THE POETICS OF PRACTICE

Becoming “Well Versed” in Loss and Grief

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Few psychotherapists choose to devote a career to working with loss and grief simply out of curiosity. Typically, the wellsprings of engagement with such existential issues as death, impermanence and the quest for meaning in their wake run deep, usually deeper than our conscious narratives. Such was the case, at least, for me. When my father opted to end the growing darkness occasioned by his encroaching blindness and financial ruin 10 days before my 12th birthday, the life he ended ushered my mother, brother, sister, and me into another life entirely, one characterized by little of the innocence, predictability, and security that we had long taken for granted (Neimeyer, 2011). Ironically, it also launched me into an experience that made more intelligible the tragedy and transcendence of those people who would later become my clients, whose worlds were often shattered by similar loss. Though I scarcely recognized it at the time, my pursuit of a career in psychotherapy in general and grief therapy in particular represented my intuitive effort to step into the alien terrain into which I was introduced by loss, to map its contours, and if I could, to help survivors—myself included—stretch the boundaries of lives that seemed foreclosed in a single fateful moment by the traumatic loss of another (Neimeyer, 2009).

This chapter offers two snapshots of the resulting journey, conveyed conventionally in brief clinical vignettes, and unconventionally in my poetic response to them. In each instance I will try to sketch some of the terrain my client and I negotiated together, and then share a poem that arose for me in the midst of the work that attempts to give voice and verse to a poignant moment of meeting. Of course, I recognize that poetry, perhaps as much as any literary or artistic medium, speaks uncertainly across the divide of different aesthetic preferences, and that figurative depiction of our clients’ realities is uncommon in clinical discourse. But this is an uncommon book, and in inviting soundings from the
hearts of therapists who love their practice, editor Michael Hoyt challenged each of us to go beyond convention to conviction and candor about how we are moved by the work we do. The poems and meditations that follow are my response to this invitation.

Case 1: The Presence of Absence

When Cara lost the infant daughter she had carried inside her for seven hopeful months, she was disconsolate. A loving mother of three other children, she had prepared them for the baby's arrival, and her youngest daughters, Alexis and Alia, in particular, looked forward to becoming "big sisters," just as her husband Alfonso eagerly anticipated an expanded fatherhood. When Cara awakened in panic one morning to the concerning quiescence of the previously active baby in her womb, and when the child's death was confirmed in medical examination, she was catapulted into her worst nightmare, just as her family began to deal with the apparent double loss of the child to death and her mother to an isolating grief in its aftermath. Together, Cara and Alfonso decided to name their stillborn daughter Spirit, because, as he said, that was how she came to them, as a spiritual being, rather than a physically living child. Ironically, Cara returned from the memorial service to a house filled not only with funeral bouquets but also to wilting Mother's Day flowers, given to her the day before she had entered the hospital. Broken but proud, Cara hid her tears behind the closed door of her bedroom, the first day of an apparently endless series of days that she would spend there to buffer her contact with a world that had wounded her deeply.

At the point she came to see me some months later, Cara had quit her work, discontinued her schooling, and beyond mandatory functioning in the home, cut off substantially from both friends and family. Seemingly every restaurant was filled with thriving babies, and even the eyes of the babies she saw in framed photographs on visits to her ob/gyn for post-partum care seemed to accuse her of having done something wrong to lead to the death, prompting her to discontinue even this follow-up care. Greatly compounding her suffering were the pregnancy of her best friend, due to deliver within a few weeks of our initial visit, and much more problematically, the parallel pregnancy of Cara's oldest daughter, Jasmine, just 16, unmarried, and wholly unready for motherhood. Being unaware that her daughter was even sexually active, it was literally at Spirit's funeral that Cara observed that Jasmine was beginning to "show," and soon experienced a grief alloyed with anger, guilt and envy, all of which prompted her to keep contact with the girl to a bare minimum, despite Jasmine's clear need for a mother at an anxious and life-changing time. It was in the crucible of this complicated grief that Cara was referred to me for a planned six-session therapy across a two-month period, every session of which was captured on video, with accompanying commentary (Neimeyer, 2008).
Returning from my first session with Cara, which was held in a distant city, I found myself stirred by her suffering, and in need of time to process the anguishing story she had shared, with all its hurtful reminders of her bereavement during her waking hours, and the symbolic reenactment of the loss in her dreams as she slept. Most of all I was struck by her need to make sense of the seemingly senseless death of her daughter and to form a continuing bond with her, the twin quest for meaning and attachment at the heart of grief (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006; Neimeyer & Sands, 2011). I therefore sat in my hotel room, conjured a state of mindfulness in which the words could come, and penned the following poem, titled in honor of Cara’s child (Neimeyer, 2009b):

**Spirit**

She was seven months in you
wrapped snug in your house of flesh
when she came to rest,
turned her face to the dark wall.
Beyond your high hard hope
you knew in your heart that she was gone,
this sliding shift of gravity
in your belly, in your bed.

