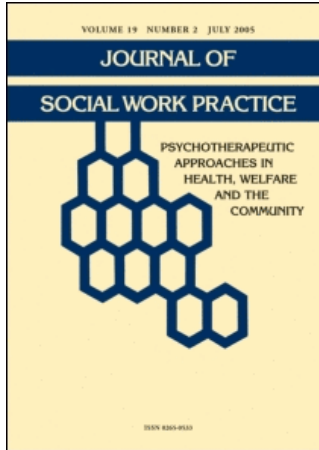


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GEORGIE'S GIRL: LAST CONVERSATION WITH MY FATHER

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Karen V. Lee

GEORGIE'S GIRL: LAST CONVERSATION WITH MY FATHER

The author auto-ethnographically reflects on the emotional struggle with her father's death. The haunting memory of their last conversation empowers her during the lengthy mourning process. She 'reconstructs the event so that it can be integrated into her life story' [J. H. Harvey (1996) Embracing Their Memory: Loss and Social Psychology of Storytelling, Allyn & Bacon, MA, p. 191]. Memories of their relationship resurface as the emotional landscape involves love, strength, denial, compassion, withdrawal and helplessness. The reflection explores the educative process of writing from the heart. It also shares multicultural funeral rites and how they differ from traditional North American funerals. At a deeper level, writing the auto-ethnography becomes cathartic as it helps 'break ties between the bereaved and the dead to achieve a good adjustment' (Ibid., p. 138). It also explores theory, practice, and innovation that embed voices in health and education in order to enlighten practice. In the end, reflecting on the memory of her father's last words becomes a transformative educational process as it provides a heightened awareness about grief, loss, bereavement and the importance of the father–daughter relationship.

Keywords auto-ethnography; grief; loss; bereavement; father–daughter relationships

Introduction

In this article, the author uses dialogue to reflect on the father–daughter parenting relationship. The thematic analysis culminates in recommending the use of reflecting on pivotal conversations between parents and children during the mourning process. The dialogue begins in the hospital during the last day of her father's life. After 29 years, her father begins to express his thoughts and feelings about her life. This last conversation gives the author strength to cope with life, love, death, and parenting.

This article represents the usefulness of a dialogic approach to social science research. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) emphasize that qualitative researchers are searching for ways to tell stories. Crossover between creative, personal, and research writing has become a valid research method for composing narratives in discursive fields of scholarly research. There are important narrative researchers: Jerome Bruner, Helen Cixous, Maxine Greene, Milan Kundera, Patti Lather, Natalie

Goldberg, Susan Wooldridge, Mary Catherine Bateson. Bruner believes people are, by nature, narrative beings.

There are pros and cons in auto-ethnographic research. Arguing the pros involves the transformation process from writing stories. First, auto-ethnography 'refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness' (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). Second, Palmer (1998) claims a sense of relatedness requires 'teaching students to intersect their autobiographies with the [subject's] story' (p. 108). Cone and Harris (2000) argue for 'a holistic approach to reflection that involves the student's intellectual and emotional capacities, as well as written and oral skills' (p. 48). Third, auto-ethnography intersects life stories that excavate, analyze, and critique assumptions in relation to other social and cultural aspects of personal experience. Writing auto-ethnography can become an epiphany (Denzin, 2001) that can heal grief (Lee, 2006a) and loss (Lee, 2006b). Thus, auto-ethnography reveals actions and feelings affected by history and social structure.

Discussing the cons outlines the challenges from writing auto-ethnography. First, there is the emotional challenge of putting the self in research. This kind of research involves a panoramic view that evokes emotional undercurrents. Thus, reflecting on the dialogue from 17 years ago resurfaces many emotions that need to be resolved for the author. Second, writing auto-ethnography becomes problematic as it needs aesthetic assessment standards. Grumet (1989) problematized the notion of beauty by discussing how the 'mediation on the meaning and significance of beauty of curriculum theory and practice' (p. 226) requires words with double reference to address aesthetics about educational policy. I believe that standards, evaluation, and accountability of beauty become slippery slopes. Eisner (1991) advocates connoisseurship and criticism of art-based inquiry with an enlightened eye. An eye, ear, and touch provide language that richly describes, explores, and explains art. Arguably, a well-received area of narrative research stems from disseminating writing in various textual forms (Richardson, 1994; Barone, 2000) like poetry, stories, autobiography, and auto-ethnography. Third, performative writing from the heart (Pelias, 2004) challenges that nature of subjective knowing. It brings out ambiguity and vulnerability while engaging the emotional and intellectual. Fourth, a discovery approach to learning about oneself and the world can become political as one pivots between theory and substance. It challenges readers to a transitional epistemology about writing as a form of knowing and research.

