

And Coyote Howled: Listening to the Call of Interpretive Inquiry

Kate Beamer

Abstract

In this article, I explore aspects of grief and the surprising mirroring of hermeneutic research and the experience of grief. Neither grief or hermeneutic research are predictable, formulaic, or without surprises, and both require patience, humility, and an openness to what comes to greet us in the nature of aletheia.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, interpretive inquiry, grief, aletheia,

I stood at the front of the hall, tracing the outline of your urn with my finger. A traditional urn did not seem to suit you, however much a container can depict a life, so I selected one made from bamboo, box shaped and tall, with trees carved into it. My fingers followed the indented grooves of the branches, rooting me to a place I did not want to be. Two hundred people milled around behind me, but I only saw you. Your face, encased by silver frames, holding our sons, arms around each other, smiling. *We were happy*. Hands approached me from behind, resting on my shoulders. Even in my cognitive distance, I could hear a semblance of reassurances: “You’ve got this;” “You’re such a strong woman;” “If anyone can do this, it’s you.” Something outside of the funeral hall window caught my attention and my gaze shifted toward a rustling in the bushes. Coyote. It was one of those bone chilling winters, a harsh climate, that provided comfort to me in its barren, hollow form. Yet still, there was movement. After the memorial, I returned home to a now empty house and a flood of emails all containing the same theme: strength and resilience. I read them on my phone while lying on the floor, completely gutted, shaking, in the fetal position, wrapped in the blanket that you died in. Their written depiction of me did not match what I saw

Corresponding Author:

Kate Beamer
University of Calgary
Email: kmbeamer@ucalgary.ca

in the reflection of the sliding glass door: a woman, broken, ripped open, heaving, a guttural cry sounding out from deep inside, hands entwined in snot soaked Kleenex, trying to move my wedding band from my left ring finger to my right. *How did I get here? How did we get here? And what am I going to do now?*

Historically, grief has been conveyed as a temporary, sequential process that one endures for a period of time until it ceases, returning us to our “normal” selves (Moules, 1998; Moules, 2009; Thirsk & Moules, 2013). While this notion of staged grieving is becoming replaced by more current theories of grief that view it as an enduring and lifelong transformation of the self (Moules, 1998; Moules, 2009; Thirsk & Moules, 2013), the effects of the stage models are still influential in how many people perceive and process grief. Grief is portrayed as something that we need to rid ourselves of through an unrealistic cloak of courage and detachment. Words such as “resilience” and “strength” seem to denote a stance of success that are needed to conquer grief: “Resilience, as an idea, carries an association with strength of will. To be able to resume an original shape in the aftermath of trauma is often considered laudable, and those who are able to ‘bounce back’ and recoil in the face of adversity should be admired” (Thomas, 2016, para. 4).

How can one possibly rebound from the sudden death of a spouse? As mentioned, grief has long been compiled into a staged sequential model (Moules, 1998; Moules, 2009; Moules, Simonson, Prins, Angus, & Bell, 2004) that we are encouraged to “whip through” in order to “return back to normal.” But there is no return and, in my life trajectory, there was never a normal. Two days after my husband died suddenly in his sleep, I was accepted into the doctoral program. I laugh a bit now, at the naiveté of my pre-grief written proposal. I was intent, focussed, strong, sure of myself, tenacious. I saw in myself then, the resiliency that I was supposed to possess now. I knew what I was going to do and how I was going to do it. I was going to grab research by the horns and show everyone that I knew exactly what I was doing. There was no doubt, no wavering, no openness to feedback. I had studied the topic of curricular interventions for child sexual abuse survivors in my master’s degree, and I was going to drive it home for my doctoral dissertation. This was my calling, where my strength lay, where I tread familiar ground. The certainty of the tone of my proposal seems foreign to me now—that was the voice of resilience and strength. But now...but now... everything is tethered together by cryptic threads that are rapidly dissolving with each out breath. Now I live on shaky ground. My topic, my life, the reality as I once knew it, is crumbling beyond my control. The strength I once knew has been replaced by an uneasy vulnerability, and I rest in limbo, torn between the world I once knew and the one that is now consuming me. This was not the plan. But apparently, Hermes had other plans for me, and perhaps this was the lesson. Perhaps, I was being called.

