

*Bringing
lost loved ones
into our conversations:
Talking about loss
in honouring ways*

A reflection from Barbara Wingard

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This piece is a reflection on the paper 'Re-membering reciprocal relationships' by Chris Dolman (2011). Barbara Wingard lives in Murray Bridge, the setting for the work described by Chris.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading Chris Dolman's paper, 'Re-membering reciprocal relationships' (2011), has led me to think about how very important it is to enable people to bring their lost loved ones into counselling conversations.

Sometimes when people come to speak with us, they are unsure about how to deal with their grief. There may be an expectation about going through certain stages of grieving. The person may even come to the counsellor and say, 'Can you tell me the steps?' or, 'Where am I at in the process?'

If we can ask questions that turn this a little bit, that enable them to look at their grief in a different way, this may be more meaningful. If we can ask questions that acknowledge their lost loved one, what that person meant to them in everyday life, and if we can enable them to speak about all the little different ways they have contributed to each other's lives, this can make a difference.

TALKING IN HONOURING WAYS – AND DIFFERENT FORMS OF SILENCE

Within mainstream ways of talking about grief, there is sometimes a focus on the actual pain, and encouraging people to 'let this out' or 'express this'. Narrative practice has a slightly different focus. While we always wish to provide a place to speak of their sorrow, we are also interested in hearing about how people contribute to each other. This is about making it possible to talk about the loss in honouring ways.

It's really important that people know they can talk about losses in ways that don't bring more pain because, if you think talking about it is going to focus on the pain, this can create more silence. People may choose not to talk about it, to go into silence, and this can prolong grief.

I have an example of the cost of silence. It's from my own experience, and it's about the loss of a twin. Many years ago now, when I had twins, I lost one. In those days, it was like, 'Ok, you've got one baby, so move on'. There was a lot of this 'move on' and 'don't talk about grief', and what this did was create a lot of silence. With that silence, many things were put on hold. It took thirty-two years until I revisited this grief and found out where my

twin was buried. I spoke to my mother-in-law about this, thirty-two years after the initial loss, and discovered for the first time that she, too, had a baby that died. She doesn't know where he is buried either. She said that her family told her not to talk about it because of the pain. So that's another example of what silence can put on you. There were thousands and thousands of women in our situation, dealing with grief in silence. Sometimes silence leaves grief hidden.

Then again, sometimes you may be grieving and genuinely not want to talk about it. You may not be ready for the conversations. That's a different sort of silence – when it's your choice. I remember when I lost my de facto husband, I had to come down the street and do things and everybody would come up to me and talk with me to say sorry about the loss, but at that time my mind was just thinking 'I don't want to talk about this'. People genuinely care about you and they want to say something, but at that time I didn't want to go there, I wanted silence. I wanted to be able to go back home and work everything through in my own mind.

So there are different forms of silence.

STRONG STORIES OF CONNECTION

Another aspect that stood out to me in the paper 'Re-membering reciprocal relationships', was how Audrey and Bert became connected with someone else, through their granddaughter. It's very much about connection. Not only were they acknowledging their own little one, there was somebody else they made room for in their lives, and through this connection they remain connected to her. It's a beautiful, strong story. When I use the word 'strong', I'm referring to their strength, to experience that loss, but still have that connection with others.

I think it's very important that we have the chance to keep connections in our own ways with people who have passed on. We've had a lot of losses in our family, and all our lost loved ones are talked about. My grandchildren know of them. Sharing stories of people who were very important in our lives, about what sort of people they were and what they did, strengthens my grandchildren. These stories strengthen their connections to culture, they teach my grandchildren about who they are, as well

as who they remind us of. My grandson reminds us of my brother, who committed suicide when he was forty-two and who we still talk about in loving ways. It's really good for the grandchildren to know who they remind us of. In Aboriginal culture, it is very important to keep those conversations going and to keep those people's spirits with us.

When I was young I never asked enough questions about our older people, I never learnt enough about their lives. Then again, they weren't with us that long – they went pretty young when we were young – but I always regret not asking more questions. If I'd asked more questions then, I'd have more stories to tell the grandchildren now. However, within Aboriginal culture there are also lot of things that you don't talk about directly. So we have to keep that balance.

NAMING INJUSTICES

I think it is very important that injustices are named and acknowledged. Aboriginal people have been treated very unfairly in many, many ways. For example, many of our fathers and grandfathers volunteered to fight for this country in war, even at a time when they were not allowed to vote. People have lost their land, their language – my grandparents weren't allowed to speak their language. And there are many other injustices that

we must always be able to name. These may be injustices that have happened to us or to our families, such as deaths in custody. So many of our people have been touched by losing a loved one in custody. These injustices continue to have an impact, especially on a lot of the young people, who don't like police because of the stories that have come down to them. Naming these injustices and their effects makes it more possible to move on a little bit. We can all play a part in naming injustices. You have to find your way of doing this, but we can all play our part.

REFLECTIONS

So these are some of my reflections upon reading the paper, 'Re-membering reciprocal relationships'. I think it's very important to enable people to bring their lost loved ones into counselling conversations, to find ways of talking about loss in honouring ways.

REFERENCES

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