Remembering Ajmal and creating diverse forms of narrative family therapy

by Abdul Ghaffar Stanikzai, Ziba Stanikzai, Shamina Stanikzai, Chelsea Size & David Denborough

Abdul Ghaffar Stanikzai is a son, father, husband, brother and a good friend to family. A humble, sports-loving individual who thrives on learning new things and tackling challenges with determination and connections. Loves playing cricket on Saturdays.

Ziba Stanikzai is a caring mother, and a source of happiness to family. Very kind and hospitable. Grew up in a remote conservative area of Afghanistan where narrative therapy and its effects are beyond imagination. Loves the family to sit around and share stories. Feels energetic and valued when someone sits with her and listens to her heart.

Shamina Stanikzai loves reading, drinking tea and walking in nature. She enjoys listening to music and is dedicated to finishing her university degree, always striving for personal growth and embracing the joy of learning.

Chelsea Size loves to drink tea, visit libraries, climb trees and look out for the sacred in the everyday. Chelsea is continuously energised by her commitments to lifelong learning (and listening), embodying her spirituality/values, laughing at herself, asking more generative questions and finding joy in simple things.

David Denborough (DD) treasures friendships and times when people come together to respond to hardships and injustices. DD has never been to Afghanistan but hopes one day it will be possible to do so with Abdul Ghaffar Stanikzai.

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Abstract

This paper shares a tender story from the Stanikzai family, a family from Afghanistan who now live in Australia. It is generously offered in the hope that it may assist other mothers and families who are silently grieving in their homes and who we can't expect to bring their suffering to professional counselling offices. This paper tells the story of Ziba Stanikzai, who was very much suffering after one of her sons, Ajmal, was killed in Afghanistan. This paper is an honouring of Ajmal's life and memory. It is told through the perspectives of each of the authors. It begins with the words of Ajmal's older brother Dr Abdul. Later you will read a series of letters linking the Stanikzai family with many others. These letters weave together storylines of loss, love and memory. They also represent a nuanced form of narrative family therapy and convey how this was a culturally and spiritually resonant response to suffering.

Key words: narrative family therapy; family therapy; grief; Afghanistan; narrative practice

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Dr Abdul

Every time when I talk about this specific incident of my brother's death, it is very hard for me to control my emotion. Our whole family suffered or are still somehow suffering. In fact, whenever we discuss about any explosion, or attack or people fleeing from their country because of war, this refreshes horrible memories in our family. Let me explain.

I am a medical doctor, now in the process of getting my registration here in Australia. In Afghanistan I also worked as a human rights advocate for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission in Uruzgan province where Australians were based. As a result of my human rights work, which involved documenting abuses by the Taliban, by the Afghan National Security Forces and by foreign forces, it was no longer safe for me to live in Afghanistan, and I was fortunate to come here to Australia. After I had arrived here, in May 2017, Ajmal, my brother who was just younger than me, was killed in an attack, an explosion, in Kabul.

My sister Shamina, my other siblings and our mum heard this blast, but they didn't know what had happened to Ajmal. He was a civil engineer and had been at work. My younger brother tried to call his mobile, and then when they checked Facebook, they saw his picture. He was lying on the road and my brother recognised his t-shirt. After an hour or so, his body was brought in by ambulance.

How Ajmal was killed impacted all of us, but more than anyone else, it affected my mum. We couldn't see her happy. We were trying everything. After some time, I was able to lodge an application, and finally she was granted an Australian visa to join me.

When she arrived here in Adelaide with my other siblings, sisters and brothers, she was always sad. Although Australia is a very beautiful country – it's green, there is no war, there is peace and there is financial support – my mother was grieving and she was sad all the time. This was putting a lot of pressure on us and this impacted us as well. We felt totally lost. Especially my younger brothers and sister who were impacted negatively. We had to hide everything about Ajmal from the eyes of my mother, his pictures and any evidence of his work, and this was somehow very sad for all of us. Every day we were trying to find ways for my mother to be more motivated, to not be so sad, but she would just reply, "It's not in my control".

We then booked an appointment with a doctor, and when explained her situation, the doctor referred her to a psychologist. My brother took my mother to the first session with the psychologist, and he told me that the psychologist asked her a series of questions from a questionnaire about whether my mother thought life was worth living, whether she had thoughts of suicide or harming herself, and all these sorts of things. The initial session was all about that questionnaire, which was not culturally appropriate. When I went back to my mum's house I asked, "How was the psychologist?" And she said, "I'm not going because it is not something for me. I have problems with what the psychologist was asking". We all encouraged her, however, with words such as: "Psychology or the counselling will work gradually. You have to trust him." With our encouragement, she agreed to attend the next session. But the next session was even worse and afterwards she said, "Don't resist, I'm not going to another session ever again".

We gave up on this and the sad moment continued in our family. Then finally one day I spoke with David (Denborough) and together we came up with an idea.

David

It was a challenging situation. When I asked Dr Abdul, "Would it be better if someone came to your home rather than your mother having to go out?", he said that would be a good idea. And then we were trying to think: Who could come and visit? It definitely needed to be a woman, and it was also clear that it would make it much easier if it could be someone with whom there was already some sort of connection or relationship, rather than a stranger. Dr Abdul and I had originally met through cricket[1], and I thought the relationships that had been created through cricket could also assist us here. Chelsea Size is a skilful narrative therapist whose partner, Jesse Size, had recently started playing with the Afghan Cricket Club. As Dr Abdul knew Jesse, I thought that this web of relationships could assist us. Chelsea and Jesse are also both Christian ministers, and I thought that for Ziba (for whom Islamic faith is important) a sense of shared spiritual commitment could also be helpful.

