

DEB BENNETT

“I Am Still a Mother”

A Hermeneutic Inquiry into Bereaved Motherhood

The death of a child is described as the loss of the future. It is a loss that defies comparison. Bereaved mothers have lifelong grief responses and maintain enduring relationships with their deceased children despite discourses that suggest a time limited experience. A deeper understanding of the bereaved mother experience over time evolved through a dialogue with eleven mothers who were involved in a hermeneutic study exploring the bereaved parent experience over time. The following article begins with a description of the hermeneutic inquiry approach utilized in this study to further understand the bereaved mother experience over time. It follows with a brief review of the traditional theories of grief and loss that have influenced our ways of knowing bereavement and grief experiences during the last century. Eleven mothers shared the stories of their children's lives and deaths as well as their responses to these losses. They shared rich and powerful narratives describing their bereavement experience over time and the enduring relationships with their deceased child. Findings of the study identify that bereaved motherhood is a timeless experience, with meaning making continuing over time. The study's findings also identify that these are disenfranchised experiences as the grief of bereaved mothers over time is not socially acknowledged or supported. The article concludes with a discussion on the mothers' experience and its fit with Ken Doka's (1989) work.

*I'll love you forever,
I'll love you for always.
As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be. (Munsch)*

“Parents should never outlive their child.” The death of a child is a painfully unique grief that defies comparison to other losses. It is a multifaceted loss that can

simultaneously impact parents’ affective, cognitive, behavioural, spiritual and social realms. Bereaved motherhood is the quintessential example of enduring relationships and lifelong connections with the deceased. The parental bond does not end with the death of a child. The nature of the mother-child relationship results in a timeless experience of bereavement. The death of a child results in a journey for a mother, both with their child through an enduring relationship and without their child physically present to hold: the crux of why this agonizing loss is so difficult to bear. Mothers will always be a mother to their child despite death. As Susan described, *“I am still a mother but in a different space and time.”* Bereaved mothers have lifelong grief responses despite existing discourses that suggest a time limit for their experience.

The following article will describe findings of my Ph.D. study that explored the experience of bereaved parents over time. My call to this topic is a reflection of my experiences as a bereaved mother, grief counsellor and death educator. Those mothers involved in the study offer new ways of knowing and understanding bereaved motherhood. Their narratives reinforce the insignificance of measuring their loss by years. The stories of eleven mothers who were involved in a semi-structured interview process for the research will be the focus of this article. These mothers had children who had died ten to twenty-five years ago as a result of both sudden and anticipated deaths. The age of the children at the time of their death ranged from ten weeks to 26 years. Our dialogues took place within a space in which the experiences of grief and bereavement were given a voice, raising issues that are rarely spoken of within Western culture. They shared stories of ongoing grief, enduring relationships, meaning making and transformation.

Inquiry Approach

Bereavement is a topic that is experienced interpretively by parents as they make meaning of their child’s death over time. A hermeneutic approach is well suited for the exploration of the bereaved mother experience over time because it engages those involved in the research in a process of interpretation. Through the hermeneutic inquiry process, the unspoken or hidden aspects of a phenomenon can be uncovered. There is much that is unspoken about grief and bereavement. Within a hermeneutic inquiry, a focus on language and its influence on understanding are explored. The language utilized within the various theories, stage and task models are powerful and rife with meaning. By sharing different ways of knowing bereaved motherhood over time and that which is often unspoken by the bereaved, increased understanding can be developed. Bereaved mothers do not “get over” their grief. Their treasured children are thought about every day.

Hermeneutics presents opportunities for researchers, participants and readers to become engaged in the process of meaning making and interpretation. It is a process of generative knowledge building and understanding through dialogue wherein all involved are changed by the process. Hermeneutics acknowledges the researcher within the inquiry process. My experiences as a bereaved mother, grief counsellor and death educator helped guide the story collection process. Each semi-structured interview was unique in its process and pacing. Tina Koch identified the process involves few direct questions and is guided by the principle of openness (175). As maintained by Koch, multiple levels of interpretation took place. This process continued to take place during discussions regarding emerging understandings with colleagues and peers who work with the dying and bereaved as well as hermeneutic researchers. The bereaved mothers that I encountered and spoke with expressed that the interpretations resonated with them. This convinced me that this is a study with stories worth telling, that previous conceptions of bereavement were inadequate to the lived experience for bereaved mothers over time.

