

Bereavement, re-membering and speaking after the loss of a family member to suicide

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Abstract

Disjunctions may arise after the loss of a friend or family member, especially after death through suicide. The first author (Rachael) calls on the words from bereaved people struggling to speak about such a loss. Their words resonate with her own lived experience of struggling to speak after the early ending of her father's life through suicide.

Autoethnographies of three events (self-data) written in the first and third person opened up spaces for Rachael to trouble and break the silence that prevailed in the discursive context of her experience of loss. The authors draw on poststructuralist theory and practices of narrative therapy to reflect on and theorise the transformation that occurred as ways were found for Rachael to speak. The autoethnographic narratives show how, by participating in a family "re-membering" conversation, Rachael and her siblings were able to honour their father in a way that sustained their hopes to speak together about their loss for the first time and story the subsequent reconnection of family members. This article potentially opens up spaces for further conversations about the possibilities and challenges of speaking about suicide loss.

Key words

bereavement, re-membering, speaking, silence, suicide.

The philosopher Derrida repeatedly had to face and respond to the death of friends from various causes, for example, the difficult deaths of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, and the suicide of Gilles Deleuze.¹ In *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida (2001/2003) captures many of the questions and disjunctions related to friends, friendships, death, and his mourning of friends who were once close to him, but then no longer *with* him. At times, the death of a friend appeared to him unthinkable, and unspeakable. Three years before his own death during surgery, Derrida (2001/2003) wrote: “I have already lost too many friends and I lack the strength to speak publicly” (p. 95). He recognised the irresolvable internal contradiction that arises in the face of loss: “Speaking is impossible, but so too would be silence or absence or a refusal to share one’s sadness” (p. 72).

Rachael (the first author) experienced this dilemma too—not knowing how to speak after the early ending of her father’s life through suicide when she was 12. A particular difficulty is finding the *words*: how do people speak of suicide, and what words do bereaved family members and other people use to mention suicide? Rachael compiled an anonymised collection of comments from conversations with various members of the New Zealand community of suicide-bereaved people whom she met during and after presentations that she made and training that she attended on this topic. Listening carefully to the voices of these people provides rich insight into the dilemmas around when, whether, and how to speak about such an experience, and offers examples of wording preferences.

The following selection from Rachael’s collection of anonymised comments are woven together to capture some of the complexity of finding words after a loss to suicide. Those who have lost loved ones to suicide tend to select particular words for specific reasons, for example, “I usually say he chose to leave this world. It helps me to think that he had his reasons for leaving and to know that he had a choice at that moment.” However, another person might say the opposite, for example, “I don’t use the word ‘chose’ because I don’t think she had any options. I say she passed away through suicide. She had no choice.” There is both a struggle with and a strong determination to use particular words, for instance, “I used to say the ‘s’ word, but I just can’t say it right now. I probably try to avoid that

¹ Barthes died tragically in 1980 as a result of injuries after being run over by a van. Foucault passed away in 1984 from AIDS-related causes. Derrida’s friend Deleuze passed by suicide in 1995. Derrida himself passed away almost a decade later, in 2004.

conversation altogether.” Or the converse: “I covered up how he died for about five years, but now I say it straight, it was suicide and I’m going to name it as that.” Some of the bereaved referred to considerations of how others might react to the mention of suicide as the cause of a person’s death: “People just don’t know what to say; the conversation just gets really awkward or they say something really stupid or hurtful.” To prevent others from backing out of what could be perceived as an uncomfortable conversation, at times Rachael herself would say, “I’ll tell you how he died, but only if you understand that I’m ok to talk about it and I want us to keep talking about it.” Finally, there are many who have not yet considered how to talk about the loss—perhaps they are still trying to understand the often un-understandable. One said: “I haven’t thought about how to talk. I just find myself going over and over—why? What was going through their head? Why did they commit suicide?”

After Rachael was introduced to Derrida by Elmarie (the second author) one afternoon, shortly after beginning counselling studies at the University of Waikato, Rachael discovered that Derrida (2001/2003) *was* able to find ways to speak about his friends: “...but today, for him, for us, for those close to him, for those who love and admire him, I thought it necessary to continue to speak, for the love of life and precisely because this love is wounded” (Derrida, 2001/2003, p. 137). This discovery supported Rachael as she struggled to talk about the loss of her father and as she embarked on a learning journey to find ways to speak about him.

