Fireworks, a funeral and friendship: Re-membering community at the end of life

by Tanya Newman

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Abstract

This paper shares a joyful practice story about re-membering community at the end of life. A "socially isolated" man was referred for social work support to arrange a will. This task became a rich experience of re-membering community and supporting Colin to craft his own after-death care. These collaborative efforts enabled friendship, community and a funeral with fireworks. Colin's story highlights the possibilities of actively re-membering people into one another's lives, and how narrative practitioners can support people to reconnect with those important to them.

Key words: re-membering; social work; hospice; palliative care; end of life; death; grief; community; funeral; eulogy; definitional ceremony; linking lives; enabling contribution; narrative practice; narrative therapy

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As a palliative care social worker, my days are filled with supporting people to navigate health systems, access resources, make informed-decisions and get their affairs in order. While narrative practice informs my work, this looks different than it might in a counselling or group-work context. Practical problem-solving is often the reason I meet people. This can become a doorway into therapeutic conversations, particularly with people who may be prepared to meet a "social worker" but not a "counsellor".

The people referred to the hospice I work for usually have less than a year to live, and many die within six weeks of admission to our service. However, while we support the dying, our work focuses on enabling people to live well. As such, we "make now precious" (Lee, 2013), listening for what people hold dear and doing our best to support people to live comfortably and enjoy time with the companions, places and activities that are important to them. I "attend to goodbyes" (Lee, 2013) in every interaction, as it is always possible the people I support may die before we can speak again. This brings a particular clarity to the work and encourages creativity to make the most of the time we have.

In this article, I will share the story of my work with Colin in which the practical task of arranging a will became a rich experience of re-membering community. Colin's story illustrates how narrative thinking, skills and ethics can enrich daily social work practice, and highlights the value of re-membering practice as more than conversation. All names in this article are pseudonyms.

A thin story: "Socially isolated"

I first met Colin when he moved into an aged care residential facility, following a hospital admission. Prior to his time in hospital, Colin had been living independently in a cabin at a local holiday park. A hospital social worker sent me a referral, requesting that I support Colin to contact his brother, arrange a will, sort out a phone plan, collect belongings, arrange storage and finalise his tenancy.

In our first conversation, I learnt Colin was interested in purchasing a campervan and travelling. He was adamant he would soon be moving out of the rest home. Colin was keen to arrange his will, but he was unsure about the content. As we talked about the kinds of questions a lawyer would ask when drafting a will, I learnt that Colin's death and after-death care wishes centred on nephews (with whom he'd had no contact for 35 years), a previous landlord and a man he had bought fireworks from (whose last name he did not know and contact details he did not appear to have). Colin articulated wishes for a funeral with "adults and children singing", fireworks, a motorcade of taxis and hot rod cars, and to have sunflowers planted on his grave.

At the time of our first conversation, Colin was very unwell. He was unable to mobilise more than 20 metres. It had been some years since he'd had contact with the people he hoped would support him. I felt a sense that we were inhabiting different worlds of expectation. I was momentarily confounded and slipped into pathologising thinking, briefly diagnosing Colin as "having unrealistic expectations". Fortunately, I held myself to account and returned to my ethics of honouring the skills, knowledges and agency of the folk I work alongside. I chose to trust Colin's vision and followed his lead.

Over the next six weeks, I met with Colin seven times. A colleague also supported Colin, helping with some of the practical tasks for which he had been referred. This is considerably more resource than we usually have capacity for. We adjusted our care to fit Colin, as initially his community was us. Colin was a private, methodical man who liked to make well-considered decisions. He needed time to connect with us, and to consider big questions such as, "Who would you like to inherit your estate?" and "Who do you want to care for you after you die?"

Re-membering in action: Enabling contribution

Time was also needed to "re-member" people into Colin's life (Myerhoff, 1982; White, 2007). Colin was initially referred to me as he was "isolated" and "had no-one". In conversation with Colin, I quickly learnt about significant figures from his past. These people had membership in Colin's "association of life" (White, 2007, p. 129), but either didn't know it or may have thought their membership had lapsed. Rather than engaging in re-membering conversations with Colin, my focus was to actively re-member people into his life.

After my second meeting with Colin, I suggested he contact his brother and previous landlords/neighbours, the Massey family. Colin wanted to "let my brother know what is happening with me" and expressed his wish to take the Massey family "out on a fishing charter". I asked Colin questions about his connections with his brother and the Masseys, so I knew a little about why they were important to him. I encouraged Colin to make these calls, as I hoped connecting with others would increase the support available to him, and assist Colin in becoming clearer about his will. I also wanted to support Colin's agency to enact his own wishes. Colin said he would make the calls in the next few days.

