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Grief: Remember, reflect, reveal¹

by

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Grief is an area that we have so much work to do on in the Aboriginal communities. It's hard for us to develop programs in a lot of areas, including talking about diabetes or heart disease, if there is so much grief in our communities. So many of our losses have been unjust and unacknowledged, and because of this they can be difficult to deal with, difficult to grieve. For a long time I have been interested in trying to find ways of talking with Aboriginal people about these issues.

At Camp Coorong (*Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, 1995 No.1) we talked a great deal about deaths in custody, the links between grief, loss and injustice and trying to find culturally appropriate ways forward. This year, issues of grief once again touched my own life when I heard about the West Terrace Project.

West Terrace Project

In our day if you had a stillborn baby, or a baby that died soon after birth, the health professionals would remove the baby and take care of all the arrangements. The mother often wouldn't even see the baby's body and they wouldn't know where the body was taken. The West Terrace Project has involved trying to find the location of the graves of these children. There had been many, many enquiries over the years about where the babies had been buried. Apparently there were so many enquiries that they found there were 30,000 babies supposed to be buried at West Terrace Cemetery. People wanted to know where. I was one of these mothers. I lost my son Michael shortly after his birth. I didn't know where he was buried and so I got involved in the West Terrace Project. I attended the ceremony of the unveiling of the Baby Memorial that is dedicated to all the lost children.

West Terrace Cemetery, Adelaide Baby Memorial

Under a Bay tree, a small sitting space formed by a curved wall of quarried stone which directs attention to a symbolic bowl of water made of granite on which floats a broken chain of white daisies in bronze.

The water symbolises calm, the white daisies innocence and the broken chain - a life cut off. The plaques are in the shape of leaves set in ceramic tiles and the whole memorial is in the form of a carpet of bay leaves - bay leaves do not change when they fall.

(Extract from Dedication and Unveiling of the Baby Memorial. West Terrace Cemetery, Adelaide, South Australia. Sunday, March 10th, 1996)

When I went to the ceremony at the West Terrace Cemetery I didn't see any Aboriginal women at the unveiling, and it bothered me. I thought that out of 30,000 babies there must be Aboriginal babies out there. Where were the people? That made me think that we need to get out there and talk, spread the word, share with them about the West Terrace Project. So I began to tell my story and send information out to other Aboriginal women.

Speaking out

As I was doing this I was asked to present at the Stillbirth and Neo Natal Deaths (SANDS) Conference. I agreed. I thought it would be an opportunity for me to share my story which would be healing for me, and I also wanted to tell the stories of Aboriginal people. I knew that I'd be the only Aboriginal person at the conference. I wished that there would be more of us but I also knew how daunting these conferences can be for me.

I decided to try to use my own grief as a way of joining. We all had that in common. I thought I could tell my own story of grief and then make the links to the broader stories of grief that we as Aboriginal people have experienced. I thought it might be healing for all of us. I began by telling my own story.

My story as an Aboriginal woman: The loss of a twin in the 1960s

Today I am going to share a part of my life with you and reflect on what it was like for me as a sixteen year old in the 1960s.

In those days we had an Aborigines Act where some Aboriginal people were given an Exemption which allowed us to mix with the wider community, but it also indicated that we ceased to be Aboriginal.

This act prevented many of my people from returning to their birth places on the missions. Also there was a loitering act which prevented people of many different races congregating together. This included mixing with our own people as well as our white friends.

In those days, we were not even citizens of this country. This didn't happen until 1967 when we could vote.

As a young girl growing up in these times I had a sense of not belonging and trying to hang on to my identity. During my school days I failed to fit in to the school system and spent my time in a special class till I was thirteen, and was able to get myself a job in a factory. It was good to get away from being called 'blacky' and 'dummy'. By this time I figured out that I didn't have anything in that head of mine but there wasn't anything wrong with my hands. By the time I was sixteen I felt like an old woman and fell in love and became pregnant ... even got married. But, like many Aboriginal women, I didn't like

Doctors and Hospitals. After all, I wasn't sick. Pregnancy to me wasn't a sickness, it was a natural condition.