As we talked, we decided that Dr Abdul could invite Chelsea into their home to meet with Ziba in a way that would make some sort of sense to everyone. Chelsea wasn't just a professional (although Chelsea is a skilled practitioner); the Stanikzai family were instead inviting

to their home someone with whom they were connected through relationships. In hindsight, this was the first key step in generating a different sort of response for the family. We searched through our web of relationships and then Dr Abdul was in a position to invite someone to their home.

Chelsea has spoken about the significant ways in which she was welcomed.

Chelsea

Yes, I was so warmly welcomed. It was shining, beautiful hospitality. I was still new to narrative therapy at the time. I had met Dr Abdul once before, but this was the first time I met his mother, Ziba, and her daughter, Shamina. It was a very tender first meeting for all of us. I mostly listened and I'd brought my notebook so, with permission, I took notes. Afterwards, I talked with David, and he asked me to just write down everything I remembered about the whole meeting, including any of the movements, actions, the leaning in, the tears and any sensory things. And that was the starting point for writing a letter.

David

Yes, and the writing of that letter was a collective process. It was really important that Chelsea's first meeting with Ziba was principally between women[2] – Chelsea, Ziba and Shamina. But it was also important that Dr Abdul could contribute to the letter as his perspective was vital to include.[3] So, after receiving Chelsea's notes, I spoke with Dr Abdul and then wove some of the ideas from that conversation, and some narrative therapy lines of enquiry, into a letter. This enabled a different sort of family therapy. It wasn't culturally appropriate for women and men to be in the room at one time having shared conversations. But instead, different family members' contributions could come together in the form of this letter, which, on her second visit to the Stanikzai home, Chelsea read aloud with the assistance of an interpreter.

Dear Ziba Stanikzai,

You welcomed me so warmly into your home for our conversation.

You showed great hospitality over green tea and a platter of delicious food.

And great patience with my language difficulties.

Shamina and Dr Abdul were there with us and Dr acted as the translator between us.

When I asked what you had noticed about living in Adelaide, since your move from Afghanistan, you told me that you noticed this was a peaceful and good place.

Very soon after you said this, your eyes filled with tears as you spoke in Pashto to your children, and they spoke to me, about the sorrow you were feeling at the loss of your son who died in Afghanistan.

Your tears were honouring your son, Ajmal Stanikzai.

Both Shamina and Dr were also deeply moved by your remembering, and they too had tears welling up in their eyes hearing you speak of their dear brother.

Soon after this moment, you left the room for a time and then returned with photographs in your hand and walked over to show them to me.

These photographs were also honouring your son.

And you began to share stories about Ajmal and what he still means to you and your family.

You told me stories about how Ajmal studied engineering in Rome, Italy, and then came home to Afghanistan to contribute to his country. You showed me photos of significant infrastructure projects that your son had contributed to.[4] You showed me how Ajmal worked on building power stations between Kandahar and Kabul along a very dangerous and risky highway. I was struck by the way in which your son worked towards the building up of Afghanistan in the midst of the ongoing struggle.

I heard that on the evening before Ajmal was killed, as he walked down the long street past the different houses of your extended families, many people wanted to speak with him. Ajmal was friendly, he had so many friends. He had his computer bag on his shoulder and was surrounded by all his cousins when you asked him "What are you doing? You must be tired … come home". He was smiling as he told you, "I am just talking with my cousins, then I will come home". That was the last moment you saw his face. His friendly face. Ajmal surrounded by his cousins who loved him.[5]

A few weeks after Ajmal's death, I heard that you went to his office to see if there was anything you could bring back to your home. You saw his chair and a small nameplate on his table that you have brought with you here to Australia. When the office manager came, I believe you explained through your tears that you were not there for any financial support, but instead with a request: "If Ajmal ever did anything wrong, please forgive him". You were there for your son's soul.[6]

In response, you heard that Ajmal's talent, his skills and his friendliness meant that the office manager believed your son was a big asset not only to their company but also to Afghanistan. I wonder what it meant to you to hear this about your beloved son.

I also heard that, even though it was very dangerous, you were determined to have a burial ceremony for Ajmal back in your province of origin. This was very risky, but you were determined to do this right. A lot of friends from other provinces came. Because it was a difficult journey, some arrived in time for the ceremony and some arrived afterwards. When the villagers saw that Ajmal's friends had come from many places and that they were people of different ethnicities, they came to realise that Ajmal wasn't to be considered as a "government supporter" but instead that he was a very big loss.

Some of Ajmal's other friends held honouring ceremonies in different parts of the country. They made posters that they sent to you, his mother, to let you know how people in different parts of the country were honouring him.[7]

I was moved by how loved Ajmal was: by you, by his siblings, by his cousins, by his friends, even by his workmates. I wonder what that was like for Ajmal to be so loved during his lifetime.[8]

Ziba, it's clear that Ajmal will never be forgotten, that many people will always carry on his stories and memories and the image of his smiling face.

Ziba, I then spoke to Shamina and heard about her experiences in Australia, and also about how you and her father inspired in her a love of learning and a commitment to help others. This is what she told me:

> Being in Australia, there is both happiness and sadness. I have gotten through struggles by talking with my friends and family back in Afghanistan and my family here in Australia. We are very close. And we each have our hopes and dreams.
>
> I went to school and university in Afghanistan and completed my master's in Pashto literature. I can adjust more easily than some women to Australian society because of going to university and being in the workplace in Afghanistan. But now I have to start again in Australia. This is very difficult and a problem that my family face.
>
> But I have a plan in my mind. I want to study here and get a good job. Then I will collect my income and not spend it on anything else. My dream is then to establish a school for girls in my hometown. I am struggling for this. I suffered this issue myself and had to walk one hour to school. This problem still exists, especially for girls.

