

**ALL OUR GRIEFS**

**AN EXPLORATION OF HOW WE ADJUST TO  
AND ACCOMMODATE NON-DEATH LOSSES**

**AN ARTS BASED NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

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**To tell you will light up part of my life and leave the rest in darkness. You don't need to know everything. There is no everything. The stories themselves make the meaning. The continuous narrative of existence is a lie. There is no continuous narrative, there are lit up moments and the rest is dark.**

Jeanette Winterson, 2004, p.134.

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## ABSTRACT

When thinking about loss, we frequently consider it in terms of the losses that occur when others die. Yet, non-death losses feature throughout our lives. This arts-based research investigates how we adjust to, and accommodate loss experiences through imaginary dialogue with a dog, along with other creative approaches. As a guidance practitioner, I frequently meet people, whose lives have been altered through illness, disability or unemployment, requiring them to alter their assumptions about their self, others, and the world around them. While many of these losses are apparent, the significance of others are less easily recognised, and indeed, sometimes not acknowledged at all, both by individuals and wider society. There is pressure in a fast moving society to separate ourselves from our experiences and ‘just get on with things’ and those who fail to do so are often considered to be personally lacking. This research demonstrates that by providing safe ‘holding’ environments and opportunities to ‘re-story’ after loss experiences we can make sense of what has happened. However, the emotional impact of our experiences cannot be over-looked and managing internal conflict is essential for a healthier identity to take shape.

I explore the emotional impact of loss by providing my own auto-ethnographic account, as well as the narrative of another person, in order to demonstrate how we make meaning.

Different sorts of loss are looked at – non-finite loss, ambiguous loss and chronic sorrow – as well as disenfranchised grief and socio- cultural factors, to provide an understanding of how we respond to situations as we do. Narrative inquiry was selected as the most appropriate way to investigate experience with arts-based methods used to creatively explore the research question. I also provide a snap-shot account of my progress in writing this work to convey the

emotional evoked in transitions. As loss is such a prevalent feature of our lives, this research offer knowledge not only to the guidance community, but to everyone.

### Introduction

*Be not afeared: the isle is full of noises,  
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices;  
That, if I then had awaked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds me thought would open, and show riches,  
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I waked  
I cried to dream again.<sup>1</sup>*

*“I cried to dream again”.*

It's very evocative, isn't it?

Re-read it if you will.

Do you hear the longing, the yearning contained within?

Does it resonate with you?

It certainly does with me.

I think that, in some way, we can all connect to that sense of loss that is sometimes experienced when we transition from one state to another. When the imagined, yet unnamed, “riches” of life disappear, and a different, sometimes unwanted, reality takes its place.

This research focuses on a similar theme. It is concerned with the impact that non-death losses have on us, and how they help to shape our lives. Loss is a universal factor for all of us but its effect is frequently overlooked by us all, as well as the broader academic community.

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<sup>1</sup> Caliban's speech in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Act 3, Scene 2.

Harris says;

there is scant writing about how the non-death losses that we encounter on a regular basis shape who we are, how we relate to the world around us, and how we live in a world that requires us to adapt, and adjust, to change on a regular basis. (2011, p. xviii)

Loss is usually considered in terms of death events but as a guidance practitioner, working in the field of disability and disadvantage, I often encounter people who have had experiences which have left them feeling uncertain and vulnerable. They frequently find it difficult to describe, or sometimes, even acknowledge, the significance of what has happened. Perhaps, this has also happened to you too? The purpose of this research is to examine non-death losses, and consider how we adjust to, and accommodate them in our lives. I want to inform my own professional practice, and bring this knowledge to other guidance counsellors, as well as others.

However, this is no ordinary academic journey, but maybe you realised that yourself by now? While some parts of this thesis are quite traditional, others may challenge your ideas about what academic writing should be.

And, there is not really an easy way to tell you this, but some of this research involves interaction with a dog - my dog, who talks, often in Italian.

I know, I know, odd, isn't it?



But, does it perk you up, and pique your interest?

Or, make you groan, and sink your head into your hands?

You may love this alternative style of presentation, or you may hate it. You see, I cannot gauge your reaction.

All I can ask is that you fully enter into the experience and keep an open mind for now.

Firstly, let me explain myself and tell you why I am taking this original approach. I am interested in exploring elements of lived experience in ways that conventional methods cannot reach. Leavy states that “art can be highly effective for communicating the emotional aspects of social life” (2015, p.23) as “new meanings, previously unaware, unvoiced, unexpressed, half-understood” (Leitch, 2006, p.566) can be presented.

Besides my talking dog, I use images, drawings, dialogue, stories, and poems to grab your attention and to tell stories in a different way. Nature and is important to me and is a frequent source of creativity. Metaphorical animals are mentioned to further elaborate points and engage your attention, as all inquiry “requires creative, imaginative and innovative ways of thinking and doing” (Speedy and Wyatt, 2014, p.204). And there’s colour, lots of colour, because life is colourful, isn’t it? Be open to the experience. Some of these stories will fascinate you, some may perplex you, and hopefully, others will make you smile. My objective is to hold your interest, and keep on holding it. This journey will be interesting, I promise you.

Narratives enable us to understand experience because, as Dewey (1938) and Palmer (1998) attest, we are our experiences. They help us to make sense of things. Narrative inquiry was selected as a methodology because it is “inquiry with people, rather than research on people” (Hunt 1992, p.113). Connelly and Clandinin consider that “Narrative and life go together so that the principle attraction of narrative as a method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways”. (1990, p.10)

Narrative writing is used to analyse fleeting moments of lived experience that might otherwise go unrecorded (Attard, 2012). I use reflexivity as a process of self-examination (DePoy and Gitlin, 1998) to help me “in understanding myself; my own actions; my thoughts; my emotions; my experiences” (Attard, p.163). I “write before knowing what to say and how to say it, and in order to find out, if possible” (Lyotard, 1992, p.119).

Narrative writing allows me to explore personal experience and, in doing so, enriches and enlightens further personal experience (Noddings, 1994, p.438). With an open, questioning mind, I venture across fresh terrain to make new discoveries and meaning of events. Taking the “curious, unknowing and tentative ‘position’ of the discovery-orientated researcher” (Speedy, 2008, p.60). I playfully enter liminal spaces of ambiguity and uncertainty, being betwixt and between (Chreim, 2002), to achieve new ways of thinking.

My own auto-ethnography, a deeply personal account of loss, is excavated to examine life as lived by me. It is presented as a game of snakes and ladders to depict the randomness of life, and to show how we can also become a gain, or a loss, for other players on the board.

You will meet Mary, a character who will allow us to explore what we mean by loss and examine the complexities of her situation. I look at how our beliefs about our self, the world and our relation to it come about, by considering Janoff-Bulman's (2004;1992) work on the assumptive world. I also look at what happens in loss events and how our beliefs are rebuilt. Non-finite loss (Bruce and Schultz, 2001; 2002) and ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999) are explored to illuminate different types of loss, as well looking at chronic sorrow (Olshansky, 1962). An exploration of these definitions provides an appreciation of how we recognise, or not, the significance and or degree of a loss when they occur. I am particularly interested in disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989) and how socially mediated factors regulate responses to loss.

You will also be introduced to Anna who will talk about how she has made sense of her own losses. You see, ethically I could not ask others to participate without first examining my own experience. As Hunt states;

If applied research is to be authentic and relevant, researchers must first accept their own personhood, their co-participation in the human venture that they seek to understand. (1992, p.116)

Her tale, in creative parity with my own, is narrated through a series of speech bubbles. We hope that you enjoy both of our unique stories. However, this is not to suggest that either promotes a single interpretive truth (Lincoln and Denzin, 1994), as narratives constantly evolve over time, and are fixed with other stories (Widdershoven, 1993).

In dialogic text with my dog, I further examine the reasons for selecting the research topic, discuss why particular approaches were selected, and examine the findings from the research.

This 'imaginal' dialogue (Hermans et al, 1993), along with a series of 'progress reports', also explores my personal journey of engaging in the research process with its attending frustrations and satisfactions. This parallels the paradoxical emotions that are frequently contained in loss experiences.

So come, come with me, into my world of stories, for that is what mean making is.

And while you are reading, think about your own life.

See if you can look at loss in a new way.

Come, come....

Let's journey together.

## **Progress Report 1: Carving the elephant**

I sit down to write the thesis.

I look at the blank sheet of paper. Only twenty thousand words to do. This won't be too bad.

It can't be that hard. If others can do it, so can I.

Where shall I begin?

*I sit and stare at the blank sheet of paper.*

Fears overwhelm me.

Inspiration underwhelms me.

*I sit and stare at the blank sheet of paper.*

From the depths of a long ago childhood, a memory begins to stir and take form.....

When I was young, there was a brief, yet very intense, spell of collecting and telling elephant jokes. Usually they were riddles about lumbering pachyderms set in ridiculous situations. You know, the sort of line that goes something like, *“How many elephants does it take to change a light bulb?”* Or, *“How many elephants can you fit in the boot of a Mini?”* I honestly can't remember the punch lines, but I do recall how taken I was with this sort of absurd humour. I even managed to obtain a small slim paperback of elephant jokes. And I knew that this book would endow me with instant kudos amongst my peers. Titled “Jokes! Jokes! Jokes!” and emblazoned with cavorting pink cartoon characters, it was my passport to becoming the Gag Cracking Queen of the Playground! Oh, yes!

As I flipped through the black and white pages, earnestly trying to memorise the lines, one joke made me stop dead in my tracks. Even now, decades later, I can re-connect with that thunder-struck moment. It wasn't the question that provoked such a strong reaction. After all, it was quite a straight-forward one;

*“How do you carve an elephant out of a block of wood?”*

It was the staggering simplicity of the response that proved to be so earth-shattering.

*“You cut away all of the bits that don't look like an elephant”*

WOW!

Not only was this the funniest joke in the whole wide world, but it also offered practical

advice on how I could create my own elephant. Double WOW!

All I have to do is get rid of the un-elephant bits. It's so obvious and yet, so easy....and if it could be done for an elephant... it could be done for anything! ..... Just follow this advice and I'll get what I want. All I have to do is remove the unnecessary pieces. WOW! WOW!  
WOW! This wasn't just a 2/6d joke book, it was the key to unlocking the universe – just whittle away the bits that I don't need in life.... knowledge is power.... Let's get to work...  
Hmm.... but ...Hmm...Where to start? .... Err....how do I decide what to take away and what to keep.....Umm.....which bits are vital and which are not? .... What do I want to end up with?  
..... panic, panic.... How do I decide? ..... Ah, what if I make a mistake?.....Err.....  
Err.....err.....(*sigh*)

.....If I can't carve an elephant, how can I carve *anything*?

How do I carve a thesis?

Where do I start?

*I sit and stare at the blank sheet of paper.*

I think about my own losses.

## Chapter One

### Snakes and Ladders: Auto-ethnography of loss

- ❖ Open the box.
- ❖ Unfold the board.
- ❖ The counters are there  
(and your colour has already been chosen for you).

It's a game. The Game of Life. Play the game. You Are The Game.

Roll the dice.....

We don't want to. *No, we don't.* It's not time, you see. *We're not ready.*  
I think that we have to. *No, no....* Don't worry, I'll go first.

I throw a ••

My dizogtic partner rolls a •

*Small, blond and premature, we are born.*

*My counter moves.*

*On my square there's a short wooden ladder. As*

*I gingerly ascend the rungs, like Lot's wife, I*

*look back.*

*You say Yes and I say No.*

*You say Stop and I say Go, Go, Go. (Oh, No).*

*You say Goodbye and I say Hello.*

*Hello, Hello.*

*I don't know why you say Goodbye, I say Hello.*



I live. Andrew dies.

Of course, I remember nothing of this.

Surprisingly, I grew into being a quite a tall kid. Height, the universal child indicator of strength and power, just made me feel awkward and different. *I wish I was shorter.*

By the age of thirteen, much to my surprise, everyone else spurted up past me. *I wish I was taller.*

However, when I was seven, height had its advantages. It meant that I was tall enough to place my elbows onto the window sill in my parents' bedroom, and heave myself up so I could peer out down the street. I was waiting, you see. For them. My real people. The fairy folk who were coming to take me away from this house and return me to my rightful kingdom. As a fairy Princess, I knew this. It turned out to be a fairly time consuming task, but I had faith. All I had to do was watch out for them and they will come. This is the story I told.

I throw a :

This sort of behaviour didn't go down too well. Maybe it was because she was at the end of her tether dealing with this odd, alien child. Or maybe it was because she had her own unheard story waiting to be let out, but my mother finally snapped. Moving to the ugly, dark chestnut dressing table, she rummaged around, before producing “some important papers”. Spreading them out, I was abruptly informed that, actually, I wasn't of the Fae, and here's the evidence to prove it – two long form birth certificates; one recording the mortal arrival of me, the other my twin brother.

What? Who's he? Who's me?

What you think is, isn't. What you think isn't, is.

Confusion, confusion, confusion.

*The snake hisses and sways on the square.*

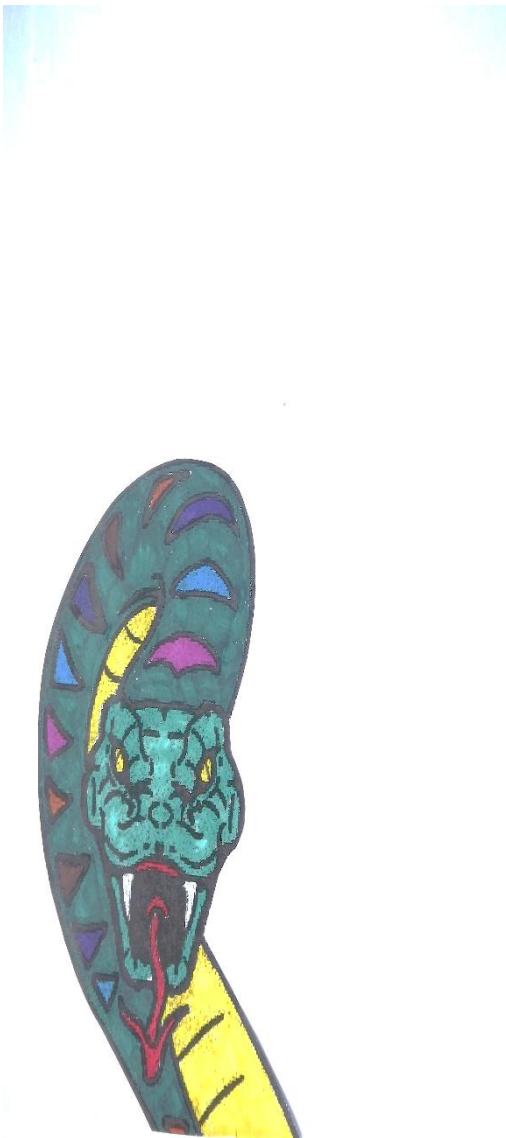
*Physically it is short, but emotionally it is a*

