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Rewriting the bereaved self: The role of narrative in rebuilding the self and constructing meaning following the loss of one's spouse

Abstract
Losing one's spouse is one of the most difficult experiences we can face in life. It typically contests our sense of self, requiring the bereaved to rebuild the self. Narrative is well suited to facilitate identity reconstruction following grief. This paper posits that further research is needed into the specific narrative processes that facilitate recovery from grief in autobiographical writing. It intends to contribute to this gap in knowledge by linking bereavement theory with narrative theory in a textual analysis of the grief memoir To have and to hold *(1997) by Walter Mikac, co-written by Lindsay Simpson.*
Through the close reading of To have and to hold *and my own autobiographical writing this paper analyses the specific ways in which identity reconstruction takes place in the text, in particular narrative structure and metaphor. In accord with contemporary grief theory as espoused by Robert Neimeyer it argues for the importance of meaning making in the reconstruction of the self following bereavement, especially in the case of premature and sudden loss. In its analysis of Mikac's meaning making in the text, it employs Neimeyer's theory of meaning construction which posits that meaning can be found either in the life of the survivor or in the loss itself. Lastly, I draw observations about my personal experience as a postgraduate student writing a grief memoir and discuss how the symbiosis of being both author and academic researching bereavement has contributed to my own identity reconstruction.*
Keywords: memoir, bereavement, grief

Introduction

Grief narratives are currently 'enjoying unprecedented popularity' (Brennan 2012) including those by Artis Henderson (2014), Becky Aikman (2013) and Maggie MacKellar (2010) that depict the experience of spousal loss. It is generally acknowledged in bereavement, psychology and autobiography theory that narrative is a medium that is well suited to the recovery from grief (Brennan 2012, Neimeyer 2006, Pennebaker 2004). However, further research is needed in this area, particularly into the specific narrative processes that make that recovery possible and how it takes place in the text. This paper addresses this gap in knowledge by linking bereavement theory with narrative theory. In particular, it combines the psychological theory of meaning reconstruction as espoused by Robert Neimeyer (2001a), a leading

contemporary bereavement scholar, with narrative theory (Abbot 2008, Riessman 1993).

In my extensive research on contemporary bereavement literature and the spousal loss memoir I have not discovered the linking of these two bodies of theories. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson posit that analysing specific autobiographies allows us to explore what happens 'at the intersection of text and context' with the aim of understanding the 'complexities of autobiographical subjectivity' (Smith & Watson 2010: 48). By combining narrative and bereavement theory in a textual analysis of a spousal loss memoir I intend to understand the complexities of the author's subjectivity in the context of his multiple losses. By bringing these two perspectives together I am able to explore what happens in the grief memoir at the junction of text and context.

Losing one's spouse or child suddenly or in a traumatic manner is one of the hardest experiences we may ever face and leads to long-term distress (Lehman et al 1987: 227). It typically contests our sense of self, requiring the bereaved to rebuild the self and to work through their grief. This paper analyses the narrative processes involved in rebuilding identity following the premature loss of a loved one and argues that narrative structure and metaphor play a key role in such identity reconstruction. Further, it posits that one core element of recovery from grief is the ability to make sense of such a loss and to 'reconstruct a world of meaning that has been challenged by loss' (Neimeyer et al 2010: 73). Constructivist grief theory suggests that finding meaning is key to the reconstruction of a new self following loss (Neimeyer 2001a, Neimeyer 2000).

Neimeyer's theory of meaning reconstruction following loss argues that making sense can be achieved in two different ways: either meaning can be sought in the death of the loved one or it can be made in the survivor's continuation of life, such as bearing witness (Neimeyer 2001c: 174).

This paper posits that narrative facilitates the process of reconstructing a meaningful worldview that incorporates the loss and of re-establishing identity continuity in the disrupted life story of the bereaved. The close reading of *To have and to hold* (1997) [1] will show the importance of narrative structure in identity rebuilding, arguing that it makes reflection and evaluation of the experience of loss possible by juxtaposing the past with the present and with inner monologue. The textual analysis will examine the key role metaphor plays in expressing grief. It illustrates that Walter Mikac is able to make sense of his loss by constructing meaning in the continuation of his life.