Ziba, when I asked Shamina where she learnt about her love of learning[9], this is what she told me:

> My father and mother didn't have professional careers. They faced extreme poverty when they were living in Pakistan as refugees. They insisted that we should be educated to be sustainable to help family and help our country.

> Always my mother and family said we should help. Not only helping individuals, but our society. We were taught to never forget this value.
>
> My father wanted us all [including the girls of the family] to have an education. My father didn't care what people said, what they liked or didn't like.

Ziba, your daughter also told me about why women's education is important to her:

> Mothers transfer their knowledge to their children, and with an education they'll know good things to teach their children. With an education, women can do more interesting activity in their lives and get more out of stressful situations. If women and girls are educated, society will be strong.
>
> Women suffer under the stress when they move to Australia. They do not know the language. Many women do not know how to read and write in their own language, so learning English is very difficult. Women like my mother used to do things face to face in Afghanistan. In Australia, they cannot go to the shops and have to wait for relatives to take them. There is such different government and systems here. The electronic system is difficult, especially when you have to wait on one relative to do all the family's forms and appointments on the computer.
>
> And another thing that is difficult in Australia for Afghan women is the difference in culture. Like how men and women are separate in Afghan culture and life. Even restaurants will have separate areas for women and men to sit. In Australia, families go out all together, but when we are at home, we still have the women and men separate. These differences in culture make it difficult for women to have friends outside of other Afghan community members. In one year at our other house, we didn't meet our neighbours, and we are just close with our Afghan culture.
>
> So it is difficult when someone first moves to Australia. We don't want to adjust too much and lose ourselves and our culture, but it is important that we meet our neighbours and other people because now this is our city and country.[10]

Ziba, your daughter also gave me a brief Afghanistan history lesson. She introduced me to some Pashto poets and she told me about the beauty of Afghanistan:

> There are many beautiful things about Afghanistan. It has beautiful mountains, rivers and creeks. We have a beautiful culture. We value hospitality and have many beautiful ways of celebrating. Like a marriage party, where all the community comes together and it is beautiful. Also, we celebrate holidays like Eid, when everyone will wear colourful clothing and walk around visiting family, giving foods and fruits and money to children. It is so beautiful.[11]

Ziba, I have now had the privilege of hearing some of the stories of three of your children – Ajmal, Dr Abdul and Shamina. I have heard of how they have already contributed to society (both in Afghanistan and in Australia) and have worked to uphold human rights. I've also heard of some of your family's dreams for the future.

What was it about you and your husband that has encouraged your children to help family and help their country? Where did this value come from? What does it mean to you to see how this value has passed on to your children?[12]

Thank you for welcoming me into your home. Thank you for your hospitality, the green tea, the platter of delicious food and for sharing stories and memories.

With kindness,
Chelsea

Chelsea

I vividly recall sitting in the Stanikzai home and reading this letter as the interpreter translated line by line. Ziba and Shamina could hear me in English and then the interpreter would speak. It was like a telling and retelling. There were tears and closeness and handholding. I was slowly, slowly reading through the letter and this pace and tone made a difference. I was taking cues from Ziba as I read. She was looking intently at me, reading my face for sentiment as I tried to use my face to reflect the words[13] so that when she heard them in her own language from the interpreter, the story could be both felt and understood. It was a ritual that I won't forget.

Dr Abdul

After that first meeting, my mother had kept asking, "When is she coming back?" Chelsea had been the perfect person in the first meeting. It was like a listening ritual in our family home as Chelsea listened very carefully. She was making verbal and nonverbal communication. Her facial expression was telling that she is so sad as well, and she is very moved with the family. I think it was about a week later when she came back with an interpreter and this letter.

As Chelsea read back about how Ajmal contributed to his country, that was very significant for my mum. As she listened to the letter, her facial expression was telling something very different from what it was before. We had been unable to talk about Ajmal or even to share any story about back in Afghanistan. This time it was different, it was a very proud moment. When Chelsea finished and left the house, I remember my mum asking me, "Can you bring my phone?" And she immediately called her sister in Afghanistan and told her the whole story about a lady coming to visit and speaking of how Ajmal contributed to the Afghanistan reconstruction and the project he was doing. This was a completely different mother. We were seeing her like before she was hurt. Prior to this, even her sister could not talk with her about this issue.

Within Afghani culture, when a loved one has died, if you have background knowledge of the person who has died and you go to visit the family, and if you talk about his or her achievements and contribution to the community, this makes the family who is grieving feel a sense of pride. It also means that this person who is visiting and sharing these stories feels like a family member. It's a big honour. It's priceless and very meaningful in our culture to join with families in their time of grieving in this way. The letter that Chelsea read to my mother was more than a letter, it was a treatment for her.

David

These first two visits and the "treatment" letter made a significant difference to Ziba and her family. However, over months, Ziba would still slip into sorrows and would ask if Chelsea was going to visit again. For various reasons, it took far longer than it should have to arrange a third meeting. Prior to this third meeting, I wanted to arrange further messages or letters for Ziba that would provide a wider audience to the stories of Ajmal and the Stanikzai family.[14] Two opportunities arose. One of these involved participants in the Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work course at The University of Melbourne, who expressed their willingness to act as outsider witnesses to these stories. These master's participants come from many different countries and cultures and their responses were richly textured. Letters were written by participants from Hong Kong, UK, Singapore, mainland China, USA and different parts of Australia including from a number of First Nations participants, one of whom was Jared Payne. Here is his letter:

Dear Ziba, Abdul and Shamina,

I am writing to you in honour of your son and brother Ajmal Stanikzai who I had the honour of learning about through Dr Abdul Ghaffar Stanikzai and his work with Dulwich Centre in Adelaide.

