“Love always”:

Letters written by dying mothers for their children

by Tanya Newman

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Abstract

This article shares stories of dying mothers writing letters for their children. The author conceives of letter writing as a way for mothers to re-member their preferred identities, and the letters as portals for future re-membering for children. The article includes examples of questions asked in interviews with mothers, the thinking behind the questions, and excerpts from the letters these conversations enabled.

Key words: hospice; palliative care; end of life; death; grief; children; therapeutic documents; letters; re-membering; narrative practice; narrative therapy

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As a palliative care social worker in Aotearoa New Zealand, I support people in their final months, weeks and days of life. While many hospice patients are 70 or older, we also care for people in their 30s, 40s and 50s, many of whom are parents to young children.

As a mother myself, I was uncertain about whether my heart could cope with caring for dying mothers. I was explicit about this at my job interview, and was reassured that other staff could lead this work. However, this changed the first time I met Tūi[1], a hospice patient close in age to me, with children of a similar age to mine. Tūi was staying in the hospice inpatient unit. I visited her briefly to drop off a needed form. When I said, “Kia ora[2], I’m Tanya, I’m a social worker”, she responded by looking me in the eye, sizing me up, and telling me, “You’re on my team now”. She then added my name to a poster she’d made with the names of her key support people.

Thus began a four-month journey of supporting Tūi and her whānau[3], and my ongoing efforts to support parents nearing death. The time I spent with Tūi expanded my heart and grew my courage. She knew I had a contribution to make, before I knew it myself, and she gave me the push I needed to show up for her, for other young parents, and for their children. The work shared in this article is one thread of Tūi’s legacy.

Dying mums are also living mums

The time I spent with Tūi was before I trained in narrative therapy and community work. Narrative practice has offered me further knowledges and skills to bring to the work. My leap into narrative practice coincided with my work with Theresa. Like Tūi, Theresa had the unfinished work of raising children. Theresa’s children were devastated about their mother’s illness and were having very tough times.

As Theresa shared her concerns with me, she spoke about how hard it was for her son Rowan to be “the kid with a dying mum”. I was struck by this single-storied description. In an effort to re-author this dominant storyline, I asked Theresa what she thought about this and offered the idea of also being a “living mum”. Her face lit up as she said, “Yes! I am a *living* mum. That’s how I want the kids to see me”.

In retrospect, I could have asked questions that supported Theresa to explore and define her own alternative storyline(s), rather than offering the idea of being a “living mum”. I wonder where such a conversation could have taken us. At the time, I offered an alternative as I was aware that the identity of “dying mother” was painful for Theresa, her illness meant our conversations were often brief, and I wanted to offer hope. Not hope in the sense of optimism, but a grounded hope that is relational, action oriented and able to hold despair: a “reasonable hope” that helps to “make sense of what exists now in the belief that this prepares us to meet what lies ahead” (Weingarten, 2010, p. 7). However, by inserting my idea of an alternative story, I may have limited Theresa’s opportunity to re-author her life in her own words. If I could re-visit the conversation, I might do it differently. However, I’m aware that being a “living mum” was a helpful shift for Theresa. If the idea hadn’t been resonant, our conversation would have moved in other directions. Theresa embraced the idea, and our conversations continued from there.

Time spent with Tūi, Theresa and other mums has had me thinking about how dying mums are living, have lived and will live on in their children. They are mums who physically leave, but who also stay in their children’s hearts, memories and actions. These ideas have been resonant with the parents I have supported since.

Like others connected with Theresa’s children, I was concerned for their wellbeing. I considered offering them my support. This would have been stepping outside my role as their mum’s social worker, and outside my organisation’s usual approach of supporting adults to support their children. This also would have centred me (Morgan, 2006). What the children wanted was a well mother, not a well-meaning social worker! My role was to support Theresa to give as much of herself to her children as she could, as this was her own priority. Alongside a range of practical steps, this orientation led me to re-membering practices.

