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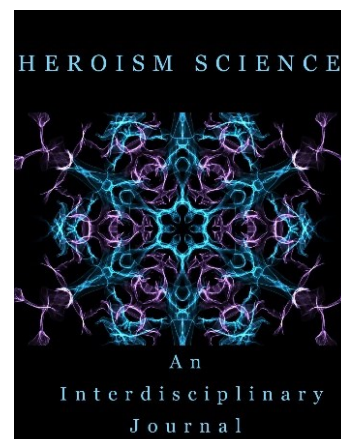
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Adopting a Heroic Persona to Manage a Traumatic Life Event: "The Face in the Mirror"



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ABSTRACT: This article applies a critical autoethnographic approach and a positive transformational stance to an experience of a choiceless traumatic loss. It considers how in a crisis of grief individuals may consciously choose to adopt a more agentic 'heroic' persona that enables them to survive the psychological disintegration of their assumptive world. Selecting a persona that serves their immediate survival needs, liberates individuals from those sociocultural expectations that dictate the conduct and positioning of the bereaved. In this new persona, the bereaved accesses a higher level of self-consciousness and autonomy, and an internal locus of control more suited to a survivor. Thus, the choices and challenges that confront the newly bereaved may ultimately lead to the preservation and transformation of the self. In this unfamiliar place the unanchored hero is tasked to accept the annihilation of the self and from the remnant begin again and break a new path resonant of a hero's journey.

KEYWORDS: *Autoethnography, adaptive strategy, alternative persona, consciousness, posttraumatic growth and transformation, hero's journey, psychic death, psychological self, traumatic loss, survival.*

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1 INTRODUCTION

Kohen et al. (2017) have argued that with prior learning, experience and training individuals can be prepared to act heroically on behalf of others. However, there is a paucity of literature on how unprepared individuals might be prepared to act heroically on behalf of themselves. This article considers what can occur when individuals, prompted by unforeseen traumatic loss events, can access evolutionary resources designed to preserve, rebalance and liberate their psychological self and enable them to act selflessly and heroically.

Sharing in Joseph Campbell's (1988/1991) overall contention that on the journey the hero must "die spiritually" to the self in order to be "reborn to a larger way of living" (p. 105) this reflective article draws upon Allison's (2019; 2024) scholarship on heroic consciousness and Steiner's concept of a heroic self (1999). But, central to the discussion, is a consideration of Jung's (1967) "persona" as a mask that individuals choose to put on for protection and to preserve their private lives from public scrutiny, or to satisfy society's expectations of "what a man should appear to be" (p. 157). In addition, this discussion draws on theory from transactional analysis (Berne, 1964), posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 2004), and dramaturgical analyses of human social interactions (Goffman, 1969). The case illustration is influenced by the methodology of critical autoethnography (Holman Jones, 2016). Consequently, this work meditates on the power of traumatic loss to obliterate the psychological self and the scope and utility of the heroic persona as an instrument of preservation and transformation in its wake.

By advancing the idea that experiences of traumatic loss invite individuals to seek solace in, and act through, heroic personas, elicits questions about the purpose of a persona in human existence. Is the heroic aspect of self hardwired into our psychological survival kit? What role does the heroic persona play in the negotiation of personal transformation? By extending the scope of heroic action and imagination to include an agentic psychological self, this article

suggests that everyday acts of heroism are effectively initiated by the self system's evolutionary need to rebalance and transform itself. Thus, the experience and symptomology of trauma might plausibly be viewed as "adaptive responses in the face of overwhelming danger" Keck et al. (2017, p. 3).

Plunged into this choiceless and evolutionary process of psychological death and resurrection, this hero's journey involves both dangers and opportunities, shifting from a "position of psychological immaturity to the courage of self-responsibility and assurance" (Campbell, 1988/191, p. 113). Individuals leave pre-heroic dualistic thoughts of "ourselves and our own self-preservation" behind to embrace the nondualistic experience of "a truly heroic transformation of consciousness" (Campbell, 1988, p. 115). In the radical reorganization of the self, survivors of trauma are called to review their mental integrity and lives through a new lens, that can reveal "the development of extraordinary capacities both creative and destructive" (Herman, 1992, p. 96).

