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Good Grief: a path through the Arts

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Good Grief...A Path through the Arts:
The incorporation of the lost relationship in the arts
processes for the resolution of grief

*The experience of grief is a part of the process of surviving a wrenching loss:
but it does not indicate what we have lost, or by what radical change in the
sense of self will follow as a consequence*

(Williams and Koolmatrie 2000).

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Introduction

'Freud.. suggests that the completion of the mourning process requires those left behind develop a new reality which no longer includes what has been lost. But it must be added that full recovery from mourning may restore what has been lost, maintaining it through incorporation into the present. Full recollection and retention may be as vital to recovery and wellbeing as forfeiting memories'

(Myerhoff 1982)

This paper looks at my own process of grief after the loss of a close friend. It tracks the parallel relationship between my artworks and writing and my internal emotional process. What was revealed is examined in the following paper with further discussion on its application within the context of analytical art psychotherapy.

Schaverien (1992) states... *'In analytical psychotherapy, as in psychoanalysis, the main pivot of treatment is transference. It is through the transference that affect, initially experienced in the past, is brought to 'live' into the present. The intense form of relating which often accompanies transference mobilizes affect, and it is this which offer the opportunity for transformation of the patterns of the inner world.'*

In utilizing Schaveriens framework for analysis, the formative effect the art and its process has on the conscious mind is revealed. This transformation of the inner and outer world is observed in the following paper as it is revealed through the relevant artworks and creative processes.

The process of art making and the images themselves are addressed with equal importance within the paper. *'Both are highly complex processes in analytical art psychotherapy' (Schaverien 1992).*

These processes are in sequence from just prior to my friend's death to the present (1 year later) and are interpreted through a series of key pieces of work produced during this time.

These works include...

* 'Blue Squares' Acrylic on canvas 45x30cm by Chelsea (Fig 1.1) Whereby discussion centers around my relationship to the work in the context of our friendship and how this later was a catalyst for my painting 'Good Grief'.

* 'Lilly Love Me' Is a piece of writing in the form of scripted dialogue that embodies delayed grief... The loss of my friend triggered unconscious 'baggage' from the past to resurface... unresolved grief that I had unconsciously carried concerning my mothers' relationship with her father.

* 'Good Grief' Oil/Acrylic on canvas 3mx4m (Fig 1.2) This was a large painting that started out as a diagrammatic image of a man riding a white horse - or a man in 'good spirit'. This related directly to my mothers' loss and the resolution found in the writing. This painting was then covered with tissue paper and repainted with large blue squares (reminiscent of Chelsea's earlier work) the squares where cut with a deep fault line that embodied the grief and loss experienced at the time.

While this does not fully encompass the entirety or complexity of the process in relation to others involved and to my own experience of the world, identification of the key turning points provides a framework for understanding the transformative aspects of the works.

Cassier states *'Man understands his activity only by removing it from himself and projecting outward... Here the world of mythological images, like that of language or art serves as one of the basic instruments by which the I 'comes to grips with the world.'* (Cassier 1955)

Observation of the transference, countertransference and embodiment within the artworks saw these forms serve as a vehicle for mediation in the following 'lost relationships'.

1. In the father /daughter relationship mediated through the written piece and...
2. Between myself and Chelsea through the painting process and resulting images.

In doing so I reflect on Whites notion of '*saying hello again*' in reference to delayed grief and pathological mourning.

I propose that in engaging in the arts process I was able to 're-kindle the lost relationship'. Through psychoanalytical observation of the writing and artworks I was able to bring the unconscious to consciousness and re-assimilated it in order to make sense of loss and further understand myself.

This process goes beyond initial analysis of transference and embodiment to explore the idea of countertransference. Drawing on the work of Schaverien 1992 and Kuhns 1983 in reference to the artist/therapist relationship I analyze the counter transference in the context of the 'lost relationship'.

Overall this examination sees the application of analytical art psychotherapy (Schaverien 1992) as a useful tool in the treatment of people experiencing grief - not simply as a means of 'letting go' but as a very practical way of revisiting the 'lost relationship' and reincorporating the experience into the consciousness.