Re-membering: Past, present, future

Michael White conceived of re-membering as

> evoke[ing] the image of a person’s life and identity as an association or a club. The membership of this association of life is made up of the significant figures of a person’s history, as well as the identities of the person’s present circumstances, whose voices are influential with regard to how the person constructs his or her own identity. (White, 2007, p. 134)

Given that mothers and children are often influential in shaping one another’s identities, this seemed relevant for Theresa and Rowan.

While re-membering practices are commonly used to "support people to reposition themselves in relation to the death of a loved one, in ways that bring relief" (White, 2007, p. 135), I saw the potential for re-membering to assist Theresa and Rowan in reclaiming their preferred sense of themselves, each other and their relationship *before* Theresa died. Indeed, Barbara Myerhoff, who coined the term "re-membering", included "one's own prior selves" as figures that can be re-membered (Myerhoff, 1982, p. 111). I hoped re-membering could extend Rowan's sense of identity beyond "the kid with a dying mum" and strengthen Theresa's reclamation of herself as "a living mum". I also hoped re-membering might support Theresa and Rowan to "say hullo again" to their sense of love and connection with one another (White, 1988).

As I was not working with Rowan, I was challenged to find ways to offer re-membering without meeting him. Aware of Theresa's limited energy, I wanted to work in ways that could maximise her efforts to be a living mum. At the time Theresa and I were meeting, I was experimenting with writing collective documents and had recently read David Newman's (2008) piece "Rescuing the said from the saying of it". I was struck by a sense of ethical obligation to record people's knowledges to hand back to them. I highlighted Newman's sentence "over the years, I have noticed that documentation is regularly a reassuring and generative aspect of my work" (2008, p. 24). As I struggled to work out how I could contribute to Theresa and her children, I was in need of some generative reassurance! I felt both out of my depth and committed to being as useful as possible. So, I turned to narrative documentation and offered to support Theresa to craft a letter for Rowan. I hoped a letter might be useful in the present, offer a portal for future re-membering, and provide a small way for Theresa to live into her son's future.

Letters of love

Theresa accepted my invitation and shared my hope that a letter might support Rowan to reconnect with her as his living mum and with his preferred sense of himself. Theresa liked these ideas very much, particularly the idea that Rowan could continue to re-visit the letter throughout his life. I hoped the letter-writing process might also support Theresa to "re-member" herself as a capable, loving, present mum.

Theresa and I spent an hour together in which I interviewed her about Rowan using re-membering questions. I recorded the conversation and took notes. I will forever remember the impact sharing stories about her son had on Theresa. Her skin brightened, with colour returning to her cheeks. Theresa smiled brightly, and she looked considerably more well. It was a privilege to see how Theresa's love for her son lit her from the inside out. When I think of the value of re-membering, Theresa's glowing face is the image I hold.

Following our interview, I edited the pages of notes into a two-page letter. Due to her deteriorating health, this was not a task Theresa was well enough to do herself, so I leant my energy to the work. I emailed the draft letter to Theresa, saying,

> I've attached a draft of your letter for Rowan. 90%+ of the words are yours. I needed to add some joining words in places, and work with the order of what you shared. Please feel very welcome to change anything that doesn't feel right, whether it's tweaking or rewriting the letter entirely. I'd love your feedback about what works and what doesn't.

She wrote back:

> The letter is perfect, thank you. It brought tears to my eyes. I couldn't ask for anything more for my little man to have as a remembrance of me and my thoughts.

Theresa gave the letter to Rowan. When he read it, he gave Theresa a big hug. Theresa asked that we also write a letter for her daughter, Aria. We repeated the process, and when Theresa received Aria's letter she said:

> Tanya, I can't thank you enough for expressing my love and thoughts to my darling daughter. Thank you, it's perfect.
>
> Lots of gratitude, Theresa x

Theresa died three months after she wrote the letters. I haven't spoken to either of her children, so I don't know how the experience has been for them. However, I witnessed the relief that recording her love in perpetuity brought for Theresa. Both children spoke at Theresa's funeral, and I was moved by the love, care and connection they expressed for their mum.

