



Book Review

Writing the Self in Bereavement: A Story of Love, Spousal Loss, and Resilience

By Reinekke Lengelle

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Every once in a while, a remarkable book comes along that has the signature of a seminal text, works such as Arthur Frank's *Wounded Storyteller* (1995), Paul Eakin's *Living Autobiographically* (2008), or Thomas Couser's *Vulnerable Subjects* (2004). What makes such texts extraordinary is their noteworthy ability to explore new territory on important subjects and significantly adding new knowledge. I believe that *Writing the Self in Bereavement: A Story of Love, Spousal Loss, and Resilience* is a text that bears this signature.

Reinekke Lengelle, a professor of writing for personal development, narrates her grief in the first one-and-a-half years following her partner Frans's diagnosis with cancer, his illness, and death. Early grief typically involves a narrowing of perspective, trapping the bereaved in a laser-like focus on all-encompassing loss. By contrast, *Writing the Self in Bereavement* offers the reader a kaleidoscope of rich, insightful, and novel perspectives on the lived experience of writing to integrate grief. This autoethnography seamlessly incorporates astute scholarship and wide-ranging research with poetry and dialogical and imaginative writing.

The thesis of the book is that writing is a companion for life 'because it does exactly the two things that the best companions do: it holds me close enough to be vulnerable (and thus comforted) and far enough to be honest

(and therefore clear-minded)' (p. 171). The chapters are organised thematically and address the complex issues surrounding spousal loss: early grief, unfinished business, the relationship history (including ongoing imagined dialogues with Frans), sexual desire after death, willingness to be present with all emotions, secondary losses, the ethics of writing a relational autoethnography, and lastly guidance on writing the self in bereavement.

In addressing these complex issues, Lengelle incorporates and interrogates various theories, including Dialogical Self Theory (DST), constructivist and contemporary bereavement theories, meaning-making and resilience, and psychoanalytic and cognitive approaches to investigate her experience of grief through the medium of writing. She also relates her personal experience to well-known literary accounts of spousal loss. These varied approaches explore territory that previous works on grief, whether scholarly or personal writing such as memoirs, have not, or scarcely ventured, to investigate.

Writing the Self in Bereavement breaks new ground in our understanding of spousal loss and bereavement by daring to address taboo subjects. Particularly noteworthy are the chapters on unfinished business and sexual desire after death. Lengelle laments that 'in the stack of over 20 books that I read on grief and loss... virtually nothing is said about ongoing sexual desire' (p. 56) and that ambivalence and unfinished business with a loved one is also hardly mentioned in the literature (p. 185). In writing openly about her sexual desire for Frans after his death, she addresses a topic that I believe has not been raised in memoirs before. While some widow memoirs, such as *Saturday Night Widows* (2013), narrate sexual desire, this is in relation to repartnering, not sexual desire for the deceased.

A central theme of the book is unfinished business with Frans and the need to honestly address this and to avoid idealisation of the dead, instead portraying the deceased as a real person with strengths and weaknesses. Lengelle's own unfinished business relates to boundary setting in the context of Frans's ex-wife and his self-acknowledged 'short fuse' (p. 4). In raising and researching the issue of unfinished business, Lengelle spearheads consciously avoiding idealisation of Frans, thus going against the entrenched cultural western concept of '*don't speak ill of the dead*' (p. 55, emphasis in original).

A primary theory employed in *Writing the Self in Bereavement* is DST, which posits that ‘we are not a singular, stable self, but a multi-voiced and somewhat integrated collection of selves’ (p. 192). Central to Lengelle’s approach is her in-depth engagement with the dialogical space, with Frans, herself, and others. She creatively engages DST methodologies used in clinical application by writing imagined dialogues with Frans, as well as multiple I-positions, or selves. A particularly creative approach is the multi-voiced dialogue in Chapter 2, ‘Unfinished Business’, between the I-positions inner counsellor, Rein-Who-Wants-To-Be-Heard, Frans, Grudge, and Goop. Lengelle credits these written healing dialogues with Frans as having allowed her to posthumously resolve at least some of her unfinished business with him (pp. 45–48).

Unexpectedly, Lengelle waits until the last chapter of her book before describing and theorising the role DST plays in writing-the-self in bereavement and in continuing bonds with Frans. In view of the prominent position afforded to DST and entering the dialogical space, it might have been more useful for the reader to have insights and reflections structurally integrated into the sections where the dialogical writing takes place, such as the remarkable multi-voiced dialogue just mentioned. The insights gained from this therapeutic dialogue appear much later, in the last chapter, ‘Writing the Self in Bereavement’, which discusses the ‘specific and essential benefits’ of writing (p. 165).

Turning to ethics, I have previously argued that an awareness of the complex, multilayered nature of ethical decision making is one of the most important aspects of undertaking personal writing about a deceased spouse: ‘given the intertwined nature of the self and the very otherness of a spouse, writing about a deceased husband is an ethical minefield’ (Den Elzen, 2019, p. 163). Lengelle shows herself to be acutely aware of the importance of ethics in writing a book about spousal loss and reveals her commitment to ethics throughout her book. In particular, she devotes Chapter 10, ‘Sharing the Work’, to the topic of ethics, and demonstrates a deep, ongoing engagement with the ethics of writing about a deceased spouse. She answers six ethical questions that had been posed to her by a colleague, including a question regarding the privacy of Frans and his ex-wife and living relatives. To ensure an ethical representation of Frans and his bond with his ex-wife, Lengelle does not simply rely on her own inner compass and highly-considered reflections on the topic but draws on discussions with colleagues and their feedback for guidance.

Central to Lengelle's process of grief is her practice of and commitment to being present in the now and with all her emotions. She provides the reader with insights on how to be present with grief: 'If anyone asked me for advice on grieving so far, I would say, *allow all the feelings to be there without inflating and inflaming these with additional thoughts*' (p. 104, emphasis in original). She frames the present moment as a place of solace in her grief, both during Frans's illness and after his death.

In viewing being present with grief in all its facets as a key factor in the integration of her loss, Lengelle echoes the well-established and researched concept of mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2021). Surprisingly, however, she never refers to mindfulness itself. It would have contributed additional depth to Lengelle's foregrounding of being present with all her emotions if it had been theorised with research on mindfulness.

Lengelle successfully shows, practices, and theorises the power of writing-the-self in bereavement. With her distinctive personal voice that employs poignant self-disclosure and intensely honest self-reflection, Lengelle reveals herself to be a wise griever. By sharing her personal journey with unwavering honesty, interwoven with in-depth and broad-ranging, up-to-date interdisciplinary research, she allows the reader to gain wisdom and understanding as well. She achieves her goal of writing a hybrid autoethnographic text that appeals to 'normal people' and scholars alike to 'inspire awakenings that ripple out and offer comfort to others' (pp. 34–35) without being prescriptive (p. 6).

I highly recommend this book, whether to scholars, to practitioners of therapeutic arts, to instructors as a tertiary textbook, or to the bereaved and those supporting others in grief. One of the things that struck me most about *Writing the Self in Bereavement* is Lengelle's unflinching honesty—it has inspired me and stayed with me long after I put down the book.

References

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