**Writing the Self and Bereavement: dialogical means and markers of moving through grief**

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**Abstract**

That expressive writing can be a beneficial response to trauma or grief is well-established in the literature. Grief research also shows that the majority of people are resilient in the face of the death of loved ones. That said, traditional rituals around loss are no longer ubiquitous, well-known phase models of bereavement are contested, and ‘unfinished business’ can create difficulties in the face of loss. Increasingly, bereavement scholars speak of a need for individuals in western society to make meaning of their own grief through narrative construction, though little is said about what constitutes a beneficial story. The author takes an autoethnographic approach to write and reflect on her spouse’s illness and death and explores through a multi-voiced expressive dialogue a personal issue around her bereavement. In an analysis of her writing, using Dialogical Self Theory, she identifies markers which may be indicative of the development of a beneficially constructed narrative. The model of writing-for-transformation is used to describe the overall intent of the process, while the dialogical markers show how progress may be identified.

**Keywords:** writing the self, bereavement, fragmented identity, narrative, dialogical self theory, transformation through writing, career construction

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**Introduction**

*‘…we need to become more familiar with what is going on inside us; we must learn to recognize our feelings and motivations, and genuinely get to know ourselves. This is necessary if we are to adjust to the new reality brought about by loss.’ (Julia Samuel, Grief Works, 2017, xiv)*

In her famous memoir on widowhood, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion makes this strange observation by another author, ‘…death, even if sudden or accidental gives advance warning of its arrival’ (2005, 26). When I read this one winter evening several weeks after my spouse Frans’s death, I was struck by this comment. It seemed I had indeed received advance warnings of his illness and eventual passing – there were three moments that seemed to me like premonitions. Despite his upbeat nature and high energy levels, it was not entirely unexpected that he would be diagnosed with terminal cancer in April 2018 and die that November.

The first sign arrived the summer before Frans’s diagnosis, I noticed I was strongly drawn to read Carolyn Ellis’s book *Final Negotiations: a story of love, loss and chronic illness* (1995) where she tells of her relationship with Gene Weinstein and his eventual death of emphysema. A student of mine had asked what I thought of the book as we were both delving further into autoethnography and I said I’d read it with great interest and then added, ‘it feels like it will prepare me.’ I noted this additional comment, hearing myself say it and then wondering why I had said it. It was as if some intuition had slipped between the cracks, but I decided at the time that my being drawn to the book must have been related to the (other) parallels in the story: an age gap between the partners and a strong, complicated and passionate relationship between intellectuals.

Another sign was my keen interest in helping a student of mine, whose husband had died of cancer, to co-author an article on her bereavement where she used poetry to help her make meaning (McClocklin and Lengelle 2018). That article came into print two years after its initial online publication, in the middle of Frans’s illness. I remember the surreal sensation of holding it in my hands at my desk right behind where he sat very ill on the couch and would spend the last months of his life.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The third warning was more instinctive: in the fall of 2017 I noticed a strange smell on Frans’s breath – a smell I had encountered before when a friend embraced me on the day of my PhD defence. She died of oesophageal cancer within a year and a half of me having noticed the odour. I told Frans of the smell and he was immediately alarmed, as if something in him shook awake, ‘don’t say that!’ I asked him directly, ‘what are you afraid of?’ and he replied, ‘that they will diagnosis me with terminal cancer and that I will die.’ A year later Frans had died, the tumour was indeed already dangerously malignant in his belly in 2017 but was not yet the source of physical pain.

Why do I tell this story? Do I write it as if to say that our deepest intuitions can help prepare us for events we often describe as random and unexpected? Why did Didion say it and elaborate by telling the story of her husband and how he had already told her that his heart would get him in the end (he did indeed die mid-sentence at their dinner table of heart failure). I believe describing these perceived warnings help me (and Didion) to better accept the death of our loved one.

Telling our stories this way allows us to make of fragments and memories a coherent tale that comforts and makes sense; narrative construction allows us to weave threads of continuity (Savickas in McIlveen and Patton 2007). In current bereavement literature, this type of meaning-making through narrative is even considered vital to adaptive grieving (Thompson and Neimeyer 2014) and writing our story of loss is one way to do it (Den Elzen 2018).

As I write and use terms from narrative theory to reflect on what I’ve written, I notice that I place myself in the story in a way that I can make of this tragedy a ‘quest narrative’ (Frank 1995). I am not just the victim of circumstance but a human on a grief journey which might make me stronger; I am experiencer, observer and narrator. I am showing myself that active engagement is possible, creatively soothing and at times even satisfying. As well, my quest story shows the dual-process of grieving: the widow in the midst of loss-orientation as well as the heroine moving deliberately into the future (i.e. restoration-orientation)[[2]](#endnote-2). There are also other ‘selves’ that ask for attention and that I witness, for instance, the inner healer who advises about getting to bed on time and exercising, the academic intrigued by all the research on bereavement, the lover getting used to being unpartnered, the writer eager to articulate the experience, the hermit-monk preferring to sit still with the magnitude of this happening in my life. In other words, my dialogical selves speak – they are multi-voiced ‘I-positions’ (or selves), aspects of my identity as described and conceptualized by Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010). I will explore this in more detail below with the aim of determining whether I can identity useful ‘markers’ or particular I-positions (or combinations thereof) that point to beneficial narrative development.