After getting a bit of pressure from my mother to book into the hospital, I decided to go there seven months into my pregnancy. During the birth it was noticed that I was delivering twins, both boys. The first twin was 7lbs, the second was only 3lbs 14oz and he was breech, plus he had chest complications. I remember the joy of having two sons.

Two days later my son, Michael, passed away. I was young and death scared me and I wasn't encouraged to talk about it. The hospital took care of the burial which was to be at West Terrace Cemetery. There were no funeral services in those days. I had a baby to take home. My other son, Shawn, has been a constant reminder all these years and always will be, but that was the practice then - how times have changed!

Then early this year, I found out through the media about the project known as the Baby Memorial at West Terrace Cemetery which had been prompted by the requests of grieving mothers.

It was then that I was able to cry again. I couldn't believe that after all this time that I had unresolved grief. I felt disbelief - I am a Health Worker and know all about grief and the process... I couldn't help thinking about the mass graves. Going to the Baby Memorial Service was a great relief to me and my children.

After the service I needed to know where Michael's resting place was, but, following many enquiries, I found that he wasn't even at the West Terrace Cemetery!!!! At this stage I decided to write my story for other Aboriginal women and give them information and details of the West Terrace project.

A very special thankyou to the researchers at the West Terrace Cemetery, for their dedication and compassion for this project.

A happy ending for my story is that I have found out, finally, almost 32 years to the day, where my son is buried: the Cheltenham Cemetery was my son's last journey, his resting place.

Telling my story

Talking about my own story first was a bit emotional for me. I'd only just found out where Michael was buried. It was a bit emotional and that was clear in my voice. The Stillbirth and Neo Natal Death Support conference was a very moving time for a lot of women who had lost their babies. Women were finally talking. So many of us had been told not to, that it might upset us. A lot of the mothers who had lost their babies had been told: 'You've got to let go and move on now'. And that's the worst thing you can say. There is a lot of pressure to grieve in particular ways. We are trying to challenge this. We are trying to allow people to grieve in their own ways. Now we are talking, following it through.

My story was an old story, my loss. I used it as an indicator of how long grief can be with us. I also used that story to show that it wasn't just about my grief, that it's also about Aboriginal people and our 'griefs', all the different sorts of losses and injustices that we are trying to find our ways through.

At the SANDS conference there were no Aboriginal people except myself. I told my story in a way to let them know what it was like in the days when we weren't citizens of this country, when we couldn't vote. I told my story in these ways because we're always trying, us guys, always trying to get them to understand!

Telling my own story of grief was a way of joining with the non-Aboriginal people there. In some way I saw that grief could help us join - to create the context for us to talk through the broader losses. I wanted to talk about injustice in a healing way because, for us as Aboriginal people, telling the stories of injustice is a part of our grieving, a part of honouring our histories. Once I had told my story I thought, 'Okay that's my story. I've made the connection with the audience, now to move on, to let people know what it's like for us as Aboriginal people.'

Externalizing 'grief'

I had decided that I would try to play the character of 'Grief' and to invite the audience to ask me particular questions. I knew this would be very different to externalizing AIDS or Sugar, but I thought that it might help us to find common ground from where I could share the experiences of Aboriginal

people. I wanted to make sure we could talk about our losses and injustices as Aboriginal people in a healing way. Playing the character of Grief and giving the participants questions to ask me was just a starting point. I'm telling this story in the hope that it will give people ideas that they could work on, so that they can come up with their own ways of working.

Talking with 'grief'

The group: *Have we met you before? What is your name?*

Grief: *Yes, you could have come across me sometime in your lives, in one way or another. My name is Grief and I'm the response to loss. I'm a process or a way of doing things.*

The group: *Has your presence been with Aboriginal People?*

Grief: *Yes and for a long time. To give you a good picture, allow me to take you on a Journey of Aboriginal History through some of the events in this country's past (loss of land, sickness, deaths, health, loss of language). You need to read in-between the lines for many happenings: removal of children, deaths in custody, rights and culture.*

At this point I put up a poster of the 'Journey of Aboriginal History' (see page 25) and encouraged people to fill in the gaps on the poster which I had left blank.

