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Giving sorrow words: the creative and cathartic power of writing fiction

Abstract:

When Shakespeare wrote, ‘*Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o’er fraught heart and bids it break*’ he was asserting what Pennebaker later described as the power of narrative expression to effect catharsis in the narrator. Written narrative is especially effective in this as it creates a space where the writer can process his/her thoughts and feelings and make concrete the amorphous shapes of grief. This is exemplified in Virginia Woolf’s description of how she released her grief for her parents by writing *To the Lighthouse*: ‘I suppose that I did for my parents what psychoanalysts do for their patients,’ she said, ‘I expressed some very long-felt and deeply-felt emotion. And in expressing it, I explained it and then laid it to rest’. Writing about a traumatic event can be cathartic whether it is intended only for the writer’s eyes, or whether it is shared with readers. However, in drawing upon personal tragedy to write fiction for publication, the writer must transcend the raw material, and through imagination and craft construct a story that allows readers entry into what Nafisi describes as a space denied by reality. In this space readers may participate in what Jong refers to as ‘their own inner monologues’. Thus, both writer and reader can accomplish what Aristotle called ‘a catharsis of such emotions’. In examining the cathartic power of writing fiction and the creative process that produces it, my paper reflects upon my own fiction writing after the death of my daughter, and draws upon such writers as Nafisi, De Blieu, Gogol and Woolf.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Cathartic writing—creative writing—writing fiction

After the bomb attack on the Piccadilly Line tube train in London, a young survivor wrote every day for a week about her experiences and feelings in an online diary on the BBC news website. Using the pseudonym ‘Rachel’, she concluded: ‘I had this overwhelming need to get the story out so everyone owned it and it wasn’t just jammed in my head, freaking me out’ (7 July, 2005). Writing her story allowed Rachel the opportunity to ‘give sorrow words’ (Macbeth 5.1: 50) and allowed those who vicariously participated in her story by reading those words, the opportunity to accomplish what Aristotle referred to as ‘a catharsis of such emotions...’

Spratt and Denney (1991) examined how stress, particularly grief, depletes the immune system. Knapp (1986) points out that when the bereaved cannot talk about or are discouraged from talking about the deceased, their feelings become internalised and manifest in physical symptoms of illness. Pennebaker conducted clinical research in the mid-80s on the power of writing to restore mental and physical health. He concluded that narrative expression could effect catharsis in the narrator by helping to integrate thoughts and feelings and he found that people who wrote about traumatic events noticed a decreased need for medical help (Pennebaker 2004). Other studies, including Bolton, 2000, Holly, 1989, Robinson, 2000 and Wright and Chung, 2001 have shown that writing about a traumatic experience is cathartic for the writer.

Written expression may be even more powerful than verbal expression, says Bolton (2003: 97) as ‘it does not disappear on the breath’. It is the process of writing itself, she says, which brings clarification to the writer (2000: 56). Grinyer’s studies, based on written narratives of parents of young adult children dying of cancer identified the difficulties parents have in finding words to speak of their experiences (2002, 2006a, 2006b). This parallels the lack of vocabulary that Knapp’s respondents revealed in interviews about their reactions on hearing of their child’s sudden death (1986). The parents who provided a written narrative found it easier to write than to speak of their experiences. This indicates that some events are either too disturbing to talk about or cannot be expressed within the limitations of spoken language. Words that may ‘disappear on the breath’ can be made concrete on the page. Through the process of writing and the clarification it brings, order can be created out of disorder by giving structure to experience.

Writers are well aware of the connection between writing and well-being. Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary about having ‘no power of phrase-making’ during a depressive illness (in Robinson 2000: 79). When she felt her ability to write return she knew she was recovering: ‘This is shown by the power to make images; the suggestive power of every sight and word is enormously increased’ (2000: 79). Isabel Allende says in *Aphrodite* that after the death of her daughter, which she documented in *Paula* (1995), she lost her ability to write and entered a long period of mourning. After three years she began to dream about food and this led to her writing *Aphrodite*, which she calls a memoir of the senses. Through writing about food and sensuality she began the journey towards recovery and reconnection to life (1998).

