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From Creative Interventions w/Children: A Transtheoretical Approach

Friendly Ghosts: Re-Membering Conversations With Children

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Casper, the friendly ghost, The friendliest ghost you know!

The grownups might look at him with fright, But the children all love him so...

Introduction: Cartoon memories, enduring connections

As a kid, I faithfully watched the cartoon, *Casper the Friendly Ghost*. It was one of a handful of cartoons that had won my weekly allegiance as a young child. But unlike *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, *Felix the Cat*, *The Jetsons*, and even *Bugs* and the rest of the *Looney Tunes* crew, *Casper* has had an enduring, endearing quality that makes it stand out as unique from the other ‘toons around which I organized my life. Even now, 40 years since my Saturday morning PJ-wearing, cereal-eating, cartoon-watching days, it is the theme song to *Casper* that pops into my head, mysteriously, surreptitiously, unannounced. Ghost-like. I remember watching *Casper* and thinking, “Grandma is like a friendly ghost” and taking some comfort in this.

Taking comfort in, and enriching our lives through, the continuation of relationships with people who have died challenges the prevailing structuralist ideas embedded within traditional grief work. Indeed, the prescription of “acceptance, letting go, and moving on,” of traditional models (e.g., Bowlby, 1980; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Worden, 1991) has gained cultural hegemony to the extent that many lay people can recite these steps by rote. Being “cured” of one’s grief means agreeing to the assumption

¹ To Drake, a young man who understood early in his life that his grandparents’ memberships in his life were not discontinued by their deaths

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³ Re-membering conversations are productive and meaningful therapeutic conversations for many problems

of the finality of death and that the relationship with the deceased is buried with their body.

Alternatively, narrative therapy practices, situated within a post-structural and social constructionist framework, offer a very different conceptual map for working alongside those who have lost someone special. Social constructionism views the important people (and other figures) in our lives as prime contributors to the stories that organize our lives and through which we are known by others and ourselves (Gergen, 1994). These significant figures are granted membership in our relational world, which does not end when they become unavailable for any reason, including physical death.

Narrative practices are founded on an ethic of social justice and focus on the discursive politics that impact peoples' lived experiences. Thus, there are particular considerations that we must attend to when working with children, to avoid the frequent reproduction of the marginalization of their young voices. White and Morgan (2006), for example, underscore the importance of attending to issues of power by avoiding the reification of "expert" knowledge. As Freeman, Epston, and Lobovits (1997) note, adults typically own the market on "what constitutes knowledge and what constitutes nonsense" (p.182). In writing about "the possibilities of childhood" White (2000) articulates how children engage in creative ways within the limitations of life guided by structuralist thinking. By trafficking in the world of "as if" rather than "reality," children "bring together many things, including words and ideas, that are not routinely brought together in the wider culture" (p.17). Honoring these emergent possibilities serves to de-center adult and expert ideas and places at the center of the conversation children's' knowledges and the possibilities that they invite.

Re-membering Conversations: Good-bye is Not the End³

“The process of grief is a ‘saying good-bye and then hullo’ phenomenon” (White, 1988, p. 13)

At our first meeting, seven-year-old Ashley handed me a drawing she had made of her late grandpa Jimmy reading to her. As I enjoyed her colorful rendering, Ashley informed me that she and her mom, Nikki, had come to talk to me “to introduce you to my grandpa because he can help us stop fussing.” I looked up from the drawing and asked her if grandpa would be a good person to help stop the fussing. Ashley matter-of-factly stated, “Yes—he always makes the best plans and makes us feel better.” Just as I was comforted by the idea of my grandma being a friendly ghost, allowing me to remain connected to her, Ashley found comfort in her grandpa’s guidance during times of “fussing.” Ashley and Nikki went on to explain that they had been “arguing and just not getting along well” since Jimmy had died eight months ago. Nikki commented, “I don’t feel like we’re as together without him,” and Ashley added, “Grandpa helps us get along.”

