



Narrative Therapy with Someone Experiencing Significant Loss and Grief: An Illustration with Reflections on Practice

By Sasha McAllum Pilkington¹

This story is dedicated by “Claudia” to “Tom” in memory of his loving ways.

I would like to thank “Claudia” for her generosity in joining me in adventuring into new territories. There would be no story without her.

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Introduction

Grief can be excruciating. The pain of loss may be overwhelming at times and its duration and intensity can be a shock to many. However, it is not always so. Relationships are shaped differently and there are many possible stories that can be told of such an experience. The following illustration of Narrative Therapy² was originally written as a therapeutic document for a woman who had been forced to contend with the death of her partner while she parented their young children. “Claudia”³, as she chose to call herself for this paper, was experiencing significant loss. At the same time she was struggling to find compassion for herself. I hoped that if Claudia viewed herself in a story of our conversations the narrative might lend strength to the new understandings we were co-constructing. Claudia was enthusiastic about the idea of co-creating such a document and after going through a careful consent process (see Pilkington, 2018) we agreed that we would record our conversations and write a story from the transcriptions.

Our purposes for writing a story evolved. As time passed, Claudia wanted to share her knowledge of grieving with others. When we discussed the possibility of sharing the story with a wider audience, I hoped the story might show the unfolding of therapy and in particular, narrative practices that companion a person⁴ and invite them to explore new meanings of their experience.

I have therefore added footnotes to the story. The footnotes explain more of what I was thinking as Claudia and I spoke, and why I asked particular questions. They also include some

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² Narrative Therapy was co-founded by Michael White and David Epston.

³ All names and identifying details have been changed. Claudia chose the pseudonyms used in the story.

⁴ By companionship I am referring to being alongside a person and fully present as I try to understand their experience rather than attempting to fix or solve what is unsolvable.





thoughts on narrative practice with people who are suffering as they live with loss. You may choose to read the story and the footnotes together or separately.

For those of you who are interested in experimenting with writing a story, in contrast to other forms of therapeutic documents, please see an earlier paper I have written on writing narrative therapeutic letters (Pilkington, 2018). I have described the process of story writing and some of the possible benefits within that paper.

A Small Hope: Co-creating a Narrative of Grief

A Cupful of Time Folded in with Love

“It’s urgent”, the community nurse told me solemnly. “Yesterday Tom was told he was bleeding internally by the doctor at the hospital. When he heard nothing could be done to stop it he asked his wife Claudia to take him home. Understandably they are reeling, this has all happened so fast. We’ve offered counselling support and Claudia has agreed. She’s asked if you could ring after 10 o’clock so you don’t wake the baby from her morning nap.”

I walked back down the hallway towards my office reflecting on what it might be like to receive such news. Just after ten o’clock I telephoned. Claudia answered. “Hello, it’s Sasha speaking. I’m one of the counsellors from the hospice. I understand you might be interested in meeting up with me. Have I got that right?” Quite often people have another understanding from a referrer so I was tentative to give Claudia space to say what she wanted⁵.

“Yes, that would be great”, she replied.

“How would tomorrow suit you?”, I asked, thinking of the urgency of the situation.

“Look it’s very kind of you. I know it’s Friday tomorrow but it’s going to have to be next week. I’m sorry. I promised our five-year-old Imogen I would bake a cake with her tomorrow. It’s her birthday and I promised”, Claudia apologised in a rush.

“Are you the kind of mother who honours promises?”, I asked with a smile in my voice⁶.

⁵ Sometimes families have been referred by their doctor or a hospital service for counselling without it having been discussed with them. Alternatively, a family may have had a conversation with a referrer about seeing a counsellor but they do not understand it as one in which they have given consent for a referral. When I enter a conversation with a tentative question such as this one I am seeking to create space for a discussion should this be the case. Instead of the family member immediately answering, “No I don’t want counselling”, we begin a dialogue recognising a possible lack of consent. Such a conversation almost always leads to the person deciding they would like to meet with me (see also Pilkington, 2016).

⁶ A life ending illness is likely to significantly impact on the lives of many people not just the person who is unwell. This question illustrates me positioning Claudia as knowing more about her life than I do and listening for what is valued by her. When I bring forward and acknowledge her value of honouring a promise I am creating a very different entry into the relationship from one where a health professional assumes they know best.





I heard Claudia let out a long breath. “She’s been looking forward to it all week.”

Warmly we now began to make a time to meet up. In the back of my mind I was thinking about Claudia prioritising a promise to her daughter when she was possibly having the worst time of her life. Images of baking with my own young daughter many years ago floated through my mind. I wondered, “What might Imogen remember of this time when her Daddy was dying and when promises were kept to her five-year-old self? What might she say about the way she was cared for by her Mum at such a terrible time?” I also appreciated Claudia’s ability to put me off and say what she wanted. I was well aware it wasn’t easy to delay health professionals, especially to honour the wishes of a child.

I looked forward to meeting Claudia and Tom and learning more about them.

A Surprising Renewal

I parked the hospice car down the road from the house, worried that the signage on it might communicate to the neighbours something Claudia and Tom wished to keep private. It wasn’t the anonymous unadorned car I usually drove. A young woman opened the front door of Tom and Claudia’s home and, as I looked at her animated face I realised I knew her.

“Do you remember me?”, she asked, wide eyed as if she could hardly believe who she was seeing.

“Yes!”, I replied flooded with memories. It was nearly twenty years since Claudia and I had last seen each other. Her father had been dying at the time and Claudia was caring for him. I was working as a counsellor in a university counselling service and we had met together across the last eighteen months of her father’s life. I easily recalled Claudia’s devotion to his care at a time when her contemporaries were more focused on parties and the opportunities study could provide them.

I walked further into a room that had ushered in many unfamiliar health professionals over the prior week, full of gratitude for this chance reunion and hopeful that it might make some difference for Claudia and Tom.

Claudia invited me to come into a bedroom for some privacy and together we sat on the bed. She was dressed comfortably in shorts and a T-shirt with her long fair hair tied back off her face. Clothes that would be practical for parenting work and caring for Tom I thought. There were dark circles under Claudia’s red lidded eyes, easily visible because of her fair skin, and her face had a hollowed appearance in spite of her warm smile.

Claudia explained she had been up all night with their baby who was sick and on top of that she herself had toothache. “Somehow I am going to have to fit in an appointment with a dentist but I don’t know how I’m going to find the time”, she exclaimed, throwing up her hands in dismay. After talking further, Claudia led me into a small darkened room to meet Tom. He lay on a





single bed unmoving and silent. Claudia touched Tom gently and he turned his head towards us. “This is Sasha”, she said. Tom looked up at me and we exchanged a greeting.

I sat down on a chair facing Tom while Claudia ignored the other chair which was placed near his pillow. Instead she sat on the floor with her arm resting on Tom’s shoulder. Tom’s skin was a faded tan colour suggesting to me he had once spent considerable time out of doors. In response to my greeting, he slowly shifted in the bed with jerky movements. Once he had settled I leaned forward looking at him. “Tom, it’s lovely to meet you”.

He was a tall man I guessed, with fair hair and a kind face, softly lined around his eyes and mouth. “I’m aware talking can take a lot of precious energy. Is this an OK time for the three of us to talk together or would you rather we spoke another time? I want to do whatever best suits you and Claudia. I can easily fit in either way”, I offered, smiling warmly at him.

“I’d like to talk for a bit. I won’t last long. We’ve been looking forward to it”, he responded, glancing at Claudia.

“When you find yourself beginning to tire will you notice and be able to let me know?” I inquired, thinking I would need to be alert for any signs I was extending the conversation longer than he could comfortably manage.

“Claudia will know. She’ll tell us both”. Claudia nodded, her face soft and relaxed.

“Thank you.” Sitting back in my chair I made myself comfortable while I looked from Claudia to Tom. “Illnesses have a way of taking over people’s lives and yet people are so much more than the illness they are living with. Would it be OK if I asked you a bit about yourselves and your lives before all this happened?”

“Gosh it’s so nice to be asked that”, Claudia exclaimed. “It makes me feel like I matter, we matter. Tom’s a teacher and you probably noticed the garden. He grows plants from seed and often ones that are good to cook with”.

In a faltering voice Tom contributed, “Yeah... I’ve taught younger age groups and I love to garden and cook”.

“Food is very important in this house!”, Claudia laughed.

Tom quietly added, “In the last year I’ve worked tutoring from home ... it’s been ideal with me having cancer”. I considered asking Tom about how he lived with cancer but decided to pursue

⁷ This question draws on a practice of getting to know people ahead of the difficulties they live with (Epston, 2004). I find bringing forward identities other than the illness identity can shape the therapeutic conversation by dignifying the people I meet with and connecting them to skills and knowledge they hold. In doing so the conversation may shine a light on seeds or even well-established narratives of an alternative story to be inquired into later. This practice can also contribute to people having a sense of being truly “seen and heard” (See Kabat-Zinn, 2005).





getting to know them more a bit more first. Claudia continued the conversation in a lively manner sharing with me stories of her work and interests.

“Tom, if I were to know Claudia as you do, what might I come to appreciate and respect about her?⁸”

Tom looked at Claudia as he answered me. “I love Claudia very deeply. She is kind. Really kind. I saw that from the first. She is honourable and dedicated to the people and things she believes in. Her loyalty is like none other and there is nothing I wouldn’t share or confide in her. Claudia is a wonderful loving mother. Knowing that makes it easier for me to be sick because I know I will be leaving the girls in her care.”

“Could you tell me a story that illustrates some of these attributes you love and appreciate in Claudia?⁹”

Tom spoke of the care Claudia had given her father as he was dying. “She will always have your back”, he told me.

“What difference has Claudia ‘having your back’ made to you?”

“It has given me a whole new life that I wouldn’t have had without her. It’s meant I can be myself and pursue my interests. It has meant I have had the joy of becoming a father.”

Claudia responded by clasping Tom’s hand. “I love you so much”, she whispered.

After I asked Tom a few more questions, I turned to Claudia.

“Claudia if were to get to know a little of the Tom that you love so much what might I come to respect and appreciate about him?”

“You’d appreciate his authenticity. Tom is real. He has a wicked sense of humour too! He’s always polite but he doesn’t suffer fools.”

