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Shelving grief: Heuristic benefits of producing a glossy 'coffee-table' book from a grief journal

Dr Caitlin Street

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Abstract

This paper uses a phenomenological approach to review responses to the self-publishing of poems and artworks created during a week of silent grieving shortly after the death of my life partner. Wrapped within the glossy hard-covered book of spontaneously produced poems and images, emerged a sense of formality towards and credibility for the isolating space of grieving. When placed on the bookshelf, alongside 'authorised knowledge', unexpected responses arose both in me and in those with whom the book was shared. This case-based discussion paper proposes that the application of commonly available self-publishing technology is an affirming means for personally negotiating the isolation of grief.

Introduction

Unexpected death bears heavily upon those carrying the burden of grief. The shock and sudden absence left by death in emotionally close relationships adds to the already severe emotional space of grieving. I experienced this emotionally crippling space in August 2010, with the death of my life partner of fifteen years, my soulmate, my rock.

The emotional journey experienced during the subsequent six weeks bore all the facets of grieving expressed in the literature. The concurrent presence of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression (Bowlby, 1961; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maciejewski et al., 2007; Parkes & Weiss, 1983) conflicted with my knowing acceptance, for while death was sudden and unexpected, my partner Anne had faced a poor prognosis due to a tumour. This state of acceptance, generated from the recognition of her release from a slow and painful death, carried a relief normally only available to carers who have accompanied those that have made that long slow journey of decline. It was within this complex grieving – in the seventh week – that I entered the reflective space of a week's silence.

This week of silent contemplation was on Bruny Island, a remote and beautiful island in Southern Tasmania. I had previously attended this annual event organised by Quakers, but the complexity of my grieving emotional state meant that this occasion was inevitably difficult. My fear of being overwhelmed within the seemingly ever-expanding space, and lost in the emotional isolation of seven days of silence, pulsed as a presence in the supportive environment shared with five other compassionate but independent folk.

*My sure's awash
The current grasps at my ankles
as I teeter in my knowing.
I cling for support upon the insubstantial
waters flowing down my cheeks.
My vision blurred...*

Extract from my poem *Direction*.

The unstructured week allowed space – space to read, space to reflect, and space to walk both forest and coast. The picturesque surroundings seen whilst out walking demanded to be photographed.¹ During more reflective times, I journalled my thoughts and feelings as a mock correspondence sharing with Anne my odyssey. Between my 'letters home'

emerged ‘streams of consciousness’ manifesting as poems to *My Beloved*.² These poems just happened, blurted out between entries, bearing no intention. But despite the lack of intention, there was purpose – unrecognised.³

An emergent return to civilisation encouraged my reflection upon the week, revisited through the review of journal notes and photos which illuminated traces of the week’s journey. The words in my journal sang sweetly, echoing the pain of loss and grief that had swelled so poignantly in the silence. The words were very present in their pain, attuned to the physical sense of loss, some performed in rhythmic meter in memory of Anne’s penchant for poetry.

A friendly request from Anne’s sister to share with her my poems inspired their combination with a photo or two – photos being “vehicles of memory” (Zelizer, 1998, p.131). My artistic background mandated a visually enticing presentation, and so I searched through the photos snapped during my wanderings through the silence, seeking images that allowed space for the words.

Stepping beyond the journal

Unexpectedly, similarities and patterns emerged. The images and the words, while ‘independently’ generated, appeared highly intertwined, with relationships reverberating

through metaphor and meme, both visual and conceptual. The emergence of these previously unrecognised relationships induced a growing awareness of the all-encompassing emotional and cognitive space of their gestation, and engendered in me a shifted understanding of autonomy where cherished ‘concepts’, though liberated, never seem to stray far from familiarity. These links, exposed through the lack of deliberate planning, opened a space of unified possibilities which still challenges my fondness for control, both personally and professionally. Most importantly, their union resulted in a PDF document of poems and images ready for emailing.

This apparent alignment of words and images engendered in me a desire to buff and polish the new whole, and a recollection arose in my mind of printed glossy photo-books displayed at the local department store. So the PDF was slightly modified to suit the new wide, glossy, coffee-table book format using an online photobook printing service.⁴ My photographic and desktop publishing experience, while not key to the compilation of the book, did allow and encourage a polishing of the production values, making the finished volume feel particularly personal. The prepared files were uploaded to the online store for printing, I paid the AUD\$29.00, and ten days later, the book arrived.

