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GRIEF AND DANCE MOVEMENT PSYCHOTHERAPY – AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF PARENTAL LOSS

Silja Ilmonen

Introduction

I finished my MA training at Roehampton University in Dance Movement Psychotherapy in 2011. As part of my research study I wanted to explore my personal journey of losing a parental figure through the mediums of dance and writing. As a method, I had the opportunity to participate in *Moving Voices* research project and workshops. In the workshops a group of us explored our personal stories relating to losing a significant other. This affected my understanding of grief and the body greatly. The workshops were facilitated by Dr. Beatrice Allegranti, (Feminist Researcher, Dance Movement Psychotherapist, Choreographer, Filmmaker) and Dr. Jonathan Wyatt, (Autoethnographic Researcher, Counsellor, Writer). The movement material from the workshops was choreographed into a solo that I performed at the Roehampton theatre and into a part of a film *Your Story Calls Me* (2012), which is being screened and exhibited throughout art venues, general practitioner surgeries and hospitals in the United Kingdom.

The workshops were divided into five cycles of investigating loss. The cycles alternated between writing, moving, talking, witnessing and being witnessed. The crucial element in these workshops was the opportunity for the people to share and encounter others who understood the pain, the sad-

ness, the memories that make us what we are in the here and now. I believe this was important, as human beings have an innate need to bond, to feel accepted and understood by others. (Bowlby 1986; Murray Parkes 1972; Yalom 1985; Panksepp 1998.) Furthermore, Daniel N. Stern (1985) talks about the infant's need to have a sense of sharing and feeling connectedness – *Moving Voices* gave a place to remember how meaningful life and people we love are, to connect with others, and to share my loss.

Dance as an explorative journey: re-visiting grief to find acceptance

With exploring new ways of being we open ourselves to all the vast possibilities of being in this world. Allegranti writes “Through storytelling we create and re-create our identities and experiment with possible selves, in a context of mutuality and trust”. (Allegranti 2011, 23; Coates 1996, 115.)



Photo: Beatrice Allegranti, 2011.

Human being's sense of self is very much formed in relation to the significant others. I discovered that the relationship to my stepfather was re-established through writing, dancing and sharing my story to others. Going through the loss and re-visiting the pain of losing a loved one gave me an op-

portunity to move all the difficult emotions – it gave me a chance to find new ways of being with it. Furthermore, it gave me an opportunity to remember the good memories:

I remember your laughter. How you used to make me smile. We played together. You were my support. You believed in me. You encouraged me and my dreams. We used to fly. (Written after a “Moving Voices” workshop in April 2011.)

In order to understand the role of dance within grief therapy, it is important to understand the meaning of dance as a ritual and the means of communication in the history of mankind. Traces of dance can be found in many pre-historic documents. Dance anthropologist Williams writes “there is evidence throughout recorded history of people dancing”. (Williams 1991, 77.) Dance is a way of communicating emotions, just as Chaiklin writes: “In all cultures, man’s earliest attempts at communication, historically and developmentally, occurred on the preverbal level. Gesture and body expression were clearly the vehicle to any attempt to share experience. Dance is a language which uses the totality of body-mind-spirit to relate to the most profound experiences, painful and joyous”. (Chaiklin 1975, 701.)

One of the main principals that Dance Movement Psychotherapists follow is the truth of the body. The very foundation of Dance Movement Psychotherapy is the fact that movement is the language of the body and that it can express deep emotions sometimes even coming up from the implicit memory – the unconscious. Moreover, from a neurological perspective, strong emotional memories can in fact be found in the tissues of the body. (Damasio 2000; Halprin 2003.) Consequently, the moving and dancing evoked memories and sensations that needed to be explored in a safe environment. Throughout the workshops I found myself bashing to the floor, remembering the pain, remembering falling to the floor when first hearing about the loss. I remember gravity pulling me down. Sharing the moments of agony and pain with other participants gave me an opportunity to release the pain, share it and be understood by others. I was no longer keeping it inside, but opening up to the world to show how much I had loved my stepfather – how much I still did. Grief is just an extension of love, and without love there would be no grief. (Kumar 2005.)

Throughout the *Moving Voices* workshops, dancing my grief and discussing about it with various people, I have learned to accept it better. I discovered the importance of re-visiting the loss in the body to accept the grief. I have accepted that sorrow comes and goes, and that it is not a linear process, but a process of a lifetime. (Worden 1990.) As dance movement psychotherapists we rely on the

power of movement – sharing your story can be healing (Leseho – Maxwell 2010; Halprin 2003.) I believe this “autobiographical unfolding” (Allegranti 2009, 21) has been a healing experience to me. Dancing and writing about my loss has made me more aware of the emotions I have gone through, and this has enabled me to grow and re-create my identity. I see dance as a healing tool for us bereaved. Furthermore, embodying the loss has given me an appreciation of life. *Winston’s wish*, a UK based charity for bereaved children, talks about “constructing a resilient narrative” to embody the grief. I feel that I am developing this resilient narrative through dancing my grief and sharing the story with others.

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Silja Ilmonen, MA, is a Dance Movement Psychotherapist from Roehampton University, London, United Kingdom. She attended the Grief Conference in Tampere, Finland 2013 and is currently working as a freelance DMP gathering data towards her further studies. In April 2013, she also performed at a Grief Evening for people who have lost a child in Turku (organisers: Lounais-Suomen Mielenterveysseuran Feeniks-hanke, Turun ja Kaarinan seurakuntayhtymä, Turun Kaupunkilähetys ry/ Senioripysäkki and Käpy - Lapsikuolemaperheet ry).