The group: *What's your way of doing things?*

Grief: *Let me talk about the different ways that people relate to me. I'm like stepping stones, and people step differently.*

When I spoke about stepping stones I talked in my own language and had a dialogue with the audience. I tried to talk about stepping stones from an Aboriginal perspective. One of the ways I did this was to focus on little griefs as with death all around us sometimes it is too overwhelming to talk about at first.

Aboriginal ways of grieving

Aboriginal people have their own ways of grieving. A part of Aboriginal people's story telling is that we hold onto our loved ones that aren't here any longer. It is a part of our history, who we belong to, who we are related to - our ancestors.

When an Aboriginal person meets another Aboriginal person we work out how we know each other through our relatives. We often refer to people who are no longer alive. Our old people are still very much with us. Through them we identify each other. I might not know your parents, but who were their parents? We constantly reflect and remember these people.

All my histories are through my grandmother. Everybody knows of her and her children. Hanging on to those old people is very much part of our strength. It is a part of our story-telling. They are talked about and so they are still with us.

When I talked about stepping stones it was with the hope that this metaphor would give a sense of movement, a sense of where people have been at and where they might move. We discussed the many different reactions people can have to loss. We talked about finding our own ways, our own individual ways, and our own cultural ways of grieving.

The group: *How close is loss to you?*

Grief: *Very close - we are partners. As I said before, Grief is the response to loss. Let me give you a definition of loss: 'It's something or someone you had or loved that has gone out of your lives'.*

People don't fully understand how broad loss is. Let me share with you the many different losses and you may be able to reflect on the Journey of Aboriginal History and the Journey of Grief.

At this point I tried to invite people to consider the losses and injustices that we as Aboriginal people have experienced and how we are trying to come to terms with these.

The group: *How can we deal with you?*

Grief: *There are many ways, people do it differently. Some people do it through having support available, talking about their grief, through maintaining*

spiritual and religious beliefs, through expressing feelings and stories - Men it's okay to cry. Some people help by gently encouraging the person to tell his/her own story, through listening far more than they talk. Never try to measure another person's grief. Their grief is what they say it is. Treat with love and respect any person who is grieving. Remember that every individual will grieve their own way.

The beginnings of a conversation

It was a very moving experience. By starting on what we had in common it allowed me to share broader stories in a powerful way, a joined way. People were very open. It was wonderful to talk with the non-Aboriginal people afterwards. They were coming up to talk and hear more. I think it is good for non-Aboriginal people to hear these stories from Aboriginal people in the ways that we choose to tell them. It invites them to understand what has happened to Aboriginal people. It seemed as if a conversation had begun, a conversation that could be healing for all of us.

A different feeling

The session had a whole different feeling to Sugar (see 'Introducing Sugar' this newsletter). Grief is such a sensitive issue so I did it in very different ways. I couldn't use humour. I couldn't be boastful. It was difficult as I had to shift from being silly and yet still get the message across. I love being boastful and silly and making people laugh. The humour was the one thing I did miss. Grief isn't a funny thing. It is a sad and delicate thing. We can't be laughing about it.

Honouring grief, talking together

I feel very close to Grief for lots and lots of reasons. I think the young children that we have now, the youth, really need to be in touch with our histories, including our histories of loss and how we have dealt with them. In some ways it is honouring of our grief. I wanted to get over to the people that

grief is natural, normal, a thing that we have to go through. A lot of our people don't want to talk about Grief as we've had a lot of losses. Often it seems as if we are just moving from one death to another. Sometimes our people just get so weary. Sometimes it's just too much to go to one more funeral. We have to find ways of grieving together. It's far too hard to do on our own. I wanted us to look at Grief together, in a positive way, not a negative way but in a way that names the injustices, acknowledges our dead, and honours Aboriginal ways. I wanted to acknowledge that people grieve in different ways, and also to acknowledge the light at the end of the tunnel. I think the externalizing gave a little bit of a vision - that there's room to move on. That there are ways to deal with Grief together.

