

*Chapter 9*

## STITCHING HOPE THROUGH LOSS IN CELEBRATION

*Ashlie Brink\* and Elmarie Kotzé*

University of Waikato, Aotearoa New Zealand

### ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the revisiting and re-storying of hopeful actions and practices in the face of emotional hurt, physical pain, sorrow, loss and shattered dreams. Painstakingly slow recovery from major surgery coincided with the shocking and immeasurable loss of a beloved mother. This chapter grew out of conversations reminiscing about a graduation ceremony in the year following the loss. Memories, of a gold dress, carefully stitched together the concern, love, attention, compassion, and admiration of a mother and her support for her daughter's hope of an academic future. These memories later became the focus of an outsider witnessing practice and re-membering conversations as a means by which to re-visit, re-story and re-member the celebration of the graduation ceremony. Eleven years after the loss and as an aspiring academic, the small, but significant steps of speaking through the hurt of injustice, the immense loss of not only a mother, but central person in the life of a young woman living with disability, opened up the space to discuss the discursive and material practices of Ashlie's lived experiences.

---

\* Ashlie Brink. Email: [abrink@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:abrink@waikato.ac.nz).

**Keywords:** outsider witness, narrative documents, re-membering, loss, grief, hope

## INTRODUCTION

### A Dress, a Graduation, a Loss

A gold, lace dress with a chiffon scarf draped across its right shoulder hangs proudly in the corner of the cupboard. It hangs in wait of its owner celebrating a graduation ceremony, a celebration of new beginnings, of hope, aspiration and dreams she had for her daughter. But the owner never did wear the dress. Instead her daughter wore it in honour of its owner, her mother. When she graduated the daughter wore the dress. The dress needed alterations to fit her daughter's smaller frame, a dress stitched together by hope, love, honour, respect and gratitude to her mother.

I, (Ashlie) am the daughter - I wore my mother's dress for the graduation

Elmarie attended the graduation as a colleague and staff member and then, 11 years later, Ashlie and Elmarie shared a conversation about the graduation. Elmarie held some knowledge and small details about the story of the dress and Ashlie's loss of her mother. Elmarie asked Ashlie about the celebration day and the dress she wore to the graduation. On this particular occasion, Ashlie spoke of the conflicting and painful memories of her mother's passing. This conversation was not only around the time of the anniversary of Ashlie's mother's passing, but at a time when Ashlie was searching for inspiration in the midst of writing a PhD and thus building an academic career for herself. Through speaking the bitter-sweet relationship that Ashlie had with the dress, she revisited the occasion of the graduation. In the conversation, Elmarie and Ashlie recalled a book that launched the previous year, *The Memory of Clothes* edited by Gibson which also included a chapter by a colleague. Ashlie and Elmarie both read the moving and touching chapter titled *The Red Pashmina*. A day or two later the story invited discussions of shared memories of clothes, loss of mothers and their mothers' handy-work of sewing outfits. It was here that an opportunity and space presented itself to talk about the materiality of the graduation dress that Ashlie talks about below.

After the death of the owner the red pashmina was claimed by her daughter. Campbell (2015) very poignantly personifies the pashmina and

writes a section with the voice of the pashmina, explaining the daughter's experiences of loss.

Saturation from tears and sweat. I was repulsed. *Stop!* I wanted yell. I, who had always been worn with stylish grace by *The Reader*, had now succumbed to the wrenching and drenching of *The Daughter*.

I grieved for *The Reader* too! I had loved her for fourteen years. Her presence pulsed inside me. I had sucked at her life, hiding bits of her essence throughout my weave. Layered her laughter into my warp, secreted her scent snug-tight in my weft. I became greedy to be worn by *The Reader*; I couldn't get enough of her. I wanted to be stuffed full with *The Reader's* essence, to be her ambassador in the world. But now the horror of living with *The Daughter* engulfed me.... (Campbell, 2015, p. 5).

