Write for Your Life: Reflections on Writing in Bereavement

Geoff Mead
Writer, performing storyteller, freelance academic and leadership consultant

A few days ago, a friend who had suffered a devastating loss emailed me about my book *Gone in the Morning: A Writer's Journey of Bereavement* [reviewed in this issue – ed.]. 'What was it like to share such a vulnerable truth, in public?', he asked. The book was published over two years ago, and his question prompted me to reflect on writing and publishing such an intimate memoir. What occurs to me now, as I respond to an invitation to write a piece for *Self & Society* about the impact of writing the book, is that it was a profoundly healing experience.

In this article, I want to unpick that statement to understand better why that is the case. What was it about writing into loss and bereavement (and sharing that writing) that has been so helpful? I have some theoretical understanding of the potential therapeutic benefits of writing, but I want to ground what I say in my own lived experience.

It is just over five years since my wife Chris Seeley died of the effects of a brain tumour, at the age of 48. She had experienced a massive seizure 18 months earlier while we were on holiday in Portugal, and the scans had revealed the cause to be an inoperable blastoma. After a year free of further symptoms, she had more seizures as the tumour grew and multiplied. She was admitted to hospital for treatment and I cared for her at home after it became clear that radio- and chemo-therapy were not helping. She died in my arms on 3 December 2014.

Grief is a universal human experience, yet each person's grief is unique. It may be helpful to know about the stages of grief identified by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, but trying to measure the progress of our grief against this yardstick creates a false expectation that it can be contained or managed. In practice, we have to find our own way through what feels like uncharted territory. We have no control over grief; we cannot choose its form or timing. The feelings associated with grief come in unpredictable waves, some so overwhelming that we fear we might drown. I wrote a poem at the time to express this fear.

> The map of grief is dark and difficult to read.
> Whole continents shift; islands disappear.
> Nothing is where it's supposed to be.
>
> There are a thousand ways to founder in the deep.
> The wreckage of the grieving and bereaved
> Is strewn beneath the billow of the waves.
>
> For those of us who navigate these dismal shores
> There's no known passage and no guarantee
> That we will make it through the stricken sea.

All we can do is to mourn the departed with as much creativity, intelligence and passion as we can muster. With help from friends, I curated a memorial of Chris's life attended by 200 people over two days; I scattered her ashes in her favourite parts of the world, from the plains of the Masai Mara to the rocky coast of Big Sur; I commissioned a memorial sculpture; I rebuilt our house in line with plans we had drawn up together. Above all, I wrote.

I had no intention of writing a book. I wrote because it was the only way I could make sense of what had happened to Chris and what was happening to me. After a few weeks, I started posting pieces on my blog because I have always needed at least a sense

of an audience in order to write coherently. The act of honing a piece before posting it helped me dwell in the experience I was writing about; exposing my writing to public scrutiny challenged me to be rigorously honest with myself.

To my great surprise, my posts received many supportive and appreciative comments. People I had never met told me how helpful they found what I had written. Instead of wallowing alone in my grief, expressing myself in this public forum gave me back a sense of meaning and purpose. If my experience could help others, then the anguish I was feeling would not be for nothing.

I also wrote a personal memoir of Chris's illness, from the time of her first seizure right through to her death and the cremation service twelve days later. Living through the experience had been so intense that there had been no chance of recording it at the time, and I wanted to write it all down while the details were still fresh in my memory. Although I drew on that material when writing the book, the original form of the memoir was that of an extended love letter and, as such, it remains a private document.

The notion of turning this outpouring of words into a book came from a friend who followed my blog. I raised the possibility with publisher Jessica Kingsley, who liked the idea and invited me to submit a proposal. By this time, I realised how much writing about my experiences was helping me, and I was so determined to continue that instead of a proposal, I sat down and wrote the book instead. By the time I finished the first draft, two years had passed since Chris's death. Finding form for the book enabled me to trace the overall trajectory of events. As I brought together and organised dozens of separate pieces of writing from that period, I could see for myself on the page how my story was unfolding and who I was becoming.

The question I found most difficult to answer after Chris died was not the one others asked me, 'How are you doing?', but the one I asked myself – 'Who are you now?'. Six months after she died, I wrote:

> In some ways I'm still her husband: we're still 'married' on Facebook; I still wear my wedding ring; I still love her. Is this what it is to be widowed? To live in a world where time's arrow no longer flies true? To know oneself by who one used to be? To bask in the afterglow of having been loved while aching for the one who is lost, like a beached whale trying to ease its suffering with memories of the ocean?

'Who are you now?' is an existential question that has to do with identity and a sense of oneself in the world. In the wake of bereavement, the stories I had told myself about who I was lost their meaning. I was not that person any more, but I didn't yet know who I was becoming. However, I learned that writing vignettes, anecdotes, stories and poetry over a period of at least two years (the writing did not end when the book was published) helped a new sense of self to emerge.

