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Out of Order:
To Debbie and Dave, Chris and Bill, MJ and John

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(note: authors are ordered alphabetically, not in terms of contribution)

Abstract

In this paper, a professor and a group of doctoral students reflect on the video *Out of Order: Dealing with the Death of a Child*, treating the video as research on the topic of grief. The video was shown to the group and then all individuals offered pieces of interpretive writing to show their understanding of what the "participants" in the video were helping us understand about the topic.

Keywords

grief, death of a child, hermeneutics, interpretation

There is a film that continues to draw me (Moules) as a nursing educator and as a researcher in the hermeneutic tradition. It is a film about the experiences of three dyads of parents who suffered the experience of having a child die[1]. This is a very local, personal film, made for therapeutic purposes to offer help to other parents experiencing the unimaginable and never expected experience of being a bereaved parent. As an educator and researcher, I choose this film deliberately - - it is poignant, powerful, painful, raw, and truthful. I have "used" it in classes on grief because it is so powerful. I have also repeatedly used it in graduate level research classes.

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I myself have likely watched this film close to 50 times and I know it almost by heart.

I ask graduate students if we can treat this delicate and heartfelt video as akin to a transcript of an interview of what it is to be a parent whose child has died. In doing so, it opens itself to the "tragic and loving" relationship of language in interpretation (Moules, 2002; Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015).

I offer this video to students as an invitation to interpretation in all of the rawness of transcripts and unfiltered words, tears, and disclosures. I invite them to take up one aspect of the film that addresses them; I ask them to go away and write about that thing that spoke to them. We part company for only about 45 minutes and then return to read aloud our interpretations. Without exception, this process of giving ourselves over to the words of these parents, to try to find our own words to give them the respect and honor they ask of us, and then to read our own work aloud to others – to see how our words interact and our interpretations grow and change – is nothing short of miraculous.

> Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as is writing but nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind either. In deciphering and interpreting it, a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity….that is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us. (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 163)

I have been engaging in some version of this pedagogical exercise for many years. This year in a doctoral course on analysis in qualitative research, I listened on the edge of my seat with every sense attuned to these doctoral students read aloud their shy, awkward, beautiful, embarrassed, and humble responses to the video. We offer them here as one way that applied hermeneutic interpretation can take a shape. More, we offer them as a thank you to the parents who spoke their hearts in the video.

"I Could Not Stay Where the Policeman Stood" - Lorraine Smith-MacDonald

I could not "stay where the policeman stood." It is a simple statement, a statement that on the surface means nothing. The policeman does not matter; he is only the bearer of bad news. It is what he says that matters. He is irrelevant.

And yet, is possible that he represents more? That it *does matter to say* "I could not stay where the policeman stood"?

To stay means "to cease going forward, to become halted." This is the parody with death. When the recipient hears the death announcement, they often want to run, escape, and leave that place. And yet the reality of death is such that all of life (for that moment) has come to halt; it has ceased going forward. And it is not just in those initial moments. For many grievers, that experience is repeated over and over. They can no longer stay in the presence of those people, those places, and even those things that remind them of their beloved. They must go; they must leave; they must find new places, maybe even finding new ways to flee the painful reality of the death. The policeman cannot always be present.

But as far away from the grief as the grievers run, there is always the experience of finding themselves stopped, halted. The policeman once again reappears. Perhaps it is in our favorite shop, a song on the radio, a food we once ate together. Grief always draws us back to the very place that it all began. Grief requires us to stay where the policeman stood. We must hear what he has to say. We must in time come to accept and believe his words. In time, this tension between running and stopping will quiet, and one day even maybe even stop. Then the griever can say "I stayed where the policeman stood."

The Soft Place of Grief - Katherine Bright

"A soft place to land"…
For couples that have lost a child there is no getting on with life.
There is no choice to move on.
If it weren't for the restlessness that accompanies grief, these couples would have no momentum at all.
But their grief doesn't provide them with a distinct direction or destination.
Their grief feels more like the shock of being pushed out of an airplane and being out of control while they are freefalling through the air.
As they are losing altitude, they have a sensation that they are searching for something.
Exactly what they are looking for is difficult to pinpoint.
Maybe it is a something, maybe it is a person, or just maybe it is just the desire to find something so that they don't have to be alone with their thoughts.
If someone is by his or her side, then he or she can share their loss or maybe to just tell them what they are going to do.
But maybe that person won't know what to do either, maybe that person will be just as lost as they are.
Maybe they are searching for their partner in order to come together rather than floating aimlessly on their own.
But will they be able to hear their partner's sadness?
How can couples share the experience of a loss of a child so closely but suffer it so differently?
Maybe they both need a comfortable place to go and maybe it will be better to if they have someone with them when they find their soft place to land.
Maybe they will be that soft place to land for their partner or maybe the other person will be their comfortable place to stay.
And just maybe the role of a safe place will be passed back and forth between the two partners.
Regardless, they hope to find their soft place to land.