Traditional Theories of Grief

We have an awareness of grief and bereavement in our lives and talk about these experiences in ways that reflect prevailing Western thought. The foundational theories of grief and bereavement continue to have an enormous impact on how responses to loss are understood. The psychoanalytic models of Sigmund Freud (1917) and later Erich Lindemann (1944), along with the attachment theory of John Bowlby (1961), have been identified as foundational theories of grief and loss. All involve the “eventual breaking of ties to the deceased and consider grief resolved when the griever is free of these earlier bonds and allegiances” (Marwit and Klass 283). These perspectives introduced the term “grief work,” a foundational concept in grief literature and interventions today. The “work” is an active process involving the reduction of grief symptoms in order to release ties to the deceased and begin interacting with the world in new ways. The severing of attachments to the deceased is posited to be required for recovery. Normal functioning, according to this perspective, returns when the bereaved have let go of the deceased (Klass; Wortman and Silver).

Within grief and loss literature, a wide variety of stage, phase and task theories have been created to serve as guides to the grief process. While these can be helpful in understanding grief and bereavement, it is important to recognize that they can create challenges for individuals and families depending on the interpretation and meaning attributed to each particular theory. The models often fail to identify the distinct types of grief or the contexts in which they occur. For example, the delineation between expected, sudden or traumatic death is not always addressed

nor is the type and nature of the relationship with the deceased. The loss of a child has different dynamics and challenges than other losses.

Adding to the complexities of these models is the fact that many processes and "symptoms" of grief have been identified. Further adding to their complexity is the inconsistent use of the terms and perspectives of grief. Bruce Horacek discussed how terms such as "complete," "resolve," "heal," "get over," and "closure," pervade the existing discourse on grief. The language alone suggests that there is an ultimate resolution to grief. The models can inadvertently provide a rationale for labeling or pathologizing an individual's grief. They can also entice people into believing that they may be abnormal if their reactions do not fit within existing mainstream models.

This language of grief can minimize our ability to live with loss and our processing of it as it relates to time. Much of the literature on grief and bereavement implies a time-limited process with the expectation of a positive outcome, that of resolved grief. A western focus and its use of language also reinforce the way grief and bereavement is viewed. In order to honour our loved ones and our loss experience, terms such as "closure" and "letting go" need to be challenged. Terms such as "exaggerated," "prolonged," "acute," "unresolved," "pathological," "chronic," and "morbid" have been used in the literature. These terms can contribute to the pathologizing of grief. Those words are value-laden and are often accompanied by pre-conceived notions; they may discount both the individual and the unique nature of their grief. By challenging dominant discourses, acknowledgement of the timeless nature of the bereaved mother experience can occur. Enduring relationships and the many ways of knowing loss can be honoured. As Lisa expressed, *"It's a good friend now, something you walk with like a companion."* For this bereaved mother, grief is not about letting go. The stories of the mothers in this study illustrate the individual nature of the bereaved motherhood experience. They remind us of the importance of not categorizing or applying labels to their experiences, particularly through the measurement of time.

Beyond Traditional Theories: The Paradigm Shift in the Literature

Various authors including Thomas Attig and Robert Neimeyer have identified a paradigm shift in grief and bereavement that has been taking place over the past two decades. Phyllis Silverman and Dennis Klass maintain that continuing attachments, bonds and relationships with the deceased should not be considered pathological. There are additional ways of understanding grief and bereavement that go beyond "work," "closure," or "resolution." When counselling, I found that normalizing the continuing aspects of grief provided comfort for the bereaved, as they are not often acknowledged as part of the process. Recognizing the

ongoing experiences of birthdays, anniversary dates and significant events and the responses associated with them is vitally important. Expressions of these recurring losses allow the acknowledgement of the deceased as remaining in the memory and the hearts of those who cared for them.

A number of authors, including Attig in *The Heart of Grief* and Neimeyer in *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*, believe that the bereaved redefine their ties to the deceased during the grief experience. Rather than letting go, the bereaved redefine their relationships with the deceased as living on in their hearts and memories (Silverman and Klass). In addition, learning and growth, as well as changes in beliefs, values and attitudes about living can be positive outcomes of grief experiences. In these ways, the deceased remain in the lives of the bereaved. The stories of the mothers in this study suggest this is especially the case for bereaved mothers. Numerous researchers and clinicians agree that the bereaved often continue relationships and connections with the deceased in some manner, questioning the assumption that there is an endpoint to grief, a perspective that resonated with the bereaved mothers in this study.