Of course, I could have told a different story – equally true – about what happened in those months leading up to Frans’s diagnosis and death. I could have said that all along we thought he had kidney stones and that we were in shock when he found out it was an advanced malignant ureter tumour. This story seems to serve a different purpose: while we were still telling it, it served as a kind of restitution narrative (Frank 1995) – he was ill, but this could be overcome and we would eventually go back to normal. Later, when the cancer diagnosis was made, this story served another purpose: in the telling, we experienced ourselves as innocent and surprised – worthy of the compassion and the care of others and not to blame.

A third story we could have told about Frans’s illness and death was the chaos narrative (Frank 1995) where this incredibly unfair and tragic reality came into our lives, that we were undeserving of such a fate and that we would rail against it. Friends who visited, regularly asked us if we were angry, which seemed to suggest we had a right to such a story or a better outcome. Frans (as atheist) and me (as agnostic) simply replied, ‘at whom would we be angry?’ We did not choose this third narrative – it felt foreign to us and unhelpful. I believe one of the reasons it felt particularly foreign was because we’d trained ourselves over the span of many years – in our personal lives, but also within the framework of our work in personal development and career learning – that cultivating agency is the correct response to disorienting dilemmas, no matter how difficult. The questions we as researchers, creators of ‘career writing’ and identity development through writing (Meijers and Lengelle 2012) faced in practice (e.g. career choice, job-loss, workplace injustice and other boundary experiences) were in essence the same as this big problem of impending death. This to us meant that the fitting response was to promote openness and not hopelessness. Frans, as he customarily positioned himself in the face of adversity, asked himself, ‘what can I learn from this?’ and my response from many years of using writing as a form of inquiry was, ‘Is it true that this wasn’t supposed to happen? Can I absolutely know?’ (Katie 2002).

**Beyond narrative categories**

In the above introduction, I tell particular stories about Frans’s illness and death and I use the bereavement literature and basic conceptual frameworks from narrative theory to reflect on them. Concretely, I used the frame of the quest, restitution and chaos narrative categories (Frank 1995) to identify how I am positioning myself, to elaborate on the purpose of such stories and to create conscious meaning for both the griever and the researcher in myself. My urge to write and to interpret, analyse and describe what appears on the page (e.g. through such frames as dialogical self theory) is also motivated by my need to enlarge the real and symbolic space I perceive for living, much in the same way we envisioned this for developing career agency (Muijen, Lengelle, Wardekker and Meijers 2018).

In the next section, instead of telling stories and reflecting in hindsight on their narrative shape and purpose as I have here, I will use the writing-the-self process as a way of unfolding new meanings in an area of my grieving that was more ambivalent and which therefore made meaning-making more difficult.

Ultimately, there are three questions I am asking and proposing to answer in this article: (1) how might an exercise in writing-the-self (e.g. expressive dialogue writing) and my analysis of this writing assist me in addressing a particular personal struggle in my grief; (2) Which dialogical markers might indicate the development of a beneficial (i.e. healing) narrative and/ or personal development? (3) How may grievers, facilitators of writing processes, and researchers benefit from this work?

I will now work within the structure of a more standard format for a research article to articulate the problem, the context of the problem and what my intended exploration will entail.

**The problem and context of the problem**

Problem 1: Grief and meaning construction through writing

That various forms of writing (e.g. expressive, therapeutic, autoethnographic) can offer a response to trauma has been well-established in the literature in both large-scale studies (Pennebaker 2011, 2012) and in practice.[[3]](#endnote-3) The latest grief research also shows that the majority (68%) of people are resilient in the face of the death of loved ones and that social support and the adaptive nature of emotions are key factors in recovery (Bonnano 2009). That said, grief can be prolonged by maladaptive perspectives such as stories that cause guilt or shame or fail to answer questions vital to the griever (Bonanno 2009). Even in cases of ‘normal’ non-pathologised grief, ‘resilient grievers can still benefit from meaning-making and exploring unfinished business’ (Den Elzen 2019, personal correspondence). Ambivalent feelings towards the loved one are common but remain taboo (Miller and Loring 2016); such taboos are captured in folk expressions like ‘Speak no ill of the dead’ (Smith 2014, 77) and risk causing ‘disenfranchised grief’ (Doka 2002). For the latter difficulties, narrative construction may be meaningful, and writing can be a tool to engage in such construction and heal ‘fragmented identity’ – that is, to invite the multiple, sometimes contradictory voices of the self to express themselves and work towards a narrative whole that fosters a stable sense of self (Den Elzen 2017, 2018).

Problem 2: Markers of beneficial narrative

In the broader context of society’s move away from traditional rituals around death, contested phase models of bereavement (McClocklin and Lengelle 2018) and an individualised society where the tensions between independence and inter-dependence have increased (Hermans 2016), developing ways that will foster adaptive grieving are important. Indeed, bereavement scholars increasingly speak of a need for individuals in western society to make meaning of their loss in their own way within a social context (Neimeyer 2016) though little is said about what is needed by a person to do this. As well, as grief counsellor and author Julia Samuel points out, the struggles around grief can be an impetus for personal growth – this sentiment reflects a similar idea of boundary experiences being starting points for career-identity learning (Meijers and Lengelle 2012). This idea is also reflected in the understanding that ‘career construction relies on the idea that people organize their lives around a problem that preoccupies them and a solution that occupies them’ (Savickas 2011, 32).