In reviewing the genres of autobiography, memoir and fiction, Erica Jong concludes that the most powerful writing comes out of the writer's own experiences (1985). This is exemplified in such works of fiction as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando: A biography* (1928). Woolf intended *Orlando* to be the first book that crossed the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction by giving real people fictional names (Lee 1996). In describing how she released her grief for her parents by writing *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf said: 'I suppose that I did for my parents what psychoanalysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long-felt and deeply-felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest' (Lee 1996: 80).

New Zealand writer Janet Frame's novels, especially *Owls do Cry* (1985), draw upon the many traumatic events in her life. In the third volume of her autobiography, *The Envoy from Mirror City* (1989), she describes how she integrated these events into her fiction: '... although I have remodelled, changed, added, subtracted from all experiences, I have never written of my own life and feelings... I have mixed myself with other characters who themselves are a product of known and unknown, real and imagined; I have created selves but I have never written of me' (1989: 405).

American author John Irving issued a press release with his novel *Until I find You* (2005), which was reported in The Press in New Zealand as:

... dropping the literary equivalent of what was aboard the Enola Gay. He revealed that during the past decade all those novels packed with sadness about the horrors that adults inflict on children—all those unwanted babies in *The Cider House Rules*, Franny's horrible rape in the *Hotel New Hampshire*, the Ellen Jamesians in *The World According to Garp*, nutcase parents in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*—he was really drawing upon his own childhood experiences (Davis 2005: D4).

Irving says that after the cathartic time of writing *Until I find You* and the nine months of re-writing it in the third person, he was finally ready to let his book go out into the world. He adds: '... as emotionally difficult as this novel was for me, it is now very gratifying to have it behind me ... I just know I won't feel any urgent need to write about those subjects again' (*ibid.*).

Whether a piece of writing about a traumatic event is intended only for the writer's eyes, or for sharing with readers as in Rachel's on-line diary, or as fiction after the re-writing and editing process has worked the raw material into art, all such writing, by giving concrete structure to the amorphous shapes of grief, can accomplish Aristotle's 'catharsis of such emotions'. In writing-as-therapy, the 'writing-out' takes primacy over the quality of the content. However, re-writing and re-structuring can enhance the therapeutic benefit, says Robinson: '...it is the control which the writer exhibits over the material which is most important, his/her conception of the relationship of language to experience rather than a mechanical process of transmutation and universalisation' (2000: 80). He discusses the idea that the process of writing creates a reflecting place. Bolton describes this place as: '...a deeply creative, explorative and inventive space. It is a strenuous exercise of the imagination, when the imagination is

a power at once intelligent, sensitive and constructive, importantly related to the power of healing' (2003: 97).

The difference between writing-as-therapy and writing publishable fiction is that in the latter the material must be worked to allow the reader entry into what Nafisi describes as a space denied by reality (2004). Thus, writing fiction demands that the writer transcend the original experience and through imagination and craft construct a story that allows readers to 'participate in their own inner monologues' (Jong, 1985: 3). This acknowledgement of the reader's 'monologue' is expressed in New Zealand writer Fiona Farrell's conclusion to her autobiographical novel *Book book* (2004: 367).

While she reads everything co-exists: past and present and future, friends and family, the living and the dead, apple trees, doughnuts and newspapers and hens pecking about in a garden.

To describe the process that shaped the fiction I wrote after my daughter died I need to go back eight years. In the first year of grieving, like Allende, I lost the capacity to write. The year passed 'as if there were no seasons—just a drifting,' as one of my colleagues described her life in a desert country. It may not have been coincidence that at the end of that first year I was drawn to work in Oman, a desert country in the Arabian Gulf. My husband took a year's leave to accompany me and we went to stay with my brother in England for a few weeks, before flying to Oman. Together, my brother and I visited the scenes of our childhood, both physically and metaphorically, our words and laughter spilling over each other as our memories surfaced in the way Zimmerman describes: "When we lose our moorings, when we are caught in currents beyond our control, we need to step out of the maelstrom and look back. We need to retrieve images from our youth. We need to step back so we can look forward. We need to take solace in that which can be preserved—and somehow completed—by the gloss of memory" (2002: 63).