“Would it be OK to ask you for a story of Tom’s authenticity and his wicked sense of humour?” I grinned at Tom and his eyes twinkled in return. Claudia launched into some stories with enthusiasm. Tom lay back quietly enjoying her words.

⁸ This question draws on David Epston’s practice of wonderfulness inquiries. See chapter 2 in “Narrative Therapy in Wonderland. Connecting with children’s imaginative know-how.” Marsten, D. Epston, D. & Markham, L. (2016). I have sometimes, with David’s agreement, referred to this practice as “virtue inquiries” when they take place with adults (See video of November Collab Salon, 2018). I only ask such a question early on if I have assurance that the relationship is a happy one. I had already had prior information that this was the case for Tom and Claudia. It is important to note I cannot assume this. Such a question could be unhelpful in a differently shaped relationship.

⁹ My intention in asking Tom this question is to add depth to the story of what makes Claudia loveable. As Tom replies I am listening for what matters to them both, how Claudia goes about her life and whether what is spoken of could offer her a sense of living meaningfully. I then repeat the process with Tom (see May, 2015).





As the conversation progressed, it turned quite naturally towards the cancer and what they had been going through. I looked over to Tom and inquired,

“What do you give weight to in your days as you live with this cancer?¹⁰”

“My family, being a father, I like to be involved with the girls”, Tom confided. A small smile emerged on his face. Tom tried to raise himself in the bed but, before Claudia could help him, slipped back down and, seeming to give up on a sitting position rested his head on the pillow. When he looked comfortable again I asked, “Could you help me to understand a little of what it means to you to be a father?”

“I love it! I wasn’t truly happy until I was a Dad. I took one look at Imogen our eldest and I fell in love.”

I was aware Tom’s words might carry meaning that could be passed on and retold down the years, perhaps providing solace for his girls.

“Could I ask you about this experience of falling in love?”

Contentment seemed to flow over his face for a moment, relaxing the lines as he contemplated my question. “Sure. I didn’t know what happiness was till Imogen came along. She made my life complete.”

“What did Imogen’s birth give you that has you experiencing this sense of completion and happiness?”, I responded smiling.

Tom pondered, “I think it was a proper purpose...”

Claudia joined us. “...Being parents connected us to what’s important....I think Tom’s found a role that really fits him. He’s a good father.”

Tom’s quiet voice gained strength and the corners of his eyes turned up. “...And then Libby was born and I felt overwhelmed with wonder”.

¹⁰ My purpose in asking this question is to learn more of what matters to Tom. Questions that connect Tom to what he values and how his values are expressed in his life may form a narrative that generates for him a sense of living a meaningful life (see May, 2015). In addition they can create for Tom a sense of agency by casting light on how he would prefer to respond to what is happening to him. I used the language of “living with” to offer Tom a wide terrain of possibility in which to describe his experience. Once he does so, I can use language he prefers to use and check its fit with him in subsequent conversations as the narrative of his relationship to the illness evolves. If I was to reproduce dominant discourse and use a battle metaphor (Harrington, 2012) not only would it create a binary of “winning or losing” that can be unhelpful for people with a life ending illness, I would be limiting the possible areas of inquiry into Tom’s responses. Note that such questions are made possible by me using externalising language when referring to cancer.





“What had you overwhelmed with wonder when Libby was born?”, I asked collecting stories again¹¹.

“Libby having her very own personality and the way she could let her feelings be known”, he responded with a chuckle. Claudia joined in, “He sent me a message when I was at work that said, “Baby does not want to sleep in the bedroom today. She was very vocal on the matter!””, Claudia laughed. “Tom always appreciates her strength of character and being able to understand what she’s trying to say.”

Enjoying their delight I responded, “What is important to you both that the experience of parenting has connected you to?”

“Our values and beliefs”, Claudia told me. Tom nodded meeting Claudia’s eyes. “What we treasure”. I was keen to ask them more about their values and beliefs but I didn’t know how long we might have for our conversation. Tom was likely managing fatigue and so I decided to pursue another path. I would return to the detail of what they treasured at a later date.

“Would it be OK to ask how this giving weight to what you believe in and treasure shapes your experience of living with cancer?¹²”

“It’s given us good times, wonderful times in amongst the hard stuff. The girls make each day worth living for”, Tom answered.

“We spent one morning just watching Libby learn to roll”, Claudia laughed.

Our laughter was cut off by sounds of crying from the room upstairs followed by shuffling as Tom’s mother walked quickly to attend to Libby.

Claudia tilted her head as she listened for signs Libby had been soothed. Tom stilled listening as well. “How will I do it without you?”, she whispered, looking back to Tom. Tears began to flow down Claudia’s face. Stifling sobs, she rested her head on Tom’s chest and stretched her arms out as if to cradle the entire length of his body.

¹¹ I am gathering detail to highlight and add depth to a potentially beautiful story that can be re-told to Tom’s and Claudia’s children in the future and hopefully support their relationship with him.

¹² This question draws to Tom’s attention agency he may have in shaping his experience. I began the question by seeking permission as I turn the conversation from parenting which may have been easier for them to discuss back to the illness. The topic of Tom’s illness and approaching death is one that requires every respect I can offer as it may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable for them to talk about especially in this early stage of our relationship. When I seek permission to talk about a topic I convey with my intonation and often a pause that I am truly offering them a choice. As Claudia said to me once “you really mean it when you ask”. Polite entries into questions (see Ingamells, 2016) are genuine and if the person indicates they are uncomfortable or says “no” I will then inquire into their “no” and other ways of talking that might be more comfortable for them. Note also that I have used externalising language in order to place Tom in relationship to a practice of “giving weight” to what he believes in so we can reflect on how he goes about it.





“I’m still here now. I’m still here now”, he crooned, patting her back.

“How will I raise the girls without you?”, Claudia reiterated.

“I trust you. You will do a good job”, he said, trying to placate her. Tom continued to pat Claudia’s back in the age old rhythm of comfort. I remained quiet, touched by her pain and his attempts to console her¹³.

After a time I asked him, “What is it that you know about Claudia that allows you to trust her?”

Tom began to describe his faith in Claudia, gently patting her back all the while he talked.

“Could you tell me a story that illustrates this trust you hold for Claudia and her parenting?”

Tom expressed his admiration for Claudia as a mother. “She always puts the girls first.” He told me stories of her kindness and her beliefs about mothering, explaining how important their shared parenting beliefs were to them. As he spoke, Claudia listened silently, intent on his every word.

“How might you like to carry these beliefs you share forward so Imogen and Libby might know something of what is important to you as a couple and as a family?”, I responded.

Claudia suggested they create a family charter that recorded their values¹⁴. Tom was enthusiastic about such a project and together we discussed what might be included in the document.

I checked with Tom as to how his energy levels were at regular intervals. Mindful that it is hard to send someone away, when I noticed his eyelids start to droop a little I began to bring the conversation to an end.

“How has this conversation been going? Have we talked about what you hoped we might or have I taken us off track?”, I checked.

“It’s been good”, Claudia said.

“Thanks. I liked talking”, Tom said warmly.

Claudia showed me out a few minutes later.

¹³ As I bear witness to Tom and Claudia speaking about what may have been previously unspeakable I am completely in the moment. My focus is entirely on listening to them and there is no thought or question in my mind. Sometimes I notice with hindsight I have even breathed in time with the person as I witness their experience. I am in no hurry to move out of such moments but rather sink into them and let the people I am with guide me as to when they are ready for the next question. They might do this by a change of position or a pause or the passing of an expression of emotion.

¹⁴ Claudia and Tom followed up with this idea.





A Small Hope

Over the following week I heard that Tom had stopped eating and was now unable to leave his bed. The nurses told me that Claudia had insisted no one speak to her about his symptoms or deteriorating condition.

At the end of the week I went to see Tom and Claudia as we had arranged.

Claudia and I sat outside in the garden at an old wooden table. Tom was inside sleeping, too sick to talk. The garden provided a quiet private place away from the activity of the household as the extended family all worked together to care for him and the girls. Tired harrowed faces had welcomed me and in the heavy movements of the family I thought I could feel unspoken sadness weighing down their every step.

Claudia looked up as the leaves ruffled in the moving air. "It's been a better week."

"When you look back on the last two weeks, do you have some ideas about what has contributed to this week being better?", I asked incorporating her words into my question.

"I've stopped looking ahead", Claudia replied. Not wanting to presume what Claudia meant I responded, "May I ask, where do you look when you're not looking ahead?"

"No one can know exactly what's going to happen, can they?", Claudia replied. "Now I only think about today and I have some hope".

"Could you help me to understand a little of what this hope¹⁵ is to you?"

Claudia paused bowing her head.

"It is only a small hope", she said in a quiet voice as if confessing something. "...To be with Tom, for another day or maybe even a few days." Claudia looked up at me with tears gleaming in her eyes.

"May I ask what difference this small hope makes to you?", I replied, moved by the humility of her hope.

"It means I'm not crying all the time. I sat by the window and told Tom what I saw outside. We spent some time talking quietly together once Imogen was at school. I made him a little

¹⁵ Claudia could easily have been positioned as "in denial" but researching the meaning of her actions reveals something quite different. See Pilkington (2017), for my thoughts on practice with people who have been positioned as "in denial". This chapter illustrates me using language to externalise hope and explore Claudia's relationship with it (see White, 1988/89). Doing so generates a previously invisible narrative that gives new meaning to Claudia's desire to not speak about Tom's symptoms with the nurses. This is in contrast to other conversations we had which are sometimes referred to as "externalising conversations" (See Bird, 2000). By externalising conversations I am referring to therapeutic conversations where many ideas and attributes are externalised through the way language is constructed.





something for lunch and we sat together. He told me being together like that was ‘perfect’, and he has never said that before.”

“As you look out the window describing the view to Tom, what does this small hope do that has Tom finding your time together perfect?”

“I can enjoy the moment and he feels that. It helps me forget what is coming”, Claudia explained.

“When you spend these moments that the small hope has given you, what has been made possible that hadn’t been there in the week before?” I knew that the week before had been distressing for them both.

“Close time together. Over the past few months we’ve been arguing because of the stress and that isn’t us”, was Claudia’s reply.

“How did you come to find closeness in sharing the view from the window and talking and bringing Tom food?”

