

# NARRATIVE STRATEGIES IN GRIEF THERAPY

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*The field of grief therapy is currently in a state of conceptual revolution, opening the prospect of reconfiguring our understanding of the human experience of loss along constructivist lines. In this article I outline some of the tenets of such an approach, proposing that the reconstruction of a world of meaning is the central process in grieving. I then present several narrative strategies for assisting bereaved people in making meaning of loss, and discuss indications, illustrations, variations, and precautions pertinent to each.*

By any standard, the field of grief counseling is in revolution. The long-standing Freudian view of grieving as a process of decathexis of emotional energy from a lost loved one is under assault by critics within the psychodynamic tradition (Hagman, 1995), and scholars of many orientations are questioning popular models of mourning as a series of emotional stages of adaptation to loss (Corr, 1993; Worden, 1991). Moreover, recent research evidence fails to support cherished models that assume that grieving is necessarily associated with depression, that the absence of grief is pathological, that a complicated process of "working through" is critical to recovery, or that grieving can be resolved through a return to one's preloss status (Stroebe, 1992; Wortman & Silver, 1987). As a result of this deep-going critique of traditional grief theory, there is a newfound openness to novel perspectives on bereavement as a human experience. My own interest has been in developing a constructivist response to this conceptual crisis, joining a cadre of kindred theorists, researchers, and clinicians who are moving in a similar direction (Neimeyer, in press).

In this article, my goal is to sketch the outlines of this emerging constructivist approach and then offer a handful of narrative strategies for promoting adaptation to loss in the context of grief counseling. The

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aim of this article is therefore primarily practical, and I encourage readers interested in the conceptual and methodological implications of a constructivist approach to grief therapy to consult other resources for a more adequate treatment of these issues (Neimeyer, 1998a; Neimeyer, in press; Neimeyer, Keesee, & Fortner, 1998).

## GRIEVING AS A PROCESS OF MEANING RECONSTRUCTION

If we examine the process of grieving in the concrete particulars of people's lives, we are immediately pushed to the limits of popular grief theories, with their simplifying assumptions about stages of emotional adjustment to loss and universal tasks to be mastered by the bereaved individual. Instead, the intimate details of people's stories of loss suggest a complex process of adaptation to a changed reality, a process that is at the same time immensely personal, intricately relational, and inevitably cultural. In the hope of interesting other counselors and therapists in these complexities, I adopt as a starting point a view of grieving as a process of *meaning reconstruction*, with special emphasis on its individuality rather than sameness across bereaved persons. I begin by reviewing a few basic propositions of this constructivist model and follow this with a discussion of several narrative strategies or techniques that can facilitate this reconstructive process.

## EMERGING MODELS OF MOURNING

In response to the growing dissatisfaction with traditional models of mourning, a "new wave" of grief theory is emerging, one that is less the product of any particular author than it is the expression of a changed *zeitgeist* about the nature of bereavement as a profound transition in our lives. Among the common elements of these newer models are

1. skepticism about the universality of a predictable "emotional trajectory" that leads from psychological disequilibrium to re-adjustment, coupled with an appreciation of more complex patterns of adaptation (Attig, 1991; Attig, 1996);
2. a shift away from the presumption that successful grieving requires "letting go" of the one who has died and moving toward a recognition of the potentially healthy role of maintaining continued symbolic bonds with the deceased (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 1998);

3. attention to meaning-making processes entailed in mourning, supplementing the traditional focus on the emotional and symptomatic consequences of loss (Horowitz, 1997; Janoff-Bulman, 1989; Viney, 1991);
4. greater awareness of the implications of major loss for the bereaved individual's sense of identity, often necessitating deep-going revisions in his or her self-definition (Attig, 1996; Neimeyer, 1998a);
5. increased appreciation of the possibility of life-enhancing spirituality and "posttraumatic growth" as one integrates the lessons of loss (Richards & Folkman, 1997; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998); and
6. a broadening of the focus of attention to include not only the experience of individual grievers, but also the reciprocal impact of loss on families (Nadeau, 1997) and larger (sub)cultural groups (Neimeyer & Keese, 1998; Nord, 1997).

