

## **Spotlight on Practice**

### **Cruse Bereavement Care Journal**

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## **Sunflowers on the road to NASA**

### **Writing in bereavement**

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This article describes a project I ran in summer 2009 with the Princess Alice Hospice's counseling team in Surrey, to the South West of London. I am a writer interested in how creative as well as expressive writing can help people in bereavement. My aim was to explore how themed writing exercises could provide stimulus for bereaved people to write imaginatively about their own lives and begin to enjoy their creativity as they worked through their grief.

The results were encouraging and, in some cases, revelatory. If I had to choose one word to describe the effect of the writing it would be 'hopefulness'. In *Poetry, Therapy and Emotional Life*, Diana Hedges describes the importance of hope after a life changing loss;

Hope is often a feeling that is completely missing when losses occur...Hope is the sense of possibility...the sense of a way out and a destiny that goes somewhere, even if not to the specific place one had in mind. (Hedges 2009, 70)

The clinical research carried out by James Pennebaker in the USA has shown how writing can complement talking therapies and can enhance physical as well as emotional health (Pennebaker 1997). Pennebaker has this to say about people who are trying to adjust to major changes in their lives, whether through bereavement or other trauma:

With time, individuals may reorient their lives in order to force new experiences into their existing belief systems. Alternatively, peoples' original belief systems may gradually return by their having positive experiences. (Pennebaker 1997, 76)

This suggests to me that writing, as a positive experience and a means of self expression, can help people begin to recover a sense of themselves or to imagine a more positive state in the future: in short, to be hopeful.

Pennebaker focuses on expressive writing (the expression of thoughts and feelings whose release through the pen can, he argues, reduce stress and even bring down blood pressure).

Hedges acknowledges the value of more creative forms such as poetry;

The benefits of expressing yourself through poetry can be enormous and include the cathartic value of getting down on paper what was previously in your mind. (Hedges 2009, 90)

As a poet, I recognize this catharsis. People often ask, 'Why do you write?' I say 'Because I have to.'

In the UK, research into the value of writing for physical and emotional well being has tended to focus on palliative care and counselling for mental illness. Bereavement is often mentioned alongside healthcare, yet bereavement is not an illness. It brings exhaustion, anger, guilt and confusion, and a sense of not knowing what to do next, but it does not necessarily lead to depression or other forms of physical ill health.

As anyone familiar with the range of emotions experienced in bereavement (and the work of Murray Parkes, Worden, Kubler Ross and others), knows, there are no rules for how long it takes to move through a process of grieving. Everyone finds their own path through that forest in time. Bereaved people often manage to function well in their daily lives. They can engage in normal conversations, retain their sense of humour (although sometimes mislaying it), and can take temporary pleasure in everyday experiences. They may, in time, resume old activities or try new ones.

Bereaved people live in a time of transition in which nothing is quite as it was. Writing can help people make the transition, understand it and see progress through it. In *Dying, Bereavement and the Healing Arts*, Judy Clinton describes the value of writing poetry at a time of grief;

The grieving goes on...Writing the poems helped me at the time of writing and they remain with me as a record of where I have travelled. (Bolton 2008, 138)

Writing offers a constructive expressive and creative activity which brings with it the satisfaction of having made something. It can be accomplished alone or with others and it can take place anywhere; at home, at work, on the bus, or wherever motivation strikes. All you need is a pen and paper. It is one of the most accessible forms of creativity.

When I approached the Princess Alice Hospice I was fortunate to team up with Anne Rivers, the Bereavement Service Co-ordinator. Anne was already an advocate of the value of writing in counselling and she agreed to help me form a writing group from among clients of the Hospice's bereavement counseling service. A friendly written invitation soon yielded a list of potential participants, all women.

We wanted members of our group to feel comfortable with each other and able to share their writing. We wanted to provide structure through the use of themes and guided exercises but, within that structure, to enable people to choose what to write about. We wondered whether people would wish to write about their loss, or whether they would prefer to steer clear of it. My hunch was that people would decide for themselves. This proved to be the case and participants told us that they were relieved to find they were not expected to write about their bereavement. Perhaps this would have been different if they had been in the very early stages of grief where writing could have provided an outlet in addition to talking and crying.

