

# HOW AND WHY WE SPEAK: REFLECTING ON LOSS AND CONNECTION

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*This is a personal account of the author's relationship with Angela, a client from whom much was learned about collaborative and respectful practices. Integrating narrative ideas, this is also a story about coming to terms with loss: over five years ago, after struggling with mental health problems and other oppressions for many years, Angela died of an overdose. The author also integrates the voice of her colleague, Laura Anderson, in order to explore the transformative journey that Angela's life and death continues to have the two of them and the struggle to hold on to hopefulness and connection.*



Lorraine Hedtke writes in *The Origami of Remembering* (2003) of the importance of telling our "relationship stories" – especially those stories that would otherwise go unnoticed. This is one of those stories. It is a personal account of my relationship with "Angela,"<sup>1</sup> a client who taught me much about collaborative and respectful practices through her continual resistance to being made "other." This is also a story about coming to terms with loss: over five years ago, after struggling for many years with despair and other oppressions, Angela died of an overdose.

## Journeys

*What is it that enables us to hear our clients' stories? At times in counseling we are careful followers, not knowing where the story will take us but convinced of our courage to be present to and for our clients.*

(Winslade, Crocket, Monk, 1997, p. 63)

I began seeing Angela for counseling in 1991 when I worked as a counselor in a sexual assault care centre seeing women and men

for issues related to sexual assault. Her long history of trauma and dislocation soon emerged during our conversations. During the course of our professional relationship, she struggled with multiple issues and stresses related to living in poverty, substance use, severe depression and other mental health problems, isolation, and chronic victimization in her current relationships. Around the time of her death, I was seeing Angela only sporadically; she had other long-standing professional and therapeutic supports in her life, but she kept up our connection through periodic phone calls and visits, often prompted by a crisis or significant event.

Despite my awareness of the depth of her distress and the often overwhelming nature of her problems, I experienced waves of shock, anger, and sadness at the awful finality of her death. And in spite of my intellectual understanding that some problems are too large to overcome, I experienced pangs of doubt and regret – at conversations not had and missed opportunities for connection – as well as a vague sense of failure and hopelessness. I started to write about our connection in the hope of finding a way "out" – a way to make sense of what had happened

### **To Tell Is to Remember**

Because I strongly believe that there is an us in them, and also a them in us...the opportunities for dialogue are opened up, allowing the stories of life to emerge. Hugo Kamyra (as cited in Burr Smith & Behan, 2002, p. 88)

In her fight against silence and despair, Angela had many strengths and resources. We shared many moments and stories which revealed her sense of humor, her unwavering ability to connect (and "take care" of others), her acute sensitivity to language, her keen insight which penetrated to the heart of a matter, and finally, her love of animals. I remember the sadness she felt when her beloved cats died as well as the story of when she showed up at the counseling centre with two kittens hidden in her pocket. Many of our visits involved small but meaningful gift-giving rituals involving bags of candy, fruit juices, and cards to mark various holidays and other significant events. Some of the most meaningful memories are those shared between me and Laura Anderson – a colleague and friend who developed close ties with Angela and was along on the journey the whole way. Her connection to Angela, as well as her relationship with me in trying to provide a circle of support for Angela, made Laura an integral part of this unfolding story.

One of the most memorable visits occurred a couple of years before Angela's death when she came to our counseling centre to share with us her project to try to make sense of her fragmented personal history. Letters and other official looking papers spilled out of an overburdened knapsack, and I think we all felt somewhat overwhelmed by the practical and emotional difficulties of her task. There was a moment of tension as none of us were sure how to proceed. Then, Laura said simply, "Wow - that sure is a lot of stuff." Angela glanced up for a second, hesitated,

and then broke into a big grin. We all began to laugh together and, in that moment, some heaviness lifted allowing humor and connection to briefly enter the room.

### **The Power of Naming**

*Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.* (hooks, 1990, p. 146)

More than any theoretical analysis of post-modern practice, it was Angela who taught me most about noticing the often taken-for-granted practices that can disconnect us from the clients we work with. After years of journeying through the mental health system, she had a finely tuned understanding of the potentially disconnecting effects of clinical language as well as the role of language in shaping meaning. My education in treating clients as "people rather than cases" (Winslade, Crockett, & Monk, 1997) began almost immediately when Angela walked through the door of my counseling office and challenged the very idea of keeping a file on her. Refusing to be categorized and filed away, she stated simply but clearly, "I am not a chart number."

Her intuitive understanding of the inherent power in the act of naming, and her understanding of language as an act of resistance, was also evident in the dance we did negotiating the language of our relationship. Questions such as: "How are you coping?" (too clinical) became simply: "How are you doing?" Angela seemed to intuitively know the value of what Michael White calls "experience-near description," language which is closest to the subjective experience of the person rather than that derived from professional knowledge (as cited in Winslade, Crockett, & Monk, 1997, p. 69). After a while, even my ears could detect phrases that disconnected us and there were times when I

could sense the distancing effect of my words even as they were leaving my mouth.