In response to these trends, I have tried to develop the outlines of an alternative model of mourning, one that argues that meaning reconstruction in response to a loss is the central process in grieving. In keeping with the broader constructivist approach to psychotherapy from which it derives (Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995), this approach is informed by a view of human beings as inveterate meaning makers—weavers of narratives that give thematic significance to the salient plot structure of their lives (Neimeyer & Stewart, 1996). Innovating upon culturally available systems of belief, individuals construct permeable, provisional meaning structures that help them interpret experiences, coordinate their relationships with others, and organize their actions toward personally significant goals (Kelly, 1955). Importantly, however, these frameworks of meaning are anchored less in some "objective" reality, than in specific negotiations with intimate others and general systems of cultural discourse. One implication of this social constructionist view is that the themes on which people draw to attribute significance to their lives will be as variegated as the local conversations in which they are engaged and as complex as the cross-currents of shared belief systems that inform their personal attempts at meaning making (Neimeyer, 1998b). A further implication of this view is that people may feel varying degrees of "authorship" over the narratives of their lives, with some having a sense of deeply personal commitment to their beliefs, values, and choices, while others feel estranged from those beliefs and expectations that they experience as imposed on them by others in their social networks or by communal ideologies (Monk, Winslade, Crocket, & Epston, 1997).

In keeping with this general constructivist thesis loss is viewed as an event that can profoundly perturb one's taken-for-granted constructions about life, sometimes traumatically shaking the very foundations of one's assumptive world (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Often, the sustaining assumptions that are violated by the death of a loved one are subtle, functioning as habitual ways of thinking and acting that regulate our daily lives (Rando, 1995). Therapists working from this perspective therefore require ways of helping clients interrogate their own tacit assumptions about life that were challenged by a particular loss, while groping their way toward new sustaining frameworks of meaning.

One of the key deficiencies in traditional models of grieving is their implicit presumption of universality—the idea that all or most bereaved persons respond similarly to loss at an emotional level. In contrast, a meaning-reconstruction view emphasizes the subtle nuances of difference in each griever's reaction, so that no two people can be presumed to experience the same grief in response to the “same” loss (Gilbert, 1996). Instead, each person is viewed as the constructor of a different phenomenological world and as occupying a different position in relation to broader discourses of culture, gender, and spirituality (Neimeyer & Keesee, 1998). This assumption of the radical incommensurability of grieving across persons challenges professional caregivers to approach bereaved individuals from a position of “not knowing” rather than presumed understanding, necessitating means of accessing each bereaved person's unique experience without the imposition of “expert” knowledge (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992).

A third feature of a constructivist approach to loss is the conviction that grieving is an active process, however much the bereavement itself was unbidden (Attig, 1991). Although the “choiceless” nature of the loss can leave persons feeling like pawns in the hands of some larger fate, bereavement in fact thrusts survivors into a period of accelerated decision making. At a very basic level, grievers even confront the choice of whether to focus their attention on either the loss itself (doing the “grief work” of sorting through the turbulent feelings triggered by his death) or the restoration of their lives (through a practical focus on adjustments needed to re-engage their occupational and social worlds; Stroebe & Schut, in press). Viewing mourning in this way encourages caregivers to assist bereaved individuals in identifying the many choices they confront in revising their life narratives and then helping them sift through their options and make difficult decisions.

Finally, the reconstructive processes entailed in grieving cannot be understood as taking place within isolated subjectivities divorced from a larger social world. However private our grief, it is necessarily

linked with the responses of others, each constraining and enabling the other. Thus, even private readjustments in one's sense of self and world must eventually be negotiated with those persons who figure prominently in the bereaved person's ongoing life. Ultimately, reconstructing a world of significance in the wake of bereavement is more than a cognitive or emotional exercise; it also requires survivors to recruit social validation for their changed identities (Neimeyer, 1997).