Mo(ve)ment² from silence to re-membering³ conversations

In 2017, Rachael embarked on her studies towards a Master of Counselling qualification. In a paper that Elmarie coordinated, the following comment by Burr (2015), which was the topic for an assignment, opened up an opportunity for Rachael to research her own stories of the loss of her father and reflect on this in her academic work. In particular, Rachael began to consider how discursive practices had shaped her life and what positions she might take up:

Discourses provide the possibilities and limitations on what we may or may not do and claim for ourselves within a particular discourse. We may ourselves adopt a position by drawing upon a particular discourse, or we may assign positions to other speakers through the part that we give them in our account. (Burr, 2015, p. 133)

As Rachael reflected on the period after her father's death, she began to see and hear the wide array of mourning practices⁴ that shaped her family's, friends', and community members' responses to the loss a person through suicide. She took up the invitation to present on the topic of bereavement and loss at a noho marae (a week-long stay at a traditional Māori meeting house), and to write about the experience of her father's death, 31 years earlier. Rachael explored several aspects, ideas and practices regarding the self-ending of a life by a family member. This included the language and discourses used by members of the

² Poststructural theorists use brackets to trouble a singular description, for example, "(in)conclusion" and "(im)possibility" (see Davies et al., 2006). The word "moment" implies a singular event that passes quickly, whereas "mo(ve)ment" holds the "moment" in tension as both fleeting and continuing, with profound implications forward and backwards. In this case, this forwards and backwards is not limited to a succession of temporal moments, but deconstructs the binary of a static moment versus movement, just as "(im)possibility" deconstructs another binary set.

³ "Remembering", without the hyphen, describes only a recollection of past experiences. Here, the hyphen in "re-membering" suggests an ongoing relationship between those who have passed and the living, as the term alludes to membership in a person's team/club of life (see Hedtke & Winslade, 2017; Meyerhoff, 1982; White, 1989).

⁴ Practices and rituals of burial and mourning have taken on many ethno-cultural-political and spiritual-religious forms throughout history. In respect to the practices related to passing through suicide, Ling (2019) discusses the Malaysian Buddhist practice of grave sweeping festivals (pp. 49–50); Malaysian Hindu practices using *thulasi* (holy basil) leaves (pp. 50–51); and the washing of the body in a Malaysian Islamic context (pp. 160–171). Emery et al. (2015) describe historical practices of lament (p. 230); and life-review (pp. 230–231) in an Aotearoa Māori context. In her counselling practice, Rachael has met with family members bereaved through suicide. The question sometimes arises of whether the person who has died has the right to be buried inside the graveyard or cemetery.

Relating to other forms of death, burial and mourning practices might include the processes and complex patterns of tangihanga in both a historical and modern context (see Nikora et al., 2010); decision-making and hui following the passing of a whānau member (see Nikora et al., 2012a); tangihanga in a public context mediated through mainstream media (see Nikora et al., 2012b); speaking rights and funeral attire in a South African context (see Barr, 2017); six practices in an African context (see Kotzé et al., 2012), such as the cutting of their hair by the bereaved; and a description of re-membering practices following the passing of family members (see Snowdon, 2017).

community, how family members speak of and retell the event, as well as their mourning rituals and practices.

Burr (2015) argues that discursive practices (shaped by and reflected in language) “are intimately connected to institutional and social practices that have a profound effect on how we live our lives, on what we can do and on what can be done to us” (p. 87). This insight is complemented by the following observation by Sather (2015):

Those of us who are bereaved by suicide are in relationship with ideas from earlier centuries that are often so very harsh.... The more we can know of such histories and meanings, the more space we have to imagine and construct generative meanings.
(p. 43)

After the noho marae, Rachael continued to reflect on how her experience of loss may have been shaped by religious institutions and faith communities, as well as by different people’s ethno-cultural and socio-political stances. Some people regard taking one’s own life as a sin, clouding it in shame and embarrassment. Others prefer to see the action as exercising agency by implementing a decision, or as a desperate last call for help, or as an effect of mental health challenges (see Marsh, 2010). Through these ongoing reflections, and further discussions with Elmarie, the idea of writing an article about Rachael’s experiences and learnings was born.