Continuing bonds represents a response to the grief work assumptions of “detachment and reinvestment” (Silverman and Klass 5). Within this approach is the belief that the bereaved continue to incorporate the deceased into their lives in ways that are rich and vital. These ongoing relationships with the deceased endure over time. Continued connections, bonds and attachments can influence the survivors’ lives in positive ways. When continuing ties, connections and bonds are recognized, enduring relationships with the deceased can be honoured rather than pathologized. Enduring relationships play a significant role in lives of the bereaved. Acknowledging these relationships and their meaning over time is imperative for bereaved mothers.

Bereaved Motherhood: A Timeless Experience

Listening to the stories of these eleven bereaved mothers, it became obvious that bereaved motherhood is a timeless experience as enduring relationships and meaning making continue to manifest over time. These processes may transform or appear different yet they do not diminish in significance with time. Darlene explained, “*It’s forever and yet right there at the exact same time.*” The narratives of the study’s mothers illustrate how time can circle back and forth in infinite ways as the past both blends with the present and extends into the future.

Loss of the Future

The death of a child has been poignantly described as the loss of the future. This death results in the loss of what could have been and what should have

happened for the child and family. This perspective offers a unique way of understanding the experience of bereaved mothers. Secondary losses, such as future family relationships and the subsequent grieving of those continue throughout a mother's life. Missed milestones, celebrations and holidays are also mourned and continue to be difficult despite the passage of time. These experiences are powerful manifestations of enduring relationships and bereavement over time. Maggie related, *"It's yesterday and forever."* Events such as Mother's Day and the beginning of the school year are coped with annually. Jennifer articulated, *"It's the loss of a future. What would have been? What would he have done? Would I have been a grandparent?"*

Bereaved mothers often find themselves questioning their responses to their loss experiences and ways of knowing within traditional views of time and its measurement. The loss of the future removes the possibility of traditional measurement within a linear passage of time. Within a traditional view of grief and time, the fear of forgetting treasured memories and the importance of recall is expressed by mothers. Lisa commented, *"It's really important to me that he's not forgotten."* The critical importance of those memories and their integration into their life were expressed by some mothers. Margaret explained, *"I don't want to forget, it makes us who we are, our personality and how we live."* The experiences of the mothers in this study reinforce that if grief is part of identity and ways of living, it can't be seen as a letting go.

Living With It Every Day

Mothers shared their lifelong experiences with moments and events that triggered grief. Lynda noted, *"Things can just trigger it that you don't expect at all."* Triggers can present themselves in a variety of forms including smell, sights, sounds, songs and the time of year. They can summon forth pleasant memories, sad reminders or secondary losses. Triggers are also a connection or a way of being transported back, a means for re-experiencing and remembering. Some mothers found triggers a source of comfort, others found them meaningful connections. No matter what responses are summoned forth, mothers live with these recurring occasions. Margaret stated, *"You're never over it; it's just something you learn to live with."* The ubiquitous nature of grief was powerfully described by the mothers in this study.

Imagined Projections

Some mothers in the study described that they found themselves in a process wherein their deceased child continues to age within their minds or imaginations. They wonder what life would be like for their child and family. Questions such as "What would my child be doing?" and "What would he look like?" or "Would she be happy?" were woven throughout the mothers'

stories. Susan described, *“And I still do the fantasies a little bit. You can’t help but wonder what he would have looked like a few years ago. And the disbelief because they always stay the age they were.”* This ongoing process of determining where their child fits as they negotiate between the then and now is a distinctly unique process for each parent. Jennifer shared, *“We all think about what she missed; she would be 17.”* This process of projection might have been seen as unhealthy within the older paradigm; however these mothers teach us that it is an essential part of the lived experience of bereaved parenthood.

Expectations

The expectations of others within the mothers’ environment have a substantial impact on their bereavement experience, further contributing to the complex nature of this loss. Messages about how one should grieve and for what length of time add to the challenges that parents endure, as expectations from external sources create further demands. Lynda detailed, *“I’m always concerned when people say ‘Well how long has it been?’ I say ten years and they go ‘Oh yeah’ like I should be over this. That’s my feeling from them.”*

Some parents reported difficulties dealing with expectations from others which deterred them from doing what they needed to cope and adjust. External expectations regarding an appropriate time-frame for grief resulted in mothers placing additional burdens on their healing process. Elaine disclosed, *“I thought there must be something wrong with me. Why can’t I get over it if I should be? But in the same instance I thought how can you be over something like that.”* Nancy Moules and Walter Kauffman described that the bereaved can self-pathologize. Self-doubt that originates from unrealistic and external expectations of others can lead to mothers negating their own inner wisdom and questioning their responses to their child’s death.