The experience of grief is a part of the process of surviving a wrenching loss: but it does not indicate what we have lost, or by what radical change in the sense of self will follow as a consequence

(Williams and Koolmatrie 2000).

Chelsea was my friend, fellow poet, artist and musician. We worked together creatively and artistically on a number of projects, wrote and shared our writing frequently and made art together. In March 2003 Chelsea took her own life.

According to Hillman we are in transference '*wherever a connection means something to the soul*' (Hillman 1972)

It could safely be suggested that during our time as friends and work partners we developed and maintained a strong relationship whereby the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and counter transference played a significant role in the way we related to each other. This was reflected in our poetry art and other collaborations.

Transference is traditionally regarded as the transferring of emotion, which was usually first experience in infancy or childhood, onto any new situation in which a close relationship with another human being is involved.

(Schaverien 1992)

In Schaveriens discussion on the therapeutic relationship to effectively observe transference the relationship is '*based on trust, non-sexual liking and mutual respect. This is the essential basis to work if new insights are to be risked*'. (Schaverien 1992)

My relationship with Chelsea was one of mutual support and has parallels to the therapeutic relationship. While similarities in ideology and character often served as a catalyst for growth and change it could also have an adverse effect.

On reflection it is apparent that similarities in some areas we struggled with similar issues and our inability to address these 'held us back' or 'kept us where we where'. It wasn't until after Chelsea died that I was able to acknowledge and take the positive action to deal with these issues consciously.

Chelsea had been depressed for a number of months. During this time her artwork became more repetitious and many of her works depicted boxes, grids and squares of different sizes and colors. 'Blue Squares' 45x30cm (Fig 1.1) was one such image.

When I queried her on the meaning she responded apathetically. At the time I was frustrated with her response and wanted to say more. I asked her if I could have the piece to which she replied that she 'wasn't ready to part with it'.

In hindsight I see I was frustrated with her inability to discuss her inner world with me. That some part of me felt defeated and through my own interpretation of her work I was projecting my own inner fears and conflict onto her work. My inability to uncover my fear kept me immobilized emotionally.

Schaverien describes a similar situation in reference to therapy... *The power of the imagery, which sometimes manifests in pictures, is such that, without the development of a conscious attitude, the patient-therapist pair may remain physically fixed in mutual unconsciousness, which holds them in thrall. (Schaverien 1992)*

The fact Chelsea was repeating the same patterns in her artwork, blue squares, boxes and gridlines in similar colors indicates that it may be a medium for transference. The fact that she was struggling with depression would make it fair to say that somehow the boxes, the blue, the repetition were an expression of her experience of the world at the time.

According to Greenson (1967) the two outstanding characteristics of transference are that it is both repetitious and inappropriate. He states that all transference is characterized by ambivalence. Identifying the transference in her work and understanding my own reaction to this later helped me understand the subsequent countertransference in my own work 'Good Grief'.

When Chelsea died in March 2003, I was devastated. My internal world was in turmoil and I did not write or paint anything at all during the initial part of the grieving period.

There was a funeral, wake and a time for grief. During this time we went to Chelsea's house and tidied up her things. I took her painting, 'Blue Squares' and put it face down in the back of my car and left it there for a number of months.

As time passed my art practice slowly re-emerged serving as a tool to move through the various stages of the grieving process.

The first of these involved a series of images... 12 circles painted in bright green... a symbol for life... I painted these in one afternoon and posted them to friends as a ritualistic gesture symbolizing my need for connectedness to others and faith in the world.

The conscious action of this process supported me in my grief. Significantly the same symbol... the green of the 'life light' re-emerges as a feature in the painting "Good Grief" forming an integral part of the symbolism within the image.

The second practice was the writing of the scripted dialogue. At the time Chelsea died I was already pre-committed to writing a play for a festival in Brisbane. This meant that when the time came to write the script I was still well in my own grief. What emerged was quite unintentional and on later reflection can be understood as a process of uncovering delayed grief.

The writing was relatively lucid, unstructured and fluid. Written as poetry/prose, three distinct characters emerged. In hindsight I understood them to be archetypes of my mother, her father and myself. At the time I was aware that the play was dealing specifically with grief however I had no clear conscious understanding as to how it related to my own experience.

