

NARRATIVES AND STORY TELLING IN COPING WITH GRIEF AND BEREAVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

My daughter was a normal, healthy young lady, looking forward to becoming a teenager. Then, a strange sensation appeared in the muscle of her upper arm and everything changed! She waged the toughest battle of her life, but died of cancer in the middle of her thirteenth year. How does a mother cope with so tragic a loss? I told and retold the story. I talked about how we faced the chemo, the pain, and the fear together, about the fun we had, about the impact on our family, about the final days on the wish trip, about her death, about her friends, about the support of our faith community. I shared with all who would listen and, gradually, the storytelling helped me to make sense of things, to cope with the gaping hole in my world, to find a new normal for myself, to move on. My daughter stills lives—in eternity, in my memory, in the life I live as a result of having been her mom for those thirteen and a half years, and in the stories—hers, mine, ours.

Much work on death, dying, grieving, and bereavement discusses the role of stories in coping with these fundamental human processes. The brief story above, based on the experiences of the senior author of this review, captures the experiences of many. The value of reliance on narratives and story telling has been suggested by several authors, as will be discussed below—this concept is not a new one to scholars studying death and dying issues. In particular, the Healing Story Alliance of the National Storytellers Network has taught us much about the value of storytelling during coping and healing. Much of the work and writing

on this topic, however, does not provide a detailed discussion of the conceptual foundations of the process of story telling. In light of the argument of the relevance of stories and narratives in the death and dying processes, it is likely that a more specific discussion of the concept would be useful for scholars in this area. Most of the conceptual work on narratives and stories has not been conducted by thanatology scholars, but has great relevance for work in this area. It is the goal of the present article to present this conceptual discussion, rather than to focus upon actual stories. Some stories, of course, will be told in the process of presenting this conceptualization. Most of these stories are taken from interviews with bereaved parents conducted by Bosticco (2002). Every parent interviewed by Bosticco shared the story of the death of his or her child during their interaction, most without prompting. We begin with a discussion of the components of a story. This is followed by discussions of why people tell stories and how story telling works. The article concludes with some examples of research focusing on story telling in coping with death and dying. It is hoped that this overview will be helpful for future researchers examining the roles of story telling and narratives in grief and bereavement.

WHAT IS A STORY?

For a passage to be considered a story, the minimum requirements are “characters and a plot that evolves over time” (Brockmeier & Harre, 1997, p. 265). It must have a “sequential, action-oriented, and diachronic structure” (p. 270). Claiming that many different types of passages fulfill these requirements, Brockmeier and Harre condense them under the title of narrative. Narrative captures the culturally “coherent and plausible” in a concentrated collection of principles, according to Brockmeier and Harre (p. 275).

Stein and Policastro’s (1984) work reviews various attempts to definitively describe a story so that a story can be effectively separated from a non-story. The authors group definitions from various social science sources into “state – event – state change definitions” (p. 117), “goal based definitions” (pp. 117-122), and “more complex definitions” (pp. 122-124), none of which they feel emerge as the supreme description of a story. Stein and Policastro propose that story recognition among hearers may include an “ideal” or “prototype” representation as well as other passages that overlap in significant ways with the ideal (p. 124). Their hypothesis suggests that, as people grow through life and gain experience, the subjective definition of what constitutes a story might change for them.

Stein and Policastro’s (1984) study compared the story recognition ability of second graders with that of elementary school teachers. Both groups expected to find “an animate protagonist and some type of causal relationship among events” (p. 147) as well as goal-directed actions (unless the passage clearly explains the protagonist’s inability to take such actions, such as lack of time or know-how); both groups consider the same stories to be good ones and poor ones. Their work

appears to confirm goal-directed definitions of story as the most valid and is quoted by several other authors in their attempts to define a story (McAdams, 1990; Robinson & Hawpe, 1986; Weick, 1995).

The accounts reported herein from Bosticco (2002) qualify as stories because they identify a character (the bereaved person) who takes action or submits to a process that addresses a difficulty (the grief process) over time. The accounts make causal connections between events and actions of the characters, using cohesive and plausible narrative conventions.

WHY DO PEOPLE TELL STORIES?