I asked Nikki if she saw Ashley’s grandpa, her father, as a resource for their struggles. “Well, he was like her second parent—she’s never known her own dad—and he helped us a lot. He was one of my best friends. I just think maybe we need to find our way now without him.” I asked Nikki, “Would finding your way without Ashley’s grandpa Jimmy, your dad, mean finding your way without his wisdom and some of those best plans that Ashley says always made you both feel better?” Nikki hardily shook her head “no” and took Ashley’s hand. “Nikki, what kinds of plans would he wish for you to

³ Re-membering conversations are productive and meaningful therapeutic conversations for many problems that enter peoples’ lives. In this chapter, I am solely and specifically applying these practices when a child has lost a grandparent to material death.

make with Ashley when there is fussing?” I asked. Nikki sighed, smiled, and her eyes welled with tears. “ ‘Don’t be making no plans without me!’—That’s always step one of all his plans, right, Ash?” They hugged as Ashley smiled, “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, momma.”

By actively consulting grandpa Jimmy and intentionally seeking ways of maintaining their relationship with him, Ashley and Nikki were engaging in “re-membering,” a purposeful peopling of one’s “club of life” (Hedtke, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Hedtke & Winslade, 2004; Myerhoff, 1978, 1982, 1986; Russell & Carey, 2002; White, 1997). Re-membering conversations are based on the work of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986), and were first introduced into narrative practice by Michael White (1988), and expanded on by Hedtke (2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003) and Hedtke and Winslade (2004, 2005), among others. Re-membering conversations view life as an association or club consisting of members whose contributions are instrumental to the development of our identities and how we understand ourselves (White, 2007). Hedtke (2001a) notes, “... there are no endings to these relationships except those that we arbitrarily create” (p. 5), revealing the socially constructed nature of the discourse of finality in relationships where a death has occurred.

Talk that Re-members: Practice Guidelines

Underlying this practice is the paradigmatic shift from essentialist constitutions of identity informed by structural accounts, to a multi-voiced sense of identity co-created relationally with the significant figures in one’s life. Based on this understanding, White (1988, 2007) offers a conversational map for re-membering conversations. As always, it is paramount to attend closely to the conversation, and check with the child and others to

make sure the conversation you are having is salient. With Ashley and Nikki, I did not impose a re-remembering conversation. Rather, I followed Ashley's lead, or invitation if you will, to develop the story of Jimmy when she showed me the drawing and introduced him as an important figure in her family's life. Further, honoring peoples' spiritual, religious, personal, and cultural beliefs and values about death is critical, and may require some careful negotiation of the meanings held by various family members

Two organizing sets of inquiry lend structure to these conversations.⁴ First, there are questions that invite a description of the grandparent's contribution to the child's and family members' lives. The second set of questions invites a description of what the child and family members have contributed to the grandparent's life, and the implications of this contribution for the grandparent's sense of identity. Both categories privilege the relational ethic that honors the past, present, and future of the relationship. Lines of inquiry and specific questions must be born out of the therapeutic conversation, utilize the language of the family, and privilege their knowledge and world-view.

I asked Ashley and Nikki questions to explore the impact that Jimmy had had on their lives, and how that impact lived on after his material death, like:

Influence on the past:

- *What did grandpa see and appreciate about each of you?*
- *What would he say he especially liked about how you were a mom and daughter together?*
- *What kinds of things let him know this about each of you and your mom-daughter ways?*

⁴ For the purpose of this chapter I will refer to "grandparent" and "child and family members." However, re-remembering conversations can involve any variety of significant figures in a person's life and can be held with people of all ages.

- *If grandpa were to have you remember one of his best plans that helped you feel better before, which plan would that be?*
- *After you followed that plan, how were you different? What new things did you know or could you do because of grandpa's plan?*

Influence on the present

- *If grandpa were here right now, what ideas would he have about this fussing and what could be done about it?*
- *If grandpa could make a wish for you right now, what would his wish be? What is it about that wish that would make grandpa wish it for you?*
- *When you are remembering grandpa, what things are you able to remember about yourself and your mom? How might it help to keep those memories in the front of your heads instead of the backs?*

Influence on the future

- *When you are listening to grandpa's advice what will others notice that tells them grandpa had a talk with you?*
- *As you follow grandpa's advice over the next year, how would he know that you've been listening?*
- *How will following grandpa's advice help you to make your own best plans in the future? What would be familiar to grandpa about the best plans that you make?*
- *How will remembering these things that grandpa knows about you help you and your mom when fussing starts revving up?*

- *What are some of the best things about you that come about when you keep grandpa and his best plans close?*

During our conversation, I addressed Ashley and Nikki, weaving their responses together to bring forward the voice of their relationship and their *relationship's relationship with Jimmy*. Emboldened by the strength of these connections and acknowledgement of Jimmy's ongoing presence and influence, Nikki and Ashley were better able to protest the effects of Fussing by underscoring the ways in which Jimmy had contributed to their lives—individually and within their relationship. I used language that was accessible to Ashley. Ashley had lost her grandpa and her “second parent” and Nikki had lost her father and “one of her best friends.” Sharing the significance of these relationships by bringing forward the ongoing influence of Jimmy enriched the connection between mom and daughter.

