

AN AFTERLIFE OF STORIES

by Lorraine Hedtke MSW, CISW

In my clinical practice, I actively seek to invite forward the memories, stories and rituals of remembrance for those who have died. People who are dying and their loved ones are often greatly relieved to have conversations that affirm that they will not be forgotten after death. Based on narrative therapy (White and Epston 1990) and social constructionist theory (Gergen 1999; Burr 1995), this approach to remembering and fostering connection following death is a strong departure from traditional approaches to death and bereavement.

I support people to continue growing relationships with and fostering “membership” for those who have died. I am using the term “membership” to suggest that people who are significant to us are ascribed member status in the club of our lives. Our interactions with these people constitute and give meaning to our lives in powerful ways. These communities co-produce and authenticate the stories that shape our lived experiences (Myerhoff, 1980; White, 1989, 1995, 1997; Hedtke, 2000, 2001). Our clubs of membership may be comprised of biological family members, co-workers, friends, neighbors as well as a larger community of shared public figures who may influence us, such as politicians, movie stars, celebrities, religious figures and the like.

In traditional bereavement models, death often disavows or revokes membership of the person who has died by encouraging the living to “move on and get over” the loss. The assumption is that death and loss of membership are “realities” that go together. From a narrative perspective, this pairing is not necessary. We make our encounters with death easier to bear through keeping stories alive following death. We can continue to

include those who have died as significant members of our lives rather than immediately consign them to forgotten status. More simply, we can re-member the person who has died. It is my hope that membered status may even grow over time, strengthening the bonds and affirming the importance of the relationship. There are unlimited ways to bring about re-membered status of a dead individual, but in this article I will focus on only one domain that I believe can be pivotal in this work.

In the process of remembering, metaphors and beliefs about afterlife are productive avenues for therapeutic conversations. Cultural and religious meanings about what occurs after death can produce varied personal approaches to dying. In therapeutic conversations I want to know what shapes a person's understandings of these topics and make gentle inquiries regarding them. When possible, I explore these areas with a person prior to death, but also find the information important for loved ones following a death as it gives form for the fostering of ongoing relationship with their deceased.

I might ask the person who is dying, for example, whether s/he holds a belief in a particular afterlife and if so, what form it takes. I want to know a little about the vision that they have and what they imagine their afterlife will be like for them. Where do they imagine they will "be" following death; who else might be there; what is it like in this place; what are they looking forward to about going to this place. Additionally, I am curious about the veil between "life" and "afterlife". For example, will the dying person still be able to communicate with their loved ones after death? Will their loved ones be able to communicate with them and if so how might this be?

It is my hope that these questions will flush out additional resources for a person who is facing death. There may be significant comfort in their thoughts about afterlife. These questions also open opportunity for persons to reexamine and reconstruct beliefs

that are no longer congruent with their lives. It is not uncommon for a person facing death to re-evaluate the purpose of previously held stories about life, death and beyond.

Even narratives that offer people negative options in death can be re-examined. For example, one young gentleman feared that when he died he might go to hell. As we explored how these thoughts acted against his peaceful death, he was able to form more meaningful stories about his God being forgiving of his indiscretions. When he died, he did so with a strong conviction that he was heaven-bound. These conversations were critical for his own well-being as well as for his family. Following his death, they were comforted by their on-going connection to him as they felt they were able to communicate to him, in heaven, through prayer.

Exploring afterlife

Exploring these topics can construct avenues that promote practical decision-making and positive meaning-making during death for a dying person and their family. If our stories transcend our physical death, then knowing how a story continues to progress, and how to access this, can feed a sense of relationship over the many years following death. When we believe, for example, that a dead loved one now lives in heaven, we produce particular kinds of conversation and action. These practices may be different for someone whose dead loved one can be found in the beauty of a garden or in the sound of the wind. Likewise, a strong belief in reincarnation might bring different implications for reconnecting with the deceased. Even those who do not sustain a faith in a religious or spiritual afterlife may look to legacies in storied form to affirm the significance of remembering. Such a family may find meaning and comfort in a resemblance to the deceased in a child's smile or from recounting stories that draw inspiration from the good

life this person lived and from the value of their relationship over the years.

Each after-life metaphor opens different possibilities for incorporating a sense of continuity with those left behind. Once we are committed to supporting the maintenance of connection rather than the saying of final goodbyes, then each metaphor guides us to ask different questions. In the process, ongoing relationship can be solicited forward and loving stories affirmed.

All are welcome

The power and flexibility of narrative can transcend the boundaries between particular religious beliefs. It is equally possible for a person who has a strong belief that they will live on in a Christian heaven and for a person who is an atheist who believes there is no afterlife to be comforted by an “narrative afterlife”. Both can develop practices of remembering and rituals that fit within their meanings as places of loving connection between them and their loved ones.

I often speak about my own mother and my daughter when explaining remembering practices. They have a deep and loving relationship that has sustained my daughter, Addison, over her eight years. Addison knows her grandmother’s favorite stories, sings her songs, speaks her expressions, celebrates her birthday and has a strong sense of her grandmother as being an active part of her daily life. Even though my mother has been dead for more than twenty years now, for Addison their connection is as close as if we just visited grandmother last week. Through the power of narrative, my daughter has had the benefit of knowing her grandmother when in body the two of them have never met. Rather than focusing on how sad it is that Addison’s grandmother is not around, we celebrate their connection by actively remembering grandmother into our daily lives. Such practices avoid a focus on loss and the accompanying production of exaggerated

painful emotion and concentrate on the ongoing incorporation of those who have died into the warp and weft of daily life.

Lest we forget

Keeping people's stories and legacies alive goes against prevalent ideas that we need to mourn the loss and get over our loved one's death to return to wholeness. Yet again and again as I sit with people who are dying, I hear that they do not want to be forgotten. Knowing that our lives have mattered is critical as we face death and for those who tend to our stories following death. It can be very comforting for a person who is ill to hear how their lives have mattered and will continue on in their siblings, children, grandchildren and communities! It is equally comforting for those who have been placed in charge of the stories and the relationships. They too want to know that they do not have to forget and wrench themselves away from the precious memories of their loved one, but in fact can continue to foster their connections.

In my mind, I am uncertain about whether there is an afterlife of an etheric or religious kind. I would like to think so, but not having been there I leave a small kernel of doubt and a preferred belief in the uncertainty of it all. In narrative, I have no doubt that there is an afterlife. It is an afterlife where my stories and life will continue to be celebrated and live on in immortality to those who matter to me.

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