Sunflowers on the road to NASA

Writing in bereavement

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This article describes a creative writing project carried out with the counselling team at Princess Alice Hospice, in Surrey, UK, to explore the benefits of creative writing for bereaved people. Specifically, the project sought to explore how creative (as opposed to expressive) writing could help people work through their grief by offering a way to put into words their experiences, emotions, memories and ideas about the future.

Expressive writing can be a form of thinking out loud, listening to oneself on the page and expressing deeply held emotions that are hard to verbalise. Counsellors may use writing techniques, such as the unsent letter or written dialogue, as a complement to talking therapy. Pennebaker's clinical research has shown how expressive writing can complement talking therapies and can enhance physical as well as emotional well-being (Pennebaker, 1997), but his work is not specific to bereavement.

More recently, as reported by Neimeyer (2010), Lichtenthal and Cruess's controlled trial sought to evaluate the benefits of personal narrative writing for bereaved people. They found significant improvements in depressive and PTSD symptoms, especially in the control group that was directed to write about the positive meaning they derived from their experiences. This suggests that expressive writing can have a constructive role for bereaved individuals, either as a tool in counselling or in its own right.

Expressive writing is a process. Creative writing takes the writer a step further into the deliberate making of a product. As Bolton, one of the most influential practitioners in the field of therapeutic writing, observed in her 1999 study:

> '… the act of writing creates an object to which the writer can relate tangibly, visually and aurally … this tangibility lasts over time, to be re-experienced in different frames of mind, different stages of life'. (pp213–214)

Benefits of creative writing

The emotional benefits of creative writing forms such as poetry have been explored by Hedges (2005):

> '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.' (p90)

Bolton (2008) describes the value of the creative arts for healing and well-being:

> 'The process of writing a story or poem, painting and picture or creating music is enjoyable, life-affirming and confidence enhancing. People do deep emotional, spiritual, and psychological work when they create art products, especially when they are supported by an experienced arts therapist or arts in health practitioner.' (p16)

Matarasso, a key researcher in the arts and health field, argues (1997): 'Art as activity, process and object is central to how people experience, understand and then shape the world.' He cites as the chief benefit for health from engagement in the arts, 'an improved sense of well-being, often related to increased levels of confidence, activity and social contact'.

Much of UK research into the therapeutic benefits of the arts is based on arts therapies, including music, drama, visual art and craft. Creative writing has been a relative late-comer, although Lapidus, the UK network for writers in health and social care, has a growing and active membership and is developing a professional accreditation system. Lapidus was funded by Arts Council England to run eight pilot projects to test out the benefits of creative writing with different client groups, using different methods of evaluation. They included a project with male prisoners at risk of self-harm, a project with children in long-stay hospital care, and a project about journal writing for members of the St Luke's Hospice Bereavement Service. The final report (Field, 2009) highlights the lack of experience of practitioners in evaluation, but also describes some innovative use of formal evaluation tools to measure improvements in health and well-being.

Bolton has published guidance for writers working with health professionals and carers who deal daily with bereavement (Bolton, 2008). Hunt and Sampson's work (1998) is influential, and the

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resources provided by Bolton and colleagues (2006) are widely used by practitioners. As well as Lapidus, the National Association for Writers in Education has done much to document case studies of writers working in a wide range of community residencies and health settings. The Kingfisher project, conducted by Salisbury Arts Centre and ArtCare, the arts service for Salisbury Health Care NHS Trust (Sampson, 2004), is a well-documented example that enabled patients to 'express feelings of sadness, experience moments of happiness and create memories within the safe medium of poetry' (p102).

The evaluation of this work concluded:

> 'For many people the quality of life has been improved in a way which may not have seemed possible at the onset of terminal illness.' (p103)

These examples represent an established and rapidly growing area of practice for writers in health and social care.

Within this context, however, the specific benefits of writing in bereavement are comparatively under-explored. Bereavement is not in itself an illness, although the emotional and physical condition of many bereaved people may have symptoms in common with depressive illness and physical trauma. It is a time of major transition with attendant struggles to accept and adapt to enforced change. As people work through their grief they begin to attempt new activities as they start the construction of a different future to the one they may have expected. Pennebaker (1997) says:

> '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.' (p76)

Writing can help people make the transition, understand it and see progress through it. Bolton (2008) quotes a bereaved mother, Judy Clinton, on 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.' (p138)

The hospice project

I am a creative writer and workshop leader with a specific interest in the benefits of creative writing for bereaved people and for people with depression. I approached the counselling team at Princess Alice Hospice in spring 2009 to suggest that I ran a series of creative writing workshops for some of their clients.