My name is Jared. In my culture, it is commonplace to establish connections and explore relationships when meeting people. I would like to start by saying that I am a Barkindji Wimpatja from the Barka-Darling River Country. And that my grandfather was raised by a man from Afghanistan named Mohamet Sultan. We knew him as Lola. Many of the people in my family are descendants from the first wave of Afghani migrants who came to

Australia over a hundred years ago to support the development of major infrastructure such as highways and rail lines.[15] The house Mohamet built is now the home of my grandmother and uncle and has housed many of my family over the years. The fruit trees he planted over 60 years ago still grow and people from the community come to collect the fruit. These trees grow interwoven with the native quandong trees and Sturt peas, which are harvested by my family every year. I would like to extend to you this ongoing connection and solidarity from my family to yours.

I am deeply saddened to learn of Ajmal's passing. Despite this sadness, I am honoured to learn of him and his commitment and contribution to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. I wonder if this commitment comes from a deep love and belief in his people and his country, and if so, I wonder where he may have learnt this love and belief.

I heard of the photos you shared of Ajmal's infrastructure projects, including roads and dams. I heard of the risky highway between Kabul and Kandahar that Ajmal worked on. This draws me to consider Ajmal's bravery. I also heard of his studies in Rome and the love of learning he inspired in his sister, Shamina. As I work through my studies, I draw inspiration from Ajmal's and Shamina's love of learning.

I know that the grief and sadness of losing a family member can impact people in all kinds of ways. And talking to psychologists can feel a bit weird. However, I was amazed to hear of how you bravely shared these stories with Chelsea and shared photos of Ajmal's projects, and how you then shared that experience with Shamina. I believe that stories hold memories and culture, but they also hold power in how we tell them, so thank you for your strong stories in honour of Ajmal. I want to honour those feelings of grief and sadness but also joy in reflecting on Ajmal's work and his achievements and contributions. As I learnt about how he was an asset to his company and had friends and family from all over Afghanistan honour him through ceremonies and making posters, I wonder how his words and work impacted them and what lessons they carry from Ajmal throughout their lives. What seeds did Ajmal plant to grow throughout the reconstruction of Afghanistan?

I know when you visited Ajmal's workplace they thought you may be visiting for financial reasons, but you were only there to ask forgiveness if Ajmal had ever done anything wrong. You were there for his soul. I also learnt how you were determined to have a burial ceremony and to do it right even though it may have been risky. I heard Dr Abdul recite a prayer for his brother in your language. I did not understand the words, but I was moved by this act of faith and your family's connection to Islam. I wonder how you will carry Ajmal through your prayers during this Ramadan and into the future.

Yours sincerely,
Jared

A second opportunity to generate responses to Ziba occurred in Calgary, Canada, at the fiftieth anniversary conference of the Calgary Family Therapy Center when Dr Abdul shared the story of Ajmal and his mother and of Chelsea's visits. One of the participants in this conference, Sara Warkentin, shared her willingness to create a collective letter with the Afghan women she works with in Winnipeg to send back to Ziba. Here is an extract from the thoughtful letter they crafted:

Dear Ziba,

My name is Sara, and I am a therapist in Winnipeg, Canada. I heard your story from your son, Dr Abdul, and from David Denborough last August at a conference in Calgary. They also shared with us about your other son who died, Ajmal Stanikzai.

Over the last two years, I held space at work for a group of Afghan women who came to Winnipeg as refugees, most of them mothers or grandmothers. Many of them are separated from family members and community that they love. Some of them have experienced the death of a family member, friend, loved one or neighbour in Afghanistan. I hope it's okay that I shared your family's story and the story of Ajmal with them.

I wanted to share with you some of their words in response, about how they have faced their difficulties, some of which sounded to me like echoes of your own:

- Ziba raised a child like Ajmal, who was unique, so special, and always wanted to do something for his country. As a mom, it is my wish to have a child like that.
- Ajmal is the pride not just of his mother, but we are also proud of him as Afghans, to have him as part of our community. We feel sad and angry that people are killing good people like your son. We are thinking of all the young boys and girls, men and women who were killed and whose mothers grieve as you grieve.
- Ziba, we hope you can hold on to beautiful memories of your son that bring you happiness. Ajmal will always be remembered. We will remember him, and we hope your heart can relax.
- Ziba, I would like to tell my daughter your story. She was young when we left two years ago, and I tell her about Afghanistan and the brave people who worked hard to make it a better place and how much they accomplished.
- Many people take advantage of Afghanistan, and even other countries have interfered and hurt Afghanistan. Ziba, we hope you are proud of your son and what he did for the benefit of his country and his people.

Hearing your story opened up room for other stories to surface. Some of the women in the group told stories of people they would like to remember, who, like Ajmal, were killed.

I hope it is okay to share some of them below.

- I would like everyone to know the story of my friend Humera. She was in her second year studying law. I was preparing myself to go to university that day. There was an attack at Kabul University and her family had to search all day and night to find her body. I felt it could have so easily been me, if the timing was just slightly different. I would like to remember my friend.
- I would like to remember my father. He worked in rural areas building schools, mosques and other things that were useful to build up communities. When they found out what he was doing, they killed him in a terrible way. It was so difficult for us because we were young and grew up without a father. Later, my brother was also taken from us and killed. I remember my father and my brother.
- My neighbour was engaged and was about to graduate medical school. We would talk every day. He died in an explosion at the university.
- My neighbour was bombed and the whole family died except the baby. They asked me to watch the baby, and I did for a few hours. I held her and I breastfed her. I had six children, but I told them that I would keep her and raise her as a daughter if she had no family left. They later found her aunt and she went to live with her, but I always remember that baby who lived and her family who were taken from her.