The following conversation between the author and her father unfolds *post facto* from yearly memories of the funeral service. The emotional terrain surfaces memories of love, strength, denial, compassion, withdrawal and helplessness. Weaving snippets of conversation invites 'qualitative researchers to become engaged pedagogues within our communities and to create spaces for "honest talk" that opens our hearts and minds to the pains and joys of social diversity' (Pilcher, 2001, p. 283).

While the *post facto* account becomes a transformational educational process, it also raises the issue about the fallibility of immediate memory, which happens close to the time of experience, as opposed to true memory, which involves recalling the experience many years later. As the dialogue was created from a written journal account the author saved for 17 years, it is believed the conversation is from

immediate memory. A new study by Harvard psychologists reveals that memories of good times can be less accurate than memories of bad times (Cromie, 2006). As the dialogue recalls more bad than good times, it is believed to be as accurate as possible.

Writing this auto-ethnography demonstrates the importance of transformational writing in the field of health, counselling, education and social work. Writing inquiry becomes a method of research (Richardson, 1994) as one composes themes and counterpoints that enable change. As harmonies probe and deconstruct, writing and rewriting creates understanding that surrounds grief, loss, bereavement, and the importance of father–daughter relationships. In Vancouver, B.C., there has been a recent interest in narrative research at the International Multidisciplinary Conference on Spirituality and Health: Interweaving Science, Wisdom, and Compassion. The use of constructing stories is a natural human process that helps individuals to understand themselves. Thus, when subjects write their deepest thoughts and feelings about traumatic experiences, the writing can change their lives (Pennebaker, 2000).

At the hospital

'I want you to be happy', he says.

'But I am, Dad', I reply.

'I want you to have some kids.' Sitting on the side of his hospital bed, he folds his arms.

'Maybe', I say, wanting to please him.

'I want you to get along with your mother. The two of you have so many loud arguments. I want you to be better to your mother.'

'Why are you saying this now?'

'Because I don't think I'll live much longer. I'm tired and sick and don't feel good.'

Tears roll down my face. I doubt him. But I cannot doubt him. In the last spasms of a father–daughter affair, I am a committed romantic. A blooming feminist from scholarly influences. My mind fills with thoughts. I pant, in and out, and explode. Fighting the fight for my father. I couldn't live without him. Tears roll down my face.

'Don't', I sniff. 'Don't say that.'

'Look, it's the way it is. I'm not well. You'll have your mother and brother.'

'No', I wail. 'I'm moving back to Vancouver now. We'll spend more time together. Don't say all this.'

'I just wish you would get along with your mother. Both of you argue about so many unimportant things.'

'Okay, I'll try', I assure him. 'But you'll get better. Please. Believe me. They're checking you out. Mom says it's a bad case of the flu.'

'I don't know.' His voice softens.

The room is white and barren. An old man sleeps across from my father with an I.V. in his arm.

'I'll get you some water', I say and take a paper cup. Walking to the washroom, I wipe the tears from my face. Filling the cup with water, I return to his bedside. 'Here Dad', handing him the cup, 'fresh water'. Taking the cup, he sips and lies back in bed. A man of 69 years, he is pale as the walls. He does not smile or give eye contact.

'Has anybody else come to visit today?'

'No, your mother is busy and I don't know where your brother is.'

'I just decided to drop by on my way to the airport. I'm looking for a place to live now that I'm moving back to Vancouver.'

'Whereabouts?'

'Maybe I'll get a place near you and Mom in Richmond. Are there apartments around there?'

'I guess so. But don't get an expensive place. Save your money to buy a house', he says sharply.

He tried to get a bypass operation but did not qualify. His heart is old and his arteries clogged.

'You hungry, Dad?'

'No.' His face grows ashen.

'You must be dehydrated. More water?'

'No thanks. So', he pauses, 'tell me again why you want to go back to school?' he asks with probing eyes.

'Well, I want to get my Master's.'

'How many courses will you take?'

'Just a couple of counselling courses. I'll be working at the crisis centre, training to answer phone calls.'

'Why do you want to do that?'

