Reclaiming the Tree of Life:
Collective storytelling, re-membering and legacy in later life

by Helena Rose

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Abstract

This article describes a storytelling group with older people living in a nursing home in the UK, developed in collaboration with creative activity workers as part of a diploma in narrative therapy. Grounded in collective narrative practice, including the Tree of Life, the group created experiences of connection, dignity and legacy among residents (many of whom were living with memory loss). The project reconnected the author with the social and political roots of narrative therapy, creating space to resist ageism, individualism and marginalisation through shared storytelling, witnessing and community rituals.

Key words: storytelling; Tree of Life; groupwork; older people; aged care; dementia; collective narrative practice; narrative therapy

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This project began with a conversation over coffee in the initial aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. I learnt that my friend's niece was a creative activity worker in a nursing care home for Jewish elders. During the pandemic lockdowns when residents were unable to see family and loved ones or go out into the community, the workers in the care home had persevered in offering reading and poetry groups. I was later invited to meet some of the residents to learn about these groups and what they meant to them. After a morning spent talking with the residents and activity workers about their lives, interests, hardships and loved ones, they expressed an interest in forming a new group – a *storytelling* group – which we might go on to create together.

Collective narrative practice: Roots and philosophy

Narrative practice emerged from within social movements that challenged taken-for-granted authority and put forward alternatives in mental health services (C. White, 2011). Collective narrative practice emphasises naming injustice, double-storied accounts (of both hardship *and* the ways in which people resist or survive hardship – including through holding on to their values), and linking lives through witnessing and collective documentation (Denborough, 2008; M. White, 2003).

During the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, we heard repeated remarks from powerful political figures about the virus being "nature's way of dealing with old people", that older people should "accept their fate", and "let the young get on with life and get the economy going" (Weaver, 2023). Discourses of frailty and vulnerability in later life became cemented by these comments, perpetuated by neoliberal economic ideologies that prioritise productivity and competition in society (Freedman & Combs, 2020).

Collective practices have the potential to unsettle such discourses by fostering mutuality and shared purpose (Freedman & Combs, 2020). Barbara Myerhoff's work with Jewish elders, for example, showed us how public rituals, ceremonies, protests and performances offer opportunities "for being seen and, in one's own terms, garnering witnesses to one's worth, vitality, and being" (Myerhoff, 1982, p. 105).

I had noticed that my day-to-day practice as a systemic psychotherapist and clinical psychologist had become limited to clinical spaces that were dislocated from the communities we were meant to serve. My re-engagement with Myerhoff's work deepened my appreciation for the potential of collective practices *within* communities. Moreover, I revisited the idea that these practices might also act as means of resisting neoliberal fatalism (Freire, 1999) – the kind of despair that is felt when "solutions" to social problems cannot be found in conventional places. I was therefore moved to explore collective narrative practices in new and unfamiliar places.

The storytelling group

The residents who were interested in joining this storytelling group met in the nursing home's coffee shop – an established space for music, visitors, celebrations and everyday chats. Our group was made up of eight to 10 residents, between 83 and 98 years old, with a regular attendance of two men and six women. We met once a fortnight over a period of eight months. At least five of the group members had some kind of memory loss (generally referred to as dementia) that affected short-term memory more than long-term memory. Some members experienced disorientation about time and place. Each session was a new experience for them. Sometimes they forgot that we had met or what we'd talked about previously. I was grateful in these early meetings for Bobbi Rood's (2009) work with groups for older people. Rood highlighted the importance of varying method and materials, pacing, using objects and photographs, adapting questions, and the importance of repetition and consistency.

We began with informal storytelling activities: our names, neighbourhoods, recipes, favourite songs

and precious objects. I found that these supposed "warm-ups" quickly opened up alternative stories of identity and took us to some unexpected places. We heard how one woman changed her surname to a more "English" version to disguise her Jewish heritage and protect her children from antisemitism. Another member brought a newspaper cutting from a paper she worked for as a journalist and spoke about her pride in doing this work as a woman back then. These early conversations assisted me to re-engage with how we *listen* in narrative practice: paying careful, close attention to residents' unique words and meanings, and as Lynn Hoffman (1998) has suggested, being "never … more than an inch from [their] experience" (p. 152).

