



Saying hullo, goodbye, or both?

Multi-storied re-remembering practices to assist women in the transition
after the loss of a male partner to suicide

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex experiences of women who have lost a male partner to suicide after experiencing violence from that partner. These circumstances often result in women trying to rise from the 'stigma' of violence and suicide. This paper describes how using multi-storied re-remembering narrative practices creates space for women to speak of their multitude of experiences. These stories illuminate agency and hopes for the future for the women. They also offer ways free of a double taboo: in relation to suicide and in relation to men's violence against women.

Key words: *death, dying, bereavement, women, violence, narrative therapy, narrative practice, collective documents, re-remembering practices*

'The process of swimming through the waters of shame and guilt has been rocky, and sometimes I've been swept out by the strong currents. Now, with this project, we hope to collectively come up with ideas and actions that will make a difference to others who have lost loved ones to suicide. We hope this project will assist people to hold their heads up in difficult times.'

(Newman, Sather, & Dulwich Centre, 2010, p. 16).¹

It all began on a sunny day in Adelaide in March 2010. I sat with David Denborough, and we discussed how I was struggling to hold my head up after the suicide of my husband in 2004. I spoke of how the shame had crippled me and, at times, led me to live underground. I was introduced to David Newman, a fellow narrative practitioner who had lost his mother to suicide. We started the project *Illuminating skills and knowledges around suicide: An invitation to practitioners*. The first step was crafting narratively-informed questions derived from our local knowledges, narrative theories, and narrative practice.

We used narrative ideas to seek out particular stories and storylines about the ways people cope and deal with the suicide of a loved one. We rescued the skills and knowledges in the stories that were largely emailed to us. The multi-storied theme of 'it is so important to see people who suicide as more than their final act' (Newman & Sather, forthcoming) gave people strength and dignity to remember their loved one in ways that honoured what was important to them and the contributions they made to their lives. The resource for families that was created from this project is entitled, '**Holding our heads up: We have lost loved ones to suicide and want to share stories not stigma**' and is included in this journal issue.

When relationships were fraught with violence

The *Illuminating skills and knowledges around suicide* project has now led to a further determination to create resources for women who experienced violence from their male partners and subsequently their male partner suicided. In these situations, women can find themselves in a double-bind, holding love and care for their partner (knowing he is more than his final act) while recognising the relationship had been fraught with violence and abusive practices. In this paper, I will outline the process of how I am using narrative ideas to create a resource for women in this situation of surviving a partnership characterised by violence and suicide. Some short stories from women are included.

My own history

I live in Melbourne, Australia, and am from Irish and English decent, with Christian heritage. My ancestral lineage is made up of shepherds, missionaries, and a young poor English man who was accused of stealing a scarf and was shipped to Australia. Most women in my family were not able to find safety in marriages. Only one of my grandmothers achieved this: Helen was artistic and created a safe passage for herself, moving to Tasmania and marrying a fisherman who valued equity in their marriage. I have lived with the complexity of loving my husband and also being afraid of him at times, and then having to come to terms with his suicide.

At times this has been like making my way through a web of taboos: living in a relationship that is fraught carries shame, and suicide carries another stigma. As I started to meet other women who had lost male partners to suicide, and who had also experienced violence at the hands of their partners, it became clear to me personally and professionally that this dual experience is incredibly important to address.

Power of histories

There are different cultural and historical meanings surrounding suicide. Those of us who are bereaved by suicide are in relationship with ideas from earlier centuries that are often so very harsh and, although some have changed over time, the past still haunts us today. The more we can know of such histories and meanings, the more space we have to imagine and construct generative meanings. For us women, it can seem as if we are trapped in a shame trap that we didn't invent; it has been around for a very long time. Now we are making our escape!

Polyphony of voices

This paper represents the voices and knowledge of six Australian women, Aunty Bea Edwards, Geraldine, Annette, Jen, Shirley, and me. It is our intention to make contributions to other women transitioning in life after the loss of a male partner. We all agreed that some sort of resource that included diverse stories from other women would have been helpful to us, as we wouldn't have felt as alone and despairing.

We began by sharing poetry and then we responded to some of the questions from the original *Illuminating skills and knowledges around suicide* project (Sather & Newman, 2010).

