

Harnessing the Power of Metaphors in Group-Work with Bereaved Families

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There is hope for a tree;
If it is cut down it will renew itself;
Its shoots will not cease.
If its roots are old in the earth,
And its stump dies in the ground,
At the scent of water it will bud.
And produce branches like sapling
JOB 14:7-9

Introduction

This paper describes a model for supporting families coping with traumatic loss, and focuses on the ways metaphors can be explored, elaborated and harnessed as vehicles for communication and reconstruction of meaning in the wake of loss.

The word "metaphor" is Greek in origin; the Greek etymology is from *meta* (change) and *pherein* (to bear, or to carry). The word 'Amphora', which is of the same root, means an ancient Greek vessel for carrying and storing precious liquids. Metaphors can carry ideas and feelings that otherwise might be difficult to put into words. (Knopp, 1995; Seligman, 1990).

The model that will be described converges with a constructivist approach to the reconstruction of meaning in the wake of loss (Neimeyer, 2001a) and with new trends in grief theory and research including (a) an adoption of non-pathologizing models of transformation (b) a shift away from traditional stage models of grieving that emphasize "closure" or "letting go" towards an affirmation of continuing bonds (Klass, 1996; Rubin, 1996), (c) a search for culture sensitive approaches (Malkinson, 2003) and (d) adoption of concepts of "relearning" the world (Attig, 2000) and of re-authoring life narratives following loss (Neimeyer, 2001b).
A Model for Supporting Families Coping with Traumatic Loss.

Selah, the Israel Crisis Management Center is a non-profit organization that has, in the past ten years, supported more than 11,000 immigrants coping with traumatic loss due to terror attack, car and work accidents, sudden illness or other circumstances. A countrywide network of about 600 trained volunteers is organized into multi-disciplinary emergency teams that provide:

Immediate on-site emergency practical assistance and emotional support - in the hospitals, morgue, or homes - to the bereaved as well as to the wounded and their families from the initial hours after tragedy strikes.

Long-term individual and group support.

Selah's two or three day seminars are an integral part of its long term support program. The seminars are held in different locations in Israel and are tailored to meet the needs of different target groups including bereaved parents, widows/widowers, and grandparents raising orphaned grandchildren, and children and adolescents coping with sudden death or severe wounding of a family member. Each of these groups deal with specific themes but all the programs share the common goal of creating a climate of support and validating grief while accepting and respecting individual differences of coping.

The intersection of loss, trauma, and immigration generates multiple stresses. Immigrants are often isolated, lacking the language and the natural support systems provided by extended family and long-time friends.

It is well known that isolation is a risk factor in the aftermath of trauma (Danieli et al, 2004; Malkinson et al, 2000; Rubin, 1999). Mutual support, professional guidance, and the support of the volunteers are weaved together to identify urgent needs, to break through isolation and to create a "safety net" - a community of support.

Most of the families who come together at the seminar would have been unwilling to do so if the way hadn't been paved by the intensive one-on-one relationship and strong bonds of trust they formed with Selah volunteers from the first hours after tragedy struck. The families that attend a seminar for the first time return and participate in subsequent seminars that are held several times a year in different locations in Israel. Over the years, some of the bereaved parents and widows/widowers who received support have joined the ranks of volunteers reaching out to help the newly bereaved.

Encounters in Nature

Nature provides endless opportunities to learn about the cycles of change, life and death, as well as about processes of regeneration.

The original idea of the seminars was to enable bereaved families to support each other and to get away from the stresses of everyday life, at least for a while. The group excursions were planned to offer an opportunity to get to know the country and to experience some sense of belonging through visiting places of historical significance and relevance.

The workshops are planned and facilitated by a multi-disciplinary team of volunteers, including mental health professionals and volunteers with different professional backgrounds, each bringing unique strengths, perspectives and experience.

One of our leading volunteers, Dr Zvia Shapira, is a botanist specializing in ethnic botany. Observing nature through her keen eyes added a new dimension to the outdoor group experiences. Discussions on themes such as survival strategies in nature, the re-acclimatization of transplanted plants and the regeneration of burnt trees, resonated deeply with group members enabling them to share their own feelings and reflections.

The botanical perspective uncovered hidden processes concealed from the untrained eye, underscoring the inter-connectedness of the web of life and the multiple ways life unfolds and interacts with death and regenerative processes in nature.

