

# Flames on water: Mourning through a creative ritual in the Great Sandy Desert

Susan Begg

## Abstract

I had arrived in Alice Springs on a trip when I found out that my brother had died. After some indecision, I decided to continue to travel with the group into the Western Desert of Australia. To honour my brother's wishes, I would give him the funeral he had wanted since childhood: a Viking funeral. My grief was relieved by art-making in which I created an effigy and a Viking boat. The narratives of the other travellers supported my belief that it had been a valuable art therapy experience worthy of further reflection and sharing.

## Keywords

Location, ritual, effigy, Viking boat, connection, grief and loss

## Introduction

February 2007 was a stressful time in my life; there were many pressures bearing down on me. My older brother, Johnnie, had been found to have a terminal illness, discovered as he was recovering from surgery. I had visited him in Perth and parted from him in great distress, sensing that I might never see him again. Around that time, course work for my Master of Art Therapy had been completed but I had begun working on my thesis.

Close friends, Buck and Beth, offered me the opportunity to travel for three weeks through Central Australia, from Apollo Bay to Broome via Alice Springs. For several months I tossed the idea around in my head. There were many reasons not to go: worrying about my dearly loved brother, leaving home when I felt vulnerable, having a holiday without my husband, and submitting my thesis. Encouragement to travel came from my brother who had always wanted to show me the desert country where he had worked and travelled for several decades. Besides, at the journey's end, I would be in Western Australia and could possibly see him once more in Perth.

Finally, in May 2007, I submitted a draft of my thesis which was near completion, and decided that I would travel. A break away would hopefully be refreshing and invigorating. Two close friends would be leading the trip and three other friends of theirs, whom I had not met, were coming too. We ranged in age from 56 to 80.

We had travelled for a week and were in Alice Springs when I called the hospital in Perth to speak to Johnnie. He had not spoken since admission but his younger son held the phone to his ear so that I could wish him well on his last journey. He uttered a faint "Bye".

That particular day passed in a numb blur, whilst the other travellers shopped, stocked, and prepared the vehicles for the two week journey to Broome; I had felt overwhelmed. That evening I heard from his family that Johnnie had died.

Eventually, after many phone calls and emails with family members in Perth and Melbourne, and discussion with my close friends, I decided to continue travelling. I would commemorate Johnnie with a symbolic Viking funeral (Escott-Inman, 1903; Lang, 1914) to be held at the same time as his funeral was

taking place in a funeral parlour in Perth. The Viking funeral would include the words of a song (Bogle, 1982) that seemed to have been written about Johnnie specifically for this time, the end of his life. He was a keen recreational sailor who had circumnavigated Australia and travelled through the islands to the north as far as Timor. Since his retirement he had spent many hours sailing and maintaining his yacht.

My need was to commemorate his life by making commemorative art (Allen, 1995; Moon, 1995; Rubin, 1999), creating a ritual, and “making special” (Dissanayake, 2002) his life and memory. As I discovered, my head still contained the content of my study: heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990), art-based research (McNiff, 2004), creative art-making ritual (Dissanayake, 2002; Marcow Speiser, 1998), and knowledge that regular art practice was essential for an art therapist (Allen, 1995; Hyland Moon, 2002; McNiff, 2004; Moon, 2003; Rubin, 1999). Concepts and phrases from these authors’ works influenced the art-making ritual to honour my brother’s life and to commemorate his death.

Five days after Johnnie’s death, we arrived in Rudall River National Park, since properly renamed Karlamilyi National Park in 2008, to acknowledge the traditional owners of the area, the Martu people. It was in the Desert Queen Baths of this vast, remote and isolated park that we held the commemorative ceremony that included the launch of an effigy on a flaming boat.

It was four years before I considered writing up the ritual and contacting fellow travellers to gain their memories and reflections of this ‘lived experience’, so that I could discover meaning from the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). It took another three years before I felt enough distance from the loss of my brother to be able to write.

In this article, I present the stages of the commemorative ritual – the preparation, the art-making, the performance – as well as comments and reflections from narrative accounts provided, four years later, by the participants who had been with me at the ritual.

