

Remembrance: Women and Grief Project

Dulwich Centre

This article documents the initial stage of Dulwich Centre's Women and Grief Project, a project based on narrative practice to collect stories, skills, and knowledge of women responding to grief and loss. The article includes a list of narratively-informed questions for women to reflect on their experiences of grief and loss, and a heartfelt response to these by a Palestinian woman, as well as responses to her writing by other women. The article also explores the complexities of grief in the context of violence, abuse, or other 'fraught' aspects of relationships, as well as socially-unsanctioned forms of grief.

Keywords: grief, women, Women and Grief Project, narrative practice

INTRODUCTION

The project described in this paper was created in response to an unusual situation. One day last year, Almas Jeninie, a colleague who lives in Ramallah in the Palestinian territories, wrote to David Denborough to tell him that her husband, Daim, had died and that she was struggling terribly as a consequence. In this situation, a counselling response was not going to be possible, nor appropriate, but somehow it seemed important to create a context in which Almas could speak about her loss, her love, her lament, and in some way have this be meaningful to others. And so a collective project based on narrative ideas was generated in which women could share stories of their experiences of grief and ways of responding to these. David Denborough drafted a series of questions to inform the project and a range of other colleagues then contributed to these – Margie Pitcher from Australia, Gitta Leibeher from Switzerland, and Lorraine Hedtke from the USA. These questions were designed to be used in conversations or via email to assist women in grief to share their particular stories in ways that may be strengthening. These questions were orientated around twelve themes:

The physical

- Are there particular places that you go to that bring comfort in relation to loss?
- Why are these places special? Can you tell a story about these places?
- What do you do at these places?

Memory

- Are there particular memories that you deliberately revisit and that bring you comfort?
- If so, could you share a story about some of these?

Your own history

- Have there been other times, earlier in your life, when you have had to deal with loss or grief?

- If so, how did you go about this? Please tell us a story about this.
- What were the hardest parts then?
- Were there others who supported you through this time? If so, what did they do? And what would they do if they were with you now?

Missing/lament

- What are some of the things that you miss the most in relation to the person who has died?
- Why are these the things that matter most at this time? Why are these things important to you?
- Have they always been important to you? How did they come to be so significant?
- Who else would know that these are some of the things that matter most to you in life?

The spiritual

- As you are dealing with issues of grief and loss, are you also engaged in spiritual matters in some way?
- If so, what are the sorts of 'spiritual conversations' you are having at the moment ... either with God, with yourself, with others?
- What do you think these spiritual conversations say about what is important to you?
- Has this always been important to you in life? Who did you learn these spiritual values from?

Culture

- Are there particular cultural ways of responding to grief and loss that are significant to you?
- Why are these significant? How do you participate in these?
- Are there aspects of your culture's ways of responding to grief and loss that do not fit so well for you?

- If so, how do you find ways to grieve in your own ways?

Different realms of expression

- At this time of loss, are there particular smells, sounds, songs, textures, tastes, dances, etc., that are particularly important to you at this time?
- If so, can you explain why these are especially important to you now?
- Are there rituals that you are finding helpful? These might be rituals which celebrate the person's life, or rituals of memory, or other sorts of rituals ...

Life looking different

- Is there anything about life that looks different because of your loss?
- Are there things you are noticing differently, doing differently?
- Are there ways in which you want to live the rest of your life differently?

Legacy

- Are there any things about the person who has died that you want to 'carry on' in your life?
- Are there particular values, or dreams, or ways of being that you wish to continue?
- Are there ways in which you are already doing this? If so, can you share a story about this?
- What things do you think the person would want you to continue in your life?
- What stories about him/her do you think he/she would want to be passed on in your family?
- Who might he/she want to be the keeper and teller of these stories?

Others

- Are there ways in which you are trying to support others in coming to terms with

this loss? How? Can you tell us a story about this?

- Where did you learn these ways of trying to take care of others at these times?
- What is the history of these skills?
- Who would be least surprised to know that you have these skills, even when you yourself are struggling?
- Are there ways in which others (your friends, children, colleagues) are trying to support you? If so, have there been certain actions that have meant a lot to you? Can you tell a story about this?
- Why were these actions significant to you?
- Were you able to receive their care? How?

Contributions to each other's lives

- When you think about the person who has died, what difference did they make to your life?
- What has that made possible that would otherwise not have been possible?
- How do you think that person would feel knowing this?
- What did you bring to their life that made a difference to them?