Discourses and autoethnography

For the purposes of this article, Rachael adopted an autoethnographic approach to reflect on her own experiences of the discourses surrounding the loss of her father. Autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) opens up many opportunities for researchers “to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274).⁵ However, post-structural theorists point out the (im)possibility that subjects, whose subjectivity is under constant revision, are capable of knowing or articulating themselves, because “(self) knowledge can only ever be tentative, contingent and situated” (Gannon, 2006, p. 474). Bearing in mind the opportunities and caveats relating to autoethnography, Rachael selected an autoethnographic approach that

⁵Another example of calling on autoethnographic writing practices to describe everyday living and counselling research is found in Kotzé (2017), where the interwoven practices of knowing and being are explored in relation to doing hope.

invited her to trouble and theorise her experiences in writing. She chose to write in the first and third person,⁶ because it opened up a space for her to take a step back when painful memories were held in close focus. Rachael takes up a first-person position when she writes about her experiences and a third-person position when she theorises her experiences, especially the discursive elements of those experiences. She also uses the first person in retelling her memories of three key events in her journey with her bereavement through suicide. She has opted for present tense in these memories and in some of her ongoing reflection to show the continued immediacy of these memories and experiences.

Discourses are considered to consist of a series of taken-for-granted assumptions that, over time, may become invisible. Discourses can also align and compete with one another. In this regard, Burr (2015) suggests that “prevailing discourses are always under implicit threat from alternatives, which can dislodge them from their position as truth” (p. 91). Careful attention was therefore paid to discourses and their effects in the theorising of Rachael’s autoethnographic narrative, and to language that could highlight mo(ve)ments where changes in the lines of discursive force become visible (see Davies et al., 2006).

In the next section, Rachael describes three events that occurred in the days and weeks after her father’s passing. She deconstructs each event, reading these mo(ve)ments through the lens of discourse and discursive positioning (see Sampson, 1989, on Derrida). She then traces how many of these mo(ve)ments closed down space for speaking and led to a thin description (see White, 2000) of her father’s identity as a person who committed suicide.

Three events

The first event highlights practices of compassion and of judgement for the family and community as they reeled at the suddenness and manner of the loss of Rachael’s father. The family adopted an initial discourse of grief that positioned them to recognise and honour the bravery and suffering of a life lived with bipolar disorder. This discursive position promoted a knowledge of suicide which resonates with that described by Emery et al. (2015) regarding some traditional Māori views:

⁶ Contrary to these purposes, another example of purposefully interchanging 1st and 3rd person positions in autoethnographic writing is found in Kotzé (2018, pp. 105–106) where the author temporarily interrupts / disrupts the coherency of a singular “I” narrative and explores diffractive becoming through three stories.

... the death of an individual by suicide was not considered a shameful or cowardly act ... in the time of our ancestors, premature death through suicide was considered a human tragedy and loss of potential and was thus treated with understanding, compassion and aroha. (p. 225)

The understanding and compassionate discourse that the family drew on thus constructed them as the bereaved and gave permission for the family's practices of mourning. There was no shame. Talking about memories, checking in with each other, and taking the time they needed were gentle and relational ways to enact practices of care as the family journeyed into a new way of relating to their father. However, their foregrounding of their father's loving and fun nature rapidly receded when harsh and judgemental socially constructed discourses of suicide as a sin or crime entered.

Rachael's initial attempt to resist the positioning of her father's passing in this way did not prevail. Over time, she, too, assumed these judgemental knowledges. Her father was then storied from this limiting position as someone who had let the family down and opted out of his life and responsibilities. Her experience is similar to descriptions of abandonment and anger mentioned by other children bereaved through suicide (for example, Jessica, 2015), in that Rachael experienced anger at what she perceived as her father's rejection of her and the rest of the family. As she was repositioned to experience shame regarding her father's actions, she became adept at avoiding talking about him. She remembers:

It is the day after my dad died, around mid-afternoon. My two brothers, two sisters and members of my extended family sit in my parents' bedroom. We sit in a circle, surrounding their double bed. The bed is covered with a clean white sheet. On the bed is my father's open coffin. It's been there for a couple of hours now, having returned from the undertakers in a black hearse. We are silent, a comfortable silence that hangs over us. Sitting there together ... time passes slowly. From time to time we talk—just small, hushed comments.

About how Dad looks... peaceful, we think.

Mostly we are quiet.

There is a heater beside the bed. It's been put there because my three-and-a-half-year-old sister commented that Dad was cold.

She is right, his skin is cold to touch and pale, but this is my dad, there is no mistaking that.

Faint noises from outside on the driveway indicate that more family have arrived.