A previously unpublished extract from a critical autoethnographic case by the author is presented (see, Bray, 2019a; Holman Jones, 2016) to illustrate how an individual's heroic persona, as an instrument of the self, comes to the fore in a moment of extreme need when overwhelmed by the powerlessness of loss. While this personal portrait may suggest that the individual is exercising a degree of conscious choice in the matter, in other extreme conditions an individual's heroic persona may not necessarily, or automatically, enter the action after conscious negotiation.

2 THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA AND LOSS ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF

Most human beings are possessed of a relatively flexible ego, the identity or persona that other people know us by, that protects the self from pain. But a traumatic event may remove the ego's defences (Rogers, 1989) and simultaneously lay bare the "perfectly ordinary and

perfectly ecstatic” vulnerable self beneath (Rowan, 1983, p. 65). Surprised and caught off-balance by the unimaginable shock and dissonance of the event, it is not surprising that the newly bereaved feel the need to defend their psychological self from further outrages and seek safety behind a protective mask or persona (Laing, 1977; Strouse & Vollmann 2021).

In a process known as ‘ego death’, or in Jungian psychology ‘psychic death’, the ego’s controlling authority to balance reality with the desires of the id and the morality of superego are severely compromised. This, results in the annihilation of the previous psychic structure leaving the individual in a state of helplessness, aimless without self-regulation or control. The ego, literally dismantled by the powerful effect of trauma is no longer capable of holding the centre and, as it decays, ego boundaries dissolve. Estranged from the self in an archetypal wasteland, vulnerable survivors can experience the totality of traumatic loss as an alienating, annihilating and meaningless void. In these circumstances, and after such a significant loss, Frankl (1992) writes that we are programmed to make meaning of our lives and in that purposeful endeavour we can choose our attitude towards our suffering and how we might create a new and enduring relational bond with the deceased (Klass, et al., 1996). Putting on a mask that one can discard or working with a persona may help. Thus, in therapy it is not uncommon for a client who has experienced traumatic loss to be given the opportunity to safely try on masks that represent and express the self they have become and the self they wish to become. Strouse and Vollmann (2021) suggest that as a way to adapt to unfamiliar circumstances survivors of trauma “develop a protective face to show the world, while a hidden face holds another story” (p. 226).

Paradoxically, therefore, despite the totality of pain and hopelessness, traumatic loss offers an opportunity to liberate oneself from attachments to the material world in ways that generate “developments previously unthinkable” (Wirtz, 2020, p. 16). Having to relearn the world (Attig, 1996) individuals might choose to become the person they always thought they should

be and “to feel the rapture of being alive” (Campbell, 1988/1991). Thus, the science of post-traumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) demonstrates that while traumatic experiences might threaten to annihilate us (Janoff-Bulman, 2004) they can also enlarge our capacity for survival and give a greater appreciation of existence. These events, Kosminsky (2021) claims “also provide transformative lessons about what truly matters in life” (p. 46) and help us to recognise the power of our everyday heroism. However, while the potential for growth in the aftermath of traumatic experiences is not a given, healing and growth resulting from serving others is a theme that recurs in the literature repeatedly. As Frankl (1992) suggests, “a helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change”, aided by the desire to meaningfully honour and maintain a loving relationship, “may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by so doing change himself. He may turn a personal tragedy into a triumph” (p. 161).

3 TRAUMA AND HEROIC CONSCIOUSNESS TRANSFORMATION

Allison (2019) describes this potential for personal growth in the aftermath of tragedy as a transformation of consciousness, a capacity to transform “complex, competing experiences into synthesized, enlightened, experiential wholes” (p. 2). Heroic consciousness enables the hero to recognise the compartmentalising experiences of dualistic thinking whilst simultaneously being fully open to a wider view of existence characterised by nondualistic thinking characterised by the perception of all existence as unitive. Thus, the hero is open to the experience and influence of transrational phenomena such as love, death, suffering, God, eternity, and paradox and metaphor. These experiences, Allison suggests “are a ubiquitous part of human life [and] pervade good hero mythology and storytelling” (p. 12). Experiences that, to paraphrase Joseph Campbell, are the essence, and at the heart of the hero’s journey.