The hospice had previously hosted a writer in residence, which suggested it would be a responsible and supportive host for such a project. Writers are not counsellors, and it is important to work in a setting that is able to support participants as they reflect on the stories and realisations that emerge from the writing activity.

Anne Rivers, the counselling team co-ordinator, agreed to co-host with me a series of six writing sessions over a 12-week period. She felt this would be an appropriate frequency for people who were managing the demands of work and home alongside their bereavement and other complex and difficult circumstances.

The aim of the project was to explore the benefits of creative (as opposed to purely expressive) writing for bereaved people. Specifically, our aim was to explore how creative writing could help people work through their grief by offering a way of describing their experiences, emotions, memories and ideas about the future.

We agreed that structure was important and that we would use themes that were relevant but not exclusive to bereavement as a stimulus for writing. We wanted people to feel supported but free to write what they wished, so the themes would be open to interpretation and people would not be required to write about their bereavement unless they wanted to. Participants subsequently told us that they were relieved to find that they were not expected to write about their loss.

I drew up plans for three sessions of up to an hour and a half each. This is a typical timescale for any creative writing workshop. It allows time for ten minute introductions and warm up, around half an hour for short writing games and exercises, a longer period for a more extended piece of writing around a theme, and time to wind down at the end and share what has been written. The sharing is an important part of the process. It enables self-reflection, feedback and comparison among the group. We decided to see how the group developed, and which kinds of activities were popular and fruitful, before planning the content of the remaining three sessions.

Anne and her counselling colleagues approached potential participants from among their clients, verbally at first. This was followed up with a written invitation describing what they could expect: that participants would take part in creative writing exercises and would be invited to share their writing with other members of the group if they wished (we stressed that this was not compulsory). The invitation informed participants that this was a new activity, that we intended it to be an enjoyable one, and that their feedback would be welcome as we hoped to learn from them how writing could be of benefit to bereaved people.

The invitation included a reply slip to enable people to confirm that they could attend. Participants were asked to bring a pen or pencil. The hospice provided a notebook for everyone.

We received 11 responses to the invitation. Inevitably, not everyone could attend every session. Attendance varied between five at most and three on one occasion. The respondents were all women, aged from mid-30s to 70s, with losses of different kinds, including that of their partner. The length of time since their bereavement ranged from around eight months to over a year.

How we worked

The hospice provided a spacious 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 sought to create a welcoming, friendly atmosphere in which people could relax.

As the facilitators, we considered carefully whether we should join in the writing. I needed to be able to lead the exercises, keep time and be vigilant to the needs of individuals. Anne was mindful of the

boundaries of the counsellor/client relationship and issues of confidentiality. In the event, it seemed natural for us both to write with the group, and this contributed to the group's bonding.

The sessions were held in the evening, at 6.45pm for a 7.00pm start, and ended no later than 8.30pm. In the first session the participants introduced themselves and we explained the format and ground rules, including confidentiality (Bolton, 2006, p17).

We discussed the ground rules with participants, suggesting some ourselves and inviting the group to suggest others. We agreed to share our writing with each other, although this would not be compulsory. We agreed we would not be literary critics, but would listen with care and make constructive comments. We would feel free to write as much or as little as we wished. Participants could sit out any exercises they found difficult or distressing. We agreed that what occurred within the group would be confidential to the group. In the event, there were very few upsets. On the only occasion when a member of the group felt unable to read out what she had written, she asked if someone else could read it out on her behalf. People wanted to share their writing and to receive feedback from the group.

Writing exercises

The participants were not experienced writers but were interested in writing creatively and learning new skills. Writing quickly and sharing their work was new to everyone so we initially focused on helping them feel comfortable with this element of the sessions. Familiar forms of writing such as lists can help people write spontaneously and overcome anxieties about what to write or how to start. Lists can also produce insights. A list of 'Ten things I know' (Sansom, 2007), for example, loosens the pen and enables people to express whatever is on their mind.