Introducing the Tree of Life

I had been considering introducing a collective narrative methodology such as the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006) to offer a consistent, tangible, visual framework for our conversations in line with Rood's (2009) suggestions. As a non-Western, culturally grounded approach, the Tree of Life also creates opportunities to recognise social and systemic issues in people's lives, such as racism and poverty. Tree of Life groups have been conducted with refugee youth (Stiles et al., 2021) and survivors of gun violence in the US (Hill & Soprych, 2024). Chow and Fung (2021) developed a Tree of Life group for Chinese older people living in Hong Kong where they highlighted and reconnected with stories of wisdom and dignity.

I hesitated, however, because over time this practice (in the UK at least) had become more familiar to me as a task at corporate style "away days" and team-building exercises. I have noticed how readily it is requested, suggested and taken up as a prefabricated worksheet or template. It has even made its way on to my social media feeds, promoted as part of a brightly coloured, visually appealing generic therapy resource bundle that can be downloaded (for a price). Rendering the Tree of Life as a standardised, printable, replicable *resource* in this way decontextualises and depoliticises it. I had therefore been left feeling sceptical and with a sense that its origins in Ncazelo Ncube-Mlilo's community work in southern Africa with children orphaned by HIV/AIDS, and the inspiration from the work of Paolo Freire (Denborough, 2008), had been lost in the service of more Eurocentric, individualising aims and purposes.

However, I also learnt about the significance of trees for the residents. The abundance of trees in the local area gave them a feeling of peace and calmness, particularly in the context of the confusion or distress some felt at not being "at home", moving somewhere unfamiliar, or no longer living with family or loved ones. They also told me about *Etz Chaim* (the Tree of Life) being associated with wisdom and vitality.[1]

I began to feel that the Tree of Life could offer us something more in keeping with its founding philosophy and purpose. We spent a session talking about trees and their meanings; I shared an example of the Tree of Life with the group, and they expressed interest in using this as a foundation for our storytelling activities.

Adapting the Tree of Life methodology

Traditionally, a Tree of Life group invites members to create individual trees that later form a collective *forest of life* to explore how we weather life's challenges together (Ncube, 2006). However, I felt that this approach risked excluding some members who may have difficulty participating in their preferred ways. I decided to ask each of the group members what they would prefer – to make their own trees or collaborate in creating some kind of collective tree to document multiple stories in one place. This approach allowed for diverse forms of participation, including nonverbal expressions and practical assistance from activity workers. It meant that we were gathered around the table together, talking and listening as a group. It also enabled the creation of a large-scale artwork that the group wanted to display in the coffee shop.

Echoing Rood's (2009) recommendations, I adopted a decentred and influential position (M. White, 2007), introducing the Tree of Life framework and its categories of inquiry to create possibilities for the group to tell and witness stories of love, loss, struggle, survival and legacy. As we got to know each other, we developed our own rhythms and rituals for meeting including making our coffees, asking how each other's day was, and then engaging with a particular part of the tree. I listened, made notes, asked questions, invited responses, asked questions about these responses, and invited group members to ask questions of one another.

The roots: Exploring origins

In our session about "roots", group members shared stories of their origins: their countries of birth, familial heritage, what they did for a living and their hometowns. These stories reflected pride as they spoke about vibrant cultures and communities that had shaped their identities:

> "It's a very 'go ahead' kind of place."
>
> "A fantastic city."
>
> "Great music!"

One member asked us to play some music by a famous performer of the time. The group all recognised the song, and they sang along together – I had not heard the song before, but I did my best to join in and keep up!

The ground: Daily life and sustaining practices

Our conversations about the "ground" focused on the here-and-now and what sustained us in daily life. Some residents spoke about life at the care home and their relationships there. Others spoke about how they missed their "own place", how there had been confusion about where they were going and what this place was at first. They described how difficult it had been living under the visiting restrictions of the pandemic, and talked together about making friends and the importance of friendships in feeling more *at home*.

The trunk: Skills, abilities and qualities

We used the session working on the "trunk" to talk about group members' skills, abilities and personal qualities. Here, the conversation became even more of a shared practice. When group members were initially unsure about their abilities, other residents made rich and detailed contributions. We learnt about one of the men who was an engineer – how this led him to be very focused, calm and patient. He spoke about how he brought those skills to being a father. We heard from another man who said, "I dedicated myself to my wife over a lifetime". We learnt that she lived a distance away due to needing specialist nursing care, and they had not been able to see one another for some time. We later heard that, following the session, he had drawn a self-portrait and posted this to her. We were all affected by this story; some members of the group shed tears and remembered people they missed, who had died or who they were no longer in touch with.