Without Words – Merilee Brockway

This excerpt originated out of my need to make people feel better as well as my own reticence when interacting with people that have suffered a loss.

What struck me from watching the video was the concept of understanding - - how people who have experienced the loss of a loved one need for others to understand them and what they have

been through. If not to understand, then it is to acknowledge their experience, to ask about how they are doing.

Dave suggested that in demonstrating understanding, people should provide less advice and more hugs. This is an interesting concept to consider. A hug is an affectionate embrace, the surrounding of one with another's arms. To hug is to foster, to cherish, to enclose, to provide comfort. The word hug can also mean to think and consider. One can feel protected and safe within a hug; it can be a source of courage. A hug is a physical manifestation of the support, understanding, and protection that was called upon by many of the participants in this video. An embrace can say so much more than words and it will rarely offend. I think that, in avoiding the conversation of "how are you doing" when speaking to someone that has suffered a loss, we are protecting ourselves from discomfort, but also we may be acting out of fear of offending the person who had suffered the loss. Perhaps in offering a hug, we can acknowledge the pain and loss they are experiencing, and provide the support, both physically and emotionally of which they are seeking.

The Embodiment of Grief – Barbara Kathol

Grief has a visceral effect, a strong physicality as one moves through towards healing. Recounting their experience of grief, the parents in the film used active, physical descriptors to tell their story. Grief and sadness were experienced as overwhelming, over-taking, and encompassing their whole body.

Noting a lack of attention to how a person's body experiences loss, Hentz (2002) interviewed women who had experienced a significant loss of a loved one to discover "…the body memory following a loss…" (p. 161). Hentz suggested that to study grief includes an understanding "…of the wisdom of the body as the natural self experiencing the world" (p. 164).

Free Falling

Upon hearing the news of the loss of their child, the parents described a feeling of falling and collapsing. The parent experienced a physical descent, a sense of free falling without destination or purpose. The sense of falling was a manifestation of the overwhelming grief. The solid, comfortable ground of their lives was gone in an instant; the earth was pulled out from under their feet.

> "Fell to my knees."
> "Needed a soft place to fall."
> "Pushed out a door at 30000 feet and free-falling."

Listening to stories of loss, Hentz (2002) sensed a "…physical knowing of the experience that was nonrational (sic) and noncognitive (sic)" (p. 162), suggesting that perception includes both the mind and the body. "Perception and knowing occur through the body's sensing the experience" (p. 164). The parents were experiencing grief through their bodies.

Moving Forward

As time passed, while the parents could move forward, they experienced an isolating and desolate struggle.

> "I was up and she was not, and vice versa."
> "I was restless and had to keep moving."
> "What are we moving on to?"

There was a struggle with everyday life and how to live within their lives again. Unique approaches helped each different individual: breathing the fresh air, taking comfort in going to Mass, starting to listen. The slow path towards recovery was infused with physical sensations, moving towards a different place.

Hentz (2002) described, "…body memory…" (p.165) as a unique expression, a pattern of feeling where the person has the same sensation, relived as it was originally experienced. The women described hearing a song, coming into the season or day of the loss, seeing a phone number, all memories of the person but they also described the physical sensation associated with the memory (Hentz, 2002). It was a physical connection to the earlier experiences, a body memory.

Beginning to Ascend, Together

At different times, and in different ways, the parents described the physical sensation of being uplifted, of moving upward. Parents used words connecting themselves with others. The words were positive and hopeful, suggesting a break from their desolation and loneliness.

> "Joining hands and raising our arms and seeing the stars."
> "Starting to just listen more."
> "We are ascending to the idea that we are not stopping here."

Hentz noted that through listening to their bodies, the women in her study recognized the process of mourning and the cyclic pattern of time. "Knowing the time was as the body perceived the time...the body just knew" (p. 169). "Each experienced a process that had its own time and progression that could not be controlled through will or conscious awareness" (p. 169). Without describing the physical toll grief has on a person, the parents all expressed their grief as a visceral, physical experience through the passage of time.

Free falling, moving forward, and beginning to ascend, together.