## Collecting

My husband Richard had patiently transcribed the lyrics of the song ‘Safe in the Harbour’ (Bogle, 1982, Track 8) and had sent email copies to me while I was in Alice Springs and to my sister, who would take the lyrics and a recording of the song to Perth.

As we drove out from Alice Springs through the Western Macdonnell Ranges, collection of art media began. At Larapinta Gorge I gathered armfuls of a large variety of grasses, leaves, and dried native hops. The other travellers watched. Later in the day, the tour leader, Buck, offered two blue stones which he had found. His recollection was that Johnnie’s eyes were blue. As we sat around the campfire that night, another traveller, Al, said that he would be collecting feathers from road-kill for his daughter and suggested that some might be helpful for the Viking funeral.

At the time of writing the article and researching ritual, I discovered that these activities represented the preparatory phase, described by Vivien Marcow Speiser in her article on ritual in expressive therapy (Marcow Speiser, 1998). The preparatory phase included conception of the ritual, creative planning, and process. My time was spent choosing objects needed, planning solutions for the process of construction, and discarding natural objects too difficult to attach. Quietly and unobtrusively, other travellers became involved as I grieved. Whilst on the road, I drew the landscape passing by in a journal. At stops on the way, my collecting continued. Art-making at this time of stress felt soothing and it relieved some pain (Allen, 1995; Hyland Moon, 2002; McNiff, 2004; Moon, 2002).

Clouds were gathering, putting reaching our destination in doubt. The day before we were due to turn southwards to enter Karlamilyi National Park, the rain poured down unrelentingly. Petrol was low in one of the vehicles and we needed to make a detour into an Aboriginal community. The site manager suggested we camp in the commonroom, with the proviso that if any community members came in we would need to vacate the space.

Fortuitously, it was a place where arts and crafts were practiced, so I was able to purchase some cotton yarn, material needed for binding and tying the effigy and boat to create shape and forms.

## Location

As dawn broke, the rain ceased. Some roads were impassable but a detour would enable us to take an alternative route to Karlamilyi. After travelling from dawn until mid afternoon, we arrived, set up camp, and then explored our surroundings.

The landscape was carved from glacial action, which formed cliffs, rock faces, and ridges. Some of these escarpments consisted of red rock dotted throughout with rounded white and yellow ochre stones that had been worn smooth by flowing water. Buck had assured me earlier that the destination was appropriate as there would be water for the ritual. The Desert Queen Baths provided a majestic and unforgettable setting. They consist of a series of dark, seemingly bottomless pools above which a red cliff face rose. The weathered remains of an Indigenous painting of white goannas contrasted with the red cliff face. Awkward access to the cliff face filled me with respect for the determination and feat of daring that the Indigenous artist had needed to complete the work. Was it a message from the Martu people? “We have been here, this is our place”. It certainly felt like a sacred place commanding respect as a place of ceremony, rituals and worship; it seemed to be a place visited by the devout who hold knowledge different from and beyond my own, perhaps even a place of ‘sorry business’, Indigenous Australian rituals carried out at the time of death (Government, 2014). Archaeology reveals that even as far back as the time of Neanderthal man, responses to the end of life have found symbolic expression in every culture (Dissanayake, 2002; Wilson, 2014).

We all experienced a sense of reverence and admiration. Desert bushland surrounding the campsite included sparse bush dotted with trees. A dead branch from a desert oak matched the shape needed for the Viking boat (Escott-Inman, 1903).

## Viking funeral

My knowledge and images of Viking funerals were probably gained, during my childhood with Johnnie, from stories of Norse myths in which descriptions were given of a god or warrior laid to rest on a pyre, “then the pyre was set alight, and the great vessel was launched, and glided out to sea with its sails aflame” (Lang, 1914, p.242).

In the book *Jarl the Neatherd*, King Olaf was carried to the fiord,

and they sat him, all dressed in his royal robes and war gear, high on one of the war-ships; and they hoisted the great sail and then lit a mighty fire and let the ship sail out onto the dark waves, while from the shore they watched it burning [...] And then higher rose the flame and the great ship bounded as the wind urged it on, till it was but like a great red star shining in the distance [...] and presently the star was gone and only darkness rested on the ocean, and then they sighed (Escott-Inman, 1903, pp.288-289).