If the person who has died could be there with you now

- If the person who has died could be there with you now, what do you think they would say about how you are trying to deal with their dying?
- What would they notice about your grief, your loss and your special ways of dealing with this?
- What would they say to you at this time? And how would they say it?

By forming this collective project, it was then possible for us to ask Almas whether she would be willing to participate in it, not only for her own sake, but because her words, her stories may

make a contribution to others. This is a collective ethic. Almas immediately agreed to participate:

PHYSICAL PLACES ASSOCIATED WITH COMFORT

- Are there particular places that you go to that bring comfort?
- Why are these places special? Can you tell a story about these places?
- What do you do there?

My brother-in-law has been taking amazing care of us. Sometimes he asks me about the black circles under my eyes, or my weight loss, but usually we just ignore the obvious and deal with daily issues. I asked him to come over the other day and he arrived when I was in my room turning on the computer. He stood in the doorway and I asked him to come in, sit down. He fumbled for a minute and suggested we sit in the kitchen. I said, 'Fine, but the kitchen is freezing, it's much warmer in here'. He shrugged and made his way towards the kitchen. After he left, I walked back into my room; the computer was still on, with my screensaver glowing. Then it hit me. Over the last few months, my room (our room; Daim's and mine) has somehow turned into a shrine.

It wasn't anything I planned to do. I had found a really great picture of him pulling at a cigarette with his eyes all scrunched up, very 'Marlboro/cowboy/rugged man' type of picture and blown it up. I hung it right over my side of the bed. The sides of the bureau mirror are all stuffed with pictures. A wedding picture of ours hung – has always hung – on another wall. My screensaver is a picture of Daim up in a tangerine tree with dew all over him, and he's looking great with a devilish smile and sparkly eyes. His side of the bed still has his glasses, pack of cigarettes and cell phone on the nightstand. His robe hangs, as it always has, behind the door. He was a university professor, so his pile of books and papers still lay right by the computer. When he first died, I refused to go into the room for over a month. Having others bring me out clothes got impractical, so I eventually braved the space, but until about a month ago, I slept on the couch. I turned off the radiator, and told everyone I was conserving solar by sleeping on the couch.

Then one day, Mom came over and sat on the edge of the bed while I worked on the computer.

After she left, I began smoothing out the covers and his smell rose up. I tore back the covers, buried my face in his pillow and slept – my first real sleep in months. So, I moved back in. I sincerely doubt that the pillows and sheets still smell like him, but somehow, he's there. I did a 180 degree turn-around – instead of sleeping on the couch and avoiding the entire room, I began looking forward to being there. I don't know if turning the room into a shrine, and the fact that time, in some ways, stopped in that room is very 'healthy', but I did, and it has. My brother-in-law is uncomfortable with Daim's eyes smiling down from every wall, as well as his clothes and books, but right now, it's a comfort to me.

SIGNIFICANT MEMORIES THAT ARE DELIBERATELY REVISITED

- Are there particular memories that you deliberately revisit and that bring comfort?
- If so, could you share a story about some of these?
- Are there other memories that you know it's better not to think about? How do you keep these memories at bay?

I have so many good memories. I remember calling him at work the very day he died and telling him 'Hey, there's a picture of me on our work website!' He asked for the address and opened it up while we were on the phone. He printed it out and showed it to all his colleagues. He brought it home with him that day and sat and read the text. When I asked him why he was so absorbed in the article, he said, 'Because you're in it. I'm interested in everything you do'. That memory always makes me smile!

I remember once my youngest son, Sharif, asked Daim, 'Why do you and mom fight sometimes?' Without missing a beat, in less than a second, he had Sharif thrown over his shoulder and said, 'So that we can make up!'

So many times he'd actually hide my make-up bag, and when I'd begin the search for it he'd always say, 'I really don't think there's room for improvement'.

During the month of Ramadan, he would wake the kids up before dawn and prepare an elaborate breakfast for them. I never could fathom the idea of

waking up at 3am, eating a huge meal and going back to sleep, so he took over. Right before daybreak, he'd bring a glass of water to me, gently wake me up and say, 'Just please drink this'.

I could probably go on forever about memories that I deliberately revisit; I have sixteen years of memories that bring me comfort. Sometimes I spend too much time there and worry that I'm not dealing with reality. The other day I was off in la-la land and my daughter walked by and touched my face; she said, 'You look so pretty with that smile on your face – what're you thinking about?'