In the section above the pashmina speaks of the intimate relationship with the first owner and the transition to the hands and tears of the new "owner." A shift or re-positioning happens as a result of the "intra-action" (Barad, 2007) between daughter and the material of the pashmina she wrapped herself in. The pashmina continues:

I don't know what came over me, but after a few hours of more tugging and wailing from *The Daughter*, I remembered what I had been born to do – to adorn and protect. The strain of resisting *The Daughter* was tiring, so I relaxed. I loosened my weave a little, ever so slightly to reveal a scent. *The Daughter* calmed and became still. I opened my memory-laden pores a little more. A smile teetered at the corner of *The Daughter's* mouth. I relaxed further allowing more of *The Reader's* essence to float in the air. A ray crept across *The Daughter's* face, no teeth to speak of, but a smile none the less. Then, holding me close to her cheek, she whispered the word *Mum*.

I know now that I adopted the role of surrogate mother in those first few months after *The Reader's* death. *The Daughter* wore me often, mostly at home by herself. Every time I enshrouded her, I released more of my greedily stored away memories of her mother (Campbell, 2015, p. 5).

Unlike the daughter in the story of The Red Pashmina, Ashlie had conflicting views of the dress that she wore to the graduation. Ashlie did not invite the dress to envelope and comfort her body nor did she want the dress to adorn her. Ashlie had wanted her mother to wear the dress as she had always intended to. It was her mother's celebration outfit that she had chosen for herself to wear to her daughter's ceremony, not the other way around. Ashlie

recalls her mother's joy when purchasing the dress and carefully hanging the garment in the spare room cupboard for the occasion. Ashlie's mother was pleased with her 'find.' Despite the fact that her mother had not yet established a physical, 'worn in' relationship with the dress as the owner of The Red Pashmina had, the dress represented a garment of significance to her. Ashlie graduated with a Masters of Special Education for which she had interviewed young women with visible, physical disabilities for she herself had learned to live with. A common thread acknowledged in Ashlie's research interviews, were the close relationships that the participants had with their families, and particularly the bond that they shared with their mothers.

Experiencing the ongoing impact of the loss of Ashlie's mother, anger crept in as the graduation neared. Ashlie loved the dress as the dress was a garment her mom had chosen for herself to wear at Ashlie ceremony, but at the same time, Ashlie hated it because it represented the stark reality her that a pivotal person in her life was absent. The resentment and bitterness of Ashlie's mother's accident pushed itself forward and the dress became a painful reminder of what should have been, but was not.

Ashlie briefly told Elmarie about the incident of receiving the news of her mother's car accident:

This January, 11 years ago my mother called me earlier in the day to say that she would be home late from work. My mother never made it home. In an instant my life changed, dramatically.... A police car outside the drive ... A police officer... Cap in hands ... Asked to sit down ... I went numb, chilled to the bone. He expressed his deepest sympathies. I could not hear a single word that passed the officer's lips. I saw the movement of his mouth and smelt the smoky residue of a recently smoked cigarette. I sat there ... I was brought back to reality when I heard the bellowing cries of my brother. I saw the tears rolling down my father's cheeks. I got up ... We embraced, holding each other tightly as though one would fall if any of us let go. Time went both quickly and slowly. The embrace was both comforting and empty. My body both cold and numb and life shattered and unfamiliar - the feeling of my mother's love in an embrace which made all things better, absent.

Ashlie had shared with Elmarie the shock she felt on hearing the above news of her mother's tragic accident and how it was not something she often spoke about. It was through the above sharing of clothes, memories, mothers, loss and renewed dreams that an opportunity presented itself which was well timed being the beginning of January and the start of new academic year. The intention of the outsider witness practice was not for therapeutic purposes, but

an opportunity for both students in the University's Master of Counseling (M Couns) programme to bear witness and Ashlie to talk about a significant experience in her life.

## OUTSIDER WITNESSING

Elmarie teaches narrative therapy to M Couns students and one practice that she teaches is "outsider witnessing" (White, 2007). At the beginning of an academic year Elmarie introduces M Couns students to outsider witnessing practice. She sometimes invites a graduate or senior counseling student to join in the introduction of this practice. In 2016, a week after the conversation with Ashlie and hearing how Ashlie received the news of the car accident, Elmarie invited Ashlie to join the discussion with the M Couns students. Elmarie explained that the purpose would be for Ashlie's story to be witnessed by outsiders (Weingarten, 2010) and to further thicken (White, 2007) her story of her graduation and her mother's contribution to her life and studies. Prior to the session Elmarie provided Ashlie with relevant readings (White, 1988, 2007) about the process of outsider witnessing. Elmarie first consulted the group of 25 students and asked if they were in agreement to invite Ashlie into the group which they supported. Ashlie then accepted the invitation to join the group. The function of outsider witnessing (White, 2007) in this specific situation was not therapeutic, but a practice to create an audience to witness Ashlie's experiences of loss, her celebration of her graduation and the remembering of her mother.