Heroic consciousness, in its ability to see the world differently, has the potential to be transformative, to navigate the freedom and fear of unitive consciousness experiences, and demonstrate “the wisdom of tempered empowerment” (Allison, 2019, p. 23) that recognises when to act and when not to. Unsurprisingly, it is these skills, rather than superpowers, that Harrington (2021) suggests make everyday heroes the most superpowerful, “as they have no superpowers, only the ability to tap into their humanity” (p. 242).

4 CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH APPROACH

By bringing together a contemporaneously written biographical account, and subsequent autoethnographic treatments of this same story, this research marries the disciplines of critical autoethnography (Ellis, et al., 2010; Holman Jones, 2015) and heroism science (Allison, 2016), together with scholarship interested in ‘persona’ and ‘archetype’ (Jung, 1991), ‘self’ in social interactions (Goffman, 1969; Hillman, 1997), the ‘self’ in humanistic psychology (Rogers, 1989; Rowan, 1983) and the psychotherapeutic notion of the ‘heroic self’ (Steiner, 1999).

4.1 CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY – POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER

“...loss challenges the life stories or narratives on which we have relied for orientation, and grieving is the emotional quest to learn the lessons of loss and to reconstruct our life story in a way that is sustainable now.” (Neimeyer & Harrington, 2021, pp. 23-24)

This article retells an experience of traumatic loss that occurred to its author 25 years ago when he first migrated to New Zealand with his wife and children (Bray, 2019b). With the help of an account written a few months after the event, and with the inclusion of recovered memories, this section briefly focuses on a defining moment that occurred within the first 18 hours of his exposure to bereavement trauma. It reflects on his spontaneous “decision” to adopt

an alternative persona and proposes that in a crisis, the appropriation of an alternative heroic role, can support an individual to endure the immediate impact of trauma and can have accumulating, enduring and beneficial effects on his later life.

The following personal narrative, therefore, illustrates how its author was called to make a hero's decision and embark upon a journey (Campbell, 1972). The decision to do so was particularly difficult because of his paralysing grief. It was all that he could do to maintain his diminished reserves and psychological equilibrium, let alone process the traumatic deaths of his wife and children, or understand how this violation might subsequently wound his life and those of his surviving children.

4.2 POSITIONING THE RESEARCHER AS THE AUTHOR

“Know that your life, like all lives, is an act of creative fiction. Make it a good story.”

(Neimeyer & Harrington, 2021, p. 29)

4.3 THE AUTHOR WRITES...

Reading earlier transcripts and continuing to underestimate the experience of writing and the written word, I am forced to revisit this painful event ... achieving a little more objectivity with each iteration.

Perhaps, like Coleridge's (1900) Ancient mariner, I cannot let it alone until I have shared it just one more time. Even after all this time my story demands attention and continues to supply fresh insights on how personal tragedy may share the same path as self transformation. In this context I am bound to reveal and interrogate a very specific moment from my bereavement experience that has so far avoided elucidation. Understandably, I was so preoccupied with details of the actual event that I missed its singular contribution to my subsequent development as a survivor of loss.

Kohen, et al., (2017) suggest that heroes exhibit common characteristics determined by choices made long before their heroic action takes place. They are empathic, can anticipate difficult situations, know what help to give, and have the professional skills necessary to confidently see their heroic tasks through to completion.

Perhaps, the call to journey had always been there waiting in the wings - part of the background noise – a surreal nightmare soundscape that unmanned me and sent me spiralling down into nothing... a way to pause reality and prevent the further fragmentation of the now before it blew away and I lost it forever.

4.4 THE RESEARCHER/AUTHOR WRITES...

I am sparing you all the details, but the first I heard of my wife and son's death and my baby son's injuries was when two policemen arrived at my home in the morning to break the news. At which point, all I wanted to do was to bury myself. The police, who heralded this dramatic change in my family's circumstances and fortune were unable to spare me the facts. The world continued to turn, but for me the world had stopped.

5 REFLECTION ONE A) A TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS (TA) OF EGO STATES BEFORE TRAUMATIC BEREAVEMENT

The theory and practice of Transactional Analysis (TA) (Berne,1964), suggests that in social interactions human beings bring to the fore one of three ego states: parent; child; or adult. The scripts that each participant uses are dominated by one of the three ego states that influence what is thought, felt and conveyed and guides both party's behaviours in these everyday social transactions. Consequently, viewed through a TA lens, the storyteller, pre-crisis, is a naïve Adult. However, faced with an impossible existential crisis, he understandably reverts to his helpless Adaptive Child state and looks to support from his Parent state.