Question categories

In narrative practice, questions are designed to explore new meanings and possibilities in people's lives and relationships. 'Questions act to open discursive space for new descriptions, exceptions, and information previously restrained by the problem' (Madigan, 2013, p. 455).

We used questions from the following categories:

- making sense of the suicide;
- the initial news;
- guilt, shame, or blame;
- preparations made for the survivor;
- community responses;
- places, people, or things;
- considerations of family and culture;
- ongoing relationships;
- legacies;
- messages to others (Sather & Newman, 2010).

For this project, I also developed some new questions specifically for women who have experienced violence prior to their partner's suicide:

- Which memories/lived experiences do we want to 'say hullo' to again, and what experiences do we want to say goodbye to?
- Have there been women who have come before you that might have some knowledges about overcoming the tactics of abuse and shame?
- What kinds of stories do you think could contribute to other women travelling on a similar journey?

I conducted and recorded interviews with the permission of the women. Each woman was then sent a written draft of her responses to the questions and asked to correct any errors, particularly of meaning and emphasis. A booklet containing the collective document of all the revised narratives was then distributed to the women.

Insider skills and double-listening

I was a participant in this co-search project.² I was also the facilitator and final editor of the co-constructed narratives. I used my insider-knowledges purposefully to prompt

conversations and create a context for speaking. I introduced myself to the women as someone who had lost her husband and had four children. I discussed the *Illuminating skills and knowledges around suicide* project and said, 'I was surprised how many people who had lost a loved one responded to the questions from different parts of the world'. I also spoke about how this project had helped me personally, as I had previously felt considerable shame and isolation. I thoughtfully chose stories from my own life to create a context of mutual sharing. In sharing our insider-knowledges, we created community around hardship.

As the facilitator of the conversations, I carried Michael White's words closely, 'There is no excuse for people to experience re-traumatization within the context of therapy. Distress yes, re-traumatization no' (White, 1995, p. 85). Double-listening (White, 1995) opens up space for double-storied accounts. In our conversations, we discovered that we are 'more than these events'. Through double-listening, despite the fact that experiences of abusive tactics had left us questioning ourselves, we discovered that we shared similar missions and life purposes. We shared a hope for our children to be okay, and a hope to contribute to the lives of others: one of us loves to cook for men recovering from drugs and alcohol; one of us has their own interior design business creatively helping people use space and light; one of us wants to open a drop-in centre where women can come and chat; one of us was nominated for the Women's Honour Roll for her work around domestic violence; and one of us coaches her son's basketball team.

We also found we were not merely passive recipients of trauma, but responded in particular, meaningful ways. For example, one woman left her husband to keep herself and her child safe; another woman tried to secure the family finances. We developed a special section of our collective document entitled, 'Celebrating the small things that we do'. Acknowledging these small things seemed to provide us with a different sense of dignity.

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Multi-storied and contradictory accounts

A narrative multi-storied approach allows women to speak about all their lived experiences through a gendered, analytical lens. Together we acknowledged horrific events and their vast effects. We also acknowledged that we women are more than these events, not merely passive recipients, and that we had responded in particular meaningful ways. Acknowledging multiple stories provided a chance for us to revise our relationships with our histories, and in doing so created a space for new possibilities in our current day-to-day lives.

The process of naming abusive practices in past relationships, and making the effects of the abuse in the relationship visible, provided us as women a chance to reach different identity conclusions. It makes the totalisation of 'It's all my fault' less possible. And yet, naming and acknowledging abusive practices by one's partner can be a very complex and heart-wrenching process after someone has died. Immediately after the death, children, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and community are all grieving. As women partners/wives, we can feel in the middle and reluctant to say too much about the complexity of our experiences, as everyone is in despair.

There are other restraints to talking too. Many of the women I spoke with described a particular sort of fear, as they believed their husbands were still watching over them, even in death. Shirley said, 'I thought he was haunting my family home. So after a while, I sold my house and that was helpful for me to feel safe again'.³

This project is determined to create room for multiple and sometimes contradictory stories. Not only did we name abusive practices and their effects, we also spoke of how important it is to us that our partners' competencies, gifts and values be acknowledged and archived in some way so that their positive legacies are left for their children. Some of us have made special boxes, with photos, letters, clothes, watches, pens, diaries – things that our children might treasure as they get older. My sons wear their Dad's clothes, as they are all over six feet tall now, and they read his book and writings, and sing along to his CDs.