Dani also chose to work with me to write letters for her kids. Dani's health rapidly declined between writing a letter for her eldest and writing a letter for her youngest a few days later. I am in awe of the determination she showed to ensure she left a letter for her daughter. Dani completed our interview, despite slipping in and out of consciousness. We continued the work, knowing it might be all the time she had. Sadly, we were right. Dani died a few days after finishing her second letter. I hope having the letter read to her helped ease her dying, knowing she had completed this important task.

In the next section, I will share examples of the questions I used when supporting Theresa and Dani to write letters for their children, the thinking behind the questions, and excerpts from the letters they enabled. The questions are grouped into themes and presented in a linear fashion; however, that is an outcome of sharing the work in written form rather than an accurate reflection of the interviews, which were more conversational and organic. I encouraged Theresa and Dani to reject any questions that didn't work for them, and I followed their interests, building on questions they received warmly rather than working through a preprepared script.

Through a mother's loving eyes

I started the interviews with questions that invited descriptions of the children. This was a way to warm up the conversation, with each woman introducing her children to me. Theresa lit up as she spoke, and Dani relaxed into sharing her stories.

The questions included:

- Could you introduce [child] to me?
- What can you tell me about [child]?
- What are some of your best memories of [child]?
- If [child] were to see themself through your eyes, what would they see?

As Theresa and Dani spoke, I asked for examples to illustrate their points. My hope was this would offer "experience-near" (White, 2007, p. 40) language that the children could relate to, that it would anchor words to shared memories and "thicken" (Morgan, 2000, p. 15) stories beyond platitudes to meaningful identity descriptions the children could connect with. As I drafted the letters, I noticed this meant Theresa's and Dani's words often shifted between landscape of action and landscape of identity (White, 2007, pp. 77–78), moving from stories about doing things with their children to rich description of the children's identities as seen through their mothers' loving eyes (White, 2007). I hope the content these initial descriptions generated will support the children to construct identity in helpful ways.

Here are some examples of the content generated through these questions:

> You are an amazing kid. You brighten up a room when you come in. It makes me proud, the way you speak up if something's not right. I appreciate how you let others know they are loved by doing kind things and saying "I love you". When I think of the way we say, "I love you", "I love you more!", "No, I love you more!", it makes me smile. I hope I have taught you to love easily and whole heartedly. You are kind and gentle: all the beautiful things that anyone would want in a son. And you give the best hugs. I love sinking into your hugs. They're so big and strong and real.
>
> I've always loved sharing water with you. It's a together thing we had, a way we connect. I was taking you to swimming lessons from when you were six months old. Swimming with you when you were a baby was a beautiful experience. I enjoyed holding you in water, our skin touching. Before Daisy was born, we'd go to your swimming lesson, swim in the pool together for ages afterwards, and then have a sushi date. I loved our special sushi dates. When you were older, I loved the way that when we were in the pool or ocean, you'd hug and cling to me and hold on tight. Surfing together was fun too – you picked it up really fast! The times I've spent in the water with you are some of my best.
>
> I love your company. My day brightens when you are in it. When you used to race home from school and try to get home in less than five minutes, I'd look forward to hearing you rush inside to check the time on the microwave. Those are good memories. Lockdown was a good time for me – I enjoyed having the extra time with you and Aria, painting, talking, cooking and not worrying about the outside world. I get a lot of pleasure from being in being in your company and Aria's – talking, watching movies and just being together.

Appreciation: "You are such a cool kid"

I was conscious that while the initial readers of Theresa's and Dani's letters were children, the letters were likely to be revisited again and again. Therefore, I was cognisant of the need for the letters to resonate both with their 10 to 15-year-old readers, and also with those same readers when they are 20, 30, 40, 50+ years old. My hope was that the letters would provide their recipients with a sense over time of belonging to their mothers, and that the record of their mother's voice would encourage positive self-regard. The letters could be portals for future re-membering. With this in mind, I asked questions that could enable Theresa's and Dani's children to know what their mums appreciated about them, what they recognised in their children that others may have missed, and what they valued about their children. My questions included:

- What do you admire about [child]?
- When you think of [child], what are you most proud of?