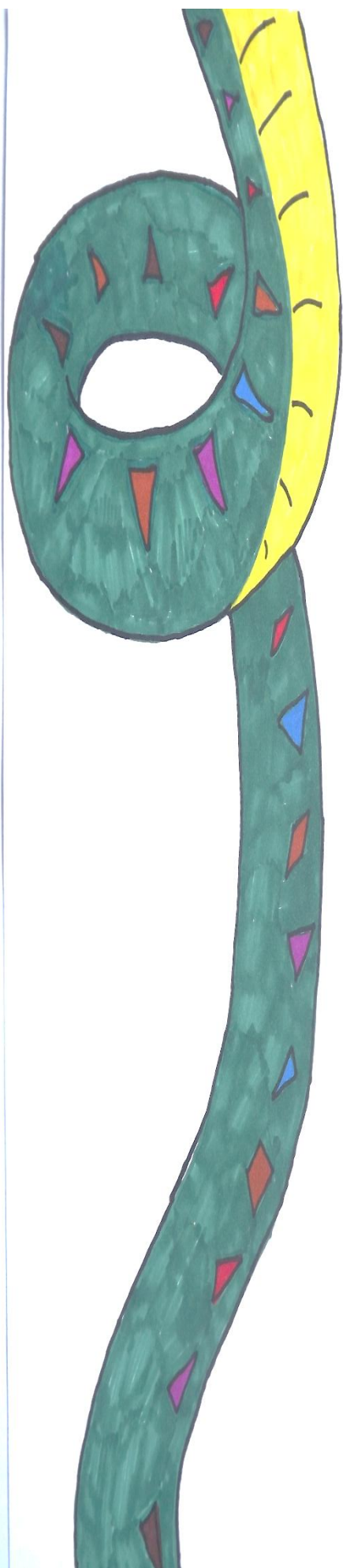
*basilisk.*

*Trance-like, I grasp its thick scaly neck*

*and clamber onto its writhing back.*

*And I....*





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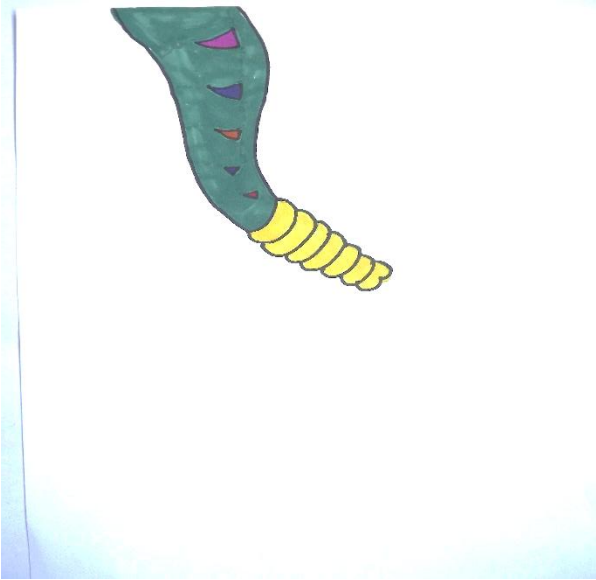
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**to the bottom.**

Out goes the idea of me being me.

I'm half a set, a broken set.

A set they wanted and didn't get.

They must be disappointed.

I must be a disappointment.

Maybe it was my fault? I've let them down.

My people aren't coming.

I look around...Is this it?

In come feelings of doubt, and sadness, and guilt.

Bye, bye love,  
Bye, bye sweet caress.  
Hello emptiness  
I feel like I could di-ie.  
Goodbye, my love, Goodbye.

It was rather a lot for a little girl to take on board.

My parents had lost a son but for me it was not a death loss, it was something else.

Who am I? A single? A twin? Or a twin-less twin? Woodward (1998) suggests that surviving twins, who likewise suddenly find out they are part of a multiple birth, “are faced with a very deep sense of loss .... and (are) compelled to rethink their sense of self” (p.18).

What is true? What is not? Who can I trust?

Question: Does this sound a tad too dramatic? Unbelievable, perhaps? Just pull yourself together and get over it? Worse things happen at sea.

Answer: But this shattered my developing notions of identity and trust in the world. The World is unpredictable, unsafe and beyond my personal control (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Not only did these questions matter at that moment, they continued to resonate from that point on, and well into the future.

I was left unsure who I was and how to relate to what was gone. There was no-one to offer me any answers. As it was my own parents’ grief was disenfranchised (Doka, 1989) but, as far as they were concerned, I had lost nothing. And this was the story that I told myself – I had lost nothing, so what’s wrong with you? In turn, my grief became disenfranchised both by myself, and others (Doka, 1989).

Except emotions do not just extinguish after traumatic events pass, they carry on. Over the years Andrew continued to be physically absent, but psychologically present, and their grief

paralleled Boss's (1999) concepts of ambiguous loss. But of course we could not talk about it.

The topic was too emotional, you see, and I would get upset, not just then, but for years after. From the outset, and with no other available explanation, I presumed that Andrew's death was my fault. I was guilty. This was a child's tale but it became an adult's.....and continued.

But where snakes reside, so too do ladders.

Quick, quick, search.....and pick up the dice.

I throw a ●●●●

It is school.

At first I hate it, but then I love it.

It's a curious mix of new learning-through-play and traditional teaching.

### Roll Call

- ✓ The Wendy House
- ✓ The sand pit
- ✓ Poetry Competitions
- ✓ Drawing
- ✓ Nature
- ✓ Painting

And singing, lots of singing

*All things bright and beaut-ti-ful  
All crea-tures great and small  
All things wise and won-der-ful  
The Lord God ma-de them ALL*

I like school. I'm good at it.  
It provides a safe space for me to quietly excel.

In come feelings of value, satisfaction, achievement,

Do you want to put on a play? Fine, off you go. All we have to do is come up with an idea/  
write a script/ cast the characters/ learn the lines/ rehearse it/ make the set/ and don't forget  
the costumes ..... and then do it.

This sort of thing went on all the time. We were expected to be imaginative and  
creative, "to relax expectation, and to experiment, to let flow – a willingness to put on masks  
and play" (Hughes, 1982, p.7). It was fun.

But there were the more formal aspects to school life as well.

Good morning exam.

Good morning Joy. How are you today?

Splendid. Now, let's get this thing done.

I do that thing with determination and diligence.



I know that I only have only one throw of the dice, one opportunity to progress.

I am given this chance because my mother permits it.

Most parents do not.

*I climb the ladder*

*Up, up.*

*Turning, I wave to my people far below.*

*They don't signal back.*

*They don't understand.*

*I keep on climbing.*

*I cling on tight to the ladder.*

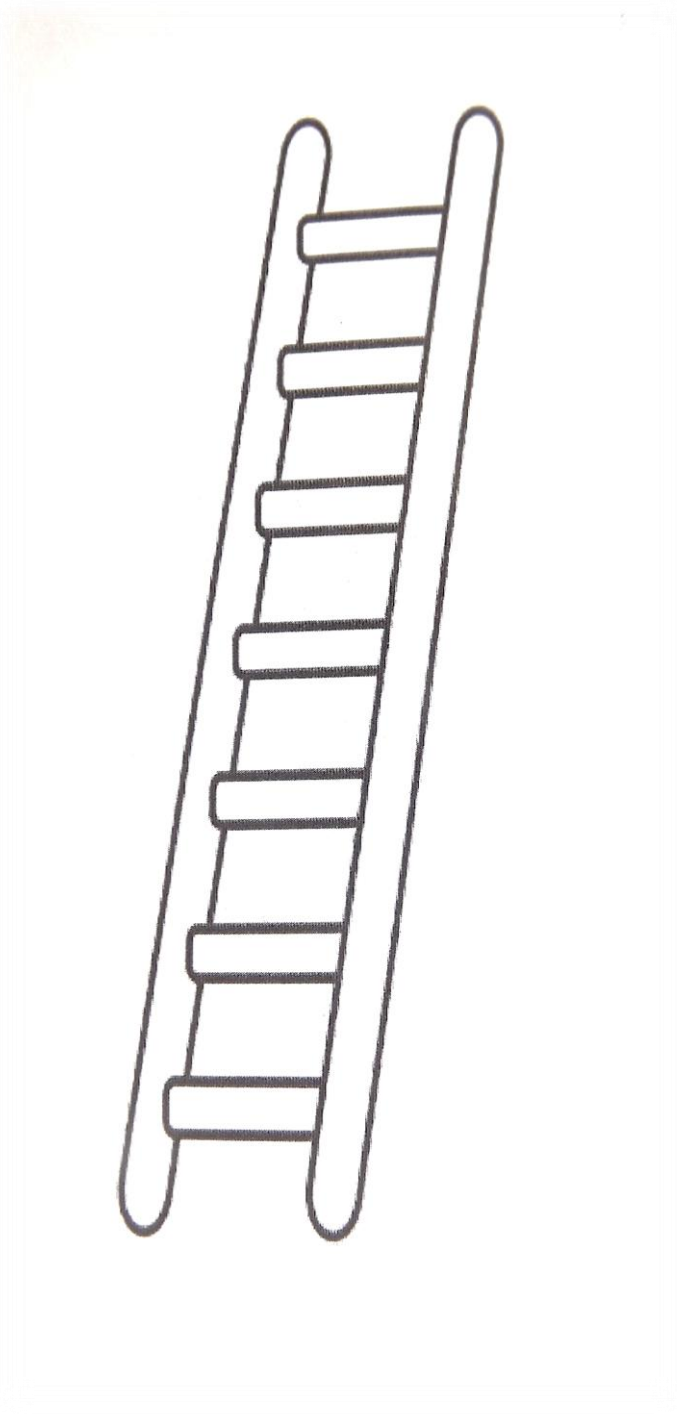
Education becomes my passport to elsewhere.

I travel away.

I throw the dice many times over and find other ladders.

I worked in training centres for people with disabilities.

I like my job and the people whom I work.



Decades ago I meet  
my partner – a long  
solid ladder.

Throughout the journey I took Andrew with me, but told no-one.

So, what changed, I hear you ask?

The author, Karen Blixen says that “All sorrows can be born if you put them into a story, or tell a story about them” (cited in Arendt, 1999, p.175).

But what happens when we cannot find the words to tell of our sorrow?

Then the story starts to tell us.

I behaved in ways that I did not understand. Andrew became an emotional bruise, one that was so tender that my tentative attempts to connect to the thought of what had happened, made me instantly well up. Not acknowledging the losses meant that my grieving disenfranchised self, turned in and repeatedly attacked itself, preventing me moving through the process that assists integration (Kauffman, 2002a).

It was my burden. *I became my own snake.*

And how do I slay an old snake?

I listen to the voices within me.

The one that said that **I do not want to feel like this, I want to change.**

While others cried, **No, No, it's too scary!**

**Stay as you are!**      **It's all your fault anyway!**

Internal Family Systems therapy offers an understanding of how these inner voices come about. Schwartz (1995) suggests that we are comprised of relatively discrete sub personalities, with their own qualities, feelings, goals and viewpoints. Each of these sub personalities, or 'parts', is designed to, and wants to, play a valuable role in the psyche but their ability to do so is determined by experience. Some parts are rewarded by family and culture and so, continual positive reinforcement strengthens their dominance. However, external circumstances, such as trauma, can push other parts out of their roles so that they behave in unhealthy ways. This offers some understanding of how we can have conflicting emotions about situations as parts fight to be heard. According to Schwartz, as all parts of the system, including the maladaptive ones, are valuable and the self can act as an agent of healing by its "emergent compassion, lucidity, and wisdom to get to know and care for these inner personalities" (p.36).

Yalom (2002) suggests interviewing these critical voices.

Imagine the scene.

Well, guilt and shame, you've been hanging around now for a very long time and I thought that it might be time we got to know each other a bit better.

*Ooh, I'm not sure about that.*

You've never asked us before. Why now?

Well, I'm doing research about loss experiences and I was wondering why you feel that you need to stick around?

*To protect you, of course.*

Yes, that's our job. We're your defence.

And what would happen if you didn't do your job?

*Well, you'd grieve your loss and experience the chaos of other family relationships.*

It's too scary, you see.

Maybe it's time that I did that? Maybe it's time to grieve?

*But what about us?*

Where would we go?

Well, you'd stay, of course. You are part of me but not all of me.

I want to treat you with compassion

I want to enfranchise you

*We agree* Yes, we do

A healthier, more integrated identity takes shape with an increased congruence and authenticity.

### **Winter bog walk: Walking with Lola**

It is part of my daily routine to walk the dog each morning and, once we get into our stride, we both enjoy the exercise, and each other's company. Lola, an Italian Spinone, like most other gun-dogs, is friendly and loyal, with sharp intelligence and an honest, open zest for life. Naturally, as a pedigree animal she speaks Italian, the language of her birth, but mostly we converse in English.

Our usual route is up to the stretch of blanket bog that lies behind the house. A barren-brown place in winter, our solitary trudge goes undisturbed, except for the occasional trumpet- oink of whooper swans as they gracefully sweep across the grey skyline.

Lola speedily explores her territory before returning to trot beside me, as we settle into companionable conversation.

*(Pants, tail wagging) So, how's it going?*

The research? Well....I've got some books so I guess it's underway....

*Si.... and the purpose of you doing this is to deepen your own understanding of loss?*

Yes, that's right. I've been thinking about how, as we move through life, there are innumerable losses that shape who we become. Do you remember the research I did for the post-graduate diploma in adult guidance and counselling about sibling loss?

(Manning, 2014)

*Si, how could I forget! But if you did it before why do it again?*

Well, it isn't really the same. Previously I looked at sibling loss and how it affected family members. Now I want to consider how we adjust to, and accommodate non-death losses as we move through life. Besides, when I previously talked about my own losses, I told a situated story from a particular position, for a particular purpose, and at a certain time, to a particular audience (Ellis, 2009). I want to take the opportunity, as Ellis suggests, to re-examine events "to expand and deepen our understandings of the lives we have led, the culture in which we have lived, and the work that we have done." (p.13)

*And how are you going to do that?*

Well, I began with my own auto-ethnography to examine the link between the personal to larger social and cultural factors. Look here, (pulls out text book from jacket pocket) again Ellis says;

autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world; it has become a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally, reflexively. It asks that we not only examine our lives but also consider how and why we think, act and feel the way that we do. Autoethnography requires that we observe ourself observing, that we interrogate what we think and believe, and we challenge our own assumptions, asking over and over if we have penetrated as many layers of our own defences, fears, and insecurities as our project requires. It asks that we rethink and revise our lives, making conscious decisions about who and how we want to be. And in the process it seeks a story that is hopeful, where authors ultimately



write themselves as survivors of the story they are living. (Jones et al, 2013, p.10)

We do this by reconsidering events that have happened and being open to reinterpreting memories and other people's way of being – in essence, we deconstruct and reconstruct our own identity. As Spry states, “autoethnography has been a vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have structured [my] identity personally and professionally” (2001, p.708).

*Well, that sounds.....exposing?*

Believe me it is! The author, Jeanette Winterson says; “The curious are always in some danger. If you are curious you might never come home” (1985, p.92). It’s balancing the part of me that wants to protect my privacy, with the other part wants to examine my vulnerabilities - the ones that I also keep protected from myself and others.

*Arresto, you can't do both.*

I know, I know. I think that that horse has already bolted, but this chat gives me the chance to consider the effect of being so... so revealing. Walmsley talks about auto-ethnography as being like “the artist’s self-portrait,” as it encourages researchers “to locate values in life experiences and to define particular episodes, experiences or moments as key to self- understanding” (2006, p115). It is seen as having therapeutic value (Malhotra, 2013) as it interacts with, and integrates, the me of the past, with the me of now. Thus, it can be transformative – that's the “never come home” bit, I guess. My story can resonate with others who have had similar experiences, and inform others who haven't. It offers possibilities for making meaning and seeing the world in different

ways.

*And when you say 'making meaning' what do you mean?*

Well, err ..... making sense?