Like life’s traumas, the hermeneutic address is something that can happen to us, without heed or warning. What we may have conceptualized as our topic might not be pursued in the manner that we initially had planned. Sometimes, it is what bothers us the most, the thing that keeps us up at night, that nags us, provokes us, pisses us off, that ends up being our topic. It is the responsibility of interpretivists to listen to that call when it arises:

As a practice, hermeneutics is not a neutral enterprise; we do not simply select a method and aim it at the work to accomplish something we want to do. Rather, it is action called upon for the achievement of some moral good... It is a call that addresses us in the

first person ... what can I add to the larger conversation, in the discipline, that might help us see, think about, act differently toward the phenomenon? (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015, p. 58)

Everything I see now is tinted through a grief stricken lens. The resiliency in which I drafted my initial proposal has since left the building. What calls out to me now is not the same that had provoked me previously. The thoughts that keep me awake at night, the horrific images of your lifeless body covered in carefully placed sheets to hide the autopsy cuts, me throwing myself on top of you, pounding your stiff chest with my fists—the sheets falling to the floor; I have been ripped open to a point where everything looks different; everything has been marked by you. There is no return to a previous self, for this is where I live now. Grief has affected my perceptions and understanding of the world, so it is inevitable that it will impact my topic of research; yet, it is not a temporal shift just as my grief is not a transient state. It is a new way of knowing.

Grief is not a temporal state; it is a transformation of the self: “grief becomes a permanent, enduring, sometimes relenting, sometimes poignant, but always present part of the life of a person who has lost” (Moules, 1998, p. 148). Part of accepting this transformation is surrendering to the fact that it is happening, and even though it is well beyond our control, that is okay.

There is a belief in our society that if we do everything right, no one will suffer. It is supported by the paradigm that believes we can control and manipulate our worlds entirely—but there is nothing anyone can do to escape grief. Death is not something that we can overcome. Perhaps grief brings suffering that we can never escape because it also means we have lived and loved. Perhaps it is in grief that we are still reminded about our nature of the lack of control over some aspects of our worlds, the nature of human suffering, and the ever-present possibilities of hope that allow suffering to be something beyond pain and anguish. (Thirsk & Moules, 2013, p. 93)

There is nothing I can do to escape this. As I kept repeating to the police officers when they knocked on the door to tell me of your passing: “this is actually happening.” No amount of strength is going to change this. So, it is in this sheer state of vulnerability and woundedness that I realize, no, I have not “got this”—and I am starting to think that it is not only okay to feel this way, but also necessary.

A certain humility is needed when conducting hermeneutic research in the same vein that ego has no place in grief. Just as I must surrender to the process of grief, I must also be vulnerable in the calling of interpretive work. Hermeneutics deals with life, in all of its complexities and messiness, in ways that many other methodologies do not recognize. Therefore, when life shifts, when life gets complicated, when we are called to attend to a different dilemma than one first imagined, hermeneutics is there to embrace that. For hermeneutics thrives in the difficulties of life, demands that risks be taken to examine the ambiguity of life:

Hermeneutics is not a theory of knowledge but the art of life and death, and ranges over the length and breadth and depth of life. Hermeneutics does not shy away from the

difficulty of life but summons the courage to deal with life in all its ambiguity. Hermeneutics takes the risk of embracing the coming of what we cannot see coming. (Caputo, in Moules et al., 2015, p. xiii)

The art of life and death. When the trickster appears. When our world is turned instantly upside down, when the unforeseeable happens. These are the moments of address in which hermeneutics delves into and thrives. Hermeneutics is not about deductively charging into the world, trying to prove its own theory. It is much softer than that. It is not about resilience or objective truth, it is about curiosity into life's most complex and intricate experiences. When we set out to discover the truth about something, to learn its innermost essence, a sense of humility is required: "Hermeneutical questioning is informed by a humility toward one's own not knowing, a genuine curiosity toward what the other might have to say, and the goal of shared understanding – not simply taking information for one's own ends" (Moules et al., 2015, p. 42). If our intent when conducting research is to really understand something, then we must be prepared to encounter the unknown. In this way, it is no different from grief. This journey I have been placed on is not about being strong; it is about surrendering to this uncharted experience and trusting enough to let it move me to where I need to be. So, while vulnerability and humility are needed to truly listen to the call as it appears in our lives, so is a sense of bravery to follow that call, not knowing exactly where it will take us, but having the faith to know its importance.