There are other memories that I don't want to think about that relate to the days before he died. Four days before he died we sat around (as usual) talking and just being until about midnight and then headed off to bed. I managed to beat him in and watched him take off his clothes so that he could get his pyjamas on. Suddenly, he turned his back to me and put both hands on the bureau. He motioned for me to be quiet. I practically stopped breathing and listened. I was expecting a military incursion, shooting, something like that. After about 30 seconds, I whispered that I couldn't hear anything. He turned around, and I was out of bed in less than a second. He was lemon yellow and his undershirt, fresh less than 60 seconds ago, was literally soaked. He looked like someone poured a bucket of water on him. His hair, wet with sweat, began to curl. In short, he looked like he took a shower with his clothes on. But his colour. It was a colour I had never seen before, and my father died from cancer – so that's saying a lot.

I got him to the hospital but after many hours and various tests, the doctors released him and said he was fine. Why didn't I scream, 'How stupid are you?' I didn't. I insisted that he be admitted and went home. Two hours later he had been discharged. By 8am the next morning, we were back at the hospital but again the doctors said there was nothing wrong, perhaps a gas attack from eating an okra dish, or a spec of sand in his urinary tract. A third doctor we consulted said that he should stay away from air conditioning.

Two days later, Daim died as a result of a massive heart attack when driving his car. There were way too many signs. I knew he was sick. I could have screamed louder, insisted harder. Forced him to a hospital in Israel or Jordan. He died from massive heart failure in less than thirty seconds. He was 44.

I don't like to go back to those four days because it hurts so very, very badly. But Guilt is really powerful and demands attention. It will never let me forget. Guilt can sometimes make the memory of those four days override the memories I've made over sixteen years. But Guilt understands that I have three children to care for, and tries to only visit at night when the kids are sleeping and everything's quiet.

YOUR OWN HISTORY

- Have there been other times in your life when you have had to deal with loss or grief?
- If so, how did you go about this? Please tell us a story about this.
- What were the hardest parts then?
- Were there others who supported you through this time? If so, what did they do? And what would they do if they were with you now?

There is a story about the history of grief and loss that I must tell. It is about my father and me. Now that I've lost my husband, this story about my father is even more meaningful. My father actually died twice. I spent the last forty-eight hours of his life sitting behind him holding him at an angle that was comfortable for him. He couldn't lay down because he felt he was suffocating, and he couldn't sit up on his own – he kept sliding down. So, I sat behind him, on the bed, and kept him comfortable. People kept coming to say goodbye, and when they'd see him and cry, I'd hate them. They were destroying his spirit.

The doctor came in to check him at 4pm and carried him out of my arms and set him on a chair. I used the time to straighten the bed; the doctor was fumbling in his bag. When we looked up, dad had stopped breathing. Everyone had been so impressed with my strength and practicality, but I went crazy then. I ran over and began to shake him and scream, 'No *yaba*, not now, not yet, I have to tell you ... I still didn't tell you. Please, *yaba*, please, the boys will be here soon, don't do this, not now, please not now ...' The doctor literally poured a bottle of water over his head and punched him in the chest. He woke up and was clearly disoriented. I'll never forget what he said, and others heard him say it too: 'But I was home, I want to go back home, please let me go back home'. I got really close to

his face and began gently wiping the water off. I said, 'Yaba, you are home. The boys will be here in a couple of hours. Please wait for the boys'.

He did. As soon as the boys came in, they rushed upstairs. Dad looked at them and recognised them. They cried softly and kneeled before him, while I was still holding him. I motioned for them not to cry, but they couldn't help it. They had seen him less than two months ago and couldn't believe how quickly he had deteriorated. He kissed their heads and said, 'Why are you crying? I should be crying for you, I get to go home while you're still here. It's so beautiful, I get to go home; don't cry for me'. Of course, by then, everyone was bawling. But the conviction in his face was amazing: there was absolutely no fear or reluctance; he actually seemed eager. He turned his head back as much as possible and said to me, 'I want to sleep now. Please lay me down, I want to go back home'. So, I did. We took turns monitoring his breathing until 11:30pm, when he passed away.

Sometimes my father visits me in my dreams. The first time, I actually sleepwalked. About a week after my father died, I heard a knock at the front door. When I got to the front door, there was a really powerful bright light as well as a string of lights at the front door. A group of similar lights were in the back. The light at the front was my dad – I heard his voice, but I knew it was him before he spoke. I asked him what he was doing outside the front door – to come in, it was cold and windy. He said, 'We come here every morning to check on you, but *yaba*, if you keep this up, I won't come anymore'. He was referring to my crying, shock, and withdrawal – I knew exactly what he meant. I said, 'Yeah, okay, fine, but come in, it's so cold'. He said that he couldn't; he was 'all over' and couldn't stay too long in any one place. He said he wouldn't wake me up anymore, but he knew I'd remember this visit (and I always have, like it was yesterday), and that I should know that he was always around.