*Because I think that you're agreeing with Gilbert (2002), that meaning is essential for adjustment to loss. You think that people are motivated to seek for meaning and that if they find it, they can somehow recognise the benefits and move on with their lives. Si?*

Err..... (slowly)... yeah .... (thinks)...I do, but I also feel that there is an insistence that non-death loss experiences are not important, and people should just be able to get on with things, and those that don't are somehow personally lacking. It's this idea, prevalent in positive psychology, that it is problematic ways of thinking that create difficulties, not people's circumstances. Seligman (1999) outlines this view;

In general, when things go wrong, we now have a culture which supports the belief that this was done to you by some larger force, as opposed to, you brought it on yourself by your character or decisions. The problem about that is that it is a recipe for passivity. What you do matters a great deal ..... a lot of your troubles were brought on by yourself. You are responsible for them. (cited in Whippman, 2016, p. 147)

And it's not just people (waves arm vaguely) 'out there' that think that. I often meet individuals in guidance who want to separate themselves from their experiences and so internalise this belief, as they seek to "put the past behind me", or "start anew".

You see, I think that when we try to pass over what has happened to us....

*“Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold”, as Yeats (1920) warned.*

Exactly Loll. Similarly, Craib talks people having the idea that their self is constituted from separate parts that can be manipulated and therefore, controlled. We “develop an illusion of our power over ourselves” (1994, p.82) by thinking that we can separate ourselves from our experiences by selecting which emotions we wish to have, and remove the ones that we don’t want – frequently the negative ones. But, he goes on to suggest, that this is just not possible, as experiences are a mix of good and bad, and although the meaning of them can be modified, they remain part of our experience.

*Mmmm, capisco. Tell me more.*

Well, Craib considers that we constantly experience a flux of emotions, thinking one thing one moment and entirely the opposite the next. The challenge is to tolerate these incessant internal conflicts and recognise that some of our choices, and some of our feelings, are more valued than others.

[It] involves a constant doubt about the world and ourselves, and in its ideal form is combined with our ability to decide and act, and the ability to experience strong feelings without being driven by them; we must question and at the same time lay wagers on the certainty of our knowledge. (p.172)

You see, these two approaches offer quite contradictory positions and, as a guidance practitioner, I need to consider where I stand in relation to them.

*Interessante! And you want to do all this... how do you say....'creatively'?*

Yes, I do. I'll illustrate the research partly because it makes it more evocative, but also because it can jar people into seeing things in alternative ways. I also like the idea that this sort of work runs counter to more conventional forms of research – it ignites the rebel in me! Plus, I don't think that it will be as linear, or sequential, and as distanced from participants, as traditional academic work frequently is (Coles and Knowles, 2008). "Authentic findings will only emerge from authentic relationships," as Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman-Davis (1997, p.138) suggest.

*.....Er, mi 'scusi, are you good at art?*

No, not really.

*(rolls eyes) Mamma Mia!*

(laughs) No, don't fret, I don't think that it's about being good, it's more about being engaged. I enjoy being creative as allows me to enter 'a potential space' for play (Winnicott, 1971, p.107) and connect with my inner child (Reid, 2016). Walking with you allows me to play with ideas. I can tickle them; wrestle them; turn them upside down; throw them up in the air; inside out; connect with other notions; expand them or drop-kick them. It's being open to listening to the many different voices in my head that's important.

*Va bene. And how will you know if this research will be any good?*

Sheesh, you're a tough audience, doggie! Well, at this stage I don't know if it will, or it won't be, but remember it is a process, as much as a product. Richardson says that "Unlike quantitative work, which can be interpreted through its tables and summaries, qualitative work carries its meaning in its entire text." (2000, p.924).

*And which methodology are you going to use?*

Well, umm.....err ..... I'm not quite sure of that one yet.

*(mimics Marlon Brando in The Godfather) Let me give you some good advice. Go back to the library and read some more books.*

(grins) Yeah, ok, maybe later. At the moment I'm writing in my journal about the things that happen, so I'm able to construct new meanings, interpretations, new knowledge and understandings. According to Ghaye and Ghaye writing offers "the space and time to look back, relive and experience, and ultimately reflect upon our daily lives". (1998, p.161)

Being reflexive helps me to identify and acknowledge the way in which I influence the research and, thus, what is accepted as knowledge.

Reflexivity implies the ability to reflect inward towards oneself as an inquirer; outward to the cultural, historical, linguistic, political and other forces that shape everything about enquiry; and, in between researcher and participant to the

social interaction they share (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2002, p.222).

*Err... sono confuso (shakes head) ..... in what way is this different to what Craib is talking about?*

Well, my Italian friend, Craib's argument lies in recognising and managing internal conflict, and the complexity of our responses. We need to allow space for them to exist – we're essentially managing what is already there. Reflexivity allows me to construct myself from a range of different perspectives, by "doubling the self," as Hunt and Sampson (2006, p.4) term it. That is, I can see myself as being both simultaneously "observer and observed" (Bollas, 1987 p.236) switching playfully from one state to another – as is happening now – and experiencing myself as other, while still maintaining a grounding in my familiar sense of self (Bolton, 2010, cited in Langelle and Meijers, 2014 p. 56). This allows for ideas and ways of thinking can come about - "the arrival of news from the self" as Bollas terms it (1987, p.236). In doing so, practitioners can recognise their "multiple selves" (Damianakis, 2001, p.29) and complexity of identity in the modern world.

*Come?*

Bourdieu (1977) says that reflexivity is an important aspect of social research as social reality can be unmasked revealing the assumptions that lie within. Talking with you is also part of this process. I'm working out my assumptions, mulling over theories and exposing my knowledge, and understanding. Schön (1983) considers internal dialogue necessary for reflection, while Ghaye and Ghaye assert that self-talk is "the centre-piece

of the whole reflective process” (1983, p.9).

*So, I'm me, and I'm you, and I'm your partner in this process - “the other”, as Bolton suggests (2010, p.4) suggests?*

Yes.

*Cool.*

And there's someone else involved.

*Chi?*

The unseen audience of this research. The reader is also “in the midst” of their own narrative. Our stories impact on them and help shed light on their new experiences.

*Contento!*

*Contento!*

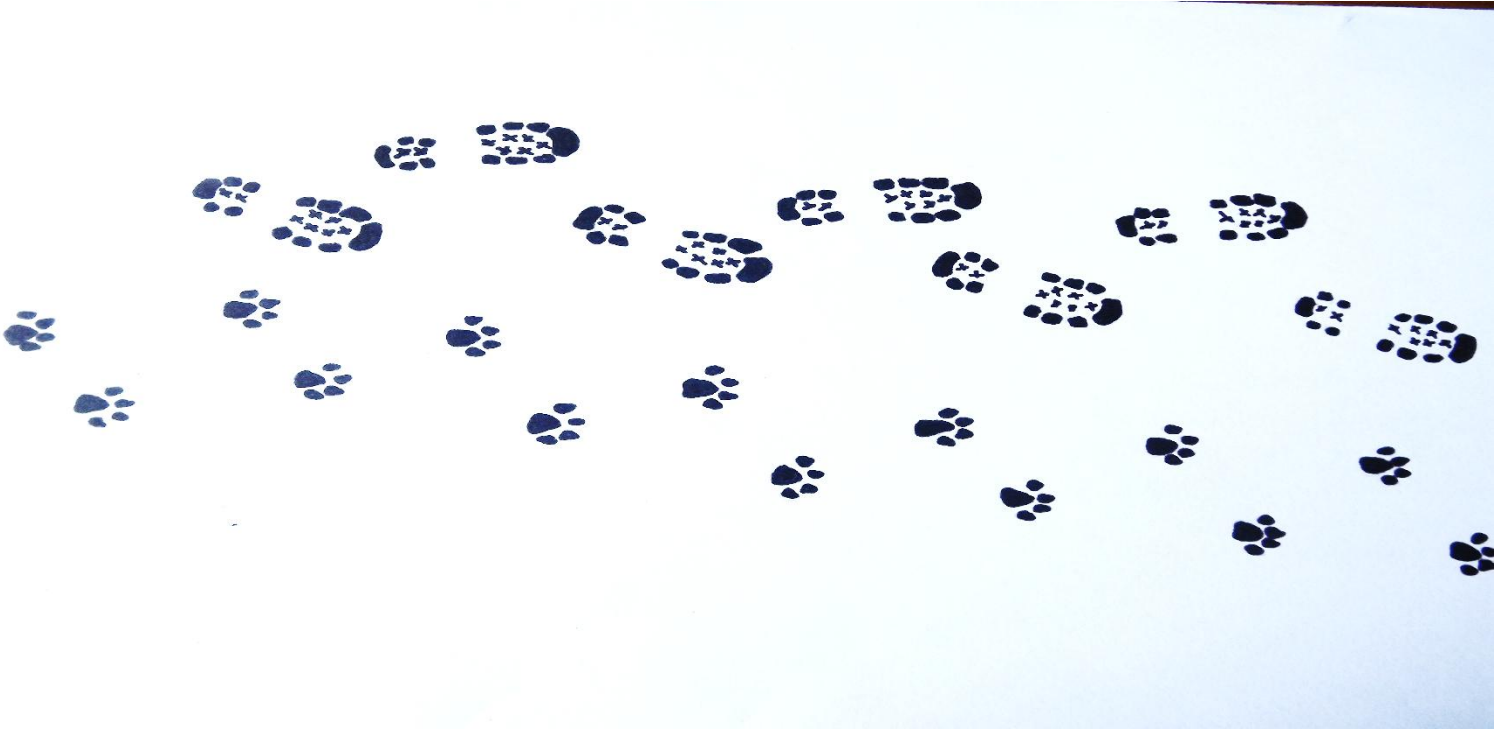
*Contento!...*

*(spins around enthusiastically, wag, wag, wag)*

*.....Friends not yet met .....*

*..... We'd better get started .....*

.....I think that we already have.





## Progress Report 2: Reflection on group supervision.

I'm reading. I'm reading a lot. There are books scattered everywhere.

Books fall open  
you fall in  
delighted where  
you've never been;  
hear voices not once  
heard before,  
reach world on world  
through door on door;  
find unexpected  
keys to things  
locked up beyond  
imaginings.

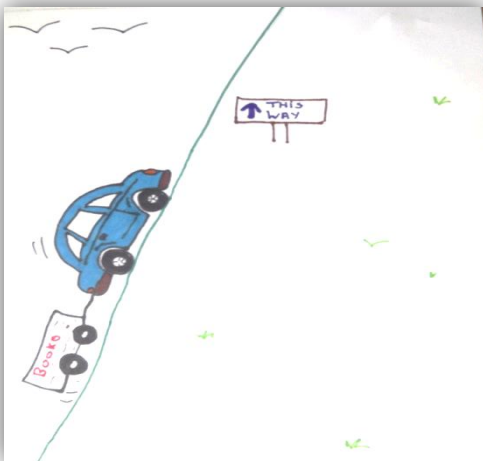
(McCord, 1985)

We had group supervision today. I took along my drawing to show my journey. I'm driving.

It's an image that often comes to mind when I think about the thesis – I travel from country to town, ordinary life to academia, routine to challenge.

In my imagination the car is piled high with books - so many in fact that I've had to hitch up the trailer up and fill that up as well.

I've set off. It's an expedition of discovery.



*Why is the mountain so steep, they ask?*

Because it has to be, I reply.

That's the way I learn.

It's all or nothing in my head.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Understanding the dynamics of non-death loss**

Now we are going to meet Mary.

Let's zoom in on her life .....

*Looking down at her mug, Mary slowly picked up the teaspoon and listlessly stirred her tea. It was good to be away from the noise of the factory, she thought as she took her first welcome sip. Yes, the money was handy even if the hours were a bit erratic – a few here and a few there – but, still, that's the same for everyone, I suppose. Economic recovery, my arse, she snorted. You want to come down the country more often Taoiseach and see how tight things really are .... but, I suppose that I'm lucky to get any bit of work at my age.*

*Flexing her shoulders in an effort to relieve her aching back, Mary told herself to look on the bright side. At least it gives me time to drop in on Bob's dad now, she thought as she drank more of the hot beverage. It was funny at first how her father-in-law had kept misplacing things – his glasses.... his wallet... and, God forbid, his teeth, but Mary increasingly wasn't so amused. He's getting more and more befuddled, she thought. I really must try again to get him to go to a doctor. It's not as if either of us have any brothers or sisters to give us a dig out. Only children need broad shoulders, as Mammy used to say. God be good to her.*

*Not that Bob is around that much to help out either. What with working away so much and then spending every hour at the weekend on the computer. Who'd have thought that Donedeal could be so damn interesting! And the young fella isn't much different, for that matter. He's either permanently attached to that X-box or engrossed in his bloody phone. Still, he'll be off*

*to university soon, for whatever it is he wants to do.*

*Cupping the mug, Mary looked out the cafe window and caught sight of the red tiled roof of the local college. That's where I'd have gone if I'd been allowed to stay on at school, she mused. Yeah, the nuns were all for it but, (shrug) it wasn't to be. Imagine if I'd become a teacher instead of ending up as an office girl! Now, that would have been a good job, she sighed. You don't hear of schools closing down and everyone being given the heave-ho, just like that, thank you very much.*

*Still, we have a lovely home, she reassured herself as she drank on. We've worked hard for what we have, we're happy. And the sitting room looks a treat now that it's got a fresh coat of paint – and the new lamps are to die for! I know what I'll do, mused Mary ..... I'll sit in there this evening and watch TV. Ah, bless the days when we all used to do that together, she sighed.*

*At least we're all in good health and that's the main thing. We've a roof over our heads, unlike some of those poor people on "The Joe Duffy Show" last week. Now wouldn't that be terrible? No, we're the lucky ones, Mary declared as she drained the warm mug. Yes, the lucky ones.....we're better off than a lot of people.....and we should be happy with what we have, so we should .....*

*As Mary settled the empty cup back onto the worn formica table top, a single tear slowly rolled down her cheek.*

-----

So, what is the problem? Indeed, you could be asking if Mary has one at all. She has a job and so has her partner. Their son seems to be doing well at school, with third level in his sights, and she can help out with Bob's dad. By Mary's own admission they have a lovely home. There are no huge problems. No-one has died. You may even be thinking, "What has she got to complain about?"

Yet, for Mary, there is sadness, an on-going awareness that "something" is wrong, but what is it?

Sure, there are lots of changes happening, but is that not so for every one of us? Everyday life involves natural transitions, with endings and new beginnings. Changing jobs, getting older, dealing with elderly relatives, relationship going stale, letting go of childhood ambitions are all part of life and we have to just get on with things, don't we?

## **Loss**

Certainly, change, whether it is wanted or not, is inevitable as we move through the years. As we gain, we inevitably relinquish what we once had and, in this way, loss can be considered as an encompassing theme permeating all facets of our lives. Humphrey and Zimpher (1996) define loss as "the state of being deprived of, or being without something one has had, or a detriment or disadvantage from failure to keep, have or get" (p.3). Thompson (1998) considers loss to be "an unavoidable fixture" (p.21) in life. To put it simply, we all encounter losses on a regular basis just by the simple act of living.

Yet, what are these universal losses? Our early losses include loss of physical contact with

carers; loss of childhood innocence; loss of youthfulness; loss of friends and relationships; loss of school, college and the family home; loss of jobs and colleagues; loss of opportunities; loss of health; loss of independence. Mitchell and Anderson (1983) consider that losses can be separated into six major types – the loss of a familiar surroundings or a physical object (material loss); loss of others (relationship loss); loss of self (intra-psychic loss) and loss forced upon us (systemic loss); loss of health (functional loss); loss of social place (role loss). Perhaps you can recognise some of your own losses in this inexhaustible list? We live in a world that continually requires us to adapt to changing circumstances and, as Viorst suggests, loss is therefore, “universal, unavoidable, inexorable”. (1986, p.16).