The branches: Hopes and wishes

The "branches" provided opportunities to talk about hopes, dreams and wishes. I noted that group members had less to say about hopes for themselves. I reflected on how we ask people about *hope* at different stages of life. Some elders may hold hopes for a future they might no longer be present for yet have contributed to and created. An adaptation of the "branches" conversation is to talk about hopes for people who matter to you, rather than hopes for your own life (Ncube, 2006). The group spoke at length about this:

> "For my children to have a good life – to be healthy."
>
> "To have good fortune in life."

They also expressed their hopes for the other group members:

> "For the people here to be happy and healthy."

The leaves: Significant relationships

The "leaves" were used to represent people who had been important in group members' lives, past and present. Many of the members spoke about their mothers.

> "She was the best ever – she worried about everyone, and she laughed about everything."

> "She was soft – she had a lot of love to give."

Others spoke about their memories of family and wartime evacuations, with one member recalling:

> "I was their only child, they kept me with them during the war, they couldn't bear to send me away."

One woman told us a story about moving cities to live with her brother and his wife (against her father's expectations of marriage) to meet her "true love" to whom she was married until he died.

The fruits: Gifts received

The "fruits" provided an opportunity to talk about gifts – both tangible and abstract – that the group members had received. Again, they often spoke about their family and loved ones, gifts of qualities or skills that they had received, as well as spiritual practices and rituals that they continued to practice in their daily lives.

Flowers: Cherished memories

Our conversation about the "flowers" explored cherished memories. This was a lively session with one woman recalling meeting her husband at the local dance hall. She enjoyed telling us how he waited for her each week until she decided to speak with him. One of the men in the group recalled going to North Africa with his work – how this had opened his eyes to different ways of life. For most group members, cherished memories were about family, cooking or eating together, and important celebrations. We learnt how one of the women made her daughter's wedding dress, as her mother had done for her.

The Birds: Legacies and future contributions

The "birds" on the tree told us about the group members' legacies – what they hoped would be carried on from their lives into the lives of others. This was a tender and moving conversation. There were echoes of re-membering conversations (M. White, 2008) when group members spoke about the influence that they hoped they might have had on the lives of their families and loved ones. For example, one man told us about his nephew who was "born disabled". His nephew had cerebral palsy and had set up a charity supporting young people with disabilities to access sport in the community. We heard that, when his nephew was growing up, it was him, his uncle, who spent time playing football with him and noticing his different abilities. We asked what he hoped his nephew learnt from this, and he said it was "having a good attitude towards himself".

Solidarity, transport and linking lives

I learnt from the activity workers that, in the time in between our sessions, the group members

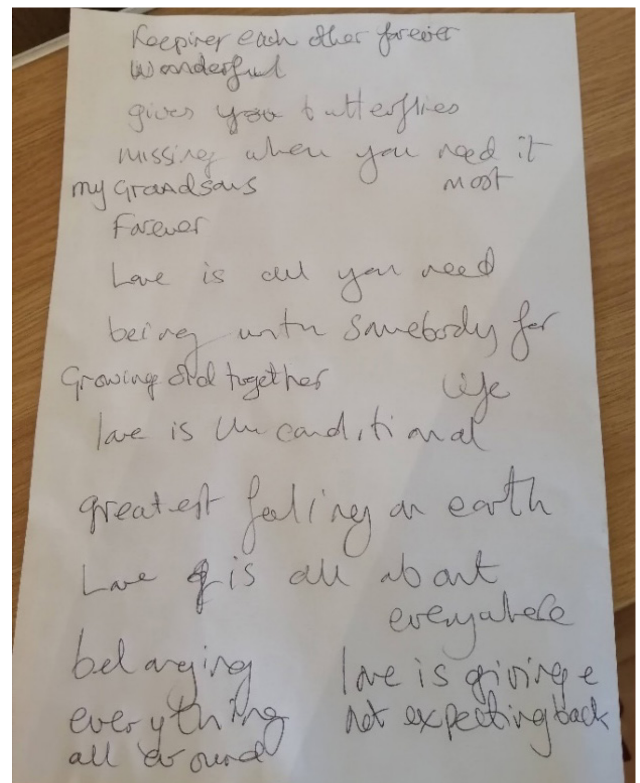

Figure 1. Collective poem about love

had become engaged in their own documenting and artmaking following on from our themes. For example, they created a shared poem about *love* after our "leaves" session (Figure 1). It included the phrases "growing old together", "the greatest feeling on Earth", "belonging", and poignantly, "missing when you need it most".

