

Losing one's Spouse, Transformation of the Self and the Role of Writing

(Dissertation)

Locked In – Daring to Break Free

(Creative Work)

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary institution.

.....

(Katrin Den Elzen)

Abstract

This thesis comprises two components: a dissertation and a memoir. The dissertation focuses on the role of writing in relation to the experience of traumatic loss. It argues that expressive writing is a powerful tool to resolve grief following such loss. The thesis investigates how narrative and writing assist in the resolution of grief. It contributes to research through a narrative analysis of the memoir '*To have and to hold*' (1997). The analysis examines the text's representations of Walter Mikac's shattered sense of self and worldview, following the loss of his wife and daughters in Australia's worst mass shooting in Port Arthur, Tasmania, in 1996. The dissertation examines how the narrative facilitates the re-building of coherence in Mikac's life through memory, reflection, and finding meaning; and it analyses the text's narrative structure in relation to the healing benefits of writing.

The second component of the thesis is a work of creative non-fiction. The submitted section, *Locked in – Breaking Free*, is the beginning of my memoir, which depicts the illness and death of my husband Mark at the age of 42 in 2004. The submitted section is approximately 15,500 words long. The section will be followed (in the final memoir) by chapters which will discuss Mark's eight-month illness, his death, my identity crisis as a widow and single mother, my transformation, personal growth and the rebuilding of my family life, and the difficulty of re-living Mark's illness and death in a medical negligence court case. I have found meaning in Mark's death by becoming a palliative care spokesperson and in bearing witness by writing the memoir. The section submitted gives a detailed description of Mark's sudden illness, the unfolding of his treatment, and the alternating hope and devastation. The memoir includes flashbacks to the beginnings of our early life together. The title refers to the fact that Mark was locked in his body, unable to move or speak, and to my own 'breaking free' in terms of the rebuilding of my life, family and self.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my late husband Mark Den Elzen in deep gratitude for his love and incredible courage in living through such unimaginable adversity.

**LOSING ONE'S SPOUSE, TRANSFORMATION
OF THE SELF AND THE ROLE OF WRITING
(DISSERTATION)**

Introduction

Losing one's spouse suddenly, perhaps in an act of violence, is a distressing and traumatic life experience. Research suggests that such a loss not only evokes deep grief, but also brings about a loss of the self, a loss of meaning and a shattering of one's world view. This dissertation argues that expressive writing is an effective and powerful healing tool following the experience of trauma and grief. The term 'expressive writing' refers to personal writing written in response to traumatic or emotional experiences (Pennebaker and Chung, 2007:267; Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005:338; Lepore et al, 2002:99).

Contrary to popular belief, profound grief often does not heal over time and may require the bereaved to take steps towards their healing and recovery. According to Camille Wortman and Kathrin Boerner, 'most grief theorists assert that it involves an active, ongoing effort to come to terms with the death', and that without intervention 'it is not possible to resolve the loss' (2007:296). Bereavement studies show that without actively working through the loss, the surviving spouse may live with their unresolved grief indefinitely, especially in the case of sudden and traumatic loss (Davis, 2001:137; Lehman et al, 1987:229; Lundin, 1984:424; Parkes and Weiss, 1983:xv+69). Research on stress and the after-effects of trauma and grief shows that survivors' symptoms may include depression, a heightened risk of suicide, serious mental health problems, increased alcohol consumption, disrupted sleep patterns, weakening of the immune system, a higher rate of cancer and heart disease, and higher mortality rates (Cacciatore and Flint, 2012:62; Pennebaker, 2004a:4; Archer, 2001:266+267; Davis et al,

2000:526; Spiegel, 1999:1328; McEwen, 1998:171-178; Prigerson et al, 1997:616). In accordance with these findings, spousal loss memoirs convey feelings of vulnerability (Oates, 2011:136), lack of control, feeling unsafe and such 'felt' symptoms as 'deep depression', 'inner desolation' and 'emptiness' (Brenner and Ashley, 1995:59,114+149); represented like 'going down to the deepest pit' (Mackellar, 2010:30).

Since the early 1980s a number of authors were arguing that, in traumatic situations, expressive writing improved physical, emotional and mental well-being (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005:338; Lepore and Smyth, 2002:4; Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999:1243; Pennebaker, 1997:162). By 2006, over 150 studies supported these early findings (Murphy and Neilsen, 2008: n.p.). However, research still has not clarified why expressive writing is effective in recovering from trauma and grief. As Denise Sloan and Brian Marx state: 'What is needed now is attention towards understanding the mechanism(s) underlying the [writing] paradigm' (2004a:121+134).