The content of the play involved the reconciliation of the father daughter relationship. Later I understood this to be the 'lost relationship' my mother experienced as a child between herself and her father. This repressed grief was 'unconsciously' acted out in my own life and was reflected in my actions, relationship with others and life choices.

The loss of Chelsea re-triggered the 'unresolved grief' evident in my own experience of the father/ daughter relationship. It was through the scripted dialogue and the character interactions that I found understanding and empathy and consequent resolution in my 'stuck' relationships.

According to White... *"Once conscious wishes and impulses are repressed because they are of an unacceptable nature. For Freud these impulses usually relate to sexuality or trauma. It is when these impulses begin to come alive and so are experienced in the present in the transference, that the neurosis becomes activated and so there is a possibility for change."* (White 1959)

Finding the resolution in the script served as a catalyst for change in my own life. After writing the play I found myself engaging in a new relationship with a man, which I had not done for at least six years. I rang my father who I had not spoken to for a very long period and made an amends; and I moved out of the single apartment I had been in for six years into a 'share house'.

White goes on to say...*When the repressed contents of the psyche come into the present in their original form, the transference mobilizes unconscious effect and it is through this re-experiencing that the unconscious becomes conscious (White 1959).*

In terms of the transformative process in relation to analytical psychotherapy the writing of this play served as an integral part in bringing the unconscious to the conscious. In terms of Whites notion of 'Saying Hello Again' the play served as an excellent medium for consciously addressing previously repressed issues.

Not long after this, I painted on a large canvas, the image of a man riding a white horse with free abandon across open land. The painting was done with no prior planning or forethought and embodied the notion of a man in his own right, 'naturally in good spirit', 'as he is' or 'should be'.

Jung states, *'The collective unconscious is expressed in archetypes. These are universally reoccurring 'archaic or primordial types' which transcend time and cultural boundaries' (Jung 1959).*

With this in mind it would be fair to say that this image was the embodiment of the resolution found in the scripted dialogue...and could be seen as my unconscious mind bringing the image to consciousness

Interestingly, I found this image difficult to look at. I had trouble understanding its significance in the overall process. Not quite able to assimilate it or its meaning to my consciousness it remained covered.

One night I was unable to sleep. I kept trying to make sense out of Chelsea's death, going over events, trying to seek some resolution. At 3am I took her painting from behind the bed and took it to the studio where I uncovered the painting of the warrior man on the white horse.

I covered the whole painting with glue and stuck layer over layer of fine tissue paper. Tissue paper and glue... and again tissue paper and glue. All the time I peeled back layers and then re-stuck them to the surface.

Then with oils and acrylics painted back into the surface. I painted squares - blue - shapes and lines repeating across the canvas... all the while, still tearing back and re-sticking paper. Mixing the colors I incorporated the green - the life light.

All the time saying... 'See... see Chelsea... this is how it is...' and through the center I painted a rich green fault line, connecting the blue to the green, painting the tissue in and linking the squares to the fault line... this was my process.

Not long after making the image I gave it to my mother as a gift. I told her the image was called 'Good Grief' and she loved it.

This part of the process saw the transformation of the consciousness whereby material that was 'split off' becomes reintegrated. The squares, the life light and the masculine energy were all reflected in the piece. This picture, 'Good Grief' effectively embodied the entire process in its symbolic form.

My dialogue with Chelsea through the art making indicates a more conscious synthesis taking place. Here too the material is not denied but assimilated and reintegrated back into my life. This is what White (1989) would refer to as the '*rekindling of the lost relationship*' between Chelsea and myself.

Giving the painting to my mother was a significant factor in 'letting go' and in itself was a transformative action in the context of events. Making the phone call to my father was an action taken as a result of the transformative process.

White goes on to say, '*that through the incorporation of the lost relationship, those problems defined in terms such as 'pathological mourning' and 'delayed grief' are resolved.* (White 1989)

Conclusion

The transformation that occurred for me was unexpected. The unconscious spoke through the art practice and the images initiating change. I did not understand these changes consciously until later reflection through a framework of analytical art psychotherapy.