We also used acrostics, in which the first letters of each line spell out a word, name or message. These can be descriptive or expressive, as in this example from our group: Love Is Never Dying Alone.

Alpha-poems use the letters of the alphabet at the start of each line. This exercise produced laughter and applause when one member produced a seamless account of her day from A to Z.

Metaphor, the technique of describing something in terms of something else, is an essential tool for the creative writer. Its ability to reveal truth and convey insight is transferable to counselling: '… not merely a poetic device, but an essential part of our mental and physical furniture' (Bolton & Latham, 2004, p117). We used metaphorical prompts to enable our participants to express imagery descriptive of their inner feelings.

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?

Weather elicited rainy days, foggy mornings and dull afternoons. Furniture included broken chairs and collapsing sofas. One woman described herself as a donkey carrying a heavy load. The flowers were especially revealing. One participant chose a daisy. 'This,' she said, 'is the real me.' The simple exercise revealed an unexpected image of a woman waiting to flower again, vulnerable but fresh and bright as a daisy.

'How old are you today?' produced answers ranging from seven years to 101. The same question repeated at the close of the session produced strikingly different responses from some: one participant who had felt in her 80s at the start was in her 40s by the end.

After opening games and wordplay, we moved on to more extended writing around themes. Some of our themes, such as going on a journey, or making a comparison between the past, the present and the future, were designed to enable people to explore the idea of transition and the passage of time. This, we felt, could be of benefit to people at varying stages of grief, enabling them to see progress or to move past a stage at which they had become stuck, by imagining being in a different place, situation or time. As Bolton says:

> 'Writing is different from talking … It can allow an exploration of cognitive, emotional and spiritual areas otherwise not accessible, and expression of elements otherwise inexpressible.' (Bolton, 2004, p1)

The theme of a journey used a technique similar to the 'unsent letter' often used by counsellors. Participants were asked to clear their minds and think about a place they would love to visit, somewhere real or imagined; to sit with eyes closed for a while, to picture this place and observe the detail, before writing about it for five minutes.

Next, we asked them to write a list of five items to take with them, and five items they would leave behind. The exercise concluded with an extended piece of writing (15 minutes) in which they imagined arriving at their destination and experiencing the sights, sounds, textures, tastes and smells. We shared all these pieces of writing and discussed what we had written.

The exercise took some people into detailed literal description; others wrote metaphorically. In one example someone recalled a painting holiday in the south of France that had given her pleasure in the past. Although she had not been back, she said she would now like to try something similar.

An affecting example came from a young woman who had arrived late after a stressful day at work. She wrote about a dream holiday she and her late husband had planned to take to the NASA Kennedy space centre in Florida. By the end of the exercise she wrote that she felt able to contemplate making that journey by herself. She would take a video recorder in order to share the experience with her friends and family. She said that, at the start of the session, she had not expected to write about hope, but that that was what she now felt. The writing had enabled her to experience the shift described by Hedges (2005):

> '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.' (p70)

In another exercise we looked at the shift in perspective that the passage of time can bring. The exercise began with a meditation in which we asked participants to close their eyes, take deep breaths and feel the stillness in the room. We then asked them to choose a pleasant memory and think about who else was involved and where and when it took place. Then they wrote the story of that memory, quickly, and chose words to sum up how they remembered feeling at the time.

Next, they were asked to think about the present – to sit quietly, and then to write about what they could see and hear in the room. They shared their writing at this point and compared the words chosen to describe their feelings in the memory and in the present moment. This produced some insightful pairings: for example, free (in the past) and enveloped (in the present), spontaneous and joyful outpouring (in the past) and consciousness of the losses that age brings (in the present).

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

Next, the group was invited to choose an image that appealed to them from a selection of art postcards and magazine photographs of scenes including a glassy lake, a seat in a floral garden, a path through autumn woods, a dramatic mountain, and a bridge over a river. They were asked to look at the image and write about the future, incorporating the feeling that the picture evoked in them.

The three-step approach in this exercise enables people to make a shift of perspective from past to present and into the future. One group member wrote about her bereavement for the first time. Another chose a Van Gogh sunflower as her image. Although in a stressed state and unable, generally, to see past her present low mood, 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. In this way she was able to acknowledge a shift taking place in her ability to envisage a better future.