From the time that he was told by the police the news that his wife and sons had been involved in a fatal car accident, he fought to stay in control of his Adult ego state. Initially responding with an adult's respectful openness to what the police might say, and distracted by how they might be affected by delivering it, he quickly collapses into an Adaptive Child state. This is demonstrated by his acquiescent behaviours. He tries to lessen the tension with humour – he wants to be liked - and attempts to delay the message's delivery. Finally losing focus, dissociating and closing off, his frightened Child waits for the inevitable punishment. From this point on, he surrenders his control and puts himself into the hands of others.

5.1 THE AUTHOR WRITES...

I had arrived at the hospital to sit with my broken and dying child. Like kindly spirits the nurses and doctors moved quietly and solicitously about the room. They knew the narrative and had rehearsed it many times.

We were waiting for someone to die...

Wirtz (2020), summarising the impact of traumatic experiences, notes that they “activate archaic levels of the psyche and constellate an archetypal landscape highly charged with affect” (p. 17).

I had spent hours of precious time with my child resting motionless in my arms. The day turned to evening, but I had dared not to move for fear of breaking the spell. The doctor read the monitor that measured the pressure in my son's skull. A nurse came and explained. It was way too high now. I don't remember them asking me if they could remove the life support device. It was dark. Somehow, I had found movement and staggered into a washroom totally exhausted and depleted.

I was tired and deadened to the bone. I had become a small guttering flame in a deep black universe. I feared for my annihilation but also yearned for it. I stood in front of the mirror and began to speak...

“One thing that comes out in myths, for example, is that at the bottom of the abyss comes the voice of salvation. The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light” (Campbell, 1988, p. 41).

The room was empty and a place of quiet and sanctuary where I could lift the mask for a moment and act truly as myself. Pivotal personal moment – unable to contemplate what this might mean. Alone – hoping no-one would come in to disturb my peace and ask more of me. Choosing how to respond to the imminent death of my son, I needed processing time but more than that I needed to disappear – I needed it to disappear – to give it to someone else. I offered it to God, but He was rendered speechless. I couldn't make it all go away and I needed help to understand.

Grof (1998) sums up the author's experience of psychic or ego death in the words of the seventeenth century monk Abraham Sancta Clara, as “The man who dies before he dies, does not die when he dies”. This “dying before dying” plays a central role in shamanic traditions. Unsurprisingly, sudden death for which the victim is unprepared is still a central preoccupation for many cultures. For example, Beaty (1970) singles out the medieval volume, *Ars Moriendi* (Art of Dying) as being solely devoted to preparing its readers for the moment of death. By experiencing his “dying before dying” the author is less fearful of death and learns more about its experiential territory.

5.2 THE MOMENT...

The moment occurred quite spontaneously. I had no concept of time... I was staring at a shape in a grimy mirror but seeing nothing. The lights were dull, and one was flickering like a scene in the movie when the main character is trying to recollect what he must do next.

In that space, I had no hope or answers left and yet in my blind reaching out for someone or something to give me support I discovered the unquenchable reservoir of my own humanity. Simply, in this cheap film noir encounter my reflected self stared back at me with his world-weary eyes that had seen everything, and suddenly I was not alone.

The face in the mirror was familiar to me, but not mine. Transformed by loss and grief, its bruised eyes stared unresponsively as if at a poor joke, and his messed-up features seemed to turn towards me with what could only be described as grisly amusement and surprise. Are you really asking me what to do...? I am desolated by a wound I cannot see and whose scar I will never allow to fully heal.

His fear was palpable as my own, we understood each other. Observing his existential desolation, I experienced compassion, but it was not going to help right now. If I was a reflection of this weary derelict in the glass, then I must have had a very hard life. What could he possibly offer me except more despair?

6 REFLECTION ONE B) A TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS (TA) OF EGO STATES DURING TRAUMATIC BEREAVEMENT

Later, in the loneliness and silence of the hospital washroom, he looked at himself in the mirror as if for the first time. No longer needing to maintain any semblance of Adult control

and finding his Nurturing Parent ego state depleted by hopelessness, his Compliant Child cries out to its own reflection to be released from the overwhelming pain and responsibility. At that moment, he recognises a familiar image of one who truly understands his situation. Projecting on this image his deepest fears, raises the spectre of his Critical Parent, in whose judgement he is expecting to be found wanting.