They have travelled many hours to be here.

My aunty enters the room.

I watch as she walks past me, around to the opposite side of the bed. She stands over Dad and looks at him ... as we have all done. She bends down closer. She puts one hand on either side of his head.

I watch her lift his head.

She gently turns it to the side and then the other way...

'Where did he shoot himself?' she asks.

The silence becomes heavy.

Small shock waves ripple through the silence.

Time moves slowly.

Tears come and I leave the room.

As I leave, I hear my uncle speak, 'Why did you have to say that?'

I walk down to my bedroom at the back of the house and close the door.

The curtains are closed. Numb, I curl up on the bed.

'Numb' is the place I have started to go when I don't understand.

Later my mum comes down to talk to me.

I want my aunty to say sorry.

But I don't want to upset my mum.

So I join the family and we get on with it.

Many years later, I can easily allow myself to be transported back to what happened that day in my parents' room. I recall there was both sadness and comfort in our being together as a family, together with Dad. But what stands out is the slowness of time as we sat together. It was as if our lives had been put on pause, and in the pause, we found space and the time to reminisce, tell jokes and stories. I was new to grief, and I recall that I didn't say anything, but as I watched, I saw how we did mourning as a family. In the pause, I found space to express

myself when I felt ready. I was allowed to feel what I felt, and together we had the time needed to express where we were at. And then, like an aftershock that echoes an earthquake, my life, which had been turned upside down the day before, lurched over again. I can recall the event only in slow motion but experienced it like a sudden, blurring shock. Comfort in sadness was quickly replaced by upset, confusion, shame, and anger. I didn't understand what had happened, and the numbness—my newfound ability to disconnect—meant that couldn't comprehend or resolve what had happened.

Keep going and move on

As Rachael's family got on with life, discourses promoting ideas such as “soldier on”, “get over it”, and “keep going and move on” spoke to the harsh reality that life must continue. It had to. There were hungry mouths still to be fed, bills to be paid, and routines such as school attendance to be maintained. These discourses that proclaimed that life should continue drew family members back into the ebb and flow of a busy family life, but also eroded any attempt to talk about the trauma of what had happened. As time passed, Rachael and her siblings lost their sense of connection with their father. As the speaking space closed, and silence enveloped the loss, the family's shared grief became like the metaphorical skeleton in the closet, with a door that no-one knew how to open.

I don't recall noticing it happening, but as I reflect, I can see clearly that the wealth of stories and experiences of my 12 years of growing up in our family with Dad faded quietly into the background. Dad's love, and memories of fun times we spent together were locked securely away. I developed new stories that I can now see align closely with some judgemental stereotypes about people who commit suicide. I remember being angry with Dad, thinking he had copped out and let us down. I recall the shame and stress of confronting moments when I was asked how Dad had passed away, and I learnt skills to avoid talking about him. Below, I capture one such event, which occurred when the school holidays began, a week and a half after he passed away:

The funeral is done. The school holidays begin.

Mum's family linger. Mum is struggling and they are here to support her.

With family here, I am one of the many kids running around. As long as the kids look happy, then the adults leave us be.

The adults.

The adults talk amongst themselves; the adults are in charge; the adults sort things out.

I've been practising some piano pieces over the previous months and in the first week of the holidays, the local competitions are held.

I don't want to play.

My Dad is dead, and I don't want to do it.

Mum has evidently talked to my teacher, and they think I should play, I've done the hard work; I should play.

I want to talk to Mum. I want to tell her how I'm feeling, like I usually would, but I can't. Mum is really stressed, and the adults don't want her upset further. I know what will happen if I talk to her, she'll cry and it will be my fault.

So, I don't talk to Mum.

Instead, I perform, and I find I can play, even with numbness.

This event came just a week and a half after the loss of Rachael's father. A discourse of care was enacted by concerned family members who remained present to support the family. Sadly, though, as they cared for her mother, the concern of family members was shaped by the idea that showing that one was upset, or expressing distress and shedding tears was to be avoided, closing down space for the children's expressions of grief. This led Rachael to refrain from talking, because it might upset her mother. The silence limited the space to connect with her mother and talk about what had happened.

As the siblings worked to maintain their identity as "good children", even their mother's efforts to encourage her children to talk could not sway them from their determination to identify as good children and stay silent. The siblings engaged in practices of discipline directed towards each other and established an unspoken rule of not upsetting their mother by talking about their father. This unspoken rule was adhered to by all, bringing dis-connection, because they could not talk to each other or their mother about what had happened.