This paper also draws on my own experiences of writing a grief memoir to show that metaphor and narrative structure play a pivotal role in the rebuilding of identity following loss. Autobiographical writing allowed me to express the grief I experienced following the traumatic death of my husband and to work towards rebuilding my identity. The most difficult aspect of my identity construction was the loss of meaning I faced. In accord with Neimeyer's statement that if death cannot be accounted for meaningfully, survivors undergo 'the greatest discontinuity' (2006: 236), I could not re-establish continuity in my life story because I was unable to construct meaning from my experience of loss. Memoir writing helped to facilitate the construction of meaning for me.

Loss of self and meaning

In 2004 my sense of self shattered when my husband lived through seven months of being locked in his body and then an agonising death. I turned to autobiographical writing with the aim of producing a literary memoir when I enrolled in a postgraduate degree in creative writing in 2009. The beginning of my memoir *Locked In – Daring to Break free* depicts my husband's illness following an undiagnosed brain cyst.

> As I made my way back into the waiting room, the doctor who had ordered the CAT scan came over. Her face looked almost frozen, the gravity of the situation mirrored in her motionless expression and stilted body posture. "Katrin. Mark's condition is extremely critical." "What does that mean?" "Mark is on the brink of dying. *Right here and now? Right under the care of emergency doctors? That can't be true.* (Den Elzen 7-8)

The grief memoir *To have and to hold* also shows the loss of self experienced by Mikac. The theme is sudden, violent and tragic loss. It focuses on Mikac's loss of his wife and two young daughters at the historic site of Port Arthur, Tasmania, in Australia's worst mass shooting. It clearly represents the shattering of Mikac's sense of self and of meaning in his life, which leads him to contemplate suicide: 'I'd talked of suicide to my friend. I had the capacity to do it quickly and painlessly with my access to drugs. I had never before contemplated such a thing. We had been so happy, but now they were gone' (Mikac & Simpson 1997: 131).

Loss frequently 'represents severe threats to how people perceive themselves and … the world' (Davis 2001: 137) due to the 'discrepancies between our internal world and the world that now exists for us' (Parkes & Prigerson 2010: 102). When a traumatic experience shatters a person's worldview (Sloan & Marx 2004: 123), core assumptions are called into question. According to Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, three core assumptions tend to be shattered: 1. the world is benevolent, 2. the world is meaningful and 3. the self is worthy (Janoff-Bulman 1992: 6). *To have and to hold* shows that all of these fundamental assumptions are lost to Mikac:

> My perception of life has changed forever... I know now we are not assured there will be a tomorrow' (195). But could it get worse? Could my mother or father die of a heart attack?… Will I be able to enter public places without the nagging fear that the worst can happen? (140)

Mikac's world has lost its meaning: 'I am struck sometimes by the meaninglessness of my existence' (258). 'I felt a shattered man' (208). In accord with his loss of self and a meaningful worldview, the memoir starts off with the voice of chaos (Frank 1995: 99). The description of Mikac seeing his wife's dead body is vivid and sensory: 'her life-giving blood had poured from the exit and run some ten metres down the bitumen road' (8). Standing next to his wife's body, Mikac exclaims: 'Seeing this [his wife's blood] was one of the greatest blows a human being could be dealt. The person whom I was sure to grow old with was no longer with me' (8-9). In this sense, the initial writing and voice are quite different to those of later chapters.

In *The Wounded Storyteller* (1995) sociologist Arthur Frank analyses published illness narratives and examines the deconstruction of identity occasioned by serious illness and, in his terms, the reconstruction of the wounded self. I draw on Frank's work to theorise the grief memoir positing that there is a close analogy between the rebuilding of identity required in the face of serious illness

and grief arising from premature loss. Frank has created three typologies of illness narratives: chaos, restitution and quest.

He sums up the plot of the restitution narrative in this way: 'Yesterday I was healthy, today I am sick, but tomorrow I'll be healthy again' (Frank 1995: 77). This plot is based on the expectation that health will be restored and that life will return to normal. The chaos narrative is about suffering (117). The defining characteristic of this typology is the absence of coherence and narrative order, which Frank terms an 'anti-narrative without sequence'. It is narrating 'without mediation', that is the narrator is unable to fully reflect upon the experience (97-98). The quest narrative describes the hero's journey from agony to atonement (119). In contrast to restitution, the quest narrative 'recognises that the old intactness must be stripped away' so that something new can emerge from one's suffering (171).