Again, I asked follow-up questions to generate specificity, encourage experience-near language, and foster movement between landscape of action and landscape of identity. These questions led to the following excerpts:

> I admire your intelligence and your dry sense of humour. I'm always impressed about how you can come up with lots of facts and little bits of knowledge, and how you teach me things that I have no idea about. I learn so much from you. I'm amazed how you can read books and recite them back, adding your own thoughts, and how you look up YouTubers and learn different facts and spill them out when we least expect them. I admire your brain – that it can soak up so much information. And the way you can crack a joke and put others at ease.
>
> You are a such a cool kid. You're witty, handsome, talented and smart. I love how you are yourself. When you went to school, I admired how if the teachers told you to draw a tree with a brown trunk, and a blue sky, and green grass, you'd ignore them and just make what you wanted to make. I see your creativity now in your gaming, with the way you love to dive into different worlds and adapt avatars. You are imaginative and eccentric. I love that about you.
>
> You are incredibly smart. You taught yourself to read before you were five. You wanted to know what words said, so you'd ask, "Dad, how do you read this? What does this say?" You'd get sick of waiting to be told, so you just picked it up. Then you'd run into the room and say, "Mum, I can read this!" and read me a whole book! You can learn whatever you want to know.
>
> You are also really kind. I see how you try hard with your sister. Like when we went to TimeZone and Daisy didn't have enough credit to pay for the key chain she wanted, so you just went and got it for her. You do stuff like that all the time. I love that you look out for Daisy, and I'm proud of your kindness.

Contribution: "Being your Mum absolutely made me"

Michael White highlighted the mutual contributions people make to one another's lives, and how re-membering practices can offer space to uncover and acknowledge such contributions. Inquiry about contribution is central to the re-membering map of practice (White, 2007).

In the context of parents writing to their children, I think questions about mutual contributions are particularly important. Dominant discourses focus on children being shaped by their parents, and on parents bestowing knowledge, values and skills to their children. Therefore, I was keen to record the contributions that Theresa's and Dani's children had made to the lives of their mothers.

These questions invited some of the most heartfelt replies.

- How has [child] contributed to your life?
- What have you learnt from [child]?
- In what ways has being [child's] mum contributed to your life?
- What does it mean for you to be [child's] mum?

The letters documented some of the contributions Theresa's and Dani's children made to their mothers' lives:

> I appreciate the ways you've chilled me out. I've learnt to be much more patient and understanding. I can be quite a high-strung,

anxious mum, and you've really supported me in that. I remember a time when I was doing something creative in the art room, and the house was a mess. I got completely overwhelmed and you were like, "Mum, don't worry about the mess, do what you're doing". Thank you. I needed that permission. You told me, "You've done so well, Mum". You are a real sweetheart. You make an amazing son, that's for sure.

Thank you for looking out for me and getting Dad for me when I've needed help.

When I was younger, I was told that I wouldn't be able to have children, so having you and Aria was such a wonderful surprise. I had never thought that I was born to be a mum. But I was. Being your mum absolutely made me. You came into my life and gave me purpose and so much happiness. Once I had you and Aria, it just made sense. This is what my life was meant to be. Being your mum.

Being yours and Daisy's mum is a privilege. I love being in our family. Our family is my home.

Thank you for all of your help. For caring for your brother, and for helping around the house, and for cooking meals. You're a wonderful help, and you do it all while spreading, love, joy, happiness and laughter. Thank you.

My heart got bigger when I became your mum. Everything changed when I had you. You were this beautiful little human being that we somehow had to look after and get to know. My love for you and Daisy is intense and it's unconditional. I'd do anything for you, and I'm proud of you, no matter what!