Upon reflection as a counselling student, the silence that infiltrated her family took on new meaning for Rachael. She began to see silence less as an empty space than as a space positioned by discourse, and as a space that could speak with its own voice. This view of

silence is explored by Mazzei (2013), who regards silence as a productive space: “The question is not what is lacking, but what desires are producing the silences and what do these silences in turn produce?” (p. 105). The desire of Rachael and her siblings to be good children produced practices of silence. This, in turn, opened a way for them to avoid disapproval from the adults. Alongside dis-connection, the unspoken rule of silence produced a uniting sense of balance and security for the siblings as they worked to avoid upsetting their mother. Just as silence spoke loudly of isolation and aloneness, it also spoke to values of care and gave comfort. These practices were maintained firmly for years.

I recall how worried I was about my Mum, especially as I was old enough to see how hard it was for her to bring up five children on her own. I saw the financial struggle and the sheer workload my Mum had to pick up. Positioning myself in the role of the good child meant that I made efforts to care for Mum, but, at the same time, I treated my siblings harshly in the hope that they, too, would help and care for Mum. This tenuous position also got me into trouble at times. Among my siblings, there were other ways, too, in which we directed or shamed each other into caring for and not upsetting Mum.

Practices of care

In the third memory, the school holidays were over and Rachael returned to school. Community practices of care, shaped by ideas of avoiding upset, were expressed in Rachael’s classroom by the avoidance of talk about or acknowledgment of what had happened. These practices jarred with Rachael’s hopes of acknowledgment and for a trusted and understanding person to walk alongside her. Steadfastly united in their practices of care, the community did not realise that the position they subscribed to did not translate into care for Rachael. She experienced being alone and isolated:

We’ve been off school for three and a half weeks. It’s time to go back.

I don’t want to go.

Us five kids are in the car. Mum will drop us off today—our first day back since Dad died.

I don’t want to go.

We arrive at school, drive slowly around the drop-off loop. My classroom is right by the drop-off loop and I watch as it looms closer.

I don't want to go.

The van stops. I hop out and so does Mum. A kiss and a cuddle, "You ok?"

"Yes, I'm ok," and off I go.

I walk along the path, around the corner, in the door, across the room, around the back of my group and to the safety of my desk.

My desk.

My space.

I'll hide there.

I glance around. A couple of classmates are looking at me. They look away... quickly. Other classmates are milling around. Everyone is looking at me, but then everyone is not looking at me.

The bell rings.

The teacher comes in, her eyes rest on me briefly as she walks across the room.

Mrs Jenkins. My favourite teacher. I asked to be in her class for Form Two and they put me in her class.

She's the best.

The last time I saw her was three weeks ago, the night before my Dad's funeral. We gathered together, family, friends, and community, all squashed in the lounge of our house and talked about Dad. Told stories, sung songs, prayed.

Mrs Jenkins came—my teacher.

Unexpected.

She didn't know many people, but she had come to our home, and she sat beside me, and I made sure I sat beside her. My teacher, at my house, sitting beside me.

And when she cried that evening, I hugged her.

And I know Mrs Jenkins will know how I feel now because she had come and she saw.

She knows what happened.

She's busy now, but I know she will talk to me later.

The class gets busy, the day passes. I'm one of the kids again.

The bell rings, the day is finished, and I go home.

No-one has said anything.

Later never comes ...

New possibilities and learning

After learning about social constructionism, discourse, and positioning theories through my counselling studies, I began to see how I was taking up positions within harsh and judgemental discourses about people who “commit suicide”. According to Burr (2015), “our capacity to reflect upon the repeated occasions when we may be positioned in particular ways can be a source of insight into our situation and constitute the basis for change” (p. 169).

Through ongoing reflections, I began to question and deconstruct (see Sampson, 1989) the stories I told about my life and about Dad. I found myself in a position to tell only a narrow selection of the many possible stories that existed. Even in religion, I found knowledges that allowed for gentle and compassionate ways of viewing Dad, and the way he passed. These knowledges positioned me differently, in that they invited me to speak about my dad without shame trying to silence me.