The three-stage process of outsider witnessing was developed by Michael White, based on Barbara Myerhof's "definitional ceremonies" (White, 2007). Within a therapeutic context, a client and therapist negotiate the presence of outsider witnesses. In the first stage, the client tells an aspect of her life story while the invited outsider witnesses listen carefully to the conversation. The outsider witnesses are then invited to retell the story to the therapist, guided by the carefully crafted questions. During this stage, the person whose story is witnessed, listens to the conversations between therapist and outsider witnesses. In the third stage, the therapist returns to the person whose story was witnessed and invites them to retell the story witnessed and retold by the outsider witness. Once again the therapist carefully scaffolds this conversation with crafted questions.

The practice was audio-taped to capture Ashlie's words for her to listen to and re-visit. At the start of the session Elmarie once again set out the process

for the group and then turned to Ashlie and asked her what she thought could be the focus of the discussion. After a few moments of silence Ashlie selected to talk about the dress and said: ... *the gold dress gives me that comfort in talking about other things ... so I'm feeling I'm holding onto the gold dress, so its that, that is giving me warmth. A place to talk ...* Ashlie returned to the January conversation that she and Elmarie had.

... it was January, and an anniversary – my mom's anniversary was coming up ... I also recalled some of those memories of the graduation ... I think I had mentioned it to you at the time ... - when we [staff] queued, lined up to go up to the stage ... colleagues around me ... at that time it was something that was really warming for me. I felt cloaked [a korowai]<sup>1</sup> I felt protected ... a blanket of comfort from colleagues' presence. Also, at the time knowing that my family were in the audience, and it was a difficult time – the whole graduation ... Certainly, the whole event was steeped in bitter-sweet emotions at that time.

She continued to talk about the loss of her mother, the bitter sweet memories of the graduation, and her decision to wear the gold dress with pride.

Through the telling and questioning, a relationship with the dress and the graduation ceremony emerged. Ashlie talked about the conflictual relationship:

I think at that time there was a lot of anger, still, a lot of anger – and a lot of this was just not how it was supposed to be ... unfair. So, I had ... arguments with the dress... It wasn't my initial decision... [to wear it] it was a gradual decision, it grew with me.

After the conversation with Ashlie, Elmarie turned to the M Couns students and asked them to reflect on and relate how Ashlie's story resonated with, and transported them. Elmarie invited Ashlie to listen to the discussion. Elmarie carefully scaffolded the questions to the witnesses. For example, she asked about the particular words or expressions that stood out for them in Ashlie's story. She invited them to think of images or values that came to mind when they heard those particular words. They were requested to think about why they connected with particular aspects of Ashlie's telling and what

<sup>1</sup> A korowai is a particular type of Māori kākahu (cloak). It is usually decorated with feathers and/or tassels and has a border along the bottom, although this can vary according to tribal custom.

it was in their own lives that connected them to those particular aspects of the story. Elmarie asked what in their own lives prepared them to hear these aspects of Ashlie's story. Towards the end of the conversation Elmarie also asked them how they might take the learning from the event into their future counseling practices. Elmarie ended the discussion and slowly returned to Ashlie. She created a few moments of silence for all to re-collect thoughts and emotions.

In the third stage, Ashlie was then invited to retell the story as witnessed and retold by the M Couns students as witnesses. Once again, Elmarie carefully scaffolded this conversation and asked Ashlie what she thought about what she had heard them speak. Elmarie asked Ashlie what meanings she had made of their re-tellings (White, 2007).