You named her Spirit
because this is how she came to you—
there and not there,
a doll baby with eyes
painted shut. Instinctively,
your hands reach out,
grasp at air,
try to pull the light toward you,
into you, disperse the darkness.
A silent cipher, no one
can know what you have lost.

Now she stares at you
with the indifference of the angels
through the paper eyes, smiles
of baby pictures in your obstetrician’s office,
the glazed gaze of newborns nursing
in restaurants at their mothers’ breasts.
One after another, she tries on lives,
in the frames, in the arms of strangers.

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She leaves each like a pair
of discarded shoes.

And so you seek her
in the misty maze to which she has retreated,
the shadow flash of dreams,
the sudden sightings of a body,
small and dark as a polished stone,
and as cold.
Left still on the couch,
found wrapped in a box,
she practices dying until it is perfected,
until you find a new way

of holding on.

In the remaining five sessions of therapy, in the second month of which Jasmine gave birth to Cara’s granddaughter, we stood close to the very present absence or void Cara felt within her and around her, seeking practical and spiritual reorientation in a life transformed by loss. In one particularly moving session we reviewed the photographs taken of the birth and funeral by Cara’s sister—the first time that she had done so—trusting me to examine and describe each to prepare her for the image that was to follow. Layer after layer, we drew closer to the core of the painful question of why her child was “taken,” an urgent issue brought into sharp focus by the mysterious image of a “woman” in her four-month ultrasound of her living baby, the apparent harbinger of her daughter’s looming death. Grappling with the disturbing spiritual implications of this “thing,” we sharpened the questions in a narrative assignment without offering saccharine answers. What emerged from our work and the family conversations it sparked was ultimately a more expansive, less “Cara-centric” view of the universe, in which she was able to recover trust in a beneficent cosmos, even as she also came to more intimately know the suffering of other bereaved women who shared an analogous loss. As therapy concluded, Cara had reentered school, begun once more to mother Jasmine and hold her grandchild in loving arms, and experience a return of occasional joy, hope and appreciation for the life she had and again began to value. A qualitative research study of the “innovative moments” of reflection, action and reconceptualization that made this possible can be found elsewhere (Alves, Mendes, Gonçalves, & Neimeyer, 2011).

What did my encounter with Cara across our six sessions of work teach me? In a phrase, a great deal. At one level it reminded me of the core lessons of loss: life is ephemeral, anticipation is uncertain, and grief may come calling at any point. But it also affirmed the reality of resistance, the durability of love beyond death, and the power of compassionate companionship as we traverse a dark terrain. As we completed our work, I was left in awe of this brave woman
who somehow trusted me, across the divides of race and gender, to accompany her in one of the most intimate passages of her life. And with a sense of shared sacred space constructed in our secular encounter, I felt once again the grace, the gift, of being a therapist.

Case 2: Dialogue with a Dead Daughter

The cold March morning brought chilling news from a distant state: Tricia and Scott's 19-year-old daughter, Christine, was found dead by overdose after a turbulent few years marked by treatment-unresponsive depression and previous attempts to end her life. Yet even with this dark drum roll, the announcement of her death was shattering, leaving the couple blindsided by its seeming impossibility. Always before, they would somehow coach her through the crisis; always before, things would improve, if only for a time. Now there would be no more opportunities and no hope: only burning questions about why she didn't call, and the indelible guilt left behind.

By the time they consulted me some months later, Tricia was drowning in despair, and Scott felt helpless to reach her. As religious people, both struggled to understand the will of a God who could create a child who once seemed so perfect that she was the envy of her teachers, who somehow went "so wrong" during adolescence. Nearly as unsettling as the crisis of faith engendered by Christine's death was the way the world moved blindly forward: the birds would keep singing, people would get in their cars and go to work, all oblivious to the hole in the universe left by their daughter's departure. As Scott worked to reestablish some sense of order and control in a life turned upside down, Tricia retreated into a world of private pain and self-soothing, leaving both partners wondering whether their marriage would survive. It was at this point of painful standoff that I penned the poem Survivors to capture their emotional position as we began our work together (Neimeyer, 2009b).

Survivors²
He has stopped trying
to grasp her remoteness
that he mistakes for calm,
this cooling that accompanies
the wintering of her grief.

Since their daughter's explosive
departure, its echo
like a slammed door,
she has pulled in, and in,
away from the pain,

away from him.
What he cannot know is how
she slips inside the sleeve
of her music, the lyrics
of angels
touch
return,
draws down into the bubble
of her hope.