Lule (1990) asserts that people use narratives to “make sense of the world” (p. 273). According to Weick (1995), stories “impose a formal coherence on flowing soup” (p. 128). People put events in order and comprehend reality when they tell stories, thus creating links between the world, themselves and others (Tannen, 1988). Through stories, people can bring order to disparate events, combining them into logical temporal sequences (McAdams, 1990). Stories clarify or explain events by creating a network of cause and effect relationships that bring together accepted facts as well as speculative information that is germane to analysis of the situation (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986). According to Schank (1990), “it’s as if nothing has happened” unless a story is told about it (p. 114). As time goes by, stories serve to bind experiences together, maintaining them in relationship to each other as parts of distinctive memory segments. This notion of memory is relevant to our discussion of stories and bereavement.

The topic of the accuracy of memories was mentioned by three of the parents in the Bosticco (2002) study. The first selection that follows comes from the mother of an almost 15-year-old daughter. She talks about a birthday celebration she had on the anniversary of her daughter’s birthday and of how her daughter’s friends told stories of things she didn’t know that her daughter had done. The second segment is spoken by the mother of a 20-year-old son. The final quotation comes from the father of a 12-year-old daughter.

Initially, I just remembered the hard part—the last few days of her life. I think what happens is there is a tendency to remember the death and then remember the good stuff and to not remember the bad stuff. So there’s a tendency not to remember the stuff that used to make you mad, but now I can—I can remember the good stuff, the bad stuff, the stuff that used to make me mad—now I have the whole picture. And it’s OK, too, because at this party, I found out some stuff I didn’t know about my daughter. I’m like, “OK.” The kids are like, “I’m not sure I should tell you” and I’m like, “Listen now, the child is dead and there’s nothing I can do, you know, so you can tell me.” I found out about the experimenting with drinking, the experimenting with cigarettes, the experimenting with sex. I said, “Oh, at age 14?

OK, thanks for telling me I was blind. . . .” And I was happy to actually know about that stuff because now it’s funny.

Learning to be able to deal with how to talk about it and how to remember [my son] as he was—not to make him a saint. I think that’s a risk we all face.

Parents always wonder what their child would have been like when she grew. The interesting thing is we always see the positives—she would have gotten married. But the problem is we never see the difficulties—unable to cope with her illness, bad marriage. We always see them as this wonderful child who would have grown up to be this wonderful adult. I mean, we hope that.

The following quote from a parent talks about telling stories about a son to keep his memory alive:

We celebrate the holiday and celebrate [him] because he was kind of freaky about Christmas, so we celebrate [my son] in that moment when we have breakfast, . . . and tell stories [about him]. Everybody’s got stories [about him], but we all, you know, we all shed a tear who can be there.

Another parent also focuses on memories:

Maybe if you read a story about someone who is in a similar situation. I remember that I was still involved in the [congenital disease] chapter, but I knew so many people. You would hear about little friends dying in the hospital and you’d go to see them and that would be very hard. I didn’t do much of that. Or reading something in the paper about someone’s child. You know those columns they have all the time. Give me a break! . . . I think the most difficult thing is the reminders, like I said—[my grandson].

McAdams (1990) believes that stories constitute an instinctive means for conveying human purpose and sensemaking. Since “[s]tories . . . do not just happen, they are told” (Brockmeier & Harre, 1997, p. 266), they represent deliberate attempts to create meaning-carrying structures. Stories sort out what causes people to act, according to McAdams, while at the same time, causes for action give order to stories. A story functions as a “model” or “analogue” that connects “the unknown to the known” (Brockmeier & Harre, 1997, p. 279). In other words, stories contextualize events in terms of narrative structures with which people are already familiar.

Sensemaking

Such sensemaking can be seen in the stories told by the parents interviewed by Bosticco. Two parents talked about the consolation they find in their belief that their children are enjoying a happy afterlife. The first selection quoted below is from a mother who often uses euphemisms rather than direct words. Both her husband and her son are dead and her reference takes for granted that they are

both enjoying a common afterlife. The second selection is from a father who actually mentions an afterlife.

And, of course, I've taken consolation in the fact that he is with this father and that they are together. They were very close. Daddy picked his foot up, [his son's] foot was right there! Very close, yes.

