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Saying hullo again:

The incorporation of the lost relationship in the resolution of grief [1]

by

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Freud … suggests that the completion of the mourning process requires that those left behind develop a new reality which no longer includes what has been lost. But … it must be added that full recovery from mourning may restore what has been lost, maintaining it through incorporation into the present. Full recollection and retention may be as vital to recovery and wellbeing as forfeiting memories.
(Myerhoff 1982, p.111)

For some time I have been exploring the 'saying hullo' metaphor and its application to grief work. This exploration has been prompted by particular experiences in therapy with persons who have been diagnosed elsewhere as suffering from 'delayed grief' or 'pathological mourning'. Many of these persons have received intensive and lengthy treatments that have been oriented by the normative model of the grief process, or by the chemical approach to life's problems.

I usually find that such persons are well acquainted with the grief map and can locate their experience in relation to it. They clearly understand that they have failed, in their grief work, to reach the appropriate destination. They 'know' that their arrival at this destination will be evidenced by a fully experienced 'goodbye', acceptance of the permanence of the loss of the loved one, and a desire to get on with a new life that is disconnected from that person.

At first contact, persons experiencing 'delayed grief' or 'pathological mourning' look as if they have lost their own 'selves' as well as the loved one. Without prompting, they put therapists in touch with their loss and its subsequent effect on their life, freely relating the details of their sense of emptiness, worthlessness, and feelings of depression. Such is their despair that I have often felt quite overwhelmed at the outset of therapy. Although I commonly discern invitations from these persons to join in further 'more of the same' conversations that are activated by the 'saying goodbye' metaphor, I am usually able to decline these.

It can be expected that, under these circumstances, persisting with 'grief work' oriented by the normative model will complicate the situation further, rather than empower these persons and enrich their lives. Such is the desolation that these persons experience, establishing a context in therapy for the incorporation of the lost relationship seems far more strongly indicated than further efforts at encouraging the forfeiture of this relationship. My investigation of the 'saying hullo' metaphor was prompted by this consideration.

Guided by this metaphor, I formulated and introduced questions that I hoped would open up the possibility for persons to reclaim their relationship with the lost loved one. Surprised by the effect of these questions in the resolution of the sense of emptiness and feelings of depression, I decided to

explore the metaphor further. I expected that a fuller understanding of the processes involved would enable me to more effectively assist persons in the re-positioning of themselves in relation to the death of a loved one, a re-positioning that would bring the relief so strongly desired.

Mary

Mary was forty-three years old when she sought help for what she described as ‘unresolved loss’. Some six years earlier, her husband, Ron, had died suddenly from heart failure. This had been entirely unexpected. Until that time, everything had been fine for Mary. She and Ron had enjoyed a ‘rich and loving’ friendship, one that they both valued very highly.

Upon Ron’s death, Mary’s world fell apart. Grief-stricken, and feeling ‘numbed’ from that time, she ‘simply went through the motions of life’, not experiencing consolation from any quarter. Her numbness survived a number of attempts to ‘work through’ her grief via counselling. Medication had not provided relief. Despite this, Mary persisted in her attempts to achieve some sense of wellbeing by consulting therapists and ‘working on acceptance’ over the next five years.

At my first meeting with Mary, she said that she had all but given up hope that she would ever regain even a semblance of wellbeing. She thought she would never be able to say goodbye. After Mary had put me in touch with her despair, I invited her to escape the ‘deadly serious’ consequences of Ron’s death.

I wondered aloud whether saying goodbye was a helpful idea anyway, and about whether it might be a better idea to say hullo to Ron. Further, I said that the desolation she so keenly experienced might mean that she had said goodbye just too well. Mary’s response was one of puzzlement and surprise. Had she heard what she thought she had? I repeated my thoughts and saw, for the first time, a spark in her.