The images my brother and I took from our youth centred on memories of our father. My passion for language and writing fiction began with him. He made up stories where my brother and I were the main characters—a boy and girl who entered 'fairyland' and had adventures. He always returned us, sleepy yet wanting more, to the 'fairy bus' that would take us to 'the Land of Nod', where, he assured us, these adventures would continue. As I grew up I gave my father the titles and themes of stories I wanted him to invent and tell me. He also told me tales of his real-life adventures when he travelled to exotic countries. Such story-making is consistent with Gilbert's description of the human affinity with story-telling (2002) and our ability to make meaning through the telling of stories. My father's storytelling opened the door to my imagination and the possibilities of language. One of my most treasured gifts from him was a dictionary. The process of taking a journey through the past with my brother helped to establish who we had become in the present and opened our minds to the possibilities for the future. When we said goodbye, I flew to Oman feeling confident of my ability to live there.

My life in Oman included astonishment at the stark beauty of the landscape and the ability of the inhabitants to survive in one of the most inhospitable deserts on earth. I started a journal and wrote in it every day to record the characters we met, the situations we were involved in and the adventures we had. Many of the expats we met in Oman were colourful characters, such as my colleague, an Irish woman of fifty, with a mane of red-gold hair. She made me laugh so much it hurt and she fascinated me with her stories of places and situations she had been in. I wondered if I might weave her into a short story one day, but writing fiction again was, at that stage, something I had no desire for. Instead, I read as much as I could about Oman and the lives of its people.

Women and Community in Oman (Eickman 1984) and *Behind the veil in Arabia: Women in Oman* (Wikan: 1982) described life in the 1970s, just as the country was developing after the discovery of oil. Similarly, *Mother without a Mask* (Holton: 1993) discussed the lives of women in Al Ayn, on the border of Oman. When I began teaching my classes in Muscat, I saw how different life was for the young women I taught, compared to Eickman's, Wikan's and Holton's accounts of uneducated, masked women confined to the home. Iranian writer, Azar Nafisi, describes her experiences in teaching English Literature to a group of young Iranian women (2004). Some of these descriptions were similar to my own experiences of teaching English to my class of young Omani women. They had been selected by the Ministry of Higher Education to be future academics and had been sponsored by the Ministry to study Academic English before going to Australia to begin postgraduate degrees. As I got to know my students I began to add their stories to my journal.

In an interview, Nafisi says that one of her favourite stories is *Alice in Wonderland*. 'Alice shows us how curiosity, a desire to go beyond our everyday habits and routines, can open up wondrous worlds to us and give us the power to turn the most ordinary into the most extra-ordinary' (2003). In Oman I often had the feeling that I had fallen, like Alice, through to the other side of the looking-glass, where 'normal' was a variable construct. As I tried to make sense of this in my writing, while describing the amazing lunar landscape of Oman, my pleasure in language was restored and slowly my own inner landscape began to change. The idea of using the journal as the basis for writing a travel book gradually took shape, but this soon morphed into short stories about loss, grief and reconnection to life, some of which drew from my own experiences after the death of my daughter. Nafisi describes fiction as a window into another reality and states that 'the ordinary pebble of ordinary life can be transformed into a jewel through the magic eye of fiction' (2004: 10). She says: '...what we search for in fiction is not so much a reality but the epiphany of truth' (2004: 1). The 'epiphany of truth' was what I sought to capture in this description of dying in a short story titled *The Stone*:

Beneath the hills wild horses graze in the moonlight. The lead mare lifts her head and pricks her ears. The colts and fillies stop chasing each other's shadows. Foals stand closer to their mothers. The old ones stop grazing. They all watch the lead

mare, and wait. The earth holds its breath. Beth's pulse flutters like a moth's wing, and is gone. I go outside to tell Vincent and Melanie and they say they know because the wind has died.

Sitting on top of a sand dune in the Wahiba Desert I thought of all the civilisations that had lived and died there. The desert winds had blown over the once green landscape, obliterating all traces. A year later, back in New Zealand, I thought again of the desert wind as the scorching nor'wester roared over the Canterbury Plains for a whole week. Phrases, poems and books about the wind tended to find me. I saw a beautiful piece of prose engraved on wood in a butcher's shop. I inquired about the name of the carver and rang him to ask where he had found the phrase. He said it was from Gogol's *Dead Souls*. I located the book on a dusty shelf at home and found the quotation: 'Surely the winds themselves must abide within their manes... and hooves which barely touch the earth as they gallop... rent into a thousand shreds, the air roars past you' (1968: 212).

This image was absorbed into my own work in a story called Witches' Winds.