The image I remembered from childhood whilst planning the Viking funeral contained flames on water as the Viking boat burned and a silence as people watched the burning. I had not remembered that the boat would have a sail, nor did I recall that the figure was seated.

## Making the effigy and the boat

The next phase, art-making, proceeded as a solitary process. The natural found objects were sorted, grasses were bunched and twisted, then bound with yarn. Awareness of creating on a “kinaesthetic and sensory level” (Lusebrink, 1990), using my hands, with no distance between me and the materials, reminded me of my childhood. The process of making was my focus during this time, not the production of an artwork. This creative engagement of making something with a sense of purpose, out of seemingly nothing, offered contentment. Pleasure came from the smells and feel of the grass. A rhythm developed as I wound thread to form arms and legs; a fleeting thought likened my action to preparation of the dead, and

embalming. The movement felt soothing and calming. However, at times this was interrupted by the harsh sensation of resistant grasses that had to be forced into shape and often sharply pierced my skin.

During the writing process, I was reminded of other developmental stages of the Expressive Therapies Continuum (Lusebrink, 1990) from which I now had an increased reflective distance. As the effigy took shape, decisions were made intuitively by imposing structure on and within the sculptural form: the position of eyes, suggestion of hair, a mouth. These decisions were a shift to a perceptual level of functioning. Creative solutions flowed spontaneously. Memories of making and creating in childhood with my brother were powerful. Modifications to the form gave rise to affection for the effigy (Figure 1). A stubborn stalk of dry grass protruded between the legs making the effigy male, my brother.

Pete noticed this and returned to camp with two shiny red bean shaped seeds; he drilled holes in them so that they could be attached and Johnnie could be a complete male. Johnnie was the middle child, a boy between two sisters.

Members of the group became interested in the work and its progress. Buck started working



Figure 1. The effigy.

on the frame of the craft (Figure 2), a Viking boat to transport Johnnie.

Reflecting on the process whilst writing, I understand how Buck and I entered into a cognitive level of functioning “analytical, sequential operations; logical thought; and problem solving” (Lusebrink, 1990, p.94). Solutions for how to fill in the boat frame and what action was needed to strengthen the grasses to form panels were reached by Buck. I followed his lead. We worked energetically and spoke very little. Together we rolled lengths of grass to fill in the frame (Figure 3).

Creativity continued when I decorated the craft with feathers and placed the effigy. My brother deserved a soft and cosy final resting place (Figure 4).

Buck made plans for the enactment of burning, with the use of bio fuel so that the Viking boat and effigy would burn but not damage the water quality in the pool.

I had been preoccupied with making the effigy and the Viking boat and a simple plan to send it burning onto the water at four in the afternoon, the same time as my brother’s funeral was to be held in Perth. Any further planning of how the ritual would unfold on the day was beyond me; I was too distressed. The bond between Johnnie and me was close; we had played together, created together, and together we had experienced the loss of our parents who had died eight months apart when we were in our early twenties.

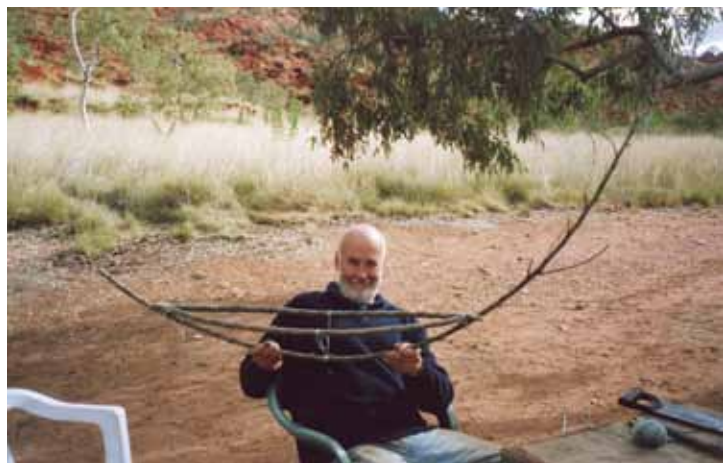


Figure 2. The frame for the Viking boat.