It was actually very cold, and my crazy-with-fear husband found me about 5:30am, on the front porch which is glassed-in, sitting on the couch, in a long T-shirt. There were leaves everywhere and the front door was open.

He still visits in my dreams occasionally and I say it: I tell him that I love him, that I understand, that I forgive him for being so distant. I thank him for taking so much care of me. I thank him for instilling pride in my culture in me. I tell him I

respect him for being so brave; leaving his country to secure a future for his children without ever forgetting who he was. But that's just in my dreams; I don't know if he can hear me. I do know though that I will never, ever forget the peaceful smile on his face when he stopped breathing.

THE SPIRITUAL

- Are you engaged in spiritual matters at present?
- If so, what sorts of 'spiritual conversations' are you having at the moment ... either with God, with yourself, with others?
- What do you think these spiritual conversations say about what is important to you?
- Has this always been important to you in life? Who did you learn these spiritual values from?

My spirituality is currently on a roller-coaster ride. My religion was instilled in me, pretty much by force, as a child – so it never really had any true meaning. I tried to keep it up right after I got married, but Daim wasn't really religious at the time either, so we had weak attempts. The 'break down and fall on your knees believing to the marrow of your bone in God' happened to us both at the same time, when our first child, Mimi, was born. I know a lot of people explain life scientifically, but I truly believe that God had everything to do with that perfect creation. I was astounded. I treated her like a miracle, and not at all because we had trouble having her. I truly believe that giving life is a miracle. I again believed in God when I lost my father; he was so comfortable about passing away.

After Daim's death, though, my beliefs have become like a roller-coaster. Daim didn't want to die. When I took him to the hospital a couple of days before he died, he actually said that the angel of death had come for him and he turned him away saying that his wife and children still needed him. We talked about going to the kids' graduations and weddings. We talked about being grandparents. We joked about who would take care of who. We had plans and dreams; he had plans and dreams. I wonder why God didn't take me instead of Daim, I wonder why God thinks I can bear this pain – I wonder how I will. People try to console me by reciting information on predestination. I can't swallow that yet. Daim died from medical negligence – God had nothing to do with it. God can't possibly be so cruel.

I read the excerpts from other women who have lost loved ones. I believe, as they do, that Daim is now in a better place. I believe he is at peace and comfortable. That is reassuring in many ways, but then I think, 'But he was at peace here, he was comfortable here, he *wanted* to be here'. If I have to look for things to be grateful for, I am grateful that he didn't suffer. We traced his phone calls and movements, and he died in less than a minute; when I saw him, he looked like he was sleeping.

I think my loss has shaken my spirit and my faith. It's inside of me though, like a bunch of butterflies in a closed jar. If you shake the jar, they'll flutter around for a while, even panic. But eventually, they'll all settle down again. It shook me hard, really hard, to think that God is cruel. I just hope that the butterflies settle down before the moral of the story flashes by and I miss it in a whirl of wings.

DIFFERENT REALMS OF EXPRESSION

- Are there particular smells, sounds, songs, textures, tastes, dances, etc., that are particularly important to you at this time?
- If so, can you explain why these are especially important to you now?

I really like these questions. Sometimes something will remind me, and people around me will have no idea, and I'll smile – or pull away to control my tears. I've started smoking. Not really. I'm not addicted or anything, sometimes I'll light one up and just let it burn down in the ashtray. Not a lovely or romantic smell I must admit, but it reminds me of him. He also has a pack of cherry vanilla cigars by his bedstand. I won't dare burn them; then they'd be gone. But sometimes, I just open up the tin and smell them. I remember how his hands and clothes would smell. I'd complain of course, but now it reminds me.

As for sounds, Daim set me up for a nightmare right before he left! Sharif's our little monkey; very sly, sweet, and smooth. Daim had taken him to music school during the summer, about a month before he died. Sharif tried out all the instruments and kept going back to the cello. About two hours later, they came home with a cello and promises of music lessons to begin within a month. I was really confused – why the cello? Not very Eastern, not very Arabic, not what we expected! So now, six months

later, I get to deal with the whine and squeal of the cello as Sharif 'practices'. I get to tell him how wonderfully he's progressing. I look up at the sky and mumble, 'Thanks Daim! Hope you can hear this!' I imagine he can; it is loud and horrible enough to wake the dead! BJ plays the *Oud* rather well, Mimi plays the piano beautifully, but Sharif has a long, long way to go!