Throughout our life we grow by giving up. We give up some of our deepest attachments to others. We give up certain cherished parts of ourselves. We must confront, in the dreams we dream, as well as well as in our intimate relationships, all that we will never have and never will be. (Viorst, p.16)

It is these intangible losses that affect Mary mourns as she thinks about what life ‘should be’ but how did these beliefs come about?

### **The Assumptive World**

From early childhood, our observations and suppositions help us to construct assumptions and beliefs about ourselves, the world in general and our relationship to it. Bowlby (1969, 1973) drawing on Piaget's (1954) work of ‘schemas’, (mental constructions that represent things, or events in the world), suggested that individuals form ‘working models’ of the self and the world based on their own early childhood attachment experiences. When secure attachments are formed the world is considered to be capable of meeting our needs and providing a sense of safety and security. When losses occur our working models are

challenged to the extent that they have to be rebuilt, or restructured, to meet this new reality.

Parkes (1975) added the idea of 'assumptive world' to the concept of the internal working model. Assumptions, based on early attachments and experiences, are;

strongly held set of assumptions about the world and the self, which is confidently maintained and used as a means of recognising, planning and acting" (p.132) ..... as it is.... "the only world we know, and it includes everything we know or think that we know. It includes our interpretations of the past and our expectations of the future, our plans and our prejudices (Parkes, 1971, p.103).

Experiences of loss, according to Parkes (1971) can threaten an individual's assumptive world. This idea was taken up by Janoff-Bulman (1992) who considered that assumptions are deeply rooted in early experience and provide a sense of confidence. This view that the world is safe shares similarities with Erikson's (1968) view of 'basic trust' in his approach to psychological development.

According to Janoff-Bulman (1992) our world view is based on three assumptions;

- The world is benevolent – it is a good place, most people are well intentioned and events usually have positive outcomes.

...we maintain a kind of implicit base-rate notion about goodness and badness in the world; in general, we believe we live in a benevolent, safe world rather than a malevolent, hostile one.....In considering the benevolence of the world, people are actually considering the benevolence of 'their' world. (p.7)

- The world is meaningful – things make sense and there is an apparent relationship between events and outcomes. As Janoff-Bulman states;

...we can directly control what happens to us through our own behaviour. If we engage

in appropriate behaviours, we will be protected from negative events and if we engage in appropriate behaviours, good things will happen to us. (p.9)

- The self is worthy – we are good, capable and moral individuals who have value. ...a belief in a person-outcome contingency that is reflected in conceptions about justice and control. (p.11)

These three broad abstract conceptions “coexist at the core of our assumptive world .... [and] are also emotionally potent..... [and indicate how] positive feelings are inextricably tied to our assumptive world” (Janoff-Bulman (p.12/13). Rando (1993; 2002) further added to this concept by differencing between global assumptions about the self, others, and the world, including spirituality and specific assumptions about what has been, or is being lost. When trauma occurs these assumptions, that have helped us to maintain a coherent world, are uncovered to be fantasies. An abrupt, terrifying disillusionment comes about (Fleming and Robinson, 2001) causing the collapse of the assumptive world (Kauffman, 2000b).

Nothing seems to be as they had thought, their inner world is in turmoil. Suddenly, the self and the worldviews they had taken for granted are unreliable. They can no longer assume that the world is a good place or that other people are kind and trustworthy. They can no longer assume that the world is meaningful or what happens makes sense. They can no longer assume that they have control over negative outcomes or will reap benefits because they are good people. The very nature of the world and self seems to have changed; neither can be trusted, neither guarantees security. (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p.62)

As our core assumptions are positive, we remain safe and secure, honouring ‘an illusion of invulnerability’ (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p.19). When adversity happens we make gradual

adjustments to our beliefs and reinterpret the meaning of the event to accommodate it. However, if the experience is more traumatic, the new experience cannot be integrated into the known way of how the world should work. As assumptions are challenged there is dissonance between life experiences and beliefs of the assumptive world. These assumptions that have kept us steady and given us a sense of coherence in our lives are abruptly discovered to be illusory, and feelings of panic may descend. In order to rebuild their assumptive world and restore psychological equilibrium conflicting emotions occur. Either the world is threatening (malevolent and meaningless) and/or the self is seen negatively (helpless and unworthy). This dilemma illustrates the powerful interplay of emotions in loss experiences, as “these new assumptions may seem valid, but emotionally they are extremely unattractive” (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p.95).

Although the response to overwhelming trauma is frequently numbness and denial, rebuilding the assumptive world comes about, according to Janoff-Bulman (1992, p.117), through;

- comparing experiences with the real or imagined outcomes of others, particularly people who have had similar trauma.
- Interpreting what happened and assessing instances of self-blame.
- Re-evaluating the experience in an attempt to make sense of it.

This is achieved more effectively if it is done in relation to others as it allows for feedback on the person’s efficacy of the person’s behaviour, as well as being able to obtain reactions from others. We will return to this point later.

### **The complexities of loss**

While we grieve what has been lost, it is not to suggest that all losses are negative or that we



all suffer unending trauma, as everything we once had is unceasingly relinquished. Much can depend on our own reaction to a particular loss, a view that Janoff-Bulman (1992) also endorses. As Von Weizeman suggests;

Losses are minor; losses are major. Losses are expected; losses are unexpected.

Losses are negative; losses are positive. Losses occur every day, from time to time and throughout a lifetime. Losses happen to everyone, yet each person deals with loss – even the same loss - in a different way. (1998, p.5)

Frequently losses are unacknowledged and unexpressed. Humphrey (2009) reports, although individuals may initially seek counselling to deal with major experiences, such as divorce and relationship break ups, loss and grief experiences are frequently an underlying factor.

For example, exploration of client anger often reveals core losses that have never been addressed or were inadequately grieved.; anxiety problems sometimes originate in loss events and certainly intensify and compound anxiety reactions; people with addictions frequently have a history of loss experiences that contribute to development of their addiction as well as losses resulting from their addictions that complicate their recovery. Traumatic experiences usually include significant loss, although the loss is sometimes obscured by more critical circumstances or crises while grieving lingers in the background. (Humphrey, 2009, p.19)

As Kaufman, (2002c) suggests;

There is a sense in which traumatic loss of the assumptive world is a paradigm for the psychology of change, in that there is a kernel of trauma at the psychological core of all change experience, when we understand that the traumatic loss of the assumptive world, we understand a core wound in all bereavement (p.1-2)

These losses, both explicit and hidden, can be further examined in greater detail through the concepts of disenfranchised grief, non- finite loss, ambiguous loss and chronic sorrow.

### **Non-finite loss**

According to Bruce and Schultz non-finite losses refer to “losses that are contingent on development; the passage of time; and the lack of synchronicity with hopes, wishes, ideals and expectations” (2002, p.7). They consider that these losses are continuous in nature and are usually hastened by a negative life event and/or psychological presence, in an on-going manner. It is frequently difficult to be precise about when these losses occurred but, they demand continual adjustment or accommodation. The loss is characterised by being (a) continuous and ongoing, although it may follow a specific event, such as an accident or a diagnosis (b) prevents normal developmental expectations from happening resulting in physical, cognitive, social, emotional, or spiritual losses and (c) includes tangible losses, such as the loss of hopes or ideals affecting the person’s expectations about what should have been, or might have been (Bruce and Schultz, 2001). They also consider that;

- there is an ongoing uncertainty about what will happen next
- there is frequently a sense of disconnection from others, and what is generally considered “normal”
- The size of the loss is frequently unrecognised, or not acknowledged by others
- There is an on- going sense of helplessness and powerlessness associated with the loss

(Bruce and Schultz, 2001)

Mary's losses are continuous and ongoing though a triggering event is not apparent. It appears that she does not have the close relationships to other family members that she wishes for,

and her life has not developed in the way that she would have liked it to. Although seeped in sadness, it remains unclear as what will happen next to her. She seems to be isolated, with no support forthcoming from others. Indeed, her partner appears to be unaware of her distress and Mary seems powerless to alter her situation. Jones and Beck (2007, cited in Harris, 2011, p. 3) add that when people attempt to reconcile their present experience to their anticipated future, feelings of chronic despair and ongoing dread occurs – hence, the tears.

Non-finite loss is described from an intrapersonal perspective, while ambiguous loss, which is similar in many ways, is portrayed from a family systems approach by considering who is absent from the family unit.

### **Ambiguous loss**

These losses “remain unclear” (Boss, 2007, p.105), so there is significant ambiguity about what exactly has been lost, either on a temporary or permanent basis. Boss suggests that there are two situations where losses might occur.

- (1) where the individual is perceived to be physically absent, but psychologically present – loved ones who are “missing” from the family unit through events such as, divorce, kidnappings, adoptions, serving prison sentences or being posted overseas.
- (2) Where the individual is physically present, but considered to be psychologically absent – family members who are – as in Mary's family - “unavailable” due to illness, such as Alzheimer disease or chronic addictions, such as work or other obsessive behaviour.

Each of these situations can cause people to feel that they are living in “limbo” (Boss and Couden, 2002) as they struggle to live with ambiguity (Boss, 1999, 2006, 2007) to make

sense of it.

### **Chronic sorrow**

Originally applied by Olshansky (1962) to the unique grief displayed by parents of children born with disabilities, this sort of grief is predominantly seen as a gradual understanding of what a diagnosis means over time and the effect that it will have. It is:

a set of pervasive, profound, continuing and re-occurring grief responses resulting from a significant loss or absence of crucial aspects of oneself (self-loss) or another living person (other-loss) to whom there is a deep attachment. The way in which the loss is perceived determines the existence of chronic sorrow. The essence of chronic sorrow is a painful discrepancy between what is perceived as reality and what continues to be dreamed of. The loss is ongoing since the source of the loss continues to be present. The loss is experienced as *living loss*. (Roos, 2002, p.2, italics in original)

Roos (2002) emphasises that chronic sorrow lasts a lifetime and goes largely unrecognised. A range of factors, both internal and external factors, as well as positive and negative, can contribute to feelings of sorrow (Peterson and Bredow, 2004). In this way, Mary's recognition of the anniversary of her mother's death and her ensuing sadness, highlights how chronic sorrow can be cyclical in nature.

### **Disenfranchised grief**

When grief is not socially recognised or sanctioned, or if it is beyond what is considered “normal” in some way, can be considered to be disenfranchised. That is, individuals are denied the right to grieve, as outlined by Doka (1989) which provides an understanding of why some people, like Mary do not recognise their own grief, or that of others. Doka defined

disenfranchised grief as “the grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publically mourned or socially supported” (Doka, 1989, cited in Corr, 2002, p.39).

Bruce and Schultz (2001) suggest that individuals, not wanting to appear to be seen to complain unduly, disenfranchise their own right to grief. Consequently, Mary fails to fully recognise that she has anything to be sad about, and further complicates her position by seeing herself as one of “the lucky ones” and suggesting that she “should be happy”. Perhaps, you even agreed with her? Or you may want to reassure her “to cheer up”, or “to look on the bright side”? Well intended advice like this, often result in emotions being hidden both from the self, and others, as grief becomes buried and, in doing so, remains illegitimised. Mary has developed a certain level of emotional stoicism, considered to be a mark of civilised habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), even with other family members. Mary has learnt that although there are specific accepted norms about death losses, other losses are not acknowledged. She holds herself up for evaluation (Friere, 1972b) against the dominant notion of Western capitalist society of being a productive member and, consequently, feels that she should pretend to feel better than she is. The absence of pain is equated with good mental health (Wolfelt, 2007) and ‘quick fix’ is often sought for those who demonstrate any emotional pain. The sense of isolation can lead to difficulties with adjusting to the new situation leading to increased feelings of guilt, shame, blame or self-blame, anger, fear or helplessness (Worden, 2009) Doka (1989) considers that all individuals who grieve non-death losses are to some extent disenfranchised. Corr (2002) goes a step further and declares that disenfranchised grief is an active process of disavowal, renunciation and rejection.

Maybe you are thinking that Mary’s response is partly because she is a woman, and a man

would not react in this way? Gilligan (1982) considers that as early female identity is organised through external sources, such as relationships, the loss of them can be devastating and perhaps makes Mary's response more understandable. Contrary to this position, Konigsberg (2011) asserts that gender differences in grieving, if they exist "are certainly not as great as the similarities" (p.180). She maintains that to view grief through a framework of gender is more likely "obscure than clarify" (p.180). What do you think?

And now for a confession.

I do not know Mary or her account. She is a made up from an amalgam of people that I have recently encountered and many emotional stories that I have heard. Her lived experience is derived from fragments of real conversations, feelings and events similar to the fictional narratives devised by Yalom (1991, 2006). His work pioneered "symbolic equivalents" of the stories he encountered in his psychotherapy practice which, ethically, he could not tell.

Clough (2002) also provides fictional accounts to evoke "a deeper view of life in familiar contexts: it can make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar .... stories can provide the means by which those truths, which cannot be otherwise told, uncovered" (p.8). He goes on to suggest that tales "allow the report of those experiences which might otherwise not be made public by other "traditional" tools of the trade (p.9).

So, what do you think would help Mary?

Let me tell you.....

Listen to her story and help her to validate her experience.

Listening affords her the chance to make sense of what has happened.

Listening helps her to start rebuilding her assumptive world.

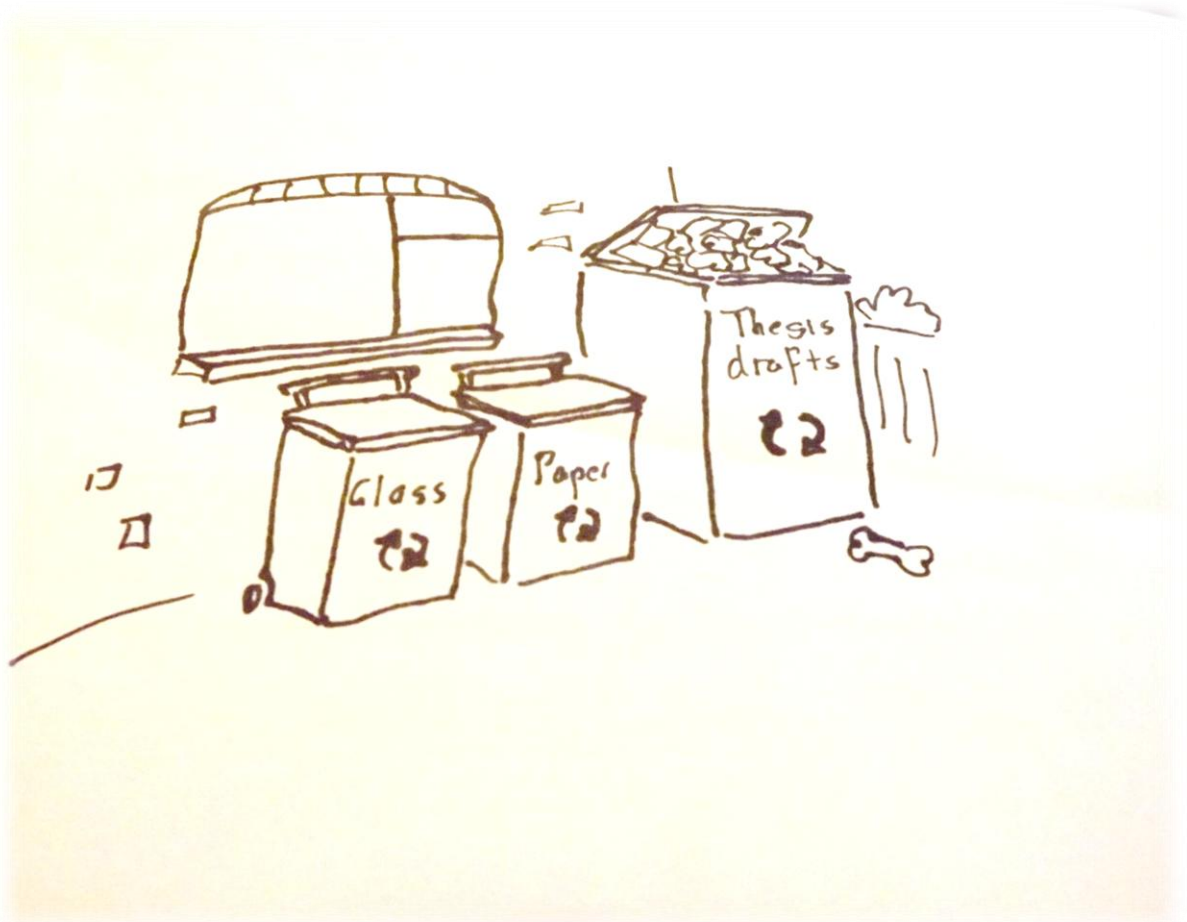
*Just listen.*

### Progress Report 3: Writing gets underway

Lola quietly pads into the room.