**The model of transformation through writing**

(Figure here)

In determining how to describe the change processes we were seeing in our teaching and research and to develop the theoretical underpinnings for Career Writing (Lengelle 2014), Frans and I developed the ‘Transformation-through-Writing model’ which we first described in *The Journal of Poetry Therapy* (Lengelle and Meijers 2009). We agreed that this type of meaning-oriented learning begins with a ‘boundary experience’ (Meijers and Lengelle 2012) – something that challenges our sense of well-being (loss of loved one, a difficult career choice or transition) and is complicated by our unique – often unhelpful – response to it that is rooted in our particular life themes (i.e. preoccupations) as Savickas (2011) describes.

Our first story about the event or situation is usually a limiting default narrative (a first story) and we must learn to tell a different, more life-giving (second) story. We do this by engaging with feelings and at the same time observing the drama of our stories with some detachment. Using a variety of writing exercises while in dialogue with ourselves and others (both literally and in imagination), we move through learning stages identified by Bill Law (1996): sensing, sifting, focusing and understanding – though not necessarily in linear fashion. Ultimately the new story we tell about our lives and our lived experience is one which uplifts us (i.e. it often includes acceptance, a shift in perspective, a new sense of meaning) and culminates in a more stable sense of self.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This model *describes* the movement we would ideally see in narrative development, however, it does not identify actual markers for noting the progress. In the context of bereavement, there are a variety of assessment tools to measure the positive or negative progression of bereavement (e.g. using detailed questionnaires and scored inventories).[[5]](#endnote-5) However, there are few approaches by which to assess textual pieces (e.g. written narratives) in this context. Although Pennebaker et al. (2015) have developed a word analysis programme called the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC), which is intended for large-scale quantitative text studies of expressive writing (Pennebaker 2011; also see Lengelle 2014), there are few theoretically powerful frameworks that allow a qualitative analysis of personal writing samples.

In summary, the two key problems being addressed here are:

Problem 1: How can writing-the-self exercises assist in moving a person through grief when bereavement is made more difficult by an issue or question vital to the griever? (This first problem is of special significance to grievers and to those who might facilitate writing-the-self in the context of bereavement.)

Problem 2: How can researchers determine (i.e. by which markers) whether beneficial progress is being made? (This second problem is of special significance to those who might facilitate and/ or aim to research writing-the-self processes in this context.)

**Methodology**

In this exploration, I combine autobiographical writing with various theoretical reflections from career narrative theory. What I am doing is in fact autoethnographic in nature: autoethnographic research makes use of a researcher’s personal experience to describe – and examine or critique – a particular phenomenon (Ellis and Bochner 1996). While it seems much of academia chooses deliberately to leave the mess of human emotions out of the process of research, autoethnography readily embraces what actually happens in human lives. However, the approach involves more than storytelling – it combines compelling personal narrative with analysis: the researcher is at once telling and interpreting the telling through particular frames in an attempt to make meaning and gain new insights that may also be meaningful to others (Ellis and Bochner 1996). The theoretical framework I will use to interpret a sample of my writing is the Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Gieser 2012). Note that the descriptions of this theoretical frame are intentionally brief to begin with. It will become clear in the analysis of a sample of an *expressive dialogue* how they may be used to identify ‘markers’ of beneficial grieving.

**Dialogical Self Theory**

This theory, developed by Hubert Hermans, defines the self as comprising a multiplicity of selves in the landscape of the mind (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010). The self is not seen as a singular ‘authentic self’ but as a combination of I-positions (reasonably autonomous voices) in conversation with one another, positioning and re-positioning themselves in response to both inner and outer perceptions, realities, and conflicts. I-positions may be roles (e.g. I-as-widow, I-as-writer) but they may also be particular identifications (e.g. I-as-creator of my own recipe for bereavement) as well as internalised others, (I-as-the-voice of Frans who still speaks to me).

The development of a beneficial narrative seen through the lens of Dialogical Self Theory can be described as a progression from expressing I-positions (what is important to someone), expanding those I-positions (deepening and widening the initial positions that appear), the appearance of meta-positions (positions which can observe and make space for a dialogical exchange that may lead to new combinations or coalitions of I-positions) and the development of promoter positions (positions that are actionable, innovative and open to the future).[[6]](#endnote-6) These four types of positions each play a progressive role in meaning-making and speak to the fact that ‘the self has become a project that requires care, wisdom, planning and a sense of direction in order to make effective use of its strengths and weaknesses in changing and unpredictable environments’ (Hermans 2016, xiii). The term ‘dialogical markers’ will be used to describe how these four I-positions – individually and together – help situate us in a particular relationship to the happening or struggle so that we may explore specific dimensions, limitations and/ or possibilities of our experience in ways that are both cognitive (i.e. understood) as well as embodied (i.e. felt).

**A dialogical writing exercise**

The writing in this section aims to show the process by which unfinished business in the face of loss may be addressed. The written work includes (1) letter-like fragments addressed to my deceased partner; and (2) an expressive multi-voiced dialogue which zeros in on the issue I perceive as unfinished business. This writing represents the main data that will later be analysed using Dialogical Self Theory.

