

*Saying Hullo Again:
The Incorporation of the Lost Relationship
in the Resolution of Grief***

*by Michael White**

Freud ... suggests that the completion of the mourning process requires that those left behind develop a new reality which no longer includes what has been lost. But ... it must be added that full recovery from mourning may restore what has been lost, maintaining it through incorporation into the present. Full recollection and retention may be as vital to recovery and wellbeing as forfeiting memories. (Myerhoff, 1982, p.110)

For some time I have been exploring the 'saying hullo' metaphor and its application to grief work. This exploration has been prompted by particular experiences in therapy with persons who have been diagnosed elsewhere as suffering from 'delayed grief' or 'pathological mourning'. Many of these persons have received intensive and lengthy treatments that have been oriented by the normative model of the grief process, or by the chemical approach to life's problems.

I usually find that such persons are well acquainted with the grief map and can locate their experience in relation to it. They clearly understand that they have failed, in their grief work, to reach the appropriate destination. They 'know' that their arrival at this destination will be evidenced by a fully experienced 'goodbye', acceptance of the permanence of the loss of the loved one, and a desire to get on with a new life that is disconnected from that person.

At first contact, persons experiencing 'delayed grief' or 'pathological mourning' look as if they have lost their own 'selves' as well as the loved one. Without prompting, they put therapists in touch with their loss and its subsequent effect on their life, freely relating the details of their sense of emptiness, worthlessness, and feelings of depression. Such is their despair that I have often felt quite overwhelmed at the outset of therapy. Although I commonly discern invitations from these persons to join in further 'more of the same' conversations that are activated by the 'saying goodbye' metaphor, I am usually able to decline these.

It can be expected that, under these circumstances, further 'grief work' oriented by the

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normative model will complicate the situation further, rather than empower these persons and enrich their lives. Such is the desolation that these persons experience, establishing a context in therapy for the incorporation of the lost relationship seems far more strongly indicated than further efforts at encouraging the forfeiture of this relationship. My investigation of the 'saying hullo' metaphor was prompted by this consideration.

Guided by this metaphor, I formulated and introduced questions that I hoped would open up the possibility for persons to reclaim their relationship with the lost loved one. Surprised by the effect of these questions in the resolution of the sense of emptiness and feelings of depression, I decided to explore the metaphor further. I expected that a fuller understanding of the processes involved would enable me to more effectively assist persons in the re-positioning of themselves in relation to the death of a loved one, a re-positioning that would bring the relief so strongly desired.

MARY

Mary was 43 years old when she sought help for what she described as "unresolved loss". Some six years earlier, her husband, Ron, had died suddenly from heart failure. This had been entirely unexpected. Until that time, everything had been fine for Mary. She and Ron had enjoyed a "rich and loving" friendship, one that they both valued very highly.

Upon Ron's death, Mary's world fell apart. Grief-stricken, and feeling "numbed" from that time, she "simply went through the motions of life", not experiencing consolation from any quarter. Her numbness survived a number of attempts to "work through" her grief via counselling. Medication had not provided relief. Despite this, Mary persisted in her attempts to achieve some sense of wellbeing by consulting therapists and "working on acceptance" over the next five years.

At my first meeting with Mary she said that she had all but given up hope that she would ever regain even a semblance of wellbeing. She thought she would never be able to say goodbye. After Mary had put me in touch with her despair, I invited her to escape the "deadly serious" consequences of Ron's death.

I wondered aloud whether saying goodbye was a

helpful idea anyway, and about whether it might be a better idea to say hullo to Ron. Further, I said that the desolation she so keenly experienced might mean that she had said goodbye just too well. Mary's response was one of puzzlement and surprise. Had she heard what she thought she had? I repeated my thoughts and saw, for the first time, a spark in her.

I then asked if she would be interested in experimenting with saying hullo to Ron or if she thought he was buried too deep for her to entertain this idea. Mary began to sob; easy sobbing, not desperate. I waited. After ten or fifteen minutes she suddenly said: "Yes, he's been buried too deep for me." She smiled and then said that it might be helpful to "dig him up a bit". So I began to ask some questions¹:

If you were seeing yourself through Ron's eyes right now, what would you be noticing about yourself that you could appreciate?

What difference would it make to how you feel if you were appreciating this in yourself right now?

What do you know about yourself that you are awakened to when you bring alive the enjoyable things that Ron knew about you?

What difference would it make to you if you kept this realization, about yourself, alive on a day-to-day basis?

What difference would feeling this way make to the steps that you could take to get back into life?

How could you let others know that you have reclaimed some of the discoveries about yourself that were clearly visible to Ron, and that you personally find attractive?

How would being aware of that which has not been visible to you for the past six years enable you to intervene in your life?

What difference will knowing what you now know about yourself make to your next step?

In taking this next step, what else do you think you might find out about yourself that could be important for you to know?

Mary struggled with these questions through alternating bursts of sadness and joy. Over the two subsequent sessions she shared with me the important rediscoveries that she was making about herself and life. At follow-up, some twelve months later, Mary said: "It's strange, but when I discovered that Ron didn't have to die for me, that I didn't have to separate from him, I became less preoccupied with him and life was richer."

JOHN

John was thirty-nine years old when he consulted me about longstanding "difficulties with self-esteem". He couldn't recall not having a critical attitude toward himself. Throughout his life he had hungered for approval and recognition from others.

For this, he hated himself all the more, believing that he lacked substance as a person and that this was clearly apparent to others.

John considered himself loved by his wife and children and believed that his experience in this family of procreation had gone some way toward countering his nagging self-doubt - but never far enough. His self-doubt was so easily triggered by what he considered to be the most trivial of circumstances. He had, on various occasions, sought professional advice, but had not experienced the relief that he was seeking.

In view of the long history of John's self-rejection, I asked for further details about his life. He told me that, as far as he knew, he had a happy childhood until the death of his mother at the tender age of seven, just before his eighth birthday. No-one in the family had coped with this at all well and, for a time, John's father had been a lost person to everyone, including himself. John had vivid recall of the events surrounding his mother's death. He experienced disbelief for some considerable time, always expecting that she would show up around the next corner. He then became entirely heartbroken. Eventually his father re-married to a caring person "but things were never really the same again".

I asked John about what difference it would have made to how he felt about himself now if things had remained the same; if his mother hadn't died. At this point he began to get tearful. Didn't he think she might have gone missing from his life for too long? Was it really helpful for her to remain absent from his life? He looked surprised. Would he mind if I asked more questions? "No, that would be fine." I proceeded with the following:

What did your mother see when she looked at you through her loving eyes?

How did she know these things about you?

What is it about you that told her about this?

What can you now see in yourself that had been lost to you for many years?

What difference would it make to your relationships with others if you carried this knowledge with you in your daily life?

How would this make it easier for you to be your own person, rather than a person for others?

What could you do to introduce others to this new picture of yourself as a person?

How would bringing others into this new picture of your person enable you to nurture yourself more?

In what way would such an experience of nurturing yourself effect your relationship with yourself?

1. Of course, the examples of questions that are given in this paper are not presented by therapists in barrage-like fashion, but within the context of a co-evolving process. Each question is sensitively attuned to the person's response to the previous question.