Our sessions ran for around an hour and a half. The Hospice provided a pleasant, good sized room with a large table, flip chart and coffee and tea. This created a social atmosphere which was important for members of the group who needed to unwind after a stressful day. Anne and I strove to create a welcoming, friendly tone in which people could enjoy each other's company. The Hospice generously provided us with smart black note books in which to write; although not everyone appreciated the colour – 'too funereal' said one!

Our group members were not experienced as writers, although all had expressed an interest in writing as a creative activity. For some this would be a step towards rediscovering their creative selves or a version of themselves that had been subsumed following their bereavement and which they only now felt able to resume. For others, it was quite new. Everyone seemed drawn by the opportunity to express themselves in words on the page.

Anne and I considered carefully whether we should join in the writing. As facilitator I needed to be able to focus on the group, keep time and be observant of the needs of individuals. For Anne, there were the professional boundaries of the counselor/client relationship and issues of confidentiality. In the event, it felt natural for us both to write with the group, and this contributed to the trust among us. Anne's presence helped to ensure the group's safety. Her ability to offer emotional or counseling support outside the group sessions was, we both agreed, an important complement to the work we did together in the group.

We felt it important to set rules. We were guided by the advice in *Writing Works*; Boundaries and ground rules need to be established.

Confidentiality, trust, respect, pacing, boundaries; how to introduce writing effectively and safely enough; who owns what, and so on, are all vital areas...(Bolton, Field and Thompson 2006, 17)

Anne and I suggested some rules; others were elicited from the group. We would share our writing with each other, although if someone preferred not to, that was fine. We would not be literary critics, but would listen to the writing and make constructive comments, responding to images, descriptions and metaphors that struck us as effective. What we shared in the room would stay in the room. People should feel free to write as much or as little as they wished and to sit out any exercises they found difficult or distressing. Everyone was comfortable with this and there proved to be very few upsets. We kept a box of tissues discreetly on the table, just in case.

Sessions usually began with a warm up exercise; for example introducing ourselves and saying something about our journey to get to the Hospice, or something we were wearing, or something that had happened to us that day. These invariably produced a range of anecdotes and insights into people's lives, demonstrating that we all have stories to tell.

Word games and familiar forms got people writing quickly. Trigger questions such as 'What was today like?' got people thinking creatively:

Today was like  
a race with a slow start  
sunshine breaking through clouds  
a game of pinball  
a half eaten sandwich  
a story with a good ending.

The question 'What colour are you today?' elicited answers such as 'silvery grey', while 'How old are you today?' produced answers ranging from seven years to 101. The same question repeated at the close produced strikingly different responses from some; one participant who had felt in her 80s at the start was in her 40s by the end.

Acrostics, using the letters of people's names, proved revealing. One example, Love Is Never Dying Alone, was especially moving. Alpha-poems in which letters of the alphabet provide the start of each line provided a challenge to which everyone rose. This exercise resulted

in laughter and applause when one member read out her ingenious and vivid description of her day which went seamlessly from A to Z.

Metaphor (describing something by comparing it to something else), can produce powerful insights. I adapted poet and teacher Peter Sansom's metaphor game (Sansom 1994, 76), to give our writers these prompts:

What would you be if you were:

A kind of weather?

A piece of furniture?

A song?

A flower?

A time of day?

An animal?

The results were revealing. Weather elicited a shower of rainy days, foggy mornings and dull afternoons. Furniture included broken old chairs and collapsing sofas. One woman described herself as a donkey carrying a heavy load. The flowers were especially revealing. When one participant said 'I'm a daisy', it stopped us in our tracks. We considered the image of the delicate little flower with its white and yellow face close to the ground but looking upwards. 'This', she said, 'is the real me.' The simple exercise had revealed something unexpected; that there was a version of herself waiting to flower again, vulnerable but fresh and bright as a daisy.

After our opening games and wordplay, we moved on to more extended, structured writing. Here are two examples which I devised.