I then asked if she would be interested in experimenting with saying hullo to Ron or if she thought he was buried too deep for her to entertain this idea. Mary began to sob; easy sobbing, not desperate. I waited. After ten or fifteen minutes she suddenly said: ‘Yes, he’s been buried too deep for me’. She

smiled and then said that it might be helpful to 'dig him up a bit'. So I began to ask some questions:[3]

- *If you were seeing yourself through Ron's eyes right now, what would you be noticing about yourself that you could appreciate?*
- *What difference would it make to how you feel if you were appreciating this in yourself right now?*
- *What do you know about yourself that you are awakened to when you bring alive the enjoyable things that Ron knew about you?*
- *What difference would it make to you if you kept this realisation, about yourself, alive on a day-to-day basis?*
- *What difference would feeling this way make to the steps that you could take to get back into life?*
- *How could you let others know that you have reclaimed some of the discoveries about yourself that were clearly visible to Ron, and that you personally find attractive?*
- *How would being aware of that which has not been visible to you for the past six years enable you to intervene in your life?*
- *What difference will knowing what you now know about yourself make to your next step?*
- *In taking this next step, what else do you think you might find out about yourself that could be important for you to know?*

Mary struggled with these questions through alternating bursts of sadness and joy. Over the two subsequent sessions she shared with me the important rediscoveries that she was making about herself and life. At follow-up, some twelve months later, Mary said: 'It's strange, but when I discovered that Ron didn't have to die for me, that I didn't have to separate from him, I became less preoccupied with him and life was richer'.

John

John was thirty-nine years old when he consulted me about longstanding 'difficulties with self-esteem'. He couldn't recall not having a critical attitude toward himself. Throughout his life he had hungered for approval and

recognition from others. For this, he hated himself all the more, believing that he lacked substance as a person and that this was clearly apparent to others.

John considered himself loved by his wife and children and believed that his experience in this family of procreation had gone some way toward countering his nagging self-doubt - but never far enough. His self-doubt was so easily triggered by what he considered to be the most trivial of circumstances. He had, on various occasions, sought professional advice, but had not experienced the relief that he was seeking.

In view of the long history of John's self-rejection, I asked for further details about his life. He told me that, as far as he knew, he had a happy childhood until the death of his mother at the tender age of seven, just before his eighth birthday. No-one in the family had coped with this at all well and, for a time, John's father had been a lost person to everyone, including himself. John had vivid recall of the events surrounding his mother's death. He experienced disbelief for some considerable time, always expecting that she would show up around the next corner. He then became entirely heartbroken. Eventually his father re-married to a caring person 'but things were never really the same again'.

I asked John about what difference it would have made to how he felt about himself now if things had remained the same; if his mother hadn't died. At this point he began to get tearful. Didn't he think she might have gone missing from his life for too long? Was it really helpful for her to remain absent from his life? He looked surprised. Would he mind if I asked more questions? 'No, that would be fine.' I proceeded with the following:

- *What did your mother see when she looked at you through her loving eyes?*
- *How did she know these things about you?*
- *What is it about you that told her about this?*
- *What can you now see in yourself that had been lost to you for many years?*
- *What difference would it make to your relationships with others if you carried this knowledge with you in your daily life?*
- *How would this make it easier for you to be your own person, rather than a person for others?*
- *What could you do to introduce others to this new picture of yourself as a person?*

- *How would bringing others into this new picture of your person enable you to nurture yourself more?*
- *In what way would such an experience of nurturing yourself affect your relationship with yourself?*

I met with John on three further occasions at two week intervals, and then for a follow-up eight months later. Over this time, he took various steps to keep his mother's 'picture' of him in circulation, and arrived at a new relationship with himself, one that was self-accepting rather than self-rejecting. He no longer felt vulnerable to those events that used to drive him into self-doubt.

Discussion

Experience of experience

- *If you were seeing yourself through Ron's eyes right now, what would you be noticing about yourself that you could appreciate?*

Those questions that seemed most helpful in assisting persons to reclaim these important relationships, were the ones that invited a recounting of what they perceived to be the deceased person's positive experience of them. This recounting was an expression of their experience of specific aspects of the deceased person's experience. These questions had an immediate and visible effect. The memories that they touched off were not just a factual account of historical events, but a full and vivid re-living of experience, one that incorporated the person's various senses and emotions.

It was clear that, in this recounting, a re-experience of past selves was triggered off. Various lost or forgotten knowledges of self seemed to become available for persons to express. How is this process to be understood?

In striving to make sense of our lives, we face the task of arranging our experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of ourselves. Specific experiences of events of the past and the present, and those that are predicted to occur in the future, are connected to develop this account, which has been referred to as a story or self-narrative.