In fact, I found writing so helpful that I decided to study the therapeutic use of creative writing, and have just completed the second year of an M.Sc. in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes offered by the Metanoia Institute, London. Now, I can understand more clearly the theoretical basis for what I did intuitively, and I want to share three key ideas that strike me as profoundly important for anyone who wants to use writing therapeutically, either for themselves or with clients.

The first key concept is that of **narrative identity**: the idea that our sense of self arises from a more or less coherent set of stories that we have internalised about our place in the world. The origins of this notion are to be found in the work of Paul Ricoeur (1985), who argued that the only meaningful answer to the question 'Who are you?' beyond the mere naming of someone is the story of their life. For it is that ongoing, ever-changing story that gives coherence and continuity to a sense of self-in-process in a way that avoids the polarity of either being fixed in time or fragmented.

Dan McAdams (1997) built on this foundation by showing how narrative identity develops over time in response to the demands of different life stages and as a result of life's inevitable vicissitudes. Positive and negative events have an asymmetrical psychological impact, and it is how we respond to the latter that is critical for our development because while we might celebrate positive events, negative events demand an explanation and, depending on how we narrate them, those explanations can either enlarge or diminish our sense of agency.

In that sense, we are, more or less, the authors of our own lives, constantly revising the plot to take account of new circumstances and events. We may have little or no control over external events but, within the limits of our intrinsic personality traits, we do have some choice about how we account for them. We are the product but not necessarily the prisoner of our past. Thus, our answer to the question 'Who are you now?' is always a creative admixture of explanations of the past and aspirations for the future. Writing the poems and stories that found their way into *Gone in the Morning* was how I sought to understand and influence my ongoing life story in the midst of my agony.

The second important and personally influential idea comes from Arthur Frank's (1995) work on **narrative wreckage**, by which he means those times when, for whatever reason, our current narrative identity is severely disrupted. When this happens (and it happens to most of us at some point in our lives, usually from negative events such as illness, bereavement, divorce, redundancy or failure), there are three possible outcomes. We can get stuck in the ensuing *chaos narrative* in which we constantly relive the catastrophic events upon which our identity foundered; we might call this 'staying in it'. We can attach ourselves to a *restitution narrative* in which we try to go back to how things were before, striving to recover our original identity; we might characterise this as 'getting over it'. Or we can seek a way of living into a *quest narrative*, in which we are transformed by our experience and find a new identity, which we might label 'going through it'.

Bereavement does not let us go back to how things were before, no matter how much we might wish that were possible. The only way out of grief is to go through it, and the only way out of narrative wreckage, Frank suggests, is telling stories – specifically, 'self-stories' to ourselves and to others, as both affirmation and self-affirmation (as I found through writing and publishing my stories) of our shifting narrative identity. This kind of storytelling can amplify, and make real, new possibilities only glimpsed in the imagination.

This leads me to the third important concept, James Hillman's (1983) notion of **healing fiction**. Hillman stresses the imaginative, poetic basis of soul and life. It is in the realm of the imaginal, that third space between matter and mind, that soul leads us in the direction of being and becoming ourselves. The images, metaphors and stories we create are fateful and literally self-defining. We can only live the lives we can imagine; we are only healed by healing fictions. This does not imply naïve wishful thinking; it demands courageous, reflexive inquiry sustained over the course of a lifetime. Artful expression gives the imagination voice and activates our potential for change and growth in the face of personal crisis and catastrophe.

With hindsight, I can see that in writing *Gone in the Morning* I was unconsciously seeking to create a healing fiction (in the sense of making something real rather than uttering falsehoods) in order to re-story an identity that had been shattered as a consequence of narrative wreckage. It was also a way of honouring Chris and all that she meant to me: a gift to her memory.

At the time, I just knew that I had to write – not a book *about* bereavement, but a living testament of love and loss. When I replied to my friend who asked me what it was like to 'share such a vulnerable truth in public', what I actually said was, 'The only way I could make sense of what happened

was to write about it, and the only way I could bear the loss was to "give it away". I could not have not written it.'

References

Frank, A (1995). *The Wounded Storyteller*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hillman, J. (1983). *Healing Fiction*. Woodstock, Conn.: Spring.

McAdams, D.P. (1997). *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. New York: Guilford Press.

Mead, G. (2018). *Gone in the Morning: A Writer's Journey of Bereavement*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Ricoeur, P. (1985). *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

About the contributor

Geoff Mead Ph.D. is a writer, performing storyteller, freelance academic and leadership consultant; an Associate Fellow of Oxford Saïd Business School, and Adjunct Professor of Narrative Leadership at Hult International Business School. The author of numerous academic and professional papers, and several volumes of poetry, his books include *Coming Home to Story* (Vala, 2011), *Telling the Story: The Heart and Soul of Successful Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 2014), *Gone in the Morning: A Writer's Journey of Bereavement* (Jessica Kingsley, 2018), and *Bear Child* (2018, Floris Book), an illustrated children's book. Geoff divides his time between the Cotswolds and Lyme Regis, where he dreams and writes in sight of the sea. Personal blog – www.cominghometostory.com; correspondence: geoff.mead@me.com.

SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

"The only person who is educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change."

Carl R. Rogers (1902-1987)