I base my structural analysis of *To have and to hold* on Frank's narrative typologies. Chaos, for Frank, refers to narratives in which individuals represent themselves as emotionally battered and lacking control (1995: 101). In accordance with Frank's chaos narrative, the memoir starts by representing Mikac as vulnerable, out of control and as having lost all meaning in life. For example, in the opening pages Mikac questions his religion, asking an invisible audience why God couldn't have left him one of his girls (Mikac 1999: 2). The figure of God in this representation, the 'puppeteer', has all the control that Mikac does not have:

> I began sobbing uncontrollably … I slumped puppet-like on the bed crying until my vision clouded. I was kneeling now and yelling for the world to hear. "Couldn't he have left me one, just one?" (2)

This paper defines 'the self' as a narrative construction. The self therefore is not a unified entity fixed in time, but is rather continually constructed and reconstructed: 'the narrative self is an open-ended construction that is under constant revision' (Zahavi 2005: 105). This construction of the self requires reflexivity, which Daniel Chaffee defines as 'that which takes account of itself' (Chaffee 2011: 100). According to Paul Ricoeur, self-understanding is an 'attempt to discover the narrative identity which constitutes us' (Ricoeur 1991: 32). Central to Ricoeur's concept of self-understanding is the notion of narrative identity (Ricoeur 1992: 114). He uses the term 'narrative identity' synonymously with 'subjectivity' and states his view that 'narrative composition alone can create' identity (1991: 32). In agreement with Ricoeur, philosopher Dan Zahavi states that self-understanding cannot be gained by simply thinking of oneself as an 'I'; implicit in the construction of 'I' is a narrative: 'The self is the product of a narratively structured life' (Zahavi 2005: 107).

Losing the knowledge of a particular self located in time and space as the 'I am', is to lose the coherence in our life story, which translates as a loss of self and loss of meaning. Zahavi suggests that finding 'what it means to be a self' requires 'the examination of the structure of experience', that is, the self and one's experiences are intertwined and can only be understood together (2005: 106). When our experiences can no longer be understood within the current framework of our narrative self-understanding, as is the case with profound grief, this 'knowing of the self' is shattered. The shattering of the self and loss of worldview are closely linked to the loss of meaning, thus finding meaning in the experience of loss is central to the process reconstructing the self.

The problem that Mikac faces is that his life and former self no longer form the basis of his subjectivity:

> This time last year I was an ordinary person in an ordinary situation… A father and a husband striving for a quiet and successful life. All of that has gone now. Instead I have an overwhelming sense of being alone. I am no longer answerable to anyone. No responsibilities, no commitment required. A strange concept after caring for others for so long. My brain still finds it hard to reprogramme. (98)

The metaphor of reprogramming represents Mikac's shattered self and loss of meaning: a computer with all its files erased; a new programme needs to be installed.

The significant use of metaphor employed in *To have and to hold* is also evident in my autobiographical writing, which draws on metaphor and dialogue to express the emotional intensity and pain of being told of my husband's prognosis:

> "There is no hope of recovery. Mark, as you know him, is gone." I put out my hand and steadied myself. My heart-beat throbbing in my ears. The palm of my hand slipped on the table top. *But what about those crucial first two weeks?*
>
> Any hope given to me that morning lay crushed, destroyed with the force of a concrete demolition ball. Boom, and the bricks, mortar, concrete of my life crumbled. "Is there any chance that this diagnosis could be wrong?" I heard myself ask through a thick fog. "Less than zero point zero something percent." I heard him say. This time there was no mention of the need to wait for the swelling of the brain to go down. (55-56)

The metaphor of the concrete demolition ball represents my loss of self and the discontinuity experienced in my life story: like a house that is demolished in its entirety, my sense of self was crushed. Further, in accord with Sloan and Marx's notion of a shattered worldview in the wake of a traumatic experience mentioned above, my loss of a meaningful worldview is symbolised by the metaphor of the forcefully wiped out house, as if the whole world had fallen around me.