6.1 THE AUTHOR WRITES...

Belying his/my physical condition a no-nonsense voice broke in, shattering the silence, its indifferent authority simultaneously evoking nervous amusement and child-like compliance. He had my attention....

“Man-up... get on with your life”, he said quite reasonably.

I suddenly felt ridiculous. I was talking to myself. The way he looked at me I knew that I couldn't put off making decisions about how I should respond to my conflicting feelings of loss, to those whose immediate support I was receiving, and to those who were yet to share their pain and sympathy with me.

This Critical Parent's demeanour displays a disregard for his dilemma and his feedback is unsympathetic, expedient, and contradictory. Stop behaving like a child, “Man-up... get on with your life”. The former script of his childhood that drew upon the pragmatic values, words and actions of his father's celluloid heroes - John Wayne and Clint Eastwood – now introjected into his Critical Parent state.

After a pause...

“There is no dignity in death, only in loving and living” announced my heroic reflection.

“Life is too short. Live your life with them and for them.”

Reflecting on this part of the account, the bereaved individual’s acceptance of his alternative hero persona began from the moment he met him in the mirror. Initially his alter ego’s cynical bravado is confronting but, in this instance, it powerfully cuts through the writer’s usual tendency to use indirect self-deprecating language as an apologetic front (Goffman, 1969) to manage uncomfortable relational interactions whenever he writes or performs. This resembles the Child ego state that Berne has described as the Little Professor (Adult in Child). Unsurprisingly, like the subject, the hero persona also likes to put on a show, and the show must go on.

7 REFLECTION TWO: A NOTE ABOUT THE ALTER EGO AND THE HEROIC SELF

The term ‘alter ego’, literally a “second I”, suggests the presence of an alternative persona. In this case, one that might emerge in times of extreme difficulty. In his classic novella the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Stevenson (1886) meditates upon the duality of human nature, in this case expressed as an inner struggle between the rational and gentlemanly Dr Jekyll and the unfathomable and therefore monstrous Mr Hyde. In Freudian terms, the struggle between socialized conscious drive and unconscious biological, aggressive, and pleasure-seeking drives.

Unlike Stevenson’s Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, it is suggested that there is a collaborative, positively motivated partnership, that may support the trauma survivor to navigate his crisis by reframing his situation. This reframing occurs consciously through positive self-talk. It reminds the speaker of his heroic potential and capacity to negotiate this deeply stressful and unfamiliar situation. This aligns with Steiner’s (1999) concept of the “heroic self” that, through projection and introjection, consciously and unconsciously draws its materials from an

individual's particular cultural tradition. Available as a "constitutional endowment" for most people, the heroic self provides an integrated and constructive self-awareness of a person's heroic gifts (p. 713).

At the very least, adopting a more heroic persona might be described as a coping mechanism that helps an individual effectively perform their social roles and obligations (Hannah, 1976). Similarly, once it has proved effective in one situation, the re-adoption of a well-integrated aspirational hero role might also prove beneficial and transformational in other aspects of the individual's life and increase their capacity to cope long term. How effective this strategy is, and how long term this relatively benign relationship with an alternative aspect of self continues, is likely to depend on an individual's psychological cohesion, circumstances and need, social support and attachment style and resistance to 'putting on an act' (Goffman, 1969).

7.1 THE RESEARCHER/AUTHOR WRITES...

Survivors of traumatic loss must decide how to respond to their new situation, do they succumb to hopelessness or do they reframe their tragic losses as an opportunity or a challenge. Recognising that my sons' and wife's deaths had swiftly dumped me at rock bottom I anxiously looked for ways to remove myself from the scene. But finding myself as the author and protagonist in the narrative of my journey – at that stage I really knew nothing of the hero's journey - I had to endure, and somehow claim personal redemption by purposefully employing the knowledge gleaned from my survival in a form of mundane heroism that is most often expressed in simple acts of care and helping directed to others who have undergone similar losses. Kept alive by the memory of those who had died, the continual performance of individual acts of everyday kindness slowly paved a healing pathway out of the abyss of trauma. This has led me to the understanding that these individual acts of care and support, that

inevitably rise up from a renewed gratitude for life, a quest for meaning and an affinity for other survivors' experiences when grouped together, reveal all survivors to be heroes.