Outsider witnessing can serve many purposes (White, 2007). In this specific situation, it provided Ashlie with an opportunity to speak the loss and grief outside of her immediate family. The witnesses created an audience to listen carefully to Ashlie's experiences of loss and grief, the graduation ceremony and her relationship with a dress. The outsider witness responses were scaffolded by Elmarie and the ritual opened up opportunities for Ashlie to develop richer descriptions of her relationship with a dress and in turn remembering her mother and her mother's love and contribution to her graduation ceremony became even more richly storied.

## A NARRATIVE DOCUMENT

Narrative documents have been described as "expanding the conversation" (Epston, 1998, p. 95; Freeman, Epston and Lobovits, 1997, pp. 112-124) and the practice has developed to include many forms of documentation. White (2000) calls on Geertz (see also Newman, 2008) when writing about the work that a narrative document can be used for when he writes:

Practices of the written word, which have for a long time been a theme of narrative therapy, contribute significantly to the visibility, substantiation, and endurance of the sparkling events that are identified in narrative conversations – these practices of the written word document the more sparkling events of people's lives and in doing so contribute to 'rescuing the said from the saying of it,' the 'told from the telling of it.' This documentation can take many forms, including certificates, letters,

announcements, position statements, verse, song, and transcripts of therapeutic conversations. (White, 2000, p. 6)

Another contribution to the use of narrative documents came from Speedy (2005) who developed the use of “poetic documents” in narrative therapy. Speedy (2005, p. 285) writes that “poetic language speaks to that which is not fixed or known and that which ‘moves or escapes’ and appears to defy the confines of conventional language.” She provides some “suggestions and safeguards” (p. 295) in the crafting of such documents. Elmarie was mindful of these guidelines when she captured Ashlie’s words from the transcript of the outsider witness conversation. Elmarie used Ashlie’s language and captured words and phrases that Speedy (2005, p. 295) identifies as “unforeseen, evocative and resonant, that link lives and that attend to ‘particularities’ rather than generalities.” Elmarie also reached for the “talk ... that emerges out of moments of silence or reverie” (p. 295) and “‘talk’ from all sorts of places—places of struggle, and difficulty ...or more helpful moments ...talk that surprises people, comes unexpectedly to their lips, shifts ... their experiences of life’s possibilities” (Speedy, 2005, p. 295).

For the purpose of capturing the above, Elmarie studied the transcript of the interview with care and highlighted the words that stood out as speaking the relationship with the dress and the connecting and re-connecting of the dress and Ashlie’s mother. She did this with the intention to re-turn Ashlie’s words to her in order to provide her with a rich description of her experiences. This practice supported a thickening of the story outside of “established assumptions and social constraints” (Speedy, 2005, p. 285).

January

Her anniversary

I submitted my dissertation

The weekend before Mother’s Day

Graduation ceremony

Bittersweet memories

We lined up to go on stage

Colleagues – a blanket, safety, warmth, comfort

Family in the audience – bittersweet memories

I can talk the dress, *now*

Brings warmth and comfort

To talk, to remember

Bittersweet memories



She *wasn't* there ... she *was* there  
 The dress spoke, my mother spoke  
 The dress is my mum  
 I could feel the flow – cold and warming

I argued with the dress  
 The decision to wear it grew with me  
 Proud to wear it, and anger ...  
 She would have worn the dress,  
 with pride ... and grace  
 I brought her to the graduation ceremony  
 In her absence, she spoke  
 A bittersweet moment

The dress, re-fitted, altered, spoke  
 Opened space for me to think, talk, write  
 Doing hope with me ...  
 For a future ceremony... celebration

## RE-MEMBERING

Ashlie remembered how she cared for her mother when she farewelled her mother's body. Spending time with Ashlie's mother before her funeral was an incredibly painful, but precious time shared together – just one last time! She carefully ran her fingers through her mother's beautiful hair, sweeping and stroking her forehead in the way her mother had done when Ashlie had been retching and vomiting after an anaesthetic. Ashlie sat with her mother for ages clasping her hand wishing her mother could reciprocate in the way she had done so many times when Ashlie would wake in pain searching for comfort and relief. Ashlie's thumb tenderly stroked her mother's cold, limp hand that at that time, Ashlie had convinced herself that the patch that she had stroked became warm, just warm enough to feel like her mother was alive and present. Ashlie's mother hated being cold and was always known to rub her hands together to keep them warm.