I don't watch much TV. Never have. Sometimes though, Daim would stay up late to watch an Arabic play adapted for television. I could hear his booming laugh all the way in the bedroom. I'd be trying to sleep but giggling at him laughing. Sometimes I'd go hang out with him. I wouldn't understand the play very well, but I would just enjoy watching him laugh. His eyes would sparkle while he waited for the punchline, sometimes he'd even say the punchline before the actors. When I wouldn't join him, I'd wake up in the morning and find that he had seriously raided the refrigerator during the night. Much more than a meal's worth, way beyond nibbling. I'd ask him about it, and he'd say: 'I wanted something salty, but after I ate something salty, I craved something sweet. It was a vicious cycle!' I really miss that – movement and laughter in the house in the middle of the night.

CULTURE

- Are there particular cultural ways of responding to grief and loss that are significant to you?
- Why are these significant? How do you participate in these?
- Are there aspects of your culture's ways of responding to grief and loss that do not fit so well for you?
- If so, how do you find ways to grieve in your own ways?

As I mentioned before, I spent much of my childhood in the United States so I have lived in two cultures. Here in Palestine, we have some interesting cultural responses to loss. Some are beautiful, some infuriate me, and some I will never forgive.

The Islamic culture has a very practical view on death. We believe that, from the moment you are born, it is predetermined when exactly you will die. There is absolutely nothing you can do about it.

You may have some effect on *how* you die, for example, by not smoking you may prevent death by lung cancer, but you're still going to die on that day. I don't think this is actually in the Koran, so this may be more cultural than religious, but a lot of speculation is also given on how one dies. For example, my dad was such a generous, respected figure, that when he died from lung cancer two months after diagnosis, and only really suffered for about five days, no-one was surprised. Dying from cancer can be very drawn out and painful, but dad didn't really suffer extensively, supposedly because he was 'a good man'. I don't really buy into this idea, because a lot of incredible people suffer immensely while dying, but our culture believes that a torturous death is God's way of speeding up the punishment you are sure to receive in the afterworld. A lot of people here also talk about 'punishment in the grave'; horror stories about how the grave caves in on you and angels torture you as you await judgement day. These are horrific ideas to me and I try to stay away from them.

Anyway, when a person dies, it is supposedly predestined and therefore excessive grief is frowned on. Some people actually say that wailing and lamentation will cause the dead pain, as if you're protesting God's will. After Daim's death, I heard hundreds of accounts from people speaking about the 'tree of life' in heaven and how Daim's leaf simply fell off. This meant his life was over. This a very final, very practical way of looking at death, but it doesn't necessarily create room for expressions of pain, hurt, and sudden love loss.

Another religious custom involves the immediate burial of the dead. We have a saying 'respect for the dead is in the burial'. The body is bathed, wrapped in a sheet, prayed over, and put in the ground. Ideally, it should be in the ground by the next call to prayer, or within 24 hours maximum. Usually the burial takes place at the noon prayers – these are the biggest prayers, where the largest amount of people join in, so it's the most honouring.

When Daim died, two factors prevented him being buried within 24 hours: he died a little before midnight, and had previously asked to be buried in Jenin. Due to checkpoints, it would have been impossible to bury him in Jenin by noon the next day. More importantly, our daughter, Mimi, was abroad. She needed eighteen hours minimum to get to Jenin. Daim died Tuesday night, and we buried him Thursday, at noon prayers.

Before the burial, they brought his body back to his parents' house. In our culture, the rituals of grief are very public. There are people everywhere, which meant that I was given very little privacy. I knew I wasn't allowed to touch him, or kiss him goodbye, but even if I was, there were people everywhere, crammed into the room where his body lay. I was called out several times as the men tried to explain to me that he had to be taken to burial. But I was wildly firm about his body not being moved until Mimi saw him. Of course, another cultural thing: men have serious problems taking orders from women; women aren't supposed to be so strong. Furthermore, I don't cover my hair, and everyone was looking at me like I should be ashamed of myself or something. But I stood strong. I was also on the cell phone with my daughter and her taxi driver kept giving me expectations of her arrival time.