> *The past, present, and future are not only constructed but connected in a lineal sequence that is defined by systematic if not causal relations. How we depict any one segment is related to our conception of the whole, which I choose to think of as a story.* (Bruner 1986a, p.141)

The success of this task provides us with a sense of continuity and meaning in our lives. We rely on this sense for the ordering of our daily lives and for the interpretation of further experiences. However, this sense is gained at a price. A narrative can never re-present the richness of what Turner (1986) has called our 'lived experience':

> *… life experience is richer than discourse. Narrative structures organize and give meaning to experience, but there are always feelings and lived experience not fully encompassed by the dominant story.* (Bruner 1986a, p.143)

The structuring of a narrative requires recourse to a selective process in which we prune, from our experience, those events that do not fit with the dominant evolving story that we and others have about us. Thus, over time, much of our stock of lived experience goes unstoried and is never 'told' or expressed.

However, under certain circumstances, it is possible for persons to re-live neglected aspects of their lived experience in un-edited form. At these times the sequential arrangement of events across time is temporarily undone and replaced by what Myerhoff (1982) refers to as 'simultaneity'. Thus, *a sense of oneness with all that has been one's history is achieved* (p.110).

I believe that those questions that invite persons to recount what they perceive to be the deceased person's experience of them, achieve this simultaneity. In this reaching back into experience, alternative and previously lost knowledges can be located and re-performed. Thus, new and enriching acknowledgements and validations of self can become available to persons.

Selection of alternative knowledges

- *What do you know about yourself that you are awakened to when you bring alive the enjoyable things that Ron knew about you?*

In encouraging persons to claim the alternative knowledges that become

available in this reliving of experience, I have found other questions to be helpful. These questions invite persons to review this experience and to locate those alternative knowledges of self that present the 'facts' about self that are most appealing; those 'facts' that will assist them and others to 'write' a new story of their lives.

These questions also assist persons in the development of an awareness that:

> *Every telling is an arbitrary imposition of meaning on the flow of memory, in that we highlight some causes and discount others; that is, every telling is interpretive.* (Bruner 1986b, p.7)

Circulation of self-knowledge

- *How could you let others know that you have reclaimed some of the discoveries about yourself that were clearly visible to Ron, and that you find personally attractive?*

As 'self' is a performed self, the survival of alternative knowledges is enhanced if the new ideas and new meanings that they bring forth are put into circulation: *The hard-won meanings should be said, painted, danced, dramatised, put into circulation* (Turner 1986, p.37).

To achieve this circulation, an audience to the performance of such new meanings is required. Questions can be derived that identify and recruit this audience. In the 'reading' of these new meanings, this audience participates, via feedback, in new productions of the person's self. The production of self is a recursive process, one in which selected aspects of one's experience are performed, and in which this very performance contributes to the stock of one's experience of events from which self-knowledge is derived.

Consciousness of production of productions

- *What difference will knowing what you now know about yourself make to your next step?*
- *In taking this next step, what else do you think you might find out about yourself that could be important for you to know?*

Further questions can be introduced that encourage persons to entertain, more fully, their role in the production of their own productions of self. Consciousness of one's production of one's productions opens new possibilities for persons to direct their own course in life.

As persons become aware of the process in which they are both a performer in, and audience to, their own performances, new choices become available to them in regard to the alternative knowledges of self that they might co-operate with - and they experiences themselves as *the authors of themselves* (Myerhoff 1986, p.263).

Other applications

Loss of young child

Parents who have lost very young children have found the 'saying hullo' metaphor helpful, including in the circumstances of the death of unborn children. After being introduced to the idea, they do not experience great difficulty in speculating about what the child's experience of them, as parents, might have been, and then incorporating this.

Child abuse

The applicability of this metaphor has also been explored and found to be helpful with children who have been 'taken into care' with histories of being repeatedly and seriously abused. As a result of such abuse, these children usually relate to their self with hate, and go about doing their best to fail, often mutilating their own lives and futures through destructive behaviour.

In these circumstances, I have worked with the child and residential care workers to locate 'unique outcomes' (White 1988) that identify occurrences of adult persons relating positively and helpfully to the child, instead of negatively and harmfully. These unique outcomes can be located historically and/or currently. For example, it might be discovered that a certain school teacher had taken a particularly kindly attitude towards the child, that a community worker had taken a special interest in the child's plight, or that a residential care worker

has recently made some important and pleasing observations about the child.

Once unique outcomes have been established, questions can be introduced that invite the child to render them significant through a performance of meaning. These questions encourage speculation about the alternative knowledges of self that are associated with the unique outcomes. Examples of these questions follow:

- *What do you think it is that your teacher noticed about you that your …* [the abusing adult] *was blind to?*
- *What is it about you that told your teacher this?*
- *So what did this teacher know about you that you can know about yourself?*
- *If* [the abusing adult] *had not been so blind to these facts, and had not missed out on you as a person, what difference would this have made to their attitude towards you?*

These questions, and those that encourage the circulation of the alternative knowledges and a consciousness of the production of one's productions, undermine the child's self-hate and their participation in the mutilation of their own lives and futures.