Questions about Ashley's and Nikki's impact on Jimmy served to thicken their identities and keep alive the recursive nature of their relationship with Jimmy; even after his death, the mutual influence continues to be generative and meaningful. Some of these questions included:

- *If I were to have a talk with Jimmy, what would he say have been some of his most favorite things about being a dad to you, Nikki, and a grandpa to you, Ashley?*
- *What did being a dad and grandpa mean to Jimmy?*
- *When you think about what being a dad and grandpa meant to Jimmy, what does that mean for you as a mom and a daughter?*
- *What might Jimmy say about how his plans have helped you to stop the*

fussing from coming between you?

It's important to note the grammatical structure and tone of many of these questions, as they rely heavily on the subjunctive mood, which expresses a wish, emotion, possibility, judgment, opinion, necessity, or action that has not yet occurred. This is not common in day-to-day conversation, which is typically constructed to reflect greater certainty. Use of the subjunctive allows flexibility and movement within a liminal space that creates room for what can be made real, rather than insisting on a compulsory reality. Dialogically, the intent is *to shift the conversation's focus from accepting reality to creating reality*. The subjunctive mood is particularly suited to a child's imagination and inclination to explore "what ifs." Hedtke and Winslade (2005) describe this as a shift from *actualities to possibilities* as people are allowed to suspend expectations of reality in order to engaging in supposing. Often, children's perspectives are pushed to the margins as adults work to incorporate them into the so-called "real world."⁵

As our conversation continued (we met three times over two months), Nikki and Ashley re-membered their lives, not only with Jimmy's measured voice of support and wisdom that Fussing had been drowning out, but also with their preferred accounts of each other and of themselves. Nikki reclaimed her knowledge of herself as "being more like my dad – calm, playful, and not so rattled by stuff" – that had been unavailable to her immediately after Jimmy's death. Nikki said, "I think the arguing and struggles that we were having were because I lost sight of my dad. When I'm more myself, he's closer, and when I keep him in sight, I'm more myself and I see the things in Ashley – like her

⁵ For greater explication of the use of the subjunctive, the reader is referred to the work of anthropologist Victor Turner (1986) and psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986). White and Epston (1990) in their seminal work *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* discuss the theory and application of the subjunctive.

good heart and earnestness – that he always, always, so cherished. I really want to do that for him, and for us.”

Ashley said, “I’m part happy and part sad. The happy part is that I know so much about my grandpa and he knows so much about me. That makes me happy ‘cuz then I know he’s not alone and I’m not alone either. The sad part is I still do miss him but it feels different now and I don’t have to fight with my mom when I miss him. That’s a happy part, too.”

Re-membered Lives, Never-ending Stories

Working alongside Ashley, and other children and their families living after the death of a grandparent, deepened my already enduring appreciation for, and admiration of, children’s creative resourcefulness and capacities for embracing what some adults oftentimes experience as the unembraceable. Having been myself long ago initiated into the cult of adulthood, I too, am susceptible to recruitment into notions that talk like Ashley’s talk indicates some kind of irrational state, as if she “really” thinks that she can climb back into grandpa’s lap and cozy up for a good read. Actively protesting such recruitment, I stand in solidarity with the connection-making and connection-keeping ways of children and their families that stand outside of normative ideas about death and grief. Re-membering my own life with Imagination by re-watching episodes of *Casper* (thank you, youtube) is one form of protest in which I engage toward this end.

Re-membering practices harness children’s imaginations and permit them to explore the world of possibilities. Because death is not seen as final and the separation between life and death is blurred, the binary of life and death gives way to a multiplicity of relational possibilities. Re-membering practices are not just about reminiscing,

solitary reflection, or being nostalgic (not that these are bad or discouraged in any way); rather, they involve purposeful involvement of the deceased person in the grieving person's life. This involvement is future oriented as the relationship is considered to be on going, generative, and alive in every way conceivable to the client. Thus, the focus shifts from a story of loss and finality to one of relationship and continuation, punctuated by the hopes, dreams, and intentions of all involved.

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