Claudia told me with eagerness now edging into her voice, “It’s what we’ve always done together, enjoyed the simple things. We like to enjoy those things that money can’t buy”. Claudia continued telling me stories illustrating this.

“What else do you do in the day that speaks to the closeness you share as a couple, and as parents together, and brings you closer to Tom?”

“Gardening”, Claudia readily answered. “I feel close to him when I do his garden and I will keep doing it. I just couldn’t do it before. I was too shocked. Now I have some hope and it gets me through the day.”

“How important is this hope in keeping you close to Tom and getting through the day?”

Firmness was in her voice as she stated, “Very, very important. It means I can enjoy some time with Tom and that is the most important thing to me. The time is so precious. And I don’t want to cry every minute.”

We carried on talking about how Claudia and Tom were enjoying the window of time they still had together when Claudia confided, “Did you know I’ve stopped the nurses telling me about Tom’s symptoms?” She glanced up at me and paused, “Maybe that means I’m in denial, I don’t know.”

“What sort of talk are you encouraging or hoping for when you halt discussion about Tom’s condition?”, I asked.





Her reply tumbled out. “I know what’s coming...I just want a little longer, just a little longer with him without thinking of that. It’s always there in the background but I don’t want to go there before I have too.”

I could easily understand why Claudia might want to protect the hope that was allowing her to savour time with Tom. To me it was not denial of his approaching death but rather embracing what was most important to her - close time with Tom before he died.

I left that day not knowing when Claudia and I would next meet. The uncertainty Tom and Claudia were living with made it difficult for Claudia to plan. We had agreed she would call me when she next wanted to meet.

The following week I heard that Tom was dying. The hospice nurses were visiting daily and every effort was being made to keep him comfortable.

One morning I arrived at work early. I sat down at my desk noting the light was blinking on my answerphone. I punched in the numbers to access my messages. There was just one. One of the hospice community nurses had called to let me know Tom had died. “Claudia would like to see you”, she said.

Holding Tom Close

Two weeks later¹⁶, Claudia and I sat talking in the living room. Tom’s vegetable seeds sat in a basket on the kitchen bench behind us and photos of him were pinned to the walls. Claudia sat near me, perched on the edge of a small green sofa as she straightened children’s books on the coffee table in front of us. Her long fair hair was pulled back by a clip so I could easily see the smattering of freckles that stood out against the pallor of her skin. She looked slim in her navy shorts and top, unusually so for a mother of young children. I wondered if she could stomach food or even had time for it.

“Such a lot has happened since we last met. Would you like to talk about the last fortnight or is there another place you would rather begin?”, I asked, seeking to create some space for her to guide me as to how she wanted to begin our conversation. I didn’t know how talking about Tom dying would be for Claudia or what language she preferred to use¹⁷.

Claudia spoke slowly contemplating her words as if they were transporting her back in time. “I moved Tom back into our room after I saw you. I’m so glad I did. It was much nicer for him”. She smiled tenderly. “I lay beside him on the bed that last week as he was dying. I told him over and over, ‘You’re loved and you’re safe’. It was just him and me when he died...”. Claudia

¹⁶ The week or two after a person dies is often busy for a family. They may be organising the funeral/ tangihana and have extended family and friends in constant contact offering support. People usually indicate they are ready to meet with me again once the support they are receiving drops off and their day to day life quietens. I am guided by the family as to what they want.

¹⁷ I am guided by the person and their knowledge of themselves as to how to begin and what to explore.





paused, her eyes staring unfocused. Returning her attention to me she resumed speaking. “The family had left for the evening to give us some time alone together but I called them when I realised he was dying. They came straight back. In the end, he died like he’d wanted.”

I imagined Claudia reassuring Tom with her love. “May I ask... what difference did it make to Tom to feel loved by you as he was dying?”

Claudia sat back in the sofa. “I guess he could bear it. He’d had a tough childhood because he was different and he was bullied a lot. But when he died, he had a family. He was loved. He had all the things that were really important to him.” She glanced at a photo of Tom and the girls on the wall. I too looked at the picture of Tom holding Libby while Imogen wrapped herself around his legs.

The slow pace and rhythm of my words matched Claudia’s as I returned my entire attention to her and expanded my previous question. “What did it mean to Tom to have a family and to be loved as he was dying do you think?”

“Everything. A chaplain visited Tom at the hospital just after we heard the news he was going to die. The chaplain asked Tom, ‘Has it been a good life?’, and Tom said, ‘Yes. It has been a good life’. It comforts me to think that. He always said he’d got a life through me he’d never expected to have.”

I leant towards her as I replied, “What was it that he got from his relationship with you that made his life good?”

“He said he learnt new things. He became a father. He said because of our relationship he got to have a life he wanted but never imagined having”. Claudia’s body stilled and her mouth turned down. I responded tentatively,

“Would you mind sharing with me a little more about this good life that your relationship gave Tom?” I hesitated... , “Might Tom have said it was *a longed for* life?”

“It *was* a longed for life”, Claudia replied emphatically. She wrapped her arms around her body as if to hug herself and began to recall how she met Tom and the friendship they shared. The words came out quickly matched by the tears that fell from her eyes. After a few minutes of talking Claudia slowed, releasing her arms from her body and sat back on the sofa. “He said he’d always been on the outside and never felt like he belonged. It all changed for him when we were together. We both valued friendship and loyalty and it built our relationship.”

I was spellbound by what they had given each other. “People mean many things when they talk about friendship and loyalty. What were yours and Tom’s understandings and how did they show in your relationship... that had Tom moving from feeling on the outside to stepping inside and experiencing belonging, friendship and love a longed for life?” It was a long question and I said it slowly with expression. Claudia stared at me attentively. Eagerly she replied, “We





had each other's backs. Even if we didn't agree we always loved each other. We respected our differences and opinions. Our love was always there even in the way I cared for him. When Tom got sick he said it changed how he dealt with having cancer".

"How did this love you shared and the loving ways you cared for Tom influence how he lived with the cancer?¹⁸"

Claudia leant towards me seeming oblivious to anything other than what she was about to express. "It meant he could go on enjoying his life. We were good at loving each other. We both changed and grew because of the relationship. I will never have another like it. It kind of gives me more to hold on to and I keep saying to myself how grateful I am for my relationship with Tom but it's also so much more to lose." Claudia lowered her voice, her passionate tones fading rapidly and almost whispered, "I've been on the edge of a cliff for so long knowing there was a chasm ahead of me. I know I'm falling into it now but there's this numbness. I hate it. It disconnects me from Tom. It's like this isn't real and it is".

I reflected on the enormity of such a loss and Claudia's ability to express gratitude at such a moment. "When you've had such a special relationship which both gives you more to hold on to and more to lose, how do you understand this sense of numbness?" Claudia nodded when I gave weight to the words "more to lose" and then replied hesitantly, "It's an anaesthetic. My body being kind maybe".

"What does this sense of numbness speak to about the relationship you have with Tom and the magnitude of the loss do you think?" I wondered if the numbness was an expression of their close connection and the magnitude of the loss Claudia was experiencing.

Claudia straightened her back and lifted her chin. "Tom dying is bigger than any loss I have been through before. Other people I have loved have died but nothing compares to this. Nothing!" She uttered the words emphatically as if arguing with an unseen audience. Then, making eye contact with me added, "Does that make sense?"

I nodded as she spoke, reflecting that she was in a much more informed position to speak of this than I was. "Losses are not the same, relationships are different and circumstances are different. Would it be OK to ask what it is that contributes to Tom dying being an incomparable loss, the biggest loss you have ever experienced in your life?" I wanted to fully acknowledge her experience¹⁹.

¹⁸ As we explore the love Tom and Claudia shared I want to bring to Claudia's attention how they crafted their experience of living with cancer. The narrative that Claudia shares may be her only opportunity to speak of it and gives her the opportunity to weave their loving relationship into the cancer story. The cancer story then holds threads not just of tragedy and pain but of the love story too.

¹⁹ In contrast to normalising Claudia's experience here I acknowledge and inquire into the distinctions in her experience of loss. I seek to companion her and try and understand her hardest moments. Claudia has told me that there is nothing comparable to what she is feeling. If I were to normalise the unique aspects of her experience, I





Claudia wriggled back on the sofa unfolding her arms. Her chest rose as she took a deep breath. “He has been the most important person in my life. He is my best friend. I don’t want to forget.” I remembered how upset Claudia had been by the sense of disconnection she was experiencing. “Could you help me understand more of what you don’t want to forget?”

“There will never be anyone like him again for me. It would be like forgetting who I was to not remember or think of him”, she responded, looking up at me seeming to seek reassurance. I nodded. “When you have shared so much I imagine Tom is an important part of who you are”. Claudia sighed relaxing her body and moved back in her chair with a hint of a smile.

“Would you mind telling me more of who Tom is to you so that I might get to know him a little better through your eyes and perhaps understand more of what you might like to carry with you and remember?” I reflected on the ever present pressure on people to “move on” and “say goodbye” and thought how sad it was that she was forced to justify her desire to remain in relationship with Tom.

Claudia seized the chance to talk about Tom. “He loved the natural world. Tom knew so much about the Warkworth area, the plants and even insects. It used to surprise me at times what he came out with.” Her eyes sparkled as she continued to share her knowledge of Tom and how he was special to her.

“What might Tom be saying about how he would like you to remember him?” I finally asked.

“He’d want to be close to us. He would want the girls to know him and to know how much he loved them”, Claudia replied.

“If you were to hold Tom close in your lives, how might that influence the way you experience this loss do you think? Is that something that might fit with how you want to remember and connect with Tom?”

Immediately Claudia reacted with energy. “It fits definitely. It’s what I want and he would have wanted. I think it would help me.”

Tears edged their way out of her eyes as we began to explore how she might go about this.

I then thought of the family whom I had met when Tom was alive. “Who else loved and cared for Tom? And what role might they have in supporting you in keeping Tom close?²⁰”

could render invisible meaning that is particular to Claudia and risk inviting her to pathologise herself. For example she might ask herself “Why am I not coping like other people?” By asking about the pain and distinctions in her experience I create an opportunity to fully acknowledge the pain and fully honour her efforts to live with it. Normalising isn’t always unhelpful. For example I notice that normalising can be helpful for people who are grieving when they attend groups or if they feel isolated in their experience.

