positive reasons for personal sharing or use of literary prompts include modeling, to 'give' permission (stories evoke stories), lower the barrier between client and therapist, and, as discussed herein, as prompts for the therapeutic work of the other person.

Apart from these therapeutic guidelines, I have avoided commentary about each of the earlier sections. My experience is that commentary or too lengthy descriptions of 'technique' can foster debate or bias. For this essay, I desire the reader to seek discernment about bibliotherapy for one's own life and/or practices. While not a disciplined writer (I do not write each day for example), I do attempt to write as the above guidelines advise. Listening to myself has been reinforced by the Rumi poem to welcome all that comes. Attempting to finding words or putting such awarenesses into words reinforces my honesty and coping. When my grandson died, I did commit to regular writing for at least one year. Because his death was 'off-time' and tainted by addictions I needed more discipline than for my wife's death. Each was a profound loss, still is. Yet, her death was on-time and less ambiguous. Some of the writing herein was self-generated as I strived to interpret feelings (physical or emotional) or thoughts I experienced. Most were prompted by someone else's words; hence bibliotherapy as a personal resource. The aphorism

that if something is unmentionable, it can be also unmanageable is core for me. Words become a container for healing.

Concluding words

Irish poet Eavan Boland (1998) wrote that language can be a 'habitable grief', a suitable setting for bereaved and grieving people. Indeed, language and stories may be the only container some people have for grief and bereavement. Words can help make grief habitable, something to live in or live with. Robert Neimeyer used 'holding environment' ...a related metaphor.

'It is not a question of what grief therapy techniques do for the bereaved client; it is the question of what bereaved clients (and therapists) do with the techniques that counts...my goal is to suggest that therapeutic presence provides the "holding environment" for a responsive grief therapy, within which attention to therapeutic process attunes the therapist to that unique juncture where a client's need meets his or her readiness for a particular intervention in a particular moment of interaction'.

(Neimeyer, 2012)

To be sure, there are many ways of bereavement care. In this article, the uses of literary resources (bibliotherapy) have been emphasized and discussed. The key is to aid the grieving person to find words for their loss and a narrative, even one that allows for not having words, that moves toward healing and continuing bonds with those now dead. Prompts, such as demonstrated herein, can be one useful tool.

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