A DEATH IS WORTH A THOUSAND TELLINGS: TRANSFORMATION THROUGH STORYTELLING

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Abstract
Why do we share our intimate stories with others? When are personal stories most frequently told? What are the rewards and benefits of telling our personal stories? In the context of transforming loss and grief, this paper explores these questions and the meaning they reveal during death and dying. A major objective of the paper is to provide the readers with a deepened insight and appreciation for re-telling the story of a death. In this paper I explore the phenomenon of storytelling as a narrative research methodology in the context of the dying and death processes. I also draw on the growing scholarly research on meaning as it relates to the end of life. The research section of this paper discusses two specific narrative stories that address different kinds of death: A suicide and a death of a young wife from breast cancer. A major focus of the narrative stories includes themes of meaning as described by each individual. These are discussed in detail as part of my general conclusions.

INTRODUCTION
We each have our unique life story that is wrapped in a myriad of experiences and expressions and further composed of smaller, sub-connecting life stories. Some life experiences lend themselves to humorous, captivating, and compelling stories that are retold hundreds of times. Some stories, for whatever reason, are shared with only a chosen few or remain in the silence of our own hearts. The telling of a story that surrounds the death of a loved one holds the potential for significant personal transformation because in telling it one reflects on and views the experience from a different emotional place each time it is re-told.

One’s life is qualitatively different after a death or loss (Levine, 1982; McDonald, 1997). If one is able to perceive the loss through a different more meaningful lens, personal transformation is not only possible, it is probable. How one proceeds with this transformation depends on unique individual abilities. As noted in this study, the telling of a death reveals both beauty and pain, and one’s capability to recognize and appreciate each of these qualities is the point at which personal meaning can be made. Hence, the death story is a place of entry for transformation in grieving, healing, and living. You will see from the content of these interviews that it clearly takes time, energy, and effort to arrive at this point.

The telling of a loved one’s death confirms to both the teller and the listener that life is ephemeral, fragile, and precious. The description of the death and the experiences leading up to it reveals as much about the teller as it does about the deceased. It also provides the listener with keen insights into the lives that preceded it. Ultimately, it is the telling or re-telling of a death that helps one embrace the meaning in life, and indeed suggests that a death be worth a thousand tellings.

In Western culture certain topics are difficult to discuss and may even be viewed as taboo. Kubler-Ross (1997) among a host of other scholars in the field of thanatology asserts that we are a death denying culture. Therefore, because the topic of death is a difficult one to discuss its telling and re-telling are precisely the reason that the story of a loved one’s death is so powerful and offers a path of transformation in the first place.

This paper examines the phenomenon of story telling as a way of making meaning for those who have experienced the death of a loved one. It further suggests that personal transformation is a result of the meaning making process. Drawing from Roemer’s (1995) work on narrative and storytelling and Frankl’s (1985) classic research on meaning, this paper assumes that telling the story of a loved one’s death provides a deepened insight into appreciating life and death even when pain and struggle may accompany that death. The following two narrative stories will be discussed to support these concepts.

Although each story is different, this narrative study describes similar themes of meaning and
transformation as expressed by the participants. Narrative research using storytelling is intended to recount as accurately as possible those stories described by the participants. Storytelling, as a method of research, is extremely personal, and while the interpretation by the researcher is also a personal rendering of descriptions, it is no less rigorous in its scholarly attempt to accurately and truthfully portray what the participants experienced.

First, to provide a brief context and to clarify terms for the readers I wish to define these terms: teller, listener, death story, and life story. The teller is simply the person who shares the story. The listener is the person or audience who hears what the teller has to say. The death story addresses the way in which the loved one died, but also integrates a number of smaller life stories. Potentially, the death story uncovers a significant number of life events and is part of the person’s larger life story. The life story is the person’s total history, which can never be completely told because human life is constantly moving, developing, and evolving. As soon as a story has been told, life has continued thereby adding more to the story, even after death.