A third exercise explored the theme of personal possessions. Participants were familiar with the task of sorting through a person's belongings after a death and the mixed emotions and strange discoveries that it can provoke.

The exercise began with a discussion about items we always wear or carry with us, and the meaning they hold for us. To explore this further we read a published poem, 'Handbag' by Ruth Fainlight (2002), 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.

The group was asked to remember someone who was close to them and an item of clothing or possession associated with them. They wrote about this using sensory detail, then wrote about a specific memory of being with that person, and a conversation they would like to have with them.

This exercise enabled people to choose whether to write about the subject of their bereavement or about someone else of significance to them. Some wrote about themselves, remembering how they were in earlier life and an item of clothing that said something about them and their personality. Others wrote about their loss and used the description of a personal belonging to describe with emotional depth and detail the person who had died.

As well as themed writing, we used specific writing forms to encourage people to concentrate on the craft of writing as well as what they were expressing. This, our group told us, had a directly therapeutic effect when we tried the Japanese haiku. The haiku is a short poem of 17 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, the haiku is the perfect beginner's poem.

Writing a haiku requires the writer to enter a meditative state in which she or he connects to the natural surroundings. The constraint of the 17 syllable form requires economy and precision of expression. Participants told us that they felt calm after the haiku writing and that they had lost themselves in the activity. This state of creative receptiveness has much in common with what a counsellor might term mindfulness. For some in our group, the effect was lasting. They continued to write haiku for themselves and found it to be soothing. One example was particularly well achieved (see over page).

Evaluation

As mentioned above, Lapidus is currently exploring appropriate tools and methods for the qualitative and quantitative evaluation of creative writing. Thorne (2009), reporting the approaches taken to evaluation in the Lapidus Spreading the Word projects, emphasises the importance of identifying in advance the project's aims, objectives, indicators of success and means of measuring impact and outcome at the outset. She points out that practitioners have generally used individual case studies to demonstrate the benefits of their work, and that time needs to be built into projects for formal evaluation to be undertaken successfully. She concludes by recommending further exploration of the use of MYCAW (Paterson *et al*, 2007) and WEMWBS (NHS Scotland, University of Warwick & University of Edinburgh, 2006) – two formal evaluations tools designed to be easy to use and person-centred – to capture quantitatively the benefits of creative writing for individual emotional health and well-being.

Sampson (2004) argues for a person-centred approach that enables the respondent to set their own goals and describe the outcomes in their own terms, 'expressed in their own words' (p219). This approach would work for individuals but may be harder to achieve in a group context in the early stages. Our experience of eliciting goals from this group suggests that people may feel a reticence in speaking out about their personal situations and what they hope to achieve through writing before they know each other or have had a taste of the creative activity.

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?

Our project's main purpose was to explore how writing could be of benefit to bereaved people and to gain some understanding of the difference it made to our participants. We focused on qualitative evaluation in order to understand which activities had the most beneficial effect. Rather than expecting our participants to set goals from the outset, we introduced a range of approaches to writing, consulted regularly to ensure the activities were appropriate to their interests and expectations, and left the full evaluation until the end of the project.

We provided a short questionnaire at the end of the final session and asked participants to complete it in writing. We asked what they had found most useful and enjoyable, whether there was anything they had not enjoyed, whether writing had helped them feel better or had provided insights into their feelings, how they had found the experience of working with the group, whether they would like to take part in further sessions, what they would like to do more or less of and whether they would like to suggest improvements. It ended with an open question in which they were invited to comment on anything else they felt about the writing sessions.

Not everyone returned the evaluation, but comments from those who did were universally positive. The aspects people had enjoyed most included the opportunity to have a different relationship with the hospice, learning new skills and meeting new people. Exercises people particularly enjoyed and found helpful in terms of producing new insights included the acrostic word games, the exercises in form such as the haiku, and the theme work such as the journey (particularly the opportunity to think about what to leave behind). Participants also mentioned the laughter and the opportunity to share stories as beneficial in gaining personal insight and enjoyment.