When we met a week later, Colin had not made the calls. I realised poor health (and perhaps nerves), meant this task was beyond what Colin was able to do. The ethic of being "decentred and influential" is central to my work (Morgan, 2006; White, 2007). As a palliative care social worker, I often take on more practical "doing" than I would with people who are well. Prioritising people's wishes for their lives sometimes requires me to lend my energy and take on responsibilities that could be disempowering in other contexts. Not doing so could risk being ineffective, uninfluential and abandoning what is precious for the people I am working with. Therefore, when I realised Colin hadn't been able to make the calls himself, I offered to support him to do so. When he asked if I would make the calls for him, I offered to lend him my phone and sit with him while he called. Colin called his brother and left a message before calling Nicole Massey. He did so on speaker phone, and I heard the surprise in Nicole's voice. She initially declined Colin's offer to leave his belongings to her family, gently telling Colin they didn't need anything and suggesting a charity donation instead. Colin asked to pass the phone to me, so I could talk with Nicole. She asked if she was off speaker phone, and then said: "Tanya, this is a real surprise, I'm Colin's old landlord and I haven't seen him in years!"

I replied: "Yes, Colin told me. He's been talking with me about the people who are important to him, and he shared his fondness for your family. He's been telling me about your family's kindnesses, like gathering wild mushrooms and sharing them with him. Your kindness means a lot to Colin." I was intentional in my reply, hoping to "thicken" the story of connection between the Massey family and Colin (Morgan, 2000), highlighting some of what they had already contributed to his life in the hope this may enable ongoing connection.

Nicole thought about Colin overnight, and rang me the next day to tell me she was prepared to visit and to help out if she could. In that conversation, I asked questions about her connection with Colin, and heard stories about the years Colin spent living on the Massey family farm – the chats over cups of tea, gifts of fresh eggs, groceries collected, cars loaned and Christmas days where Colin was included in the Massey family lunch. I highlighted the significance of these kindnesses and connections in Colin's life. Again, my hope was to thicken and "richly describe" stories of connection (Morgan, 2000) and to "enable contribution" (Denborough, 2008). Nicole is a kind-hearted, practical and energetic woman. She quickly shifted from surprise to feeling touched by her significance to Colin. Nicole then proceeded to thoroughly exceed my expectations, visiting to support Colin with practical tasks the next day, and extending the gift of her friendship to Colin over his final weeks.

When I first asked Colin about his family, he shared a tragic story of his elder brother Norman dying in an accident 35 years ago. He chose the cemetery where Norman was buried as his own final resting place, as he wanted to be as close as possible to his brother. Norman had two sons, who were teenagers when he died. Colin had little contact with them since his brother's death. Buoyed by our experience of reaching out to Nicole, I asked Colin if he would like to reconnect with his nephews. Colin was eager to do so and asked me to find them. Fortunately, an internet search produced a picture of a man who appeared the right age, had the right name and bore a striking resemblance to Colin. I emailed him, introducing myself, asking if he was Colin's nephew, and offering to connect them. Colin's nephew, Brendan, called me within 15 minutes. When we spoke, I shared Colin's love for Brendan's father, his decision to be buried at the same cemetery, and Colin's regret at not keeping in touch with Brendan and his brother. Again, I was intentional about thickening stories of connection and was guided by the ethic of enabling Colin to "speak through me, not just to me" (Denborough, 2018), "rescuing" Colin's words and sharing them verbatim (Newman, 2008). Brendan agreed to receive family photos and other heirlooms, and to video call with Colin. When I told Colin about this, his face lit up. It meant a great deal to Colin to reconnect with his brother's sons.

At this point, we were gaining momentum. Another puzzle piece was to find Darrell, a man who had previously sold Colin fireworks. Colin loved fireworks, had amassed an impressive collection of pyrotechnics and wanted to bequeath these to Darrell as he was "reliable", "safe", and would "know what to do with them". I initially tried connecting with a pyrotechnics supplier where Darrell had worked but was unsuccessful. Fortunately, during a later visit to Colin, he remembered he had Darrell's phone number. It was stored in a pill container, on a small slip of paper, which had ripped in two. Colin pieced the papers together, so we had most of the numbers. I tried a few variations to fill the number gap and was thrilled to get through to Darrell's voicemail. Again, I left a message, introducing myself and explaining the reason for my call. Five minutes later, Darrell called me back. I shared Colin's sense of connection to Darrell, including the words Colin had said about him. Like Nicole and Brendan before him, Darrell was both surprised and willing to support Colin's wishes.