Similarly, Brian Esterling and colleagues state that 'despite the beneficial effects of writing, it is not entirely clear why it is effective in bringing about such striking physical health and behaviour change' (1999:84). James Pennebaker, the most prominent researcher in the field of the health effects of expressive writing, says that how and why such writing works, and what the underlying mechanics are, is a recurring puzzle (2004b:138; 1997:164).

It is important to understand why expressive writing works because of its potential for clinical application (Pennebaker, 2004b:141). Research shows that expressive writing results in symptom reduction in chronic conditions such as asthma and rheumatoid arthritis. As David Spiegel posits, if these studies provided equally

positive evidence in relation to a new drug 'it likely would be in widespread use within a short time' (1999:1329).

This thesis contributes to existing research through its close reading and analysis of the memoir '*To have and to hold*' (1997) by Walter Mikac, co-written by Lindsay Simpson¹, after the traumatic murder of Mikac's wife and two young daughters, aged six and three, in a public shooting at Port Arthur, Tasmania, in 1996. The analysis explores how narrative and writing encourages healing through memory, reflection and meaning making and the re-authoring of a new, coherent life story.

In considering why expressive writing contributes to healing, Sloan and Marx argue that the mechanisms underlying such writing are too complex to be accounted for by a single theory (2004a:130). This thesis concurs with this view and focuses on moments within the narrative that demonstrate shifts in the writer's identity. To understand these select moments within the narrative, I have drawn on theories from constructivist psychology, psychology, bereavement studies, literary studies, postmodernism and narrative theory. Each of these fields brings a particular perspective to the contribution of how writing to heal works.

Scholars from the fields of psychology and creative writing alike suggest that the healing benefits of writing requires that a detailed, vivid account of the event is linked to a description of one's feelings (DeSalvo, 1999:22; Pennebaker, 1990:41). I find that such writing, together with the use of symbolic language, accesses traumatic memories and feelings that are stored in both the subconscious and the conscious mind.

¹ According to a phone conversation with Lindsay Simpson, an ex-journalist and academic, she "facilitated the process. We would sit side by side" (Phone Interview, 3 April 2012).

Expressive writing also allows the writer to contextualise the events surrounding his/her loss within the context of past, present and future. Narrative structure, which makes such contextualisation possible, and reflection, allows the writer to gain new perspectives and to establish continuity and coherence. New perspectives build a new relationship with the experience and with the self, as continuity is established in the previously disrupted life story. Bearing witness and the sharing of deeply personal and honest insights in a society that tends to prohibit male expressions of emotion, helps Mikac to rebuild his self while the memoir pays tribute to his family, assists others in grief and contributes to social reform.

In summary, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that the narrative shows Mikac working through his loss, to the point that it concludes with Mikac looking forward to the future (271). The narrative structure is shown to facilitate the reconstruction of the self through accessing and contextualising memory, gaining new perspectives, reflection and linking emotions with events, thereby transcending the former traumatised self by building a new relationship with the experience, making meaning and re-establishing continuity in the disrupted life story.

This thesis draws selectively on ideas from constructivism and cognitive processing. I employ constructivist and cognitive theory to show that *To have and to hold* demonstrates that trauma leads to a shattered worldview and sense of self. The consequent loss of meaning therefore requires the rebuilding of core assumptions in order to rebuild a viable identity. However, in accord with constructivism, this thesis views the rebuilding of core assumptions as a much more complex process than mere cognitive assimilation.

In constructivism, 'the profound reconstruction of one's sense of self' (Neimeyer, 2001c:173) suggests that a complex multilayered integration of thoughts, feelings and hidden meanings informs expressive writing with coherence, meaning and continuity. While cognitive processes alone cannot account for the effectiveness of writing, expressive writing can unlock the subjective freezing of time by contextualising trauma in narrative, which positions the writing in the past, present and future. Writing therefore facilitates a change in the relationship between the self that experienced the trauma and the traumatic experience, allowing a separation between the narrator and the traumatised [narrated] self. Such a new relationship has to be meaningful to the narrator in order to bring about closure.

The thesis analyses *To have and to hold* to illustrate how it represents Mikac's relationship to his traumatic loss and how, during the course of the narration, Mikac is shown to change from a passive to an active subject. The narrative, which begins with the chaos of the traumatic event and Mikac's emotional response to it, shows a profound loss of meaning and a shattered sense of self. The narrative structure which follows then intertwines past, present and future as the expressive writing uses narrative, metaphor and symbolism to allow for the embodiment of trauma, reflection and healing. The thesis argues that in *To have and to hold* narrative structure, the extended use of flashbacks, reflection, inner monologue, dialogue, and narrative time allow for the integration of traumatic memories, thereby changing Mikac's relationship to traumatic loss. I wish to highlight at this point that this dissertation does *not* claim that the analysis of the text demonstrates that Mikac himself has been completely healed, rather that his memoir contains specific aspects of writing which have been found to contribute to healing.