I have returned to the world not as I left it but learning how to love it nevertheless.

8 REFLECTION THREE: MAPPING TRAUMA AND HEROIC CONSCIOUSNESS TRANSFORMATION

“Confronted by the outer limits of life, one loses the familiar sense of being physically in the world. Then consciousness of another reality seems to shine forth.” (Wirtz, 2020, p. 17)

In popular cultures the traumatising impact of the death of a loved one is often presented as the forerunner or trigger to an experience of transformation for the hero. Driven by the urgency to make sense of the new assumptive world that they find themselves in, grief is finally transmuted into a love that “transform[s] their pain into meaningful, positive changes.” (Harrington & Neimeyer, 2021, p. xxxiv). Therefore, rather than becoming captives to our griefs and losses, transformative grief proposes heroic consciousness transformation and personal growth.

Discussing psychological consciousness and transformation, Allison (2019) suggests that most individuals in a pre-heroic state of consciousness depend upon incomplete or faulty beliefs that employ “dualism, separation, mono-rationality, and a naïve sense of empowerment.” (pp. 2-3). However, he argues that human beings are capable of developing a heroic consciousness if they are able to escape from their narrow pre-heroic dualistic thinking. Thus, as a vehicle for consciousness transformation, the hero journey holds the potential to integrate experiences through the adoption of a “nondual, paranoetic worldview” (p. 2). Unlike its pre-heroic state, heroic consciousness expands and unifies a previously incomplete and distorted understanding of the world. Holding a greater awareness, heroes deploy it with wise discernment allowing themselves to escape from the thralldom and self-centredness of the ego.

Applying excerpts from the author's account, the following explores Allison's (2019) identifiable characteristics of heroic consciousness and adapts them to map the author's experiences. This will include his experiences of nondualistic consciousness, seven varieties of transrational phenomenon, unitive consciousness, and heroic wisdom in action.

8.1 NONDUALISTIC THINKING AND TRANSRATIONAL PHENOMENA

In his pre-heroic state, his use of dualistic thinking makes it impossible for the author to fully comprehend the avalanche of new experiences that he is being exposed to. Even in the learning of his losses, his psychological self is simultaneously breaking down and opening up as transrational phenomena bleed through into consciousness. On the whole these are not experienced as disruptive or disturbing intrusions but as comforting visions that calm or prompt him to acceptance and appreciation of the value of life. Nevertheless, Allison (2019) maintains that to unlock their mystery one must use heroic consciousness, "These seven transrational experiences are a ubiquitous part of human life, pervade good hero mythology and storytelling, and are endemic to the classic monomythic hero's journey as described by Joseph Campbell (1949)" (p. 12).

8.2 TRANSRATIONAL EXPERIENCES

In his story of loss, the author often describes and understands his experiences of different varieties of transrational phenomena by using esoteric and sometimes mystic language that include the following:

- i. ***Eternity*** – In an attempt to process those precious and inexplicably timeless moments in the presence of death the author writes,

Inside the hospital I lost all sense of time. Hospital staff maintain their steady routines and the clock on the wall ceased to be important. Freddie and I were

cocooned in a monochrome bubble of time where nothing and no one else mattered. Unspeaking, all-loving, ageless. Magically holding my breath to resist the painful farewell.

- ii. **Suffering** – The author shares his son’s loss and the two become interwoven in both its reality and its metaphor of universal loss and suffering.

My son and I were suffering together. Numbed by my losses, all I could manage was to hold the space that held his fading life.

- iii. **God** – Bridging two worlds, the author seeks out God in his lamenting and, finding Him, satisfied his deep need to relocate his deceased family. Knowing that they are not alone or lost, this transpersonal moment is simultaneously comforting but also reawakens his self to the intense reality of his immediate losses.

And then there was God.... Holding me and gathering my wife and son out of their pain. I helplessly watched on the threshold as this mysterious metamorphosis unfolded.

- iv. **Love** – Love binds them into one being.