Throughout the entire condolence period (three days) men and women are kept very, very separated. There are very different rituals for men and women. For instance, once Daim had been bathed for burial, I was not allowed to touch him. Those women who he can't marry, like his mother, daughter, and niece can hug, kiss, and touch all they want, but as his wife, I would 'dirty' him. I would make him 'unclean'. I really can't comment on how I feel about that little bit of culture right now. It's still way too much for me to comprehend.

During the three-day funeral reception, the Koran is supposed to be played non-stop and bitter coffee is served. Daim's mom refused to do either. She refused to believe that this was a funeral. She refused to believe that her son was dead. I felt so much pain for her, but was caught in a crossroads. My daughter, Mimi, wanted the Koran. She told me it would help her dad get into heaven. I wanted the Koran because I felt that if the Koran was being recited, well-wishers would be quiet. I was amazed that people came, each for ten minutes maximum, and were actually swapping recipes, talking about their children, cooking and cleaning. Even at times of death, life goes on.

I spent a whole lot of time in the bedroom with Mimi. People kept coming in to tell me that people wanted to offer me condolences, and that I should be outside, that I was being rude. That's when I pulled my 'bi-cultural card'; I didn't understand, I meant no harm.

After the three-day reception in Jenin, we went back to Ramallah. We had another three-day reception there. Believe it or not, we had to rent a hall in the municipality! Police were called in to close roads. Still, when I think about the thousands of people who came, I well up with tears. This is an aspect of our culture that still surprises me. The President sent a telegram. Everyone from Birzeit university, including staff from all departments and students, came every day. Representative groups from the Palestinian Authority, everyone (parents, teachers) from my kids' schools, everyone from my workplace, and swarms of people I didn't even know. We hired someone to serve the bitter coffee and he told us that he was going through over 2000 plastic coffee cups a day. Bear in mind that we only accepted guests from 5pm to 10pm. There were people outside, inside, everywhere. The newspaper was plastered with condolences for over a week (the normal time is three days). We were all grieving, but I can't deny that I felt somehow proud.

Less than ten days later, I had to start dealing with legal things. Of course, if I had seen a mental health doctor, I would definitely have been diagnosed as 'in shock' among other things. I was going to Sharia court and signing things. I wanted to give all of my inheritance to my children, but stopped at the last moment. I decided that I would inherit and, while I was alive, divide it equally among my three children in the form of gifts. I don't like the Islamic rule that girls inherit one-half of what boys inherit. So, somehow, I had the sense of mind to straighten that out.

Another cultural ritual is 'cleaning up'. We are supposed to give away the possessions of the deceased to those who are needy. I decided not to participate in this. At least, not yet. So many people have encouraged me to give away Daim's things; poor people would benefit greatly. Well, sorry to be selfish, but I'm not there yet. How can I give away sweaters that smell like him? How can I give away his shorts with splotches of paint all over them, that he wore around the house, that were missing the top button (we'd joke that his growing belly helped keep the shorts in place and that a button would only restrict the growth!)?

Right now, culture is encouraging me to move on. Get out of black, put some make-up on, cut my hair. I don't wear black on purpose, and I do wear colours but, as my friend noticed, I no longer dress to impress, I dress to cover my body, and my hand

is attracted to dark colours. I can't even imagine looking at myself in the mirror and caring long enough to put make up on, and don't think I will ever, ever cut my hair. Daim used to spend hours running his hands through it and smelling it. When I would lay on his lap at night, he would smooth it over his thigh. If we would talk at night, while he was talking he'd be smoothing it over the pillow. I don't think I can ever cut it. Of course, the culture doesn't care if I cut it, everyone just wants me to cover my hair, to wear the headscarf, but Daim was really against that too, so I don't think I'll be doing that either!

As I wrote at the very beginning of this piece, Daim is everywhere in my house. I won't dispose of him, or give him away. He was mine. He had such close friends, and was really close to his family, but nobody had him the way I had him (and he had me). I grieve for him every minute, for what he's missed. Nothing will ever fill up the trench that he's left behind, but he was so proud of me, and I can't let him down. Some days, when I'm too tired to open my eyes, I push myself for him. He's a part of me, so even though I grieve, I believe he's still there. He's in his children, in me, in his house, his car, he's everywhere.

LIFE LOOKING DIFFERENT

- Is there anything about life that looks different because of the recent loss?
- Are there things you are noticing differently, doing differently?
- Are there ways in which you want to live the rest of your life differently?