One of the women said:

> In Afghanistan, people are killed at work, at school, in the hospital, walking home …
> We deserve to be safe.

The women shared some words about how they carry their losses, which can sometimes feel so heavy[16], and we talked about mothers and grandmothers and grief. One said, "Our country, Afghanistan, is like a mother. She must grieve all the children she has lost. We miss her like a mother".

The women wanted to share some of the things they love and miss about Afghanistan, to also honour the beautiful country that Ajmal and so many people died building up, in hope that one day you will all see it again.

- I miss the weather! It is not too hot or too cold like it can be in Canada, and we have all four seasons.
- There are delicious foods in every corner of the city. There are all the fruits and vegetables we love, and they taste much better there somehow!
- I love the Afghan bread, dried fruit and nuts.
- What I miss the most is how cheap everything is compared to other countries! We never knew there were so many taxes in other places …
- We love and miss all our friends and family still in Afghanistan.
- Shopping there is so fun! We do not think it is as much fun in Canada.
- I remember and miss the tasty smells of street food and it makes my mouth water.
- There are some special places in our country that our heart aches for. Sometimes we will look them up on YouTube just to see them.
- We miss the parties, Eid parties, and especially wedding parties where we do beautiful henna, make beautiful colourful dresses, and there is dancing and wonderful music. We miss the ritual and togetherness of holidays, which were much bigger there than here.
- What I remember the most is the hospitality. People will butcher sheep or lamb and share the meat with all their neighbours. Afghans are a generous people.
- Everybody likes their own country, but for us, we love it. Despite the long war and struggle, we were happy many times. Every day was different and every day we hoped for better.

Ziba, thank you for your story, and the story of Ajmal. There were tears in the room as we thought of your son and brave young people like him, and thought of you and brave mothers who endure unthinkable loss. We promised to remember him and you.

The women in the group asked also to extend an invitation to you if you would ever like to say hello! They think Australia is probably warmer than Canada, but they suspect there may be more snakes. I said I didn't know, but you can tell us if you decide to join us via Zoom link. If you ever feel like getting up early in the morning to meet our group, just let me know, and I (Sara) will set it up.

The Afghan women's group at Aurora Family Therapy Centre
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Transcribed by Sara Warkentin

Taking with her a whole collection of letters and messages for Ziba, and a world globe, Chelsea returned to the Stanikzai home.

Chelsea

When I arrived for this third meeting, Shamina told me that her mum was really excited to see me and had gone to put on some special eyeliner, but this had gone badly and she had to rub it all off. It was such a sweet story, and we had a big giggle about it together. The timing for this meeting was during Ramadan, and Dr Abdul had thought it would be very good for this to happen prior to Eid so that during the festivities, when other families would visit, this would provide opportunities for further retellings.

During this third meeting, we sat on the floor together and kind of huddled over the globe. With each letter, we scanned the globe to find the area from which the particular letter had come, and then I read out some of the messages.

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There were many more letters than Chelsea could read out during her visit, so the remainder were left with Shamina to share with her mother at a later time. Ziba was so moved by these messages that over time, with help from Shamina and her younger son Matin, she wrote responses back to their authors. This meant that the "family therapy" process continued in a different form. As with many families who have immigrated, the younger Stanikzai children were more proficient than the parents in the language of the new land. Shamina and Matin could translate the letters for Ziba, and in turn translate her replies into English. We have included here some of these replies from Ziba as she evocatively conveys how receiving these letters was resonant with Afghan cultural ways of supporting those in grief.

Dear Teresa,

After my son died, I felt so down and broken heart and every moment became a silent killer for me as I was missing Ajmal so much. I couldn't find a name to tell someone my sorrow with and no person can fully understand what I am going through and what I am feeling and what I have in heart, until Chelsea come and talked to me like my daughter and a good friend. She sat with me, shared every tears coming from my eyes and then your letters stopped and dried those tears and changed those tears of sadness and sorrow to the tears of joy and pride.

In your letter you are saying "I will never forget Ajmal's story and if I ever visit Afghanistan sometime in the future, I will hold him in mind". When Shamina is reading this to me, I am feeling like you are just next to me and hugging me and comforting my heart. Traditionally we have to visit the graveyards each Eid mornings, but I am too far from Ajmal's graveyard. But every time Shamina is reading your letters, such sentence making me feel that I am next to Ajmal graveyard with much pride.

Dear Jean,

You mentioned about your dad passed away. In our tradition when someone connect theirselves and their situation and feelings with a grieving and tragic family, it means that they are the same family. I wish one day I can host you in my very house for a simple tea and a lunch.

Dear Steve,

Thanks so much for your kindness and I am so grateful, and of course Ajmal would also be, that our story and Ajmal's legacy in a way contribute to other people and families' healings … I am sure the way your letters helped me will help many more families and mothers. They are still grieving and there is no one to go and sit with her/them to explore what they have/hide in their hearts that are burning them from inside invisible.

Your letters and the time you spend on them have changed my and my kids' lives. In such a friendly, warmly and caring traditional environments: Chelsea, interpreter, me, my daughter, my son, our traditional room with cushions and red carpet, when I had tears in my eyes coming on my face with Chelsea squeezing my hands as an assurance and confidence next to me, and the tears in interpreter's eyes were all showing so many people caring for us and for my beloved martyred son Ajmal.