²⁰ A community of people who re-member Tom into their lives (see White, 1989) will be more powerful than Claudia trying to do it on her own.





Claudia answered with a smile. “All the wider family loved Tom. His mum is a great support with the girls and she talks about him with me. I want people to talk about him. It helps me feel connected to him. I like hearing how he mattered to other people.”

“How are we going with this conversation?”, I checked. “Are we talking about what you hoped we might or are there some other things you think might be important to talk about?²¹”

“It’s such a relief to talk about him and what this means to me. I feel closer to him”, Claudia confided.

As we continued to talk the conversation moved towards the girls, and how Claudia could support them. I left half an hour later having given an assurance we could meet again in a week. This was a crisis and I wanted to do all I could to support Claudia. I reflected on the prescriptive ideas that could put pressure on Claudia to conform to thinking she had to “say good bye” to Tom and “move on” and the ridiculously short time frames that accompanied such concepts. Such unhelpful ideas often had people judging themselves as failures. I would support Claudia to counter them where I could. It isn’t easy to stand against an incoming tide.

Bringing Memories to Life

“I want to remember the precious times we had together in those last weeks but already they are fading and I am forgetting”, Claudia said with resignation. It was now a month after Tom had died and the conversation had just shifted from the challenges of getting through each day.

“Is gathering up memories of the precious times something that you might like to do in this conversation?”, I checked.

“Yes, those last four weeks”, Claudia said through tears. “From when we were told in the hospital Tom was dying and decided to come home. In the hospital, I asked one of the nurses, ‘How long does he have?’, and she replied, ‘Maybe a week’, though as you know he lived for four weeks... Tom didn’t ask how long he had to live but I wanted to know.”

“Would it be Ok to ask... what was important to you that you asked for the nurse’s guess as to how long he had to live?” I added the word “guess” as no one ever definitely knows and that uncertainty is often unfamiliar to people.

²¹ Checking questions are a regular part of my practice. I would ask a checking question such as this one at least once in every meeting as I want to make sure we are talking about what a person hoped we might. I am also often speaking with people in territories that can be unfamiliar and tender and I want to create space for them to share how that experience has been for them. Another area I ask checking questions in is around how someone is managing in light of their energy levels if they are unwell. I ask these questions with care, creating as much space as possible for a person to answer as they would wish too. I might do this by scaffolding the question with an explanation as to why I am checking in with them.





Claudia's voice broke, "I just wanted to know how long I had with him. I think I was just trying to get a clear view of the future".

"Did you have any hopes for what a clear view might provide you and Tom?"

"I was thinking this is valuable time. It clarified that we wanted him to come home", Claudia affirmed.

"In this decision to go home, what kind of valuable time were you and Tom hoping for?²²"

"It meant he could see the changes in the girls. They are so young they change rapidly, especially Libby who develops in small ways every week. I knew that visiting in hospital is just not the same. Everything is different, distorted and not in their natural state", she explained. Visions of hospital rooms with their lack of privacy and noisy nights floated through my mind. I tried to imagine visiting such an unfamiliar environment frequently with a baby and young child.

"What does it say about Tom's relationship with Imogen and Libby that he prioritised noticing small changes in them even when he was dying?"

Claudia smiled. "He treasured and valued every little thing about them. He's been quite good at appreciating small things for a very long time", she answered speaking of Tom in the present.

"Could you tell me a story of Tom appreciating Libby and the small changes in her perhaps? And then Imogen and what he enjoyed about her?" I was aware that I was collecting memories, not only for Claudia, but for her girls as well. Together we would build a document of memories she could keep²³.

After Claudia had shared some stories, I became aware we had diverged from what Claudia had originally said she wanted to discuss. "I notice we have moved away from speaking about the four weeks you said you wanted to focus on. Would you like to continue on this track or would you like to spend some time talking about the last weeks of Tom's life? What would you like to do at this point?²⁴"

"The last four weeks. It's fading so fast. I've even forgotten subtleties that were routine to me like giving him his morning wash and that was something I treasured doing", Claudia stated. I

²² Note how this deconstructive question gathers detail of what valuable time consists of for Claudia and Tom. Lost or overlooked stories often reside in details.

²³ The therapeutic document I mention here eventually took the form of this story. In addition, Claudia has the recordings of some of our meetings and the transcriptions of those recordings that I used to write this story with, plus therapeutic letters and copies of the notes I took during our meetings. The Charter of Values Tom and Claudia wrote provided another storehouse of memories.

²⁴ This is another example of a checking question.





was glad I had checked. I didn't want the conversation to end without it having been what she wished.

"Would asking you about treasuring his wash be a good place to begin?" Claudia nodded and sat back on the sofa. "Would you like to walk me through how you went about giving him his wash?"

Claudia began to recall previously unspoken details of the daily routine with me inquiring into their meaning. Towards the end of collecting as many details as I could I asked, "When you were washing him was there a particular way you touched him?"

"Yes. When he was moving less I would give him a little massage or I'd move his legs around. I could tell he liked it. After his massage we'd put frankincense on his palms and the soles of his feet and he'd go, 'Oh Frank!' and wiggle his fingers making a joke!" Claudia laughed.

"Did he keep his sense of humour even..."

Claudia's words tumbled out in her enthusiasm. "Always, right up until that last night. A carer came for the night to help. When she saw Tom she said, 'Still unresponsive', so he wriggled his eyebrows at me. It was our little joke! Frequently through the day I would wash his face and I'd say, 'Would you like a cool flannel or a hot flannel to wash your face?'"

"When you were giving him that choice... what was your intention?"

"He had very little control over his life. He deserved respect", Claudia explained.

"What did you want him to know by giving him that choice and respect...and control?" In tender tones Claudia answered, "He was still just as valuable. Even though he couldn't move or see much, he was still my Tom, he was still the same to me". Moved by her love and respect I responded, "May I ask, what would have Tom noticed that would have told him it was you washing him rather than someone else and that he was still the same to you?"

"He would have felt my love in the way I washed him. I was given a choice of washing him or having a carer do it. There was no way I was going to let someone else do such a personal private thing for him", Claudia stated, flicking her hair behind her²⁵.

"What were you valuing do you think, when you prioritised this loving moment with him and protecting his privacy even as you were parenting two small children and doing everything else that was required of you?" I reflected on the exhaustion that comes with parenting very young children. Such a choice was not right for everyone. Claudia lowered her voice, leaning towards me as she spoke, "I wanted to protect his dignity and have that intimate time with him".

²⁵ In Aotearoa New Zealand, carers are available to do personal cares such as showering at no cost to the family. For many families this service provides an essential break at a time when breaks are scarce. Not only that but physical strength is required to wash someone who is seriously ill and is often a task for two people.





“May I ask, what did you experience as meaningful in the relationship when you managed to get that time together and share love and intimacy?”

“It felt like this was why we had him at home. It meant I was the one changing his nappy... And I did feel proud and honoured that I could do that for him. It’s not something a wife normally does for a partner but I guess it was a new intimate thing we could do where there were precious few of those new things.”

Struck by her ability to generate such a deeply loving experience in something so far from what couples ordinarily do together I responded, “What does it say about you that you felt proud and honoured to do that care for Tom ... that you could find intimacy in changing his nappy for him rather than seeing it as a chore?²⁶”

Thoughtfully Claudia answered, “I think I understood what he needed; I understood the best way to do that for him”.

“What was it that you understood about Tom in those last weeks that was important to you both?” Claudia pondered. “We were able to slow things down a bit.”

“How did you do this slowing?” I wondered. Claudia spoke slowly as she considered, “Just focusing on little things. I’d go and get him milkshakes and I’d say, ‘So what flavour milkshake do you want today and where do you want me to get it from?’ It was treasuring very small decisions. I got great pleasure from him eating or drinking something and he got to make decisions and think about that milkshake and what he wanted. Life zoomed in and focused on those nice moments.”

“What did you know Claudia, perhaps about living with such a serious illness, or about Tom, that had you recognising that making a decision about the flavour of a milkshake was worth treasuring?” I couldn’t help but notice her extraordinary sensitivity to Tom’s experience and I hoped that my questions might draw Claudia’s attention to her wise and gentle care.

Claudia laughed. “Tom knew his own mind. I would never make that decision for him, particularly around food”, she said, reminding me that Tom was a skilful and passionate cook. “Choices in his life were dwindling. He didn’t have a lot of control.” She dropped her head for a moment reflecting. Tears glistened in Claudia’s eyes as another thought occurred to her. “Tom knew how much it would hurt me when he went.” The tears gathered and a sob escaped but she went on speaking. “He didn’t want to go but most of all he was worried about me...”

²⁶ Claudia and Tom being able to find intimacy in such a moment is unusual. Many people speak to me about losing elements of intimacy in their relationship as a person becomes less well and requires more care from their partner. If this is the case they can find it helpful to have health professionals offer some aspects of care to give them the space to reclaim aspects of intimacy in their relationship. Some people choose to die in hospice rather than at home for this reason. It is important to note that the amount of care a person requires and the duration are highly variable. In addition, relationships are not the same, nor are family circumstances and the physical demands of care on a partner may be extensive.





Claudia started to cry unreservedly. Her face reddened as more of her body joined the experience of grief. Rather than a break in the conversation it was as if these tears spoke what words couldn't as we reflected on Tom's love for her even as he was dying²⁷.

Quietly I eventually asked her, "What were these worries Tom held for you?"

Claudia was barely able to speak yet she persevered, wanting to express what the emotion meant in words. "He just knew how hard it was going to be... he cared enormously about me being alone."

We were quiet for a time as Claudia continued to weep.

"He was sad for himself and the girls but he was really sad for me", she eventually explained.

I thought about Tom worrying about Claudia even as he lay in bed so sick. "What does Tom's compassion mean to you? that he couldn't bear to think of you being on your own...that he cared so much about what might happen to you...?"

"It was a demonstration of how much he loved me", Claudia choked out. "I usually cried", she explained, smiling at herself through the tears. "I felt guilty every time I cried and got comfort from him but he's the person I turned to when things were wrong. He said comforting me was something he could do". She stared at me with her eyes wide waiting for my response.

"Do you have a sense of what it was to Tom that you chose him to seek support from?"

Claudia exhaled, "I think he was thinking about the time when he wouldn't be able to support me and he was doing what he could."