### Going on a journey

Warm up: tell each other about your journey to get the Hospice today.

1. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Clear your mind and let yourself think about a place you would love to go to; perhaps somewhere you have been before, or a place you have dreamed of visiting. Let yourself imagine it now. Open your eyes and write about that place for five minutes.
2. The good news is that you're about to set off to this wonderful place. You can take five items with you. Write your list of five including anything you like; people, pets, possessions or even your sense of humour or your courage.

3. The less good news is that there's a restriction on baggage. You can only take one of the items on your list. Which will you take? Write your invitation, explaining where you are going to go and why you would like it to come with you.

At this point the facilitator invites the group to share their writing.

4. Next, decide what you want to leave behind in left luggage. Write a list of five, then pick one of those items and write it a postcard explaining why you don't want it to come with you. Again, the group is invited to share what they have written.

5. Finally, close your eyes and imagine you have arrived at your destination. What can you see, hear, touch, taste and smell? How do you feel? What is the first thing you do? Open your eyes and write about it.

The group is asked to share the final writing and reflect on what has been expressed.

This exercise can take people into detailed literal description or into the realms of metaphor. The use of the invitation and the postcard are similar to 'the unsent letter'. In one example someone recalled a painting holiday in the South of France which had given her great pleasure many years ago. Although she had not done anything similar since, she felt that she would like to try something like it again.

The most affecting example came from a young woman who wrote about a dream holiday to the space centre at NASA; a trip she and her late husband had planned to make together. By the end of the exercise she wrote that she now felt able to contemplate making that journey for herself. She would take a video recorder in order to share the experience with others. She had arrived for our writing session in a stressed state after a difficult day at work. At the conclusion she said that she had not expected to find herself writing about hope, but that that was what she felt.

### Past, present and future

Warm up: write metaphors to stimulate the imagination:

What colour are you today?

What item of clothing?

What tree?

What animal?

What kind of music?

1. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Feel the stillness in the room. Choose a memory that gives you pleasure. Let your mind recall that memory, who was there and what you were doing. Open your eyes and write quickly about your memory. Finish by writing one word that sums up how you felt at that time.
2. Think about the present. Sit quietly and write what you see and hear in this room. Choose one word to describe how you feel being in this room at this moment.  
Share what has been written and compare the words you have chosen to describe your memory and how you feel in this room now.
3. Next, the facilitator provides a selection of pictures including art postcards and images cut from magazines of beautiful views and scenes; for example a glassy lake, a seat in a floral garden, a path through autumn woods, a dramatic mountain, and a bridge over a river. Look at the pictures provided. Pick one that appeals to you.  
Imagine something in the future. You can decide how far ahead you want to imagine (next year, two years, five...). Write about this and your part in it, incorporating the feeling that the picture evokes in you.  
Share what has been written.

The three step approach in this exercise enables people to make a shift of perspective from past to present and into the future. One member of our group wrote about her bereavement for the first time in our meetings. Another member, who habitually wrote less than the others but always spoke about her bereavement, chose a Van Gogh sunflower as her image. She wrote that she could imagine being able to plant her late husband's allotment and that by this time next year she might have sunflowers growing in it. This short statement spoke volumes about the shift taking place in her ability to envisage the future.

A third example, designed with bereavement more overtly in mind, took the theme of personal possessions. Participants were familiar with the task of sorting through someone's belongings after a death and the mixed emotions and strange discoveries that can accompany that activity.

The exercise begins with a warm up about what people are wearing. Invariably someone will mention a favorite piece of jewelry or a personal item. This is followed by reading a published poem, *Handbag*, by Ruth Fainlight, which evokes the poet's mother, the era in which she lived and her character and relationships through a sensuous description of the contents of her handbag:

Stimulated by the poem, the group is asked to remember someone who was close to them and an item of clothing or possession they associate with them. They write about this using as much sensory detail as they can muster. They go on to write about a specific memory they have of being with that person, and a conversation they would like to have with them.