There were nights I had nightmares and never tell even to my kids about them. I was sometime hopeless that what should I do and what can be helpful for me as I am unable to speak a word of English to talk to someone in park or with our neighbours. We have a good Afghan community here, but nearly everyone has somehow similar issues and unfortunately the tradition we had is gradually changing here mean that most of the families are busy with work, study, appointments, etc. and I can't just go to their house and visit. Unlike Afghanistan, we have to call them first to see they are at home and then ask when would be a good time to visit. Whereas in Afghanistan, we don't have to make calls before visiting a family, we just knock on the door and visit the family very simple. But the letters and the way it was read to me in my house without so much formal process was so relieving and can't imagine how beautiful it is to sit in friendly traditional place where the discussion is about the person you missing him every moment and the discussion change your sorrow and sadness to a prouder moments.

When Chelsea and now Shamina reading me your letters, I can feel and sense that these letters are from the core of your hearts that cares so much for humanity. You mentioned about the Kabuli pulao rice. You all deserve a Kabuli pulao. Whenever you come to Adelaide, please let my son know so at least I can meet you and can see your kind faces and eyes that cared for me and for my martyred son Ajmal.

And finally, here is Ziba's response to Jared:

Dear Jared,

We have nearly the same cultural ways to establish connections when meeting people. In our tradition, those who share your sorrow and grief in such a way mean they are like one's family members and most trusted people.

When you named an Afghan man Mohamet Sultan, you called him Lola; we actually call it Lala. Lala is the person most senior, respectful and trusted, not only in his family but in all the village. That's a very beautiful connection through these letters. The house of Lala and tree fruits is what our culture and religion teach us to help people. We Afghans are very hospitable, but unfortunately the several decades' imposed war has demolished our beautiful culture, and show it to the world that Afghans' name is tied with war and conflict, which is not true. When Shamina explained your word "seeds" to me it is so much resonant and touched not only me but my whole family about Ajmal's legacy and his path. My grandsons each one is trying and telling me, "Bobo (what they call me at home), I look like Ajmal." And then I have to kiss them and reply them, "Yes you are". So these are the seeds he grow.

I wish one day I can meet your family too, or the other way round – you bring your family and meet us for an Afghan traditional lunch.

This exchange with Jared honoured elements of Afghan culture at the same time as honouring Ajmal. This was also true in the letter from the Afghan women living in Winnipeg. When that letter was shared, Ziba and Shamina and Dr Abdul all joined with Chelsea to talk about many of the beautiful things of Afghanistan. There was laughter as they shared stories and memories. In some ways, this linked back to the themes Shamina had spoken about in the initial meeting with Chelsea in which she had honoured aspects of Afghani culture. Storylines of grief and remembrance and honouring of Ajmal were interwoven with storylines of treasured aspects of Afghani cultural life. Significantly, the grieving and honouring practices that this process involved were resonant with, or somehow evoked, Afghani practices.[17] Throughout this process, spiritual cultural elements were also ever present.

Chelsea

Islam is very significant to the Stanikzai family and Christianity is very significant to me. I think this influenced how we were meeting with each other and receiving suffering. At particular times, I would mention that I would "pray for Afghanistan" or "pray for your family", and these invocations were part of our shared meetings. So too was a sense that we are all joined in a longing for justice and a longing for peace. When so much is out of control, when much is unutterable or unfathomable, small rituals of being joined in prayer or hopes can be significant.

A nuanced form of narrative family therapy

This paper describes how a nuanced form of narrative family therapy was created for a specific circumstance. We learnt a lot along the way. Some of the things that worked well were:

