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# Growing New Eyes : a Personal Inscape of Grief viewed through Autobiographical Performance

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## “GROWING NEW EYES”

### A PERSONAL INSCAPE OF GRIEF VIEWED THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PERFORMANCE

by  
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In collaboration with Kate Smith, a fellow Dramatherapy MA Student, we have proposed to present a performance piece that explores two women’s inner landscapes shaped by separate experiences of Grief and the creative processes they engaged with on their Mourning journeys.

The piece will intertwine poetry and music by Kate Smith and physical narrative performance by myself, Emma Bacon. Visual images created by both women will also be incorporated.

It is always tricky to write about performance, especially if you are “in it” and not wanting to comment in a newspaper review-type way. It is even trickier to write about performance before the fact as it is always subject to the vagaries of time, place, space, the mood of the performers, the attitude of the audience etc – the list goes on. As such, I will attempt to carve out a picture of the story behind the performance – the personal history that has precipitated its existence as well as some of the theoretical considerations that have informed my work. This will be only one side of the performance story, my side, as Kate has commented elsewhere on her own story.

Responding to the theme of the therapeutic dimensions of “Inscape” the performance will explore the idea of Grief as a process that unleashes powerful, confusing, and at times terrifying, images from the bereaved persons’ inner landscape. However it is my belief that when the grief process is embraced creatively through image making, writing, poetry, drama and performance - “elegiac mourning”, as Mogenson posits - then the images of the “Inscape” may be brought forth, allowing not only for the expression of emotion but for revelation, transformation and a strengthening of spirit.

*“Everything we mourn is generative of psyche, generative of soul. Whatever fails, dies, or is abandoned as error becomes an ancestor of consciousness.”(Mogenson, 1992, p. xiv)*

In the writing of this paper I have drawn extensively from the writing of Mogenson in *Greeting the Angels: An Imaginal View of the Mourning Process*. Mogenson argues for the need to re-view mourning as a deeply creative process not merely with the principal aim of dissolving ties with the lost love-object, as Freud suggested, but as a means of productively integrating the image of the object within the landscape of the individual and collective psyche. (1992)

*“Mourning, we must never forget, is an intensely creative process” (Mogenson, 1992, p. xii)*

I have also found it helpful whilst writing to bear in mind Beverley Raphael's definition of grief and mourning cited by Judy Griffiths.

*“Bereavement is the reaction to the loss of a close relationship. Sometimes grief is also used to describe this reaction, but in this work grief will be used to refer to the emotional response to loss: the complex amalgam of painful affects including sadness, anger, helplessness, guilt, despair. Mourning will be used here to refer to the psychological mourning processes that occur in bereavement: the processes whereby the bereaved gradually undoes the psychological bonds that bound him to the deceased” (Griffiths, 1995, p.3)*

### SO THIS IS LIFE.....

On Wednesday the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2003 my mother Diane was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma – a particularly stealthy and aggressive form of bone marrow cancer. In the weeks following the news I encountered first hand the pain, fear, anger, hopelessness, despair, disorientation and exhaustion that characterises an experience of grief. I was shaken to the core – nothing had ever impacted on me this profoundly and in such a violent, unexpected way.

*“When there is a significant loss in our lives, our sense of how we are in the world is shattered. It can feel as if our very core of being is shattered. This is a time of profoundly experiencing who and how we are in the world, stripped of the illusions that we had believed to be, and taken for granted as, our reality. Loss thrusts us into tumultuous feelings and experiences, with no sense of reason or control.” (Griffiths, 2001, p.189)*

I was stripped of the illusion of a Life without ‘too much’ physical pain or impairment. In Mum’s illness I sensed my own vulnerability to the wears and tears of existence on a flesh and blood body.

I was stripped of the illusion that ‘bad things don’t happen to good people.’

I was stripped of the illusion that, with all the hygiene, health and technology a modern, western society can offer, death only comes to those in old age.

I was stripped of the illusion that “living” is somehow distinct from “dying”.

I was stripped of the illusion that we as human beings are outside the order of nature and not susceptible to cycles of growth and decay, that death is somehow 'unnatural'.

*"...nature rises up against us, majestic, cruel and inexorable; she brings to our mind once more our weaknesses and helplessness, which we thought to escape through the work of civilization." (Freud in Gay, 1995, p.693)*

5<sup>th</sup> June 2003

This house is a house of tears.  
Full to the brim and  
Overflowing.  
Through the cracks and windows,  
down the street  
and to the park.

This body is a body of fears.  
Trembling and moaning  
in the dark.  
Terrified of processed sugar

cigarette smoke

dairy food

red meat

car emissions

pesticides

hormones

G.M. food.

carcinogens crowding close to bite the hand that feeds.

This heart is a broken heart.  
Watching my beautiful Mum  
suffer.  
Pained to move.  
Struggling to breathe.  
Jaundiced with  
pupils contracted.

her Bones worn brittle.

her Blood turned aggressor.

multiplying cells

unneded and unwanted.

cells deadly

in their immaturity.

like wayward

delinquents they

E P D

their encasings

X O

their encasings

L E

to colonise

her ribs

and

gnaw

at her

hips.