A compelling aspect of hermeneutics is its correlation between understanding and experience. We are situated in this life with our own personal, cultural, and historical experiences. What we experience in life often calls out to us as interpretivists. But what if that experience changes? What if something occurs to trump our past priorities of experience? What if what was once important fades softly into the back glow of another, more urgent experience? This grief, this deep well of seemingly endless grief has changed me. It directs my interests, has changed my perceptions on fairness, and sorrow, and hardship. In essence, my understanding has changed. How could it not? Having the police come to my door, and tell me in front of our two small children that you are dead; watching my sons fall to the floor in confused anguish, falling alongside them in a heap of hysteria. Being whisked off to identify your body, trying in a desperate attempt of preservation to crawl into your casket before you entered the cremator. Clawing at the wood panels of the box as you proceeded to enter anyway. How could it not? This new form of understanding has direct implications on my topic of research, and by revisiting my topic through this new lens, I also have come to understand myself better. It is because our understanding is so directly tied to our experiences where the most precious form of knowing occurs: "All understanding is ultimately self-understanding" (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 251). We are not stagnant in life, and neither is our topic. Just as our experience grows and evolves, so does our understanding of our topical interest. Our topics also have life, and cannot remain unchanged. New research may debunk our previous theories; different methodologies interpret different results. The researcher's experience also has direct effect on the topic. While I still am in pursuit of the topic of child sexual abuse survivors' experiences in schools, I approach it differently now, with more of a focus on the narrative nature of trauma, and with a gentler, more humble and curious outlook, knowing that I am not all knowing, knowing that the Trickster is always waiting in the shadows to reinforce that humility if needed. We are always moving, but if we move in patience, it could bring us much closer to the truth than hardened strength and resilience ever could.

Instead of attending to research with some type of indignant fervour, what if it was approached instead with humility and patience? What if it was approached with the same resonance that I have learned to embrace grief? “Patience, in its original meaning, was a virtue that enabled a person to overcome his suffering and, in some sense, enact understanding in the face of the faults and limitations of others” (Thomas, 2016, para. 8). Sometimes, in order to truly embrace understanding, we must put aside our preconceived notions and ego in patient perseverance of true understanding. What I have learned about grief as I meander on its journey is that there is no prescription; there are no five stages (Moules, 1998; Moules et al., 2004). Grief does not proceed in a systematic format with shock followed by anger followed by denial. Oftentimes it is more cyclical, one step forward two steps back. As soon as I feel that the anger has been conquered, it comes rushing back in grabbing me by the throat, urgent, overwhelming, and consuming. Perhaps it is the trickster fooling me again. Perhaps Hermes is trying to tell me that the lesson has not yet been learned, that I am still on the brink of discovering. Patience.

Patience recognises suffering in the difficulties of one’s life and that of another. ...patience becomes a way of bearing sorrows. Unlike resilience, which implies retuning to an original shape, patience suggests change and allows the possibility of transformation as a means of overcoming difficulties. It is a simultaneous act of defiance and tenderness, a complex existence that gently breaks barriers. In patience, a person exists on the edge of becoming. With an abundance of time, people are allowed space to be undefined, neither ending nor broken, but instead, transfigured. And it is an act of courage, because only the unknown lies on the other side of the threshold of events we seek to overcome. (Thomas, 2016, para. 9)

It is the same with interpretive work. Patience is needed to understand the phenomenon, to understand our positioning in its interpretation. It also requires a sense of openness that is not characteristic in a stance of guarded strength and resilience. As soon as we have firmly established in our minds that that is the way that something occurs, we close off our likelihood of seeing other possibilities. We become resistant to change and potential truth. I could have easily prescribed myself to the common notion that grief occurs in temporary sequential stages that, once completed, would return me back to a sense of normalcy, back to where I was. But there is no turning back. Instead, encapsulated in a state of egoless vulnerability, I opened myself to other forms of truth. There is always another way. Yet it did take the death of a spouse to break down those walls of righteous indignation, of a sense of egoic mastery. But that is the way of the trickster. As soon as you think you have truly “got” or understood something, he is there to playfully tell you, “not so fast my child, not so fast.”

It is important that both the experience of grief and the topics that drive us not remain hidden, but instead, needs to be uprooted from where it often resides, deep inside, and be unearthed. For what remains hidden, can never be brought to light. This is a hermeneutic concept called *aletheia*:

[Aletheia] is also connected to the mystical River Lethe in Hades; the River of Forgetfulness – a river that, if crossed, erased memory. Aletheia is the antithesis of this: it is about remembering. In its unconcealment, enlivening, and remembering, aletheia

brings home what may have been lost, forgotten, deadened, or concealed... (Moules, 2015, pp. 1-2)