Meaning Making

“It’s like I have two lives to live.” Developing meaning is vitally important to bereaved mothers. The essential nature of finding and developing meaning was referred to numerous times during the interviews. Meaning was and continues to be made from a variety of sources including: life before the death of their child, how and under what circumstances their child died, enduring relationships after their child’s death, and life choices and actions after their death. Maggie shared *“It gave me the ability to be able to reach out to other people with an experience of my own and it did honour Richard’s life with us.”* The mothers’ descriptions fit with the literature identifying meaning making as a central component of grief (Neimeyer). This study reveals that meaning making continues over time. It is an organic process that changes and grows as parents do.

The mothers in the study highlighted the need to talk about both their

child and living without their child. This need is an important component of the meaning making process. However they noted few opportunities to do so within a Western environment because of expectations regarding time as well as an ingrained taboo about talking about death and grief. Bereaved mothers inhabit a world in which living children are freely discussed but the lives of deceased children are not shared with others in the same way. The mothers of these children often feel that they are rendered silent when the topic of children's milestones and life stage development events are being discussed in social and work settings. For many, not sharing stories of their deceased child is acutely painful. Darlene noted, *"I haven't read anything that truly captures how that is."*

Enduring Relationships

"He's with us always. We keep him alive in our memories." The mothers in the study illustrate that the loss of a child continues in an enduring relationship that is known and experienced in various ways including: treasured memories, the development of meaning, acknowledgement of gifts, personal growth and ongoing projections of what should have happened for the family. These findings are a reminder that loss is a lifelong process for mothers. As with grief and bereavement, each relationship is unique and manifests in a variety of forms.

The many ways of knowing and experiencing enduring relationships requires acknowledgement without applying labels or pathologizing. Relationships develop between mothers and children before they are born, as parents imagine, dream and plan for the future. Relationships endure after a child's death, with mothers continuing to imagine what they would be doing or look like. The mothers' stories offer examples of lessons learned, gifts received such as the ability to support others and meanings made from both their loss and from their enduring relationships with their children. This study not only confirms the existence of enduring relationships with their deceased children but also shows that they live with them in a different form. This is a relationship that remains with parents throughout their lives. Susan stated, *"I've always disliked the word closure. I don't think you'll ever have closure because your child is always there in your heart."*

Bereaved Motherhood Over Time: A Disenfranchised Experience

The ongoing experiences of the mothers as they grieve over time and maintain relationships with their children fit with Ken Doka's description of disenfranchised grief. Grief is not socially recognized and individuals "are not accorded a right to grieve" (5). The responses of others in the bereaved mothers' environments as well as the associated unrealistic expectations and demands

reflect the lack of social support and empathy that occurs when grief is disenfranchised. At times, the mothers found themselves isolated, their responses being minimized or even ignored, with few opportunities to talk about their child and their grief experiences.

The study's mothers related that the expectations of others within their environment and community regarding which grief responses should occur and when, limited their expression over time. When this lack of social recognition occurs bereaved mothers become disenfranchised. Social support dwindles and expectations for "moving on" are communicated. As a result, social support is no longer offered nor provided to mothers over time because assumptions exist that this support should not be needed anymore. However, bereaved mothers will always maintain lifelong relationships with their children and therefore will have lifelong experiences of disenfranchisement.

Bereaved mothers must be granted the opportunity to grieve the death of their child over time, just as they must and will grieve the secondary losses that inevitably accompany this experience. A lack of social recognition of secondary loss is another cause of disenfranchisement of the bereaved motherhood experience over time. Mothers related that their mourning for what might have been was not acknowledged nor accepted by others numerous times throughout the interviews. Their enduring relationships with their children were also not socially acknowledged. A mother's bond with her child does not differentiate between life and death.