This paper is organized as follows: four points from Roemer’s work will be discussed to illustrate a place of intersection between one’s personal transformative process and the experience of a loved one’s death. The four points are: (a) stories connect us to other people, things, and events; (b) the context of stories is known prior to the telling; (c) most stories are family oriented; and (d) all stories are past and therefore precluded. Following Roemer’s work I will draw connections to Frankl’s research on meaning and meaning making as relevant to death. I will conclude with suggestions on how storytelling can function as a transformative process in resolving a death, loss and grief.

**ROEMER’S WORK ON NARRATIVE AND STORYTELLING**

While Roemer’s work primarily offers a philosophical analysis of storytelling in the context of fictional literature and prose, it also has merit for specific storytelling at the end of a life. He notes that, “...despite our knowledge, we lend ourselves to their adventures...” (p. 3). I make a connection to Roemer because as we hear stories of death and loss, we grasp a sense of our own vulnerability and unpredictable future (Roemer, 1995). In our storytelling and story-listening our own mortality becomes hauntingly evident. Roemer (1995) identifies a significant point, that:

“Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. In life, the most immediate evidence we have for the ‘real’ or sacred is death, which constitutes our most persuasive encounter with necessity...we know we must die, and this knowledge could be said to govern us...Death gives meaning and order to the life of the individual and to the community. It is a predicate of our existence that links the thinking of common folk to the investigations of philosophers, and informs our shared understanding of the human condition. It sanctions story as it does relationship and morality...as death limits and governs our existence, so it governs traditional story. We know how the story—like our lives—will end, but not generally, how the figures willing get there. Death is indeed, the source of story’s authority.... (1995, p. 84-85)

As noted by Roemer (1995) and as indicated by the stories of my participants, few events have the potential to create significant meaning in our lives like that of death. When something or someone we love or cherish is about to be taken away from us, we are forced to look more deeply at what we value in life. A death intensifies our need to refine our perspective on life and forces a reorganization of our priorities. A death reminds us that life is short. Recognizing life’s brevity often motivates us to make the most of the life we have. A death indeed sanctions life.

In his 1984 preface to his classic work, Frankl (1985) seems to confirm my point. In referring to why he was motivated to compose Man’s Search for Meaning he writes, “I had wanted simply to convey to the reader by way of a concrete example that life holds a potential meaning under any condition, even the most miserable ones....” (p. 16). The stories you will hear, although not as horrendous as those from a concentration camp, may nonetheless evoke a propinquity of raw tenderness in our hearts.
STORIES CONNECT AND UNITE US
Roemer suggests that stories connect and unite us. His emphasis is primarily on the teller since his work centers on drama, prose, and poetry, but he does appear to recognize the vital role of the listener. An interesting transition occurs after one hears the death or life story that further connects one to others. The listener may choose to later become a teller of the story he has previously heard. Because of this connection all storytellers first have been story listeners, even if this may mean listening to one’s own experiences and then later telling them to the world for the very first time.

Furthermore, the listener has an intimate connection with the death story in another way. The listener becomes an integral part of one’s history because the dying person will not be alive to tell his own death story. We all must rely on others to tell our story after we have left this earthly plane and how much of it is fact or fiction, flattering or incriminating, public or private, vivacious or mundane depends on someone else. What we leave behind in the way of personal journals and other possessions may assist those who wish to tell our story. But eventually we relinquish the telling of our history to someone else.

Stories of death and life then are always set in the context of relationship with others. In a sense, we are never not in relationship with someone or something. Roemer (1995) implies an analogous thought when he writes, “In narrative, no one is an island, however isolated or free he may believe himself to be” (p. 11). Roemer suggests whether we know it or not, we are always connected to someone or something else. His following quote more clearly emphasizes our inherent relationship with others:

But while the knowledge of our mortality makes us fearful, it can also induce the concern and tenderness—not just for those close to us, but for all others—that are a distinguishing mark of our species. Mortality makes us alike: it makes us kin and can make us kind. (Roemer, 1995, p. 85)

THE CONTEXT OF THE STORY IS KNOWN
Roemer (1995) writes that in narrative one generally knows the context of the story before it has been told. For instance, long before many of us first read Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet we were at least familiar with the story-line; somewhere we had learned that this was a love story of two young people whose lives ended in tragedy because of feuding families. The rest of the details were acquired as we read or saw the play. A parallel can be made with the death story. When we are telling the story of our loved one, we clearly know its context. Our listener may not have the same understanding but it is revealed to them through our storytelling.