I suffered from stifling alarm at the magnitude of emotions generated by mums illness. The methods and systems I had carefully constructed over the years to contain my emotional experiences were annihilated and I was left floundering. I was unable to conceive of how I might ever again be anything other than this raw, suppurating wound secreting tears and snot that was want to erupt at any time.

What was I to do with this volcano of Grief that over a lifetime I had managed to confine within (fairly well I had imagined) but which was now threatening to erupt? Would my social network of friends, relatives and even acquaintances be able to ‘contain’<sup>1</sup> the veracity of it’s force, the depth of it’s history and the breadth of losses that I yearned to mourn? But more importantly, would I?..... Or would, as was my deepest fear, the “I” that I knew be annihilated?

As it turned out, the answer was no and yes - to both questions.

## TWO ROADS DIVERGED IN A WOOD.....

It appeared that I had two choices. One was to continue with the narrative that had thus far dominated my story of Grief – to suppress the tears, to not talk about it, do something ‘constructive’ and try to still the swirling pool of thoughts in my head - essentially to continue seeing the expression of emotion as a weakness.

*“A danger associated with loss and bereavement, as with all the other tribulations of life, is that the mourner will try to evade the anxiety that attends a loss and thereby affirm a smaller personality. Rather than being initiated by loss and living more fully in the face of death, the mourner may shrink from death, and thereby, from life as well. Instead of setting aside childish attitudes and taking on the wider issues which his loss bequeaths to him, he may try to preserve his previous identity.” (Mogenson, 1992, p.135) <sup>2</sup>*

My second choice, one that did indeed fill me with anxiety and dread, was to somehow take on the role of mid-wife to my grief. So great was my sense of grief it felt that if I were to embrace the mourning process and scour my story visible, I might come to see more clearly the fabric of my entire life - the mechanisms that underpin my way of being in the world. <sup>3</sup>

*“The mourning process is the laboratory in which the images life has imposed upon the film of death are developed. Everything that has died and that we encounter as no longer there is the negative from which our inner life emerges.” (Mogenson, 1992, p.24)*

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<sup>1</sup> (Griffiths, 1995, p7)

<sup>2</sup> Robert Lifton approaches this issue in a different way. He speaks of Psychic Numbing - “...an incapacity to feel or to confront certain kinds of experience, due to the blocking or absence of inner forms or imagery that can connect with such experience.” (1976, p.21)

<sup>3</sup> “The psyche is created, in large measure, by the mourning process itself. The more precisely we imagine our losses. the more nsychological we become.” (Mogenson. 1992. n. xi )

## THE WAY OF HEALING

By a stroke of luck (or was it cosmic design?) prior to Mum falling ill, I had signed up to participate in a PhD Art Therapy project. The images of my grief were of hospital machines, disembodied organs, a figure spurting red liquid, a strange tree-like spirit offering shelter, a page of waves, floating plants with roots dangling, explosions of colour (what I called creative sparks) and lots of red, purple, black. Not coming from a visual arts background I was surprised by the intensity of the images and by my engagement with the image making process – by how many images my grief had held on to as well as formulated. It was a completely new experience for me and one that facilitated a deeper understanding of my interaction with grief and the steps I was taking in my mourning journey.

*“The dark impulses which guide creative work are of a kind with the impulses that compel the work of mourning.” (Mogenson, 1992, p.120)*

My mourning was multifaceted. Although there wasn't a physical loss involved, I keenly felt the loss of a way of life that will never be restored. Multiple Myeloma is an incurable cancer – although the sufferer may reach what is known as the plateau stage of the disease and enter into remission, this is a cancer that inhabits the bone marrow and therefore can not be cut out, such as with breast or liver cancer. There is no known 'cure' at present and the expected life span after diagnosis ranges from 2-5 years, with treatment. It is a disease that Mum will now live with for the rest of her life and in the knowledge that it will, in all probability, be the reason for her death.

I mourned for the loss of my 'Healthy Mum' – the woman who loved to talk, to sing (off-key), who was a committed member of community life. The woman who was “full of life”.

I mourned for the loss of certainty that I had always carried with me – that Mum and Dad would grow old together, finally do that world trip they were always talking about.

I mourned for the changes to roles within the family. Gone was the strong nurturing Mother role that always put the needs and illnesses of her family before her own, that acted as the buffer in family conflict. Suddenly we were without an anchor – stress lines began to appear in our family structure – old hurts re-emerged and buried resentments pushed to the surface.

I mourned for “unfinished business”. For the unspoken words between Mother and Daughter and also woman to woman.

In the initial weeks of uncertainty, I was consumed by the implications Mum's passing away might have upon my own sense of identity. The threshold between young adult to fully matured adult loomed large in my vision. I felt unprepared to be motherless in this world. How could I take up the mantle of adulthood when I felt so insufficiently initiated into the rites of this social identity?