I love our talks. They are my best times. I love that you share things with me, and that nothing's too shocking to share (even when it is shocking). I've tried to keep things open and nonjudgemental between us. I'm glad you talk to me, and that we've always talked and been open with each other. Let's keep talking.

Skills for living: "You've made it through"

Given the children were already living with a very unwell mother, and that in their near future they would be traversing their mother's death, I was interested in what Theresa and Dani knew about the skills their children had in navigating hard times. I hoped their answers might support the children to resist the collapsing of their identities into "kids whose mum died", and support them to hold on to preferred and useful stories. Questions to thicken stories about their children getting through tough times included:

- What else have you seen [child] overcome in life?
- What skills and knowledges do you think [child] has, that help them get through hard times?
- How do you know this about them?
- Can you tell me a story about [child] when they have shown these skills?

Theresa's and Dani's children had many skills in navigating hard times:

> Watching your determination makes me proud. You've made it through hard times, like when our family changed, and you really missed Tom.
>
> We're different from other families, which hasn't always been easy. As a family, we've had to deep dive into learning about our differences and figuring out what works for us. You had it tough with bullying, and I admire your strength in working through that.
>
> Seeing you know what you want and how you stand up for yourself is reassuring for me. I see you stand up for yourself – with me, with your dad, and in the stories you tell me from school. I couldn't be prouder.
>
> You choose people well. I want you to keep listening to your intuition and making good decisions. You have good judgement, which gives me confidence that you'll always be okay. I appreciate that you surround yourself with good people and that you accept help from people that you trust. Keep doing that.
>
> You're going through a lot, and you're doing wonderfully. I'm tremendously proud of you. Be easy on yourself. Don't worry about the future, or about your grades, or about whether

> you're going to cope. You are stronger than you know. I see your strength every day, in your choices and decisions. You are going to be okay.

The C word

As mentioned previously, Theresa, Dani and I were all conscious of their letters being documents that would be read in the present context and re-read across time. Considering this, I wondered what it might be useful for the children to know about how their mothers made sense of their illness, death and dying. I offered Theresa and Dani an opportunity to share their thoughts about cancer and about dying. I asked:

- What would you like [child] to know about your sickness? Is there anything you want to say to them about death and dying?

They answered:

> I know things haven't been the same since we found out the sickness is terminal. It's *really* hard. I'm here, and I want to support you. I want to soak up our time together, for however long we have. I can't walk up hills or go on big adventures anymore, but I am here. I love all the small moments of nurturing that I can do – getting your clothes ready when you get out of the shower, preparing your meals, those simple motherly things mean a lot to me. I love your company. Just being together and having cuddles makes me so happy.
>
> Cancer is so hard. I wish it was different. I didn't want you and Daisy to be witnesses of my suffering, and I'm sorry this is part of your life too. I want you to know that while I'm in pain, I am managing it. It's alright. You don't need to worry about me. Even if I'm hurting, our time together is precious for me. I want to keep having as many family experiences as we can.
>
> I'm so sorry that the cancer has changed your life. I feel a lot of shame about all the hard stuff that is happening for you and Rowan because of the cancer. If I could change it, I would. I wish I could. I'd give anything to protect you from this.
>
> I know the cancer is hard and it's scary. It means the world to me that we can keep letting our love in. Please don't be too scared to love me. I'm here now. Let's be scared and love each other anyway.

My wish for you is a happy life

Thinking of letters as portals for future re-membering, and as a way for mothers' voices to be present in children's lives over time, had me asking what Theresa and Dani might like to say to their children when they are older. I asked questions like:

- What are your hopes and wishes for [child's] future?
- Is there anything you want to share with [child], about being an adult? About being a parent? Any key pieces of advice you want to share?

