When the Personal Becomes Professional: Response Poetry in the Processing of Loss

Abstract
Almost inevitably, grief counselling has an impact on the clinician as well as the client, invoking our empathic resonance to the client’s often tragic losses and sometimes echoing our own. Likewise, the ongoing losses of our private lives can feed forward into our responses to those of our clients in ways that at best deepen our appreciation for their struggle, and at worst muddle our recognition of how it differs from ours. Left unprocessed, the cumulative weight of countless stories of bereavement can lead to our deadening as persons and professionals, and undermine our presence to those we serve. This brief article describes my use of response poetry to assist in the integration of my client’s losses and my own, as illustrated in a selection of poems arising from both domains.

An Early Imprint
Few of us find ourselves studying or practising grief therapy out of simple academic curiosity. More commonly, something in our experience confronted us with the ineluctable reality of death and loss, frequently at a point in our lives that predated our choice of career, and tacitly shaped our subsequent vocational choices. Such, at least, was the case for me, when my father’s growing blindness from untreatable glaucoma, pending financial ruin with the loss of his family pharmacy, and perhaps personal demons summoned by the early and deep losses of his childhood, conspired to lead to his alcoholic abuse and death by suicide scarcely a week before my 12th birthday. As I have recounted elsewhere (Neimeyer, 2015), much of my subsequent development as a person and professional can be traced to that fateful event, which I have continued to reflect on as I interact with clients whose lives have been shattered by corollary loss.

In the Shadow of Suicide
A few years ago I found myself in a workshop with Richard Gold, who was describing and illustrating Pongo Teen Poetry, a creative methodology for mentoring at-risk youth to give poetic voice to their stories of trauma and survival (Gold, 2014). Something in the simple structure of the writing scaffold he provided spoke to the preadolescent in me, and in the few minutes allotted for the exercise I found myself penning the following verse:

I Couldn’t
I couldn’t cut through the night,
find you in the inked blackness of your shame.

I couldn’t find a way to awaken you on your small cot,
so like the stretcher after the accident of your life.

I couldn’t feel the great weight of your living death,
hold you up with my small arms.

I couldn’t find a way to grow up fast enough.
The song was about childhood’s end.

I couldn’t say, Don’t drink, Daddy.

Reading that brief piece now, I am struck by the plaintive quality of the verse, one part apology, one part confession. Like the empty chair dialogues with the dead I often facilitate with my clients (Neimeyer, 2012a), it reads like a call to reopen a conversation between father and son cut short by sudden death. Along with other writers who recognize the expressive and healing power of verse (Bowman & Johnson, 2010; Mazza, 2015), I find what might be termed “response poetry” to be helpful in articulating and exploring significant emotions and meanings of loss, whether it arises in response to my own life or to clients or communities with whom I work therapeutically.

A Contemporary Loss
While some purely personal losses press invisibly to the surface like rocks heaving up through frozen soil, others are conjured by a circumstance that converges with a felt sense of sadness or longing associated with ongoing or anticipated transitions. The poem that follows arose from a conjunction of events – the recent death of my mother-in-law, the last surviving parent on either side of our family, and my driving for hours through a deep Canadian winter to offer a grief workshop in Brockville, Ontario. The periodic bursts of long “O” sounds echoed for me the howling wind, and the endlessly receding terrain invoked the landscape of memory and our yearning for return. The sensory pull between the strong draw of the past and my forward momentum found expression in the evolving imagery, and hinted at an essential tension in grieving.
Upcoming Conferences

**The Second International Conference on Loss, Bereavement & Human Resilience in Israel and the World: Facts, Insights & Implications**

Conference: January 12–14, 2016  
Preconference workshop: January 11, 2016  
Eilat, Israel  
Registration and abstract submission are now open.  
The early registration deadline is August 31.  
For more details, please visit the website: http://www.ovdan-eilat2016.com  
Hosted by the International Center for the Study of Loss, Bereavement and Human Resilience at the University of Haifa

**ADEC 38th Annual Conference**

April 13–16, 2016  
April 12–13, 2016 (Pre-Conference Institute)  
Hilton, Minneapolis  
Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.  
The premiere educational, interdisciplinary meeting for professionals working in the field of death, dying and bereavement: mental health professionals, social workers, counsellors, educators, clergy, funeral directors, hospital and hospice personnel, and psychologists.  
Arrive a few days early for our Pre-Conference Institute  
Enhance your conference experience by participating in one or more of the pre-conference sessions being offered. These specially designed courses provide an in-depth look at the topics and issues of greatest importance in grief and bereavement. (Participation requires an additional fee.)  
For more information, visit the conference website:  

**International Death, Grief and Bereavement Conference 2016**

Blue Ribbon Care: Hospice and Mental Health  
June 6–8, 2016  
June 5 (Pre-Conference)  
University of Wisconsin-La Crosse  
La Crosse, Wisconsin, USA.  
Center for Death Education & Bioethics  
Continuing Education and Extension  
For more information, visit the conference website:  
https://www.uwlax.edu/conted/DGB/2016-Call-for-concurrent-or-poster-proposals/
The Art of Longing
Those of us who have driven
the long cold road alone
have watched the thin line
of trees, frosted white,
slipping behind
like memories.
We know the pull
of something unseen
beyond the reach of dry eyes,
fixed, blinking
at the distant mist.
We ride the road
with our lonely ghosts,
unwavering in their devotion
like penitents at the altar
of our grief.
This is how we perfect
the art of longing,
learn to nurse the hurt,
refuse the fullness
of this world.
For now, we keep driving,
lean into the dimming light,
lean further toward
winter’s receding horizon,
and away from arrival.