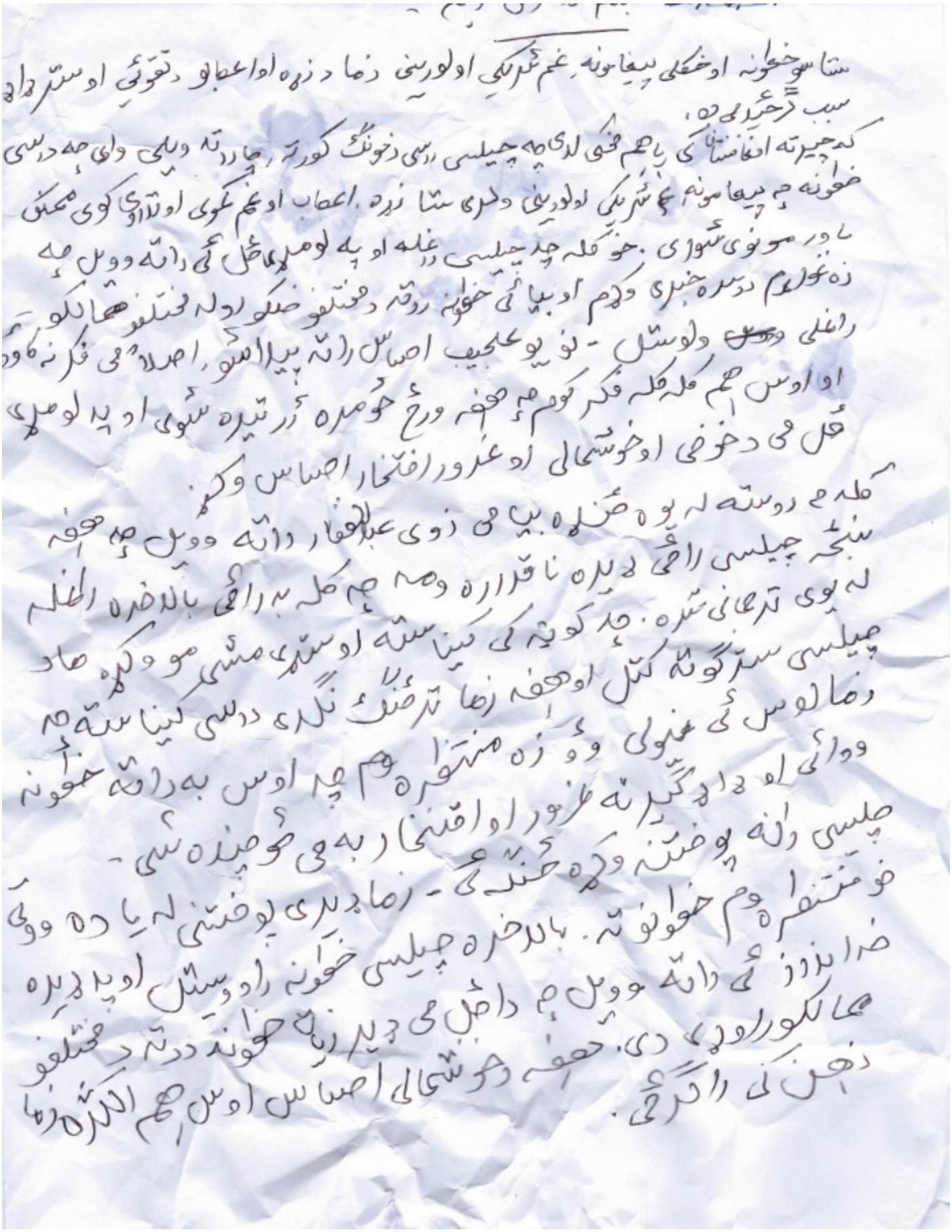
- carefully considering how existing relationships might be a pathway to a dignified first conversation – "We searched through our web of relationships and then Dr Abdul was in a position to invite someone to their home"
- meeting in the person's home, which meant the family became a host in familiar surrounds and could include whomever and whatever they wished in the conversation (Ziba bringing photos of Ajmal to show to Chelsea)
- writing a letter for the family through a collective process that enabled women and men from the family to contribute but not need to be in direct conversation; this was particularly significant as within Afghan culture, separate spaces for women's conversation and men's conversations are very important; this process also enabled two narrative practitioners (Chelsea and David) to collaborate even though they were never in the same place
- writing the collective letter in a way that (with permission from the family) could then be shared with others from diverse cultural locations who sent messages back; this meant that storylines from across the globe could be linked with the stories of this family
- generating spiritual cultural ritual retellings in which these messages were read, translated and received
- the family having a chance to send responses back to those who had written so that the process was mutually dignifying
- in all conversations and interactions, honouring storylines of culture and spirituality as well as honouring the contributions of all family members (alive and no longer living) – "When that letter was shared, Ziba and Shamina and Dr Abdul all joined with Chelsea to talk about many of the beautiful things of Afghanistan"
- having a chance to reflect together on how these practices resonate with the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the family and the narrative practitioners.

We hope some of these learnings may also be relevant to you, the reader, and we would be very interested to hear about the diverse ways you might engage with families experiencing loss and hardship.

Now though, it seems appropriate to end this paper with the words of Ziba, Shamina and Dr Abdul.

Concluding words from Ziba, Shamina and Dr Abdul

Here is a letter that Ziba wrote addressed to all those who had sent her messages:



Your beautiful letters and support messages sharing my sorrow and sad moments and encouraging words are a good treat, support and a secret of resilience to me and my kids.

Before Chelsea came into our house, if back in my home country or even here if someone told me that only letters from other people whom you never met and don't know will/can give you peace of mind, reduce your sorrow and reduce your stress to this level, no one would believe that. But when Chelsea came to our house and then next time retold my own family story and resilience, it was unbelievable, and no one have yet told us about how strong I am and how much my beloved son Ajmal contributed to our country reconstruction and how much he was friendly and much more. That whole day I felt happy and much energetic and that all night I was feeling prouder and remembering Ajmal with much proud and happiness.
I still remember I was telling myself that I am a prouder mother and shouldn't be sad all the time. Then next time Chelsea came to our house and told me for the first time that she brought some letters from people all around Australia and the world. It was something very new and I wasn't expecting this. When she was reading the letters to me through an interpreter, I still remember I had completely different feelings. When Chelsea, the interpreter and my kids had tears in their eyes, I was completely lost in different feelings. I felt so honoured and prouder. Even now sometimes, those feelings come in my mind and eyes and I am taking deep breaths and can feel that my chest is expanding more and taking more air into my lungs.

Then after a long pause in between that second session, my son told me that lady [Chelsea] is coming again soon. I was so happy and asking my son every day, when is she coming? Finally, Chelsea came with a different interpreter this time. Chelsea asked me, how are you? Chelsea sat next to me hold my hand to support me.
I was anxiously waiting to listen to the new letters. I don't know whether Chelsea noticed that or not. I didn't interact much as I was waiting for new letters to listen to. Then Chelsea took the letters and asked me to read a few letters. That feelings and happiness will stay with me for very long time. And even now when I am alone trying to keep myself busy with something silently thinking about all those times and letters, giving me the feelings of happiness.

During all these times, whenever I was getting stressed or bored, I was asking Shamina, let's go to the park. Shamina prepare green tea we going to the park.
There is a spot in the park which is quiet and open area. Shamina put the mat, we sit on that, and Shamina put tea in the cups and start reading one letter. I am feeling much prouder and happier. I remember once I was coming to park it wasn't enjoyable at all, and I was sometimes scared of crowd and people, but now even I don't know how many people are in the park, what they doing, as Shamina reading letters to me and we both listen by our heart and making me so happy and my time passes with so much joy.