STORIES ARE ABOUT FAMILIES
Roemer (1995) also states that most stories are family centered and as such they have the capacity to “…nurture and undermine, wound and heal, sustain and strangle” (p. 14.) As a bereaved person tells the story, this notion becomes even more evident. Loss and illness potentially bring out the best and worst in families as they cope. As you will hear about one of the participant’s, her family and their unconditional love is what has sustained her throughout her grief process. The story that the other participant tells is almost completely interconnected with his family.

STORIES ARE PAST AND PRECLUDED
Whether we tell or listen to the death story we are generally aware of the outcome. The specific details may be unknown, but we are aware of the conclusion. When we attend a funeral we know at least one part of the deceased’s story: That he died and that a segment of his story is past and precluded. More of the details will be unraveled as we listen to the loved one telling his story. Just as we are aware that we will have a past to our story, we know that it is precluded.

CREATING MEANING THROUGH STORIES
We live in a time when growing numbers of people tell personal stories of woe. Throughout the world many report that their lives are filled with meaninglessness despite the abundance of material wealth and prosperity (Wong & Fry, 1998). Perhaps the most disturbing phenomenon is that a significant number of youth, especially Americans, report a lack of meaning in their lives (Krasko, 1997).
This paper is primarily concerned with the written and spoken words of people and how their expressions reveal meaning in their lives. Their making of meaning then leads to their personal transformation. A superb example is found in Frankl’s (1985) work. In fact, his entire account could be seen as a meaningful story in which he retells his experiences in the concentration camps. A piece of one story that holds significance for this paper is when he recalls a vivid memory of his beloved wife. He writes:

Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife’s image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise. (p. 56-57)

This passage described not only the physical details of what that moment was like, it also revealed with poetic beauty the depth of the love he held for her. Frankl continued:

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth—that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment…. (p. 57)

In this passage the listener or reader acquires a sense of the depth of Frankl’s character and what he values. One comes away from that passage knowing that truth and love are co-authors of meaning for Frankl and that the current moment, no matter what comprises it, holds tremendous power and poignancy. Specifically the reader notes that through Frankl’s own admission he has gained new insight and therefore has been personally transformed by his current awareness of the present.

MEANING MAKING AS TRANSFORMATION

Although Frankl does not actually use the word transformation in his work, he clearly implies that finding or creating meaning in life is a transforming experience. Instead he uses such expressions as “rising or growing above” one’s self to describe this transformation. In other words, transformation occurs when the meaning that has been created has fundamentally changed the individual; it has made him somehow a more complete, more full human being. In the re-telling of this experience, we see that Frankl grasps what he understands as the “greatest secret that…poetry and thought” impart.

This passage also calls to mind an ancient Buddhist story about a man running from a charging tiger. The story goes like this: The man is running away from the tiger toward the edge of a steep cliff. As he nears the edge of the cliff, he looks down and sees more tigers at the cliff’s bottom. To free himself from the ensuing tiger, he leaps for a tree branch overhanging the cliff. As the branch begins to break and the man is seconds away from falling to his fate, he notices a lovely ripe strawberry. He picks and eats it in utter bliss just before he falls. This story, somewhat like Frankl’s, reminds us that even as death stares us in the face, we can embrace the present and experience a transcendent aliveness that is filled with unquestioned meaning.

Our story about our deceased loved one equips us with a similar wisdom. As we tell their story, often in the midst of extraordinary pain, sorrow, and fear, we are given a glimmer of hope that their life was not in vain and that somehow through their death, they are quickened. This juxtaposition between life and death heightens our awareness and transforms us because we have dared to endure loss with some sense of equanimity.