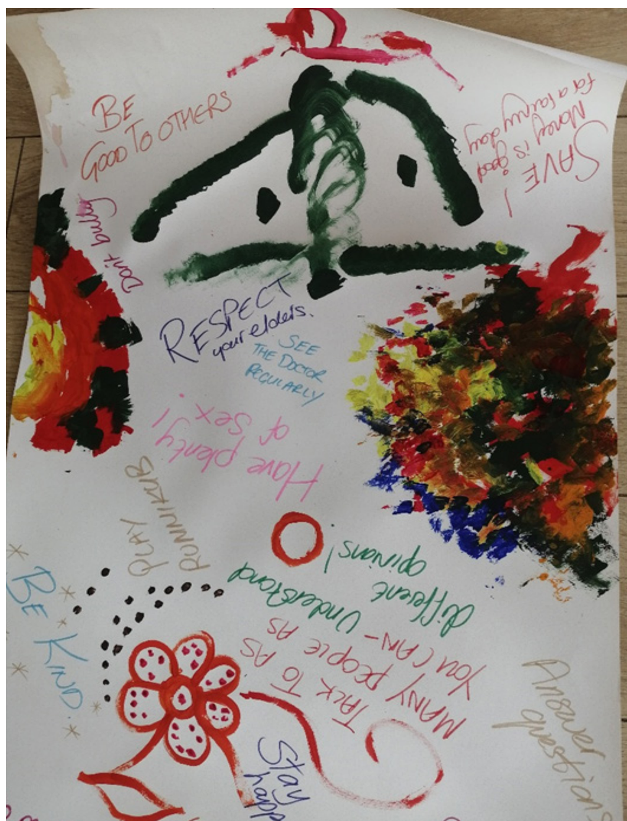

Figure 2. Advice for future generations

After the session about the "birds" – our legacies – they created a collective artwork with advice to future generations (Figure 2), which highlighted the importance of talking and listening to others, having fun, not raising your voice, "respecting your elders" and having "plenty of sex!" This was displayed on the coffee shop wall for other residents to see and talk about too.

In her documentary film *Number Our Days* (Myerhoff & Littman, 1976), Barbara Myerhoff looks at the camera and tells us, "Someday, I will be a little old Jewish lady". Spending time with our group invited me to think about where I will be when I am older, how I will be telling the stories of my life and to whom. These are not always easy or comfortable questions to ask ourselves. A theme from the group was about stories being carried across generations, the hopes that members had for those who knew about them, and what others might learn from them. A *futured* form of re-membering, engaging with the stories we would *want* to be told about us, may assist us to bring such meaning and purpose back into our present:

> Think of a story that you would want to be told about you or recounted one day in the (near or distant) future:
>
> - Who already knows about this story? How do they know about it?
> - What does it tell them about what matters to you?
> - What would you want people who hear it in the future to appreciate about you?
> - What do you hope they might take, learn, or hold onto from it?
> - How would you hope it might contribute to their lives?
> - Is there some part of this story that you might like to revisit, keep onto, or hold in your own heart right now?
> - What do you hope it might make possible for you?

The activity workers and care home staff reported that relationships within the group began to change. The group members themselves spoke about how our sessions had created opportunities to get to know one another in new and different ways which they took with them – eating dinner together, talking with one another outside of the group and having coffee together. The group members themselves spoke about growing feelings of friendship among them, of feeling closer to each other, and feeling more in touch with one another's lives *beyond* the care home or the here-and-now. They described feeling connected to important people in each other's lives who they had not even met in person. One of the women said that "It's like there's an army of people behind us now!"

Practice notes: Collective storytelling, memory and holding identity in later life

In our storytelling sessions, group members seemed to (re)discover resourcefulness and creativity while reconnecting with intergenerational narratives that may have been overlooked or forgotten. I noticed that the more abstract parts of the tree required careful scaffolding – a clear and detailed location within the landscape of action and a more gradual movement from the "known-and-familiar" to the "possible-to-know" (M. White, 2007) to adapt to different cognitive abilities. Conversations proceeded slowly to avoid outpacing some group members. However, this had the advantage of creating opportunities to "loiter with intent" in the stories that people told (Winslade & Hedtke, 2008, p. 75), allowing rich description and opportunities for responses, questions and witnessing in the group.