They answered:

> I hope you get to be a dad one day. If you do, I hope you get as much joy out of being a parent as I do! My biggest wish for you is to have happiness. I hope you find a passion, and work on it on a daily basis. I hope your life is as filled with love as mine.
>
> My wish for you is a happy life. A life where you are surrounded by love, which is what you deserve. I hope you are passionate about whatever you choose in life, and that you carry on sharing your joy. Don't worry about the small stuff. Continue to be you, and follow your own path. I know you'll be a wonderful mum one day. When you are, enjoy the moments. It all goes so quickly.
>
> You are an amazing think-outside-the-box person. My main hope is that you create a life for yourself where you thrive, enjoy yourself, and where you can be creative and just be you. The jobs you do in the future may not even have been invented yet. You and Daisy don't fit boxes, so we need to smash out of the box. You're good at that. It suits you.
>
> You've always been the one to look after someone who is a bit different, to take them under your wing. You've always done that, right from preschool. I want you to hold on to that, to continue being kind and to keep finding joy with people. Helping others has been my passion in life, and I see that same caring in you. I'm proud of your kind heart.

“Love always, Mum”

As we reached the end of the letter-writing conversations, I followed Theresa’s and Dani’s direction. I asked, “What else is there to say?”, and they said the most important things:

> I hope these words can help sustain you over time and that they remind you of our connection if I ever feel far away.
>
> I have a very deep love for you. I am so proud that you are my son. I’d do anything for you and your sister, and you have made that easy. You are an easy person to love.
>
> I want you to know that I love you, and I will never stop. I will always be there. My physical body will leave, but my energy won’t. I’m always going to be hanging around.
>
> Know that you always belong, and you are always loved. You will always belong with me, Dad and Daisy. The three of you are an amazing team, and you’re going to be just fine.
>
> Please look after Dad. He’ll keep going and going, and he’s not very good at taking breaks, so you might need to remind him sometimes.
>
> Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. And know that I love you bigger than words can explain. It’s absolutely a pleasure and a privilege to be your mum!
>
> I love you fiercely, totally and completely. I adore you. I hope you always feel that, with every fibre of your being.
>
> I will always love you, no matter what. I will always be your mum.

Linking lives: The beginning of an archive

It was a privilege to support Theresa and Dani. I’m grateful for all they taught me. Our work together continues to inform my practice (and my parenting!).

Dying parents have shared with me that they feel alone in the experience. While it is difficult to link lives and build community between hospice patients (due to their limited energy and limited time), Theresa generously agreed to share anonymised copies of her children’s letters with other parents who are considering writing to their children. In Theresa’s words,

> I’m more than happy for you to share the letters. I’m just so sad and sorry that another young person is going through this journey. I found the letters a wonderful expression of love for my children that they will have there to remind them of my love for them and the special moments we shared.

Theresa’s generous contribution in sharing her letters has enabled other parents (including Dani) to feel less alone in their experience and more able to write letters to their own children. My invitation for letters to be shared was inspired by collective narrative practice, and was an effort to link lives and enable those I support to “speak through me, not just to me” (Denborough, 2018, p. 2). In the tradition of David Epston (Epston & White, 1990; see Denborough, 2018, p. 185–186), sharing letters enables dying parents to offer their experience, wisdom and support to others. Dani’s husband has given posthumous permission for Dani’s letters to also be shared with other parents considering writing letters of their own. Together, Theresa’s and Dani’s letters are the beginning of an archive

Limitations of the work

The work shared in this article speaks only to my experience supporting the people whose stories I have included. My focus has been on supporting mothers, as they are the people who have invited me into their lives. I recently started working with fathers, and I look forward to learning from these collaborations. While this work endeavours to be child-focused, it has been led by adults. I look forward to learning from children’s feedback and to growing my accountability to those with insider knowledge.