*“While in traditional societies young people are initiated into their adult lives through rites which symbolically put to death their childish identity so that an adult personality can form, in our society the initiatory encounter with death may come to us for the first time only in adulthood through the loss of someone dear.” (Mogenson, 1992, p.133-134)*

I mourned also for my western, secular society which, I felt, could not mourn - did not have a place for grief, had tried to sanitise death out of the family and into institutions.

*“Social organizations of modern societies are increasingly rationalized and bureaucratic. Illness and death, when they occur, are socially located in formal organizations that have the mixed values of efficient lifesaving and isolation of the ill and dying person from his family.” (Fulton, 1976, p.11)*

I felt that the mythologies for explaining death, the codes of behaviour for the bereaved and the ritualised means of expressing grief that I saw in smaller, more traditional cultures were distinctly lacking from my own. (Counts & Counts, 1991)<sup>4</sup> I was angry at this – I felt it created confusion for the bereaved and made it more difficult for the healing process to begin.

It has taken a long time for me to come to terms with this anger and relinquish my desire to be ‘shown’ how to mourn. I have come to realise that my grief, its expression, and the way I choose to mourn, should not be determined by cultural expectations and social standards but by the way my internal landscape interacts with the loss. I am forever indebted to my colleague Dr. Rose Williams for helping me come to an understanding of this point. In her words, “Grief is not just a cultural experience, it is a human one - although it may be expressed in accordance with its cultural context. Above all else, it is intensely private.”

And so, the questions that I had been struggling with have now in some ways been answered :-

**“Is there a ‘right’ way to grieve?”**

*“The experience of loss is different for all of us, not just because of the different circumstances of the loss and all that person was in our lives, but also because each one of us has a different internal landscape within which the individual loss will be experienced....It makes the*

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<sup>4</sup> ‘...non-modern societies must organise themselves around death’s recurrent presence. Modern societies, on the other hand, have largely succeeded in containing mortality and its social disruptiveness.’ (Blauner, 1976, p.36)

*journey of every grief a unique experience, each step of which has to be walked in order to find a pathway through.”(Griffiths, 2001, p.189-190)*

I now see that at the root of my anger was the anxiety that my grief, once released, would find a society unable to act as a ‘container’ or worse, that I would be publicly ridiculed. What I now hope for is that the unique and individual way in which I choose to express my grief will be accepted and supported by the social and cultural contexts in which I live.

**In our society, one that seems to be becoming increasingly devoid of ‘communal sharing’, is it possible to liberate grief from the confines of our bedrooms and inner lives?**

*“Mourning is a less desolate process when it is supported by culture. Though the pain of loss may remain acute, the meaning supplied by our faith and tradition may help it to be borne.”(Mogenson, 1992, p.131)*

#### NEW EYES, NEW SIGHT.

My decision to embody my grief has given me new eyes. I have begun to see how the way I am in the world has been shaped largely by the lost desires, aspirations and love-objects of my life that have been left unmourned. Mogenson talks about character structure as being composed of the corpses of desires that have been ‘killed’ by their encounter with the external world and thus form a “narcissistic shell” around the psyche in order to save it from a similar fate. They form the epidermis through which all other experience is mediated. So, when I show resistance to concepts and ideas, feel emotions seemingly inappropriate to the situation, become angry and confused for no apparent reason am I in fact, as Mogenson puts it, stumbling over the “unmourned corpse of an abandoned love-object”? (1992, p. 5) Am I in fact experiencing an *unconscious mourning* of past experiences that have been left to rot in the grave yard of my psyche without proper burial? I believe so.

*“If consciousness is to gain insight into itself it must mourn the dead objects and petrified instincts of which it’s existence is but a precipitate.”(Mogenson, 1992, p.10)*

My grief is an unfinished story. Mums illness continues and I continue to seek ways of mourning that allow me to midwife my feelings to expression. For me, the mourning process is at it’s most productive when embraced creatively - through image making, writing poetry, enacting my grief, performing my story and inscribing these words on these pages. By Mourning creatively with a therapeutic intent it has been possible for me to grow “new eyes”. I have begun to see that how I am in the world is shaped not only by physical loss but by the lost desires, aspirations and love-objects of life that have been left unmourned. By bringing to the surface the psyches’ ‘corpses of desires’ that have been killed by their encounter with the external world I

have gained greater clarity as to how they have functioned to mediate my experience of life.

*“Everything we mourn is generative of psyche, generative of soul. Whatever fails, dies, or is abandoned as error becomes an ancestor of consciousness.” (Mogenson, 1992, p. xiv)*

*TO CONTAIN AND BE CONTAINED.....*

I have an image that I carry with me.

No longer is Grief a shadowy presence, hovering on the fringes of my Conscious, threatening to fog my life and choke my breath.

Now I imagine my Grief to be a bowl. Sometimes the bowl is full and at other times it contains only a few drops. Sometimes it sits heavy – a concrete dish, solid and dull. Other times it sings – a crystal bowl rubbed along edges, liquid reflecting light as it moves with the sound.

This is the image that I have within me and I carry it as I continue on my Mourning journey.

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