Grieving in our own ways

Aboriginal people have many different ways of dealing with grief. Often when people die there can be a good feeling that their spirit will be going with all the other spirits, other lost loved ones. A lot of Aboriginal people experience signs from loved ones who have died. Seeing particular birds, for instance, is often experienced as having ongoing contact with people who have died, ongoing contact with their spirits.

Some people feel that they have to move house after a person has died because their loved one's spirit still lives in the building. When I lost a loved one I needed to get the room in which he died blessed before I could re-enter it. There are a lot of different ways that Aboriginal people grieve. They can be quite complex.

I hope that the exercise and these ways of talking about grief puts people more in touch with their own ways of relating to death, to grief, to loss. I hope that it puts people more in touch with their own healing ways. I think telling the story of my own grief gives people a chance to relate to stories of loss and how differently they can be dealt with over time.

Reflecting on cultural histories

I am interested in using these ways of working with Aboriginal people. I think externalizing grief could invite people to reflect on their culture. A lot of

programs don't reflect on Aboriginal culture and don't include our history. Many people are starting to forget about the invasion and the losses we have had: the land, the language, the culture. I want to talk about grief in ways that invite our people to reflect on our histories. Not to dwell on the past but to remember it, to look at some of the issues, some of the events in their lives, and see them as stepping stones. We need to talk about our history with our own people otherwise we are going to lose our young ones. They're going to have a lot of identity problems about where they belong and where they fit, and we have to help them. I think we do.

For Aboriginal people in some ways inviting people into conversations with Grief is inviting people to hold on. Grief invites us to cherish our people and histories. We need situations that invite us to be in touch with our histories to keep them alive. Talking about losses in these ways is one way of keeping our stories alive.

I'm trying to find ways for my people not to be angry, but, at the same time, I want us to understand our anger - deaths in custody, babies taken from families - there are many reasons. I want us to reflect on those histories - look at them as losses in our lives, and remember. Because we've started forgetting. Our culture is constantly being challenged, and this way our people can remember and reflect.

Grief and justice

It is important for us as Aboriginal people to make the links between justice and grief. So many of our losses have been unjust, and this is what is so hard to deal with. So many of our deaths are due to injustice. We are losing a lot of our people well before their time. A lot of our deaths are not natural deaths - for example, deaths in custody. It is tragic that we are losing our people so young. When my father died he was thirty-nine, a week off his fortieth birthday. To us that is a tragic event, but it is a common one. People like me, who are nearly fifty, we count our blessings that we are here each day. We say to each other how lucky we are to still be alive. We don't take life for granted.

We need the injustices addressed so that we can grieve our losses. We need stories told and acknowledged. Working on our grief in these ways is working towards justice.

Futures

I've been Sugar, I've been Grief. I can't wait for another one now - to see what it might be. There is so much work to be done at a grassroots level, and there are lots of other workers who are interested in building on this sort of work. It all blended in beautifully. And my own story of grief had a happy ending. I found my baby just before I went to the SANDS conference. A week before the conference they rang me up to tell me they had found him at Cheltenham Cemetery. So we're going to get a little plaque now. That's our next step - to have a family gathering to say goodbye to him, to honour him.

It was moving for me to find a way to be joined on issues of grief across cultures that got us talking together. It was also powerful to realise the links in my own life. There were many links for me between finding my way through my own losses and injustices, such as where my baby had been buried, and getting in touch with ways of working with Aboriginal communities on the injustices and losses we have all experienced. They were linked in some way. The link is there. I had to tell my story - to share it. We have to share our stories - to grieve and honour. We have to tell our stories in ways that make us stronger.

Notes

1. First published in the 1996 No.3 issue of the *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*. Republished here with permission.
2. Barbara is the proud mother of three grown-up adults, is blessed with eight grandchildren, and is fortunate to have her elderly mother living with her. When not working, Barbara enjoys being with her grannies [grandchildren], and her other passion is to be involved in narrative practices. Barbara can be contacted at the Murray Mallee Community Health Service, PO Box 346, Murray Bridge 5253, South Australia.