Aletheia occurs when something that has been historically hidden, is brought to the surface: “Aletheia works against what was dead bringing it to life; it remembers and unconceals what was forgotten or lost...” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 3). Hermeneuts often set out in pursuit of unearthing and revealing some of life’s most complex and intricate, often intimate, experiences. We need to unearth and reveal and remember in order to move forward, as we draw on our pasts to guide us. It is this concept of aletheia and remembering that is becoming more prominent in more modern theories of grief: “Grief invites us to look back, to remember. We willingly and necessarily, in grief, walk back into time and history, recalling when the one who died was physically present. At the same time, however, we learn how to continue to live and to move ahead” (Moules et al., 2004, p. 103). Unearthing what was once hidden or what we wish could remain hidden is not always easy. Eight months later, and I still wake up every morning expecting you to be there. In my fog of early morning grogginess, I roll over to reach for you. It is only when my hand grazes the empty pillow that I remember my reality. As much as I wish I could plunge into the River Lethe and forget all that has happened, as much as I instinctually want to push these memories of you down so that they reside deep in unconscious remembering, I know that this is not the way. These memories and stories of you need to be unearthed. I do it for our children. I do it in honour of the love I have for you.

A part of the reason that we live in this world is to experience the terrible hermeneutic angst of remembering. There are times we wish to swim the River Lethe and forget, and there are times we are afraid we already have and we clamour to reclaim what is lost from memory. ...In hermeneutic understanding, we know that things must be awakened, recalled, remembered, and suffered. (Moules, 2015, p. 4)

It is important to remember suffering. It guides me to being a better person; it is through suffering that we have the possibility of transformation, and as Gadamer states, “a transformation into the true” (1969/1980, p. 112).

Many cultures possess stories of the trickster, that sneaky character who can pull the rug out from under you, teach you lessons and illuminate experiences. He goes by many names: Coyote, Raven, Hermes, Loki (“Trickster,” n.d.). The trickster character has been used in folklore to demonstrate the impermanence of life, reveal secret or sacred knowledge (albeit indirectly), and instigate change. As the messages of the trickster are often indirect, interpretation is required in order to find the meaning behind the messages. Indeed, hermeneutics is associated with the trickster Hermes, who had “the capacity to see things anew and his power is change, prediction, and the solving of puzzles” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 2). One cannot encounter the trickster without a sense of reverent humility. The trickster appears when a guide is needed, when inexplicable change occurs, when we seek meaning for events we do not understand: “The Coyote or Trickster, as embodied in Southwest native American accounts, suggests the situation we are in when we give up mastery but keep searching for fidelity, knowing all the while that we will be hoodwinked” (Haraway, 1988, p. 594). In order to best interpret the messages presented to us by the trickster, we must be patient and still enough to listen carefully. We must read the

signs. We cannot hear the messages if we are wrapped up in an indignant shroud of strength. As often, it is in our most vulnerable state where true resilience is found.

I sit here writing this one day after the worst mass shooting in modern American history. Over fifty families instantaneously now join me in the grief journey. Tomorrow there will be more. The wind whips at my windows, unruly, caused by an unexpected fall snowstorm. Coyote howls. Life is precious, fleeting, sacred. This is not where I thought my research was going to go, in the same vein that I did not know this is where my life was going to go. My life has now been divided into two parts: life with you, and life after you. I try to follow it as it ebbs and flows. A small settling of dust has accumulated on the tops of your framed pictures, and I know now that you have been gone for a while. It is my only indication that time has passed, as I live out each day in horrific presence of your absence in my world. But I also know that these feelings too will pass, and I will be propelled forward into a new state. I must be patient. I now approach my topic of research in a state of humility and vulnerability, seeing it differently, more clearly than before. For even in death, we can be given gifts of understanding. That is the way of the trickster. I cradle my topic carefully in my hands, the same way I held you as you lay on the metal gurney at the funeral home: gently, realizing the fragility and temporality and movement of life, knowing with acute awareness that how I approach this topic, will have implications. We are all called at different times and stages in life. Coyote. The Trickster. Hermes. We must listen to these calls of life with the same urgency that we address what is calling to us in research. This is not about resilience or strength; it is about patient listening and openness. It is about unearthing what lies deep inside of us. Perhaps our topic will change. Perhaps, our existing topic will be given new life. Perhaps it will be us who are changed through engagement with our topic. I now wear a necklace engraved with your fingerprint, the inside containing your ashes. It is all I have left of your bodily form. I run my fingers over it and am reminded of the movement of life. Nothing is stagnant. Nothing is solidified in permanence. We are in a perpetual state of motion, yet what propels us, what calls out to us may evolve and shift and, as researchers, as humans, we must heed that calling as if our life depends on it. As often, whether we recognize it or not, it does.

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