**1) Letters to my deceased partner**

*Dear Frans,*

*You said if I ever needed you, you would be there, all I had to do was call. This always makes me smile because you said it so cheerily and you were an atheist. I have called you on to the page many times these last months and this has kept me feeling close to you. You will have predicted, my love, that I was going to use writing to try and figure out that irksome thing between us too.*

In the most up-to-date research on grief, it is said that a part of adaptive grieving is retaining a relationship with the loved one (Neimeyer 2016). However, that may be easier said than done. In a number of widow stories I’ve read recently, ‘unfinished business’ seems to challenge relationships and preoccupy grievers. In one of the stories, for instance, a woman is troubled by her husband’s suicide and struggles to understand his mental illness (Den Elzen 2017). In another story, a wife wrestles with the love and aversion she has for her terminally ill alcoholic husband (told in *Grief Works*, Julia Samuel). In that same book, a man in grief counselling admits his wife was both the centre of their family but also a bossy and resentful person – there are some things he does not miss, while he also cherishes her and shares this appreciation with their sons (Samuel 2017). These stories have made it easier for me to write about my own difficulties and to respect myself that such questions are relevant to a surviving spouse. As expressive writing researcher James Pennebaker (2011) observed, positive experiences rarely need integration, but negative ones do.

*Frans, when I came home to Edmonton on November 30th, two weeks after you died, I wasn’t the model griever. Although we shared so much love and intimacy and did such inspired work and our closeness endured, even my attraction for you did not wane (to your surprise) as you became an emaciated man, I was not at peace. By my own estimation, I should have sung your praises…but…*

I was also angry. A deeply painful thread of it ran through everything else I was feeling.

*In our work we had already learned that emotions often point to something vital and can therefore be a doorway into exploring life themes, so I tried my best not to pretend that I wasn’t feeling extremely vexed and shared my struggle with a few friends.*

Marriage researcher John Gottman’s (2011) studies show that a surprising two-thirds of all marital conflict relates to ‘perpetual problems’ – things couples cannot fix but can only hope to manage. In light of that statistic, Frans and I had very little to complain about, though we did have one family-related issue that caused ongoing friction and now that Frans is dead, there seems to be no way of dealing with it.

*Frans, readers might wonder why I still cared about this in early December – shouldn’t I have been missing you instead, after all you were dead and our troubles died with you. There are always those who will say, ‘remember the good things’ but that is as futile as saying ‘do what you’re good at’ to a career client. You would agree with me that such statements ignore what we might learn from personal struggles and that we must speak of learning processes and learning environments, not simply of destinations. I did not want to stay angry (about a past I could not change) but I also simply could not stop*.

*There was a step to take – at least to try and take – one that might lead to a different perspective or insight.*

**2) Expressive Written Dialogue: *Excerpt from The Widow Project***

I undertook the following writing exercise from Neimeyer and Konopka’s (2018) book chapter on creative ways to respond to bereavement because this exercise was aimed at addressing ‘a specific issue around this loss.’ In the period since Frans’s death, I have read myriad books on grief and if there is a writing prompt or approach that I imagine might be useful to me, I will engage with it as I did here. This particular exercise begins with the following five questions and I used it to explore how I viewed Frans and our relationship. What resulted became the entry point for the dialogue that followed which allowed me to play with the content and focus on the unfinished business I referred to earlier.

1. What is the special quality of the loved one?
2. What is his unique role in relation to me?
3. How did I experience myself in relation to him?
4. What are my dominant feelings in the wake of his death?
5. What would help me with a specific issue around this loss? (Neimeyer & Konopka 2018, 111)
6. Frans’s special quality in our relating was his dialogue about life, love and work. That is pretty general though. Can I get closer and more specific about that? We spent at least two hours a day talking about life, work, personal growth, and in that conversation we developed a lot of our ideas for research and writing. Dialogue was also a source of our troubles; this sounds ironic, but in a dinner conversation we once had with our career colleagues, someone mentioned an insight that Adler had – I’ll paraphrase it here: *the thing you at first love about your partner is the thing you might end up despising*.
7. Frans’s unique relationship to me: lover, spouse, research and writing partner.
8. How did I experience myself in the relationship? Loved, loving, inspired, cared for, challenged, and dismissed.
9. Dominant feelings in the wake of his death: sadness and anger.
10. The specific issue I would like to work on through writing: feeling dismissed in conversations and being angry about this.[[7]](#endnote-7)

After writing out the answers to these five questions, I built in a kind of inner pause. I sat with the responses while postponing any tendency to find answers or draw conclusions. For a less experienced writer, such a step may require a facilitator who invites the participant to sit for a moment and become acquainted with any bodily sensations and underlying feelings. Then such a facilitator (in my case an inner counsellor) might ask:

(Inner) Counsellor: are there any sensations, images or words that are coming up as you sit with the response to the questions you’ve written down?

Reinekke (sensing): I am getting a sense of a big muddy, oily pile of goop that I will call ‘the problem’.

Counsellor: Let’s put a chair out for ‘Goop’ – the messy problem you felt was never resolved between you. There is a chair for the part of you that really wants to be heard on this over here. You can sit here and address Goop. Let’s start with these and we can add positions as needed. I’ll be here with you as a witness.

(The mass seems to gurgle and shift a bit like a Jabba-the-hut. I note the pile kind of makes me giggle inside – it’s so ridiculous looking and not scary.)