"How would Tom have understood the way you saw him when you sought comfort from him?"

Claudia considered, speaking what seemed like newly formed thoughts. "He was my best friend and we were there for each other. It didn't change when he was sick. I think it was hard but very important for him. It allowed him to show support for me I guess. He saw it as something he could do for me when he could do so little, when I was doing so much for him. I didn't feel the need to protect him."

"What do you know about Tom that you knew you didn't need to protect him?"

²⁷ I am steady in these moments that I sit with people partly because of some ideas I hold about suffering. One of these ideas is that I believe in the resilience of the people I meet with. Another is that I believe that if I join Claudia in the dark place she will have a companion alongside her for a short time, rather than being alone. Note I don't end the conversation when Claudia is expressing how hard it is for her but continue it so she has the opportunity to make sense of her experience and will later check in with her as to how it has been. I understand Claudia's pain to be an honouring of her relationship with Tom rather than something to be fixed or solved and so my attention in these conversations is on meaning making and witnessing Claudia's experience.





“He was strong. He said he wasn’t scared of dying.” Claudia let out a big long sigh collapsing in on herself in seeming resignation.

“Would it be OK to ask you one more question about the way you shared your grief together?” Claudia nodded.

“What did you know about the relationship that told you that talking would be best for it?” I wanted to bring forward Claudia’s knowledge of their particular relationship because I knew that this kind of talking wasn’t best for everyone.

“It’s what we’ve always done”, she readily replied.

Our time was coming to an end. After I summarised what we had been discussing I checked with Claudia, “How has our conversation gone today? Has the experience of reflecting on the last four weeks connected you with anything that is helpful or important to you?²⁸”

“I think it’s highlighted how we did it according to our values. That’s incredibly important to me. It eases the pain just a little to know that”, Claudia responded.

“How might you carry that knowledge do you think? That you did it according to your values?”

“I guess by carrying on doing that with the girls”, she replied thoughtfully.

“Perhaps we might come back to that next time if it interests you.... but could I ask you something else? As you reflect on the last weeks of Tom’s life, was there anything that happened that moved you a little closer to being the person you want to be?”

With some energy and perhaps surprise in her voice, Claudia answered, “Now that I talk about it, lots of things. Doing it our way and speaking up to make that happen. The way I was able to show him how much I love him through what I did. It was so hard but I was there to support him die the way he wanted to do it. I hadn’t really thought about it before.”

Turning Towards Pain

Claudia and I met each week until I was scheduled to be away on leave²⁹. Before I left we planned who Claudia might turn to in difficult times for support and what she might do. Not long after I returned we were once again sitting in her home. After greeting each other warmly, Claudia brought her cup of tea into the living room and we sat down.

“We had a fortnight gap this time, how did that go?”, I inquired.

²⁸ Here I am wondering if there are untold narratives that Claudia can fold into the story of Tom’s dying.

²⁹ It isn’t usual for me to see someone weekly; however at that time Claudia described herself as “only just hanging on” and so I fitted my practice around what she said was best for her.





Claudia let a rush of air out. “My sister said, ‘Have you seen your counsellor this week?’ And I said, ‘No we couldn’t make it. Sasha was away’. And she said, “I always know when you haven’t seen her”. I thought I’d be fine but I’ve had a really awful fortnight.”

“What is it that you do differently in the week when you’ve had a chance to talk?³⁰”, I inquired, but I was off track.

“I was thinking about what it was that changed. You know how I was feeling numb? Well I’m raw now. I can’t seem to stop crying...” Claudia’s voice broke and she could no longer speak. The pain gathered and eventually she sobbed, “It’s all the time... just crying all the time. I’m right back to raw and where is he? And how can this be happening?”

I listened feeling the echoes of her pain³¹.

Claudia bowed her head and tightly wound her arms around her body. It was as if she was holding herself together. “I’m right back there... and that lovely numbness... that I was feeling has just gone”, she stuttered through the sobs. “It’s horrible... just that relentlessness... And I went to see a clairvoyant and she was just ghastly. I think that tipped me over the edge a bit. I realised I had a lot of hope riding on it.” She looked up at me with wet eyes.

My voice was soft. “May I ask ...what were your hopes in seeing the clairvoyant?” I wasn’t surprised Claudia had visited a clairvoyant. Many people search for connection with someone who has died through spiritual understandings they hold.

“I didn’t realise until afterwards that I was hoping that it would be for real. I would have got a feeling of peace knowing that he is somewhere and can be with us. I didn’t get that at all. I just felt duped. I was already feeling quite low but hopeful, I realised afterwards.”

“Would it be okay if I ask a bit more about these hopes?” Claudia nodded as she blew her nose. “Would you mind speaking a little about what you were hoping for?”

“That he’s somewhere...And he’s not just puff gone. That he is somewhere and sometimes, somehow, he is around ...that’s what I really want to believe...I need a message to say, ‘I’m Ok, I can never see you again but I’m OK...and I know you are Ok’. It is one of the hardest things I think, the not knowing.” I reflected on how much not knowing there could be surrounding illness and death.

Claudia’s anguish layered her words as she again tightly encased herself with her arms. “I’m stuck in this awful hole... I don’t know how to go on. I just don’t know how to hold on. I feel like I’m clinging on to a ledge. I have to but I don’t know how to keep going and going and

³⁰ Note that I move her into an agentic position with this question.

³¹ Claudia had no other space in which she could speak fully of her suffering. For her, being able to speak of her pain and have it acknowledged by me was significant and meaningful. Hence the presence of such exchanges in this story.





going...³²” I tried to imagine the relentlessness of continuing on. Her words created a vivid picture of the ledge. I made sounds of empathy as I listened, a witness to her pain and sorrow. “How important was knowing where Tom is in this holding on?³³”

“Very important”, she cried.

“Yeah... yeah...”, I replied, almost crooning in my compassion for her. “What would it have given you in the holding on?”

Claudia cried, hiccupping as she answered, “Some sort of peace that he’s OK...that he’s with us...and that I might see him again...It’s so hard. It’s not like breaking up with someone and you know they’re Ok. Somewhere they’re alive...”

“Completely different”, I affirmed.

Claudia voice was husky, “I just can’t get my head around it. It’s the absolute worst that could happen to me...I’m really struggling....” Her tears took over and we paused, neither of us hurrying or censoring her expressions of grief...., ”and I’m sure having less help this week is making a difference. The family have been away. I’ve actually been feeling OK with my parenting.”

My ears pricked up. “Yeah...?” We had talked a lot about the impact of grief on her parenting as Imogen and Libby were Claudia’s top priority. However, I didn’t want to move Claudia away from her talk of the struggle sooner than she wanted so I resisted asking a question and kept my query very small.

“We’ve found a routine and I’m not shouting. I’m not feeling desperate about those times”, Claudia told me with an energy that conveyed to me she might have a possible interest in speaking further about her parenting.

“Is this something you would be interested in talking about?” When Claudia indicated she would like to follow this direction I continued, “What’s allowed you to be Ok with your parenting especially when there is so much struggle?”

“I think routine has helped. It’s soothing. And I’ve got really, really good at filling in the time now. Those girls are bloody tired by the end of the day because I’ve worn them out. Like last Sunday we went to the markets and met a friend for breakfast, then we went to a school children’s art exhibition which was a couple of hours and then we went out west to another

³² Note how our conversations develop stories of hope, purpose, connection and meaning. These are all protective factors for people who may consider suicide.

³³ I don’t avoid inquiring into Claudia’s pain. I can’t truly witness and acknowledge her experience or companion her if I don’t try and understand it. This inquiry however takes place in the context of our relationship which provides safety for Claudia and a history of permission giving for these kinds of questions.





friend's. We got home at 6pm". Claudia sighed, sounding exhausted even by the thought of what she had just relayed to me.

While being so busy was not Claudia's preferred way of parenting prior to Tom's death, this was a survival strategy she was using. "I'm really tired but that's how I cope. Just fill in every hour possible. It's not because I don't want to think because I like to think about him. It's just the only way I can cope with the kids. It's helped."

I returned to the aspect of parenting Claudia was feeling good about and, remembering Tom's belief in Claudia's parenting, decided to bring him into the conversation.³⁴ "And what would Tom make of you doing your parenting in a way that you felt good about? Finding a routine and being more how you want to be with the girls. What would he be thinking about that?"

"He'd be saying, 'I knew you could. I'm proud of you'".

We both smiled. With a lighter voice I asked: "What might Tom have known about you that allowed him to know you could do it?"

"That I put them first...", she replied as tears trickled down her face. "...That I'll always look after them..." Intensity and what sounded like determination entered her tones of sadness "...and I'll hold onto that ledge for them hard as it is..."

"Is Tom under your feet helping to hold you up a bit too?", I asked, wanting to add his support if it was there.

"I don't know...I hope so.... He would if he could.... if he can he will...I forgot about the rawness. It's so horrible." I nodded.

"It's only three months since he died", Claudia told me with emphasis.

"No time at all and yet perhaps a long time too. How would you describe it?", I reflected, slowly waiting for what else she might be about to share. Claudia replied, crying as if her heart would break, "No time and yet forever. It's part of why I hurt so much. How's three years going to feel since I saw him? And thirty years? I feel like I'm only living for my girls... to give them a good life... and not enjoying any of it myself. The hole just keeps getting bigger."

"Is it hard to imagine that the hole might stop expanding and steady a bit? That it might be less gaping one day?", I said offering a future possibility.

"I can't ..."

³⁴ Claudia told me she was only just able to hold on earlier in the conversation. As I turn the conversation to parts of her life that might strengthen her ability to hold on I add in Tom's voice for further support.





I nodded.

“Is your wanting to parent the girls so they have good lives...”, I began to ask as I looked to connect Claudia to parts of her life that might help support her keep holding on. Her virtuous desire to care for her children in spite of the pain of living stood out to me.

Claudia interrupted me, staunch as always in her love of her girls. “I want them to have good happy lives absolutely.”

“How would you describe a good happy life for your girls?”, I invited, seeking to connect her with a future for them that might be possible to envisage.

“Doing things that stimulate them and interest them with me... positive times with me and ...being strong in themselves ...able to weather some storms... and get enjoyment out of things...and finding passions. I want that for them but not for myself. I don’t believe in having that for myself. I can’t see it again. It feels like it’s all gone...”