In addition, this passage is another example of the chaos narrative. According to Frank, the chaos story literally cannot be told but only lived, however, 'the voice of chaos can be identified and a story reconstructed' (Frank 1995: 99). The beginning of *Locked In – Daring to break free* is also characterised by the voice of chaos in accord with Frank's claim that lack of control and feeling emotionally crushed are the hallmarks of the chaos narrative (1995: 101). Here is another scene that illustrates inner chaos and shock:

> I stared into his face. I was close to fainting. Without hope to hold onto, I was drowning. As the group left the room, my legs gave way. Nothing seemed real. I had never experienced such shock before. (57)

Research shows that in the event of sudden, violent or untimely loss, most bereaved people begin to search for meaning in the experience (Lehman et al 1987: 229). Contemporary grief theory posits that the experience of loss necessitates the rebuilding of a new meaningful worldview that incorporates the negative experience of loss (Davis 2001: 143, Davis et al 2000: 534). In

two studies of bereaved parents and spouses, Davis et al found that 'meaning [was] an important issue for most people who have experienced loss', and that those who failed to find meaningful answers 'experienced considerable pain about their inability to resolve the loss' (2000: 509). [2] The loss of self and of a meaningful worldview evident in the texts under review support Davis' notion that the bereaved need to rebuild the self and find meaning in the face of their premature loss.

The role of narrative

In considering how narrative might facilitate the rebuilding of the self and a meaningful worldview following sudden and premature loss, I examine the role narrative structure and metaphor play in the reconstruction of meaning and identity.

According to narrative theory, we come to understand our lived experience 'through an act of representation, which is at the same time an act of re-creation' (Abbot 2008: 37). This act of re-creating reshapes lived events, thereby making meaning. Porter Abbot states that we cannot represent lived experience 'without adding, framing, colouring and inflecting events in a multitude of ways' (2008: 37). As such, narratives are not 'merely information storage devices', rather, they structure experience and organise memories (Riessman 1993: 2). Narrative structure is a device that allows such framing and evaluation of events to occur.

Catherine Riessman discusses the importance of narrative structure, arguing that 'events become meaningful because of their placement in narrative' (Riessman 1993: 18). Scenes drawn from 'free-floating memories' are given shape; 'a beginning, middle and end' is created (Myers 2010: 133). After the initial chaos narrative, *To have and to hold* uses two other narrative structures. The first is a three-part intricate structure that I have named the 'tri-factor'. The second is an overarching quest narrative (Frank 1995).

The tri-factor structure has three linked narratives: Story A, B and C. Story A is the narrative that re-creates the story of Mikac's loss as a complex, highly organised and vivid narrative. Story B includes Mikac's life history prior to the shooting: his family of origin and his family life. Story C expresses Mikac's inner world, as such it is characterised by self-reflection. These 'stream of consciousness' thoughts take up approximately one third of the book. This story is set apart from the other two stories by the use of italics, which suggests Mikac's colloquial, inner voice.

Much of the memoir is organised around the abyss between Story B (pre-loss) and Story A (post-loss). The revisiting of the past and the representation of the present are essential to Mikac's meaning reconstruction, and, in this sense, both Story A and Story B give shape to the abyss, represented by Story C (his internal thoughts), that he is to cross. Explicit meaning making occurs in Story C as Mikac is shown reflecting on his experiences and situation.

As Mark Freeman comments, making sense of our past experience is not about "recapturing" what was, but rather about *interpreting* 'the past from the standpoint of the present, remembering and narrating, which means situating the experiences of the past – rewriting them – in accordance with and in relation to what has happened since' (Freeman 2003: 123). Story C creates a story of retrospective transformation, reflexivity and interpretation: 'Narrativisation assumes point of view … facts and interpretations require and shape one another (Stivers cited in Riessman 1993:64).

In Story C Mikac shows his emotions, comments on his feelings and evaluates his inner world, connecting the dots between external and internal worlds. This intertwining of outer and inner worlds mirrors Jerome Bruner's metaphor of dual landscapes: the landscape of action and the landscape of consciousness, which refers to the inner world of the author/protagonist (Bruner 2004: 698). Evaluation is part of this process as Mikac steps back from Story A and Story B to comment on meaning and to communicate emotion. These moments of evaluation impart value and meaning to a text (Riessman 2005: 3, 21). Bruner sees reflexivity as 'our capacity to turn around on the past and alter the present in its light, or to alter the past in the light of the present. Neither the past nor the present stays fixed in the face of this reflexivity' (Bruner 1990: 109). The stories of Mikac's marriage and family life are rewritten and interpreted through the point of view of that loss: 'Thus the answer to the question [Who am I?] is not immediately accessible', it requires evaluation (Zahavi 2005: 108).