*Come va? You've been at it for ages. How's it going?*

Oh, well, err.....not so bad





## Chapter Three

### Narrative Inquiry: A dreamscape

Like Cixous, I too write in the morning, and find that “In fact what this means is that I begin writing at night, in my dreams” (1989, p.18)

And at night, I too dream.....

We are in a library lined with wooden bookcases that rise up towards the ceiling, their tops obscured by the dolorous light. I am surprised, but not disconcerted, by the fact that I am carrying a lantern in my out-stretched hand. My footsteps ring out in the still air as Lola quietly trots alongside and says....

*So, you were saying that you think narratives are important?*

Yeah. In order to learn how we make sense of loss experiences, I'm going to listen to the stories that we tell ourselves and how they give meaning to our lives (Andrews, Squire and Tambokou, 2008). As Kearney says, “There is an abiding recognition that existence is inherently storied. Life is pregnant with stories” (2002, p.130). Just think about what life would be like if we did not have narratives (*Lola frowns*) – no books or poems; no dramas; no conversations; no fairy tales or myths; no memories; no revelations....

*or... (gulp) opera? .....*

(Shrugs) or dreams like this.....

(Aghast)... or *Fellini films!*

(nodding)...or research for that matter.

*Si capisco. Look here ..... (Lola reaches up and takes down a text) ... Ochs says, imagine "going through life without telling others what happened to you or someone else..... Imagine not even composing interior narratives, to, and for, yourself..... it would mean a world without history" (1998, p.185).*

(Lola's long ears flap noisily around her head as she shakes in disbelief).

*Mama mia!*

We make sense of our lives by telling and re-telling our actions, thoughts, habits, beliefs and so on. Bolton suggests that we are brought up surrounded by stories. If we didn't have narratives we wouldn't have a clear idea of who we are, where we are going, what we believe, what we want, where we belong and how to be. We are immersed in stories from birth – they tell us who we are and where we belong; as well what is morally right, and what is wrong. Our knowledge about the world is held as narrative, but that knowledge is constructed through our political and cultural interactions (Bolton, 2006).

*(Nods) Like we are doing now?*

Exactly ..... Err, Loll, why are you wearing my glasses?

*Perché I'm the one doing the reading, you're just talking!*

Oh, err, ok ..... You have to remember that stories cannot be considered as an exact replica of the event being described (Sandelowski, 1991). They are on-going and can be reinterpreted with each telling, sometimes dramatically, sometimes incrementally. They can be coloured by experience, just as the telling influences the experience of what is being talked about. Often we only come to understand and give meaning to events after they have happened.

*Si. Atwood says that;*

*When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion: a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (2009, p. 297)*

.....Yeah, (mutters) I feel a bit like that about writing this thesis at times..... But coming back to what I was saying, by exposing narratives to critical scrutiny, people can be helped to recognise, and potentially alter, previously taken- for- granted paradigms, or stories.

*Si, interessante ..... so, we can never think of narratives as telling "the truth"?*

Good point! At best they are only a partial interpretation of what happened and how we see it from our own personal and cultural standpoints. It's partly that a different

researcher from a different background would tell a different story - my experience as a British woman is different to other people's – and often the stories that we tell ourselves can be self-affirming and uncritical. Sharkey (2004) talks about “cover stories” as they relay experiences that we are comfortable with or would like the world to be. However, the main point is that in the telling and re-telling of stories there are lots of opportunities for different meanings to come about, and alternative stances to be taken by both the person telling the narrative, and those listening. Speedy talks about the “small stories” (2008, p. 22) that people provide to make sense of their lives, and suggests that there are limitless possibilities in dialogue. As there is no absolute interpretation of meanings, language, culture or such-like, our understanding emerges within conversations and between people.

*(wags tail)*

*Scusami...but what's the point of doing research this way?*

Well, it gives voice to those traditionally marginalised. De Certeau says that stories “constantly transform places into spaces or spaces into places” and in doing so offer spaces of resistance, resistance to the narratives of instituted power, as “stories offer their audience a repertory of tactics for future use” (1984, p.23).

*So, the stories of our everyday lives and the challenges that we face in trying to live well can offer us some insight into how change can come about?*

That's it! You've got it! I'm really interested in the research empowering others so that

authentic dialogue, in which everyone contributes on an equal level. This way it promotes possibilities for transformation - an idea that can be found in the writings of Freire (1972a, 1976) and Habermas (1972).

*(wag, wag, wag)*

*But does that mean that there is a collective voice? How can individual experiences have a shared meaning? Err, non capisco.*

Well, doggie, I think that you can honour both. Andrews talks about in accepting that society is comprised of individuals “we can begin to understand the framework that lends meaning to these lives, then we have taken the important first step to being able to access the wider framework of meaning that is the binding agent of a culture” (2007, cited in Trahar, 2009, p.9)

*Mmmm.....It sounds to me as though you are using a social construction approach of narrative inquiry as both the phenomena under study and the methodology for study.*

(looks witless) Eh?

*As Olsen explains:*

*Careful examination and exploration of stories is the essence of narrative (i)nquiry. People often focus on the word narrative but skip lightly over the word (i)nquiry. Yet, it is the (i)nquiry into the stories that creates the educative experience as individuals find new and more expansive ways to interpret their own stories and other*

*experiences. Thus, narrative (i)nquiry continually opens up new story lines to pursue and new issues to address (2000, p.350).*

*You see it is a collaboration between researcher and participants (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000) and necessitates paying keen attention to unfolding time and events (Conle, 1999), as the researcher reflects inward and outward, backward and forward (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000) on experience as it becomes lived and re-lived in context. We enter into the middle of other people's stories and our own, so we are always "in the midst" (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000, p.20). Exploring these doings, feelings and actions, creates personal and social circumstances which shape future happenings.*

You've got it, doggie. Trahar (2011) says that the researcher can, and must, move from inside to outside the research space as data is collected, analysed and re-told as a story. Our stories happen in storied landscapes (Connolly and Clandinin, 1999) and we cannot view ourselves as objective observers of these experiences as we also "in the parade we presume to study" (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000 p.81). In this way I can reach a deep understanding of the unique aspects of their narratives.

*Si, but as we said before, it's difficult to fully represent them. However, as Ollerenshaw and Creswell suggest we can help identify "time, place, plot and scene" and provide "a chronological sequence" which may be missing from the original story. By the researcher adding "rich detail", making "causal links" and identifying "themes" (2002, p.332) a fuller, but different, narrative takes shape. This approach is non-linear and interactive in a one-step-forward, one-step-back kind of way (Maple and Edwards, 2010, p.33), similar to how we tell stories to each other.*

Excellent.

*Also, narratives of loss develop in conversation with real and imagined audiences (Gilbert, 2002). These social networks then provide a context within which our view of the world is tested and explored in relation to others (Gilbert, 1996; Gilbert and Smart, 1992).*

It's really about how we built a different identity for ourselves. Reid suggests, "[n]ew ideas, experiences and information can be built on existing knowledge in a way that has meaning for the individual" (2016, p.106).

*Err, non capisco...*

Well, let's put it another way. We know that "stories are somehow important for our identity: They tell us who we are" (Widdershoven, 1993, p.6) but those stories are not set in stone. Jeanette Winterson says that "if we weave ourselves as narratives we change the story that we are. If we weave ourselves as literal and fixed, we find that we change nothing" (2005, p.19). We can change the story by seeing events differently and altering the view that we have of ourselves. Alheit's (1995, cited in Reid, 2016 p.106) concept of biographicity is useful in thinking how individuals continually re-interpret their lives in the social contexts in which we make new experiences, and how we apply this new knowledge to what we have already learnt.

Biographical background knowledge comprises certainties from the life-world which we draw upon implicitly when we act, take decisions, make plans or just tell our life story. It comprises orientations and prescriptions that we have adopted from others, but above all it is made up of layered experience which we

have collected and connected up, but which is not clear at all to us. These experiences can be partially reconstructed as memories of concretely lived events, as, for example, when we narrate our biography in a particular situation. (Dausien, 1996, p.577, cited in Evans, 2014, p. 199)

People can reflect on experiences to decide on what is important to them, within their social context, as well as evaluate possible choices, however limited they may seem (Reid, 2016). In this way, a new future can be re-storied but it still is connected to the past.

Comprendere. It is seeing ourselves as continually 'becoming', "*[t]he unfinished-ness of the human person [in] a permanent process of searching*" (Freire, 1998, p.21).

(admiringly).....You know, Lola, you really are a clever dog.

*Prego.....I'm not just a dog..... (puffs up her chest) .... I'm an Italian Spinone.*

(smiles) That's true.



## Progress Report 4: Writing progresses

Like Beowulf before me, I unlock my “word-hoard” (Heaney, 2007, p.21).

and I write .....lots.....endlessly.

The ideas tumble out like noisy marauding children.

“Quiet! Quiet!” I beg. “I can’t hear myself think!”

“WE ARE YOUR THINK”, they chorus.

I listen.

and start making headway.....



*Fig. 2 picture of driving to demonstrate progress of learning*

## Chapter Four

### Participant interview: Meet Anna

Hi,

This is Anna.

You don't know her.

and she doesn't know you.

But she is curious about

who you might be.

So soon you will read about her.

She's going to tell you

about some losses that have

happened.

Not everything but enough

so that some of her life

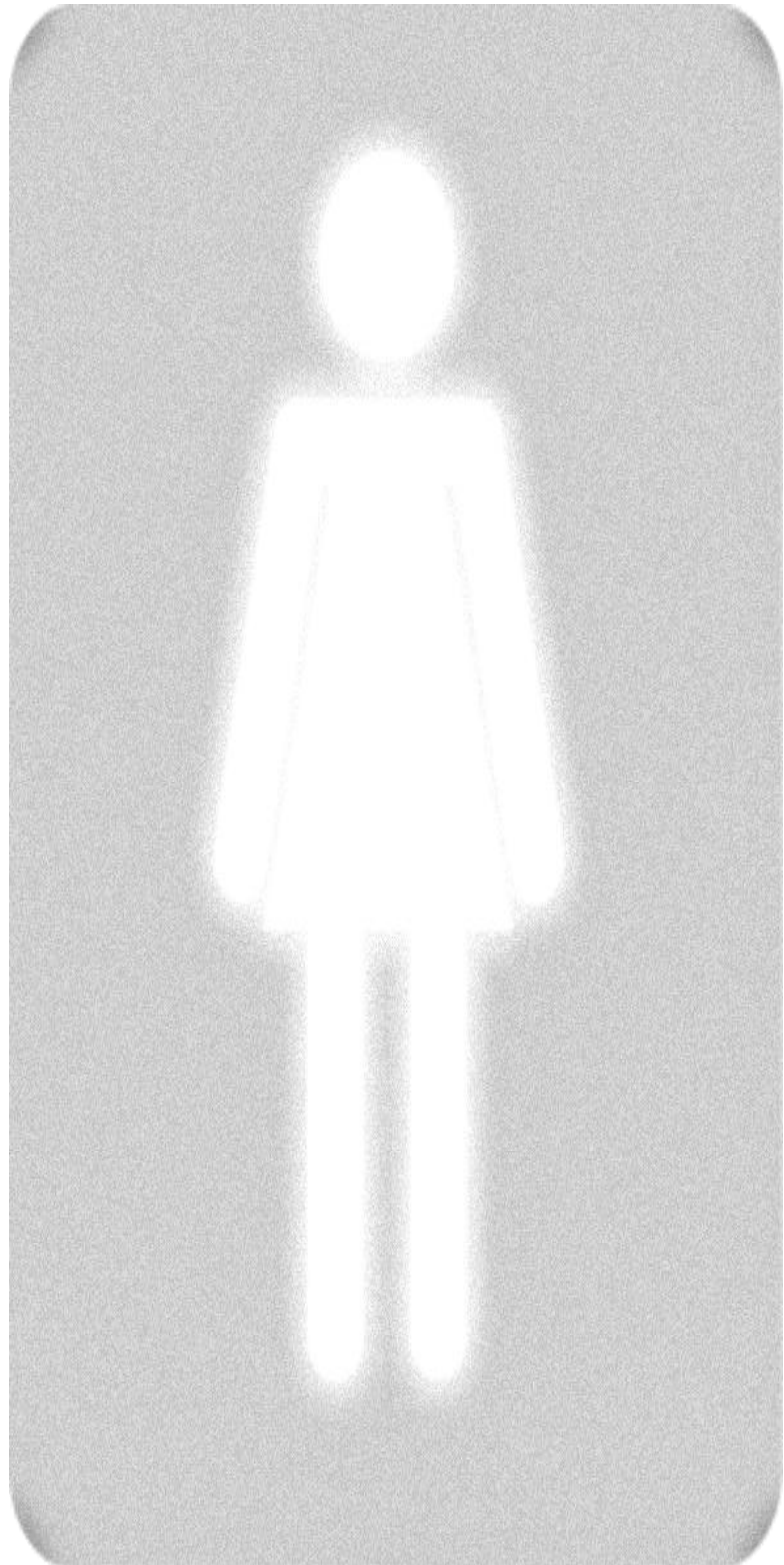
will come a little more

into focus.

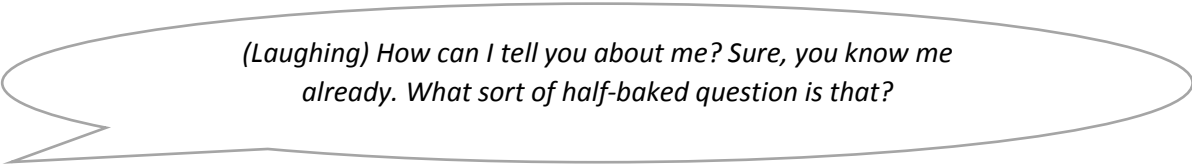
Settle down

down and hear

her speak....