The 'Saying hullo again' metaphor

In the 1980s, Michael White (1988/1998) introduced the 'Saying hullo again' metaphor, a shift away from the presumption that successful grieving requires saying 'goodbye' and passing through linear prescribed stages of grief. The concept of 'Saying hullo again' enables a reincorporation of the person in the loved one's day-to-day life.

In this project, we needed to expand the metaphor to embody a multitude of positions: 'saying hullo, goodbye, or both?'⁴

A woman reclaiming the relationship to their partner by 'saying hullo again' may involve remembering the positive contributions the loved one made in their life, but at the same time 'saying goodbye' to the effects of abuse and violence in the relationship. There may well be actions that caused distress and harm, and that gave rise to expressions of unworthiness, that women wish to farewell.

In a conversation between David Epston and Michael White on AIDS and dying, initiated by Cheryl White (White & Epston, 1991, p. 9), Michael was discussing the 'Saying hullo' metaphor and the reincorporation of the lost relationship. David Epston proposed asking the bereaved tender questions, such as,

- Of all the virtues of your dead sister, Rosemary, which of these would you like to carry forward in your own life?
- Do you think by doing this you will be able to keep her memory alive?

When Shirley and I were trying to discern how we could modify these questions, she said the question about virtues 'made her stomach turn'. Her husband didn't have virtues she wanted to carry on, but she did have happy memories of her children with their father that she wished to preserve.

Beautiful 'Saying hullo' questions therefore needed to be reworked for the project. When you are re-membering partners that have done very hurtful things, one needs to take complexity into consideration. In our group, I appreciated Jen's courage to include her learnings and commitment to helping women speak about 'all of it'. Jen's husband raped her 14-year-old daughter. She was married for 25 years, more than half of her life. I couldn't assume Jen would think her husband had virtues that she would want to carry forward in her life, but I couldn't assume there weren't things that she didn't hold dear either.

After a few conversations, there was an entry point; she was talking about how her son was scared he would turn out like his father. She reassured her son that it was the alcohol that took away his father's thinking – that he had an illness. She told me it helped her to see it that way. I asked her, 'What did that idea make possible?' She pondered for a while, and said she could reconnect to her husband 'having a good soul'. He was close to his family, and tried to help people. She thought that he would now want the best for her and he knew that she always helped people and was a good person. This was an important turning point as she said it was 'healing and takes me full circle; I don't have to forgive, but I can let go and remind my son of the better things about his Dad'.

This conversation gave me ideas for how I could ask a question from a similar line of enquiry from the 'saying hullo' metaphor that left room for all experiences. I devised this particular line of enquiry and received feedback from the women:

- What hopes and dreams of your children's father would you like your children to carry?
- What hopes and dreams can you imagine your partner would have for your life now?
- Do you think your partner might think differently about some of his actions now that he is no longer suffering? What would he want for your sense of self-worth now?

These questions provided an entry point into what the women want to hold precious about their partners. All the women were able to access things they valued about their partners on behalf of their children.

When I imagine how my partner, Drake⁵, would respond to witnessing my answers to the questions above, I think he would be proud that I am trying to acknowledge that he was trying to protect his family from his rages and that he could acknowledge that his actions were very hurtful. The complexity in his intentions was in being protective; he was suffering and feeling tremendous shame. I can envision my husband's 'better self' and how he would have preferred to make things right in life rather than death. I type this with agony in my heart: he wrote in his suicide letter (which I recently revisited), 'I wanted to set the world right, and I'm so sorry for mistreating you'. Drake would want me to reclaim my self-worth. He wrote in the letter, 'This isn't your fault, it's mine'. He would be incredibly grateful that we are keeping alive his dreams of creativity, writing, humour; we are working hard against the odds.