Cultivating Spaces to Nurture and Nourish Grieving – Elizabeth Keys

The parents in this video spoke of finding unique spaces along their continuum of grief experiences. These spaces could be different physical locations in which to experience their grief,

a relational space in which to share grief, or a mental space in which new ideas and beliefs were cultivated. One couple contrasted their experiences of the physical spaces of which they sought. Shortly after receiving the news of the death of their child, the mother settled on a single space – her child's bed, while the father spoke of being restless and "pacing," seemingly searching through multiple places for some elusive place where he could settle. Another example of a physical space that seemingly nourished a mother's grief was being outside, at the farm with the fresh air. Relational spaces seemed to hold significance for the ability to nurture these parents' grief. One of the fathers spoke of making space to experience grief differently than his wife, as a mother, would. For him, the relational space between a father and child held significance for opening up a unique space for grief. Another father spoke of his wish that other people in the family's life would join them in a relational space for grieving, rather than avoid it. One couple spoke of the ups and downs they would experience relating to one another's grief, often not being in sync with each other's struggles and occupying different emotional and mental spaces. These parents' experiences seemed to allow the couple a chance to lean on one another and offer strength when their partner needed it most. Other times, a partner may be so far away in a different mental or emotional space that the other would only be able to wait for the low to pass, until they were once again within arm's reach to grasp on to, if only for a brief moment, and move on to exchange spaces.

Reordered Worlds – Alexandra Robinson

It was only a few weeks ago that I attended my father's funeral. Although it was, and is, hard to accept that we will not have his physical presence with us any longer, his funeral was a celebration of a life well lived. This is how it should be-- it is the natural order of things. When parents lose a child, the order of life is abruptly disrupted and the bereaved parents are left to navigate a universe that seems to be governed by anarchy. One of the mothers described that upon learning of her daughter's death, she felt like she "went into the twilight zone." "You're in shock, you don't want to believe it." You can't run, there is nowhere to go, no place to hide from the storms of sorrow that have become the climate of this universe, this twilight zone. "You just can't hide it." And how could she hide with a "neon sign on her saying, 'this person is in pain' "? "Running away does not help, you need a safe haven, a soft place to fall."

What kind of universe is this that does not respect the correct order of life and death itself and then has the audacity to prescribe how to grieve and in what order? "Each of us grieves differently, there is not a schedule, you can't plan it, and you can't fix it." Who are these people that give advice instead of comfort? They give advice like "you need to accept this or you need to get on with things…and we're thinking, we don't know that we want to get on with life…To say to accept it and move on is very cruel." For him, it was a couple of months later, all alone on his farm when he finally wept for his daughter, wanting to feel the depth of his loss. He gave himself permission to grieve for as long as he wanted to. He welcomed that moment.

They eventually surrendered to the new order of their world, a world where they outlived their children. Shouting back with tears of remembrance, with rituals of remembrance, comforting one another, and celebrating the life that they shared together. Celebrating her life was "the best thing we could have ever done for Jodi, for the family, everybody was brought to the next level of

healing and we continue." We accept that our world is forever changed and we will never be the same. "Let this pain be our teacher."

Having experienced the loss of their child, they have a better understanding of what life is all about. One father said he gained a new appreciation for young people. Another said that he realized that he still had much to learn that his son already knew and understood and " my son is helping me along the way." Another father reflected that they take comfort in appreciating that in the end, their daughter's life was a picture of love and so "Who am I to question?"

The Twilight Zone of Grief – Gelenn Carrera

"Knowing that you have lost a child is like going into the Twilight Zone"

Losing a child takes one to an area where nothing is certain anymore. The normal order of things would be for parents to die before children, but when the reverse happens, it takes away the normalcy of things. It makes one wonder if things will ever be normal again. Life goes on, however, and for many parents who have lost a child, facing the realities of life without the child they have lost *becomes* the new normal.

The Unanswered Question of Closure – Anila Virani

Grief leaves us with unanswered questions. One of the unanswered questions is about closure. Will these parents in the video ever get a closure or will they struggle till the day they die to get closure? Finding meaning, seeing oneself as a better person after experiencing child's death and celebrating the deceased child's birthday, felt like examples of struggles, struggles to get closure.

One parent in the video said she felt relieved and at peace after celebrating her deceased child's birthday. One might argue that having family and friends over and remembering the memories of her child facilitates closure. However, is it really closure and is closure ever possible? One parent said moving on and getting on with life might bring a closure but struggled with what moving on would look like. One parent said if she had an explanation of why it happened from her deceased child who died by suicide (a letter or a note), she would have been better able to cope or may get closure.