Mikac raises difficult or unanswerable questions: 'Why wasn't I there? (4, 11); 'How could I live without her' (132); 'If they'd died in a car accident … it might have been easier to accept' (139). Mikac's reflections eventually become a force for change: 'So what could I do about it [gun-control]?' (158). Mikac regains hope for his future: 'It reminded me that some point in the future I could be me again' (184).

In that Story C provides the opportunity to reflect, to reassess the past from the viewpoint of the present, it offers a wiser, enlarged perspective, and as such, it is the heart of the overall quest narrative, bridging the past (Story A) and the present (Story B) narratives.

The initial chaos narrative, together with Stories A, B and C, are embedded in an overall quest narrative. Drawing again on Frank's narrative typologies the quest narrative describes the hero's journey from anguish to redemption. In the typical quest narrative, the narrator is conscious of the transformative nature of his/her quest story (1995: 118-119).

The defining features of the quest narrative, as outlined by Frank, are evident in *To have and to hold:* for example, Mikac opens himself up to his suffering; he is aware of the transformation his identity is undergoing (though it is painful for him) and he becomes aware of the kind of journey it has been after he takes on new roles as philanthropist (245) and social activist (232).

The overall quest narrative structure shows Mikac revisiting and reconstructing his past with the aim of constructing a new worldview that incorporates his loss and transforms his self. According to Frank, the quest narrative is the only narrative that gives the narrator a voice and therefore the opportunity to reclaim agency (1995: 115). As the quest narrative develops, Mikac is shown reclaiming his agency and constructing a meaningful vision for his future. The narrative representation of Mikac's thought processes show the process of reconstructing a meaningful worldview, thereby allowing Mikac to transcend the intense grief that had made him contemplate suicide (131). He begins to see a future for himself: 'I feel the many things I've learned since losing my family will offer me all kinds of opportunities that will challenge me. Areas like counselling or even motivational speaking. I believe I can achieve anything I set my mind to' (267).

His reclaiming of agency and meaning-making evolve around the theme of love, highlighted in the sub-title: *A modern-day love story cut short*. [3] In a defiant attitude towards the gunman Mikac states: 'He could murder my family, but never take my love for them or any space within my consciousness' (205).

The book allows Mikac to pay a lasting tribute to his family: 'Writing about how wonderful they were enshrines their memory' (212-213). He also finds meaning in a new sense of purpose: (Davis et al 2000: 522) bearing witness, so that his girls did not die in vain: 'I am writing this book for you' (173).

Louise DeSalvo, in her book *Writing as a Way of Healing* (1999), concludes that bearing witness plays a vital role in the healing benefits of published personal narratives:

> Writing testimony, to be sure, means that we tell our stories. But it also means that we no longer allow ourselves to be silenced or allow others to speak for our experience. Writing to heal, then, and making that writing public, as I see it, is the most important emotional, psychological, artistic, and political project of our time. (DeSalvo 1999: 216)

Robert argues that meaning-making in the face of loss can be approached in two different ways. Firstly, meaning can be sought in the death of the loved one (Neimeyer 2001c: 174) and, secondly, meaning can be sought in the survivor's continuation of life. The survivor can also attain personal meaning by directly or indirectly evaluating the lessons learnt, or the perceived "benefits", for example, bearing witness or helping others (Janoff-Bulman 1999: 317). The particular meaning derived by the survivor is not as important as the fact that they have derived some meaning (Davis et al 2000: 528).

In *To have and to hold*, meaning is constructed in relation to Mikac's sense of self, who he has become as a result of his loss. Reflexivity leads Mikac to see himself in a new light at the end of the narrative, indicating that he recognises his personal transformation: he views himself as being more honest (264) and more compassionate (270). 'I feel as though I can love more deeply also and appreciate the simple pleasures of life more fully' (267). The end of the narrative constructs Mikac as a persuasive gun-control spokesperson and social activist: 'I read from a page of notes and I gained confidence as I realised how important my message was and how persuasive I could be' (164). Mikac is heartened by the discovery that he has something to contribute to the world, that he can make it a better place (210). 'The knowledge that I could give something back to other people was very life-affirming for me' (247).

According to Aaron Mishara, the relationship between the embodied subject and the experience undergoes a change through writing, a shift in attitude from passive to active (Mishara 1995: 186). Mikac's transcendence shows that his attitude changes from passive victim to reclaiming his agency.