Rein-who-wants-to-be-heard (RwH): Holy shit, that is a stinky pile of stuff!

Goop: (gurgles and burps): Yes, that is exactly what this is. (More burps and gurgles).

Counsellor: Take a closer look. What else do you see?

RwH: I see straw mixed in there. Oh, jeez, I can hear Frans saying, ‘yes, yes, Reinekke, didn’t I always say love is the ability to transform shit into fertiliser?’

Frankly, I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. I am seeing this huge pile of shit and Frans’s perspective on it. He’s excited by it and I thought it was really just a huge pile of unwanted crap. I’m looking closer and I see there are also the sharp points of pitch forks hidden in there. When I tried to clean this up with him, we hit those sharp edges. Sometimes we did move some of the pile with the pitchforks, actually.

Counsellor: Are you saying this is not the same pile of shit it always was?

(This feels like an important insight).

RwH: It looks the same, but I see there is fresh manure piled on top each time as well.

Counsellor: What happened to the shit you did manage to clean up or use as fertiliser?

RwH: (I look to my left and have to cry immediately). Oh, my. I see that there are huge fields of golden crops! Gorgeous fields! Our books, our thoughts, our love! It’s very stunning. Very stunning what we’ve created out of that pile of shit and the ground that was there waiting already. (Crying, tender, grateful).

Frans: See, my love, it was never the same old shit different day! (He’s standing right next to me, shining).

Counsellor: (to RwH) How is this for you?

RwH: I am feeling his compassion and love. My mind is trying to barge in and judge me for not having the ‘growth mindset’ in this area, but most of me is just grateful to see this. (To Frans): It doesn’t mean I liked the way you shouted or got ugly about things we argued about! (To the counsellor): I note a holding on to something – a kind of grudge.

Counsellor: Let’s put the grudge in a chair too. What can you tell me about ‘Grudge?’

RwH: Grudge is like a version of me in the shape of ropes that are tightly wound – especially rope arms tightly across the chest. The words that go with it are…

Grudge: Damn you for your rude belligerent, asshole behaviour! What gave you the right to be insulting?! (Tightening around itself).

Counsellor: (to Frans) So, do you recognise this? This immense frustration – the anger? What is your sense about it?

Frans: (sighs) Yes. I see it; I felt it. I was rude at times. I was frustrated. But I never meant it the way that she took it – well, sometimes I did mean it, but I thought she would forgive and forget. I have a short fuse and have always been a hot head.

Grudge: He has very poor manners when he’s challenged! I’m not the only one who has said and experienced this.

RwH: I didn’t expect perfection, but kind words are really important to me. And if unkind things are said, I want that to be acknowledged. Then I can move past them. My need here is to be heard and to be treated respectfully.

Grudge: (Growls, facing away, rope arms still crossed). He didn’t fight fair! And he knows it.

Counsellor: What would help untie you a little, Grudge?

Grudge: She DID NOT deserve that shit!

Frans: (sitting in a chair nearby, looking defeated). I knew she was very angry with me. Yes, I knew. I told her the evening before I died that my own fear had often provoked my reactivity. Negative emotions often scared me.

RwH: (saddened) He did own his part. But, are there even such things as ‘negative emotions’ – aren’t there only emotions and negative ways to respond to them or painful ways to act them out?

Grudge: (Arms so tight there is some tearing of small fibres of the rope near shoulders and elbows. Mumbling something about injustice in a terse voice.)

Counsellor: (takes a long deliberate breath and looks at everyone in the different positions and chairs). Let’s sit with this for a moment. Reinekke didn’t feel heard and wanted to be included and trusted and not blamed, Frans was reactive in an attempt to deflect his fear, but was also well-intentioned, Grudge tightened around the problem and Goop got bigger and bigger. What is needed for you to move more of Goop into new fields?

RwH: I’m doing it by writing, like just now. So, I think I can clear Goop over time – it is a kind of harvest actually and I look positively on that. Grudge is the one that needs attention.

Counsellor: Grudge, what do you need? What would be good for you? What would the best rope-life look like to you?

Grudge: Being woven into a hammock where the tension across the whole of me is even and in harmony. I’d like to hold R in that hammock so she can feel my firm embrace. I’m the one who holds and rocks. This was about justice!

Counsellor: Tell me more about justice and what that looks like.

Grudge: To be fair! To speak kindly! To be honest about agendas.

Counsellor: I’m noticing another voice who wants to speak to this.

Justice: For R this is about truth and kindness; the two trees (pillars) of justice. The space that is needed for a true dialogue of equals requires an interaction where the intention is to leave the dignity of each speaker intact – always. This is a basic premise in R’s book of ‘Laws for Living.’ This is not a topic of debate for her, but a basic rule for loving. That it cannot always be achieved, especially with loved ones, is difficult for her to accept.

Counsellor: This insight could reveal a fundamental dimension of this problem. In some families, voices can be raised and insults can be thrown around in the privacy of the home. Members may not like it much, but they can move on and sometimes don’t think much of it. They do not necessarily see it as a threat to their bond.

RwH: Woah! It scared me. It left scratches. It did feel like a threat to our bond!

Frans: Dear, love, to me it never was! I didn’t know I’d frightened you so. I don’t condone it, even! But after we’d fight, I’d forget all about it five minutes later as all the good new experiences with you flooded my mind.