You know, if you believe that there is an afterlife, then you have to be happy that she is happy, so I use that. It's really strange, I guess—it's just human nature, but it's not about us, it's about them. Unfortunately, we're built to hold on to and love our children so we suffer for that. But it's not about us, it's about them. She's truthfully in a better place, but I wouldn't want anyone to say that to me. It's something people say in a reception line or something. I mean, that is the truth. I believe that. I mean, I hope that's true. That's where I want to go. . . . But it is a comfort. You kind of hold onto that. It's what gets you through that wave that comes upon you every now and then. I gotta remember—I gotta remember this. It's not about me!

Another story is told by a father who had discovered that his son was dead via an announcement by an officer in uniform. He had reconstructed the tale of the evening of his son's death, story by story over several months. His son had gone to a party on a Friday evening with some of his friends. He returned home for his own car because he had discovered that two girls at the party had no way home. After he had delivered them safely, he was returning to his own house when he pulled out into the path of another car that was speeding, was hit and killed.

Catharsis

Stories also perform a cathartic function for individuals. "Each time I tell my story it occupies less space and grief in my soul" (Downs, 1993, p. 303). Sedney, Baker and Gross (1994) propose that stories capture emotional events, help individuals and families gain control over the events, relieve emotional tension, make meaning out of experiences, and connect different people's experiences of the events. Because stories "open us up to the hypothetical, they help people clarify and explain events, taking into account many potential viewpoints" (Brockmeier & Harre, 1997, p. 281). Weick (1995) agrees that stories can "rehearse" implausible situations and "provide tools for diagnosis" of problems (p. 130).

One mother interviewed by Bosticco (2002) indicated that she does a lot of talking and that talking helped get her through the effects of the loss of her son. She advised others to "talk about it to everybody that'll listen."

Other stories told by the parents interviewed by Bosticco focused on similar themes. One of the most important ideas that participants suggested when giving advice to others in their position was that they acknowledge grief and allow for it.

One woman told a story about a friend of hers who had lost his son about five years after she and her husband lost theirs. She observed that although he seemed to be doing well, he never talked about his son or the death. He later developed stomach problems for which his doctor couldn't find a cause. After he had changed to a more homeopathic doctor, he discovered that his symptoms were related to depression and his denial of his need to grieve. She reported that he had improved physically and mentally since he had dealt with the guilt. The lesson of her story was that people need to pay attention to their grief work and not bury their feelings. Good stories necessitate a storyteller of competence, discrimination, and familiarity with narrative structures (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986), although research shows that stories need not be "good" in order to function effectively (Graybeal, Sexton, & Pennebaker, 2002).

Robinson and Hawpe assert that people expect stories explaining ordinary activity to be plausible, but know that other equally believable versions may exist. This acceptance of story variability is in contrast to scientific thought that looks for a single explanation for any given phenomenon. The mother's narrative that follows exemplifies recognition of story variability while it demonstrates that changes in bereaved people's stories over time can indicate the quality of their coping.

The first year I felt like—I guess I got kind of paranoid so I guess I thought every little pain, every little bump, every little bruise was gonna kill me and I was going to die. And then, I figured out that it was not going to happen. So I figured out there is plenty to live for. . . . It was kind of suicidal, but not that I would actually go out and do something. I remember having the feeling that if something happened, I wouldn't fight it. And so, if I fell into some water and started to drown, I would just probably drown. I remember going on a boat ride—and I've been on boat rides before—but I went on this boat ride on the Ohio River and that a statement was made by someone else that if the boat went down, "There wouldn't be any problem because I could swim to either side of the shore." And I remember thinking when she said that, if the boat went down I'd be going down because I can't swim to either shore and not only can I not swim to either shore, I didn't want to swim—and that scared me. On the one hand, I wouldn't fight it, but on the other hand, I don't want to die. OK, I need to stay away from the water! I knew that I didn't want to kill myself. I also knew that if something happened, I wouldn't fight it. . . . I know the son of a friend got shot and drove himself to the hospital. Three years ago, if I had gotten shot, I would have laid there and bled to death. Now, I would drive myself to the hospital. So, I was kind of . . . so now I definitely feel there is plenty to fight for. I would swim to either shore even though I can't swim very well. I would fight . . . if I got shot, I would get up and. . . .

According to Schank (1990), a common measure of a person's intelligence is their timely recitation of an interesting and pertinent story. Recognizing patterns in events, discerning similarities and differences between the stories of others and

the stories one already knows, and telling an appropriate story of one's own at the proper time are important cognitive abilities. The essence of intelligent activity is the ability to discern the meaning of a current event in terms of a related precedent, thus creating an understanding of what is going on.