Goncalves et al argue that 'narrative is the essential process through which individuals construct meaningful experiences' and that narrative structure, 'the level of coherence and connectedness between different elements in the narrative' play a central role in meaning construction (Goncalves et al 2000: 265). The narrative structure employed in *To have and to hold*, the tri-factor embedded within the overall quest narrative, which shows a high level of coherence and connectedness as it moves back and forth between external accounts, flashbacks and Mikac's inner world, is well suited to facilitate the process of meaning making.

In chapter two of *Locked In – Daring to Break Free* I turn to the past, to 'the beginning' in my quest to make sense of my loss. This chapter outlines how I met my husband:

> It is a sunny, cool February morning in 1984 and I am nineteen, standing on a railway platform in Cairo. Various loudspeakers

> spit out a loud, high-pitched, seesawing male voice; a seemingly never-ending prayer… I sit down on the vacant seat next to the young man and receive a captivating smile. "Hello. How're you?" He has a playful sparkle in his eyes. I take a moment to catch my breath, getting back up and tucking my backpack into the luggage rack above our heads, before I say hello. "I'm Mark. What's your name?" he replies. He is wearing a pair of long, white trousers, and a dark green, woollen sleeveless top with a V-neck that shows off well-developed arms. His tanned feet are stuck in plastic thongs. (16-17)

Turning to the beginnings of our relationship brings the importance of our love to my awareness and adds a broader perspective to my loss. It also serves to instigate the important psychological process of establishing 'continuing bonds' with my deceased husband (Neimeyer 2001c: 175). This chapter begins to highlight our continuing love to me, which opens up the long process of meaning making. Like Mikac, meaning making for me takes place in relation to my continued life, in particular the importance of bearing witness with the intention of contributing to social change.

Another structural feature that *Locked In – Daring to break free* employs is that of stream of consciousness, which is defined as:

> The total range of awareness and emotive-mental response of an individual … the assumption is that in the mind of an individual at a given moment a *stream of consciousness* is a mixture of all the levels of awareness, an unending flow of sensations, thoughts, memories, associations and reflections. (Harmon et al 2009: 529)

The following excerpts show the frequent use of the narrative device of stream of consciousness, illustrating a flow of sensations, thoughts, reflection and association:

> Cold sweat collected at the back of my neck. I wiped my damp hands on my legs. *Why was the change taking so long? Was something wrong?* (30)

> *What would I do now without his soothing words? Would it work out fine this time?* (39)

> I missed them [my children] and ached to be with them and comfort them. *How were they coping? Were they all right?* (15)

> I refocussed on hope. *Melanie felt that there definitely is hope.* The whole idea of brain damage was foreign, alien and unexpected. (53)

> Michelle had asked me to tape a program for her on the video recorder. I squatted in front of it, tears flooding my eyes. Mark was the one who always did the taping. Not me. *He may never be able to do the taping again, ever. He may never come home again.* (40)

Alternating the description of events with the past and with interior monologue and stream of consciousness passages denoted in the text by italics supports Abbots' notion that representation of lived experience is always framed and inflected in various ways (Abbot 2008: 37). The juxtaposing of experience,

inner thought and the past allows for reflection of the event, which makes interpretation possible. This reflecting on experience is in accordance with Zhani's premise that the self and one's experiences can only be understood together (Zhani 2005: 106).

The role of metaphor

Metaphor and symbolic language play a central role in the narrative process of re-constructing meaning and self-hood. Judith Harris refers to 'the language of pain'. She states that this language signifies 'something that can be referred to only by a symbol, image or word' (Harris 2003:6). Similarly, Neimeyer refers to the 'language of loss' (2001b). In that this 'felt experience' is often too painful or too deeply buried to be accessed, then metaphor can become a way to convey complex memories, feelings and hidden meanings. For Neimeyer, metaphors and images 'stretch the expressive power of literal language' (Neimeyer 2001c: 177).