## NARRATIVE STRATEGIES FOR GRIEF COUNSELING

Having provided a broad orientation to a constructivist approach to loss, I illustrate its practical implications by sharing a few personal applications that have proven helpful to bereaved individuals with whom I have worked in grief counseling. Used judiciously, the exercises that follow can help with the task of taking perspective on the losses of our lives and with moving forward with our grieving. In keeping with the general reflexivity of constructivist practice, grief counselors may find the following personal applications helpful, as I have, in taking an "inventory" of their own grief histories as a precondition to entering the experiential worlds of their clients. In addition, these exercises can be used as between-session "homework" in the course of grief therapy. As with all forms of therapy, the work of grief counseling ultimately must transcend the boundaries of the consulting room if it is to have an impact on our clients' lives. Making appropriate suggestions about how clients might facilitate their own grief work between meetings can help achieve this goal. However, to be used appropriately, these personal applications should be offered to the client with the following guidelines in mind:

1. *Develop a collaborative attitude.* The most useful homework assignments are likely to be mutually designed rather than therapist assigned. Of course, any of the ideas sketched below can be offered in a provisional way, especially if grafted onto the important emotional themes that have dominated the preceding session. Adopting a genuinely collaborative stance also implies a readiness to modify the homework in light of the client's feedback or suspend it altogether. All of the exercises below suggest variations that permit you to adapt the application to the client's unique circumstances, but the range of permissible variation is really limited only by your creativity as a therapeutic team and your client's specific needs and resources.
2. *Respect the client's "resistance."* If the client balks at a particular

suggestion, assume that it is for good reason. What might he or she be experiencing that you have incompletely understood? Might more be “at stake” in the completion of a given activity than you have realized from an “outsider” perspective? If respectfully understood rather than disrespectfully overridden, such resistance can be grist for the mill of therapeutic discussion and yield rich insights into the client's accommodation to loss.

3. *Respect the client's privacy.* Allow clients to “edit” what they produce in response to any given exercise, sharing with you only what they choose. If clients feel free to reserve personal reactions without feeling pressured to share them immediately with others, they are more likely to use the exercises in an uncensored fashion to sort through issues and reactions that they fear would be embarrassing or shameful. Acknowledging such reactions fully to themselves may then serve as a step toward disclosing them to others.
4. *Integrate homework into the session.* Be sure to make a note following each session about any initiatives the client has committed to undertake prior to your next meeting, and begin the next session by inquiring about how the assignment went. I have found it most helpful to fully integrate between-session work by asking clients to read or, in some other way, actively share relevant portions of exercises with me. On the rare occasion when a client is reticent to share his or her reflective writing in this way, I ask permission to read it aloud slowly and with feeling, pausing to share my own reactions and encourage therapeutic discussion of the results. Doing this sensitively can help build an empathic bridge between client and therapist and facilitate direct client sharing in later sessions.
5. *Recognize the value of “being” as well as “doing.”* As a final note, my endorsement of an active model of grieving should not be taken as advocacy for an overly “busy” approach to therapy, one that attempts to hurry a client's processing of a loss with the goal of promptly ameliorating distress and returning to a presumed emotional equilibrium. Grieving takes time, and there will be many points in the process of grief therapy when no assignments or actions are indicated, beyond attending to what is taking shape in one's life or even disattending from the loss altogether in order to devote one's energies elsewhere.

A related point concerns the narrative nature of the applications that follow, each of which uses some form of personal writing to

promote reflection on and integration of loss. I confess that this expresses my own interests and predilections toward narrative and constructivist forms of therapy, and acknowledge that not all grieving persons are drawn to “work through” their grief with pencil and paper. Still, I have often been surprised at the contribution of several of these methods to the grief work of less highly verbal individuals; indeed, a well-chosen narrative method (e.g., a short and to-the-point unsent letter) may prove to be a powerful means of articulating and addressing loss in such cases precisely because written self-expression is a novel experience. If counselors and bereaved persons can drop the bias that writing and reflection are the sole prerogatives of highly literate people, they may be surprised by the simple eloquence of which the majority of grieving people are capable, if given encouragement to express old concerns in fresh ways.

Finally, I should emphasize that the illustrative strategies offered in this article are only a subset of the dozens of applications and variations coherent with a meaning-making perspective (for a fuller discussion of these and other strategies, see Neimeyer, 1998a). I nonetheless hope that readers will experiment with some of these applications to discover what works best for them and those they attempt to help.