Everyone chose to attend and participate, and fortunately Buck took the lead. Al read the song lyrics of ‘Safe in the Harbour’ (Bogle, 1982, Track 8) the chorus of which still profoundly affects me:

*But to every sailor comes time to  
draw anchor*

*Haul in the sails and make the  
lines fast*

*You deep water dreamer, your  
journey is over.*

*You’re safe in the harbour at last*

*You’re safe in the harbour at last*

Buck lit the Viking boat and we both launched it into the pool. Pete took photos and together we all watched as the flames took hold (Figure 5). The flames rose higher and higher (Figure 6), a strange and haunting sight, fire on water.

Marcow Speiser explains that in the second phase of therapeutic ritual, the enactment phase, “the client enters into the liminal or transition space where things are not quite what they were, and not quite what they are yet to be” (Marcow Speiser, 1998, p.210). Although the image of the Viking boat remains etched on all our memories, my recall of the ritual was vague as I was grieving. I had no memory of the wake we held or the others’ comments at the time. I had carefully recreated what I remembered from childhood with the gathered and found materials available, and the burning had satisfied my need, but was it an adequate tribute to Johnnie? Johnnie and I had talked about our dislike of funeral parlours. We had agreed that funerals in funeral parlours

From top:

Figure 3. Building the Viking boat.

Figure 4. Decorated craft and effigy.

Figure 5. The flames took hold.

Figure 6. The flames rose higher and higher.

were rushed. Often a funeral was sandwiched between the one before and the one after, a macabre conveyor belt of disposal. Would I feel a sense of relief that I had made this time special instead of attending the funeral parlour service?

Distance from the experience would help to answer my questions.

From Broome I was farewelled by my fellow travellers, now great mates, and flew to Perth to be with Johnnie's partner and my nieces and nephews. The funeral service had been recorded for me on tape and I was able to view the slide show and hear the music chosen by Johnnie's younger son to accompany it. All of it was moving. Frustration that the service had been too short and rushed had upset many people. Being amongst my clan was important. I had missed out on seeing some old family friends, but I was so pleased to have honoured Johnnie with a ritual which was inspired from our shared history. I had made it special.

## Recollections from the witnesses of the Viking funeral

The narratives provided four years later by my companions enabled the third phase, the reincorporation phase, as described by Marcow Speiser. In this phase, "the individual is reincorporated into the group through reflecting, mirroring and amplifying response and feedback" (Marcow Speiser, 1998, p.210). In expressive therapy, witnessing occurs with a therapist and within the group. In this study, the narratives were witness accounts: reflective responses and descriptions of memories.

Buck recalled, "It was wonderful to be able to share this process with you. Equally, the others travelling with us were invited to join in if they felt like it. It was hardly surprising that everyone there was connected by their personal experience of loss, and was in fact able to share this special time and place".

Al remembered that "Buck was master of ceremonies with Beth right behind him. We discussed an order of ceremony and I grabbed the song reading, to make sure I was joining

in and also because I am comfortable reading something rather than ad libbing".

Pete wrote, "I remember that everyone present had the opportunity to say a few words. I was certainly feeling very emotional; I just had to be part of this as I felt I knew almost everything about Johnnie, even though I had never set eyes on him. Our discussions cemented an image of a great guy, who had lived his life to the full".

From Beth: "The boat gently floated across the deep black pool, aflame, then gently sank. The response by everyone was something I didn't expect: Claire was in tears, Pete incredibly quiet and reflective (never seen Pete like this before), Buck elated, Alan emotional, Beth tearful and satisfied, and Sue tearful, joyful, distressed... The burning seemed very cathartic for everyone and added another dimension to the trip... There didn't seem the need to talk, everyone was feeling".

Claire admitted that she "had been worried about the whole thing... it seemed like it was going to be a bit of a carry on. I was out of my depth... and I was worried that there might have been wailing. In a way I was more caught up with it later. On my return to Rudall River it was clear in my mind then... seeing that dear little craft going out. I told the story to my son and daughter in law; they could picture it and were enthralled" (personal communication, between 14 July and 2 September 2011.)

All I had remembered was relief that it had worked: the effigy, the boat and the fire. I had done it and Johnnie would have been pleased. Enacting the ritual in the desolate landscape in which my brother had worked and travelled for several decades, at the same time as the actual funeral service was held in Perth, had granted me a feeling of connection with relatives and friends. Creating and making the effigy and the Viking boat, and the enactment, had been cathartic for me as I dealt with my grief.