Wasted by death, the shared heart of those we love must live on in us. A baby’s body crushed. A son and a mother colliding and breaking upon each other. Freddie – my last and only focus - my slow blood in him and his big heart fluttering in me.

- v. **Death** – Traumatic loss is a complex experience that challenges our total existence both physiologically, psychologically and spiritually.

A part of me is dying and I have willingly stepped into Purgatory to be with him just a little longer. I know that I cannot save him and must accept his death and my loss.

- vi. **Metaphor** – In this story the author is given a choice – to make the best of his life or waste it, to be positively transformed by his traumatic losses or to live indifferently upon the surface of existence without making a mark or feeling hopeful. In his

metaphoric description of his journey to the mortuary in the middle of the night, flanked by police and companioned by friends, he writes,

I was proud to be his dad, proud to have sired such a happy boy. The agony that had taken his life was like a war and I had survived at such a terrible cost. He was my future and all of the men seemed to feel my loss. We marched together through the hospital in triumph.

- vii. **Paradox** – The author experiences a traumatic disruption to his assumptive world and is forced to make meaning of his multiple losses from the perspective of a son, a father and a husband. Painful as it is, it is only through his suffering that he is able to acquire a more expansive worldview and gain a wisdom that assists him to actively embrace his positive transformation.

I was suddenly overwhelmed by the magnitude of His Love and filled with a great peace.

Freddie had come home, and the shell I carried into the mortuary, the beautiful body, only a container for something even more beautiful. A gentle reminder and counterfeit of his life.

8.3 UNITIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

To normalise the author's response, in the first 12 hours the author experiences a variety of transrational consciousness experiences that are knitted into his text. In their playing out, these experiences both challenge and sooth him. He struggles, resists and finally begins to accept and make meaning of his baby son's death. He observes himself outside of space and time – literally a near death experience - that gives his exposed consciousness free rein to roam and to explore the universe. These transpersonal escapes reconcile him to the irresistible power of life and the inevitability of death and encourage him to patiently accept their pain in full

measure. Doing this he is able to make the first faltering steps on his journey into a larger consciousness that shares his grief and acknowledges all of his losses. And he learns from them - draws their meaning and uses it to shape a new and more expansive way of being.

In popular cultures the traumatising impact of the death of a loved one is often presented as the forerunner or trigger to an experience of transformation for the hero. Driven by the urgency to make sense of the new assumptive world that they find themselves in, grief is finally transmuted into a love that “transform[s] their pain into meaningful, positive changes.” (Harrington & Neimeyer, 2021, p. xxxiv). Therefore, rather than becoming a captive to our grief and loss, transformative grief proposes evolution and personal growth.

8.4 FEATURES THE WISDOM OF TEMPERED EMPOWERMENT

Kohen et al. (2017) argue that the human tendency toward heroism, when exposed to the right conditions and activated by the heroic imagination will support choices that lead to heroic action. Similarly, Allison (2019) suggests that in the hero journey the everyday individual experiences a transformation of consciousness that teaches wisdom and demonstrates a capacity to discern what actions in life are likely to be of value and necessary to others. He reminds us that “The heroically conscious individual has the courage to do great things as well as the courage to avoid the kind of helping behavior that may be harmful, futile, counterproductive, or unnecessary” (p. 23).

9 THE PERSONA AS AN ADAPTIVE PROTECTIVE RESPONSE TO THE EXPERIENCE OF TRAUMA

“Find the mask that speaks the truth of who you must be. And find someone with whom you can take it off.” (Neimeyer & Harrington, 2021, p. 29)

Exposed to a traumatic life event an adaptive form of dissociation may occur that limits the distress caused by hyperarousal and permits the individual to survive at a functional level in daily life in the short term, until the psychological and physical effects of the crisis have passed. In this case the individual experiences an adaptive survival response that automatically disconnects him from what he perceives as a dangerous or threatening situation rather than a pathological outcome of trauma.

Most individuals who are exposed to a traumatic event naturally experience dissociative states during the incident and sometime after (Steel, 2017). It is only with hindsight that the individual recognises these feelings of dissociation that can accompany transrational and numinous experiences (Allison, 2019) as adaptive survival strategies (Keck et al., 2017) that manage their fear and distress.