The creative activities, including painting, sculpture, music, drama etc. that are planned with the help of art therapists in the volunteer team, complement the outdoor experiences. Introducing different art techniques enables participants to use alternative channels for expression. This inter-modal approach, which includes both verbal and non verbal techniques, offers the group members a way for translating themselves to themselves and subsequently to others.

The workshops are usually held on the second or third day of each seminar after participants have already spent time together and shared various activities. Although the workshops focus on different themes, they have the same structure; each workshop has three parts: Nature walks – including relaxation, guided imagery, observations in "nature's classroom" followed with space for reflections.

painting, sculpture, collage, etc. Creative activity –
Sharing and processing of experiences.

This sequence of experiential activities is designed to enable a gradual entry and engagement of participants in the process, which unfolds as it proceeds. There is a gradual shift from a more passive to a more active participation in the activities.
“How do these trees gather the strength to go on living?”

To illustrate the above- Let me take you to the Dead Sea: Imagine a circle of about fifteen men and women sitting on the ground in the cactus garden in Kibbutz Ein Gedi, an oasis with lush vegetation nestled between two mountain streams amidst the arid desert landscape. The participants are bereaved parents whose children were killed in a suicide bombing. Five months after the bombing they participate for the first time in such a weekend seminar. It is November and it is quite hot outside; the sky is deep blue and we are sitting in the shade. The group is very quiet. Most of the participants – of ages ranging from 33 to 57 – look withdrawn and disconnected. Most are staring blankly into the air. Nevertheless, some of them gradually appear to become engaged in conversation and express interest in what the botanist, Dr. Zvia Shapiro, is saying about the survival of the plants in the desert.

A single mother, whose only daughter was killed in the suicide bombing, spontaneously shared her thoughts regarding the landscape seen along the road from Masada the day before: “I saw the trees in the desert near the Dead Sea all dry and paralyzed in such distorted positions. I feel that we are just like those trees. I asked myself: ‘How do these trees gather the strength to go on living?’”

Survival in Desert-

What can we learn from desert plants about survival in extremely harsh conditions? How do they indeed protect themselves? How do they survive?

Desert plants adapt to extremes of heat and aridity by using numerous and innovative physical and behavioral mechanisms:

Some grow extremely long roots so they can search deeply for resources.

Others survive by remaining dormant during dry periods of the year, then springing to life when water becomes available.

Many desert plants have a thick covering – a protective shield – coated with a waxy substance that seals in moisture.

Some trees and shrubs adapt through eliminating transpiration and minimize loss of energy by completely replacing leaves with thorns or by greatly reducing leaf size. Reducing the exposed area and shutting out the outside is part of the self-regulation that prevents unnecessary loss of energy.

When working with people struggling with traumatic loss, this state of "shutting down" is evident. People in the first stages of acute grief often desperately need support but too much exposure can be overwhelming. That is why a non-intrusive indirect approach, such as the use of metaphors provides, is so important. It has a third person quality that helps provide a “holding environment” (Winnicott,) which creates a safe space for sharing without imposing, without overwhelming and without letting too many words get in the way.

Trying to Put Together Fragmented Parts of Life-

As we returned from the outing to the second part of the workshop, the bereaved mother, quoted above, collected dry crumbling leaves and pieces of bark from the ground. Art materials were spread out in advance in the room. She prepared a collage of scattered fragments loosely held together with a piece of rope. She then placed a fig in the middle and began to talk slowly, trying to find words: “Until yesterday, I felt that everything was dead within me...empty...like the dry bark...Everything was falling apart. Here you can see the shattered, scattered pieces...This green fig is a sign of hope...maybe...”

“I was surprised to find strengths in me I never knew existed,” she later said. She was glad she had come in spite of her initial reluctance. She was very proud of her artwork. “I am the eyes through which my daughter can continue looking at the world”, she said.

The search for meaning in face of desolation, emptiness and fragmentation is expressed in multiple ways in the artworks created in these workshops. Trying to put together the scattered and shattered fragments of life is a recurrent theme.

Breaking through Isolation-

Metaphors can be used to break through isolation by creating a language that crosses cultural and language barriers.

A bereaved father drew an isolated island in the middle of the sea with only three trees on it, representing himself; his wife and surviving son after his 19 year old son had been killed in the suicide bombing. Far from the island, at the edge of the page, he drew a ship.
“The island is us, after the terror attack. The faraway ship is the rest of the human race, going on with their lives. The ocean is wide. Maybe the ship will come nearer. Maybe not!”