One of the women mischievously told us about a favourite memory from her childhood – how her parents and grandparents spoke in Yiddish so that the children couldn't understand them, and yet she *could* understand Yiddish and so always (secretly) understood what they were saying. She would often tell this story, sometimes several times during a session, but instead of moving on ("We've heard this one before …"), the group would always respond with raucous laughter and enthusiastic approval. I noticed that it did not seem to matter, to anyone, whether this story was linear or consistent – each time it brought joy and opportunities to make more connections and meaning.

Anne Basting's collective storytelling practices with people with dementia (2009) have demonstrated that the creation of an imaginative, improvisational and relational space matters more than "factual accuracy" or linear narratives in this respect. This resonates with what happened here in the group: stories did not need to be consistent or chronological to affirm identity, spark joy or strengthen relationships. Collective or community storytelling (as an alternative to traditional "reminiscence" therapy or "life story work") has been found to have a range of effects for people with dementia including recalling memories, expressing emotions and feeling more connected (Debnath, 2025). It can build connection and reduce isolation (Novy, 2018).

Lars-Christer Hydén (2017) has suggested that despite the often fragmented and nonverbal nature of dementia narratives, collaborative storytelling functions as an important social mechanism for maintaining relational identity within a wider social web. In this respect, listeners become active co-constructors who listen with a "third ear" to discern emotional intent and gesture over factual accuracy; their collective interaction shapes, holds and protects valued identities.

The Tree of Life group offered a practical method for *holding* identity in later life, as described by the feminist philosopher Hilde Lindemann Nelson (2009), with an emphasis on stories that reflect preferred identities, dignity and agency. The group also disrupted what Lindemann Nelson (2001) termed degrading or dismissive "master narratives" of ageing such as inevitable decline. I loved how the group chose to include "have plenty of sex!" on their spontaneous collective document – challenging the assumption that ageing brings a decline in sexual interest or desire (Vetere & Burton, 2019).

Salter (2020) demonstrated how group facilitators can support those who are in the position of being a witness (audience) to show appreciation, and to make connections to wider discourses that the story speaks to. Therefore, when we heard one woman telling us about going against her father's plans for her marriage, we reflected on how that was something unexpected for that time and how this made her brother's support for her even more significant. Through such conversations, we learn that we have things to say that others will listen to, that we tell *worthwhile* stories, and subsequently, that we are worthwhile people.

The Tree of Life has been used in family and couples therapy settings, offering a way to reinforce preferred identities and strengths as well as paying attention to cultural backgrounds and values (Chimpén-López et al., 2022; Méndez & Cole, 2014). If we are to consider the notions of collective storytelling and relational identity in the context of dementia, the Tree of Life has potential to create a foundation for families to offer one another what Hilde Lindemann Nelson has called "clumsy holding" – a form of holding that, although sometimes fragmented or chaotic, is an exercise of moral agency and persistent engagement with one another's stories, identities, meaning and purpose (Lindemann, 2009).

Practice notes: Ethics, accountability and learning

I recognised the differences in power and privilege between myself and the group members and how this might affect authorship. Establishing permissions and consent took time at the outset to ensure this was a meaningful process. We talked about how the project would be written about and who might read it, potentially being something that might be published in a magazine or journal. Two group members had worked as writers or journalists and so had some ideas about what this might mean. We talked about being "visible" (i.e. identifiable) in the writing. Although some members were ambivalent, others preferred not to be identified, but all wanted their words and writings to be shared.

We also spent time talking about contributions – the freedom to choose whether or not to contribute at different times and in a variety of different ways. I took care to offer all members a chance to contribute and to be heard. Some group members were more verbally expressive than others. Some needed scaffolding of conversations (M. White, 2008) to feel that they had something to contribute. This was where loitering with intent, spending time in the landscape of action, and using prompts such as photographs or objects were particularly helpful.

I was also aware of times when some stories were readily afforded status (for example, stories about travel and career accomplishments), and it took time to afford the same kind attention to everyday stories such as caring for baby brothers and sisters or working in a father's garden allotment. This was another part of the practice where being decentred and influential (M. White, 2008) was important, as it orientated me towards staying with the person's stories, knowledges and skills, keeping them as the focus.