For seven days and seven nights the winds blew in off the Tasman, climbed and descended the Southern Alps and blasted across the Canterbury Plains. Such ferocity was unmatched since records began, according to meteorologists, fuelling concerns about a climate shift... Melvin Huffer finished testing the water level in the Shellharts' well and carried his instruments over to his van, bracing his head against the wind. The roaring in his ears sounded like wild horses stampeding across the Plains. But it was just the wind.

Jan De Blieu (1998) compares the wind to a dragon. She describes it as an organic force that binds humankind together. She goes on to state that many aboriginal cultures believe wind to be the restless spirits of the dead. The ancient Egyptians, North American Indians, and the Aztecs, all had words that simultaneously meant breath, wind and soul (1998: 22). I set my stories in New Zealand, Brazil and Oman, linked by the winds that shape the people and landscape in Canterbury, the winds that fan the fires which disfigure the *Cerrado* in Brazil and the desert winds that blow in Arabia, and the many ways loss, grief and reconnection to life shape the inner landscape.

In a story set in Brazil called *The Season for Burning*, the fires blacken the landscape:

To the east the road led into dense scrubland. Twisted black *sucipira* trees and *buriti* palms stood against the glassy blue sky. To the west lay the city, the shining new high rises obscured by billowing smoke. This was the season for burning. The green spaces that were not already covered with rubbish were rapidly being consumed by smouldering black. I never saw who lit the fires, though Simone said it was the small boys who tended the skinny cattle in the scrub. 'They believe the grass will not come back in the spring if they don't burn it now. When I first came here I used to go out every day to put out the fires, but it was a waste of time. They just came back and lit them again.'

In this story, the *cerrado* is a metaphor for Simone's grief and eventual reconnection to life after a messy divorce. She says:

'Me? Well, I committed myself to saving the *cerrado*. When it is withered and scorched, as you see it now, it seems inconceivable that anything could ever grow again. But the rains will come, the grass will grow and the flowers will bloom. There is always the *cerrado*.'

One of my colleagues in Oman told me that during a bleak period of her life in England she stopped by an aviation club and asked to be taken up in a glider. She said, 'I just wanted to be flown around the sun and silence and watch the autumn from above.' During her flight she became aware of being part of a much larger landscape and this gave her a different perspective on her current situation. I remembered this image in the autumn of 2005 when I flew from Christchurch to Kaikoura in a four-seater plane. As we flew over the Canterbury Plains we could see our house below. To allow us to see it more closely the pilot did a 'maximum rating' turn which somehow defied gravity. The feelings of disorientation and dislocation were immense. I didn't know where the horizon was or where 'up' and 'down' were. When he pulled out of the turn I sat frozen in terror and determined that when we landed I would get a bus back to Christchurch. However, the sky was so blue and the sea sparkled with light and I was struck by the way the Plains connected to the mountains, the rivers flowed to the sea, the forests turned into scrub.

Looking down on familiar landscapes from this new perspective was exhilarating and by the time we got to Kaikoura the idea of travelling back by bus had evaporated. It occurred to me that this flight was a metaphor for my changing perspectives as I experienced life after the death of my daughter—the times I lost my orientation, the times I was frozen with terror, the moments of insight when all the pieces fitted together. Once again I had been offered a metaphor for my grief. It was also a metaphor for how I was trying to shape my stories, set in countries separated by physical, cultural and spiritual boundaries, but connected to a larger 'landscape' by the commonality of the human experience.

When my daughter was a child she liked me to make up stories for her, just as I'd liked my father to make up stories for me. 'Tell me a story,' she used to say, 'Tell it out of your mouth'. The psychoanalyst, Bruno Bettelheim (1976), theorised that in listening to stories, children identify with the central character who triumphs over adversity and are thus encouraged to face life with confidence. Similarly, adults can enter the space of a story and create a synthesis between internal and external realities. In reading a story it becomes possible to take that story off the page and use it to articulate one's own story.

Nafisi discusses the often blurred boundaries between fiction and reality and asserts that through imagination it is possible to retrieve what has been lost (2004). Writing fiction that blended the imagined with aspects of my grief allowed me to 'give sorrow words' in a way I could not otherwise have done. This process helped me retrieve the

lost creative part of myself and this retrieval reconnected me to life. In doing so I identify with Virginia Woolf's assertion that:

Imaginative work... is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners... But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in midair by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to the grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in (Woolf, 1929, p. 45).

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