## EPITAPHS

### Indications

In the numbing days and weeks following the death of someone we love, we may be unable to formulate an epitaph that uniquely captures that person's meaning for those left behind. But often an appropriately chosen inscription for a grave marker can focus and affirm the meaning of a relationship, whether or not it ever is actually chiseled in stone. Such epitaphs can be personal creations, or apt discoveries, sometimes encountered when one is not consciously looking for a suitable phrase or expression to memorialize a loss.

### Example

Karen had struggled for months to find a suitable epitaph for the gravestone of her severely disabled 8-year-old son, Kenny, who died of pneumonia after a long decline. The caretaking Kenny required throughout his life had physically and emotionally exhausted Karen, especially since the accidental death of her husband 2 years before.

The well-intended but hurtful “consolation” offered by others, who noted that she would be “better off” without the burden of caring for him, and could give more attention to her remaining “normal” child, further complicated her mourning. As she gradually began to sort out the tangle of feelings that clustered around this loss in the context of our counseling, Karen was surprised to discover in the pages of a book she was casually scanning a pithy sentence that, for her, precisely summarized the place her dead child had held in her life: “Sometimes the richest things can come into our lives from places we would never choose to go.” This then became the inscription she had carved on his headstone, bringing “closure” to a felt obligation she had previously been unable to meet.

## Precaution

Because of the high degree of condensation of meaning required by an epitaph, it should be chosen carefully and in no way be hurried in order to bring premature closure to a loss. Trying to formulate the significance of a relationship too succinctly or quickly can overly simplify a complex experience, blinding us to nuances that might be more adequately expressed in somewhat lengthier forms of reflective writing. Sometimes a suitable epitaph will arise spontaneously in the course of poetic self-expression or journaling or even in reading relevant literature of loss. For this reason, the therapeutic writing of an epitaph might best be reserved for people who are well along in their grief and who have had a chance to process it more thoroughly.

## JOURNALS

### Indications

Especially when losses are traumatic, they may be difficult to discuss or even disclose to another. And yet the psychological and physical burden of harboring painful memories without the release of sharing can prove far more destructive in the long run. A growing volume of research now supports the conclusion that writing about such traumas as sudden bereavement, personal or parental divorce, interpersonal abandonment or abuse, humiliation and job loss, and even sexual assault can have substantial positive implications for one's emotional and physical health, dramatically increasing one's sense of well-being and even improving one's immune-system functioning (Pennebaker,

Mayne, & Francis, 1996). But to enjoy these payoffs, not just any form of writing will do. To benefit from the “write stuff,” certain guidelines should be followed, including the following

1. Focus on a loss that is among the more upsetting or traumatic experiences of your entire life.
2. Write about those aspects of the experience that you have discussed least adequately with others, perhaps aspects that you could never imagine discussing with anyone.
3. Write from the standpoint of your deepest thoughts and feelings, tacking back and forth between an explicit account of the event and your reactions to it.
4. Abandon a concern with grammar, spelling, penmanship, or typographic accuracy.
5. Write for at least 15 minutes per day for at least 4 days.
6. Schedule a transitional activity after the writing before resuming “life as usual.”

### Example

Carol was referred to therapy for a severe and unremitting depression that left her unresponsive to either pain or pleasure, to the point that she felt the need to cut or burn herself in order to feel alive. She felt radically estranged and distrustful of others and was increasingly preoccupied with an internal drama consisting of tortured recollections of childhood traumas and recent abuse by a man she loved. And yet it seemed impossible for her initially to share these painful secrets, even in the confidential context of psychotherapy. With my gentle prompting, however, she began to divulge them in a personal journal, which she gradually began to share with me.

Writing daily, Carol at first vividly expressed her self-loathing associated with the painful events of her past, eventually distilling an account of her incest experiences, the death of her father, her psychological abuse by the religious cult that lured her in adolescence, and the degrading sexual relationship with a man that ensued. At first, the writing was associated with acute anguish, visible in the pressured and uneven hand in which she wrote. But across time, the writing took on a more reflective and even lyrical quality as she chronicled her long climb toward self-respect and the reconstruction of her relational life. Carol's journal reflected this gradual overall shift toward accommodation of her losses and integration of her life but also recorded the occasional setbacks she encountered on her journey toward self-affirmation.