Alone in her car,
the music builds a room
around her, around the room
a house through which
she strolls.
It is in the nursery
that she feels the peace,
rocks her child, rocks herself,
restores the bond.

Too soon, the car turns itself
into her drive, slides
into the vault of garage.
Her hand finds the latch,
pulls her out. She takes the steps
like a condemned man.

The forced hello fades,
yields to the distance.
She glances up at him,
sees the eyes,
the terrible mirrors,

and turns again to stone.

As we sought ways together to clarify and address their grief as well as mitigate it, we approached the burning question mark at the heart of most suicides, the mystery of why a loved one chooses to die rather than live, which was experienced especially acutely by Tricia, for whom it echoed in the hollow of her life on a “24/7” basis. When paired with the seemingly impossible goal of restoring an attachment bond with their dead daughter, this struggle for meaning at spiritual, psychological and relational levels was so preoccupying that it eclipsed even memories of Christine’s life. As Tricia tellingly noted in an early session, “All I can remember is the bookends of her life. I remember her birth and her death, but I can’t recall a single image of her as a little girl or a growing
teenager.” The heavy shadow of her Christine’s suicide seemed to threaten all that remained of her daughter’s existence, effacing even her memory.

A turning point in our work came when we stood at the intersection of the quest for meaning and a restored bond with Christine, and invited Tricia, in Scott’s silent and supportive presence, to address the questions burning in her heart directly to her daughter, projected imaginarily into an empty chair placed before her. As I coached her toward honest and immediate dialogue, Tricia sobbed out the questions proliferating in her heart: “Why did you do this? Why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you reach out? Why, why, why?” Accepting my suggestion to lend her daughter her own voice in the facing seat, Tricia quickly assumed a younger tone of voice and expression, and replied, “Mom, this is so not about you.” She went on to invoke a stunning metaphor: when she was a child, Tricia had been her sun, and Christine revolved around her. But as she grew toward adulthood, Tricia was no longer her sun, but rather her moon, orbiting around her. Completing the interaction in a few conversational turns, Tricia spontaneously processed its implications, including the possibility that her daughter had fallen into the thrall of a darker star, and that she was not as a mother directly responsible for her death. In the weeks that followed, Tricia’s conversations with Christine continued in her head in the kitchen, the shower, when walking, when doing housework. And in each case, she sensed she could hear and see Christine’s loving and reassuring response to the repeated or residual questions, until the unburdening answers were consolidated at a level that gave her peace. Scott soon reported that it was as if he got his wife back, and along with that shift an opportunity to walk together a difficult road that each previously had been walking alone. A fuller telling of this clinical vignette can be found elsewhere, along with a usefully integrative Tripartite Model of Suicide Bereavement that can organize psychotherapeutic work with survivors (Sands, Jordan, & Neimeyer, 2010).

What was the “take-home message” of my six-month therapy with Tricia and Scott? Again, as with Cara, the learning was multifaceted: I was brought into vivid awareness of the intricate inter-braiding of our lives with those we love, and particularly with those to whom we owe a duty of care; the power of experiential work in session to foster changes that could then be harvested and integrated in subsequent processing (Neimeyer, 2009a); and the significance of symptoms, like grief, to achieve essential, if initially unconscious ends, such as maintaining loyalty to the deceased as the only perceived alternative to forgetting. I was also impressed once again with the human capacity to construct in imagination what no therapist can provide, but only guide—in this case a healing dialogue with a daughter made more urgent, but apparently impossible, by the intervention of her death. In the end I was reminded of the tragedy that is human life, but also of the transcendence of which people are capable.
Coda

In 35 years of practicing the art form that is psychotherapy, inspired but never directed by the evolving scientific literature (Neimeyer, Harris, Winokuer, & Thornton, 2011), I am regularly struck by the capacity of my clients to confront the abyss that opens in the wake of losses of many kinds, and to find a way to bridge the chasm between what was and what will be in ways that cannot be specified in any psychotherapy manual. In this, I view myself as leading from one step behind, following closely the subtle clues in the therapy process—verbal, co-verbal, non-verbal—that inform us precisely about what a given client needs and is capable of in any given moment. My goal, when I am centered and receptive, is to discern the place where pain meets readiness, that spacious moment where a next step can be discovered and taken in the safe container of our relationship. Like free verse poets improvising jointly on a theme, we find a way forward, often with astonishing efficiency, from a reading that feels defeated, discordant or deafening to one that is clear, coherent and creative. To be a frequent, if not inevitable, party to such progress continues to astound me, and validates weekly my once naive but hopeful anticipation that I would find meaning in this astonishing career of psychotherapy.

References