Vigil
We came here to find
what we had lost.
Margaret Lawlor, April 14, 1937–February 6, 1996

From the Maritimes, before the thirst
of summer brings more death.
From BC, whose sunsets spill the blood of day
on seas indifferent to desire.
From Alberta, whose endless roads
continue their black work.
Marie Therese Monette, September 4, 1983–January 1, 2002

People of hardy stock,
accents flat as the prairie.
Francophones, voices accented by need.
Immigrants, traces of homeland
clinging to their consonants,
their vowels,
like dried earth to the treads of boots.
Waclaw Piltzer, August 18, 1951–June 20, 1981

Voiceless,
one asked to join this caste,
each nominated by a random hand
unsteady on the wheel.
Angela Stephens & Jason Skelas, June 1, 1987 &
May 1, 1987–May 14, 2004

The docile ghosts
find their places on the board.
They stare out at the ardent
with their prom eyes,
their wedding smiles,
expressions of fossilized hope.

In black and white or fading colors
they mingle, lounging
in their easy chairs,
their living rooms,
their cribs.
Raymond Mitchell, December 15, 1997 (unborn)

In unison, they greet us
with their quiet countenance,
patient as dried flowers.
Like Vonnegut’s Pilgrim,
they have become unstuck in time.
Priya Vaidyanathan, July 15, 1971–June 28, 1992

So too it is for those of us who set the shrine.
Left standing at the dance,
before the altar,
in the nursery,
we keep faith with the lost.
Bobby Amero, July 8, 1977–May 12, 1984

We seek the thin consolation of stories
well rehearsed, echoed in the hollow
of lives too like our own.
Tonight we join in blended grief,
anger lighting the two hundred candles
that are shorter than our memory.

Affirming Communal Grief
Complementing the response poetry I have written
about individuals and couples I have seen in grief
therapy (Neimeyer, 2012b), I have also drawn on this
form to honour and integrate the equally immersive
engagement in communities of mourners with whom I
have worked as a researcher or facilitator. One example
is the poem Breakfast at the Retreat (Neimeyer, 2009),
written for a weekend workshop conducted by Victims
to Victory, a support group for homicide survivors,
many of whom participated in our research on the
impact of such bereavement (Burke, Neimeyer, &
McDevitt-Murphy, 2010; Burke, Neimeyer, McDevitt-
Murphy, Ippolito, & Roberts, 2011), and one of whom
included me as her therapist in her system of social
support (Piazza-Bonin, Neimeyer, Burke, Young, &
McDevitt-Murphy, 2015). Another arose in the context
of the national meeting of Mothers Against Drunk
Driving (MADD) in Montreal, whose centerpiece was
a long hallway whose tables were crowded with standing
photographs of slain loved ones, each simply identified
by name and dates of birth and death, like so many
tombstones. Joining with hundreds of others paying
respect to the dead and conversing about them was a
moving experience, one I attempted to capture in the
following verse.
I dedicated the published piece to MADD Canada, committed to stopping impaired driving and to supporting the victims of this violent crime.

**Coda**

Like other expressive arts of a more visual, musical, performative or movement-oriented form, creative writing in general and poetry in particular are well positioned to contribute to the symbolisation, sharing and integration of grief (Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014). In this short piece I have tried to illustrate the point that verse written in response to our own losses and those of clients or communities with whom we work can be as relevant to our own processing of such experiences as it can be for our clients. I will conclude with a poem written following a working weekend spent with several colourful colleagues whom I joined in a task force on end-of-life care, organised by the American Psychological Association. The piece began with a snippet of conversation in a shared taxi ride to the airport, and led to an appreciative reflection on the many clinicians and counsellors around the world who dedicate their lives to accompanying the bereaved. Here, I use it to salute the readers of this journal for their role in meeting clients in the harsh terrain of loss, and walking beside them as they seek a path through.

**Travelers**

*You know the lucky thing about my hip replacement? she asked, not waiting for the answer. It made me think about advance directives, my living will, how I'd like to die.*

Yeah, he said, her colleague who chatted amiably with death each day, like two old men playing checkers in the park.

*I know what you mean.*

This is how it is with the nurses, doctors, therapists who walk down the halls of dying as through the home of a relative, pausing to leaf through the *Geographic*, or straighten a family photograph on the wall.

They have earned their ease the hard way, learned to reach through the bramble to find the fruit, add weight to the rusty pall.

They have not so much grown inured to pain as they have learned to savor it, taste the sweetness in the grapefruit’s bite, feel the glow of a day’s hard toll.

In the end, we need them as we need seasoned travelers met in an unfamiliar land. They greet us on the steep trail, in the twisting streets, point the way to a good taverna, trace the path home. Most of all, they help us parse the dark syllables in our hearts, bare them, and seek cleansing in the gathering storm.

**References**