To be honest, everything about life looks different now. So much has lost meaning, other things have so much meaning that I can't touch or look at them. For the time being, I've given up on changing the world. Worse, sometimes I'm noticing an ugly bitterness that comes to visit. Sick people who come out fine for example. My first thought is: how come they get a miracle and I didn't? At times it can feel like I have an internal battle of good versus evil going on. I consciously shake my head and remind myself of the sixteen years I spent with Daim. Our three beautiful children are beyond the definition of miracle.

And I have found a strength. I'm going to try and see where that takes me. Right after Daim's death, my brother-in-law sat down with me and tried to explain property and financial issues. I just kept shaking my head and telling him I didn't care, I was fine with any decisions he made; I asked him to take care of everything. He held my hand, looked me straight in the eye and said, very firmly, 'I'm sorry, but you no longer have that luxury. You have to understand everything so you can take care of everything'. I didn't get it at the time, but now, every time I just want to give up, I can hear him saying 'you no longer have that luxury'. Daim was my luxury. There are husbands, and then there are soul mates and best friends who happen to be your husband. I lost so much more than my husband, but I think I'm starting to see Strength. Our house is literally falling apart right now, and sometimes I spend the whole day filling up cracks and sweeping up debris, but somewhere along the line I found Strength. I'm not too sure I want to deal with Strength right now, because she's really weak and needs a lot of attention that I can't give her right now. I heard, though, that Strength gets strong on her own, when you're not looking. I hope that, even if I neglect her, I'll find her when I need her the most.

RESPONSES TO ALMAS'S WRITING

Almas was enthusiastic about the idea of sharing her writing with other women who were also experiencing grief, in the hope that her words could somehow contribute to others. Margie Pitcher is a narrative practitioner in Adelaide who was working with a number of women who had also recently lost loved ones. Margie approached these women, shared with them Almas' words, and then arranged for them to send messages back to Almas. Here are some of their responses:

Irene read the piece of writing one night when she could not sleep. Thinking that she would probably not read all of it, she found herself reading it all – 'The more you read, the more you couldn't put it down' – and taking it back with her to bed. She found that doing this comforted her, and she described how there would not be many days that the words and images do not come back into her mind.

One image she had while reading Almas' story was of 'a warm and loving family with laughter and closeness and with comfort being shared with one another'. She talked of having 'a good, warm feeling' along with the sad feelings that it evoked for her, and that she found it calming: 'That you can be going down a "down" track and then, "Hang on a minute – maybe you are not alone in this" ... I did feel better for reading it because it stopped me from dwelling on the down side; it stopped it from getting the better of me. It gives me comfort and, let's face it, comfort is one of the most important things.'

ALMAS' RESPONSE

When Almas received these and other messages from women in different parts of the world, this was very significant to her:

I was blown away when I read the words from women in different parts of the world. I realised that other people have been carrying the same stabbing pain. It may not sound like a profound realisation, but these women really do know how I feel, and they're not making any empty promises. It also means a lot to me to hear how others are coping. So many other people have told me 'I know how you feel', which is insulting and tends to make me angry – because unless you've been there, you really can't have a clue. That's why these women's responses mean so much to me, because, unfortunately, they've been there, and unfortunately, they really do know. I hope my words and stories can offer something back to them.

A GENDERED ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S GRIEF

In developing a project in relation to women's grief, there are a number of other key issues that we needed to consider. The first involves keeping alive a gendered, feminist analysis of women's grief. Almas in fact, has written about this: about how she has come to realise that some aspects of her experience of grief were powerfully influenced by the degree to which she was dependent upon first her father and then her husband. If women's lives are socially and financially dependent on the men in their lives, then this will influence experiences of

grief. Almas has recently changed jobs and is now working for a women's organisation dedicated to supporting women's financial independence. These sorts of considerations are not separate from grief. It may be the case that for some heterosexual women, when a male partner dies, they may wish to say goodbye to or re-think certain aspects of past dependence, while still cherishing the person who has died.

WHEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PERSON WHO HAS DIED HAVE BEEN FRAUGHT

It is also significant to acknowledge that women's grief is sometimes complicated by experiences of violence and/or other forms of abuse. Sometimes, if the person who has died tyrannised other people, or if there had been a lot of conflict or misunderstanding, relating to the person's death can be complex. Responses to death in these circumstances can be quite different as death may have brought a sense of relief as well as other responses.