Although Carol's story is a dramatic one, the use of journals can be extended quite easily to more normative life stories and narratives that revolve around less profound but nonetheless important losses. For example, Andrew, a 47-year-old administrator within a health care system, lost his job when his department "reorganized." Even with a stable history of personal and family adjustment, he found the resulting shift to self-employment bruising and felt consumed by anger and resentment over the job loss itself, as well as the inevitable hurdles to successful self-employment. For him, a week's worth of daily journal entries helped him vent his sense of betrayal by his employer and anxiety about the future that he felt the need to control at other times. Moreover, he discovered that the writing gradually changed form over time, moving from an expressive, cathartic style to a greater emphasis on problem solving. As often happens, this private journal work led to spontaneous conversations with his wife about their finances and a mutual plan to work together to weather a difficult period of adjustment as a family.

## Variations

Although the highly expressive and personal exploration of loss in daily journal entries is encouraged above, there are many other forms of diary work that can help one sort out the lessons of loss. For instance, passionate self-disclosure can alternate with more calculated and planful brainstorming, as in Andrew's case, or one can use such writing to sift through the significant emotional events of the day or week, sometimes discovering their hidden connections to previous loss experiences. Alternatively, one can keep a dream journal that captures and interprets significant dreams (e.g., pursuing the fleeting image of a deceased father in the attic of one's childhood home). Several other forms of expressive writing (Neimeyer, 1998a) can be used to prime or integrate the kind of journal entries emphasized in this application, so that people should feel free to draw on various forms according to their purposes. In some cases, any form of writing may seem too constraining, so that variations involving tape recording one's entries might be worth considering.

## Precautions

In addition to the caveats outlined above (e.g., the usefulness of scheduling buffer activities following intensive writing), it is often helpful for

people to secure the privacy of their journals so that they can feel truly free to write in an uninhibited fashion. Remember that the primary audience for their writing is themselves, so it need not ever be shared with another to have a long-term benefit. Some persons even find it reassuring to destroy their “confessions” after committing them to paper, although this has the drawback of eliminating a possible source of future reflection and a tangible record of personal growth.

A second precaution concerns the goodness of fit of this, or any, personal application for the individual user. Because intensive emotional writing can leave people temporarily feeling “raw” and vulnerable, even if it promotes long-term adjustment, it is probably best to postpone such writing until they feel relatively “together,” rather than doing so in the immediate aftermath of a major loss. As a corollary of this, counselors working with clients who are markedly unstable are encouraged to use such writing advisedly; I introduced this dimension of our work to Carol only after we had begun to establish a secure and ongoing therapeutic relationship. Even when I use such writing as a part of therapy, I continue to respect my clients' right to privacy concerning whether or not to share any particular entry with me in the course of our sessions.

## LIFE IMPRINT

### Indications

Although people in Western cultures are accustomed to thinking of themselves as “individuals,” proud of their distinctiveness from others, in fact we all represent “pastiche personalities,” reflecting characteristics modeled on an enormous range of persons who have been important to us. Without really intending it, from our first days of life we appropriate ways of gesturing, thinking, speaking, feeling, and acting from our parents, relatives, friends, and even public figures with whom we identify. In a sense, then, we become living memorials to these persons, even after they have died. Noting the imprint that such people have made on our own lives can be a powerful way of honoring their contribution, forming a living web of connection that we, through our lives, extend to others (Vickio, in press).

### Variations

Although we naturally can recognize in ourselves many of the mannerisms, tastes, and values of our parents, the imprint that one life

makes on another is by no means simply one of inheritance in a genetic sense. For example, the reverse pattern of “inheriting” a sense of love, loyalty, or the preciousness of life from their children is often reported by bereaved parents, and important mentors or teachers can often be a source of identification even when they are unrelated to us in any biological sense. Thus, tracing the impact of a friend's life on our own can be as legitimate as examining the imprint of our parents, although the former contribution to our sense of self may be more abstract than the latter.