The use of metaphor allowed me to give voice to my most harrowing experiences:

> As Dr. Nemeth spoke, the others kept their eyes downcast. He got straight to the point. "There is total brain damage", he said. It felt as if he were addressing the wall behind me. This specialist was projecting his medical expert knowledge onto me, and he was doing so with the calculated precision of a scalpel slicing skin. As if he were oblivious to my life's blood, oozing out over the grey linoleum floor. I thought my heart might bleed to death. (56) [4]

According to Bolton, metaphor allows distressing felt experience to be expressed and explored sensitively, 'leading to far greater understanding than directly addressing the feelings or experiences' (Bolton 2011: 59). The medical metaphor of a scalpel slicing skin is transferred to convey the severity of the felt emotional pain in a way literal language could not, thereby making it possible to express the inexpressible and to understand the experience. The metaphors of the scalpel and of my life's blood oozing out over the floor denote Harris' 'language of pain'. Drawing on these metaphors 'stretched the expressive power of literal language' for me and allowed me to convey my complex feelings and memories.

I found it particularly difficult to make sense of the experience described in the above scene knowing that a week later the specialist changed his prognosis and stated that everything was possible, from Mark's full recovery on one end of the scale to the possibility of him dying on the other extreme. Employing metaphor was instrumental in the reconstruction of meaning in relation to this experience. Being able to express the felt intensity of my emotions through symbolic language marked the beginning of the process of meaning making for me. The inexpressible, which is the true voice of chaos, has to be articulated in order to be able to be understood. Thus the use of metaphor to give voice to unspeakable experience can be seen as a key component of the quest narrative which reinstates agency and control. It is in the narrative act of re-creation then, the re-enactment of lived experience, that meaning is made (Riessman 1993: 9).

The extensive use of metaphors in *To have and to hold* also allowed Mikac to express his grief and to engage with his distressing feelings, thereby assisting him to transcend and transform his felt experience. The memoir utilises many

animal metaphors, as well as images of death and transformation to convey the brutality of the deaths, and of Mikac's experiences: 'We felt like caged animals'; 'They're bloodhounds' (6); 'Like ants disturbed from their nest' (7) (in reference to the press); 'What seemed like a sanctuary has turned into a nightmare' (185) (in reference to Tasmania); 'Arterial bleeding pulsating out at a rapid rate' (187) (in reference to Mikac's initial grief).

Neimeyer highlights that 'there are some meanings that are too embedded in our lives, too embodied in our actions, to be [formulated in] self-statements' (Neimeyer 2000: 554) and accessed by the conscious mind and literal language. He stresses 'the possibility that the most important meanings of loss might elude simple verbal formulation', necessitating 'more metaphoric, poetic and narrative strategies' (2000: 554). In this way, metaphor can give voice to tacit meanings of loss:

> By elaborating a metaphor into a poignant depiction of the author's grieving process, people can be prompted to capture the seemingly ineffable changes they have experienced, in a way that it can be validated by both the self and others. (Neimeyer 2001c: 177)

When *To have and to hold* likens Mikac's grief to having a hole in the heart, where the blood pours out at such speed it threatens to kill him, it expresses both mental and physical sensations of grief. The image suggests a structural life-flowing problem that is both potentially fatal and fixable:

> As time passes, the blood begins to coagulate and the flow lessens slightly. The pain doesn't reduce in intensity and the hole stays the same, but after a long time the bleeding reduces to a trickle. It seems possible that one day the flow may stop altogether. (187)

The physical imagery allows the seemingly impossible to be represented and grasped: one day, Mikac's pain may be less intense. The analogy of physical suffering to explain his emotional and mental suffering shows suffering to be an embodied experience. This 'poignant depiction' likening blood flow to his pain supports Neimeyer's notion of validating the 'ineffable changes' that are expressed in Mikac's experience of grief.

To have and to hold uses the metaphor of different types of cars to symbolise Mikac's new identity as a single man: 'I have traded our blue Pajero for a red Mercedes'. It is quintessentially not a family car: it symbolises the 'antithesis of what I was before' (263). According to Jeremy Holmes, metaphor is central to meaning-making. He sees 'metaphor [as] a fundamental narrative device: a memorable image that gives meaning to' adversity and which 'links different aspects' of the narrator's life (Holmes 2000: 95). This is evident in the symbol of the classical family car versus a sports car, linking Mikac's current life as a single person with his previous life as a family man, thereby assisting him in rebuilding a new narrative, from the old narrative of family man to the new master narrative of single man, philanthropist and social activist, the 'antithesis' of his old master narrative.