In their positive and strengths-based interpretation of adaptive responses to trauma, Keck et al. (2017) propose that working through “traumatic injuries is a heroic journey involving both risk and reward” (p. 3). The experiences of traumatic events once internalised can over time threaten the control and integrity of the whole person. Thus, in order to get on with their lives survivors may adopt adaptive strategies that distance themselves from the pain and fear of becoming overwhelmed. Unsurprisingly, Keck et al. (2017) note that coping strategies like depersonalisation, derealization, dissociative amnesia, emotional numbing and peritraumatic dissociation, to a greater or lesser degree can interfere with day-to-day functioning and especially in intimate social interactions. They suggest that in diagnoses because these strategies can be conflated with known symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), such as relational mistrust, self-harm, hypervigilance, and dissociation, that it would be more helpful to reframe such clinically maladaptive behaviours as “previously adaptive resources” (p. 8). Thus, Keck et al. (2017) conclude that, because some trauma survivors may be the

“living narrative” (p.13) of hero stories, assigning stigmatising diagnostic labels to them is unhelpful and ignores the progress they have already made on their heroic journey.

10 AFTERWORD

“Let us honor ... the courageous heroism of persevering through recovery, experiencing personal growth, and inspiring other survivors in the aftermath of trauma.”

(Keck et al. 2017, p. 13)

By consciously selecting a heroic persona, we perceive what we understand as heroic through a lens that positively amplifies and adapts our own heroic qualities to resource us through immediate crises. Adopting an alternative persona offers the opportunity to reframe how we see and can be seen in the world and to gain fresh perspectives about events that we might previously have felt powerless to understand. Due to their rich availability through popular and classical cultures and the media, archetypal patterns and their persona are intuitively available for adoption and inclusion in the lives of individuals affected by tragic circumstances. Influenced by one or more facets of the following archetypes, the heroic aspects of the: mother, father, warrior, healer, saviour, priest, jester, caretaker, and leader are likely to be considered as protagonists in the unfolding story of a traumatic loss survivor.

In the wake of traumatic loss, the need to survive, and even flourish, is a fundamental imperative of growth. Consequently, the adoption of a heroic persona is not a cynical façade or front (Goffman, 1969) but a means to an end. The heroic persona is energised by resources located deep within us at a primal level that sustains us. The outcome for each individual is likely to be coloured by prior traumatic experience, general disposition and experiential style.

Recognising my heroic self, the hero I was born to be, and the persona I might become did not remove the pain from my experience. Acknowledging my hero persona and placing it between

myself and my losses helped distance myself from its immediate glare. From this position of respite, I was able to review the unfolding events and summon up the remnants of my humanity – my dignity and courage to carry on.

For me, the choice of heroic action with dignity was the most effective attitude to adopt.

The benefits of temporarily adopting a heroic persona and placing oneself at the centre of the drama, and the recognition that, by doing so, you have become the author of your own story provided a positive and agentic power that facilitated and encouraged personal choice, growth and transformation.

After a significant loss, Frankl supports a human being's will to meaning, Attig (1996) the need to relearn the self and the world, while Klass advocates for the continuation of the bond between the bereaved and their loved ones. Putting on a mask that one can discard, or working with a persona may help. For those facing traumatic loss, the task of narrative and self-reconstruction is a heroic and transforming challenging.

11 CONCLUSION

Loss is a universal phenomenon that heightens our vigilance and threatens our integrity as human beings. It is not unusual that individuals experiencing traumatic loss must also face the complete decimation of the psychological self. Isolated and alone it is unsurprising that the monumental tasks of self-preservation, narrative reconstruction and meaning making appear well beyond reach. Yet we find ways to adapt by employing strategies that support our accommodation of unfamiliar and threatening circumstances. To meet this need it is argued that an individual might adopt a persona that in the short term relinquishes them from their immediate responsibilities without alerting others to their all-absorbing grief and distress. It is

argued that this persona supports the bereaved to manage their day-to-day existence and enables them the autonomy and control to begin rebalancing their self and to rebuild their life. Caught in the precarious balance between an understanding of the fragility of our human existence and humanity's boundless appetite for survival and self-destruction, it is perhaps unsurprising that we turn to the universal narrative of heroic rescue and heroic transformation to soften the endings of our short-lived journeys.

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13 CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.