NARRATIVES REVEALED

Procedures

Two persons, one man and one woman, were asked to tell their story about their departed loved one. Four opened-ended questions were asked in order to guide them in an unobtrusive way
through their narrative story. The questions were:
- What story or stories would you like me to hear?
- What story do you consider most meaningful?
- What does sharing these stories do for you?
- What advice about sharing similar stories would you give to someone else in a similar situation?

Each account was audio recorded and then transcribed and analyzed for themes of meaning. Interviews were intended to last approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Finished interviews actually lasted from one hour and 15 minutes to two and a half hours. To ensure confidentiality, each person’s name has been changed. People were asked to participate based on their own willingness to tell their story about their loved one. No other stipulations for participation were required.

Each of these persons experienced a different kind of loss. In this study, the woman, Sally, tells her story of her husband’s tragic suicide and its continuing effect on her family. Frank remembers his young wife’s struggle and re-occurrence of breast cancer with exquisite detail and poignancy.

*Sally and Peter*

Sally was a soft-spoken, middle-aged Caucasian woman with a gentle demeanor whose wisdom appeared to exceed her years. I also sensed that she had a quiet strength that no doubt helped her through her ordeal. Her husband, Peter, had completed suicide three years earlier. Sally’s relationship with Peter spanned over 25 years and by all measures seemed to be a very loving, healthy one. Together they had two grown children, a son and a daughter, and Peter had two children from a previous marriage. Sally was proud to mention that she still maintains a close and valued relationship with Peter’s children.

As we began our interview Sally showed me a picture of Peter. He was a very handsome man with a slender stature and thick graying hair. I remember his refined facial features and sculpted jaw line with a kindly look in his eyes. Peter could have been described as a wealthy man with several financially successful businesses. Sally said, “He was a person who seemed to have it all.” He did not appear to have any significant problems with depression until he decided to sell one of his businesses. Shortly thereafter he began to experience some financial difficulties that accelerated his depression and eventual demise.

Suicide is a very difficult story to re-tell, which is perhaps why Sally spoke more of Peter’s life and illness than of the way in which he died. However, in excruciating detail she did take a few minutes to describe how he shot himself in the throat, her first agonizing look at the sight of his body, the memory that it has forever embedded, and the many unanswered questions that will always swirl in her mind.

Today, Sally and her family are still wrestling with the settlement of Peter’s estate and a legal dispute over a significant life insurance policy. It is unknown how long it will take for these matters to be rectified. Peter’s death not only caused unimaginable emotional trauma and loss for Sally and her family, but it also created extreme financial hardships. Despite these very unfortunate circumstances, Sally and her loved ones appear to be coping in a reasonable and healthy way. Sally attributes this to the kind and generous support received from extended family, friends, and colleagues.

As a researcher who was given the privilege of hearing her story, I might suggest that at least part of her ability to cope is testimony to the resilience of her spirit and her desire to make some semblance of meaning from her tragedy. Neither she, nor her family members, seemed embittered or jaded by their experiences, although they understandably admitted moments of anger, regret, and sadness.

Sally’s stories revealed some similar themes when contrasted to Frank’s. Both began their stories by telling how they first met and fell in love with their spouses. When asked what story about Peter that Sally most wanted to share, she said in a tender, quiet tone:

I like to tell the story of who he was when we got married….One of the things that attracted me to him was his love of life. He loved the sunset, he loved the beach, the water, he loved flowers…he just loved life. He loved to travel. He loved people. He was very spontaneous. He would
call me up and say, “Don’t worry about dinner. I have something planned.” And then he’d pack a picnic dinner and we would go somewhere. And then when he was really ill with depression he didn’t want to do anything.