The decisions about which stories the group lingered on, and how silence, discomfort or nonparticipation were handled, shifted over time as the group developed. One member (whom I will call Sylvia here) often expressed frustration about not being *allowed* to return home. There were times when she was upset or angry and others simply sat quietly. I admit that I felt uncomfortable in these moments, as if they disrupted the comfortable environment we had been creating. I questioned whether I was managing the process too tightly – perhaps even suppressing expressions of anger, injustice or protest. Were we becoming too cosy? That would surely contradict the philosophy of collective narrative practice (Denborough, 1995). I also wondered about the prejudices that might be at work, about older people as vulnerable, stoic or polite. Anger or protest is often framed as behavioural disturbance in this context; how much did residents feel pressured to uphold a "good resident" identity? (Gilleard & Higgs, 2000).

This became an opportunity to more actively negotiate the process with the group, making space for protest and resistance. When Sylvia raised her frustrations again, I invited her to continue. I asked what home meant to her and what it was like to have choices permitted or denied. The group listened and responded with their own accounts of dislocation and displacement, alongside how friendships and rituals created new notions of home. Although she often revisited these frustrations, Sylvia also began to join more regularly in other conversations, and I noticed how this created new opportunities for her to participate and to be witnessed. For example, during our "trunk" session exploring abilities and skills, another member told Sylvia that she was seen as "very tenacious and determined – seeing things that others don't". While this was a way for Sylvia to develop new stories of life and identity, I now wonder how much this recognition was a direct reflection of the frustrations she voiced, which created so much resonance for the others.

My concerns about the Tree of Life process being standardised or superficial dissolved when I encountered and witnessed the group members' stories, but it also required more than this from me. I learnt about the importance of actively inviting and making space for discomfort, protest and resisting getting too comfortable or cosy in collective practice. I hope that this, together with working with locally meaningful symbols and embedding the practice within relational philosophy of narrative therapy, will help me to stay in touch with the social and political roots of the Tree of Life.

Concluding reflections: Re-membering and resonating with death and dying

This group had deep personal significance to me because my closest friend, Anna, had died not long before we began meeting. As a social researcher, she had been working on a project about "living well with dementia together" (Austin et al., 2016) and the resonances with the group were clear to see. Anna and I shared a love of talking about narrative ideas from our different perspectives and experiences, especially the idea of identity as a relational project (Freedman & Combs, 1996). She understood how people and communities "carry" the stories of their loved ones, seeing identity as something that is "distributed, performed, and fluid" (Combs & Freedman, 2016, p. 211).

When I spoke about Anna during one of our Tree of Life sessions, I wasn't just mentioning her; I was purposefully engaging in an act of re-membering that acknowledged her part in the group's creation. Two members responded by telling us how being in later life had brought them closer together – that they were best friends. One of the women explained that her friend had died recently, three months before her new (and now best) friend moved in. We spoke about how the "rules" of friendship might change as we age, and how this might be particular to the lives of women, who often lived much longer than their husbands (Blieszner et al., 2019). I asked what they had learnt about making friends when you are in your nineties. They both laughed and said that if you like spending time with someone then "You should just tell them … there isn't time to be self-conscious about such things".

During the group, and unbeknownst to its members, my father was in the last months of a terminal illness. I look back and wonder why I felt able to talk about Anna and not my father. Perhaps I was cautious about centring my own experiences. Maybe I held back from naming death so openly because I assumed it would cause distress or upset in the group, or perhaps I did not yet have the words. It was a tension I was holding throughout and was certainly influenced by, yet I remain unsure about my decision.

Narrative practice has much to offer around the continuation of relationships after death (Hedtke, 2000), in contrast to conventional Anglo-American grief psychology, which encourages us to "say goodbye", "let go" and "move on" (M. White, 1988). Barbara Myerhoff found that when people tell stories about someone who has died, they are not

just reminiscing but are actively re-engaging with that person's voice and legacy. Re-membering therefore has the potential to re-invigorate our own identities, creating meaning and purpose and carrying us into the future.

I began to see my own identity as something being *held* by the group. Although death and dying were not often named directly, we kept company with them throughout: talking about loved ones who had died, not having time to waste, thinking about those who will live beyond us. Witnessing and participating in the group members' storytelling gave me some courage to have some tender, final conversations with my father before he died, and this changed our relationship in ways that might not have been possible otherwise. It is testament to the power of collective storytelling and re-membering that my continuing friendship with Anna moved me towards this project, and my relationships with the group members transformed my relationship with my father before he died. As Michael White once said, "We get together with people for a period of time over a range of issues, and all of our lives are changed for this" (1995, p. 7).

Note

[1] It is important to note that applications of the *Etz Chaim* symbol diverge significantly across various Jewish communities and theological traditions.

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