As part of the presentation at the noho marae, Rachael uttered a wish close to her heart:

“My hope moving forward is that one day my family will pause and take a few breaths. We will develop our story and re-member Dad together as a family.” In what follows, Rachael draws on Meyerhoff’s (1982) argument that “the only pain worse than recollection [of stories] was the pain of considering the possibility that the stories would be untold” (p. 112). This knowledge allowed Rachael to reflect on her own learnings about re-membering practices and to tell the story of some of the developments that she and her family have brought about.

In re-membering practices, death does not signify the end of a relationship. Rather, those left behind can “continue to have access to stories, connections, love and meaning” (Hedtke, 2003, p. 58). White (1989) has explored the metaphor of “saying hullo again” to assist people who are grieving lost relationships to incorporate the person they have lost back into their lives. For Rachael, re-membering practices allowed many beautiful stories to emerge about her father that had been smothered under the heavy, narrow, taboo description contained in the phrase “committed suicide”. Her father’s values, hopes, and dreams, his fun-loving ways, his love of nature, to name only a few, began to see the light of day once again. Through learning about practices of re-membering, Rachael became engrossed in what felt to her like an urgent call to move into the future by exploring her past and the stories she told about her

life. This led Rachael to dream of different possibilities for her siblings and family, and to wonder if they, too, could be invited into re-membering her father.

Sather and Newman (2016) discuss possibilities for therapists to support people bereaved through suicide to uncover and thicken stories about their loved one—stories that encompass far more than just the story of their final act. Continuing this theme, Hedtke and Winslade (2017) write that “when a person dies by their own hand, we need to find ... where a new story can be anchored about who the person was and who they continue to be” (p. 97). For Rachael, re-membering her father became a determined and determining step towards re-establishing him as a full member of her and her siblings’ lives. Below, Rachael tells the story of how her learnings and hopes for her family led to two family re-membering conversations over one weekend. The five siblings and their narrative group therapist met 31 years after the loss:

It's December when it finally happens.

31 years of not happening, and one year of planning.

And just before Christmas, the season of long journeys and new beginnings.

Appropriate.

An awkward, nervous, tense mist hovers in the air,

I really want to be here, and I really don't want to be here.

Our counsellor has just arrived.

I really hope she knows what she's got herself into.

Rob [Rachael's brother] returns from the river at the last minute.

“No trout this morning,” he jokes.

Now we are all here.

Ready... I guess.

We begin with a karakia [blessing].

Then our counsellor invites my older brother to speak.

Trickling at first and then flowing cool and clear, he tells stories both familiar and new and some that take me back to vague, foggy places.

A lot of stories.

He's put some thought into this...

The memories flow gently around the room.

And the talking stick sits idle.

My turn next...

I can't decide; I don't know; I could tell more stories or read the letter?

They all agree...

Let's hear the letter.

I read it.

Slowly.

Dear Rachael and Georgie,

First of all, I love you all as much as ever and can promise you I am starting to get better.

When I come home in several weeks' time, we will have a lot of cuddling and loving and talking to do to catch up.

For now, have faith that we will all be together as a family as soon as possible...

Try your best not to worry about things...

Keep up your piano lessons and everything else as much as you can.

I'm sure you will manage...

If you want to write to me, the address is at the beginning of this letter.

I would really like to get a letter from you.

For now, love and best wishes and keep up your prayers,

Love from Dad X X X X X X X.

I glance up through my tears.

We are all crying.

I breathe in deeply.

I've read this letter before.

Many times.

But the words are different today.

It's like he is here in the room...

With us.

Dad's intentions, his hopes,

And the struggle,

Speak clear and loud from the page.

"How do you sit with that tension?" our counsellor asks.

I don't know why I search for the answer.

I know the answer.

That's the Dad who wanted to get better, that's the Dad who wanted us together.

That's our Dad.

Mum has brought over a big box of family photos,

And that evening we are all re-introduced.

The photos bring alive stories that were told earlier in the day...

Look here's the one of Dad the adventurer, abseiling off the post office...

I vaguely remember that.

Dad creating simple fun pushing us round the garden in the old green wheelbarrow.

And a hands-on Dad cuddling one of us as a baby... it must be you Elise... look how little you were!

All of us together, lined up grinning in front of our tent at a riverside campsite; the time Mum and Dad made us an easter egg hunt... "We never did find the last egg," someone comments, and we all join together in laughter.

These are the stories that I have searched for...

A beautiful shot of just Dad and me draws me in, I put it to one side for later...

And stories that I have somehow missed.

I didn't know there was a last photo ... Dad, feeding the ducks with Rob and Elise.