'Because I want to help people.'

'Those people have serious problems.' His lip curls.

'They need someone to talk to. I don't resolve their problems, just listen. People need empathy.'

'Well.' He pauses again. 'It's your life.'

A nurse enters the room with his medication. With a sip of water, he swallows the pills.

'How many years to get your Master's?'

'Two years if I go full time.'

'What will you do afterwards?'

'I don't know. Maybe get a PhD.'

'That's so many more years of university. You need to be healthy, get lots of sleep. Look at me, my body is weak.'

'You'll get better.'

'I don't know. I may not make it.' His voice is monotone. 'Take care and get along with your mother. That's all I ask.'

That night he died. A heart attack during his sleep. No pain, just instant death. The phone call, the loud words. I didn't want to hear it. It's not true. Late at night, I drive back to the hospital. Slowly, I enter his room. Darkness everywhere. He lies peacefully in bed. His eyes shut, no movement. I grab his hand, it is cold. No response. Tears roll down my face. It's not true. The tight air surrounds me. Gasping, I bend over. Kiss him goodbye.

That was 17 years ago, a vivid memory. My heart pounds, I think of our last conversation. A long time ago. Sweat runs down my forehead. The blood in my arms, legs, chest, and heart speeds up. I'm cold. Though my teeth chatter, I fall into a trance. Cannot sleep. My body wants a large amount of wine. All I know is time slows down. There is nothing I can do. When I remember his words, I want to be with him. Can't let go of what once was. What will never be again. He is gone. Gone.

I bite the inside of my mouth, a habit of mine. A small trickle of blood flows around my teeth. In my pocket, a Kleenex. Open my mouth, dab the blood. A motion takes hold. Taking a deep breath, I lean back. Sip the wine. Let the warm heat of booze soothe. In the heat of memory I reflect, like a bird watching the horizon. There are shadows. Reflections in window panes, a hundred and a thousand. It's his face, everywhere.

I believed we'd have more time together. We would talk and eat. A quiet man but he would talk when we drank coffee, ate donuts, ice cream, dim sum and played cribbage. Patches of relief, moments of tranquillity as he spoke with his calm voice. My father, George, was a patient man. From years of daughterhood I learned he only wanted to give me candles and champagne. Georgie's Girl. The song he loved to hear me play on the piano; the expression of a traditional father watching me grow up. A typical conversation with him involved mild-mannered words. He was tactful and honest, salt of the earth. No psychological babble, just practicality. My father had black and white views. Gentle, conservative, no shades of grey. Many times, we agreed to disagree while eating a lazy dim sum in a Chinese restaurant. With him, I learned to be an apostle of ordinariness. His words were very important to me. If only he could be in my life now.

His funeral, etched in stone. I see everything: the simple recipe for Chinese funerals. My father had taught me at his mother's funeral. Stand tall, bow three times. Take the burial seriously to avoid bad luck. Older people do not attend funerals of younger people. If a baby or child dies, no funeral rites, just buried in silence. With my father, an elderly person, there are prescriptions. Cover statues of deities with red paper to avoid exposure to the body or coffin. Remove mirrors as reflections from the coffin bring another death. Hang a white cloth across the doorway of the house. Place a gong on the entrance: on the left for a male, right for a female. Dress the corpse in best clothes. Cover the corpse's face with a yellow cloth, the body with a light blue one. No jewellery or red clothing to the funeral. Wear a piece of coloured cloth on your sleeve to signify mourning: black by the deceased's children, blue by grandchildren, green by great-grandchildren.

After his funeral, clothes are to be burnt. A red packet with candy and money is given to others. Rid the bitterness by eating sweet and buying something new. There is a 10-course Chinese meal. Nobody talks of the funeral, only happier times. Mourning is 100 days. One cannot visit other Chinese during this time. Children and

grandchildren of the deceased cannot cut their hair for 49 days after the death. His funeral etched in stone.

I return to standing at his grave. It is on a hillside to improve feng shui. There is a stream of tears. Dressed in black, my mother and brother by my side. Pieces of black coloured cloth on our sleeves. We hold hands. Throw a handful of earth into his grave. We stand for a long time. Sunlight festers in the veins of summer rot. The bitter juices of an unfinished afternoon. Silence soils the hillside, madness stirs the air. I let the curtain fall. A silence I have never known, gazing speechless upon his coffin. His verses floating upon the wind, I discover he had been a man, like all good men, that died. He was more reverent towards me than anybody else.