For Colin, actively reconnecting with the people who were important to him was what was needed, rather than therapeutic conversation. When Colin told me that he felt like a "lightbulb with the fuse burnt out" after Norman died, I tried asking, "What do you think it would mean to Norman, to know how much he meant to you?" Colin looked at me like I'd lost the plot. In that moment, I had centred my own curiosity and interest in re-membering conversations, rather than Colin's own priority, which was to get his will sorted. From there on, our teamwork focused on practical tasks and achieving outcomes. I think Colin liked me because I was up for straightforward conversation, getting things done and following his direction. This has been my experience when supporting other men Colin's age. He was an intensely private man, and he never would have agreed to "counselling". However, he was happy to meet with me as a social worker. Within the context of preparing his will, and on his own terms, Colin shared profound reflections with me. While our work together was not "therapy", it was therapeutic. I supported Colin to craft his own after-death care (Hedtke & Winslade, 2016). In the weeks we spent together, I saw Colin become more relaxed and at peace with his health, his story and his dying.

Honouring contribution and attending to goodbyes

When Colin was ready, I arranged for a lawyer to visit him at the rest home. He asked me to be present for this meeting. Colin was a frugal man who didn't like spending money unnecessarily. Conversations with Colin were often meandering, and I was conscious that lawyers charge by the minute. Therefore, in preparation for the meeting

with the lawyer, I "rescued" Colin's words and wishes (Newman, 2008), shared with me over our previous conversations, and documented these. I arrived early to share the document with Colin. He read and checked the document thoroughly, declared the content correct, and gave it to the lawyer as soon as she arrived. There was a real risk that Colin could die before his will was completed. Our preparatory conversations, and documenting Colin's wishes, enabled the lawyer to work quickly. Narrative documentation helped ensure Colin's will was finalised.

Supporting Colin in his meeting with the lawyer was the last time I saw him. He died two days after his will was signed. I think he held on to life to be able to complete this task, and once it was done, he relaxed into dying.

On Colin's final night, Nicole spent hours with him. She read him psalms, sang him Elvis songs, shared a beer to toast his life and supported a phone call with his brother Graham. Shortly after chatting with Graham and saying their goodbyes, Colin told Nicole, "I'll be going soon, it's time for you to go". As he expected, Colin died before morning.

When I first met Colin, I was in danger of holding a single storied account (Morgan, 2000) about Colin as "isolated" and "unrealistic". Colin could have died without a will, friendship or anyone knowing his wishes. However, I listened for alternative accounts of Colin's identity and particularly for sites of connection. The steps we took to re-member community meant Colin's final weeks of living, dying and after-death care fitted a preferred story: Colin was a man who cared and was cared for.

Funeral: A definitional ceremony

Colin's funeral was one of the best I have attended. Nicole took on the responsibility for arranging the service. She created a photo montage, chose Elvis songs for us to sing and presented Colin's casket beautifully – placing on the lid the Swanndri jacket and beanie he customarily wore, a bouquet of flowers, fireworks and a clean peanut butter jar (from the collection she found in storage). She wrote a moving eulogy, pieced together from the content of Colin's storage containers and what she knew of him. Brendan travelled to attend his uncle's funeral. He was a pall bearer and spoke at the service – a moving reclamation of family connections.

I also crafted a eulogy, comprised of conversations I had with Colin, Nicole, Brendan and Darrell, and an interview with brother Graham after Colin had died. My eulogy highlighted Colin's connections with others, continuing to thicken the story of Colin as a man who cared and was cared for. This "ceremonial re-telling" (Denborough, 2008) honoured the contributions that Nicole, Brendan, Darrell and Graham made to Colin's life. This was witnessed by the 40 or so people who attended Colin's funeral, many of whom had not known Colin personally. I think the eulogies helped foster a sense of "communitas" (Denborough, 2018), as attendees connected to the stories of Colin's life and to the knowledge that they were collectively honouring the wishes of a dying man.

At the end of the service, Nicole had a basket of bread bag ties (again, Colin had a surprisingly large collection of these). Everyone who attended placed a bread tie on Colin's casket as a moment of individual farewell. Following the service, Darrell (who was also a pallbearer) let off an impressive fireworks display in Colin's honour. I shed joyful tears watching the firework celebration of Colin's life and the fulfilment of his wishes. I was in good company, with most of the small crowd crying, laughing or both!

After the service, Colin was taken for a last drive around town, accompanied by eight hot rod cars and their drivers from the local club. Nicole and I had both shared Colin's wish for a hot rod motorcade with the funeral director, who happened to have an uncle with a hot rod connection. She took on the task of arranging a small fleet of hot rods for Colin, and the drivers were some of the people who attended Colin's service. They too contributed to Colin's story and seemed to enjoy doing so.

