

## Editorial:

# Grief and Hermeneutics: Archives of Lives and the Conflicted Character of Grief

**Nancy J. Moules**

In memory of John William Moules (July 13, 1925 - June 1, 2017)



Kate Beamer's (2017) article, *And Coyote Howled: Listening to the Call of Interpretive Inquiry*, in its raw grief, and thoughtful insight, brings to mind the hermeneutic capacity to understand grief as "not quite this and not quite that." As much as I have studied grief from a hermeneutic research approach (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015), and I have counselled bereaved parents, and stood present with many parents at the death of their children, I have not personally felt grief in the way I do now, as five months later, I continue to interpret and re-interpret the death of my father, John Moules.

In my many writings of grief (see for e.g., Moules, 1998; Moules, Simonson, Prins, Angus, & Bell, 2004), I focus on debunking stage model theories, and notions of acceptance and resolution

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and, rather, offer an idea of grief as a biological, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive experience that “becomes an enduring, sometimes relenting, sometimes poignant, but *always* present part of the life of a person who has lost” (Moules et al., 2004, p. 100). My studies and writings are primarily (though not exclusively) focused on understanding grief from the lens of parental loss.

I am coming to know grief differently now. Grief is not just about saying goodbye and hello (White, 1989; Moules et al., 2004); it is not just about making and maintaining a connection to the dead person (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Moules et al., 2004), but it also involves something more complicated, especially in the death of a spouse, a parent, or perhaps a close friend – any loss other than the loss of a child. It involves moving back and forth between memory, love, anger, disappointment, reality, romance, gratitude, admiration, regret, and history. It is working through the conflicting things, memories, and emotions that sideswipe you when you least expect them. The death of a child is different from other deaths as I believe it involves the unconditional love that is often held for a child. I am not, by any means, claiming that parent/child relationships are not complex nor that the death of a child is uncomplicated, or even that it is the hardest death to deal with, but I have come to believe there is something that is different in the deaths of other loved ones in our lives who hold different roles than that of a child. In this editorial, I will address this from the perspective of a daughter who has recently lost a father.

During the early weeks after my father’s death, a wise friend recommended a book to me written by Plum Johnson (2014), *They Left Us Everything: A Memoir*. In the book, the author writes of her experience of the deaths of her parents and the work of sorting through the archives of their lives in clearing out the 23-room house where they had lived for decades. I, too, experienced this act of sorting through the archives. Along with my son, who has a much more discerning eye than me for what is important to keep, we saw both of my parents’ lives remembered, recalled, and enlivened – the work of *aletheia* (Moules, 2015).

An old steamer trunk, marked Frosh, 1948, which marked the year my father graduated with a BA from Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick.



He would have moved with this trunk from his home in Sydney, Nova Scotia, in 1944. In the trunk was an old boy scout uniform, small; we cannot trace the date of when he wore it. There

are old pennants from his university and different places in Canada, some of which we see hanging here on the walls of his dormitory room at Mt. A., the photo taken in #239, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor West, Trueman House, 1947 (as indicated on the back of the photo). Seeing them in full, if faded, colour in the trunk stood in stark contrast to seeing them in the black and white of the photo – the still, colourless memory of a colourful past, preserved in an old steam trunk, still imbedded with the pins that held them up on the walls of dormitory in 1947.



In the lower level of the trunk, are more artifacts of their lives, and my brother and my lives - - all old toys my brother and I had as young children: two sets of a Barrel of Monkeys, old puppets, old memories.

On top of the trunk sits our sick bed table, which would be brought to our beds with our meals when we were sick, and could be tilted up after the meal on which to play, draw, colour, or write.



Inside another old steamer trunk, I find my last cast and leg brace when extensive treatment for my club feet was completed. Faded signings on the cast are reminiscent of my past: Geordie and Richard Mohl, dear family friends, both now deceased; “your brother, Donald;” “love Daddy.”



There are many other archives too: all my dad’s past sermons for his church services, letters from his little sister Hannah (now deceased), photographs of family, photographs of people we cannot identify: many weddings, baptisms, unknown faces where my father’s service as a clergyman put him present at important and memorable moments in strangers’ (to us) lives. There are things we cannot quite figure out or understand, and things that are somewhat disturbing. As Johnson wrote, working through the archives of someone else’s life, especially one where you are a character in that life, is a complicated process and it is evocative and unsettling. It raises more questions than one even knows one has. She wrote:

How could I still have questions? Friends warned me of this. They said, “When your mother dies, you’ll wish you asked her some questions.” I had more than sixty years to ask questions, but the questions didn’t form until after she’d gone. Now there are questions I didn’t even know I had. (Johnson, 2014, p. 46)

Such is the nature of hermeneutics as well. Understanding hermeneutically, researching hermeneutically, is complicated, evocative, and unsettling, often uncovering more questions than answering them. It is never a “neutral enterprise” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 58). Beamer links the idea of the hermeneutic address to that of humility, claiming that the same humility involved in conducting hermeneutic research lies also in the surrender to grief. Grief is complex and complicated, never quite this or that; it is ambiguous and, like hermeneutics, it takes on that ambiguity with humility. Beamer cites Caputo’s foreword in the Moules et al. book: “Hermeneutics does not shy away from the difficulty of life but summons the courage to deal with life in all of its ambiguity. Hermeneutics takes the risk of embracing the coming of what we cannot see coming” (Caputo, in Moules et al., 2015, p. xiii).

As much as I thought I knew grief, I surrender to the humility of it; I did not see what was coming. My son taught me to embrace, rather than discard, the treasures, artifacts, and archives of my father's life. It takes courage to look at them, and courage to face the ambiguity of grief, the complicated nature of remembering and enlivening someone. Relationships are never quite this or that either, and hermeneutics reminds us that the capacity to remain in this in-between is exactly what allows us to be open to what might come.

Patience.

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