

Life without Geoff



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After losing my precious husband, Geoff, in February 2006, it became very clear that my life would change enormously. I had never paid a gas bill, a council tax bill, an electricity bill, the mortgage, booked a holiday, etc, etc. After Geoff's death, I soon *had* to arrange a funeral and sort out all the finances. The family computer became an important tool and my journey of recognition began. For the first time I was studying myself as a widow: no longer a wife, but still a mother. The realisation was very traumatic, and the grief overpowering.

A throwaway remark to my daughters, Gem and Nic, of 'I feel like I'm studying for a degree' planted a seed in their minds – they decided that that was what mum was going to do. They informed me that four years would be my study period which included a gap year (time to travel on my own). I knew that they were serious and felt that this would be so beneficial to me. I needed to prove to my girls that I wouldn't be any trouble and that they could concentrate on their own lives without worrying about me. They both had degrees in progress – Gemma a PhD in botany, and Nic a degree in mental health nursing. I left secondary modern school with six O levels; university wasn't an option then. How could I not take on this challenge and make my girls proud of me?

I began by buying myself a blank journal and that became my crutch and lifesaver. I wrote down my feelings most days and recorded my highs and my lows. If I was travelling, I would take it with me and record my achievements and frustrations, and it was also useful when dining alone in restaurants to have my trusty journal by my side as my 'friend' to hide behind; no one knew what I was writing about.

I could write *exactly* how I was feeling and I even used the back of the journal, at times, to write letters to Geoff. I felt he needed to know how I was coping and I would even ask his advice about things. Of course I would also tell him how much I missed him and loved him.... For me, it was as if I was literally taking my feelings and grief out of my heart and putting them in another place – on paper. The journals grew and grew and after the four years I had quite a collection, with separate little decorative ones for each overseas trip I did.

Six months before the anniversary of Geoff's death, my girls wrote a very official looking letter to me on headed paper – *The*

International University of Life – setting out exactly what they expected me to submit by February 2010. It was made clear that they didn't want to read all my private and confidential jottings, but wanted me to précis my whole four years in chapters of no more than 600 words each, with 1,000 words for the overseas chapter. I also had to set out my thesis properly. My chosen title was *My life without Geoff*.

It obviously meant that I had to reread all my written work and put it in some sort of order. It was very heartwrenching and very surprising to me. Obviously reading about losing Geoff and the early days of coping, I realised just how far I had come. Practical things that had seemed so hard at the time had become second nature to me now. I had poured out my heart in my writing and found having to write in précis form was very difficult; what do I include/exclude? The whole exercise was like seeing a counsellor every day and emotionally draining, although very uplifting in parts when I began to recognise how much I had achieved as a single lady, and how independent I had become. My thesis was finally submitted.

On 15 February 2010 (the fourth anniversary of Geoff's death) I received a letter from my 'examiners' setting out a review of my thesis from each of them individually. I had passed with a first class doctor of philosophy degree! It was one of the proudest moments of my life. I felt proud that I had done this for my girls and proud of them too having spurred me on every inch of the way, while coping with their own grief for their dad and managing to get degrees themselves (*proper* degrees, may I add!)

I realise that my PhD is only *pretend*, but the homemade certificate on my wall in my study stating 'Doctor of philosophy in the field of personal growth and development following great loss', signed by my daughters, means the world to me and I look at it with pride.

The last few years have turned out to be 'research' in a very odd way, but I feel that this research has broadened my understanding, not only in myself, but in my family and friends, and has made me realise and count my blessings. It has been such an amazing journey for me – so many lows and so many highs. It has taught me that life goes on when your heart is broken.

From grief to growth: rewriting life after loss

Robert A Neimeyer, PhD, University of Memphis, USA writes:

In 'the university of life', as Ella Hoyle calls it, loss is not an elective course; it is a part of the core curriculum. And how we learn the lessons of loss, personally and collectively, shapes who we become. Ella's essay on journaling through widowhood vividly conveys the power of narrative to contribute to this process, as she bravely reached through grief to growth across the bridge of written engagement with an unwelcome but necessary life transition. Here I will briefly underscore the nature of her narrative journey, which links in many of its particulars with contemporary models of mourning, by noting seven features and functions of reflective writing in the context of bereavement.