Unanswered Questions

Sally also noted that Peter was a devoted husband and father and that fact made his final act an even more difficult one to digest. Because Peter in many ways had a very good life, his suicide has left many unanswered questions. Like many family members who survive the suicide of a loved one, Sally asked herself:

What could I have done? What did I say? What did I do or what didn’t I do? You play over that last day, those 24 hours over and over again. And those answers aren’t there. So you just let go of those questions. It’s a continuing process. But still, when you quiet yourself and reflect on that time, you have those questions. They come back…

Sally said that Peter’s actions illustrated:

…how a person can change so dramatically due to an illness…Family was very important to him…extremely. And that made it even more difficult to understand how he could end his life with four children and three grandchildren and one on the way.

Loss of Identity

Sally attributed part of the reason for Peter’s death to losing his sense of identity. She said that because of the changes in his business and financial status,

…he lost a lot and what he lost I believe was his identity. One of the first things we ask people is, “what do you do?” Instead of, “tell me who you are. Tell me what you enjoy, what inspires you?” And so for Peter I think that when he lost that identity that was his downfall.

Sally shared that during Peter’s memorial service her minister:

…talked about how hard it is for people who are successful to reveal that they have failures, especially within this community where there are expectations, where people will succeed. It is one of the most difficult things to share…you’ve lost or you’ve failed somehow. They see it as failure.

Because of the on-going litigation and the way in which Peter died, Sally and her family have not been afforded the same luxury of closure around his death that many of us experience with loved ones who pass from this life in more natural ways. Near the end of the interview Sally reminisced:

…I wonder what my life would be like if I could have stayed in my own home, taken care of what I had and only grieved the death of Peter. What would that grief be like…to focus on the grief and not the problems that were going on. I don’t know what a normal grief experience is because of all the issues I had to deal with. And I feel like I’ve never really had closure because of the issues that are still pending. Even his estate hasn’t closed. And I still have his ashes and feel almost guilty because I haven’t done anything with them yet.

Transformation

Sally said of her own transformation:

…just getting through this has been a journey, since my faith, which is more a spiritual faith than a religion, and being with people who are very supportive, encouraging and loving have helped me get through this. I’ve become more aware of what’s going on and appreciate the things like the sunset. One of the things that amazed me shortly after Peter died was how much I noticed the petal on the flower, or the leaf on a tree…

Significance of Sharing the Story

After Peter’s death, Sally understood that sharing these stories had many benefits:

…from the very beginning I’ve been very open and think part of it is because while Peter was still living he had asked me not to share and I kept so much to myself. It was like floodgates were opened and I didn’t feel I had to protect him as much. I started sharing with people I worked with, with friends about everything. It just helped me through the grieving process. I no longer felt I had to keep everything inside and what I discovered the more I talked, the more people shared with me. I was amazed in what I heard from others about their own depression or a family member who completed suicide. So my
sharing opened doors for others to share .... I really felt that I needed to share what it was like for me, so that others wouldn’t have to go through that. I also felt immediately I had to do everything I could to prevent others from taking their own lives ....

Sally articulated the difficulty as noted earlier about discussing death and tragedy. She described how important it was for her to relate with others during her time of sorrow:

...not everyone is comfortable sharing for different reasons, they’re very private or may feel that others don’t want to listen. But I would suggest that they talk, that they find people they can talk to and not worry about whether they’re going to be upset ... if you talk to the right people they can be comfortable ... they know their role is not to keep you from crying or keep you from thinking about the past, but their role is to just listen. The key is to find somebody or people who are good listeners who have experienced a death. I’ve found that when I’ve talked to others who have lost a loved one that there are a lot of similarities. It’s somewhat comforting to know that others have felt the way you’ve felt.

In Sally’s closing quote, she demonstrates her own unique transformation by noting that she is redefining her life without Peter.

Sometimes when I share my story it’s almost like I’m sharing someone else’s story ... trying to discover who I am without my husband ... almost looking at it as an opportunity to redefine myself ... and there are times when I’m trying to find too much meaning and all I need to do is just live.

The most touching part of Sally’s story came at the very end of our interview. She described how she needed people around her and their help. Friends and people she hardly knew extended true generosity and charity. After Peter’s death and news traveled that her family was experiencing financial problems, she began to receive cheques and money in the mail. Unconditional acceptance of these was very difficult for Sally because she knew she could never repay these people for their acts of kindness. She and Peter were members of a social class where they were usually in the role to extend such generosity. To be on the receiving end of this kind of charity was very humbling. My sense is that Sally is far too modest of a woman to admit that this part of her story was a tribute to her character and the kind of people both she and Peter had been.

