

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 are more than figures of speech (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). They can carry ideas and feelings that otherwise might be difficult to put into words (Knopp, 1995; Seligman, 1990). They structure the way we perceive, how we think and relate to ourselves and others.

A Model for Supporting Families Coping with Traumatic Loss

Selah, the Israel Crisis Management Center is a non-profit organization supporting immigrants coping with traumatic loss due to terror attack, car and work accidents, sudden illness or other circumstances. A countrywide network of professionals and trained volunteers is organized into multi-disciplinary 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 trauma informed programs of group support.

Selah’s two or three day seminars are an integral part of its 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, 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 validation 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.

Creating Community

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). Breaking through isolation and paving the way to foster some sense of belonging is one of the goals of the Selah group programs. Support from the multi-disciplinary team in addition to the mutual support of others in the group are weaved together step by step so as 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 better manage everyday demands and cope with trauma.

Encounters in Nature

Nature provides endless opportunities to learn about the cycles of change, life and death, as well as about processes of recovery and regeneration. Being together in nature, engaging in creative activities and having space for sharing can open new routes to reconnecting.

The original idea of the seminars was to enable bereaved families to support each other and get away from the stresses of everyday life at least for a while. The group excursions offered 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.

Discussions on themes such as survival strategies in nature, about the re-acclimatization of transplanted plants and about 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 offered by the art therapists in the volunteer team, complement the outdoor experiences. Introducing different art techniques enables participants to use alternative channels for expressing themselves and for translating themselves to themselves and to others, creating a new language within the group.

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 – relaxation, guided imagery, observations in "nature's classroom", and brief discussions with the botanist.
- Creative activity – painting, sculpture, collage, etc.
- Sharing and processing.

This sequence of experiential activities is designed to enable a gradual entry and engagement of participants in the process which unfolds as it goes along. The following section will focus on ways in which metaphors from nature were co-constructed, explored and expanded.

"How do these trees gather the strength to go on living?"

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 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 participated for the first time as a group in such a weekend seminar. It was November but it was quite hot outside; the sky was deep blue and we were all sitting in the shade. The group was very quiet. Most of the participants – of ages ranging from 33 to 57 – looked withdrawn and disconnected. They sat staring blankly into the air. Nevertheless, some of them gradually seemed to become engaged in the conversation and they listened carefully to the botanist, Dr. Zvia Shapiro, as she answered the questions they asked about the different plants around them.

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.

People in the first stages of acute grief often desperately need support but too much exposure can be overwhelming. That is why a nonintrusive indirect approach, such as the use of metaphors provides, is so important. It has a third person quality that helps provide a “holding environment” which creates a safe space for sharing without imposing, without overwhelming and without letting too many words get in the way.

Giving Sorrow Words!

The single mother, whose only daughter was killed in a suicide bombing later on collected dry crumbling leaves and pieces of bark from the ground preparing a collage of scattered fragments loosely held together with a piece of rope. She placed a fig in the middle. She said: “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 didn’t know existed,” she said .

Later she said that she was glad she had come in spite of her initial reluctance and told us how important it had been to her to reconnect to herself and to her inner resources. She was very proud of the work she prepared. "I am the eyes through which my daughter can look at the world", she said.

The expressive arts assist in shifting from passivity to activity and mobilizing resources in a strength-based approach. The use of metaphors facilitates the process of sharing experience, by creating a communal language with which one can translate oneself to oneself and others.

Breaking through Isolation!

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

A bereaved father drew a cut-off isolated island in the middle of the sea with three lonely trees on it, representing his wife and surviving son after his elder son had been killed in the suicide bombing.

“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!

A bereaved mother drew a tree with flowers in different color, 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

The idea of making room for diversity and accepting individualized ways of mourning are central issues in the nature based workshops. The thousand different species of cacti in the botanical garden, with their many ways of self protection and survival strategies, are one example of the diversity in nature.

The reactions to loss or grieving or mourning are perceived differently by each individual. It is the interpretation of change by the person experiencing it that constitutes loss. What can be viewed by one person as a threat, may be perceived for another as a challenge or opportunity. There is no one “right” or “normal” way to grieve.

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, when they feel a need for support and what kind of support suits them in different situations; Staying with spontaneous metaphors, and elaborating them, offers grieving participants opportunities to deepen awareness and strengthen connections with loved ones as well as the other participants. Elaborating metaphors with the use of both non verbal and verbal expressive arts can promote awareness so that they 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 northern part of Israel.

One of the participants, a single mother who had lost her only son in a suicide bombing, was particularly attracted to the severed root, which only she noticed. She bent over and gently stroked the root with emotion and said: “Just like my heart - broken in two.” Later on she drew a picture of the exact same tree with severed roots. She said, “I found myself identifying with the severed roots we saw on the way – split into two. On these roots there were green sprouts pushing their way out. Mine are now like those on the paper – only black. Yet who knows, maybe there will be growth in the future.” Another participant noticed the way the roots of a tree may grow around an obstacle and commented “People do not understand that we do not “get over” a loss, rather it becomes a part of us. It is with us all the time”.

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 a support group meeting 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 how, 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 for the first time he spoke a word of Hebrew at home – “Yesh, Yesh”!)

The group participants resonated strongly with the struggle of the tree. “We also need care and nourishment just like the plants” said one of the participants. “And so much patience ...” said another. “I hate the word ‘savlanut’ (patience in Hebrew) but I know deep deep inside that we have to be patient with all that is unresolved in ourselves.”

The meaning of keeping one’s roots alive was elaborated by group members as well as the different functions of roots which are essential for our nutrition as well for giving firm anchorage that helps weather the storms of life. As long as the roots remain alive, there is hope for re-growth.

The ability to engage in meaning-making and the nature of the meanings that people co-construct are powerful determinants of how they will grieve and how well they will adapt to their loss (Nadeau, 1998). The use of metaphors facilitated meaning making, by creating opportunities to create connections, introducing new frames of reference and alternative perspectives. Long term follow ups have indicated that participants continue to reflect on these experiences and how they enabled them to find their particular strengths to cope with a loss and to live more fully in the world as it is experienced.

In Conclusion,

Encounters in nature open new opportunities for sharing and for re-connecting. Sensitive and empathetic use of metaphors can help to break through isolation, to cross language and cultural barriers and create a safe space for sharing. The positive impact of nature on human health and well-being in the aftermath of loss has been

examined and documented in prior research. Connection with nature itself was valued by participants, creating and sense of togetherness, as well as offering respite and relief from immediate burden. The model developed in Selah adds an additional dimension by harnessing the power of **metaphors from nature with the expressive arts** in ways that can validate and normalize each member's respective struggle with grief while accepting the different ways of grieving.

The illustrations above highlight the potential power of metaphors in creating a safe space for sharing, processing pain and weaving connections.. This model converges with a constructivist approach to the reconstruction of meaning in the wake of loss (Neimeyer,2001b) 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) the concepts of "relearning" the world (Attig,2000) and of re-authoring life narratives following loss (Neimeyer,2001a).

The combination of nature-based group experiences and the expressive arts opens new possibilities and creative ways for honoring memories and for building bridges between the past, present, and future.

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