Ashlie sprayed both her mother's and her perfume on her mother so that the two scents would mix. Perfume was one of the many joys that bound Ashlie and her mother together and was always the height of pleasure and delight for birthdays and celebrations. On many occasions their perfumes would mix as they hugged and during the day a whiff of the other's perfume

would touch the nostril reminding one another of their ‘scent.’ Ashlie’s mother with her rich, warm, spicy, earthy notes and Ashlie with her light, spring, floral blossom tones. Both these fragrances being quite distinct and recognisable as signature scents by those closest to them. On this day and final occasion, Ashlie wanted the perfumes to mix and the vapour to dance, droplets to come together and finally settle on the body like individual hugs.

Ashlie carefully redressed her mother’s hair the way she would have worn it. Her hair felt clean but at the same time brittle and cold. Ashlie ran her fingers through a stranger’s hair – it was her mother, but at the same time it was not.

Ashlie had brought her mother’s rich burgundy lipstick to wear as she had worn so many times before. Her mother was starting to look more like the mother she had known except for the bandage on her right arm and the burgundy acrylic nails her mother loved so much that were now broken and chipped from the accident.

Detailed storying of the care Ashlie took with her mother’s body called forward memories of her mother’s care for Ashlie at times when she had surgery and other medical procedures. Ashlie remembered the love, care and commitment her mother gifted her when she was younger and needed this medical care. She recollected how as a child she would spend part of the school holidays in hospital, having most of her joints drained of the fluid build-up caused by Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis (JRA). The hospital visits had become so frequent for Ashlie growing up that an unspoken ritual had developed between Ashlie and her mother. “This time next week it will all be over” her mother would say. “This time tomorrow, you will be home and in your own bed, all done and all better,” her mother would remind her. The morning of the hospital visit Ashlie would seek reassurance, “In a few more hours, I will be done, hey? In my own pyjamas, hey? You will put my pyjamas on as soon as I get back from theatre?” Ashlie’s mother always came through on her promise to her daughter and after Ashlie returned from the operating theatre she would wake wearing her own pyjamas and hear her mother say “there, it’s all done now, it [the aspirations and cortisone injections] was so quick, in and out and it’s all done now and you will be so much better.”

Hospital visits were traumatic for Ashlie. The ordeal of following hospital policy and protocols were impacting on both Ashlie and her mother. Ashlie’s mother had negotiated for Ashlie to be admitted on the day she was due to go into theatre, not the night before as was hospital policy at that time. Ashlie would change into the gown just before going into theatre, not the many hours beforehand. This ritual alleviated some of the anxiety of going into the

operating room. Ashlie's mother would make sure the correct anti-nausea medication was administered in theatre after the procedure if it was an anaesthetist who did not know Ashlie's history of adverse reactions to some medications. Her mother would insist that she receive the Stemetil injection before Ashlie got back to the ward to ease the additional angst about having any further medical treatment like injections done to her already sensitive body. After waking and on return from the recovery ward, Ashlie's mother would carefully remove the theatre gown, gently washing Ashlie's face, neck and upper body with warm water and lightly scented rose soap. The ritual on occasions would take place two or three times to get rid of the vomit.

Ashlie's mother dressed her in her pyjamas and on the neckline of the garment, placed a dab of perfume to help rid the smell of anaesthetic and vomit Ashlie hated so much. Ashlie's mother advocated, even argued with medical staff to discharge her at the end of the day of surgery. She knew from experience that Ashlie would recover far quicker if she went home as soon as she was able.