## Precautions

Not all imprints are positive, precisely because some relationships may be troubled or ambivalent. As a result, we may sometimes trace our sense of self-doubt or our drivenness, sarcastic tone of voice, or proneness to anger to the model provided by a critical parent. We may find the origin of our distrust of others in the opinions held by an influential friend. But even in such cases it is often helpful to recognize that these negative imprints arose outside of us and perhaps can be resisted and transformed through personal effort. In addition, even these negative instances are typically accompanied by compensatory strengths modeled on these same figures, which we can selectively affirm and retain. However, sorting out the mixed imprint of ambivalent relationships can be a difficult task, one that sometimes requires the assistance of a professional counselor. The following writing exercise can be useful in this:

The person whose imprint I want to trace is:

This person has had the following impact on:

my mannerisms and gestures:

my way of speaking and communicating:

my work and pastime activities:

my basic personality:

my values and beliefs:

The imprints I would most like to affirm and maintain are:

The imprints I would most like to relinquish or change are:

## LINKING OBJECTS

### Indications

We are often comforted by preserving in our lives objects that belonged to the persons we have lost and quite naturally tend to accumulate keepsakes and mementos of people and times that have gone before. Occasionally it is helpful to adopt this as a conscious strategy for responding to loss, by making deliberate decisions about how to integrate cherished “linking objects” into our ongoing lives.

### Example

When Karen's son Kenny died after an 8-year course of disability and illness, she was unable to contemplate “cleaning out his room” for some months afterward. But as she came to feel more resolved about the meaning of his life and death over the course of grief counseling, she began to feel that doing so represented a logical next step in her healing. With minimal prompting by me, Karen solicited the help of her teenage daughter to sort through Kenny's belongings, choosing those that would be offered to specific family members and friends and others that would be donated to charity. However, Karen wisely decided to keep several toys of special significance, such as stuffed animals that had comforted her young son during his protracted hospitalizations, placing them in a simple glass display case in the room that she then converted into a study. The decision to use Kenny's toys both to continue her emotional bond with her child and to extend the same symbolic ties to other members of the family allowed Karen to find an appropriate place for Kenny in her changed life, in a way that she felt he would approve. Making such decisions in discussion with her daughter also facilitated shared reminiscences, tears, laughter, and hugs that helped the two remaining family members come together in their grief and reflect jointly on Kenny's place in their broader family system.

### Variations

Not all ways of linking to the memory of lost loved ones needs to be through objects, per se. Natalie Cole's moving posthumous duet with the voice of her father, Nat King Cole, is truly an “unforgettable” example of the harmonious blending of the voices of generations. Likewise, Martin Luther King, III's decision to carry on his father's

civil rights advocacy maintains his sense of connection to his father's mission through an extension of his father's life's work. Thus, linkages may be expressed in forms as concrete as wearing a favorite piece of jewelry or clothing of a deceased parent or as abstract as following through on his or her vision or life projects.

## Precautions

Although deeply meaningful, the cultivation of connection with one who has died can become problematic if taken to the extreme. This is particularly the case when our attempts to incorporate the concerns of the lost loved one leads to a neglect of ourselves or when identification is taken to such an extent that we become morbidly preoccupied with our personal susceptibility to the disease that took our loved one's life. Similarly, an inability to let go of any of the possessions of a loved one may suggest a failure to acknowledge necessary changes in ourselves and our lives in the wake of loss, as if our identities were to freeze from that point forward.

In such cases it is usually more enlightened for the counselor to try to understand the meaning of the continued connection and promote more discriminating and symbolic forms of bonding than it is to try to force a "letting go" on the part of the reluctant mourner.

## METAPHORIC IMAGES

### Indications

Sometimes literal words fail us in conveying our unique sense of loss—we may feel depressed, desolate, alone, or angry, but the character of our own grief is somehow more than just the sum of these standard descriptions. To move beyond the constraints of public speech, we need to use words in a more personal way, and draw on terms that are rich in resonance and imagery. Speaking of our loss metaphorically can help us accomplish this, sometimes leading to surprising insights unavailable to us when we think of it only in more conventional, "symptomatic" terms.

### Example

For most of her childhood and adolescence, Sara's grandfather had been a source of humor, inspiration, and strength to her, a touchstone

of balance in a world that was sometimes emotionally confusing and chaotic. When her grandfather died, Sara felt the loss keenly, but she integrated it as part of her rich family history and moved forward into an adult identity of which her grandfather undoubtedly would have been proud. Still, many years later, she recognized that the legacy of this loss was with her still, and she reformulated the following metaphor to convey how she currently carried her grief.