The disenfranchisement of the bereaved motherhood experience over time is implicit in the language of grief and bereavement. Many of the mothers in the study found themselves questioning their grief and/or comparing their bereavement responses to social expectations or the traditional literature and becoming concerned about their continuing bereavement responses. It is important to remember that the findings of this study demonstrate that there will always be opportunities for parents to have their grief disenfranchised because of the nature of bereaved motherhood over time.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

The limitations that need to be kept in mind with this study relate to the sampling process and those mothers who identified interest in this study. Firstly, the bereaved mothers in the study may have particular characteristics or personal traits not shared by those uninterested in becoming involved. Every mother who expressed interest in the research was interviewed. The majority revealed that they were interested in the study because it was a means for reaching out to others. Many also related their desire to have something positive come from their child's death and their grief. Exploring the experiences of those who did

not have these motives or were unable to make meaning in this same way may reveal important information.

As a result of the composition of this group of mothers, issues of diversity could not be addressed within this study. Information on diverse faiths, religions and cultures as they relate to enduring relationships and the disenfranchisement of bereaved motherhood over time may reveal important information. Further considerations include diversity related to the age of the child at the time of their death, as well as the cause of death. These differences result in varied dynamics and issues for bereaved mothers to cope with over time.

The major strength of the study lies within the topic it explores as few studies have explored the long term impact of bereavement. Even fewer studies have explored the long term impact of bereaved motherhood or parenthood. This study reinforces the need for further study on lifelong grief responses and enduring relationships. This is a particularly crucial consideration for bereaved parents who will always remain a parent.

My experiences as a bereaved mother contributed to the interview process in this study. Some mothers commented that they shared information with me that they might not have otherwise as they felt I could understand what they were relating. In some cases, mothers increased their attempts to describe certain aspects of their experience that were difficult to put into words. As a fellow bereaved mother, I was able to offer probes during the interviews that helped mothers elaborate and provide in-depth narration of their story.

Conclusion

The stories shared by the mothers in this study are asking us to question expectations for grief and bereavement as they relate to time and to consider what the eradication of these would mean for the bereaved. Time can provide a space to feel and express what is needed. Those in the presence of the bereaved need to be open to what actually occurs over time without the need to label responses that do not seem to fit within artificially imposed time lines. Bereavement is a universal experience that we are all presented with. Yet the nature of one's grief is singular. Supporting and accepting the responses of the bereaved without judgment, expectations or demands will help ensure that compassion and care is offered to all who experience loss.

I share the stories of those mothers involved in the study with respect and gratitude. They have taught us about the bereaved mother experience over time. They are also teaching us about grief's potential for growth and transformation. During our time together, I found myself in privileged spaces in which the presence of their child was with us. The mothers taught me that all lives

continue, as well as the need for further exploration into bereaved motherhood, grief over time and enduring relationships. I am truly fortunate to have learned profound lessons about the manifestations of bereavement over time and the wider and rippling potential of loss.

Note: The interviews were conducted between August and November 2004. In order to respect confidentiality, names have been changed.

References

- Attig, Thomas. *The Heart of Grief: Death and the Search for Lasting Love*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Doka, Ken. *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges and Strategies for Practice*. Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002.
- Horacek, Bruce. "A Heuristic Model of Grieving after High-Grief Deaths." *Death Studies* 19 (1995): 21-31.
- Kauffman, Walter "Intrapsychic Dimensions of Disenfranchised Grief." *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow*. Ed. Ken Doka. New York: Lexington Books, 1989.
- Klass, Dennis. "The Deceased Child in the Psychic and Social Worlds of Bereaved Parents during the Resolution of Grief." *Death Studies* 21 (1997): 147-175.
- Klass, Dennis, Phyllis Silverman and Steven Nickman, eds. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 1996.
- Koch, Tina. "Implementation of a Hermeneutic Inquiry into Nursing: Philosophy, Rigor and Representation." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 24 (1996): 174-184.
- Marwit, Samuel and Dennis Klass. "Grief and the Role of the Inner Representation of the Deceased." *Omega* 30 (4) (1994-1995): 283-298.
- Moules, Nancy. "Legitimizing Grief: Challenging Beliefs that Constrain." *Journal of Family Nursing* 4 (2) (1998): 142-166.
- Munsch, Robert. *Love You Forever*. New York: Firefly Books, 1986. Print.
- Neimeyer, Robert, ed. *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2003.
- Silverman, Phyllis and Dennis Klass. "Introduction: What's the Problem?" *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Ed. Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman and Steven Nickman. Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 1996. 3-23.
- Wortman, Camille and Roxane Silver. "The Myths of Coping with Loss." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 57 (3) (1989): 349-357.