We paused together for a time³⁵ and Claudia wept. “I feel like something in my soul has gone... an intrinsic part of me.” Her description touched me as I murmured a quiet acknowledgment. After a pause I added, “May I ask what part of your soul would that be?”

“All of my adult self...is connected to Tom. Everything I do and think is influenced by him and our relationship. All my memories of being an adult...are with him. The way I view things is because of him. It is lovely and I’m very glad. But it’s such a wrench.”

“Was your soul entwined with his?”, I wondered. Claudia nodded. “And was his entwined with yours?”

She nodded vehemently. “I don’t know where he is! It’s just so hard.” Claudia’s body shook and she put her head in her hands. It was my turn to nod as we both acknowledged the hardness. It was so hard³⁶. As we sat there for a time, I considered Claudia’s disappointment with the clairvoyant and how it had made the pain worse.

“I wonder if we can think about that a little bit ... if we could figure something out, away from the experience you had with that particular clairvoyant...”

³⁵ Some conversations are punctuated by periods of not speaking that witness and honour Claudia’s expressions of grief. I enact my willingness to be present for Claudia and not shut down her expressions of loss in many ways. Some of these ways include honouring her grief by giving her distress space and not talking over it. I seek to stay present to her distress and don’t pass her tissues if she is in the midst of crying nor give any message she should finish her tears. I am willing to speak about those topics not usually discussed in everyday conversation and will intentionally research pain to understand her experience. The pauses such as this one in the story are comfortable moments that don’t draw attention to themselves but rather as I have described are a continuation of the conversation perhaps in an embodied way or as a reflective moment.

³⁶ Acknowledgement is important especially as stories of pain and suffering are usually shut down or silenced. If the hardness of the experience isn’t fully acknowledged then Claudia’s effort and steps to live with it can’t be either.





Claudia laughed heartily through her tears, "...Who believes in herself even if she is a complete fraud. I can't accept that he's not somewhere or not existing".

"What are your understandings of possible places or ways that Tom could be existing?", I asked. People I meet with often have very different ways of understanding death even if they identify as belonging to a well-known faith tradition. They also often re-evaluate beliefs they've held for a lifetime in moments of illness and loss. I can never assume I know what someone believes.

"That he is part of the energy, the finite energy of the universe ...that's scientific", Claudia explained to me. I listened attentively as she continued, "Or he could be in a different realm or a different world which is potentially scientific as well".

"... like a parallel universe?" I inquired, noting her tears had stopped. "Yes. Or in some heavenly place, some place souls go where there's peace. I'm sure there are other frontiers but those are the ones I think of... I want him to be conscious somewhere and aware of us. If I think about another world or a heavenly place he would be conscious of us". She stared at the sky out the window. "What would a sense of Tom's presence give you?" Claudia returned her gaze to me. "I would know he's with us, present in our lives".

"Do you think you have any impact on that sense of presence or how that presence could be felt?" I inquired. Claudia looked at me quizzically. "Clairvoyant people say we do, don't they? If we can be open to it or not open to it."

"I don't know.... Can you influence the way you feel Tom?", I wondered curious.

"I don't know. I'd like to," she affirmed. I cast my mind back to a previous conversation. "When we met last time you mentioned you had felt him."

Claudia confirmed, "I felt him really strongly".

"May I ask what you were doing at the time?"

"I wasn't doing anything out of the ordinary. I was probably having a laugh which was unusual as it was maybe two or three weeks after he died. The girls were playing around so a bit of a lighter moment and I was laughing with Libby playing peek-a-boo."

"Would it be possible for you to have faith in yourself even if you can't have faith in the clairvoyant you met?³⁷"

"I've tried very hard to separate those two. It's where I came to on Saturday. I didn't have a very good experience with her but that doesn't mean it's all out. I didn't pin my hopes on just one person. I booked two clairvoyants. I've booked the other one for August and I've heard she

³⁷ In this section I am seeking to build Claudia's sense of agency so she isn't reliant on outside people in order to have faith in her own experience.





is authentic and very good. I'll keep that booking. I'm not giving up on it altogether." Claudia sounded calm.

Laughing she added, "I can spare another \$120! If she's good!" I laughed in response before inquiring, "What about your own experience of feeling Tom was with you?"

"It was very strong. But it's very easy to doubt myself. That's what's hard I think", Claudia explained. "I had another experience where I was looking for a necklace and I felt Tom very strongly. I was looking and looking and then I found it one day and I had a very strong feeling that Tom had helped me find it. I know that sounds strange. But it was such a strong feeling that I said, 'Thank you Tom! That's for Imogen'. It just came out. I need more! Greedy, greedy!"

"When you feel Tom with you, what does that feel like?", I asked curiously.

"Normal! The old normal", she explained with energy.

"How do you know he's there? When he helped you find the necklace, what happened that told you that?", I wondered, keen to learn more.

"It just felt like everything's OK again."

"Ah." I sat back in my chair.

"And I don't have to have this new normal. Both times I just felt lighter and happier. This nightmare is over or maybe not what it seems."

"If you met with another clairvoyant whom you did or didn't find authentic, could anyone take away those experiences that you've had?"

"No. They're authentic to me", Claudia stated.

"You said you want more of them..."

In a sing song voice Claudia interrupted, "I do!" She was grinning.

I returned her grin. "On demand!" I echoed in the same sing song tones. Claudia laughed³⁸.

"They felt authentic to me and I'm a big believer in going with your gut instinct. I'm quite in tune with those things. They felt real." Claudia sat back looking steady.

I drove back to the hospice some time later reflecting on the many understandings people hold about what happens to a person after they die³⁹.

³⁸ I have reflected with my colleague Wayne Gates about the skill and timing that humour requires. We both have many laughs with the people we meet with and agree that while humour can be powerful therapeutically it requires great care. Note Claudia initiates this humorous moment and I follow her lead.

³⁹ Counselling conversations about spirituality occur frequently in palliative care.





New Understandings

Claudia returned to work and, as the routine settled and time passed, the pain of Tom's death intensified. As Claudia explained to me, "It is now not just days or weeks since I last saw Tom but six months. The longer it is since I last saw my Tom the more I miss him." I wasn't surprised as many other people have described a similar experience to me.

It was a rainy day. Claudia had finished breastfeeding Libby and had returned from laying her down to sleep. She walked up the stairs with a heavy tread and sat down. "It feels like we are now in a new normal. The new normal makes me so sad. I don't want a new normal. I want the old normal. I'm feeling guilty. Sad and guilty."

I made a few acknowledging sounds as she talked, "It is so tough. Who would want this normal when comparing it to having a partner they loved alive?" I paused a moment as I looked at Claudia's drawn face. "Would it be helpful to share with me some more about this sadness and guilt?", I continued, wondering if it might be useful to get to know the experience in more detail. I didn't know the meaning of the guilt Claudia had spoken of⁴⁰.

Claudia sighed. "I associate the amount that I'm crying with the amount of love that I feel for Tom. So... if I'm crying less, I know it's silly, but I feel guilty as it seems like I don't care. Then I feel really sad."

"Hmm, I guess we often make an association between our love for a person and the amount we cry and sometimes, perhaps for some of us, it does represent some of what we feel. What ideas do you have about how the amount of crying that you are doing to express this loss got linked with the amount of love you have for Tom?" For just an instant my mind turned to the gendered nature of how we express grief, as I pictured some of the men I had met with who were experiencing enormous grief without a tear. My attention returned to Claudia,

"I think it's from trying to explain to Imogen why I am so upset. Why I'm so tired or frustrated or short tempered all the time or... I was trying to say to her it's because I love Daddy- that's why I'm feeling so much."

"Would it be OK to consider that idea for a moment? Could I ask you a little more about how you do this grieving for Tom and how it shows up in your life?⁴¹"

"Sure. I cry all the time when I'm feeling the pain. I can't seem to think or do anything else."

⁴⁰ I find it important in my practice to not assume I know the meaning of what people say but to ask them.

⁴¹ Loss may be expressed in many ways not just through tears. It may be expressed for example as irritability, anger, frustration, a sense of not coping or exhaustion. I cannot assume I know how loss shows up in Claudia's life. People often blame themselves for feeling less resourced as time goes on especially as it is not widely known just how long it takes for a person to steady and find ways of living with loss. The invisibility of the effects of living with loss over time and the nonlinear nature of the experience may lead them to conclude there is something wrong with them rather than recognising it is the effects of grief.





I listened to Claudia intently and nodded. “You mentioned that you said to Imogen it was why you were feeling so tired or frustrated or short tempered. Do you think you express the pain and loss in some other ways as well as crying?” Claudia began to reply thoughtfully, “It’s mostly crying ...or ... a feeling of stress...ornot feeling able to cope, not being able to sleep, not enjoying food much, not enjoying much”, her speech speeding up as more possibilities came to her.

“Would you say you interact with people in the same way or is the loss colouring that?”, I inquired inviting her to consider additional possibilities.

“Definitely. I feel much more reserved and I’m generally reserved anyway. It does effect everything!”

“Can you think of any part of yourself which is not touched by this loss?” I wanted to acknowledge the enormity that is so rarely named or acknowledged in Western societies.

“No, not any part”, Claudia affirmed.

“If in the moments when you’re not expressing the loss by crying, is it possible you could be expressing it in other ways?”

“Yeah... “. Claudia sat back on the sofa with a slight frown on her face as she reflected.

“If we consider the last few days, where you said you’ve been feeling a bit better; how do you think you’ve expressed the loss of Tom’s physical presence in your life in these days when you’ve felt less in pain?” The frown disappeared and energy came into Claudia’s voice, “Ah now that’s interesting. Gosh! Actually when I think about it, those two days are work days and they are a very busy. Up till now work has been filling my hours but it hasn’t been filling my mind. I’d frequently run to the bathroom and cry but I was almost too busy to do it, I got distracted. It’s maybe what it was. How I express it.”

“Did the busyness of work distract you from connecting directly with the pain?”

Claudia gave an emphatic, “Yes”.

“Would it be OK to ask... how did you carry the loss that was different?”

Claudia readily described her experience. “It felt pushed aside and I didn’t like it. It’s possibly where the guilt was. It felt a little bit shunted off to the side... away... I wasn’t doing it on purpose. Work was busy and I was quite focused.”