The Oxford dictionary definitions for closure include: a feeling of finality or resolution, especially after a traumatic experience; a sense of resolution or conclusion; a thing that closes or seals something; an act or process of closing something. The word closure is form old French closure means fence or a barrier. In Latin, *clausura*, from *claus*- 'closed', from the verb *claudere* means sense of "act of closing, bringing to a close." In legislation, closure means "closing or stopping of debate." In Gestalt psychology, it means a "tendency to create ordered and satisfying wholes."

The parents in this video invited me to think that closure is about coming to terms with what happened. Any act such as celebrating birthday or volunteering at youth camp that facilitates acceptance of what happened may bring closure and end the constant struggle - - struggle to deal with emotions, struggle to find a closure, struggle to disclose it to people, struggle to not to show

their pain. One parent said he used to believe that if you do good deeds in life, life will be without struggle but he realized he was wrong. We are meant to struggle. We are not meant to live without struggle.

Perhaps we are not ever to have closure over such an event and perhaps we do not even want it; we want to remember and stay connected. Perhaps this is one of the lessons of grief.

The Gravity of Grief – Nancy J. Moules

"Sorrow wears itself a hollow," Wallace (1985) tells us.

Their faces, lined with the hollow of loss, and wanting – of hearts broken, and presences missed – bear thin witnesses to the depth of sorrow carved out in their lives. David said it was like "free-falling without a parachute" and that he…

had a clear answer…for the first time I wasn't responsible for anyone else…I fell to my knees and felt the grief on me…and as odd as it sounds, I welcomed that moment cause I wanted to know in my soul and my heart that I had wept for my daughter.

Jody's dad's face welcoming the weight of grief called out other stories to me.

"She would have been 12 this year," a mother once spoke to me of her daughter who died at 6 years of age.

And the mother who showed me the empty bird's nest outside the window the day her 4-year-old son died. She spoke to me in a language I did not know and one I never hope to learn of her worry for the mother bird. She showed me the empty nest and broken heart of a mother.

It calls out the story of my own son who lives under the Damocles sword of heart disease.

How does a parent learn to live a life of hollows and the gravity pull of grief? Do we perhaps in encountering this unimaginable event learn that there are moments of hollows and gravitational pull, and there are moments of grace and love?

And the next morning, I felt…love. I hadn't felt love up until then. I'd only felt so much pain, but I felt love.

Through her tears and sorrow, Debbie felt love.

Oh, "this gentleness we learn from what we can't heal" (Wallace, 1985, pp. 76-77).

Discussion

This interpretive exercise in a doctoral level research class on qualitative research methods demonstrates the reflective capacity of "good data." This is not about aggregate knowledge,

developing theories, looking for repetition to authenticate themes, or semantic coding. It is about *these* parents in *these* experiences and what they have to teach us, and others, about what it might be like to be a parent whose child dies. They do not answer that question "once and for all" - there will always be other parents who unfortunately will experience the loss of a child and who will have their own experiences.

Good data in hermeneutic work are that which shed light on the topic and moves understanding along; it is not concerned with explanation but understanding (Moules et al., 2015). Good data invites reflection, the ability to think and write deeply on something that strikes us, rings true for us, or speaks to us (Moules et al., 2015).

This film in all of its pain and rawness is evocative and powerful. It is personal. I have been asked in the past why I use such a painful film for this exercise and my answer is simple. It is good. When we engage in qualitative research in applied disciplines (nursing, psychology, education, social work, etc.), the stories we invite and listen to are not always easy stories to tell or to hear. Dr. John Caputo in his Foreword in the recently published book by Moules et al. (2015) made the comment.

> …there is no theory, no body of principles, no rulebook, no set of universal norms that would enable us to "conduct" the interview recorded for us in Chapter Six with parents who have lost a child to cancer. The situation is steeped in an impenetrable mystery, a question to which there is no answer – why do children die? …The interviewer eases into the delicacy of a situation of unimaginable pain with "questions" that do no interrogate or objectify but create a space in which an unbearable suffering, an unspeakable pain, may find words. The words exchanged are gentle, sometimes hardly articulate, words that do not propose or defend thesis, words from the heart, from broken hearts. (Caputo, in Moules et al., 2015, p. xi)

Like interviews in our work, we have to be able to listen deeply and responsively (Moules et al., 2015) to the data that come to meet us. We have to *suffer* it. We have to have the courage to hear such rawness and react and then respond to it.

Experience has something to teach us. These parents in the video, Debbie and Dave, Chris and Bill, MJ and John, had the courage to speak to the unspeakable and unimaginable suffering of having a child die. They have and continue to teach us all.

References

[1] Note: The film is called *Out of Order: Dealing with the Death of a Child* ©, produced by Calgary Health Services Grief Support Program and the University of Calgary. Calgary, AB, Canada. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzaMEAQ7FnI

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