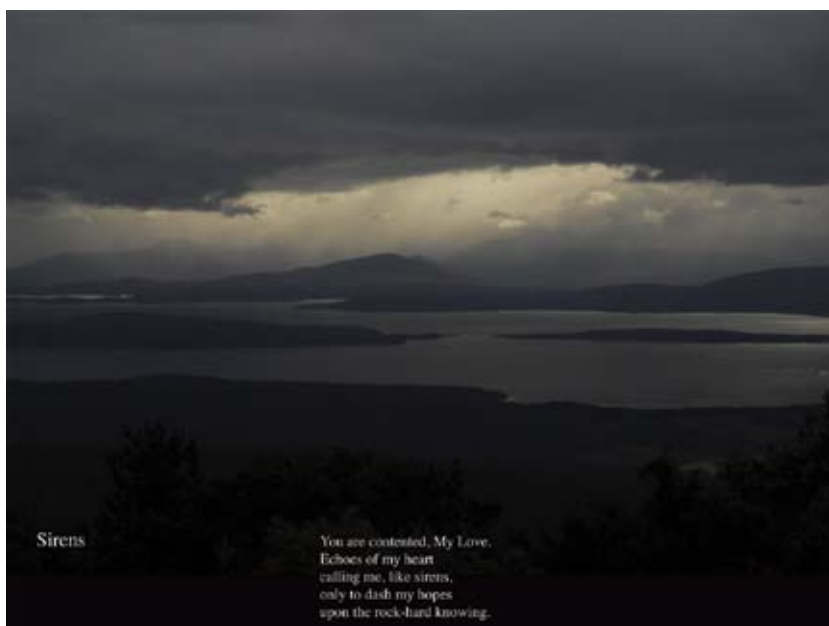


Figure 1. ‘Sirens’, page 22 of Caitlin Street’s *Bruny 2010: Caitlin’s reflections of the space for my beloved*.

Recognising value

The unexpected occurred again. The printing of the book provided a number of unanticipated responses and benefits, ranging from the recognition of change and personal growth, to the sharing with others of mutual loss, to the alignment of grief with authorised and ‘more valid’ knowledge.

Expanding mnemonics

The initial responsive benefit I recognised was the strength achieved from the book as a tactile mnemonic – a tangible reminder – that allowed an emotional ‘re-entry’ into the visceral space of grieving (Hallam & Miller, 2001; Zelizer, 1998). As a form of visual diary, the book relays the sense of closeness to Anne occurring within the grieving space that generated the text. Despite its effectiveness, the emotional support gained from perusing the poems in subsequent grieving periods remains difficult to translate. Put simply, it is grounding. The book now sits accessible and tactile, as if a fossilised remnant of the emotional reality of my grief, carrying the tears of previous readings, the lingering stains of the pain of that time.

But beyond that, re-immersion has also assisted with recognition of my shifting emotions, and now elicits new, more mellow means of identifying and expressing my grief.

These new means make apparent the changes occurring in my grief by affording the ability to compare the ‘then’ and ‘now’. This has clearly provided me with tangible evidence of the value of expressing grief through journaling, as often discussed in literature (Hallam & Miller, 2001; Lichtenthal & Neimeyer, 2012; Moon, 2004, 2006, 2010; Sidhu & Kaur, 2010; Trapnell & Campbell, 1999; Wilder-Craig, 2007).

Shared grief

Moreover, the accessing of the book’s visceral space was not limited to me. While it is intimately personal, others can and have shared in the raw pain, which seemingly translates very effectively. Despite grief being inherently isolating, (even in this, a shared grief), the unmediated immediacy expressed within the combination of words and images seems to connect with other’s experiences, and clearly strikes a chord.⁵ This resonance resulted in requests for copies, providing another form of validation of my experience.

‘Authorised’ grief

While the open authenticity of the volume’s contents instilled a validity, another form of validity was instilled by the book’s very form. Printed books carry within them traditional authority – the authority of text and the



Figure 2. ‘Direction’, page 5 of Caitlin Street’s *Brury 2010: Caitlin’s reflections of the space for my beloved*.

authority of publication. Printed texts, being the language of academia and the law, draw credibility from their ancestor, religion (best illustrated by Moses' return from Mt Sinai with the book's ancestor: stone tablets). While the printed word both defines and conveys knowledge, its content shifts from subjective to objective, and claims positivist primacy (Apple, 2000; Schneider, 1991).⁶ Books also convey credibility through the publisher acting as a form of advocate. Publishers invest value through exposed risk, and while my book was self-published, there was substantial invested value and exposed risk. The production and 'publication' of my book gained from the inherent authority of the printed word, shifting perceptions of the enveloped emotions beyond 'frail and unstable', to instead present my grieving as legitimate and valid, even bestowing upon it a strange nobility.