HOW DOES STORY TELLING WORK?

Culture is a basic component of story telling. Brockmeier and Harre (1997) point out that children are not specifically taught how to tell a story. They are simply "surrounded from infancy with stories" (p. 276). They acquire "the story-telling repertoire of our language and our culture" (p. 272) and develop "a cultural canon of narrative models" (p. 277), becoming as facile in their use as they are in manipulating the language.

There are three basic types of cultural stories, according to Schank (1990). They are: neutral, condensed, or elaborated. Generalized insights into life come in a neutral story. Condensed stories represent wisdom that is seen reflected in a number of stories—a pattern of predictability. Elaborated stories are similar to neutral and condensed stories, but contain particular details and actors. Proverbs are examples of condensed neutral stories, while myths and hero tales exemplify elaborated stories.

Schank (1990) includes detail addition, commentary, and role-playing among the devices storytellers use to elaborate stories, tying the use of each technique to the intention the author has in elaborating the story. Tannen (1988) discusses the use of constructed dialogue to create a sense of common experience—an emotional bond—between the characters in the story and the hearers. The techniques named by both Schank and Tannen create a sense of the particular in elaborated stories. "Particularity has a paradoxical power" to convey universality that is missing in "direct attempts" to do the same (Tannen, 1988, p. 92; also, Becker, 1988). Robinson and Hawpe (1986) assert that it is the very balance between "uniqueness and universality" (p. 113) contained in culturally-based, elaborated stories that produces a comfortable "sense of familiarity" for the listener (p. 114).

Robinson and Hawpe (1986) name point of view as another technique used by storytellers to create a sense of the particular. Schank (1990) observes that picking a point of view is often "a political choice" (p. 170). He notes that the act of presenting this point of view to others in stories eventually shapes the storyteller, who begins to believe that the stories he/she tells actually represent his/her own point of view.

The role of the listener in shaping stories is significant (Brockmeier & Harre, 1997; Harvey, Orbuch, Weber, Merbach, & Alt, 1992; Schank, 1990; Stein, 1982). Storytellers fold their personal self image as well as the image they want to reflect to others into their stories (Schank, 1990). Schank observes that a need to keep the attention and interest of the listener determines what details will

be included in a story and how vividly they are expressed. The “confiding experience” is important to people because it brings the concern and input of others into the attempt to understand events (Harvey et al., 1992, p. 105). The “perceived reaction of the confidant” causes the account maker (storyteller) to fashion an account that can be understood by and will result in a positive response from the listener (p. 105).

One mother interviewed by Bosticco (2002) related that she was burdened by guilt related to the birth injury to her son that caused his death. Even though she was a nurse, she still wondered if she had done something that caused the problem. In the following section, she tells about a doctor who sat her down, listened to her story, and explained that the event was not caused by her actions.

Well, and I've never really been a labor and delivery or OB-type nurse, so it was totally different. Yeah, and I really think the whole thing of understanding it was somebody listening—that I really felt was listening—was more than anything because then I thought, well, he really heard me. You know, as a physician, and hearing that, you know, that there was no way to know—just, it happened, you know. So, I think that that was a big part of it—just being listened to.

The same grieving parent talks about people listening to her story:

If I can be there for people who have gone through the same thing and they've gone down the road of alcoholism and all of that, that I can share, you know, my experience and I can share my strength and my hope with them, too. So that, even though it's very painful, it's been a good thing. You know, because a lot of women—I mean, you just don't run into people every day that say, “well, I've lost a child and I turned to drugs and duh-da-duh-da-duh.” You know, so when you are in a meeting, or giving a lead, or doing whatever I do as part of my recovery, still, people reach out for that because other women out there have suffered that but they don't hear that story. They don't—they think they are the only one that's had that loss or suffered that and suddenly they hear. “Oh yeah, and how did you get through? What did you do? And how are you sober today?”—that type of thing, so. That's a positive that I look at to see some good that came out of that.

Schank (1990) claims that all stories are subject to the “story-fitting” process (p. 169). If something happens to a person that doesn't fit into a story design with which he/she is familiar, it will be difficult for that person to tell about the event. Without familiar “explanation patterns” (p. 169), the teller will have trouble constructing a cohesive story. Thus, according to Schank, “tellers of stories and listeners have an implicit agreement” that tellers will make their stories fit into patterns with which listeners are familiar (p. 169). Because of this phenomenon, stories do not always accurately reflect what actually happened. According to Schank, “To some extent, our stories . . . are all fictions” (p. 44).