The later narratives offered by my fellow travellers, who willingly recounted their reflections on the ritual and any impact it may have had in their lives, were deeply touching. They were open and honest about

their memories, experiences of loss, and new discoveries. It was then that I felt it had been a valuable art therapy experience and a lived experience to be shared. From their accounts, interesting themes emerged and revealed content worthy of further study. Unexpectedly, transformation and healing had been enabled by the performance of the ritual, not solely by the art-making of the effigy and the Viking boat.

To increase comprehension of the extent to which the ritual had had an effect, I asked my husband Richard if he could write his reflections on his experiences of Johnnie's death whilst I was away and the transcription of the song lyrics. Richard and I had only been married for a short time when Johnnie died; they had not had time to get to know each other. Richard felt that Johnnie was wary of him. He wrote that "I had always imagined that given time, Johnnie and I would develop camaraderie and our differences would fade. Thus I didn't worry about them. I just had to be patient so it seemed". He went on to say that he felt deeply that he was not able to offer me comfort on the trip but when asked to perform the task of transcribing lyrics, "somehow it seemed very important to me that I had been entrusted with this task... I had to play the song over and over again". He found it very moving as the lyrics expressed so much about the way I saw my brother. Richard discovered, as he wrote four years later, that "somehow I still find reflecting on this very moving". He handed me his written reflections with tears in his eyes.

## Conclusion

What happened in Karlamilyi in 2007 proved to be a profound and lasting experience for the six travellers. The importance of the witnessing of the ritual by the others had not been considered at the time, however, this and their participation was vital. Not only had I been unaware of all the preparation and decision-making that went into the unfolding of the ritual, but the personal narratives of Buck, Beth, Pete, Al and Claire made my memory of

the event even more special. Themes and key words appeared, were dwelt on, and led to clear insight. The enactment of this art therapy and expressive therapy process had a lasting effect on the five witnesses who chose to be involved and who, as a result, gained personal insight. Further insights gained and written in the personal narratives were also shared with me: from Buck a story of personal grief and loss, the death of his mother 30 years prior which he was now ready to share with me; from Pete a wish for disposal of his ashes when he dies; from Al recognition of connection, "we made a memory that will bond us and stay with us for the rest of our lives"; from Beth, "The Viking funeral added another dimension to the trip, everyone wanted to offer support, and something was met in Sue"; and from Claire, "when I returned [to Karlamilyi], I was able to see it in its entirety, and with great respect, all with our own feelings".

There were some family members and friends who struggled with my choice not to attend the funeral in Perth. Now that I work as a clinical art therapist in palliative care I have increased my understanding of differential grief in families; "as we grieve we make new meaning in our loss and in our grief. In so doing we reconceptualise what is real to us. This reality may or may not reflect the dominant family position" (Wilson, 2014, p.145). A family is bereaved and within it individuals all have their own experience of sadness and loss. Additionally, each individual remembers the deceased differently because the relationship between them was unique.

Experience taken from the desert has influenced the way I work. My workplace is the client's home so art materials are restricted to those which I transport in a wheelie case, or to materials owned by the client. Creativity, flexibility, and resourcefulness were attributes needed to work in the desert. Whilst it may be argued that these attributes cannot be taught, guidance can be offered to a client to consider the potential of using meaningful items within the household to express their wishes, hopes, and needs in this time of their life. Validation

that a client's presence in life is unique frequently transcends humility and encourages them to think of how they would like to be remembered.

After a client has died, I work with the bereaved: a partner, a spouse, a child, or the family members together. By eliciting a response to their special relationship with the deceased, individuals reveal connections as diverse as nicknames, shared dreams, shared wishes, and joint pastimes. In commemoration, consideration of the environment, whether inside or outside, enriches the tribute: a memory box, a shrine, a special garden for reflection. Commemorative spaces allow communication beyond death, a special place for letters or poems to be read, or for just talking things through aloud.

Witnessing of ritual is restricted in my work due to the limits on time per visit and frequency of visits. Sometimes I am asked to assist with inclusion of artwork in the funeral service or for reproduction in the order of service. In my private practice I have assisted bereaved families to paint the coffin. There is change occurring in Australia with the formation of the Natural Death Advocacy Network which promotes "Empowering choice at end of life", and supports the bereaved to be creative, flexible, and resourceful as they prepare and conduct a ritual.