Respondents all felt participation had helped them to look at life in a different way and to think about experiences other than their bereavement. They enjoyed the intimacy and calm of the group, the variety of activities and the warmth, gentle humour and optimism provided by the facilitation. Without exception they wanted to carry on, with their own writing and with more group sessions.

Our evaluation did not use the specific term 'therapy'; the writing group was not a counselling session. Nevertheless, it was notable that respondents all commented on feeling calm, soothed and relaxed as a result of the writing. Hedges (2005) cites similar outcomes from a qualitative study of a therapeutic poetry writing class in which 66% of the participants reported that writing poetry had '[a] calming effect as well as providing an outlet for their emotions' (p119).

Thompson makes a useful distinction between a therapeutic writing group, a writing group with therapeutic outcomes, and writing in therapy (Thompson, 2006). We designed and facilitated our sessions as a writing group with therapeutic outcomes, although, as Thompson also observes:

> 'It is not always possible to make discreet categories, for, even in creative writing groups with no expected or intended therapeutic benefit or outcome … the process of writing can let loose strange insights and emotions.' (p27)

Some of our participants said they had found the idea of an overtly therapeutic writing group off-putting. They had assumed they would be expected to write about bereavement. They welcomed the use of the themed exercises because they could gain insight into emotions and explore other feelings and experiences than those that currently preoccupied them in their grieving processes.

For me as facilitator, one measure of the success of any creative writing exercise is whether people manage to produce new writing. By this criterion, the sessions were a success. They enabled people who were new to writing to work with metaphor, form and creative imagination. A common theme that emerged from the writings, reflections and discussions was hopefulness. This was interesting in a group of people at different stages of grieving.

Creative writing in relation to bereavement is still an under-evaluated area. More work is needed to explore the value of writing in the different stages and tasks of grieving. A further project could make use of journal writing to express individual experience and

Green boughs

This group had a very different feel from our usual bereavement groups, which run for a similar length of time and number of sessions, often with about the same number of participants too. However the focus of these groups is very much on loss and the experience of bereavement. They are in many ways less directed – if the group members are talking and sharing freely with each other, the facilitators' interventions may be minimal. However, if we feel the need to prompt discussion, we specifically focus the group's attention on loss-related themes such as the nature of the illness and death, the funeral, disposal of ashes, dealing with the clothes and possessions, difficulties with appetite, sleep, general ill health, coping with paperwork and so on. The opportunity to talk and share such things with those going through similar experiences is, of course, helpful and supportive to many.

I am aware, however, that sometimes individuals stopped coming to these groups after the initial session because they find it unbearable to witness others' pain. This, rather than being helpful, simply serves to compound their own; it can all feel too much.

Bereaved people feel vulnerable and insecure; their world has changed irrevocably; they have often, as a result, lost a sense of their own identity and can feel of little worth. The positive process of our creative writing project, as I observed it, did indeed give participants a sense of having a distinct voice that mattered and that had something to offer to others. Pain and sadness were given space and respected, but I also observed how the writing activities enabled group members to discover, sometimes to their surprise, their own creativity and to celebrate together a sense of new beginnings and new ways forward following death and loss.

My involvement in this group has also informed my work with individuals. I have felt encouraged to offer clients, where appropriate, the opportunity to complete short creative writing exercises, beyond the journal or unsent letter exercises with which many of us are familiar. These creative writing exercises are not complex, and certainly do not need to take up a whole individual session, but they can unlock something positive and life affirming. I am reminded here of Stroebe and Schut's (1999) dual process model and their suggestion that we are most helped in bereavement by the oscillation between grieving/sad reflection (retelling our 'old' stories) and re-engaging with life (creating 'new' stories for ourselves).

An elderly widower recently wrote to me following the death of his wife. He quoted an ancient Chinese saying: 'If we keep a green bough in our hearts, the singing birds will come.' Green boughs were much in evidence in our creative writing project, and there is more growing to be done.

Anne Rivers, Counselling team co-ordinator, Princess Alice Hospice

encourage more writing outside the group sessions. We hope to carry on this work at the hospice, provide further training for the staff and volunteer counsellors, develop further exercises and devise a more robust form of evaluation. I would be pleased to hear from counsellors or fellow writers interested in sharing experiences, ideas and example of practice in this developing area. ■

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