People sometimes say things that seem to contradict their own assessment of circumstances in the course of telling their stories. One woman interviewed by

Bosticco (2002) professed to never have felt angry, yet in another place in the interview she related an incident that happened very soon after her son's death in which she describes feeling angry. That segment appears below.

My parents were in from [another state] and they thought we needed to go out and we went to [the store] and I can remember being very angry that people were happy. People are smiling. They shouldn't be smiling because I'm hurting. Everybody should be hurting. I can remember that very clearly, that, you know, why are these people laughing?

The same woman talked at great length about her anger and frustration with the military and the government over mistakes and misjudgments that led to accidental death for military personnel. Her son had been killed in an accident while serving in the military. The anger and frustration she described are definitely connected to the death of her son; however, she interpreted these emotions related to military accidents as an attempt to make a statement, rather than as emotions flowing specifically from her loss of her son. Thus, she can make the following statement and believe it is true.

I never got angry. Some people get angry. I've never—and I'm not saying never because I understand grief to be a lifelong process. There may be one day when I wake up just as mad as ever, but for right now, there wasn't any of that kind of anger issues or any of that.

Memory Structure

Story creation for others' hearing, in Schank's (1990) estimation, is important because of the gist (the teller's memory structure) that is constructed in the process. He describes a "two-part process" of story "distillation" in which the "gist" is created and then translated into language (p. 177). The gist creation process condenses an event into a "story-size chunk that can be told in a reasonable amount of time" (p. 115) and that will be remembered as a single unit. During story telling, the gist is called up from memory and converted back into a story. Just as the details of events are condensed in the process of story construction, so are the details of stories condensed in the process of committing them to memory. As an eventual result of this distillation process, a story becomes a structure that Schank calls a "skeleton story" (p. 93). In fact, Schank (1990) claims, story telling without access to standard skeletons is very hard. Sedney et al. (1994) assert that stories are constructed to fit the needs of the contexts in which they are told, observing that a story may vary depending on where it is told, who tells it, and why. People are purposeful storytellers, according to Schank (1990), deliberately choosing well-recognized cultural skeletons when constructing stories because they can predict the results of such stories. If some details of current events do not fit the chosen skeleton, those details may be adapted-ignored or changed-so that the story being told has the desired effect.

Schank (1990) claims that memory is an important element in understanding the importance of stories to humans. He proposes that human memory is “dynamic” in that present experiences are continuously updating information stored in two types of memory—general event memory and story-based memory. Daily events are noted and attention to details of those events allows automatic updating of information stored “cross-contextually” in the mind’s database of generalized information about how to behave in the world (Schank, 1990, p. 122).

Story telling maintains the association of things that happen in any given situation and produces an account that condenses a complicated set of events and perceptions into a single comprehensive unit. The coherent story that is created, Schank (1990) argues, preserves a version of the event that is easier to remember than all the disparate details of the actual event; thus, the story eventually replaces the memory of the real event in the mind of the storyteller. Schank also observes that a story must be told from time to time in order to keep it available in active memory.

If stories can be considered memory structures, there must be some way to refer to them when desired (Schank, 1990). Schank calls these retrieval aids “indices” (p. 11)—“mental labels” (p. 23) that can be “beliefs . . . concepts . . . questions” (p. 70), “location, attitudes, quandaries, decisions, conclusions, or whatever” (p. 11). The more connections a story has in memory, the more the story can serve as a tool for learning and action in different situations (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986; Schank, 1990).

Schank and Abelson (1997) describe a pattern present in most stories in which a plan can be traced to a goal that reflects a life theme. When the results of the plan are added to the equation and a lesson (“the abstraction of the contents of a story uniquely derived from that story”) is identified, a high-level index to the story is created (p. 99). Although this index can be accessed through any of the elements of the plan-goal-theme-result-lesson sequence, it is through the lesson that most stories are remembered. In fact, the lesson becomes a skeleton story and can be referenced as a separate entity from the story that created it.