'Complex grief': A gendered analysis

'To be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given toward an open future.' Simone de Beauvoir (1946, p. 91)

'My daughter was free, my son was free, and I was free. I was free of the violence, I was free of the control, I was free knowing that I could walk this earth now on my own two feet, without looking behind my back wondering if I'm going to cop it. Now it's made me a very strong woman, very strong.' – Jen

In narrative practice, 'taken-for-granted truths' around gender, class, race, and sexual orientation are deconstructed, to create alternate stories of hope and change. In our conversations, we discussed how our ideas of being a woman impacted what we

told ourselves about ourselves. Some of the women said they had never spoken about these negative identity conclusions before and that it was a relief not to have to sit with these thoughts alone. It was in the mutual sharing that women felt safe to talk about things that had haunted them.

What made these conversations possible was finding ways to talk about the 'abusive' practices in the marriage in a way that fitted for each woman individually. In this project, we have not ignored the abusive practices that injured our dignity. **Coates and Wade (2005) remind us it is dangerous not to name or give language to the abusive practices, as that can conceal violence and women's creative resistances.** They write, 'while language is a tool of domination, it is no less a tool of resistance.' (p. 521)

At the same time, it was important that each woman had the space and possibility to name her own experiences in her own ways. To enable this, I would not bring the word 'abuse' into a participant's story, but instead invite the women to name what practices they were subjected to. The language of 'tactics of control and manipulation' was often very helpful. So too was sharing stories between women and considering our common and different experiences.

I sat with Aunty Bea on the porch and told her about Shirley's story and asked her, 'What is the role of gender in a woman losing a partner to suicide?' She replied, **'Grief is Grief, but woman are left to do the clean-up, take care of the children, without complaining, holding up the father as the hero, despite being mistreated. We have to hold the family together.'** She was also clear that in Aboriginal cultural context, colonisation had **powerfully influenced gender relations.**

In the sharing of our stories, we discovered there were **so many gendered 'if onlys'**⁶ associated with our grief: all the things I should have done and my husband would still be alive ...'

- I should have saved him
- I wasn't a good enough wife
- I should have taken him back
- I should have lived with his hurtful behaviours
- I should have tried to get him better help
- I 'should have, could have, would have ...'

We didn't feel a husband would be under the same gaze and suffer the same blame for not keeping his wife alive.

Working to free women from a double taboo

All the women interviewed in this project acknowledged that they felt shame and were not free to mourn all the parts of the loss, or speak about the fear they were living in before the death of their loved one. Women who have lost a partner to suicide often experience a double taboo: violence in the marriage, and suicide. This double taboo puts a woman in an 'against all odds' situation to remember their loved one in a way that encompasses all of their experiences. The suffering had often gone on for a considerable amount of time in the relationship before the death. This history of suffering is significant in our stories, as our worth has been slowly chipped away at over time. For some of us, we watched our mothers and grandmothers suffer in similar ways.

The idea of forgiveness

The idea of forgiveness often comes up when a male partner kills himself and the relationship has been fraught with danger.

In some forms of spiritual thinking, forgiveness is a 'supreme virtue, the most virtuous of virtues, the apotheosis of love' (Dowrick, cited in Jenkins, Hall, & Joy, 2002, p. 35). However, **the same concepts can be equally oppressive when they become experienced as mandatory obligations rather than possibilities and choices.** Jen was clear that she can never forgive or forget: 'I'm not going to forgive. I can never forgive, but just let go of the rest of the anger that's inside of me and the hating of men, because I didn't trust men'. I then asked her, 'How is that going to help you – the letting go of anger?' Jen replied, 'I'm going to be able help other people on their journeys'. Jen now works in a caring profession with men five days a week, which is no small thing!

When a husband kills himself, you can't have an in-person conversation that could result in a change in actions or a change of heart, because they are dead. You can imagine what they might think now they are no longer suffering – maybe time has given them the gift to see things differently, or maybe they have seen your tears and how hard it has been to raise the children on your own. Perhaps now, even, our husbands would want to be accountable. I was lucky my husband left me a letter that recognised that what he had done to me was a crime, and that there was no punishment, so he took matters into his own hands. Some of the women were not left letters, and they have had to have these conversations with themselves without 'a map'.

The intention of our project is to liberate women from the shackles of the double-taboo dominant discourse and to create a context for hope.