FRANK AND HANNAH

Frank was an executive for a large multinational corporation, in his early 40’s with two young sons from a previous marriage. His ability to describe his short time together with Hannah would seem to be material for the great romantic writers. It is simply an understatement to say that Frank’s love for Hannah was extraordinary. When asked about how he and Hannah met he said:

... I look at it as a love story, a total love story where we were with the person we were meant to be with...I met my soul mate. We attended this training and I looked across the room and saw this beautiful woman and this smile. I was knocked on my rear from the moment I saw her.

At this time Frank knew very little about Hannah’s illness. During their first lunch together he asked if she would talk about her cancer:

The first lunch we had we sat down and I wanted to know about her cancer. Because that had to be a focus of her life, it had to be. So as soon as we sat down I said, “I’d like you to tell me about your cancer if you’re comfortable. I don’t know what type of cancer it is. Can you just talk about it?” I think it caught her off guard because most people don’t want to talk about those things. But I understood that was important to her. The cancer for me, for us, was something that could be out in the open.

Hannah also worked at the same multinational corporation and before meeting Frank had already survived one serious bout with breast cancer. Their relationship, although only three and half years in length, seemed as full and complete as marriages and commitments of 50 or more years. I saw their relationship as testimony to Dame Cecily Saunders famous quote, “Life is a matter of depth, not length.”
Selflessness

Through the eyes of Frank, one is able to see Hannah as a tremendously selfless human being. Frank repeatedly noted her acts of kindness and generosity toward others. Early in our interview Frank shared a story about Hannah that occurred three weeks before she died. She had lent a consoling hand to a couple during their first round of chemotherapy treatment. Hannah evidently could sense their fear and trepidation and took it upon herself to offer a word of comfort. Frank said recalling that moment:

...she gets up out of her chair and without even saying a word to me, walks across the room and sits down next to them. She talks for maybe five minutes to them. I have no idea what she said, I can only guess, but she walks back and there was this look of calm on their faces. It took five minutes for Hannah to do that....That’s what she did....In her struggling to stay alive, her concern was about the couple that comes in across the hall from her. We saw this couple the next week. It was like they were best friends. This woman came up to Hannah and it was like there was this bond that wouldn’t leave. And that’s just who she was....I tell this story because it conveys who she was....

He described another story about the events of September 11, 2001, and how Hannah responded on that dreadful day:

Hannah was still working at the time. She was in her office. She came out when she heard what was going on and there were a group of people watching TV, watching what was happening, and people were devastated. But before people really knew, really were able to grasp what was happening, in fact I think it was even before the second plane, she started crying and hugging people. She grasped the humanity of that moment and the sadness long before any one else did ... after she died I opened her journal and read the entry for September 11, 2002 ... in that entry she was very reflective of the year before and all those people who died a year earlier. She always ended her entries with, “here is what

I’ve been blessed with.” And one of the things she was thankful for was all the firefighters and policemen who do what they do. I know people say that, but in your journal which is all about what you are completely feeling, that’s what she writes. That shows the type of person she was.

After just a few months of courtship, Hannah was diagnosed with a reoccurrence of cancer. In another riveting account Frank described the day she was informed of the cancer.

Three days before Christmas she had gone to the doctor because she had had pain in her shoulder. She got a bone scan and she got the results and called me at work. I took the afternoon off and we both went to my apartment and just held onto each other all afternoon...and we cried and held each other...we didn’t say much at all. There was very little conversation. And then she said, “I can’t burden you with my cancer.”

Frank replied to her:

... You would burden me more without you in my life. If I could have you for three months, six months, a year, I would do it in a heart beat ... She chose to finish her life out with me whether it was 20 years or one ... and we lived with hope ....