## Conversation with Anna



*(Laughing) How can I tell you about me? Sure, you know me already. What sort of half-baked question is that?*

And so the interview began. Anna was right, I did indeed know her already. We had met a couple of years previously, and had kept in irregular contact since. She had been on a training course in the specialist training centre for people with additional support needs, where I work as a guidance practitioner. After successfully completing her training, she secured a part-time office job and we would occasionally bump into each other around town and chat.

## Setting up the research

I had helped Anna complete a job application form a few months earlier, as well as update her CV. When thinking of who I could ask to be involved in this thesis, Anna immediately came to mind. Having shown an interest in previous research that I had conducted, and knowing that she had encountered different challenges in her life, I thought that she would have a rich story to tell, so I rang her.

My concern was that by virtue of us having a pre-existing relationship, Anna might have felt coerced (Johnson and Mcleod Clark, 2003) to accept the request. However, I believed that she could be, and would be, sufficiently assertive to state if she wanted to be involved, or not. To ensure that she was fully informed, I outlined my academic studies, the concept of confidentiality, as well as the research aims and purpose (Asselin, 2003) to her. Just to make sure I couched the invitation in terms of, “if you are not busy” to provide her with a ready-made excuse to decline, if she so wished. She responded that she was pleased to get involved.

I had purposefully not wanted to involve someone who was currently involved in training as I had practical concerns about obtaining consent from the organisation, as well as professional apprehension about role conflict. Peshkin (1988) talks about the various “Is” we bring to the research process and I wanted to keep my “Researcher I” separate from my “Guidance Counsellor I”. This, however, proved to be more difficult than I thought it would be.

## **Rapport**

Annie’s reaction is probably indicative of the good rapport that already existed between us and, as McConnell-Henry et al (2010) point out, rapport is often swiftly accelerated when there is a pre-existing relationship. As a neophyte researcher I was trying, a little mistakenly, to allow Anna to decide from the outset, how she wanted to portray herself as I already possessed some information about her from conducting guidance session previously.

Recognising this as “insider knowledge” (Teusner, 2016, p.86), along with the awareness that we have an existing “dual relationship” (McConnell-Henry et al, 2010), I was cognisant of my concern for my participant (Lee, 1993) by not assuming knowledge. Returning to my original question, and realising my error, I modified my approach and began with, “I know that you feel that your accident has had a major impact on your life, perhaps you could tell me more about this and how you have made sense of it? Do you feel that you have been able to adjust to and accommodate it into your life?”

However, I am getting ahead of myself, as I need to give you some further information first.

## **Consent**

A consent form was drawn up prior to starting but it was difficult to know how the conversation would progress. As Josselson rightly points out;

I don't think that we can fully inform a participant at the outset about what he or she is in fact consenting to since much of what will take place is unforeseeable. Thus consent has to be considered as an aspect of a relational process, deriving from an ethic of care, rather than rights. (2007, p.540)

With this in mind, I regularly asked Annie if she was comfortable with her disclosures and if she wished to continue which she did. I believe that her understanding that this was 'research' which others may benefit from (Rowling, 1999) encouraged her to speak candidly.

## **Setting the scene**

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) suggest that researchers should seek a safe and comfortable setting for participants to open up. Annie suggested meeting at her house where she provided the tea and I brought along the biscuits. Although I was initially concerned if this was a suitable location, it worked well and, I believe, encouraged Anna to be more relaxed. Rather than seeing our meetings as "interviews", I considered them to be more like relaxed and informal conversations. However, this was not "chat", but research into "life" (Oakley, 1981)

We met on two occasions for fifty minutes three weeks apart with a thirty- minute phone conversation in-between. I had intended to complete the interviews within a shorter time frame, but on-going difficulties with an injury to my back prevented this. However, this

provided the unrealised benefit of having additional opportunity to reflect on the content of the interviews which, I think, strengthened the process.

### **Recording**

We also discussed boundaries to the research and agreed that information provided would not be divulged in other social settings (Barnes, 1979). I was aware that I was not just collecting information, but sharing our stories and, as a consequence, myself more sensitive to the notion that “the data obtained is privileged; it is more than just words that will be analysed, it is the participant’s experience” (Alexander et al, 1989, p.5).

The sessions were recorded on my phone. Anna selected her own pseudonym and together we drew up how she wanted her narrative represented. As Craig and Huber suggest, “one way we see narrative inquirers honouring the relational aspects of their inquiries is by consciously inviting participants to live as co-researchers” (2007, p.272). Coming from a small town I was also aware that certain markers could easily make Anna readily identifiable and drew her attention to this. As a consequence, we have purposefully disguised a number of facts.

I started the process by providing details about my own losses, as sketched in my auto-ethnography. I wanted to ensure the authenticity and relevance of the research by showing my own experience as co-participation in the human venture that I seek to understand (Hunt, 1992).

### **Talking together**

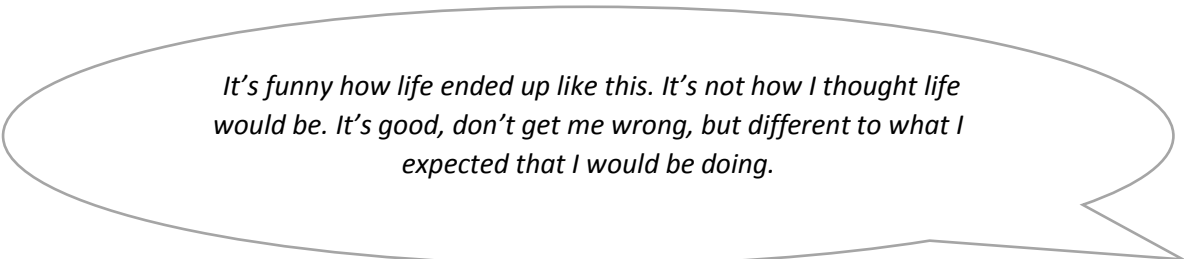
I did not have a set of pre-determined questions, but let the conversation flow naturally after the opening query. Rather than ‘hearing’ what I anticipated, I saw myself as a “traveller”

going “on a journey that leads to a tale to be told on returning home” (Kvale, 1996, p.4). As Horsdal suggests, I want to;

listen to *her* voice, to *her* experiences, to *her* interpretations. It is not a question of what is relevant to me, but what is relevant to the interviewee in her attempt at the construction and negotiation of meaning. (2012, p.77 italics in the original)

In this way, I maintained an openness to whatever was spoken about and positioned my respectful, curious self “being alongside” (Rowling, 1999, p.168) Anna. This, as Hadley suggests, “dehierarchalizes” (2003, p.36) the relationship, and consistent with feminist theory, empowers Anna as the co-creator of the resulting narrative.

### **Anna’s story**



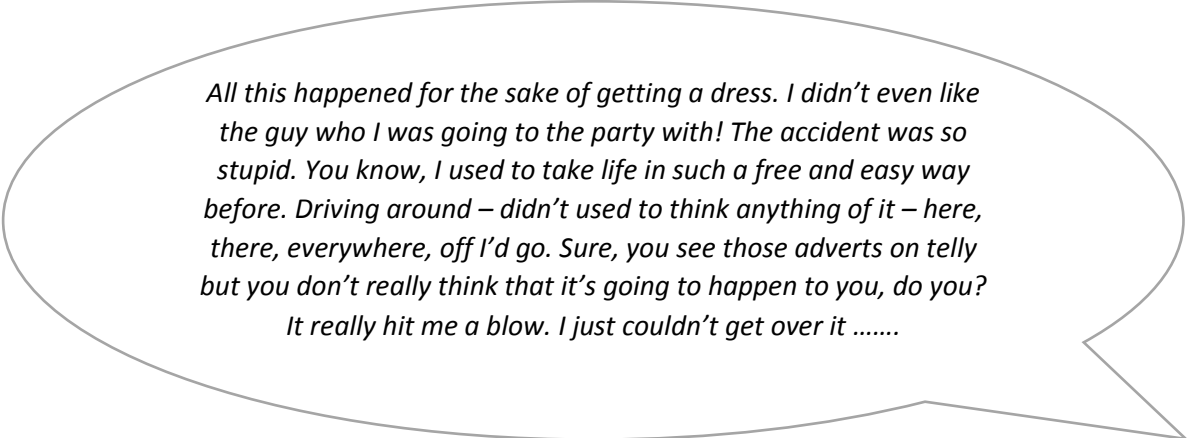
*It’s funny how life ended up like this. It’s not how I thought life would be. It’s good, don’t get me wrong, but different to what I expected that I would be doing.*

Since being a child, Anna had hoped to become a teacher and follow her two older brothers into the profession. She worked hard at school but just missed the points required to go to teacher training college, and so accepted a place on an arts course. During the Christmas holidays in her second year, Anna drove to the dry cleaners to pick up her dress for a party the following day. Unfortunately, on the return leg, Anna’s car veered off the road and down a steep slope before hitting a bridge. No other vehicle was involved and it was sometime before anyone came across her and emergency services had to cut her out of the car. She

received superficial injuries to her face and head, but severe damage to her leg, which had been pinned underneath the dashboard.

Although her injury was straightforward complication arose with the healing process. After a prolonged stay in hospital and physio, Anna has been left with stiffness in her knee and experiences some pain when standing for prolong periods of time. The psychological injury was more profound.

She returned to college eighteen months later, but left after a very short while to return home. She got some casual work in retail but was then unemployed for some time. We met after she started a training course with work experience in a pharmaceutical company, where she was subsequently offered a job. She has worked there since then.

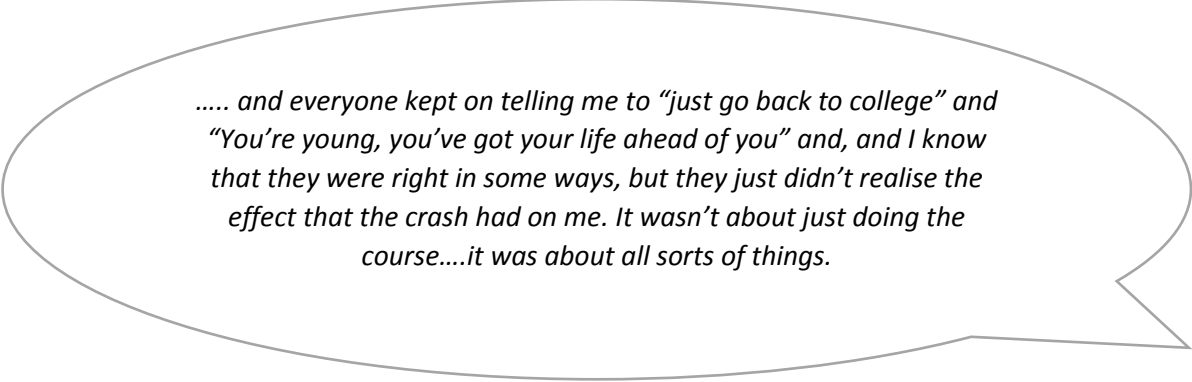


*All this happened for the sake of getting a dress. I didn't even like the guy who I was going to the party with! The accident was so stupid. You know, I used to take life in such a free and easy way before. Driving around – didn't used to think anything of it – here, there, everywhere, off I'd go. Sure, you see those adverts on telly but you don't really think that it's going to happen to you, do you? It really hit me a blow. I just couldn't get over it .....*

As previously mentioned Janoff-Bulman (1989) considers that traumatic life events challenge peoples' beliefs, assumptions and hopes that provide order, coherence and meaning to experience. These events are characterised by being outside of normal expectations, noticeably upsetting to most people, and occurring unexpectedly to the extent that there is little opportunity to psychologically prepare for them. Unpredictable life events, such as a car crash, are traumatic because they shatter fundamental assumptions about how we see the world, leaving people with the feeling that life is random, unsafe and beyond personal



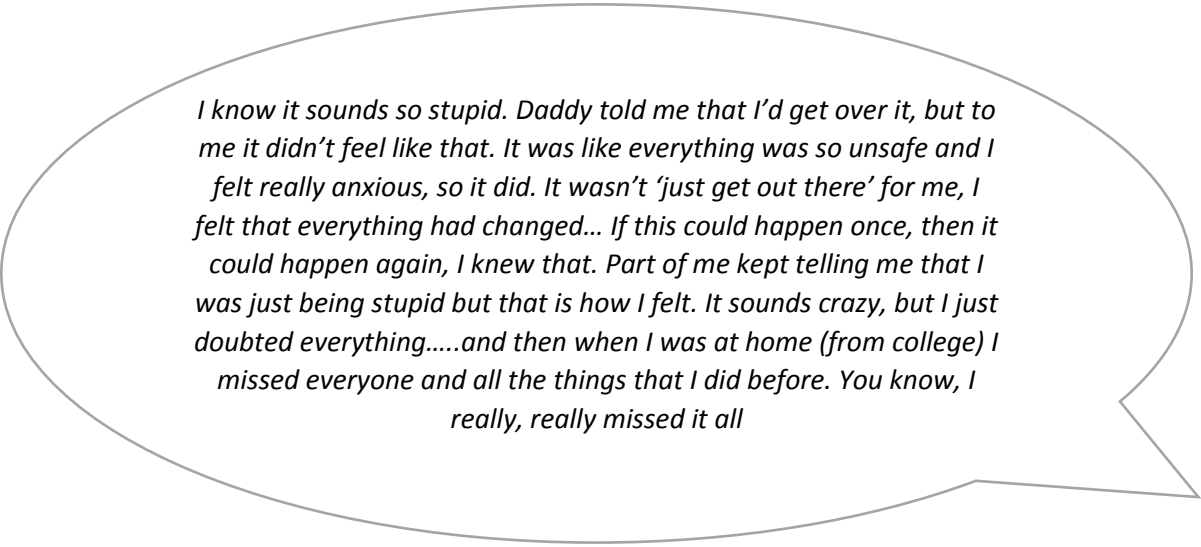
control. Parkes suggests that grief that occurs comes from “an awareness of a discrepancy between the world that is, and the world that should be” (1988, p.54).



*..... and everyone kept on telling me to “just go back to college” and “You’re young, you’ve got your life ahead of you” and, and I know that they were right in some ways, but they just didn’t realise the effect that the crash had on me. It wasn’t about just doing the course.....it was about all sorts of things.*

“The all sort of things” caused Anna to lose confidence in herself and the world around her. While others believe that they were encouraging Anna to return to normal, she felt that her life had been overturned.

Traumatic loss overwhelms and floods the self with negative assumptions deviant from the protective norm of the good... The terror that shatters the assumptive world is a violent deprivation of safety..... What is lost in the traumatic loss of the assumptive world? All is lost. Hope is lost... (Kauffman, 2002b, p.206).



*I know it sounds so stupid. Daddy told me that I’d get over it, but to me it didn’t feel like that. It was like everything was so unsafe and I felt really anxious, so it did. It wasn’t ‘just get out there’ for me, I felt that everything had changed... If this could happen once, then it could happen again, I knew that. Part of me kept telling me that I was just being stupid but that is how I felt. It sounds crazy, but I just doubted everything.....and then when I was at home (from college) I missed everyone and all the things that I did before. You know, I really, really missed it all*

What is crucial here is Anna's own perception of what happened, and the losses that occurred for her, as "loss is always a highly individualized experience" (Gorman, in Harris, 2011, p.226). These concerned her assumption about her future role, as well as her future lifestyle; perceptions of social status ('I'd have been a professional') and anticipated academic achievement. Her more immediate losses included her belief in the invulnerability of her own body; existential certainty; relationships with college-based friends. The comments made to Anna were, no doubt, made with good intention but highlight how these significant losses were not fully recognised by others (Doka, 1989). Janoff-Bulman (1992) suggests that survivors of traumatic events may act as a threat to other people's assumptive worlds, as they are living proof that the world is not as safe and secure as we would wish to believe. Therefore, it is in everyone's interest if Anna would 'just get on with her life' and let "the illusion of invulnerability" (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, p.19) quietly return.