This exercise enables people to choose whether they write about the subject of their bereavement or about someone else of significance to them. Some people choose to write about themselves, remembering how they were in earlier life.

One further exercise illustrates the positive effect of writing for our group. As a poet, I was interested to see how our writers would respond to an imposed form. The Japanese haiku uses seventeen syllables, split into three lines of five, seven and five describing the writer's response to the natural world. For writers unused to formal structure, and possibly daunted at the prospect of being asked to attempt something complex like a sonnet, the haiku is the perfect beginner's poem. One salutary example by John Cooper Clarke put our group at ease:

To convey one's mood  
In seventeen syllables  
Is very diffic

Our haiku session took place on a lovely summer evening, so we were able to explore the gardens around the Hospice. After about 40 minutes of contemplation and writing, everyone returned to the room to edit and craft their poems. Everybody produced something akin to the form. One example was particularly well achieved:

### **Haiku**

By Rowena Ferneley

Slim silver birches

Reassuringly solid  
Under my fingers

Soft gentle rustling  
Of breezes through the leaves  
Like waves on the shore

Reaching to the sky  
Where soft blue clouds brushed with pink  
Glide calmly on by

Tiny cyclamen  
Pushing through the soft damp earth  
Uncurling their buds

Overblown roses  
Faded pink and cream glory  
Arching over me

Path from the hospice  
Leading through the deep dark woods  
Going who knows where?

Dare I enter there?  
Will there be wolves and monsters  
Like when we were young?

Even if there are  
Is that any good reason  
To hold back in fear?

The participants felt calm after the haiku writing and said that they had lost themselves in the activity. At the next session, two of the group reported that they had been writing haiku for themselves and found this form of writing to be a soothing way to connect with their surroundings and enjoy the moment.

Looking across the writing achieved, and the level of self-expression and creativity, the common theme to have emerged was hopefulness. This was interesting in a group of people at different stages of grieving. For me as facilitator, one measure of success of any creative writing exercise is whether everyone manages to produce a piece of writing. By this criterion the sessions were a success, especially as they got people who were new to writing working with metaphor, form and creative imagination.

A major purpose of ours, however, was to understand how writing could be of help to bereaved people. Evaluation could be both quantitative (measuring the number of session attended, the amount of writing produced, for example), and qualitative (measuring the difference writing could make to feelings, mood and stress, for example). Hedges quotes a qualitative study in which 66% of respondents

Said that writing poetry had [a] calming effect as well as providing an outlet for their emotions (Philipp & Robertson 1996 in Hedges 2005, 119).

Fiona Sampson in *Creative Writing in Health and Social Care* considers how writing can best be evaluated in a counseling or health context. She argues for a person-centred approach to evaluation that enables the respondent to set their own goals and describe the outcomes in their own terms, 'expressed in their own words' (Sampson 2004, 219).

In this spirit we asked everyone, in a written evaluation form, to consider whether they felt better after the writing sessions. Without exception the answer was yes. People commented on the pleasure they had gained from the group's company, our ability to laugh and share stories together, the enjoyment of thinking and writing about a range of topics and themes, and the satisfaction of learning new skills. They all wanted to do more.

Could we have expected this when we started? This is an under-evaluated area of work and I, for one, would like to understand more about the value of writing in the different stages and tasks of grieving. We hope to carry on this work at the Hospice, develop further exercises and devise a more robust form of evaluation, possibly working with groups and individuals. I

would be delighted to hear from any counsellors or fellow writers interested in sharing experiences and ideas in this area.

Who would have thought that a daisy, an allotment and a trip to NASA could lead us in such a promising and hopeful direction?

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## **Biography**

Jane Moss is a writer and workshop leader based in west London. She ran away to join the writing circus after a career in arts marketing and in communications for the Home Office. She has MAs in Creative Writing in the Community and in Drama. Jane writes poetry and fiction and has a special interest in writing as an aid to self-expression in counselling for bereavement and depression. In 2009 Jane established Joined Up Writers, a partnership with short story writer Jess Kidd. Together they provide courses, workshops and tuition for individuals whilst striving to keep their own writing flames alive.