RwH: (said like a sad realisation) I know that’s what you told me, even in your letter.

I see that we were both afraid.

Frans: Yes, my dear. We were both afraid, mostly because we wanted to be together so much! Remember my last words to you, ‘I was so lucky with you!’

Counsellor: (Takes a deep relaxed breath and nods). It sounds painful and beautiful. Grudge, it sounds like you defended R from some of the pain.

Grudge: That’s my job. But (sadly) I didn’t do it very well. (Ropes loosening with a sense of futility and surrender).

Frans: (sad and open-hearted) Growing up, I never learned how to be or deal with emotions. That’s what I learned with R – I’m so grateful for the last ten years of my life! Our life and our work were so vibrant because of this! Some of my friendships with colleagues and others were much deeper in those later years because I learned about having and allowing feelings. My life was always good, but my years with R were the best! That’s what I told everyone!

Counsellor (To F): What I’m hearing was a need to control emotions and situations that challenged you. And not having experience with emotional regulation, sometimes things got out of hand. (To RwH and Grudge and Goop): Often when someone tries to shut down emotional situations with expressions of anger, they have been taught to not express their needs and they have been doing it to themselves for a long time too. (To R): What I’m hearing about you is that unkind words are really scary for you and you associate them with losing love and connection.

RwH: Actually, I associate them with damage and destruction of the relationship, not as a way of blowing off steam. When someone is aggressive like this, to me it is sign that love cannot be trusted.

Counsellor: How do you feel now?

RwH: I am deeply sad. And filled with love too. I feel heard. I feel his good intentions as well (deep sigh).

Goop: (large pieces of the shit and mess are falling on the floor beside the chair – the whole pile is shifting and becoming a bit less of a mess). I’m shaking loose here, don’t mind me! There, I feel less heavy now. Ahh…yes. Wonderful, more air! New things will grow!

Counsellor: How are you doing over there, Grudge? (Using a very compassionate voice) – How are you? What do you need?

Grudge: The acknowledgement helps. I would like to give up my job, if you don’t mind. I’d rather go hang in the garden on those trees – this was not an easy role and I’m tired and a bit threadbare. You can call me Mr. Curmudgeon now, it’s a much nicer word. You can call me in anytime you really need me, of course. Consider me your safety net.

**Initial Post-writing Reflections**

The original dialogue I wrote was more raw than the one shared here but it had the same purpose: giving myself space to be heard on a particularly painful point and seeing if there was a way to work it through despite no longer having Frans as my living dialogue partner*.* Upon revisiting this dialogue and reworking it for this article, the process at first reignited anger, but as I worked with my deepest intention of honouring us both, cherishing our bond and meeting my need for respect and acknowledgment, the dialogue and the accompanying feelings began to transform. It is important to mention that one of the underlying principles I used (expressed by the counsellor I-position) is the importance of identifying feelings and (unmet) needs in order to facilitate non-violent communication (Rosenberg 2015). It is also noteworthy that people may feel more upset directly after writing about trauma and pain, but the benefits have been documented and are felt – even physiologically (Pennebaker 1997).

Reinekke: Frans, what do you think of this draft?

Frans: It sounds like us, doesn’t it? (Ha! And I’m really proud you’re still working so hard!)

**Interpreting results**

*‘Those whom we love and lose are no longer where they were before. They are now wherever we are.’  St. John Chrysostom*

As described briefly above and based on previous research in narrative development, the stages used to describe and analyse the movement towards a potentially beneficial narrative using Dialogic Self Theory begins with an expression of I-positions (articulations of what is important to someone). These are then deepened and broadened to form expanded I-positions; and then meta- (and finally) promoter positions emerge or develop. This is important because according to Hermans, a meta position is one where a person observes from the side and articulates what s(he) sees. A meta-position: (1) permits some distance from the other positions; (2) provides an overarching view so that several positions can be seen simultaneously and their mutual relationships are visible; (3) makes it possible to see the linkages between positions as part of one’s personal history or the collective history of the group or culture to which one belongs; and (4) facilitates the creation of a dialogical space (in contact with others or one’s self) in which positions and counter-positions engage in dialogical relationships.[[8]](#endnote-8) Moreover, promoter positions, in Hermans’s account, have four corresponding characteristics:

(a) they ‘imply a considerable openness towards the future and have the potential to produce a diverse range of more specialized but qualitatively different positions in the future of the self’;

(b) they integrate a variety of new and already existing positions in the self in a way that results in a ‘more adaptive self’;

(c) they have the potential to ‘reorganize the self towards a higher level of development’;

(d) they function as guards of the continuity of the self , but at the same time they give room for discontinuity so that ‘promoter positions function as innovators of the self.’ (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 228).

In other words, the potential benefit derived from using Dialogic Self Theory is achieved by creating meta- and promoter positions in narrative. In the expressive writing dialogue excerpted above, the broadening and expanding of I-positions towards meta and finally promoter positions can be observed going through the following four stages:

1. I-positions: in the letter-style writing to Frans as well as the counsellor-led expressive dialogue, the first I-positions appeared (representing what was salient to me as spouse and griever). These I-positions don’t necessarily have clear labels yet; here they sounded like ‘there is something unresolved here’, ‘Reinekke sensing’ and ‘Reinekke who wants to be heard (RwH)’. They signify the first explorations into the issue and are frequently the voices that the griever (and those who know the griever) already know. Without resolution (i.e. narrative reframing), these I-positions tend to repeat themselves. These voices were indeed not new to me and thus they were readily available as I put pen to page.