Safe haven

As Ella notes, a journal can function, in a sense, as a reliable friend, one who receives anything in our hearts or minds without interruption or judgment. Particularly when we need a safe haven to ride out the stormy seas of grief, the invitation of blank pages to express and explore our feelings and needs can offer a kind of sanctuary. In fact, research suggests that the very act of writing repeatedly about troubling events can help modulate negative emotion and permit us to respond more adaptively.

Sense making

Research on meaning-making in bereavement clearly links a struggle to make sense of our loss with more intense, prolonged and complicated grief, and our ability to find meaning in the death and in our lives in its aftermath with a lightening of our burden. Ella's creative 'journey of recognition' in the form of 'studying' her widowhood led to deepened awareness of what was significant in her life, reaffirming core themes of learning and loving while also embracing inevitable change.

Secure base

Just as a journal can offer refuge from the world, so too it can serve as a 'portable secure base' that accompanies the mourner to restaurants or on trips, helping the survivor back into life in a new way. And like a good travelling companion, reflective writing can help us process such excursions, learning anew the terrain of a life transformed by loss.

Identity change

As Ella recognised instinctively, bereavement prompts us to review and revise our life roles and goals, relinquishing those that require our loved one's physical presence, and reinventing others in their place. Self-reflective writing can hold a kind of mirror to our souls, allowing us to discern both strands of consistency and points of transition in our self-narratives — the story of who we have been, who we are now, and who we will become. Ultimately, we seek ways of not so much 'getting over' the loss,

as we do means of integrating it into our life story in a sustainable fashion.

Continuing bonds

In seeking continuity as well as transition in our lives, we also strive for continuity in who we love. This implies that the goal of grieving is more commonly renegotiating the bond with the deceased, rather than relinquishing it. For Ella, her therapeutic writing advanced this aim, providing a means of 'communicating' with her husband, seeking his counsel, and sensing his presence and responsiveness. As in imaginal conversations in therapy, such writing has been incorporated into evidence-based treatments for complicated grief.

Benefit finding

Studies of adaptive grieving have identified the ways in which survivors find in their experience not only pain, but also gain. Rereading and consolidating her daily free writes, Ella 'realised how far she had come' and 'how much she had accomplished as a single lady', ultimately feeling 'uplifted' by the recognition of her growing strength and independence. Such outcomes — both fostered and formulated by her creative writing — underscore what research has taught us: that the lessons of loss, when integrated, can help people move from post-traumatic *stress* to post-traumatic *growth*.

Special knowledge

In engaging the challenges of bereavement consciously, Ella chose to 'research' her changed life in a way that 'broadened her understanding' of not only herself, but also her family and friends, and in an important sense, life in general. It therefore was fully in keeping with narrative therapy practice that her daughters would award her a special degree certifying her personal growth over her four-year course of 'study', in the form of a diploma that validated her achievement and honoured her new status. Like more traditional rituals of transition, such practices of recognition affirm both individual growth and communal support in the aftermath of collective change.

In sum, Ella's description of her own narrative quest to relearn life in the aftermath of loss provides a compelling illustration of themes emerging in contemporary attachment, coping and meaning reconstruction approaches to grief therapy, all of which can draw on methods like those she discovered or invented. I hope that other bereaved people and the counsellors who work alongside them will find inspiration in her story, as well as in the rich trove of techniques for supporting such reflective practice.

Recommended readings

- Moss J (2012). *Writing in bereavement*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Neimeyer RA (ed) (2012). *Techniques of grief therapy: Creative practices for counseling the bereaved*. New York: Routledge.
- Neimeyer RA, Harris D, Winokur H, Thornton G (eds) (2011). *Grief and bereavement in contemporary society: Bridging research and practice*. New York: Routledge.