I dream of my father. His slippers against the floor, standing in the middle of the kitchen. Making breakfast. He wears jeans and a sweater. Quietly, slowly, he walks around the kitchen and wipes the stove, fridge, counters. He takes his time. Over and over, the memory of him cleaning. I recall him teaching me how to make rice. Rinsing, draining, putting in my finger to measure the water, and placing the pot on the stove. I made rice but never at his slow pace. Turning on the water, rinsing, draining, and finger measuring the water was done quickly and efficiently. But he never complained when eating the rice I prepared. No difference between what he did slowly and methodically and what I did quickly and efficiently. Each meal, he ate slowly. Enjoying each morsel of food. I was convinced the world was well when watching him eat.

In the mornings, he drove me to school. Making sure I had my homework and lunch. Never a comment on my clothing or hair like my mother. When he came home from his tailoring store, I rattled off my day to him. He would nod and smile, listening to my stories. He listened like he watched TV: *Bonanza*, *Maverick*, *Ed Sullivan*, *Clint Eastwood*, *Three's Company*, *The Ropers*. He sat for hours watching TV. Once, I got out of bed to see if he was still watching TV, and he was. 'Go back to bed', he said. 'You need your sleep.'

He taught me how to play cribbage. He said scoring was easy if you memorized what pairs, 15s, and runs were worth. I memorized the score sheet. He was impressed. We kept a record of the games we played. Day after day, we played crib. Before dinner, after dinner, on weekends, during his TV shows. An entire record book of cribbage scores.

Eyes closed, I wake from a dream of wet marigolds. The smell of tree branches surrounds me. I miss the steam from his breath, his shadow. The smell of coffee from his lips, leaning over me. The dry, unruly hair on his chin. Sitting on my bed, kissing me good night. I grew up in a working-class neighbourhood. When I was 12, we moved to a larger house because I needed a grand piano.

Both of us bound together, edging along the rim of growing up. The story of my father makes meaning. My story, his story. But some stories have no words. Words drop away, some things unsaid. From his expressions, gestures, I knew what he meant. We would sit across a table, eat slowly. The food would settle inside. For half a second, I would look him in the face. He would lean towards me. A tiny moment between us.

Taking a deep breath, I celebrate another year of his death. I reach for my wine, take a sip. A palpable hint of festivity. I inhale years of his upbringing. His intense

fatherly love. I sip alone. I hear laughter like distant chimes. The windless core of the moment lifts me to his image. A maze of bright lights, clean air. A still, quiet hour ends at Big Scoop Ice Cream Parlour. As we emerge with cones, there are words and laughter. I smile and he smiles. He steps forward, puts his arm around me. He hugs me and I hug him. It is pure and real. My father, my blood, the person I was created for in the world. The person who knows me best.

Startled by a plane, I turn. Reach for my glass, I sip to the bottom. I exhale, take a deep breath. My stomach stretches. I stare at the empty glass. Don't hear or smell anything. Suddenly, I notice a narrow opening through the trees. I smile, thank him for the gifts and memories. Celebrate his life. If I could write him a letter, I would thank him for teaching me to love, share, forgive, have compassion, ride a bike, order dim sum, play cribbage, make rice. For words of wisdom. For wanting to see me happy and healthy. For helping me understand simplicity.

I wish him to know the joy, security and ordinariness of my life. The peace, clarity, sanity, serenity, pleasure, satisfaction, he gave me. I make a list of things I want to tell him. That I get along with my mother, that she is remarried and happy. I visit her often and we eat dim sum. I respect her wishes and advice. We are close. That I am healthy, taking care of myself. A diet of fish, fruit, salads, and vegetables. That I ride my bike and keep fit. That I have a doctorate, a career I love. That I enjoy teaching at the university. That I have a 10-year-old daughter, adorable and wonderful. Decorating my life with happiness. That I taught her to play cribbage.

Trembling, I linger on memories sheathed in honey, in nostalgia. It is true that I will never see him again, but I have the warm rise of memories. They will not fade into the miasma of time but instead, bring satisfaction to my day. Many years ago, in the valley of a dry summer, his life ended. The sound of his breath uninterrupted by the rhythm of my life. 'I'm happy Dad, wish you were here.'

A little red bird
 Feathers that are wet
 Bids farewell
 In poetic verse
 Leaves a path of darkness

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