Learning, according to Schank (1990), results from a comparison of an individual’s own stories that are stored in memory with new ones being told by others or arising from new experiences. In fact, Schank claims, people cannot understand new information unless it relates to their own experience in some way; that is, it connects with their own stories. Rethinking of one’s own stories is the source of new insight. Good teachers, in Schank’s estimation, recognize the value of stories to provide context for theories or “rules of thumb” (p. 15).

Another kind of memory structure—a script—is developed via the general event memory (Schank, 1990). “A script is a set of expectations about what will happen next in a well-understood situation” (p. 7). Scripts are used transparently (people are not aware of their use of them) to guide personal behavior and to aid in interpretation of the actions of others. Scripts give people a “normal”

or baseline for behavior, allowing the elimination of dull details in story telling and the addition of background detail in story hearing (p. 81).

Schank (1990) contends that decision-making, creativity, intelligence, and understanding are all bound up in the mind's use of stories. He observes that people test the efficacy of their decisions by attempting to spin a logical and consistent tale to support the decision. If they find their own story believable, then they conclude that the decision is sound. Creativity at its most basic level, Schank asserts, is beginning with known cases (stories) and applying "tweaking rules . . . to the cases" (p. 193) to find new ideas.

Stories also support mechanisms for beliefs (Schank, 1990). Any strongly-held belief can be explained by at least one story. New beliefs are sometimes supported by stories that are tentative—that contain "empty slots"—in people's minds (p. 79). These tentatively held belief stories are opportunities for individuals to learn through story comparison.

"An understander of the world is an explainer of the world" (Schank, 1990, p. 6). Daily, people must compose stories in their minds that explain what they are experiencing or what others are doing. Harvey et al. (1992) use the word "accounts" to describe these "storylike constructions" people use to explain reality to themselves (p. 103). These authors claim that accounts develop little by little in a person's life and sometimes exist only "in gist forms" (p. 103). Account making, to Harvey et al., is a significant psychological effort on the part of individuals to build coherent life explanations for themselves. They point out that people "reach a sense of completion" only when they see their "story as fitting within the boundaries of some cultural script" (p. 104).

Stories create models of the real world, according to Brockmeier and Harre (1997), which allow people to safely explore the ramifications of plans and behaviors. Schank (1990) observes that people want to be rational and deliberate. Thus, they create stories to test the rationality of proposed plans of action. Should their proposed behaviors fail the test, they may choose culturally accepted story skeletons to make their plans of action sound reasonable.

Stories in Grief and Bereavement

We now review some work on the use of stories to facilitate and predict successful grief processing. The writing of several authors recognizes and discusses the critical roles that sharing emotions and telling stories play in the addressing of grief (Byng-Hall, 1991; Conley, 1984; Kish & Holder, 1996; Sedney et al., 1994; Van Riper, 1997; Wilk, 1985; Worden, 2002). As noted earlier, the Healing Alliance of the National Storytellers Network has also played a crucial role in the advocacy of storytelling for coping and healing.

Communication is one of the key areas of family relationship breakdown after a death (Lendrum & Syme, 1992; Rosen, 1986). Sedney et al. (1994) assert that stories can be used to reconnect the family. The story of a death for the bereaved

family, according to these authors, includes how the person died, death circumstance details, what events led to and followed death, and each family member's personal experience—when and how each learned of the death. It contains multiple stories and is constructed by each family member according to his or her specific viewpoint. Similarly, Nadeau (1998, 2001) traces the role of storytelling in family meaning-making during bereavement.

Van Riper's (1997) first-hand story of bereavement is a good example of what can be accomplished by the telling of a family story. Five sisters who had lost their 17-month-old sister when the other girls ranged in age from 5 to 11 years share the story. The two youngest children had been traveling in their car with their parents when it was hit by a dump truck. The other girls had been in school at the time. Over the years since the accident, the sisters had not talked about the loss as a group until one of the sisters wanted to write a paper for a graduate class and asked the others to write down their memories of the accident. For the paper, each told of her recollections of the accident, of the events that followed and of the impact of the accident and the loss of their sister on each of their lives. In the process of the writing, the sisters interacted at a more intense level than they ever had before about the events surrounding the accident. The author gives testimony to the value of the group interaction related to the telling of the stories in the following statement:

Participating in this long and painful process helped each of us to grow and develop as individuals. It also helped us to grow and develop as a family. Moreover, it has given us a sense of relief and a sense of hope (p. 587).