Through Ashlie re-connecting with these acts of kindness and love and her mother once again became a companion on Ashlie's journey and the relationship was re-kindled. In narrative therapy's term the evoking of the presence of a deceased person is called "re-membering conversations" (White, 1988, 2007; Hedtke, 2003; Hedtke and Winslade, 2004, 2005) when storying practice of "reengagements with the history of one's relationships," through revising and revisiting the "memberships" (White, 2007, p. 129) one has with significant others in one's life. For Ashlie the outsider witness practice opened up a space to re-visit her relationship with her deceased mother through the re-membering of the care her mother provided in her life and re-storyed the role and meaning of these actions. Ashlie re-claimed her mother's membership of what in narrative therapy is called a "club of life" (White, 1988, 2007; Hedtke and Winslade, 2004). A person can introduce membership to a "club of life" to people whose presence enhance wellbeing and support what we ourselves care about and hope for in our lives. This re-membering practice was developed by White (1988) as a "saying hullo" to significant people in one's life. "Saying hullo" is a deconstruction of the readily available expected practice of "saying goodbye" to people who have passed on. A hope-full "saying hullo" provided Ashlie with the opportunity to re-claim her mother's membership of her "club of life" (White, 1988, 2007; Hedtke and Winslade, 2004). Ashlie claimed her mother's membership to her club of life when she re-visited her mother's care for her as well as her care for her mother's body. The practice of saying hullo again was called into existence by the discursive materiality of the dress.

Ashlie's relationship with the dress shifted. The golden, lace dress with a chiffon scarf draped across its right shoulder now hangs proudly in her cupboard. It hangs as testimony of the two owners' hopes, aspirations and dreams for Ashlie's forthcoming celebration of a graduation ceremony.

A Baradian (2007, p ix) statement about "memory" and remembering speaks into the significance of the "materiality" of a pashmina and a dress provided in the grieving for two mothers. Barad (2007, p. ix) writes:

Memory does not reside in the folds of individual brains ... Memory is not a record of a fixed past that can ever be fully or simply erased, written over, or recovered (that is, taken away or taken back into one's possession, as if it were a thing that can be owned). And remembering is not a replay of a string of moments, but an enlivening and reconfiguring of past and future that is larger than any individual.... The past never finished.... We never leave it and it never leaves us behind.

## CODA

The re-visiting, re-remembering and re-telling of the story of loss, grief and a graduation ceremony sustained Ashlie's hope for completion of her doctoral study. In re-storying the dress and Ashlie's previous graduation ceremony opened up a possibility for her to embark on the PhD and hearing the dress calling her to acknowledge and embrace the new possibilities of the future celebrations. The discursive materiality of the dress called forward memories of reciprocal commitment and care available to Ashlie and her mother. This relational bond beyond loss was stitched into the golden lace dress and practices of outsider witnessing, narrative document and re-remembering conversations richly described the stitching together of love, hope and care.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ashlie would like to thank the University of Waikato's Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research (WMIER) for the funding made available for transcribing and acknowledge the M Couns students at Waikato University.

## REFERENCES

- Barad, K. (2007). Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Barad, K. (2012). On touching – the inhuman therefore I am. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 25(5), 206 -223.
- Campbell, V. (2015). The red pashmina. In R. Gibson (Ed.). The memory of clothes. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Epston, D. (1998). Catching up with David Epston: A collection of narrative practice-based papers published between 1991-1996. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre Publications.
- Freeman, J., Epston, D. and Lobovits, D. (1997). Playful approaches to serious problems. Narrative therapy with children and their families. New York, NY: Norton.
- Hedtke, L. (2003). The origami of remembering, *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 4, 51-62.
- Hedtke, L. and Winslade, J. (2004). Re-membering lives. Conversations with the dying and the bereaved. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing.
- Hedtke, L. and Winslade, J. (2005). The use of the subjunctive in remembering conversations with those who are grieving. *OMEGA* 50(3), 197-215.
- Newman, D. (2008). 'Rescuing the said from the saying of it': Living documentation in narrative therapy. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 3, 24-34.
- Speedy, J. (2005). Using poetic documents: An Exploration of poststructuralist ideas and poetic practices in narrative therapy. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 33(3), 283-298.
- Weingarten, K. (2010). Reasonable hope: Construct, clinical applications and supports. *Family Process*, 49(1), 5–25.
- White, M. (1988). Saying hullo again: The incorporation of the lost relationship in the resolution of grief. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, 3, 7–11.
- White, M. (2000). Reflections on narrative practice. Essays and interviews. Adelaide, Australia: Dulwich Centre.
- White, M. (2007). Maps of narrative practice. New York, NY: Norton.