The issue of language surfaced in other ways as well as we struggled over the naming of our relationship. Over time, Angela came to define/name our professional/therapeutic connection more as a friendship. While I remained uncomfortable with this label because of the blurring of personal/professional lines it implied, at some point Angela asserted her right to name our relationship and the meaning it held for her. She began to refer to me as her friend – and to her we were.

### Learning to “Not Know”

*I like the idea of being more modest about what we know, not claiming what we know to be more certain than it is...our culture is deeply invested in the idea of certainty.*

John Winslade (as cited in Burr Smith & Behan, 2002, p. 50)

While my relationship with Angela was rich and rewarding, it was also frustrating and difficult. Her chronic emotional struggles often forced me to confront feelings of uncertainty and helplessness as well as fears for her safety. I often felt at a loss in helping her deal with intense feelings of despair exacerbated by the oppressive living conditions of poverty, marginalization, and violence. Despite my appreciation of her courage, survival skills, and resourcefulness, I found myself at times overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness at her circumstances.

Towards the end of our relationship, worn down by years of mental health crises and at times seemingly overwhelming problems, I found myself going increasingly to a place of “not knowing” and often “not doing” as well. I had moved towards trying to be with her and just saying “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure” when I really *did* know or *was* sure. It

felt tentative, and at times not very useful, but somehow more honest. Witnessing was, at times, all I had to offer.

After her death, I was similarly thrown into “not knowing” territory, asking questions that were difficult, if not impossible, to answer: Why weren’t the connections and support that Angela had so carefully cultivated over the years, along with her hard won survival skills, enough to sustain her? Did she deliberately end her life? And, given her long and at times intense struggles with suicidal thoughts and actions, does the answer really matter? Finally, and perhaps most critically, what more (or what else) could have been done to help?

### Sustaining Connection

*I am waiting for them to stop talking about the “other,” to stop even describing how important it is to be able to speak about difference. It is not just important what we speak about, but how and why we speak.*

(hooks, 1990, p. 151)

Despite my many efforts to find an adequate ending for this piece, it remained incomplete when I sent it to Laura for her response. When I received her comments, it became clear that the most fitting way to end this piece was with her words as this article is, in many ways, part of our ongoing conversation to make sense of the impact that Angela’s life, and death, continues to have on us. Laura writes:

And so Karen, we continue on a path...I am crying and laughing and missing you and Angela. I am so aware of the specialness of our connection...to each other and my connection to the two of you. I want so badly to walk into the counseling centre and gather in your office or mine with her. I think I just put the

loss of her into a spot in the universe that I couldn't look at.

This story stands as a legacy to Angela and to all the good things that she is...the ties she had with all the interesting folks. The places she inhabited in her own style. The humor we shared with her and the pain you/ we helped her carry. So much more, and also things so simple: the cats, candy, cards, conversations, and caring.

The story brings me to a place of wondrous meaning. A place that encompasses loss and presence, broken hearts and mended souls, a day in the life and life as days, and above all, connection that will sustain and transcend. Angela would be happy with the care you took for putting in just the right words and honoring her attention to detail...I can see Angela smiling as we seek just the right language to do her justice. She might say with a smile, "It's taken you a long time to get me right, hasn't it?"

While it has been important to express and honor the impact of my relationship with Angela, the writing of this piece has not been an easy task. At times revisiting the story of our relationship has helped me connect to moments of hopefulness, connection, and strengths (both hers and my own); at other times it connects me only to the sadness of losing her. It is these memories and images, however, that help sustain in me the idea that people are not defined by their problems and oppressions – however real those are. I hope that the telling of this story does justice to our connections and to the transformative impact Angela has had on our work/lives by giving voice to both what has been lost and what has been sustained.

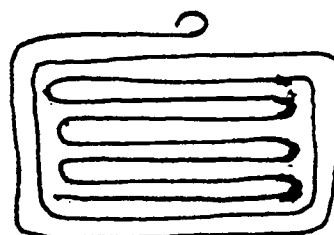
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Karen Gold, MSW, and Laura Anderson, MSW, have extensive experience as clinical social workers and educators and a longstanding interest in the power of stories to shape our own lives and the lives of the clients we work with. Karen is currently a counselor and educator at Women's College Hospital in Toronto. Laura is currently in private practice in British Columbia. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: [karen.gold@wchospital.ca](mailto:karen.gold@wchospital.ca).

## (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> The name has been changed and detailed information about circumstances of Angela's own life have been left out to protect her privacy as well as to minimize describing her as a series of clinical issues.



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