Art therapy in commemoration has been used by individuals throughout time; it helps the maker and the witness. Many art therapists have written moving accounts of their own experience of commemorative art. Pat Allen wrote of her deep interest in female archetypes and her use of various found objects for creations, a use she believes may originate from the loss of her mother (Allen, 1995). Judith Rubin wrote of examples where art in bereavement assisted her grief; her feelings of anger were expressed by painting when a young friend died. Later in her life she produced free association drawings that enabled her to express her feeling of abandonment when her mother died (Rubin, 1999). Bruce Moon, who was painting in an

open-studio setting, was deeply moved when he recognised that reflected in a mirror within an interior he had painted was his mother's kitchen from the past. His mother had just died, and, on becoming an orphan, Moon touchingly wrote, "I recognized I was now no one's son" (Moon, 2003, p.170).

The combined stages of this commemoration of Johnnie's life – the preparation, the art-making, the enactment of the Viking funeral, the narratives of the group members' recollections, our rich experience of connection, and finally writing this article – have strengthened my belief that "art heals by accepting the pain and doing something with it" (McNiff, 2004, p.v).

## Appendix

The soft pastel drawings reproduced here are a selection from an A5 sketchbook. Each day I drew for hours from the front passenger's seat of a four-wheel-drive vehicle as we travelled over 4,000 kilometres. I call these works "compilation drawings" because they were done on the move. The starting point was the horizon followed quickly by angles and shapes that caught my eye. Colour choice was limited by luggage restrictions, but it was enough. Each image captures an essence of the enormous Outback.





Figure 7. On the road to Wilpena.



Figure 11. From Stuart Highway.



Figure 8. Gamon Ranges.



Figure 12. Palmer Valley.



Figure 9. Nearing Oodnadatta.



Figure 13. Imanpa.



Figure 10. Pedirka Desert.



Figure 14. On the way to Papunya.



Figure 15. Mt Liebig.



Figure 16. Passing through Kiwirrkura.



Figure 17. Punmu.



Figure 18. Rough track entry to Karlamilyi.

## References

- Allen, P.B. (1995). *Art is a way of knowing*. Boston & London: Shambhala.
- Bogle, E. (1982). Safe in the harbour. On *Singing the spirit home*. Australia: EMI.
- Dissanayake, E. (2002). *What is art for?* Seattle & London: University of Washington Press.
- Escott-Inman, H. (1903). *The saga of Jarl the Neatherd*. London, New York & Melbourne: Ward Lock and Co Ltd.
- Queensland Health. (2014). *Sad news, sorry business: Guidelines for caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through death and dying*. Queensland Government. Retrieved from [http://www.health.qld.gov.au/atsihealth/health\\_professionals.asp](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/atsihealth/health_professionals.asp)
- Hyland Moon, C. (2002). *Studio art therapy: Cultivating the artist identity in the art therapist*. London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.
- Lang, J. (1914). *A book of myths*. Edinburgh, UK: T C & E C Jack Ltd.
- Lusebrink, V. (1990). *Imagery and visual expression in therapy*. New York & London: Plenum Press.
- Marcow Speiser, V. (1998). Rituals in expressive therapy. In A. Robbins (Ed.). *Therapeutic presence: Bridging expression and form*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley.
- McNiff, S. (2004). *Art heals: How creativity cures the soul*. Boston & London: Shambhala.
- Moon, B.L. (1995). *Existential art therapy: The canvas mirror*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Moon, B.L. (2002). *Working with images: The art of art therapists*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Moon, B.L. (2003). *Essentials for art therapy education and practice*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- Moustakas, C. (1990). *Heuristic research: Design, methodology, and applications*. London, UK: Sage.
- Natural Death Advocacy Network. Retrieved from <http://www.naturaldeathadvocacy.net/>
- Rubin, J.A. (1999). *Art therapy an introduction*. Philadelphia, PA: Brunner/Mazel.
- Wilson, J. (2014). *Supporting people through loss and grief: An introduction for counsellors and other caring practitioners*. London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.