
Preface

LORRAINE

From a young age, I have known death. Death of friends and family members as well as my own personal scrapes with unexpected events. It seemed, for better or worse, death was always around. When I made the decision to work with people who were dying and their families, it was a choice that made sense. I had, after all, been kissed by death often enough in my short life that I felt at home with this eventuality. This work was a kind of calling that offered comfort to me when I responded.

The professional milieu where I answered this calling has changed over the years. I have found myself working in medical hospitals and psychiatric settings, hospices, hospital emergency rooms, and private practice. In each of these domains, I have sought to develop some threads of constancy in my practice. My ardent desire has been to help people more fluidly and richly describe their lives, rather than flounder in or be suffocated by their problems.

Perhaps because of my personal brushes with death, or perhaps because of my professional involvement, I have been suspect of ideas that suggest that death is final. All too often, I witnessed deaths where emotional injury was layered on top of physical malady. Loved ones were routinely asked to “say good-bye” to a person who only minutes before an untimely happenstance had been full of vital life energy. Families made difficult life and death decisions flanked by labels ascribed to them by well-intentioned medical and mental health practitioners. Descriptions judging families who were in emotional turmoil as “in denial” or “avoidant” or worse, were commonplace in the dominant discourse of modernist medical conversation.

The dominant discourse was, thankfully, unsatisfying for my taste when I met people and tried to offer respectful assistance. I say thankfully, as it was this ongoing search that led me to the Institute for Creative Change in Phoenix, Arizona. My involvement began with the ICC just following graduate school. There, I had the good fortune to be exposed to a group of amazing thinkers who, like myself, were dissatisfied with mainstream therapeutic theory. I studied under the tutelage of Robert and Sharon Cottor, and explored postmodern thought, language theory, appreciative inquiry, discourse analysis, reflecting teams, social constructionism, and deconstructionism. With the Cottors, along with many other brilliant practitioners, I played with therapeutic theory and creative change practices. It is these practices, guided by this thinking, that I believe makes a difference in people's lives.

This scaffold was further constructed as I was exposed to the non-pathologizing language of narrative therapy. Based on many complementary postmodern frames of reference, narrative thought allowed my practice to flow and take shape in ways that were enlivening.

Over the past several years, I have had the good fortune to have John Winslade's encouragement. It was through conversations with him that I theorized more fully what I was already articulating in practice. John's keen thoughts sharpened my practice and persuaded me to bring pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard).

JOHN

Death and its friend grief have visited me on a number of occasions in my life too. The most notable occasion was the death of my daughter Julia at the age of five months some 22 years ago. It has remained for me a defining event. Other family members have died and not provided the same degree of challenge that Julia's death did. She has continued through the years to both live on in my memory and to feature in my life in sometimes surprising ways.

I always had a slightly uncomfortable relationship with conventional grief theory as a result of the experience of Julia's death. In my professional life, when I found myself in a counseling role with people struggling with their own grief experiences, I had no other tools at my disposal, but I was often left with a hollow feeling about offering these ideas in my work.

It was not until 1993, when I first read Michael White's article entitled "Saying Hullo Again" (White, 1989), that a penny dropped for

me. It was if a series of experiences and professional inklings quickly lined up to form a departure from what I had previously known. It was not a gradual change of perspective as I have experienced in other domains.

Since then, I have embraced a constructionist perspective in thinking about grief in my personal life and in my professional counseling and teaching work. When my mother died in January 2001, I noticed how these ideas rendered the experience of her death richly life-affirming. Remembering her continues to be a subject of joy for me. This does not mean that I have no sense of loss and would not prefer that she were still alive. But grieving for her has on the whole not been very painful, even though it has been powerfully affecting.

In my teaching life, I continue to be struck by how easily people to whom I teach these ideas seem to latch onto them. Students and practitioners regularly seem to respond with, "Of course!" rather than with, "But. . . ." This response confirms my interest in the further development of these ideas and makes teaching them exhilarating.

When I met Lorraine, I was immediately drawn to her work in this domain and to a sense of like-mindedness. Very early on I introduced her to Julia and she responded with a warm interest that is not common. I have continued to enjoy listening to her stories of practice. Her work has touched me, stimulated my thinking and inspired me to reach further in this work. This book is populated with many stories from Lorraine's work and only a few from mine. Without the foundation of her experience, I could not have undertaken this project. But our writing is not just a direct report on practice either. We have spent many hours talking through the work that is represented here. These conversations have been crucial to the writing of this book.

LORRAINE AND JOHN

As we have been writing this book, we have imagined readers who are practitioners in a variety of disciplines who have in common their professional association with people who are dying and their families. We would include here those who work in the general psychological domain: mental health clinicians, family therapists, caseworkers, social workers, psychologists, counselors, and psychiatrists. We also hope that it has relevance for those who encounter death in medical settings, such as physicians and nurses. There are also many who work specifically with the dying and bereaved, such as clergy, hospice workers, bereavement counselors, funeral directors, and planners. And there are students who may find this work relevant to their course of study in

psychology, gerontology, counseling, pastoral theology, thanatology, nursing, or social work.

Although the book is primarily aimed at a professional audience, we also believe that these ideas may hold personal interest. Death is not a subject that matters only in professional domains. Nor can we choose a life without death. Our hope is that readers from any walk of life may find ideas here that can open up possibilities in their relationship with death that they have not considered before. We do not see this as a morbid book about death but as a book of love stories, remarkable relationship tales, and inspirational practices.

We are grateful to many people whose stories of life and death are represented in these pages. Many of them are no longer alive in body but we are pleased to offer them a place to live on in written story. They have been generous in offering consent for their stories to be told in this medium. In an important sense, they have been authors alongside us in this project.

There are a number of other people who deserve acknowledgment for their contribution to the writing of this book. Cheryl White and David Denborough at Dulwich Centre Publications have offered Lorraine consistent encouragement in recent years through inviting her to showcase her work in conference presentations and in journal articles. This encouragement has spurred the further development of this writing into book form.

For Lorraine, the Institute for Creative Change in Phoenix deserves acknowledgment for being a significant part of her membership club. The refreshing thinking that takes place there has been a cool mist in the heat of the desert. For John, the community around the counseling program at the University of Waikato has been a similar source of ongoing stimulation. In particular, Wendy Drewery, Kathie Crocket, Wally McKenzie, and Gerald Monk deserve his appreciation. They have breathed warm academic life into frosty mornings on the banks of the Waikato River.

Angus Macfarlane deserves thanks and acknowledgment. Angus was helpful in confirming John's understandings of Maori perspectives on death and grief.

Our children deserve mention. They are our hope for being remembered ourselves. Lorraine is indebted to her daughter, Addison, for teaching her about inter-generational remembering. Addison has selflessly allowed Lorraine to tell the stories that connect Addison to her grandmother and her great-grandmother to audiences around the world. John's first child, Julia, has her own story to tell on some pages in this book and is present as a background witness on many other pages. His other children, Benjamin, Zane, and Joanna, are fine young

members of the club of his life. When their grandmother died, they all enriched John's community of remembering in ways that reached beyond what they fully appreciate.

Lastly, and with the utmost reverence, we thank the many people who have shared their lives with us as they faced death. To their families who have carried their stories with grace, we are eternally grateful. We are proud to have these individuals as members in our club of life.