Adult self-abuse

I have introduced a variation of this work to women and men who, as a result of emotional and/or physical abuse during childhood and adolescence, maintain a very negative and rejecting attitude towards themselves in adult life. This self-rejection is the outcome of their incorporation of the abusing adult/s' attitude towards them.

These persons cannot rest. They feel perpetually compelled to operate upon and discipline their self according to the abuser's attitudes. They are unable to trust any of the more personally favourable versions of their self that they might encounter through life.

It is helpful to invite these persons to attend to those unique outcomes that identify recent occasions during which they were able to treat themselves with a fraction of 'self-acceptance', or occasions during which they protested their submission to the dominant specifications of self that were established by

the abuser.

Once a unique outcome has been identified, questions can be introduced that encourage a specific recounting of childhood and adolescent experiences, one that locates similar but historical episodes of self-acceptance or protest. Efforts are also made to pinpoint the person's age at the time of these historical episodes. Further questions are then helpful in assisting these persons to revise their relationship with their self:

- *If you were looking at yourself through the eyes of that ten-year-old boy right now, what would he be seeing in you that he would really appreciate?*
- *What is it about the development of you as a person that would be most important to him?*
- *Noticing this, would he encourage you to try to be someone else, or would he take you for who you are?*
- *Why do you think he would have liked you for a parent?*
- *What difference do you think it would have made to his life if he'd had you for a parent?*
- *What could you do to side with this ten-year-old boy's attitude towards you, rather than …* [the abusing adult's] *attitude?*
- *What difference would this make in your relationship with yourself, to how you would treat yourself?*

The responses to these questions contribute to the reclaiming of, and to the performance of, alternative self-knowledges, and to the forging of a new relationship with self through an experience of 'self-specification'.

Separation

The 'saying hullo' metaphor is also appropriate in circumstances where there has been a loss of a relationship that has not been incurred by death. Often, such a loss is devastating to the person who did not initiate the separation and who wanted to persist with the relationship.

One common reaction is for these persons to feel betrayed by their partner, and to submit to extraordinary self-doubt. At times, this is associated with an intoxicating self-righteous anger. These responses usually relate to a

new perception that they were never really loved by the other, but 'just strung along'. I refer to this new perception as the 'second story'.

When these responses persist, questions can be introduced that bring the 'first story' - the one that includes the experience of being a lovable person - out from the shadow of the second story; questions that invite the incorporation of the first story, and an active co-operation with it. Successful incorporation resolves the self-doubt and self-righteous anger.

Conclusion

Many persons who have consulted me over problems that relate to unresolved grief have found the 'saying hullo' metaphor, and the questions derived from this metaphor, to be helpful. I have consistently found that, through the incorporation of the lost relationship, those problems defined in terms such as 'pathological mourning' and 'delayed grief' are resolved. In achieving this incorporation, persons arrive at a new relationship with their self. Their attitude towards their self becomes a more accepting and embracing one, and they come to treat themselves with greater kindness and compassion.

The illustrations given in this paper provide some examples of the utilisation of this metaphor. However, these examples by no means exhaust the possible applications.

In focussing here on the 'saying hullo' metaphor, I am not taking a position against the utilisation of the saying goodbye metaphor. There is much to say goodbye to, including to a material reality and to hopes and expectations, etc. Instead, I believe that the process of grief is a 'saying goodbye and then saying hullo' phenomenon.

Having said this, I would argue that every experience of loss is unique, as are the requirements for the resolution of every loss. Any metaphor is only helpful to the extent that it recognises, and facilitates the expression of, this uniqueness, and doesn't subject persons to normative specifications.

Notes

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2. Michael loves living in Adelaide, South Australia, and being with his family and friends. His work with families and communities has attracted widespread international interest. He can also be found swimming, flying a small plane, or riding his bicycle through the Adelaide hills. Michael can be contacted c/- Dulwich Centre, 345 Carrington Street, Adelaide 5000, South Australia.

3. Of course, the examples of questions that are given in this paper are not presented by therapists in barrage-like fashion, but within the context of a co-evolving process. Each question is sensitively attuned to the person's response to the previous question.

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