In part, the five questions I took from Neimeyer and Konopka (2018) served to put these positions on the page for observation; this also applied to my initial writing to Frans in letter form. By writing ‘to him’ I felt as if I’d invited Frans as an implied listener or personal audience I-position. Not only as a reflection of my need to be heard but also so I could create some safety around sharing this personal part of our life. As writers and collaborators on many writing projects the words addressed to him, and later the expressive dialogue with him, brought up unnamed, though important I-positions, such as ‘I-as-sharing’, ‘I-as-collaborating-still’, ‘I-as-wanting to honour’ and ‘I-as-asking-permission indirectly’.

1. Expanded I-positions: this initial position of ‘I-as-wanting to be heard’ expanded fairly quickly into ‘I-as-goop’ (the pile of unresolved shit) and ‘I-as-grudge’ (the internal position that expressed anger, frustration and hopelessness). Expanded I-positions seem to split-off from initial I-positions. In looking at my process, I see them as expressing more specific or underlying positions, perhaps even taboo positions that don’t get named initially. I notice also that both these positions are more ‘juicy’ and ‘concrete’ (more metaphorical) than the initial I-positions. These more metaphorical positions are important in narrative progression because as I have argued separately:

Metaphors make communication and interaction possible between I-positions (i.e. giving voice to life experiences in an internal dialogue) and with others (an external dialogue) by providing a ‘common ground’ for making sense of communicated images, concepts and emotions and thus facilitating the creation of new ways of making meaning (Barner 2011) […] The metaphor offers that which is ‘fuzzy’ – the often half-conscious images, thoughts and feelings that together form an I-position – with a clear label and thus functions as a ‘messenger of meaning’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008). (Lengelle, Meijers and Hughes, 61-62).

Another expanded I-position is I-as-Frans – the voice of the internalised (now deceased) spouse which might be seen as a combination of the ‘real Frans’ (based on knowledge of the person and correspondence) as well as the Frans hoped for (as we imagine on some level our partners wish to understand our points of view and will show their willingness to hear us).

1. Meta-positions: In the dialogue above, the counsellor clearly represents the most essential meta-position. This position moves smoothly between the other positions, facilitating a dialogue between them and creating dialogical space for a meaningful exchange. This position represents the helicopter view that is also peacefully in charge and recognises and holds gently the whole history at the heart of the conversation taking place.

This position does not take sides but acknowledges the relationships and contexts of the emergence of these positions. In various places in the dialogue ‘the counsellor’ pulled together a variety of viewpoints and summarised the motivation and vulnerabilities of each character. Writing about my pain in the presence of this meta-position counsellor created space and safety for my feelings and needs within the dialogue. It also expressed potential motivations and liabilities of each ‘I-position’ in the conversation. In actual therapy, the counsellor does what a meta-position does and for the same reasons.

The experience of noticing and feeling that such a position is available from within (and is not dependent on an actual outside person) can be very calming and can expand one’s personal agency in the moments when a problem seems urgent and unresolvable.

1. Promoter positions: while the meta-position in the writing exercise in the form of the counsellor already encourages openness to the future, the promoter position takes this further and represents a position that makes it possible to act, to create new and integrate existing positions and to express a perspective that is truly open and innovative. In the story I tell above, the writer/ narrator (and researcher of the process) can be seen as key promoter positions. Not only does the writer enter into the scenario in open willingness to find what is there, she also describes the entire process, combining the creative and academic in effective ways. The voice of ‘justice’ as truth and kindness may also serve as a promoter position, for instance in naming its deep value to the author, she is (I am) enabled to base future choices upon it.

In the article as a whole there are several other glimpses of promoter positions: the heroine on the hero’s journey of grief, the academic researcher with a growth mindset, and even the hammock, a metaphorical ‘safety net’ – a place to go when truth and kindness are found wanting. Here the author can rest, reflect and step back into the world more consciously.

**Final Writing Reflection**

In the process of analysis and articulation of the findings, additional positions arose, one in particular in the form of an imagined Mark Savickas (career researcher and counsellor) who acted as both meta- and promoter position. This allowed me – as Julia Samuels (2017) suggests in her grief research – to take the step away from the initial struggle towards personal development (i.e. identity learning).

Savickas: What life theme might be showing up here? How was this struggle with ‘harsh words’ a familiar show? You wouldn’t be so adamant and preoccupied with it if it wasn’t tied to your own life story, don’t you think? (with a smile).

Growing up in my family there was not a lot of room for expressing so-called ‘negative emotions’ (being heard in our needs, feelings and vulnerabilities as children). My impression is that my siblings and I all have a particular sensitivity to ‘harsh words’ which were used to put us in our places. Our upbringing is characterised by a Dutch no-nonsense attitude that Frans also grew up with. The message about feelings from this cultural background seems to be ‘get over it already’ and ‘don’t be a cry baby!’ On the other hand, personal dignity was something highly valued in my family and shouting at home was rare and represented a serious out-of-control situation and was also deemed ‘lower class behaviour.’