Now these letters are good friends with me. Every time I read these letters giving me peace and comfort and I feel prouder. Even I listen to some letters three or four times. And every time I listen, I feel more happier and joy.

At the end I can't express how grateful I and my kids are from you all.

Hope to see you whenever you come to Adelaide, and you will see how much your words mean to me and to my kids.

With best wishes,
Ziba Stanikzai

This whole process has also been very significant for Shamina, as she explains:

> There was not much difference in age between Ajmal and me, and he was my close friend since childhood. I would talk with him about problems at school and he would help me solve maths questions. The experience with Chelsea and the letters helped me personally a lot because I have had depression for almost three years, and I lost so much weight. I couldn't focus on my daily life. It was like I was away from my love. I've been to the doctor and to specialists several times, but this didn't help me. I could not find words for my feelings with them and the medications did not help. But when Chelsea came to our house, we shared our stories with her. And the third time she came, she brought stories with her from other people who shared their own experiences and sympathy words with us through letters and it helped us a lot. It helped me to get back to my life. Now I'm living in the moment and seeing my mum getting better day by day. Receiving letters from around the world gives us a relaxed feeling. People understand our pain. We are not alone, and in the sharing, they are with us. This all helped me to get rid of the depression. As I said, Ajmal helped me a lot, in school and in study. It was my hope, and also Ajmal's hope, that one day I might become a teacher. When he passed away, this hope stayed with me. It was my wish to fulfil his dream for me and to continue my education into something for the community. I am now teaching here in Australia.

And now, some final words from Dr Abdul:

> Thank you very much whoever is reading this story. My mother is not the only person who has experienced this sort of pain. Every household in Afghanistan has this same problem and every family has had multiple people who have died. I think about all those other Afghan families who no one has visited, who no one has sat with. The letters shared with us were like a bridge between my mother and other people. Now, hopefully this story can inspire people who work with other families that there are different ways to assist. How can we reach other families who won't come into professional services? We need to do things differently. So please, if any of you would like to try this sort of process with families in your communities, and especially with other new arrival communities, we would treasure that.

Notes

1. To read more about how we first met and also about Dr Abdul Stanikzai's human rights work and community work in Australia, see the paper "Moral injury and moral repair: The possibilities of narrative practice: Inspired by an Australian–Afghan friendship" (Denborough, 2021). In addition, a recent social project led by Dr Stanikzai can be found here: How do you deal with sad memories that cannot be erased? (Sediqi, Stanikzai, & Denborough, 2022).
2. Dr Abdul was also physically present, but he did not share his own perspectives during the meeting; he only assisted with interpretation.
3. Afghan culture involves a significant degree of separation of spaces for women and men. The generation of women's spaces was therefore a very important part of the "family therapy" process we were constructing, but so too was finding ways that the men and women of the family could all be involved in grieving and honouring Ajmal together.
4. The first theme that is richly explored in this letter is the multiple contributions that Ajmal made during his lifetime. These are described in ways that acknowledge Ajmal's many lasting tangible and intangible legacies.
5. This letter provided vivid preferred imagery of Ajmal's life in the hope it might dislodge the power of distressing imagery related to Ajmal's death.
6. A second theme explored here is the ways in which Ziba responded to her son's death. The letter makes visible the different actions Ziba took and imbues them with significance.
7. A third theme involves the ways in which others also responded to Ajmal's death, especially responses that illustrate the significance of Ajmal's influence in their lives.
8. This line of enquiry is linked to re-membering practice in narrative therapy (White, 2007, chapter 3) in which care is taken to make visible the contributions of the person who has died to the living and, crucially, the contributions that the living made to the person who has died and their sense of identity.
9. This line of enquiry was used to make links across generations and to positively implicate members of older generations. As it turned out, it linked Shamina's love of learning to her father and to Ziba.
10. Shamina's words, which trace the histories of the family and her parents' lives and also name the broader context of the struggle for Afghans to make new lives in Australia, were a crucial part of this letter. Her words place Ziba's suffering amidst broader collective storylines.
11. Elevating some of the treasured aspects of Afghan culture within this letter was deliberate. In the midst of grief and in the midst of decades of war, the ways in which the beautiful aspects of Aghan culture continue to be treasured, practiced and re-made in a new land are highly significant. These forms of living heritage sustain the Stanikzai family, but just as importantly, the Stanikzai family sustain, protect and continually vitalize Afghan culture.
12. These questions make visible the contributions Ziba and her husband have made across time and across generations in relation to preserving and carrying forth treasured values.
13. Conveying tone and nuance and sentiment in the reading was also to give clues to the interpreter.

[14] These letters and messages were shaped as outsider witness responses (White, 2000). DD also asked people to describe who they were and where they were writing from. Those who described personal resonances in relation to Ziba's story were asked, where possible, to include resonances related to their own culture, people's history and language. This led to the generation of outsider witness responses that included personal and collective storylines.

[15] Jared's acknowledgement of his Afghan ancestors' contributions to infrastructure projects echoes with Ajmal's civil engineering contributions in Afghanistan. These unexpected storyline resonances occurred many times throughout this process. Significantly, this interlinking of personal stories between Jared and Ziba is a continuation of collective historical links between Afghan people and Aboriginal Australians (see Haider, 2019; Mohabbat, 2019).

[16] These "ways of carrying losses" were sent to Ziba but are not included here.

[17] We didn't know this in advance. It only became clear when Ziba wrote her careful responses to those who had corresponded with her; for instance, in her beautiful phrases such as "every time Shamina is reading your letters, such sentence making me feel that I am next to Ajmal graveyard with much pride".

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