“What does your ability to focus at work and....to even do work (!)...your commitment to work...What does that represent in terms of your family going on?”, I stuttered, in growing awe as I again connected to what Claudia was managing.

“Earning money! Surviving!” Claudia asserted.





“What part of your life would you say you are prioritising in the times when you focus your attention on earning money and surviving rather than on your own experience of this pain and loss?⁴²”

“The girls...maintaining my employability, that’s how I’m doing work. It fills in the hours and maintains my employability so I can provide for my family. I guess I’m making sure we can go on”, Claudia explained thoughtfully, as the implications of what she was saying seemed to sink in. Claudia lent back in her chair with a look of wonder on her face.

“OK. May I ask, what might Tom make of that?”

“He’d be saying ‘keep the standards up at work’”, she responded imitating Tom’s voice.

Slowly, giving weight to my question I asked, “In the moments when you carry the loss in different ways so you can keep going and provide for your family as Tom wanted you to, do you think you are loving him less?”

“No...”. Claudia was attentive.

“Would it be OK if I summarised a little of what we’ve been talking about? Would you mind helping me out if I don’t get it quite right or as you understand it?⁴³” Claudia nodded her head, her eyes alert.

I cast my mind back over the conversation. “You said earlier in our conversation that you had been experiencing some feelings of guilt because you haven’t been crying as much. My understanding was that you thought this was because of an idea that the amount of crying you were doing showed how much you love Tom. Is that right?” Claudia immediately acknowledged our shared understanding so I continued. “As we know that your love for Tom is unquestionable, we then explored the idea that you might be expressing or responding to the loss of Tom’s physical presence in your life in different ways... not just by crying. We’ve uncovered some different ways you express it besides crying and one of these is by attending to your survival and that of the girls. Something that Tom would very much support. How am I going so far?”

Claudia sat forward and speaking quickly replied, “Good. I do express it in many ways and I always love him. I think it might be that I feel a bit less close to him in those times when I have to concentrate on other things.”

⁴² This question is one of many that I would never had asked if it hadn’t been for Johnella Bird’s teaching (see Bird, 2000; 2004). It moves Claudia into an agentic position of prioritising and choosing where her focus is. The question suggests there are many parts to Claudia’s life and that the loss can be present regardless of whether she is focused on it or not.

⁴³ We have discovered new meaning through this conversation together. I now summarise to underline these new understandings as they are significant to Claudia and could easily be lost. I bring in Tom to enlist his support for Claudia.





“Is that a useful understanding in view of the guilt you were experiencing before?”

“Yes, it’s more helpful and I don’t need to feel guilty. I wish he was here though”, she added wistfully.

“Of course”, I acknowledged.

Sometime later I left, having made a new plan with Claudia to meet at the hospice. While it was usual in my practice as a counsellor working with the hospice community team to visit people who were unwell and their families at home, it was not usual for me to visit people who were grieving. However, for Claudia who was breastfeeding a baby and parenting another young child as she lived with the profound loss of Tom, trying to arrange to see me at hospice had previously been too difficult. Now however, as we explored different ways Claudia could get some breaks, it had become possible without adding another burden.

The Ebb and Flow of Time⁴⁴

Week after week Claudia shared her experiences of living with loss and the ways she found to endure and live according to her values. It was inspiring. I was in no doubt that she was teaching me.

One day stood out to me nine months after Tom died. It was pouring with rain and we had struggled to find a private space for our conversation. Claudia and I had been talking about Imogen and Libby.

“I’ve been doing some new rituals with Libby to keep her close to her Dad. People say she’s too young to remember him and won’t remember any of this time. It’s so sad she won’t know him. I don’t want her going through her life with that idea. It creates an identity that is so powerless and unhelpful.”

I reflected that this chronological description of Libby and Tom’s relationship was an unhelpful one as Claudia had easily recognised. Relationships last beyond the life of our bodies (Hedtke & Winslade, 2017; White, 1989) and are not frozen in the past. They can even grow if nourished.

“What have you been doing with Libby to keep her close to her Dad?” I asked, as the idea of “not knowing” churned in my mind.

Claudia eagerly began to share all the rituals she was doing with Libby to keep Tom present and an active part of her day to day life.

“If Tom was only relegated to the past and all his influence ended when he died, then maybe Libby wouldn’t know much of her Dad. But what if you were to continue to keep kernels of

⁴⁴ See chapter 7 called “Elastic Time” in “The Crafting of Grief: Constructing aesthetic responses to loss” (Hedtke & Winslade, 2017) for background reading on working with time.





memory alive, as you already are, and grow them through retelling them to the girls and the wider family?"

Claudia was emphatic. "I want to!", she exclaimed. I reflected that Claudia was in fact already doing all she could, however the idea 'relationships end in death' surrounds us and it's hard to step outside dominant ideas.

We spent some time reflecting on what Claudia was already doing to support the girls sense of knowing their Dad. "I think it will make all the difference", Claudia told me. I considered who might support Claudia and the difference that support could make.

"If you all as a family spoke of Tom's influence on the girls and their lives as they unfolded, what might Libby and Imogen say about their father and their knowing⁴⁵ of the relationship then? Would they have an experience of 'not knowing their father'?"

"Tom's Mum has some beautiful ways of talking about him to the girls. She tells stories of him as a boy and reminds the girls of ways they are like him. I think if we all do it as an extended family they will know their father perhaps better than many children whose father is alive. It's not the same as him being here but they will 'know their Dad'", Claudia said with determination. I noted her quick grasp of such a concept.

"Would you mind sharing a memory you have of Libby with her Dad and then Imogen with her Dad so that we might explore them a little further?"

"Tom putting Libby to sleep stands out. Libby was born in the evening and the next morning she went to sleep on her Dad's chest. I would breastfeed Libby to sleep, I know the books say not too.... but he couldn't obviously. So he would lay her down on his chest and she would go to sleep. When I went back to work he knew I was missing Imogen who was at school, and Libby and him at home, so he would send me messages and photos telling me how they had got on. It was so lovely. I have six selfies of him with Libby on his chest sleeping with messages saying, 'Baby's sleeping well'".

"What do you think he gave Libby by having her sleep snuggled into his chest?"

Claudia spoke without hesitation. "Love and comfort. He soothed her and relaxed her. She was a content and happy baby."

"How might that love and soothing have seeped in and influenced her do you think?"

"She's always been a happy baby. I thought of it as entering her very cells", Claudia laughed, before responding to me with a story.

⁴⁵ Note the use of "knowing" in this section. I use "knowing" to convey that it is something they will do (activity) suggesting agency, to create movement rather than a binary, and to underline the relationship is ongoing.





“Do you have a name you give to Tom’s love and soothing entering her very cells?”

Claudia furrowed her eyebrows but then her face relaxed, “Could that be what people mean by ‘embodied’?”

“Does an “embodied memory” fit?”, I checked, thinking of the extensive knowledge Claudia brought to such a conversation.

“An embodied memory”, she affirmed smiling.

We were both warming to the topic and I asked another question. “Sadly, we often hear of the long term effects of neglect and abuse on a small child but what about the opposite? How might the love and soothing Tom gave Libby and the happiness it generated in her, influence how she will grow up and the person she will become?”

This drew an enthusiastic response from Claudia and we spent some time canvassing the topic. I am always curious about reciprocity in relationships, especially when it is usually invisible⁴⁶. Consequently I then asked her, “What do you think Libby gave her Dad when she slept on his chest each day?”

To Claudia it was clear. “She gave him love and connection. And a reason to stop. As Tom got sicker I remember him saying, ‘I feel so weak and tired and old’ and he didn’t want to feel like that. Libby gave him a reason to rest without having to think, ‘I have to lie down because I’m weak and sick’.

“What difference would this gift of Libby’s have made to her Dad; the gift of drawing Tom’s attention to what he was doing for her by resting, rather than being forced to think he was lying down because he was weak and sick? What difference would that gift have made to him and his life?”

Claudia pondered as I watched her. She then answered thoughtfully giving weight to her words. “She gave him dignity. She protected him from the pain of knowing how tired he was and of thinking about himself as a sick person.”

I was struck by the beauty of such a gift as the words of many people I have met with swirled through my mind. “What difference did it make to Tom and the way he thought about himself, to have his dignity and not be thinking about himself as a sick person?”

Claudia’s voice softened. “He would have liked thinking of someone else and not focusing on himself and how he felt.”

⁴⁶ The gifts some groups of people offer can be rendered invisible by dominant ideas. For example what children teach adults, and what the elderly or those who are sick give others. I also find what constitutes a gift is often well worth examining carefully.





“What was important to Tom, that thinking about someone else would have been helpful to him?”

“He would always put the children first, so not only would it have given him dignity, it meant he was able to be the parent he wanted to be.”

“If you were to tell Libby the story of what her Dad gave her and what she gave her Dad, what kind of understandings might she have of their relationship do you think? How might she describe herself as a daughter?”

“I think one day she will be happy to know she did that for her Dad. She was the only one who could have done it which is very special”.

“...and if it was retold both by the family and by Libby herself, how might it influence the way Libby described herself as a person and her relationship with her Dad do you think?⁴⁷”

“I think the family would add details and their impressions. I guess it could become one of those stories that gets told at family parties and special events and everyone would know it. The story of Libby’s gift to her Dad. I bet it would get longer each time too! She would be proud to know she had done something so meaningful and kind.”

“What kinds of knowing of her Dad and herself might she glean from this story of how she slept on his chest as a baby?”

After we had talked about Libby, we then easily moved on to a story of Imogen but this time I wanted Claudia to think about how she might go about thickening⁴⁸ the story.

“Last week I was in Tom’s garden with Imogen. We saw a button from one of Tom’s gardening clothes in amongst the dirt. Imogen picked it up and she said, ‘This is a magic button! Maybe it will bring my Daddy back’”.

“Wow! How might you retell this story so it spoke even further of the relationship Imogen had with her Daddy?” ‘What a poignant story’ I thought. I began to wonder how Imogen had learnt about magic and what role her Dad had had in helping her gain such knowledge but I remained quiet as I listened to Claudia add what was important to her.