Anna's losses were not all hidden either. She is conscious of the stiffness of her leg and felt "that other people always notice". You may recall that we talked about non-finite losses (Bruce and Schultz, 2002) earlier in this research. Anna's uncertainty about what she will do next in her life, along with the feeling of powerlessness. Goffman (1963) uses the term "spoiled identity" to describe the socially stigmatising effect of difference and I felt that Anna had internalised this to some degree about herself. However, Anna firmly rejected her cousin's identification of her as disabled.

Her previously held assumptions that negative things could not happen to her, were held in contrast with the fact that they already had. Coping with this traumatic experience presented Anna with the dilemma of either incorporating the event into her existing belief system, or

revising her assumptions to acknowledge a changed reality. To her, the latter made more sense, like it had to me. The world was not safe, random things happen.

### **Emotional reaction**

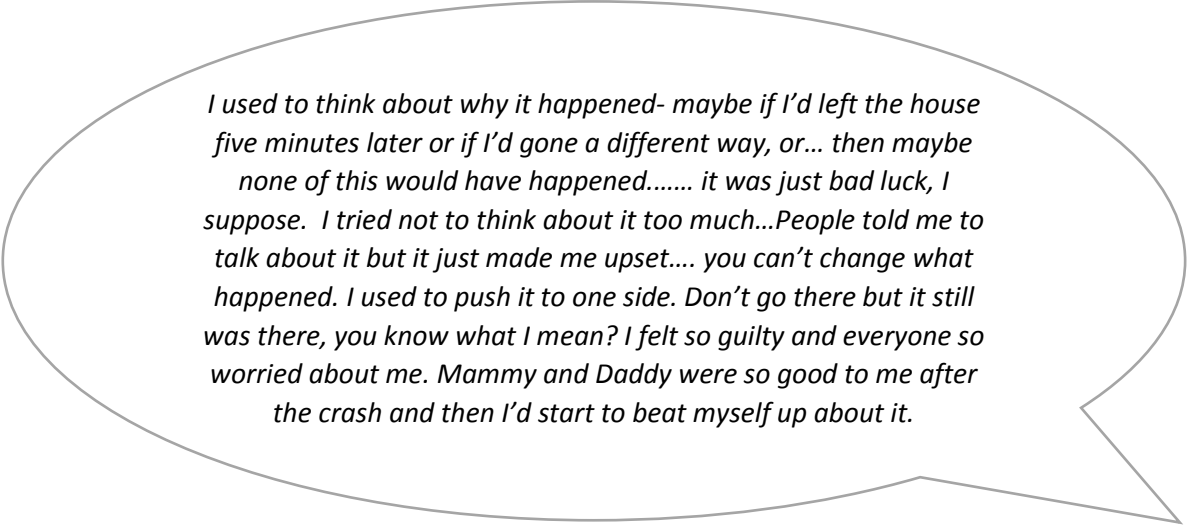
It was difficult hearing Anna's story. She gave voice to her experiences in an honest and open manner which I think was assisted by the fact that we were of the same gender (Oakley 1981; Stanley and Wise, 1991) and had good existing rapport.

As she described her experiences I felt a strong desire to assist her in some way as she spoke about her losses. I struggled to maintain a Researcher 'I' as my Guidance 'I' wanted to help her in a therapeutic way. I had to make a particular effort not fall back into 'guidance counsellor mode' but to offer Anna a more appropriate support which I will go into more detail at the end.

She spoke about initially people were very supportive towards her, but gradually this fell away. When she did not continue with life as before and, especially when she was unemployed, she felt that people considered less her less sympathetically. She found it difficult to talk to others about this, including members of her own family. In this way, her experience became disenfranchised (Doka, 1989) by both others and herself, similar to the way mine did in childhood.

It is perhaps useful here to consider how this comes about.

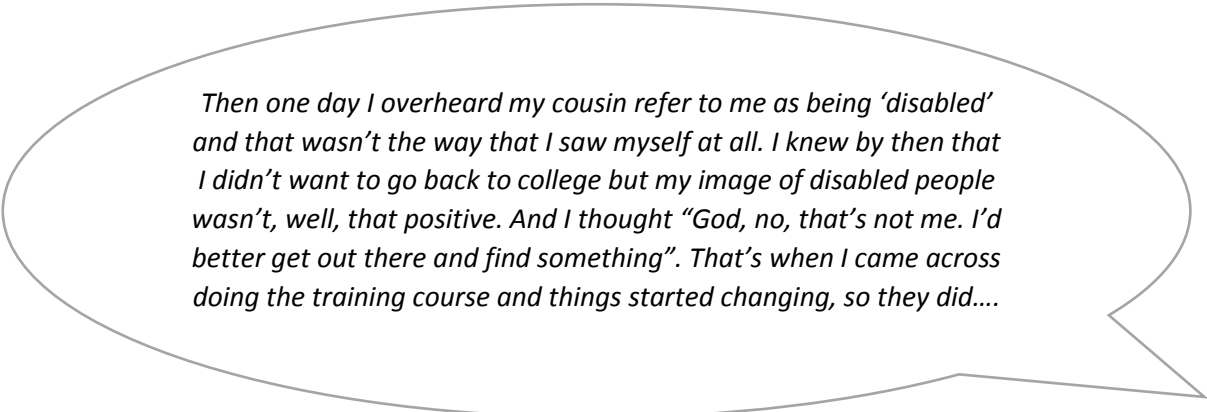
## **Making sense**



*I used to think about why it happened- maybe if I'd left the house five minutes later or if I'd gone a different way, or... then maybe none of this would have happened..... it was just bad luck, I suppose. I tried not to think about it too much...People told me to talk about it but it just made me upset.... you can't change what happened. I used to push it to one side. Don't go there but it still was there, you know what I mean? I felt so guilty and everyone so worried about me. Mammy and Daddy were so good to me after the crash and then I'd start to beat myself up about it.*

Trying to make sense of traumatic events is widely recognised in grief literature (Wheeler, 2001) and appears to be a significant part of the grieving process. It was apparent throughout the conversation that Anna had always considered herself to be a careful driver, in fact, she had never had an accident before. However, she did try to make some sense of why this happened to her. Janoff-Bulman (2004) suggests that it is essential that existential issues are addressed and interpreted to find meaning after a critical event. Anna seems to largely put it down to “bad luck”, which seems to echo my interpretation of life as a game of snakes and ladders.

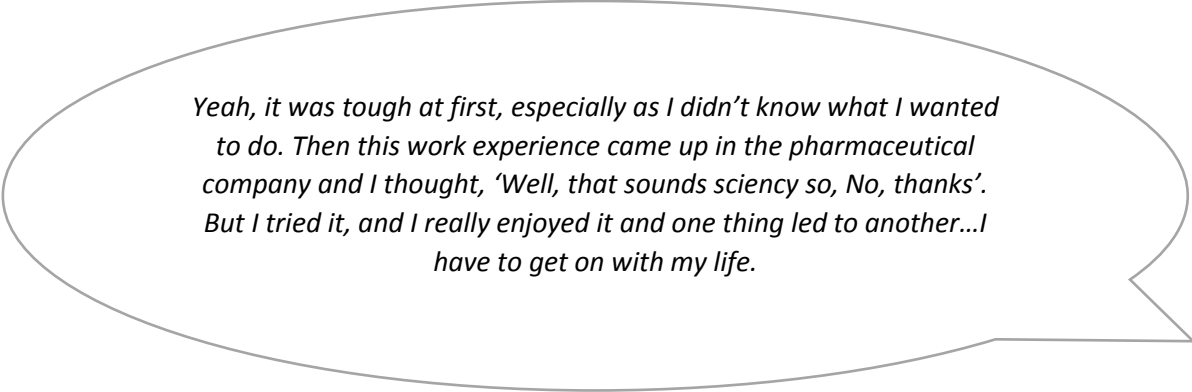
## **Seeing a different perspective**



*Then one day I overheard my cousin refer to me as being 'disabled' and that wasn't the way that I saw myself at all. I knew by then that I didn't want to go back to college but my image of disabled people wasn't, well, that positive. And I thought "God, no, that's not me. I'd better get out there and find something". That's when I came across doing the training course and things started changing, so they did....*

Janoff-Bulman (1992) suggests that the rebuilding of the assumptive world comes about as individuals continue to fluctuate between numbness or avoidance of the experience, and confrontation with what had happened until they recognise their own vulnerability and recovery is achieved, with the support of others. This, however, does not quite fit with Anna's experience. She spoke at length about the transformational moment (Mezirow, 1991) which led her to a job that she now thoroughly enjoys. She says that she did not think that the successful change in her career would have happened without having had the accident.

### **Adjusting**



*Yeah, it was tough at first, especially as I didn't know what I wanted to do. Then this work experience came up in the pharmaceutical company and I thought, 'Well, that sounds sciency so, No, thanks'. But I tried it, and I really enjoyed it and one thing led to another...I have to get on with my life.*


Frankl (1984) contends that meaning and purpose occur when positive outcomes can be identified in seemingly negative situations. Also Davis, Nolen- Hoesama and Larson (1998) suggests that finding meaning in loss can either be in the ability to find benefit in what happened, or in finding meaning as a way of making sense of the loss. I found benefit by understanding how my narrative led to a career of working in disability and finding ways of helping others who experience early birth losses. It also occurred to me how much hope forms an essential part of shaping a new story (Lester, 1995). Weingarten (2000; 2007) suggests that hope comes about not just through a state of being but is anchored in what people do and therefore, weighted with transformational possibilities. It is our actions, rather than words that make this happen. Freire considers hope to be an ontological need. "I am

hopeful, not out of mere stubbornness, but out of existential, concrete imperative” (1994, p.8).

Attig considers that after a significant loss we need to relearn the world by;

coming to terms with the loss of our assumptive world is primarily about learning new ways of acting and being in the world. It is a matter of coming to know how to go on in the world where so much of what we have taken for granted in the emotional, psychological, social, soulful and spiritual dimensions of our lives is no longer supportable, or practicable (2002, p. 64).

These ‘new ways of acting and being’ may entail, as Reid suggests, “constructing an altered view of self in order to cope with the changes encountered” (2016, p. 106). MacAdams considers identity as “an internalized and evolving life story” (2001, p.117) that results from a person’s selective appropriation of past, present and future events. To achieve this Neimeyer (2001; Neimeyer et al, 2002) talks about the importance of making sense of losses through narrative re-framing. When traumatic events occur it is difficult to integrate them into “the master narrative” (2001, p.263) which is an “understanding of one’s life and experiences, along with meanings attached to these” (p.263). By “reweaving” the new experiences with the existing narrative of their life, individuals are able to a reasonably consistent self-narrative to make sense of their losses, both to their self and others. There are obvious similarities here with the assumptive world view approach. In this way, Anna built a new set of beliefs about her place in the world. Davis (2000) talks about the possibility of speaking ourselves into existence and, in doing so, as May (2005) suggests bringing meaning and shape to a new sense of identity.



Does any of this help at all?

## **Endings**

I assured Anna that her contribution was valued and appreciated and together we both decided what was said and how it should be said, the written narrative acting as a reification of our conversations. From the outset, I had been concerned that although I would be gathering research, what would Anna gain from the process? I knew that she would have the opportunity to tell her story, but would that be sufficient?

Anna said that she felt appreciative of the chance to listen to her own story as it gave her a time to “think about what has happened and who I am now”. Initially I thought that she was talking about what had happened during our conversations but she said that her reflexive process had begun once research date had been suggested.

Telling a life story may be a very emotional event (Horsdal, 2012) and I felt that it was essential to have a clear strategy about how to handle any emotional responses (Rowling, 1999) for both Anna and myself.

I spoke to a counsellor I knew at a free local counselling service about the purpose of my research and arranged that Anna could contact him directly for an appointment should the need arise. I informed Anna that this had been done on her behalf and gave her the contact details. She was both surprised that I thought that she may require this resource, and touched that it had been thought about.

Warr (2004) considers that the emotional weight of the stories that researchers’ gather in the field stay with them and are carried around long after the inquiry is complete. With this in mind, I used a network of trusted colleagues for debriefing, as well as knowing that academic

supervision was available. I also recorded my reactions, ideas and emerging issues in my research journal, providing “an audit trail” (Denzin, 1994, cited in Rowling, p.178) which helped me to refine my reflexivity by mining “one’s emotions for their intellectual reasons” (Ely, 1991, p.136).

We mutually agreed an end point for the research. Despite my efforts to maintain an equilibrium between our respective positions, her final comment suggests a desire ‘to get it right’, to which I reassured her that she had. At the end of the research process Anna was contemplating attending counselling in the near future to discuss some of the issues that had arisen for her. As she quipped herself, “I’m a work in progress”.



## Progress Report 5: Individual Supervision

*Ciao. You called? How can I be of help to you?*

Ciao. (sitting at the desk, peering between stacked up piles of text books, notes, articles, pads, files and folders and looking very glum) “The thinks that I think” are getting me nowhere.

*Perdono?.....Ah, Dr Seuss rhymes (1975), amore.*

(explodes) Well, I certainly don't *amore* this thesis. I thought that it was going in the right direction but now I'm not so sure. There's also all these ideas and thoughts churning round and round ..... lots of voices going round in my head ..... then I'm jumping back to examining previous experiences ..... then I'm thinking about my own guidance skills...then I'm talking to you ..... then I'm reading articles ..... it's all getting too much. I'm worn out. I can't seem to drive it on at all (shakes head). And my back is aching.....

I don't know. I feel like I am going round and round. I'm without a map ..... no, I'll tell you what, I'm stuck, stuck in the sand dunes .....

Ah, this is so frustrating!!!!

(Lola sits patiently)

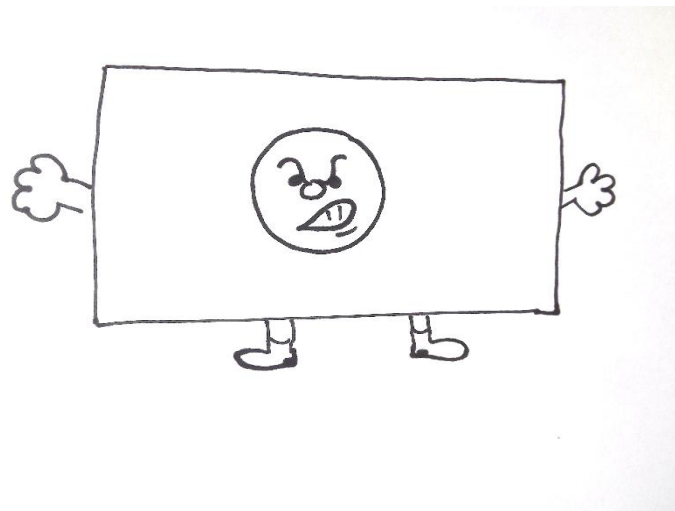
And another thing. Just don't get me going about narrative inquiry! Back, forward, up, down,

in, out! Time, events, living and re-living. It's endless. (grabs notes) See, see here .....

Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou may very well say that narrative research is “both demanding and complex work, but the rewards are potentially great” (2000, cited in Trahar, 2011, p.16), and Speedy talks about it being “broad, messy and inconclusive” (2008, p. 46), but I call it head-wrecking!