Theresa, Dani and I are Pākehā.[4] Written documentation, particularly supported by a Pākehā professional, may be less culturally resonant for Māori. Offers of letter-writing support have not yet been taken up by Māori. This may be for a multitude of reasons (and I’m conscious the sample size is small). However, I have noted a contrast with our biannual remembrance service. The remembrance service is an evening event where people who have been recently bereaved gather together to share stories, laugh, cry, sing, and eat together. These events are well attended by whānau Māori, including tamariki.[5] Given this, I am exploring other ways to offer in-person connection between parents who are living *and* dying, and their children.

The reference list below reflects the reading that enabled the practice shared in this article. It is not intended to be exhaustive, or to represent the breadth of work that narrative practitioners have contributed to understanding death, dying, grief, loss or the use of narrative documentation. I look forward to utilising others' work and continuing to extend my practice. I have included further reading that highlights practitioners whose work has made significant contributions to narrative practices with people who are dying or experiencing grief.

Next steps: Accountability and collective practice?

I am the daughter of a parent whose mother died when he was 17, my childhood included a very unwell parent receiving cancer treatment, and I have faced my own child's mortality during a life-threatening illness. However, I do not have insider knowledge as a child whose parent died, or as a dying parent leaving children behind.

I hope to stay on the outside of this knowledge. I am aware of health privilege as I spend my workday supporting dying parents, then return home to the daily joys and chores of parenting. That I am a mother is a part of why Tūi chose me, and my mother-knowledges inform my work with dying parents. My accountability to Tūi, Theresa, Dani and others is to do my best to show up in my own mothering, and not take my privilege as a living mum for granted. I know that is what they would expect from me.

While children are at the centre of this project, I am not in relationship with the specific children, and I have only heard their responses to their letters second-hand. I have been led by their parents and trusted their discernment about what will and won't work for their children. I have offered to meet with children, and also to connect them with one another, as a way of broadening the horizon from individual to collective connection, and because young people may be more interested in connecting with one another than they are in connecting with me (Denborough, 2008). So far, the invitations have been declined. I will continue to extend invitations. However, I do not expect children to meet with me, and I am thinking of other ways I can express an ethic of accountability that do not impose on mourning children.

I am inspired by collective narrative practices that enable community and contribution (Denborough, 2008). I am currently taking steps towards meeting with adults I know, whose parents died when they were children. I am planning a meeting to invite their feedback. I am tentatively thinking about inviting adults with insider knowledge to be interviewed for or write letters to children whose parent has died, including their reflections on what they learnt from the experience, how they have got through hard times, and what their parent has contributed to their life. I love the idea of having a library of letters (again, inspired by leagues and archives) available for children whose parent is dying or has died (Denborough, 2018). However, that is jumping multiple steps ahead. First, I need to share, listen, learn and see what direction(s) the feedback of people with insider knowledge points me in. I look forward to continuing to learn and to becoming more useful for dying parents, and for their children.

Further reading

Enabling people to craft their own responses to grief
The crafting of grief: Constructing aesthetic responses to loss
by Lorraine Hedtke and John Winslade (2016)

Talking to children and families about death and grief
Death talk: Conversations with children and families by Glenda Fredman (1997)

Supporting families after the death of a child
"The politics of saying hullo again"
by Helene Grau Kristensen (2021)

Narrative therapy in palliative care contexts
"Deciding how to die: Narrative therapy in palliative care with someone considering stopping dialysis" by Sasha Pilkington (2022)

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Notes

[1] Please note: all names in this article are pseudonyms.

[2] Kia ora: "Hello (literal translation – be well) (to any number of people). Kia ora can mean hello, good morning, good afternoon and thank you" (Te Aka Māori Dictionary).

[3] Whānau: "Extended family, family group, a familiar term of address to a number of people - the primary economic unit of traditional Māori society. In the modern context the term is sometimes used to include friends who may not have any kinship ties to other members" (Te Aka Māori Dictionary).

[4] Pākehā: "New Zealander of European descent – probably applied to English-speaking Europeans living in Aotearoa/New Zealand" (Te Aka Māori Dictionary).

[5] Tamariki: "Children – normally used only in the plural" (Te Aka Māori Dictionary).

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