

# Shelving grief: Heuristic benefits of producing a glossy 'coffee-table' book from a grief journal

Dr Caitlin Street

Victoria University

## Abstract

This paper uses a phenomenological approach to review responses to the self-publishing of poems and artworks created during a week of silent grieving shortly after the death of my life partner. Wrapped within the glossy hard-covered book of spontaneously produced poems and images, emerged a sense of formality towards and credibility for the isolating space of grieving. When placed on the bookshelf, alongside 'authorised knowledge', unexpected responses arose both in me and in those with whom the book was shared. This case-based discussion paper proposes that the application of commonly available self-publishing technology is an affirming means for personally negotiating the isolation of grief.

## Introduction

Unexpected death bears heavily upon those carrying the burden of grief. The shock and sudden absence left by death in emotionally close relationships adds to the already severe emotional space of grieving. I experienced this emotionally crippling space in August 2010, with the death of my life partner of fifteen years, my soulmate, my rock.

The emotional journey experienced during the subsequent six weeks bore all the facets of grieving expressed in the literature. The concurrent presence of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression (Bowlby, 1961; Kübler-Ross, 1969; Maciejewski et al., 2007; Parkes & Weiss, 1983) conflicted with my knowing acceptance, for while death was sudden and unexpected, my partner Anne had faced a poor prognosis due to a tumour. This state of acceptance, generated from the recognition of her release from a slow and painful death, carried a relief normally only available to carers who have accompanied those that have made that long slow journey of decline. It was within this complex grieving – in the seventh week – that I entered the reflective space of a week's silence.

This week of silent contemplation was on Bruny Island, a remote and beautiful island in Southern Tasmania. I had previously attended this annual event organised by Quakers, but the complexity of my grieving emotional state meant that this occasion was inevitably difficult. My fear of being overwhelmed within the seemingly ever-expanding space, and lost in the emotional isolation of seven days of silence, pulsed as a presence in the supportive environment shared with five other compassionate but independent folk.

*My sure's awash  
The current grasps at my ankles  
as I teeter in my knowing.  
I cling for support upon the insubstantial  
waters flowing down my cheeks.  
My vision blurred...*

Extract from my poem *Direction*.

The unstructured week allowed space – space to read, space to reflect, and space to walk both forest and coast. The picturesque surroundings seen whilst out walking demanded to be photographed.<sup>1</sup> During more reflective times, I journalled my thoughts and feelings as a mock correspondence sharing with Anne my odyssey. Between my 'letters home'