Additional staff from the funeral home attended Colin's funeral on their day off, bringing their own children along. Colin had "adults and children singing" as part of his farewell.

The following morning, when Colin left the funeral directors to be buried near his brother, he was flanked by a taxi guard of honour. Colin spent more than 20 years driving a taxi. He did so in a different city and had no ongoing personal connection with other drivers. However, when I rang the local company to share Colin's wish to have a taxi motorcade, I received an enthusiastic response. The local taxi company manager embraced Colin as a "taxi driving brother" and told me, "Once you're part of the taxi driving community, you're in it for life". He personally accompanied Colin alongside another driver he arranged to flank Colin. I understand more drivers joined the procession as Colin was driven through town.

Colin's funeral was a moving re-telling of Colin's life, and a celebration of Colin and his connections with the people he cared about. The funeral thickened preferred stories about Colin's life and community. It was a privilege to be involved. Colin was right – a funeral with "adults and children singing", fireworks, a motorcade of taxis and hot rods, and sunflowers planted on his grave was entirely possible.

Linking lives in social work practice

Prior to Colin's funeral, I had not met Nicole, Brendan or Darrell. When we met, we greeted one another joyfully, exchanging warm hugs and sharing bewildered delight about the way we had come together to honour a man we both barely knew, and yet knew well.

Ideas about "boundaries" can be pervasive in social work practice. Had Colin had a different social worker, the focus could have been limited to organising a lawyer to visit. Efforts to reconnect Colin with the people who were important to him could be considered "out of scope", and attending a "client's" funeral (especially on the weekend!) might have been labelled "unprofessional". This would have missed the opportunity to honour Colin's dying wishes. Fortunately, I'm a narrative social worker. As such, I'm interested in questioning taken-for-granted ideas, resisting individualising discourses and careful consideration of context-specific ethical practice. I also deeply value the healing possibilities of linking lives and enabling contribution (Handsaker, 2012). A narrative orientation towards social work practice supported me to step beyond both practical problem-solving and therapeutic conversation, towards opportunities to re-member community into Colin's life. While our work together was brief, it was deep and meaning rich (Young, 2006), and certainly much more than arranging a will!

As I said at Colin's funeral:

> It is a privilege to have known Colin. When I first met him, he told me of hopes and plans that required the support of several people he had not had contact with for some time. I admit, I was doubtful at first. However, I followed his lead, and everyone Colin hoped would support him has done so (and then some!). Colin taught me about faith and the goodness of people, and reminded me that what seems impossible may in fact be possible.

One thread of Colin's legacy will be my resistance to professional assessment (my own or others) of other's knowledge as "unrealistic". Colin's memory will encourage me to step more quickly into re-membering as an active practice of (re)building community. I hope sharing the story of our work together will encourage other narrative practitioners to do the same.

Beyond re-membering conversation

My work with Colin was inspired by Michael White's work. In particular, the story of his work with James which expolored the history of "better judgement" in relation to his parenting, and White's "farfetched suggestion" that they get in touch with the parents of James's childhood friend Frank (White, 1997, p. 44).

I am grateful for White's examples of the therapeutic benefit that sleuthing, audacious phone calls and "opening up the therapy room" (Handsaker, 2012) can contribute to people's lives. White's example encouraged my efforts to "reactivate dormant memberships through re-engaging with some of the figures of [Colin's] history" (White, 1997, p. 23).

Much of what I have read about re-membering focuses on conversations between a therapist and the person seeking their support. Re-membering is often used in the context of grief, where the person seeking support is no longer able to speak directly with their loved one (Hedtke & Winslade, 2017). I see the value of these conversations in my daily work and will continue to invite such re-membering conversations. My experience with Colin deepened my appreciation of the possibilities of actively re-membering people into one another's lives, and the role of narrative practitioners in supporting people to reconnect with those who are important to them.

I hope this story offers another example of what can be possible when narrative therapy ideas and skills disrupt task-oriented social work practice.

Narrative practices assisted in making Colin's preferred story a reality, wove a compassionate community around him, and ensured a dying man's wishes were honoured. Fireworks and all.

Acknowledgments

For Colin – thank you for granting me membership in your "club of life". It was my privilege to walk alongside you through your final weeks and to receive your stories. Thank you for the lessons learnt and for the joy of a funeral with fireworks.

Thanks to Nicole, Brendan and Darrell for exceeding my expectations, honouring Colin's wishes and for your generous support of this article being published. My world is better for knowing you are in it.

To my colleagues – your kindness, competence, flexibility and heart makes our work easier and more joyful.

To the community members everywhere who show up for one another in generous and unexpected ways, thank you.

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