If our preoccupations lead us to our occupations, as Savickas claims in his now quite famous adage, and ‘we try to actively master what we passively suffered,’ I can see why I have made my life’s work out of therapeutic writing. My preoccupation with ‘harsh words’ has driven me to work in a field that cultivates words that may heal and not harm. What occupies my work and daily reflections are questions about how poetry, narrative, and written dialogues can address our deepest pain.

**Limitations and reservations**

This autoethnographic exploration with both dialogical and narrative frames of analysis is not generalisable. I am but one writer, one grieving spouse, one researcher and as the literature on grief repeatedly states, the journey is unique to each individual. That said, in speaking with other widows and in reading bereavement stories, ‘unfinished business’ is not unique to me and it is not uncommon to be compelled to write (or at least) tell one’s story as a form of relief and comfort.

An issue that should be mentioned, however, is that it is not a simple matter for anyone to try to write for healing. Not all writing leads to a beneficial narrative. There are dangers: we may over-intellectualize, write as a substitute for action or use writing to ruminate (Pennebaker 2012). My ability to write for myself stems from years of working in the field of writing for personal development and I may still have blind spots as to when writing may be counterproductive. My subjective experience is that I am more at peace as a result of this writing and can articulate a second story about our marital struggles that reflects acceptance and a shift in perspective. I note an increased sense of well-being, but it is also always valuable to examine whether and how other factors contributed to this change (e.g. friends listening with empathy, time passed in bereavement)

Further research is necessary to see whether (and what kind of) writing assists those in bereavement and what kind of writing may inhibit healing (through retraumatization for instance) and what other supports might complement and enhance such processes. From experience with thousands of students over a span of twenty-four years, I would say that such narrative writing processes require facilitation just like other narrative methods do (e.g. life design, career writing, narrative therapy). No matter the endless potential of inner resources of the dialogical self, an external dialogue is a vital part of identity learning.[[9]](#endnote-9)

A final reservation about doing research such as this is the question as to whether one should divulge such personal material. In the process of writing this article and with this concern in mind, I asked several colleagues and peers to tell me whether they felt I had honoured Frans and whether the writing felt both truthful and kind, which they believed it did. In the process of sharing parts of my experience, others report they have been helped in the aftermath of loss as well. Third, research necessarily involves risk-taking and personal development requires courage and openness; it is consequently much easier to encourage others to work with their own ‘unfinished business’ if we as researchers and facilitators have dared. Just as I have benefitted from reading Ellis’s powerfully honest autoethnography and others who struggled, I hope to offer the same in my own tellings. It is perhaps useful to note here that one’s personal story need not match another’s experience nor should it be regarded as ‘the truth’ but rather as one’s story of experience. Writing can be a private activity done within the safety of one’s own notebook or in the context of individual or group facilitation, and as I have done here, be shared selectively. Finally, of course, in addition to feeling more peace in my grief, I concede that this ‘problem’ preoccupied me and was therefore a compelling subject of written reflection. I believe having identified ‘harsh words’ and ‘healing words’ as pointing to life themes, I have the potential to further my personal development in this area, in both work and personal contexts.

**Conclusion**

Most people are adaptive grievers (Bonnano 2009) and do not need counselling or therapeutic writing to process their loss. What people may need, however, are ways to work with ‘unfinished business’ – aspects of loss and our view of loved ones that may create ambivalence (Miller and Loring 2016) and/ or fragmented identity (Den Elzen 2017, 2018).

What might (1) grievers, (2) facilitators of writing, and (3) researchers learn from what I have done here?

The value, I propose, for grievers is three-fold: First, to see that there are ways of telling and writing stories that can promote healthy grieving. Second that expressing ‘unfinished business’ can be useful (and need not be taboo); and third that writing dialogically can help us create from loss experiences opportunities for personal development.

What those facilitating creative writing processes may learn from this telling is that there are indeed many I-positions present and accessible to engage with and draw from and that those whispering in the margins or disenfranchised or seemingly socially unacceptable voices of the self can be coaxed out in useful ways to facilitate healing. Finally, both facilitators and researchers alike may benefit from the frameworks introduced here to reflect on written material.

The quest, restitution and chaos narrative categories (Frank 1995) at the beginning of this article offer us a way to label our stories in a general way. The writing through transformation model describes the desired process of identity development. And finally, the dialogical self theory (in the form of ‘dialogical markers’) allows us to identify specific elements of change that we might use for coding or for mapping narrative development as we position and reposition ourselves in the wake of loss.

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1. Uncannily, my co-author Patricia McClocklin emailed me to invite me to get together the day I started this article and I had just re-read our article. We only speak about once or twice a year, so the timing was truly unusual and cause for some gratitude. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Stroebe and Schut 1999; Buglass 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Blake et al. 2006, Bolton 1999, De Salvo 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For a full description of the model, see Lengelle 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Hogan & Schmidt; Holland, Milman, Neijmeyer and Gillies; Caserta, Lund and Utz; Hibberd, Burke and Neimeyer. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Lengelle, Meijers and Hughes 2017, Winters et al. 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. A note to the reader: ‘dismissed’ is one aspect of a range and richness of relating. All of the dialogue written here is imagined though some of it is based on things Frans said to me and wrote in his final letter to me in which he mentions our conflict and his perspective on it. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Described in Hermans and Hermans-Konopka; see also Lengelle, 2016, 39-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Lengelle and Meijers 2009, Meijers and Lengelle 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)