The relevance of such validation became even more apparent when I placed my intimate knowledge within the bookshelf. The bookshelf itself bears the authority of knowledge, valid knowledge inscribed in stone, so to speak. Such repositories encapsulate the language of authority and are often 'applied' as authoritative 'props' positioned behind learned gentlemen. My book, representing the reality of my grief, now lies amongst the tomes of externalised knowing. The emotional legitimacy gained from the placing of the book upon the shelf was unanticipated and remained subtle, almost sub-consciously supportive, far beyond any emotional strength gained by placing the record of grief in an accessible and filed location. Interestingly, the legitimacy remains potent and tangible, even with the knowledge of the self-published nature of the book.

In memoriam

Additionally, through the quality and care taken in its production, the book has become a form of memorialisation, acting in a way normally reserved for 'cemetery' mausoleums, tombs, or crypts. The book's glossy surface reflects desires for memorials to those we have loved and lost. In earlier days, I had not comprehended the value of memorials,

assigning extrinsic motivations to their elaborate expense.⁷ Now, I can see within the book's polished poise a stature reminiscent of memorials more substantial in stone. The book has become a commemorative public statement, evoking care and love for the loved one lost. Within this public statement is encrypted proof of the existence of our love.

Printed purpose

The final recognisable benefit is very personal, and lies beyond the physicality and tangible manifestation of the painful grief. From the ashes of loss has arisen a sense of purpose emanating from the love which contributed to both the poems themselves, and my experience of their emergence. Such a sense of purpose, often presented as a key means of accepting loss and encouraging the continuation of life (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006), echoes the level of love and support from earlier in our relationship, particularly towards creativity. Anne's support and nurturing of my creative practices seem relevant here in a book that seemingly generated itself, released from the strictures of control that so often strangled my



Figure 3. The cover of Caitlin Street's *Bruny 2010: Caitlin's reflections of the space for my beloved*.

creations. Unburdened by anticipated desire, the book has flowered in a form fundamentally different to my practices and habits, with its liberation lighting a path for me to journey, sans Anne.

*... I search for the new way,
breathing an anxious desire
for the firmness of footing
that once was my foundation.
But I don't fear the future.*

Further extract from *Direction*.

Conclusion

This paper has employed a phenomenological approach to consider the solace gained from the expression of grief through self-published printed word and image. The knowledge explored cannot be expressed empirically, being, as it is, an exploration of both the intimate motivations and the responses to the production of words and images as a glossy book. However, the intrinsic nourishment attained from the dual process of grief journaling, and the subsequent development of those thoughts into a more polished form now shelved within the realms of authorised knowledge, can be assessed through my increased ability to reflect upon the process of grief, contributing to a clear reduction in

affect intensity, even when allowing for time's healing influence. The volume speaks clearly of the pain that was. I now speak of the growth that is. It is a self-directed emotional growth stemming from the nature of the process, and has provided benefits more broad and more satisfying than the sessions of counselling I sought (Currier, Neimeyer, & Berman, 2003). The process continues.

Technology now allows a polished record of the processes of personal grief. The quality of production encourages a recognition of the value of expressing a very personal space through very personally focused artistic expression in a form readily stored for later access. It has nurtured me, and it may also nurture others.



Figure 4. Pages 9 and 10 of Caitlin Street's *Bruny 2010: Caitlin's reflections of the space for my beloved*.

Endnotes

1. See Scarre (2002) for discussion of the role of place in meaning-making.
2. See Gold (2012) and Neimeyer (2008) for discussion of poetry in meaning-making.
3. For literature on the role of meaning making see Park (2010) for overview. See also Gilbert (2002); Holland, Currier & Neimeyer, (2006); Lichtenthal & Neimeyer (2012); Neimeyer (2000 & 2001).
4. There are many websites which provide accessible and economical online custom publishing and printing services suitable for photobooks.
5. See Stroebe et. al. (2006) for discussion of the complications emerging from the sharing of emotion as bereavement process.
6. See also De Certeau's 1986 notion of 'strategy' and 'place'.
7. See Hallam & Miller (2001) and Woodthorpe (2011) for a review of memorialising behaviour.

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