Several months later, in a very private wedding ceremony on a beach, Frank and Hannah were married. A little more than a year later, she died in a hospital with Frank at her side. Frank admits that journaling has helped with his grief process, “... when Hannah died I turned to writing to get my thoughts out. When I would have memories of her, I’d write because I’m fearful of losing my memories ....”

Faith and Suffering

Frank and Hannah clearly were good, decent, kind human beings. They were both intelligent and very thoughtful about their spiritual beliefs and convictions in the context of Hannah’s dying. Frank described these along with the suffering that Hannah endured:

As children we were not led down a certain path. We were both open-minded to different types of concepts from a spiritual point and
had similar beliefs. I think she had faith that there had to be something beyond life. We both believed that. But you are never at a time when it’s more important than a time like that. And at a time like that, doubts creep in but she had faith, and we grew together .... There was a journal entry in late January and she was really sick...she was in despair ... and she did write, ‘I question my faith in God.’ But I think that was more a response ... to her suffering....She was more fearful of suffering than dying—always. What she didn’t know, what she didn’t realize, was how much she suffered before she died. She suffered. She really suffered.

Frank, like Sally, has questions about his loved one’s death that he knows will never be answered. He discussed how he continues to struggle with the meaning that her apparent senseless suffering could have:

Someday maybe I’ll get used to the fact that there’s a positive aspect to her death because she’s not suffering anymore. And I know that’s probably the selfless way to look at it, but right now it’s still a difficult one for me. I quit asking why because there’s no answer. I can’t feel good today that death was her way out of suffering .... Her death was a good thing because she’s not suffering anymore .... Well, her being healed would have been a better thing so that she wouldn’t have to suffer .... That’s what I hear from a lot of people, well it’s good because she’s not suffering anymore. She’s in a perfect place, but you know what—she could have been here for 40 more years and been healthy and then been in that perfect place. So, maybe the day will come when I can look at it with less resentment ....

As a researcher and as a listener in this study, I now have some idea as to the remarkable person Hannah must have been. My hope is that I have recounted the stories accurately for my readers. Having listened to Frank’s story, I wish I could have had the privilege of meeting Hannah. What I think Frank may not have grasped yet, is his own extraordinariness and humility. As I listened to him tell his story of Hannah, not only did I gain admiration, respect, and love for her, I also experienced a sense of the veracity and depth of Frank’s character. In his closing remarks, he mentioned that when you have a very close relationship with someone, you become like a mirror for each other. He said, “You literally develop a new self identity because that person you were with was a part of yourself. They were a mirror for you and who you were.”

Like Frankl: Remembering Blissful Moments

One part of Frank’s story reminded me of Frankl recalling the blissful memory of his own wife. Frank said, “Those moments of bliss, when I think of the first kiss she gave me, or the walk down the river with each other, it puts me back in that time. And I’ve never felt better than in that time.”

Power of Sharing

Like Sally, Frank recognized the importance of sharing his stories:

I would say, share away. I gain a sense of comfort by talking about it. And that the person I’m talking to, sees the amazing goodness of the person I was with ... talking to you about her is just a way for me to continue to express how I feel about her .... So when I tell stories of Hannah and how we met and about the progression of her cancer. Even talking about the things that are horrific in terms of the last day, the last week—for me it’s a way of dealing with those emotions.

Transformation

Near the end of our interview, Frank admitted that because of his life without Hannah, he is now experiencing a personal transformation. To preserve her memory he has started a foundation to benefit cancer patients. He frequently visits the cancer clinic where Hannah received treatments and gives beautiful bracelets to breast cancer patients in hopes of lifting their spirits. He admits:

My experience with Hannah both when she was alive and now after she’s died, I have the understanding of what these women are going through at least from a support person’s perspective .... I can talk to them in an open way, in an understanding way of what they are going through. I got that from my experience with Hannah. But I also have now,
which I didn’t have when Hannah was alive, a level of compassion that I never had before in my life...Everytime I walk out of the clinic, I feel 100 percent better because it’s an amazing thing to see goodness in people that I’ve never seen before. I see the goodness in people. 