Sharing experiences between women

An Australian woman, Shirley, wrote in to the Dulwich Centre about her experience of complicated grief with the hopes it could help others, as part of the Remembrance: Women and Grief project (Dulwich Centre, 2008). Shirley's hopes of helping others came true. I contacted Shirley after reading her story. Her bravery to speak of what I could not speak gave me the courage to embark on this project.

Shirley is the furthest along on the journey than the rest of us, and this is precious. When I asked Shirley, 'How in the early days were you able to hold onto the idea that the pain would not be around every day?' she said, 'I kept hope that my life could be different'.

Shirley and I also talked about what becomes possible as time passes:

Marnie: You're the 'furthest along' in the journey than anyone in the project and carry a lot of knowledge for all of us. Could you talk a little bit about how you carried the complexity? You had your own lived-experiences with your husband that were very difficult and dangerous at times. And yet you have also acknowledged that he was a good father, he made a big deal of the birthdays, and he was there. How did you carry the legacy for your children, but also honour yourself in all of this?

Shirley: Well, I think at the beginning when I was struggling with the grief, I mainly thought about all the terrible things that had happened. I don't think I really acknowledged the fact that there were a lot of qualities that he had. It was once I started acknowledging some of the qualities that he had, that it gave me a more balanced picture of who he was. I think that helped. I think I had to be at a certain place down my journey before I could do that. I couldn't have done that in the early days.

When I asked Shirley what it meant to be the catalyst for this project she replied, 'I was excited to think that my story might have an impact on a broader field'.

"I was excited to think that my story might have an impact on a broader field."

Our collective document

I have collated the women's stories and have included an extract from their collective document. The stories are grouped around particular themes that we hope will specifically reach out to women who have experienced violence and then the person who enacted this violence died.

Our stories

Grief is Grief, but women are left to do the clean-up; take care of the children without complaining; holding up the father as the hero, despite being mistreated. We have to hold the family together. – Aunty Bea Edwards

Making sense of the suicide

In making sense of a suicide, there is a desire for resolution but there is not a single story but a multitude of stories. Accounting for all the complexity is not a tidy process and we found there is not one account that suffices to make sense of the loss.

Stopped trying to understand

For my own sanity, I've tried to stop understanding what it might have been or why, and just accept that that was actually the decision that was made. – Annette

I was unable to be present with my children, so I tried to be a detective less and less. – Molly

I stopped fact-finding for the sake of my child. – Annette

Do you want to say hullo, or goodbye, or both?

We spoke about the difficulty in talking about parts of our experiences we want to let go of. We also spoke about memories we want to hold precious, particularly on behalf of our children.

He wants the best for me

What he did almost destroyed me. But I have a certain knowledge now that he wants me to be happy in myself and just continue on what I'm doing; I've got my fifth grandchild coming soon and I know he would want the best for me, for my life, my children, my two grandchildren. This has given me freedom. – Jen

Freeing women from a double taboo

As women we are finding ways to untangle ourselves from some of the taboos of. Society has ideas about how we should grieve. We are judged for staying in abusive relationships and for leaving. Family, strangers, teachers, and the church, all tell us how we should bury the father of our children.

Made my life easier – Doesn't sit well with who I am as a human being

It was really brutal, and in some respects, not that I would have ever wished it to happen, but in some respects, his death made life easier for me. And, that's something that's taken me a long time to be able to say.

At this point, I'm not comfortable with saying that, but it's true. That's something that doesn't sit well with who I feel I am as a human being – to think those sort of things, but actually, it is a lot easier. – Annette

Celebrating the small things that we do⁷ Notes

There are small things we do each day that we now want to acknowledge. We've learnt that acknowledging these actions can bring dignity to our lives. Some of the small things we do that we want to celebrate include:

- feeding our children
- getting up out of bed in the morning
- driving our kids to school
- first day going back to work
- cuddling up with the kids
- reading stories to the children.

Messages to other women

It is important to us to make contributions to other women. Here are some of our messages to other women:

- 'Now I have 30 years between me and the loss of my husband, I would say time is important. And I never gave up hope that things could be different; I held onto the idea that I would eventually live my life.'
- 'I hope that you can find or create networks that can honour your new identity. I feel like I have gone back to the person I was before the abuse; I feel familiar to myself again and I wish this for all women.'

We're just starting to create a community through this project. We hope to continue sharing our knowledges and we hope other women will join us.

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