Narrative as a medium for identity reconstruction following loss must engage with both the conscious and the subconscious mind, with conscious and with hidden meanings. The extensive use of metaphor and symbolic language in *To and to hold* allows Mikac to access and express subconscious meanings, thereby facilitating the process of meaning making.

Writing a grief memoir – a personal perspective

Memoir writing allowed me to express my experience in vivid description and to engage with my distressing feelings and loss. The detailed description of scenes in the style of creative non-fiction facilitated my acceptance that the unthinkable did happen to me. In particular, metaphor played a key role in providing me with the language to express deep distress, thereby transcending and transforming my felt experience.

Beyond the expression of conscious and subconscious memories, I was faced with the seemingly impossible task of making sense of having been thrown into inner chaos over the initial specialist's prognosis and its later reversal and having witnessed unthinkable suffering. Prior to undertaking my postgraduate studies I had been actively searching for meaning, but had been unable to find any meaning in my experience.

My exegesis examined how narrative facilitates the process of recovery from grief and personal transformation. In the early stages of my degree I began to research contemporary bereavement theory, in particular Neimeyer's seminal book *Meaning, Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss* (2001a). My research fostered a clear understanding of the importance of meaning reconstruction in bereavement. At this juncture, the academic 'I' and the author 'I' merged into one symbiotic unit, one informing the other. An understanding arose that my inability to make sense of my experiences, such as the specialist urging me to withhold treatment only to reverse his diagnosis later, stopped me from structuring my experience in a coherent, meaningful way. I found meaning in bearing witness and also in the opportunity that memoir offers to help others faced with loss. For me, autobiographical writing is instrumental in my identity reconstruction.

This paper has posited that the premature loss of one's spouse typically contests our sense of self and causes a loss of meaning which necessitates the rebuilding of one's identity. It has argued that, although it is widely acknowledged that narrative is well suited to facilitate recovery from grief, further research is needed into the actual specific narrative processes that facilitate such recovery. Through the close reading of *To have and to hold* and my own autobiographical writing I have analysed the specific ways in which identity reconstruction takes place in the text, in particular narrative structure and metaphor, and have argued for the importance of meaning making in the reconstruction of the self following loss.

I have theorised the grief memoir by linking contemporary bereavement theory with narrative theory and by drawing on illness narrative theory. Specifically, I have combined constructivist bereavement theory which states that meaning making is one of the core elements of recovery from grief with a textual analysis that examined the narrative processes that facilitate such meaning reconstruction. I have applied Frank's illness narrative typologies to the structural analysis of the texts discussed. Narrative structure has been shown to facilitate reflection, interpretation and evaluation of the lived experience of grief, thereby promoting meaning making. Further, this paper has illustrated that metaphor makes a vital contribution to meaning making and identity rebuilding through its ability to give voice to lived experience that is too distressing to be expressed in literal language as well as uncovering subconscious meanings.

The textual analysis has drawn on Neimeyer's theory of meaning construction to show that Mikac's reclaiming of agency and meaning reconstruction evolve around the theme of love, bearing witness and a sense of purpose. I wish to

highlight at this point that I am not claiming that Mikac has recovered from grief, rather that *To have and to hold* contains specific aspects of writing which have been found to contribute to recovery.

Notes

[1] I am aware that a co-written book may raise questions about the role played by each author. According to a phone conversation with co-author Lindsay Simpson, an ex-journalist and academic, she "facilitated the process. We would sit side by side" (Phone Interview, 3 April 2012). Therefore, for the purposes of my discussion, I am treating the work similar to a sole-authored book. return to text

[2] Davis et al conducted a review of studies of people coping with loss and found that about 80 per cent of people search for meaning in the loss and ask *why me*? Most people who experienced loss and trauma failed to find an acceptable explanation (Davis et al 2000: 500). Lehman et al, in their study on the long-term effects of losing a spouse or child, found that the majority of people who had lost a spouse or child were unable to find meaning four to seven years after the loss (Lehman et al 1987: 229). return to text

[3] Mikac confirms the importance of his ongoing love in his subsequent book *The Circle of Life: Replacing hardship with love* (1999), a collection of reflections on love and loss, which he dedicates to the 'Power of love'. He writes in the preface (two years after publishing his memoir) 'I have had a fortunate life … there has been love and devotion for Nanette and my beautiful daughters'. return to text

[4] The name of the doctor has been changed. return to text

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