Despite Frank’s obvious pain and sadness he admitted, “...there is good that can come from this.”

**WHY STORIES ARE TOLD**

So why do we tell stories? What do we learn from stories, and how do stories and their telling transform us? In the context of telling stories about a death, the participants in this study have artfully expressed some of their answers to these questions.

Sally and Frank have re-taught us that we tell stories and listen to them to know that we are not alone. Stories help us to rekindle the flame of our loved one’s life when we begin to feel it flicker from our memory. We tell stories to pass on values, traditions, and memories of events and people. We tell stories to share something of ourselves. We tell stories to preserve a sense of family, culture, and personal legacy. We tell stories for merriment and enjoyment. We tell stories to grieve. We tell stories to remember and to keep a sense of our history alive. We tell stories so we can heal and help others heal. Ultimately, we tell stories because we feel we have something of import and meaning to share. And perhaps we listen to stories for these same reasons.

**STORIES HELP US Grieve**

In a sense the re-telling of a death accommodates the grief process because it serves as a catharsis. As Sally and Frank illustrate, the teller relives the death and in some cases the life as she tells and re-tells the story over and over. Repetition can soothe and give solace to both the teller and the told. This may explain why traditional calling hours, wakes, funerals, memorials, delivering a eulogy, or sitting Shiva seem so important to grieving family and friends. It is a designated time created specifically for the purpose and benefit of grieved family and friends and their telling of the deceased loved one’s story.

At this appointed time telling the death story allows people to know that they are not alone, that other people have and will experience similar events. Although the death may have been tragic, as in both Sally’s and Frank’s cases, the teller may learn that one can endure this life event and future ones because one has dared to share a story with someone else who was willing to hear. While these rituals may provide comfort and solace for the storyteller who has experienced a death, such rituals may also imbue the listener.

For those who have never met the deceased, a re-telling of the death is certain to reveal meaningful aspects of their life thereby allowing the deceased to live on in the hearts and memories of those who have heard their story.

**CONCLUSION**

In this paper I have attempted to illustrate that the telling of a death story creates meaning and can lead to personal transformation. Through the use of Roemer’s (1995) work and the stories from my participants it is clear that death can sanction a story. Furthermore, the stories told by Sally and Frank affirm the thinking of Frankl: That even under miserable circumstances one can make considerable meaning.

The themes of meaning found in the stories of Sally and Frank, although different, appeared to expose similarities. Both discussed their reasons for falling in love with their spouses. Both discussed how their spouses suffered, Hannah in a more physical way and Peter in the form of an internal torment. Sally and Frank also described their own continuing personal growth and transformation: Sally in redefining herself without her husband and Frank through his ability to reach out to others and to recognize the “goodness” in new people who enter his life. And both admitted their need to share their story with others as they grieve.

For the last several minutes I have been a storyteller. Until a few moments ago you had no conception of Sally and Peter or Frank and Hannah. Yet, through the stories I have told, they now reside in your heart and memory. One of the most significant lessons this study confirmed is how necessary it is to tell our loved one’s story.
The greatest way to diminish another human being is not to inflict physical or emotional pain, or even death, but rather it is to silence their story.

I would like to conclude with a short story about a former faculty member I knew in graduate school. I have since lost contact with her, but she had a fond affection for narrative research and once shared a lovely metaphor that seems appropriate to mention in this context. She noted that physicists use an instrument called a cloud chamber to study sub-atomic particles. The amazing phenomenon is that this sophisticated instrument can never grasp the actual particle, but instead it catches the traces that are left behind.

That is what storytelling does. The life experiences and events, like the sub-atomic particles can never again be grasped, but the traces they leave behind become the nourishment for our stories.

Perhaps when the time comes for our light to be extinguished from this life and our breath leaves the shell of our body, we can rest knowing we have seeded the beginnings of meaningful traces. In the end we hope that it can be said we have lived and died well and with meaning so that those we leave behind will have a reason for sharing our stories, for every death is worthy of a thousand tellings.

References