Making room for diversity-

Another bereaved mother drew a tree with flowers in different colors, representing the hope of “sticking together” in spite of differences. “I draw strength from being together as a group. It is important not to be left alone with the sorrow. Together we are like a tree with flowers in different colors.

Accepting individual ways of mourning is a central issue in the nature-based workshops. The diversity of the thousand different species of cacti in the botanical garden, with their many ways of self-protection and survival strategies, as mentioned before, is only one example of the diversity in nature.

Individuals can be helped to identify their needs and to “re-learn” themselves in the aftermath of loss. The experiential activities in the workshops can help them identify when they feel a need to be alone or feel a need to be together with others and what kind of support suits them in different situations; Elaborating metaphors with the use of both non verbal and verbal means can promote self awareness so participants can then let friends and family members know what feels right to them.

The Experience of Being Uprooted-

“We don’t always have an opportunity to discover what goes on beneath the surface.” With these words we stopped by a tree, the underground roots of which had been exposed and were intertwining by the side of the path. This workshop was held in a forest in the north of Israel.

One of the participants, a single mother who had lost her only son, age 23, in a suicide bombing, was particularly attracted to a severed root; she was the only one to notice this. She and gently stroked the root and said: “Just like my heart - broken in two.” Later on bent over She said, “*I identified* she drew a picture of the exact same tree with severed roots in black. with the severed roots we saw on the way – split into two. On these roots I saw green sprouts pushing their way out. Mine are now like the tree I drew– only black. Yet who knows, maybe be some growth in the future.” there will

Keeping Roots Alive-

Plants that have been uprooted, transplanted and forced to adjust to new surroundings, seem to have an inner knowledge of how to survive the relocation. At first they invest all their energy in settling down and developing roots. During this stage they do not grow leaves or produce fruit, as that would be a waste of energy. The plant may seem to be “sick” or even “dead” on the outside, but the real story is what goes on under the surface. Underneath, roots are gradually developing and spreading out. It may be difficult to accept these periods in which there is no visible growth. However, it is important to know that this is not a waste of time but part of the process of rooting and grounding. Acclimatization takes time!

In another workshop for bereaved parents, a mother whose 14-year-old daughter had been killed in a terrorist attack shortly after the family immigrated to Israel, told the group the story of the cherry tree. After her daughter's death, she tried to plant a cherry tree in Israel using a sapling sent by her mother from the Ukraine, a tree like the one they had in their garden there.

"It looked very sick and so sad here. We waited and waited. Not one leaf, not one flower. It was so dry. We thought it had already perished. One day my husband saw this tiny shoot pushing its way out. He is usually quite reserved, yet he was so excited and even shouted in Hebrew (it was the first time he spoke a word of Hebrew at home) – "Here you are! Here you are!!

The group participants resonated strongly with the struggle of the tree. "We also need care and nourishment just like the plants" said one of them "And so much patience ..." said 'patience' in Hebrew, but I know another. "I hate the word 'savlanut', which means deep deep inside that we have to be patient with all that is unresolved in ourselves."

Group members elaborated the meaning of keeping one's roots alive. They reflected on the different functions of roots, which are essential for our nutrition as well as for giving firm anchorage to help weather the storms of life. In the words of a bereaved father: "As long as the roots remain alive, there is hope for re-growth".

Conclusion,

Nature provides endless opportunities for reflection and for learning about the cycles of change, life and death. Being together in nature and engaging in creative activities, including verbal and non-verbal techniques, can open new channels of communication; these can enable the individual to translate oneself to oneself and to others. Sensitive and empathetic use of metaphors can help break through isolation, cross language and cultural barriers and create a safe space for sharing. The distance provided by the use of indirect communication can reduce the risk of re-traumatization.

While acknowledging the power of metaphors, it is important to stress that this power may be misused; The danger of imposing metaphors, minimizing pain or letting too many words get into the way, are some of the pitfalls that we need to be aware of.

Metaphors play an important role in facilitating the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary dialogue essential for the development and implementation of the support program described above. The perspectives and metaphors from different fields, such as psychology, social work, the expressive arts and botany, have enriched the coming together and creation of a "community of support". This coming together, de-professionalizing grief and making room for diversity is a major tenet in this strength-based approach of validating individual ways of coping and search for meaning in the wake of desolating loss.

The combination of nature-based group experiences and the expressive arts can open creative ways for reconstructing meaning, honoring memories, giving "life in the heart" (Kasher, 2003) and building bridges between the past, present, and future.

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