(Lola sits patiently)

If I was to draw myself right now I'd look like this (does a swift doodle).



*Fig. 3. Picture to demonstrate the stress of learning.*

Look, look, see, I'm like a board- stiff and awkward. When I haven't got time to write, I want to. Then, when I sit down to do it, I have nothing to say. Then, when I think of something worth writing about, the tick-tock of the deadline date paralyses me, so nothing gets done..... and my back is killing me with all of this typing. And if one more person tells me, “It will all come together in the end” or “You'll get it done” .....

Si.....(calmly) *You seem to have lots going on.*

(grumpily) Yes.

*Would it be helpful to take a look at things and see where we can go from here?*

(sighs) Ok.

*You seem to be saying that you feel that you have lost direction with your thesis and feel frustrated, even overwhelmed with the process.*

Yes.

*Capisco. Moustakas talks about “indwelling” (1990, p.24) as part of this research process whereby the researcher needs to turn inward to seek a deeper, more comprehension of an experience. I think that you are now expanding your knowledge at a subtler level, the “incubation” stage (p.28) as Moustakas calls it.....*

*As bad as the feelings are, stay with them, they will enrich your work.....*

*..... You've used the metaphor of driving several times before to describe your journey, but now you appear to be stuck in the sand dunes?*

Yes, but not only stuck in the dunes but wandering aimlessly about. I feel like I'm crossing

the Sinai desert, like the Israelites in the Old Testament. “For the children of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, ‘til all the people that were men of war, which came out of Egypt, were consumed, because they obeyed not the voice of the Lord” (Joshua 5:6).

*Impressionante*

(smiles slightly). I know, I impress myself at times.....but how do I cross to The Promised Land, to the “land that floweth with milk and honey?”

*Well, let's just sit with things for a moment?..... Tell me again how you feel?*

Well, confused, challenged ..... disrupted ..... (sighs) ..... lost .....

*And do you see a relationship between your use of vivid metaphor and your topic?*

.....No..... well, yes.... It's all about losing things.....loss of direction and focus.....it's not a nice feeling at all.....I just want to get to the other side..... like Moses and his people..... I'm sort of in a between place.....I've left one place and I'm trying to get to another.....  
.....

(taps head) That's it! I've missed the point entirely, haven't I? I'm in transition too.....I'm in a liminal space!

*Di preciso. Liminality frequently provokes feelings that all structure has been lost, as two*

*conditions are experienced; what has gone and what is to become, as Coombs, (2002, cited in Elliott, 2011, p.96) states. Yet, neither place is inhabited. While this liminal experience is challenging and disruptive, it affords you an opportunity to appreciate the ambiguity that runs through transitional places. Being immersed in it, you are examining and articulating provoked emotions that can lead to transformational experiences.*

Well, (grimaces) I might if I could think straight. (rubs back gingerly) I thought carving the elephant would be difficult but this is ten times as bad.....and my back muscles are in spasm ..... I'm contorted with pain.

*The injury to your back could be part of this. I'm not saying that your pain isn't real, but what you feel may be part of being in this space.*

(frowns) I don't understand.

*Well, think of it this way. You feel blocked, and in order to move to a different place, you need to become unblocked. Consider Thomas's (1958) poem;*

*Sunlight's a thing that needs a window*

*Before it can enter a dark room.*

*Windows don't happen*

*You are making windows and that takes effort. Don't underestimate the demands involved. You are continually searching for meaning in your experiences and the knowledge that you are encountering. You are also re-searching, as Freeman, (2007) suggests, through the*

*interpretive and imaginative labour of poiesis, by fashioning a creative approach which is meaningful to you. All of it is hard work and, in engaging in it, you are experiencing a whole gamut of conflicting emotions. You are creating something in a creative way. It's difficult and draining, as you labour from one state to another.*

Oh, so, (realisation dawns) it's like as I'm procreating the thesis, I'm physically paralleling the process. It's like I'm giving birth! With all the attendant feelings of having a new-born. There's pleasure and pain. I love it but I also hate it; I want it and I reject it; I nurture and abandon it: I have hope and I have despair all, at the same time.....That makes sense.....I need to give myself permission this bewilderment in order to accept things as they are.

Thank-you, knowing that helps me to contextualise the experience..... It's funny ..... Knowing that there's no control ..... well, it somehow helps me to feel more in control.

*Nessum problema. What do you think that you have learnt about yourself in this process?*

Err...err ..... I'm not sure ..... No, that isn't so. I think that I need time to explore my thoughts when I'm doing this sort of research. I need to play with the material so I can get my ideas across .....

*Tell me more.*

Talking with you helps a lot as you are part of the supportive network, along with others who are also academically orientated, and doing similar research.....it helps me to consider ideas from new angles and, as Samaras suggests, “provoke new ideas and interpretations, question

researcher assumptions, and practice in open, honest, and constructive feedback (2011, p.75/76). You all offer compassionate, empathetic “holding environments” (Winnicott, 1971) to explore and contain my notions and emotions about this journey.

*Bene, you are working well. Is there anyone in particular who helps in the supervision group?*

Well, Claire especially, as a particular critical friend. Look here, (pulls out a text) I think that she is;

a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work. (Costas and Kallick, 1993, cited in Samaras, p.75).

*Si, as we say in my country, “Chi trava un amica trova un tesoro” - whoever finds a friend, finds a treasure. (both nod saliently)*

*(Lola leans forward and leafs through another text) Si, considerare Chase (2005) who suggests that “students who receive information in a passive or transmissive manner are far less likely to understand what they have heard or read about than are students who have critically scrutinized, interpreted, applied or tested this information” (p.2). Indeed, (picking up the first book) Samaras also declares that “Critical collaborative inquiry contributes to a validation of findings because the analysis extends beyond one's personal views, thus*

*addressing personal biases” (p.72). You are progressing well.*

Thank-you, but I'm still not sure where I am going from here. How can I drive this forward?

*Well, let's sit with that for a moment.....(thinks inwardly) ..... tell me again what you want to get out of the thesis?*

I want to deepen my understanding of loss and how it affects people, to develop my own guidance practice.

*.....(thinks) well, maybe that is what you need to do. Take time to think about you have learnt so far. What is your research telling you?*

You're right. I'm starting to see connections..... I think that I can drive this on myself now. You've asked me some very useful questions.

*Non è niente. I've been watching my box set of The Sopranos lately. Tony goes to see his counsellor, so I've picked up a few tips.*

Thank-you it was very helpful.



## Progress Report 6: Picture this

*Hey, Lola!*

*I think that we've got this covered.*



Not far to go now.

*Brillante! The prosecco is on ice.....*

## Spring bog walk: Walking with Lola

The day is bright as we undertake our daily perambulation across the bog. At this hour of the morning the place is deserted, though soon neighbouring families will descend to start footing turf, as they have done for generations. For now, only the repetitive call of a distant cuckoo breaks the still morning air.

It will be good to get a bit of sun at long last Loll. We've journeyed through a long winter.

*Si. (nods) So, is this it? Are we nearly finished?*

Yeah, I think so.

*So have we done it? (wags tail) Have we carved the elephant?*

(laughs) Well, maybe ..... or, maybe we have carved something else, something finer...

(ponders) *Hmmmm? Cosa?*

Do you remember walking here last summer?

Si.

What did we see?

*(thinks).....Dragonflies! Bellissimo! With their fine gossamer wings and mighty iridescent bodies, who could forget them!*

(laughs) Well, that's the way that I would like people to see this research work.

Together I think that we've sculpted something that is delicate and memorable, yet powerful at the same time. Similarly, when people think about non-death losses, I want them to recall this research and the narratives contained within it. Bochner says that stories "promise the companionship of intimate details as a substitute for the loneliness of abstracted facts, touching readers where they live, and offering details that live in the mind" (1997, p.431). I would like to think that this research continues to live on in the mind of others because it offers something dynamic and useful.

*And did it deepen your understanding, as you hoped that it would?*

Yes, I did. It made me appreciate more that loss is an inevitable factor in our lives. While some losses are apparent, others are subtler and more hidden. Also, they don't occur in isolation but are affected by secondary losses, as well as being influenced by past losses (Humphrey and Zimpher, 1986). It has made me appreciate that as guidance

practitioners we need to be aware of our own losses, and how we have responded, or not, to them. This isn't something that we can learn from a book, it takes soul-searching effort and a willingness to be open and vulnerable in order to examine and reframe experience. And you know Lola, I've just realised that as we come to the end of this thesis, that this is also going to be a loss.

### *Cosa intendi?*

Well, there's part of me – a big part in fact – that is looking forward to de-cluttering the house of the stacks of papers and returning to a more orderly existence, but there is another part of me that will miss the thrill of researching and the demands of writing.

I know other students' may think that I'm mad for feeling this way, but it goes to show that what is a loss for one person may not be for another. The significance of the loss is unique to each individual and as guidance practitioners we have to be aware of this.

### *Si (nods sagely)*

I suppose that things are about to change ..... and ..... and that's it, isn't it! (clicks fingers) Loss is much more likely to occur during times of change. We inevitably have to relinquish something in the transitional process. So, as effective practitioners we must be aware that it's not just that losses *could* happen during times of transition, but that we *should* expect them to happen.

*And people need to make sense of these changes?*

Si, I mean, yes. It is because storytelling is a means through which identity is crafted (La Pointe, 2010) and offers “an internalised and evolving life story” (McAdams, 2001, p.117). Giddens similarly points out that “A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*” (1991. p.54). When traumatic events occur and assumptions about the self and the world are shattered (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), a new identity can be reconstructed and narrative reframing can take place. “Thus, identity is reformulated through an on-going process of self-constructed stories” (McMahon and Watson, 2013, p.280).

Coherence is an achievement, not a given. This is the work of self-narration: to make a life that seemed to be falling apart come together again, by re-telling and ‘re-storying’ the event’s in one’s life. (Bochner, 1997, p.429)

Yet, while identity consists of an internalised self-story, it is also perceived, bestowed and sustained by others. Anna spoke about her cousin labelling her as ‘disabled’ which acted as an epiphany, driving her to seek changes in her life. I remained the twinless-twin. The ‘looking-glass’ self (Goffman, 1959) responds to the interactions with, and evaluations of, others. Both of us had introjected cultural rules about what was a legitimate loss and both of us had down-played the effect of our losses (Doka, 1989). As guidance practitioners we can offer a secure holding environment (Winnicott, 1971), a safe reflective space, for people to tell their narratives ‘out loud to another’ (Reid, 2016,

p. 107) in order to construct new identities and the barriers that may limit them doing so.

*And do you think doing the research in a creative way worked?*

Yes, yes I do. I enjoyed working this way and hope that it engaged the reader. To be honest, Lola, I think that I would have found a more traditional approach to research too rigid and constricting. I'm not saying that I wouldn't have been up to the task, but I don't think that I would've been able to tell the same story, in the same way, and with the same effect. That is not to say that it has been easy though. I've found it challenging, even disruptive at times, and I've felt a whole gamut of emotions from paralysing self-doubt to deep satisfaction.

In doing so, it has made me more cognisant of the "feelings of loss of structure. The sense of being between, a withdrawal from one thing and an approach to another" (Elliott, 2011, p.96) that are not only part of this research process, but also present in lots of transitional experiences. That was the intention of the 'progress reports' dotted throughout this text, to depict some of the disorder of liminality, even though the research is presented in this straight forward fashion.

Similarly, as guidance counsellors we can unintentionally overlook the immensity of the transitional process for the people that we meet. Often people are in between two identity constructions – moving from one to another- as life changes occur. Stepping into the unknown is analogous to entering a liminal experience, and can be

accompanied by similar contradictory feelings. The unknown can be a scary place, doggie, as we struggle between the desire to know alongside the desire to avoid the anxiety and pain that inevitably accompanies such a discovery (Bion, 1965).

*So, tell me...is it possible to get rid of the anxiety and pain and just be contento?*

Ah, Loll, that's really what we don't want to do. Levine suggests that we share an illusion that emotions can be stored, and easily extracted, from some finite place, resulting in an unobtainable fantasy of the perfect, happy integrated self. "Though the ultimate wholeness is never given to us, it remains a vision that animates our work on ourselves" (1992, p.23). But we can't control life like that.....it's like the weather! There isn't 'good weather' or 'bad weather', neither is 'good' or 'bad', they are both, well, just weather. We need rain and we need sunshine for growth to happen. It's all part of life. Likewise, there are not good emotions or bad ones. They exist in us all of the time, in varying degrees. We can't control them anymore than we can control the weather, and nor would we want to. Craib considers that although we have "a desire to get out of the mess of life" (1994, p.131), it is this constant searching that prevents us accepting this struggle within our self.

*Ah, so rather than thinking that loss experiences occasion grief and that they can be integrated into our lives, we need to take a different approach and accept the chaos. conflict and pain are inevitable and so the notion of an integrated self is a paradox?*

Exactly! That's it Lola.

We are integrated and we maintain our integrity when we are aware of our internal conflicts and we can experience them without resorting too much to projection or to any other defence mechanisms ..... The point is less resolution of conflicts – the existence of conflict, internal and external, marks us off as human – than the way we live with conflicts, the honesty with which we recognise them in and to ourselves. (Craib, p.38/39)

*Fantastico! That's a lot of learning. And Anna? Do you think Anna learnt anything from the research?*

Well, I think that she enjoyed being part of the research process. It helped her to make better sense of her own story, and see how her life had shifted in a particular direction. Yet, I don't think that she has fully considered all that she had lost as a result of the accident. I suspect though that she will continue on with her journey and explore further. The same could be said for me, too. Re-visiting my own experiences allows me to see them in a wider cultural context, journeying me away from singular interpretations that have limited me in the past. Richardson states, "writing stories about our 'texts' is ..... a way of making sense of and changing our lives" (1997, p.5).

*And me and you, what did we learn?*



Lots Loll. I think that we learnt to outwit “our inner police system” (Hughes, 1982, p.7) and play so that I’ve been able to speak directly to my own experience. You’ve permitted me to explore different parts of me and communicate with the disparate voices within me. Thank-you. It’s been fun.

*Grazie. How’s your back?*

It’s funny, now we are nearly at the end, it’s fine. I’m like a gazelle!

*Oh, that’s good.*

*And they? The reader? Did they learn anything?*

I don’t know, only they can decide that for themselves, but I hope that they did.

*Do you think that they have stories to tell about their own losses?*

I’m sure that they do.

*I’d love to hear them*

And so would I doggie, so would I.....

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Letter of consent**

3<sup>rd</sup> March 2016

Dear

As you are aware I am doing an M.Ed in Adult Guidance and Counselling at Maynooth University and I am undertaking a thesis on how we adjust to and accommodate losses. As we discussed previously, I am particularly interested in your account of loss to gain insight into how you have made sense of what happened. As I mentioned, I would also like to share my experience with you.

I would like your permission to talk with you for up to an hour. I anticipate that we will meet two or three times and continue to be in contact on the phone. I intend to record our conversation on my mobile and I will be the only person who listens to what is said. I do not have a list of questions but hope that we will just talk to each other as we usually do. Your input into how you are portrayed in the research is welcome and you will be encouraged to select a pseudonym.

As you are aware our conversation is not a counselling session and if issues do arise for you the local voluntary counselling service is available. I have been in contact with them and they have agreed to this, although I did not identify you by name.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time before, during, or after we meet. If you have any questions please feel free to contact me on the usual number. Please be assured that you concerns will be deal with in a sensitive manner.

Yours sincerely,

Joy Manning