### *Sara's Suitcase*

My grief is like an old-fashioned hard-sided suitcase. It's lined with silky faded burgundy material and little elastic pockets attached to the sides for storing small trinkets or precious items you would want to keep safe during your travels. For me, that captures the way we can carry our grief around with us. Even when we think we have unpacked it completely, we can still find something surprising hidden away in one of those side compartments, maybe something we haven't seen or thought about for years.

One of the great advantages of metaphor is that it can compress a great deal of meaning into an economical expression or image, which can in turn be expanded by focusing on its elements and implications. Thus, it could prove valuable to explore with Sara whether her style of accommodating to loss was "old-fashioned" in other ways, whether the suitcase used in the metaphor might actually resemble one used by her grandfather, thereby linking her symbolically to his memory, what sorts of things might be found in the side pockets of the suitcase, what things might have been "misplaced" at the time of the loss that might yet be discovered, and so on. As in other exercises in figurative writing (Neimeyer, 1998a), metaphors of loss should be taken as bridges into the bereaved person's world of meaning, with the counselor serving as a respectful fellow traveler rather than authoritative guide to their significance.

### **Variations**

It can also be valuable to use loss metaphors in support groups for bereaved persons, where they can serve as surprisingly intimate ice-breakers for further discussion. If used as part of a group "round," with the group facilitator briefly asking "curious questions" about the image, they can also function as metaphoric means of deepening members' understanding of one another's unique experience of loss. The following illustration was excerpted from a few minutes of discussion in one such group:

## Kenya's Rock

*Counselor:* Kenya, how would you describe your grief if you tried to picture it as some form of image or object? What would it look like?

*Kenya:* For me, it's just like some enormous weight, like a big stone or rock of some kind.

*Counselor:* Hmm. And where are you in relation to this rock, in your image?

*Kenya:* Well, I guess I'm sort of underneath it, like it's on top of me.

*Counselor:* And can you feel its weight? How do you see yourself in the image?

*Kenya:* It's strange, but it doesn't really feel heavy . . . [pause] It's like it's sort of hollowed out on the bottom, you know, and I'm hunkered down in that hollow space. It's not really a bad feeling at all.

*Counselor:* How *does* it feel?

*Kenya:* Kind of, well, *protected*. Yeah, like it's a big shell or something, keeping out the world and just letting me be there by myself.

*Counselor:* That's fascinating. . . . How do you see other people being positioned in relation to that image?

*Kenya:* They're all on the outside, my husband, my mother, and lots of other folks, and they're telling me to push the stone off, and some of them are prying or lifting at it. But I don't really want it to move. It's like it's *taking care* of me.

*Counselor:* [Looking around the group.] How do the rest of you feel about Kenya's image? Does any part of it surprise you? Do you have any questions for her about it?

*Greg* (another member): Yeah, I guess I was really surprised by that. I thought her grief would be crushing her, like mine is crushing me, but she seems to almost *want* to keep it there. What I'd like to know is whether she thinks it's a permanent part of her, or if she'll come out from under it at some point in the future. . . . [A spirited discussion ensues.]

As indicated in this brief excerpt, a few curious follow-up questions can prime further exploration of the implications of any particular image, both on the part of the author of the metaphor and on the part of those with whom it is being shared.

## Precautions

In addition to the general caveat that it is the individual's interpretations of the metaphor that matter, not someone else's, further pre-

cautions in the use of loss imagery arise from the nature of metaphor itself. Unlike literal language, which tends to fix meanings and give them stable referents (if I am “bereaved” this week, I surely will be next week too), figurative language is far more fluid and protean, changing in its nuances in the very act of speaking. For this reason, it is often helpful to ask if there is any form of movement or change within the image and, if so, in what direction. For example, Maria described her grief as a kind of constriction around her chest and throat, which she experienced as a physical tightness in her body. When prompted to convey this sense in figurative terms and to identify any movement associated with the image, she described it as an invisible boa constrictor, gradually suffocating her. This then led us to augment our discussion of the image with active practice in deep breathing, coupled with the self-instruction, “loosen up.” Maria found this immensely helpful and was then able to explore other subtle aspects of the loss experience without feeling suffocated in the process.