Oh...

As we spoke together as a family, the rich heritage of values and attributes of our father that were splashed in vivid colours all over our family's canvas were gently acknowledged and skilfully brought to the fore. In our first counselling session, I noticed how our counsellor called on White's (1989) "saying hullo again" metaphor (p. 17) to ask tentative questions that supported us to reclaim our connection with Dad. After telling stories of our memories of Dad, our counsellor invited us to explore the clues that our stories contained as to the kind of dad he was. That night, between the counselling sessions, the stories captured in our family photos worked to thicken the stories that had been told earlier in the day.

In the second counselling session, the next day, the counsellor asked questions such as "What aspects of Dad would you like to bring forward into your life?" and "What would it mean for your Dad that you had this conversation?" These questions had us searching through our life stories looking for glimmers of Dad's influence and seeing ourselves through Dad's eyes. As White (1989) puts it, "[t]he memories that [we] touched off were not just a factual account of historical events, but a full and vivid re-living of experience, one that incorporated [each of our] various senses and emotions" (p. 22).

A few days afterwards, after we have all dispersed back to our homes around the country, my youngest sister posts a new family photo on Facebook with a caption that makes my heart sing and brings a tear to my eye.

"My family, and so proud of everyone ... including Dad".

It's been a long journey.

I can rest now.

Within days of our family re-remembering conversation, I noticed that Dad was being purposefully included in conversations amongst my siblings. Some of Dad's grandchildren were introduced to him for the first time, and a photo album was put together highlighting Dad's values and legacy, as seen through our (his children's) eyes. The speed of transformation in my family reminded me of Foucault's (2000) point that "as soon as people begin to have trouble thinking things the way they have been thought, transformation becomes at the same time very urgent, very difficult, and entirely possible" (pp. 456–457).

Two years after the family's re-membering conversation, our connection with Dad remains evident. We welcome Dad's presence with comments such as "Dad would love it here" or "Dad would be proud of you". These comments fill in the moments where silence used to linger. Let me return here to Derrida (2001/2003), who speaks of his experience of silence after the loss of a close friend. While the silence speaks loudly of his friend's absence, nestled implicitly within that silence, Derrida finds his friend's presence, as "silence too is unbearable. I cannot bear the thought of silence as if you in me could not bear the thought" (Derrida, 2001/2003, p. 114). Like Derrida, my siblings and I are learning to find Dad's presence despite his physical absence.

Participating in our family re-membering conversation created the pause I had hoped would come for myself and my siblings. The pause opened space for me to reflect on my journey with suicide bereavement and the positions I had taken up in discourses around that topic. Additionally, the pause created space for memories to rise to the surface, memories of overlooked moments when Dad's presence had been tangible. One such memory occurred 14 years after my Dad passed:

*It's early in the morning,
Mum and I walk briskly up the valley,
Loose gravel on the side of the road crunching rhythmically under our feet.
The sun is just up above the hills, and I can feel the summer heat in its rays already.
It's going to be a beautiful day.
"Mum... I wish Dad was here today."
We talk about him for a bit.
How we both miss him.
How much he'd want to be here today.
After a while I relax into knowing that today will be ok.
We will get through it together.
That afternoon, Mum takes my hand in hers.
All eyes are on the two of us as we walk down the aisle.
Relaxed.*

Beaming.

Knowing that Dad is here.

Absent physically and yet present.

Held close.

With Mum and me.

And he'd be proud of us.

All of us.

Mum and the kids.

And I know he'd love his new son-in-law.

Coda

The difficulty of how to speak about the passing of a loved one by suicide remains a painful experience. The poststructuralist view has been and is still enabling me to re-story my experiences in “less oppressive ways” and opening up new meanings and possibilities for the future (Davies et al., 2006, p. 89). This re-storying has occurred alongside my learning, as the possibilities and limitations of various discourses and the positions I have adopted have become visible to me (see Burr, 2015). Re-membling is a rich mo(ve)ment towards the continuation of a valued relationship in the present and for the future. For me and my family, Dad was and continues to be restored to full membership once again. In times of silence, Dad becomes present, which would not be possible if he were lost. Like Derrida (2001/2003), who found connection with his friends after they had passed away, I too have found Dad's presence in his absence, despite the years of silence.

We are pulled across past and present,
stretching forward over aeons;
taking time with us,
we walk
on a bridge of stories. (Penwarden, 2018, p. vii)

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