Another use of narratives in supporting bereaved individuals is predicting psychological adjustment based on study of the contents of stories. Folkman (1997) uses narrative analysis of stories from the final illness and death of AIDS victims to predict the coping success of their bereaved partners during the grieving period. She employs a theoretical framework and method of narrative analysis developed by Stein, Trabasso and partners (Stein & Trabasso, 1992; Stein, Trabasso, Folkman, & Richards, 1997; Trabasso & Stein, 1994) that focuses on goals and emotions. Folkman finds that the proportion of positive to negative emotions coupled with that of successful to failed goal outcomes mentioned in the dying and death stories effectively predicts positive psychological states for the bereaved individuals a year after their partners' deaths. Thus, people seem to embed in their loved ones' death stories predictions of their own psychological journeys during the grieving period.

The concept of scripts was discussed in the previous section. Byng-Hall (1991) asserts that scripts can have two kinds of results—"replicative" and "corrective" (p. 131). If a therapist or counselor perceives that an individual's or family's script might lead them to repeat unhealthy behavior in their grief process, he/she can help that person or family review their bereavement stories and compare

them to current—healthier—practices. This “redramatization” of family stories can give both the family members and the helper access to the bereavement scripts they carry (p. 133). Byng-Hall cites a case in which the author helps to create a family story for the children that is simple and yet true to the experiences of the family. As the children mature, they can return to the “simple story” and add details as they want or need them (p. 142). This simple intervention, according to Byng-Hall should “write a healthy grieving script” for the children involved (p. 142).

Myths are created stories. Schank (1990) talks about personal myths that people inherit or develop from hearing and retelling stories that others have told them about themselves. These myths are very powerful because the story telling and hearing process causes the individual to trust their veracity. Information learned without critical examination, according to Langer (1989), is difficult to correct because it is acquired in such a “mindless” manner that the individual doesn’t question it (p. 26). Nelson and Frantz (1996) observe that families of suicide victims often create myths to deny the truth and to cover up their “shame and guilt” (p. 132). Such myths then contribute to unhealthy grief processing for those families.

Deliberate construction of details for use in stories can be a positive experience in bereavement. In certain cases, such as perinatal loss, it is difficult for bereaved individuals to grieve because there is little history to remember (Gough, 1999; Mahan & Calica, 1997; Miles, 1985; Shapiro, 1993; Worden, 2002). “Commemorating their child’s existence” is a way to facilitate a family’s grieving process, according to Mahan and Calica (1997, p. 147). “Help[ing] to make the baby as real as possible” (p. 146) creates memories that validate a family’s loss (Worden, 2002). Deciding “whether and what to name the baby” (Shapiro, 1993, p. 126), “seeing, touching and holding the baby” (Mahan & Calica, 1997, p. 146), sharing decisions about disposition of the body, and participating in rituals such as a funeral or memorial service (Worden, 2002) generate experiences from which people can construct family stories. Gough (1999) discusses the value and technique of taking remembrance photographs of the baby who has died. Other authors also recommend a photo of the child to document its image for the family (Mahan & Calica, 1997; Shapiro, 1993; Worden, 2002). Writing, drawing, and role playing are effective ways for people to get in touch with their emotions during this especially difficult kind of bereavement (Worden, 2002). The work of Pennebaker and colleagues (2001) provides powerful evidence of the positive emotional and physical health outcomes of sharing of emotions during bereavement. Tangible items such as the birth certificate, a foot print, lock of hair, nursery bracelet (Worden, 2002), scrapbooks, diaries, and collections of memorabilia of the child (Shapiro, 1993) are also useful sources of memories that help create a family history.

Harvey et al. (1992) assert that one strong reason “to develop accounts of and confide about our traumas is to help others who come after us” (p. 106).

Kerewsky's (1997) ethnography verifies that assertion, but also demonstrates the value of account making for the individual. Her work tells the story of her friend Frederic (who died of AIDS) relating to his involvement in working on a section of the AIDS Memorial Quilt for his former partner, Mark. Kerewsky points out that Frederic processes some of his losses through helping to tell Mark's story in fabric. He also benefits from the community interaction he experiences in working with others on the project.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this review has been on the role of story telling or narratives in grieving and bereavement. It is hoped that the conceptual framework provided by the review and the examples of applications of the concept to grief work will prove useful for future researchers in their attempts to study this process and to guide others through their bereavement experiences.

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