## POETRY OF LOSS

### Indications

Literal language fails to capture the nuances of feeling and meaning that constitute our unique sense of loss. Poetic self-expression presses back the boundaries of public speech, articulating symbolically what cannot be stated plainly.

Writing personal poetry, for no audience other than yourself, can sometimes help crystallize a moment, validate an emotion, or convey a felt sense in a way that straightforward writing cannot. Abandon a concern with form and rhyme, and pen a few lines that capture an aspect of your experience without concern for editing them for public sharing.

### Example

On a recent, brilliant fall morning, I noticed a curious edge of sadness as I strolled outside, momentarily free of other responsibilities. Reflecting for a moment, I quickly traced the sadness to the absence of someone I loved and sat down to write the following simple poem, which honored the fleeting sense of loss and the relationship to which it referred:

### The Shadow of Your Absence

I wanted to share with you  
The colors of this day.  
But in the shadow of your absence  
They faded  
Before I had the chance.

The poetry of loss can be highly individualized or speak to nearly universal aspects of human experience. It can be in virtually any form, from metaphoric prose to rhythmic incantations, and it can illuminate a single feeling (anger, desolation, hope) or summarize the essence of an entire relationship.

### Variations

Counselors may sometimes feel moved to respond in a nonliteral way to a client's poetic productions, in a sense honoring the risk the client has taken by setting aside the usual constraints and writing a response from the heart. For example, a few months ago a young man who was in training to become a counselor shared with me a series of evocative prose poems, following a tearful and poignant session with me in which he acknowledged his misgivings about his chosen career. In his writing, he lamented the loss of a spontaneous, playful, genuine, and more emotional part of himself, which he felt had been buried beneath the sometimes suffocating requirements fostered by his graduate training to be self-controlled, efficient, cautious, and intellectual. The loss of his earlier self had been gradual, but the recognition of it was abrupt, and the force of it triggered an outpouring of feeling that could appropriately be described as grief.

As I was moved and touched by his risk taking, I responded in kind, writing him a brief poem that attempted to capture the essence of his struggle but suggesting the hopeful resolution that I felt deeply was possible for him:

### Fragments

Like echoes of voices long silent or sleeping,  
these cries and whispers murmur still,  
disturbing the sedimented practices  
that muffle their disquiet in layers of convention.

And yet, they emerge again from their slumbers  
when storms or gentle rains erode their anonymous shroud of  
years,  
and give clues to the larger pattern of coherence that once was  
theirs,  
and may yet be again.

## Precautions

Like any form of creative endeavor, poetic self-expression is a skill that is refined over time and one that may benefit from critique by a suitable mentor. But in its therapeutic rather than artistic use, it need not be refined in order to be effective in speaking from the bereaved person's experience, and perhaps even in speaking to the losses of others. Thus, it is important that the counselor (or author for that matter) not adopt the role of a critical editor attempting to "improve" the work, but instead take the position of an explorer attempting to enter into the world of feeling evoked by the poem, in order to explore its dimensions. If the counselor has not built a foundation of deep respect for the client's offerings, whether oral or written, then encouragement to share such poetry in the context of counseling is inappropriate and should be avoided.

## CONCLUSION

As grief theorists and therapists engage in a fundamental reappraisal of the assumptions that have long sustained their field, a growing number of thinkers have turned toward meaning-making models of mourning configured along constructivist lines. The resulting revitalization of grief theory has been accompanied by a growing interest in narrative strategies in grief therapy, several of which have been discussed in the present article. However, it is worth emphasizing that these represent only a few of the procedures compatible with a constructivist perspective, which also include more elaborate biographies, loss characterizations, meaning reconstruction interviews, and other reflective strategies for assessing and transforming meaning systems challenged by loss (Neimeyer, 1998a). I hope that other constructivist therapists will join in elaborating, applying, and refining such practices so that the universal experience of loss might eventually be accorded the place in constructivist theory that it has long occupied in human life.

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