We developed particular questions for the project in relation to these situations:

When the relationship with the person who has died has been fraught

- Are there things you are relieved to be no longer experiencing? Can you share a story about these? Why are you relieved to be no longer experiencing this?
- If another woman was trying to work out how to relate to the memory of a person who had been cruel to them (or with whom they had been in conflict), would there be any story from your own life that you would be willing to share with them?
- If you had a chance to say something now to the person who has died, would you want to? If so, what would it be? Has this changed over time?
- Is there anything about the person's life or the person's death that has led you to want to live your life in particular (different) ways? Why is this important to you? Can you share a story about how you put this into practice in your life?

The expectations of others

Sometimes, after a death or loss, the expectations of how one 'should' grieve can be confusing. Expressions of sadness are socially accepted and expected, while expressions of rage or regret may be less welcomed. Alternatively, it may be seen as strange if the grieving person does not 'express' certain feelings in particular ways. At the same time, for those whose relationship with the person who has died was not socially sanctioned, the experience of loss can be a very private one.

- Have there been ways in which your responses to death/loss have been outside the expectations of others?
- How have you been able to craft your own ways of responding? How do these ways reflect what is important to you?
- Can you share a story about some of your unique forms of response?

Transition

Times of grief and loss are often times of transition:

- Are there certain parts of life that you have moved away from as a result of this transition, certain things you are no longer interested in doing, being a part of, participating in? If so, what are they?
- Are there aspects of life that you have become more engaged with, that you have moved towards, as a result of this transition? If so, can you share a story about this and what it is meaning for you?

The following story was sent to us by an Australian woman who hopes that her experience of a complicated grief will be of assistance to others.

When the relationship has been fraught with conflict or violence, this creates another dimension to the grief process. In my own situation, there was a feeling of relief: relief that I no longer had to live with fear. In the

last few months, I had been stalked and had threats made on my own life. Fear was something that I had lived with for many years and it had travelled with me through most of my life. Then, after the initial shock and feeling of relief, I found fear in my life again and it was hard to let it go. I thought that there was nothing stopping him getting to me now he was dead. 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.

The greatest challenge has been dealing with guilt. He had told me many times if I didn't take him back he would either kill me or himself. I felt responsible for his death. I thought, 'If I had taken him back he would still be alive'. Guilt was a major restraint to me moving on. For a long time I believed that I could have done more, been a better wife. Now I think, 'Yes, I could have done things differently, but I did the best I knew how at the time'.

Because of the circumstances of his death, people would avoid me. I have since heard they didn't know what to say. I interpreted that behaviour as blaming me for his death. I had many irrational ideas. My experience, however, has shown me the way to a better life. I have moved from desperation, and then hope, to a life of achievement. I still have my struggles, but move through them much quicker. I have accomplished more than I ever believed I would both personally and professionally; this has only happened because of my experience. I am now in the privileged position to hear the stories of others and to assist them to see other ways of being – to help them move forward in their lives to a place that they want to be. My experience has given me the understanding to support other women dealing with similar situations as myself.

On a personal note, I have four beautiful adult children, two boys and two girls, all in healthy, respectful, long-term relationships, and seven beautiful granddaughters. Some people say that children repeat the patterns of their parents. This may be true in some cases, but many choose healthy, happy lifestyles. I believe my direction in life has

added to their lives and made them more compassionate, stronger and self-assured too.

SOCIALLY-UNSANCTIONED GRIEF

It also seems significant to pay attention to which forms of grief are socially sanctioned, supported and expected, and which are unsanctioned and so often remain private. Sometimes grief cannot be painted across the sky, sometimes it cannot be publicly grieved. Sometimes it cannot be shouted, only whispered – and in those situations, these whispers can be profoundly significant.

There are many people in different contexts who cannot publicly grieve the losses they have experienced. Queer communities have always known the colours of unsanctioned grief, but so too do many others. For a particularly evocative lesbian feminist analysis of unsanctioned grief, we would recommend Judy Small's song, 'No tears for the widow' (see Small, 1999).

AN ONGOING CONVERSATION ...

This article represents just the beginning of the Women and Grief Project. The questions and stories contained here will be placed on the Dulwich Centre website (www.dulwichcentre.com.au), and we invite other women to share their experiences of grief and loss. Women are also invited to respond to the stories contained in this article, and the other stories that will appear on the website. In this way, we hope to build a growing online resource of narrative ideas – and connections between women from around the world – that we hope will provide reflection, comfort, and inspiration for women, their families, and loved-ones, as well as therapists, health professionals, and community workers.

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We would like to acknowledge all those who have contributed their words, stories, memories and ideas to this project so far. If others would like to add their perspectives to this project we would welcome hearing from you c/o dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au

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