Claudia had lots of details and stories to add to the moment she had described and quickly it began to grow. I then asked her, “What might Imogen have been treasuring about her

⁴⁷ Here I am inviting Claudia to consider the effects of creating an audience to the story. By recruiting a wider audience to this story where it can be retold, the story will gain more solidity. See chapter 9 “Spreading the news” in “Narrative Therapy. The construction of preferred realities” (Freedman & Gene Coombs, 1996).

⁴⁸ Claudia and I had discussed previously what she could do to help treasured memories last. Thickening refers here to adding threads that develop detail and strengthen the story so it is more likely to endure (White, 2007).





relationship with her Dad in that moment when she wanted to use the magic button to bring her Daddy back?”

“They spent every Friday together from when she was very little. They’d usually go off on an adventure together. It might be local or it might be catching the ferry somewhere, to the museum or go and eat Chinese food in a food hall in town. They had whole days together which was lovely. And they were always interesting adventures. Maybe she was thinking of having another wonderful adventure.”

After we had talked for a while I began to summarise some of the ideas we had been considering and added some final questions.

“When someone talks about a child not remembering, what are they taking into account and what would you say has got left out?”

Claudia began hesitantly but as the words came out they gained solidity. “I guess saying ‘they don’t remember’ is only talking about the pictures and movies in the girls’ memories that happened that they may not recall. But we’re talking about what is all around that and in between. The relationship and what things mean to us and go on being important to us. And the memories their bodies carry that has shaped who they are even if their brains don’t have the pictures. Actually, the important stuff! And Tom doesn’t have to be just in the past, a memory movie that fades. We are putting him into our daily life now with our rituals and talk.”

“I couldn’t have said it better”, I thought to myself.

This New Life

Claudia sat down exclaiming how hectic the morning was with two young children. After expressing gratitude that the rush was over she relaxed back in her chair sipping on a steaming cup of tea. It was more than a year since Tom had died and over previous weeks we had been discussing the demands of her new life, in particular being a parent and living with loss.

Claudia opened our conversation by making some comparisons between her life now and how it was in the months just after Tom had died. After some discussion I asked Claudia, “How would you describe the reshaping of your days and your life with the girls now as you live with this grief a bit further down the track?”

Claudia readily answered, “The grief is changing. It’s deeper and I’m covering it up more now. The waves of loss come and go. In spite of that, I’m trying very hard to enjoy Imogen and Libby’s company and to remind myself what matters. For a long time, I needed to keep the girls busy to survive but now I’m not planning as many things to do and we’re able to just spend time together.”





This was a significant and welcome change for Claudia and so rather than asking about what mattered to her or further questions about her changing experience of grief I requested further details. “Would you mind sharing with me a story of the three of you just spending time together?”

“Last Saturday I took the risk of not having anything planned. Imogen and Libby were playing nicely at home when Imogen asked me if we could go to a café. I said we could go to the one up the road. Libby asked if she could push her dolls pram and when I said ‘Yes’, Imogen asked if she could too. I knew it would be hard work but I said ‘yes’ to both of them. We walked up the street with the girls pushing their dolls’ prams having a wonderful time. The five minute walk took half an hour and all the time I was trying to enjoy it. By the end of the day when I reflected back that was my favourite part of the day! I’m trying to create moments which are valuable rather than rushing around”.

I noticed Claudia acting on her own life to try and make it more like how she wished it to be. “As you prioritise such valuable moments what might you find yourself doing more of and what might you find yourself doing a bit less of do you think?”

Claudia answered me with energy. “More breathing and less jumping in! The mess on the floor really isn’t a big deal. I sat down with Libby and played with her rather than complaining about the untidiness for example. It takes practice and effort and yet it was much more valuable to both of us.”

Claudia smiled at me and I returned her warmth with a smile of my own.

“When you look back at the end of the day on those valuable moments, what makes them worthwhile?”

“I feel like I contributed to Libby’s enjoyment and learning by playing a game. And even though there is a whole list of things to do this is an important moment. An opportunity”, Claudia exclaimed.

“What is it an opportunity for?”, I asked, collecting detail.

“For connection I guess. It’s parenting how I want too.”

“What were the three of you able to enjoy together that wouldn’t have been available to you if you’d been rushing around doing other things?”

Claudia spoke as if in unfamiliar territory. “This was a shared experience that we were all getting enjoyment from rather than me creating an experience that they could enjoy and one that would help me survive.”

“You have spoken previously of needing to fill up the spaces in your day to survive. While that still may be a useful strategy at times given what hard work parenting can be and also that you





are living with loss, I was wondering... what would you say this process of moving from filling in space towards savouring some valuable moments represents?⁴⁹

“It’s something I’ve been trying to do over the last couple of months. I was aware my survival methods weren’t necessarily what they wanted so I’ve been watching to see how the girls play at home. When I noticed they could be at home and play, I thought I might try it a bit more.”

I noticed the care Claudia took in taking this new step so I asked, “Did you try it out gradually?”

“Yeah... I am acutely aware that time, while it plods, goes very quickly at the same time.”

“Would you say that savouring those moments that are valuable to you is wisdom that you’ve come to appreciate differently from this process of grieving?”

Nodding Claudia replied, “Yeah. Definitely! Since Tom has died I have imagined life when the girls are adults and I’m old. I asked myself what memories I would wish to keep and I realised I wouldn’t have him to help me remember. I also realised that if I was in a rush all the time I would only remember a blur. So I’m trying to slow life down and create memories I want to look back on.”

I was fascinated by her reply. “How did you develop or hone this ability to move forward in time and then think about what might be valuable to you when you look back on your life?⁵⁰”

Claudia’s reply of, “I learnt it through grieving. It’s more important especially as I may be doing it on my own”, was followed by further examples.

“Is this ability to move forward in time and think about how it might be looking back on your life, is it leading to you making different decisions in the present? For example, did it contribute to you deciding to walk with the girls and their prams?”

“Yes, and it’s also what Tom would have done with Imogen.”

I remembered the adventures Tom took Imogen on and his ability to savour life. “Are you taking a leaf out of Tom’s book?”

“Yeah trying too.” Claudia’s eyes twinkled.

“If you were to create a present you would wish to look back on when you are old, how might that impact on the kind of life you will end up living do you think?”

⁴⁹ I want to avoid a binary here of “savouring the moment or not”, or “filling in time to survive or not”, and so ask this in a way that suggests there could be a spectrum of parenting from filling in time towards savouring moments. (See Bird, 2000, p. 23.)

⁵⁰ This question positions Claudia as agentic and highlights her ability to collapse time and think about what might be important to her. This struck me as important knowledge that might be worth drawing to her attention. We had a much longer conversation about it than is recorded here.





"I guess if I keep doing it I might be happier. I've been reflecting and I want to try and live more according to our values. At first, I just wanted to make it to the end of my life but now I can see I don't have to claw my way through minute by minute that there can still be some valuable experiences I can enjoy. I'm thinking about how I can make my life as good as it can be, even though Tom's not here. Well...not physically. I've actually developed this belief that he is somewhere near...from that experience I had and lots of reading. I was thinking of him as somewhere a bit removed and not able to be with me every minute. But then I thought.... WHAT IF HE IS WITH ME? What if I change my thinking and think he's here every minute of the day. How does that effect how I think about things? And it's quite nice. I wondered 'what if that's crazy?'.... but does it matter? No one's ever going to know if I'm crazy or not...Some people might think that's a bit of a crutch or make believe or a bit crazy but they don't know! And I don't know so that doesn't matter. If I think that he is with me all the time, then that helps me get through. It feels like a nice very deliberate connection."

"If Tom had any say in the matter, no matter how small, where would he choose to be?"

Claudia grinned. "I know that if he had a choice he would be here with us. Even if he was told he had other things to do, I think he would still chose to be here with us. I think he'd go, 'No, no, no, those things can wait. I want to be with my family.' I like that. That's a new way of thinking about him being with us."

Thinking out loud I responded, "What difference does this way of thinking make? That if Tom had any say he would be deciding and prioritising being with you as a family in whatever ways he could...?"

Claudia interrupted my stumbling. "It helps! It eases it a bit. I don't feel so alone."

"How does it help in terms of the day to day? What difference does ..."

Claudia jumped in with energy. "He can't unload the dishwasher still and he can't help with the kids". She laughed and then paused looking up at the ceiling, "but.... maybe.... we can have our friendship... which is the thing I miss the most". Speaking as if to herself she reflected, "The parenting by myself is overwhelmingly hard but what I really miss is having the person who knows me so well and who loves me for who I am that partner that's what I miss the most. He can't talk back but I can imagine he's here. There's no harm in thinking that, is there? People might think I'm crazy but they don't know. We don't know! We don't know!"

"No we don't!", I agreed.

"And it helps me!", she enthused, her eyes twinkling.

I smiled. "What might Tom be saying about that?"





“Mmmm! He’s saying, ‘I want to be with you. I don’t want to go and wash my halo!’” Claudia started laughing.

Claudia, still laughing, lowered her voice and imitated Tom talking “I have obligations! And I haven’t made a choice to be out here.”

We continued to laugh and talk, with Claudia then speculating what Tom might know, given she thought he could read her mind. It was good to see her enjoying the joke.

“I would definitely not have chosen this life but as I have to have this new life I’m choosing to have him with me and if he can, he will be choosing to be with me”, she concluded.

Neither of us for a second thought that this moment of realisation and laughter meant the sense of loss and pain had gone. But we enjoyed the value it offered and together we savoured that moment.

POST SCRIPT:

Claudia you are the anonymous co-author of this story and have generously shared your experiences in order to benefit others. “How do you see yourself through the eyes of the story?”

“I must have read it at least twenty times and all the different versions. Whenever I read it I see my values but differently. In a focused way. I see myself and I think ‘gosh I must be a good person’. Even at the moment when I’m feeling so low and stressed I read it and it makes a difference.”

When I performed⁵¹ the first part of this story for you three years ago, you described seeing yourself “through Tom’s loving compassionate eyes”. Would you like to add to this description now that you have glimpsed yourself in the fuller version?

“It was incredibly important for us to spend that last part of Tom’s life according to our values. I want people to know we weren’t perfect. When I read the story, it’s like seeing you. I can imagine what you might ask me. I miss writing it! Now I’m looking out and forwards. I feel really good, better than in years.”

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⁵¹ By “performed” I mean reading it in the tones that we first spoke the words in. Claudia and I had already discussed the meaning of this word.





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