The changes that occurred as a result of losing my friend have been profound. The arts processes facilitated the changes by providing an anchor for my grief, by giving me a means of ritualizing the process, enabling me to address 'delayed grief' and providing a means for revisiting and reintegrating lost relations.

The application of analytical art psychotherapy, illuminated where the conscious and unconscious process led to the transformative experience. This was evident specifically in the discussion around my work with my peers and the writing of this paper.

While this paper dealt specifically with my individual process and my relation to Chelsea it would be fair to say that this process or any part of it could be used in a therapeutic environment. This would be especially true in relation to creative art therapies as it applies to individuals experiencing loss or dealing with 'delayed grief'.

To quote White (1989), *'Every experience of loss is unique as are the steps necessary for the resolution of every loss.'*

The process I encountered was unique to my situation and is not indicative of any formal process or framework. Every individual's experience will be different and any approach should recognize and facilitate the expression of uniqueness in order to be effective.

Appendix 1: Images

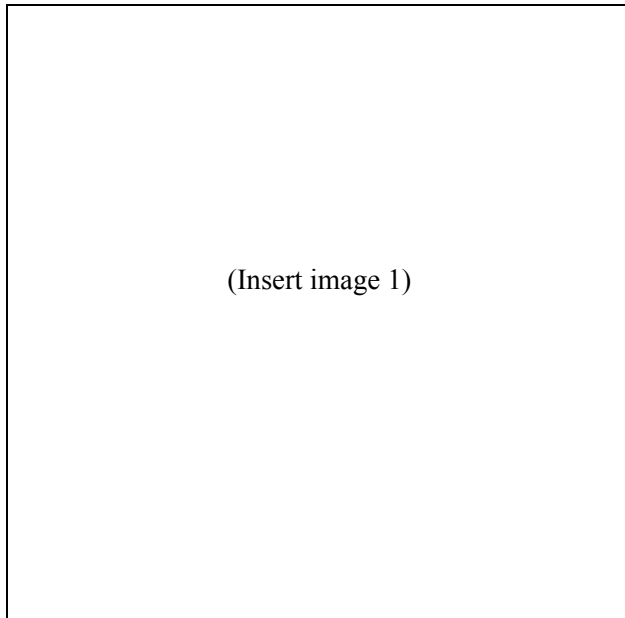


Figure 1.1

'Blue Squares' by Chelsea
Acrylic on canvas 20x30cm

The image depicts a grid or framework made up simply of blue squares the image is relatively simple and each square is a shade of blue to blue grey.

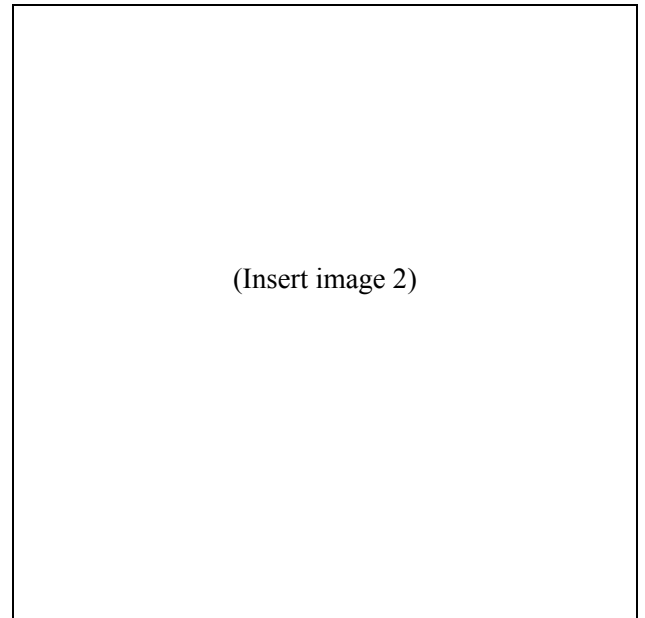


Figure 1.2

'Good Grief' by Kate Smith
Oil/Acrylic on canvas 3mx4m

This was a large painting that started out as a diagrammatic image of a man riding a white horse - or a man in 'good spirit'.

This painting was then covered with tissue paper and repainted with large blue squares cut with a deep green 'fault line'.

*NB. These images are reproductions of the original works and are not to scale.

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