



JUSTICE AND HEALING
Spirituality and
work-related deaths

Report of a project on building
partnerships in developing an
international best practice for responding
to work-related deaths

Volume three

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GRIEF NARRATIVES: The Spirit's work in the healing journey

1. Introduction

People bereaved by a work-related death suffer considerable loneliness. It is as if there is a societal denial that work, which is viewed as the source of personal and social advancement, could cause people to die. This resistance has the force of a taboo, silencing those who are bereaved by a work-related death.

This report draws together the commitment to breaking that silence of four people bereaved by a work-related death. Each of the four people has participated in the Urban Ministry Network's Partnerships in Grieving Program. Three took part in a program equipping them to speak the story of their experience. The focus of the program was on shaping a narrative that spoke the truth of their experience.

Speaking the truth takes people to the heart of their experience, and so opens up the complex relationships between issues of justice and healing. The four narratives are a rich exploration of these issues, and provide a basis for exploring the spiritual dimension of the journey towards healing.

2. Health and Safety Week

The tenth annual Church and Trade Unions Committee Memorial Service was held on Sunday 30 May at Wesley Uniting Church. During the Service, the Minister for WorkCover, Bob Cameron, launched Health and Safety Week in Victoria. Before the Minister spoke, Michelle Ehlers and Paul Mayfield spoke.

Michelle Ehlers

My brother Ross was born two days after my third birthday. My new baby brother brought me the first feelings I was to experience of known excitement, wanting to protect, care and share. We loved each other a lot, played great games together and had some pretty good fights too. Sadly, our parents separated and divorced when we were young, but no matter what, with our very loving Mother always there for us we were a dynamic trio throughout time. I think that because neither Ross nor I married that our trio became even stronger and we stood together in life like a sturdy steel tripod, each strongly supporting the other.

Ross became an incredibly skilled Cabinet Maker; his outstanding ability as a craftsman marvelled at by many. However, his driving passion had always been with heavy machinery, and following a long contract working on enormous machinery in Iron Ore Mining, he came back home and went into road construction which he loved passionately and was most dedicated to. He even had 2 alarm clocks to ensure he wasn't late for work. He was incredibly supportive to Mum and me, dependable and reliable. His dry sense of humour was hilarious, and his great big hugs and his even bigger smile were reassuring and very special.

My Mum and I went on a holiday to Ireland to visit relatives on 17 August 1996. All was fun and it was terrific to see everyone again, continuing our adventures in our family homeland. We returned to London exhausted on the 10th of September. At 3am the next morning we were awoken by Police who advised that Ross had been crushed to death in an industrial accident on the 9th of September, 2 months exactly before his 34th birthday, and 1 year to the day he had settled on his first house.

I can remember my Mother screaming 'Nooo!', and that all my energy felt as if it had been sucked from me as my legs crumpled beneath me. My beautiful baby brother, this marvellous man so passionate and proud, dignified and dependable, so patient and generous, so reliable and respected, and so absolutely hilarious... taken, not there, dead. We were so very far away, where was he now? Who had his body? This had to be a mistake. There had to have been a terrible mistake. I just knew that if we went home Ross would be there like he always had been. He'd be waiting to tell us it was all a dreadful mistake and everything would be all right. Then I looked at my Mum, and the light was gone from her beautiful green blue eyes and I knew our lives had been changed forever. Little did I realise just how much.

A workplace death is not just tragic at the beginning, it is worsened through a lack of understanding and a lot of insensitivity from every direction. For us it began that night with the Australian Police, who I was told to ring from London. The Senior Police Officer responded abruptly, it seemed as investigator, judge and jury "does your Brother wear an Akubra hat ? Well, he went under the wheels of a truck. It was no-ones fault. Don't worry, he wouldn't have felt a thing ". Then a Union Health and Safety delegate, who invited us to his office and rubbing his hands together boasted "I predicted 6 this year, 4 more to go". The Coroners office sent a counsellor to our home, and we indicated our concern that Ross felt pain when he died. He advised us to call the pathologist, which Mum did, only to be given explicit and horrendous details of Ross's injuries, leaving Mum screaming on the other end of the phone. It appears some of the organisations should learn how to responsibly and delicately manage if a major accident occurs; through appropriate training, most particularly for those dealing with the public. Many we dealt with did not appear to have much idea of the dreadful impact their approach was having.

The company for whom Ross worked tried to do their best to help us, making kind gestures to resolve some initial problems, and I must say they tried but seemed to have no formal procedure for handling a dreadful situation. It seemed to us that the persons sent to assist us were having personal difficulties coping with the situation, often not knowing how to deal with our emotions. Sometimes it felt like they needed our assistance, however they did try.

At Ross's funeral, they announced that they were going to erect a memorial plaque at the site of Ross's death. The plaque was officially laid in the presence of company representatives, VicRoads' representatives and Ross's workmates. The plaque was mounted on a basalt boulder and set in a raised garden. The official presentation was done with great reverence, and we noticed just how deeply Ross's death had affected not only his workmates, but many others associated with him. It felt encouraging that the company was being so committed to showing their respect for Ross as a valuable employee, and to understanding the grief of his workmates and family.

When Ross was killed I was on annual leave which was to finish the day after Ross's funeral. I had been away for 4 weeks plus 1 week, that of the funeral. At the end of that week, I was telephoned and told that I had already had enough time off and that I had to come back to work. I was in despair. Our sturdy steel tripod was falling without Ross. My Mother was distraught, and Dad was not too flash either. I needed to support my family, but my employer wasn't interested in what was wrong. The day I arrived back, feeling shaky and vulnerable, I was called into a Director's office and told that I needed to put it all behind me and get on with it. There was no possibility of compassionate leave. The MD told me that it only takes a day to get a funeral over and done with. One year later I was still in a mess. It felt like we were battling the world single handed, and that nobody was interested or cared. I tried to tell those with whom I worked what was happening and how I felt, but I was treated like a leper, a person with a chip on my shoulder, and isolated as a problem dwelling on the past. In the end I left after 8 dedicated years with that company.

During this time the Court proceedings had commenced. I knew Mum was in an emotional whirlpool, and I was not coping awfully well either. I felt unmotivated and depressed. Everything seemed so difficult and I just wanted to concentrate my energy on getting through this huge black cloud, but no answers were forthcoming. All the "you shoulds" came from those who knew least. The "you shoulds" included when we should cease discussion of Ross, when we should dispose of Ross's memory, his belongings, his ashes, and even our own grief. Even speaking of Ross made some most uncomfortable and they would change the subject. We attended this same memorial service 2 years ago. During the service Sister Loretta Brennan sang "Donna Nobis Pacem", whilst I sat thinking. Sister Loretta's song was penetrating and beautiful, her voice so pure and sweet. It was then that I felt a sudden and certain reassurance, one that said, "everything is going to be all right". How, I could not begin to imagine.

WorkCover, who were marvellously compassionate to us, instigated the court case. A magnificent man named John Young was a field investigator who remained in constant contact with us, just telephoning to see how we were, or to update us when he could. The company was pleading guilty to having an unsafe workplace, and would most probably be convicted with a fine. In those days the workplace was filled with profiteers and bean counters who did not seem to include workplace health and safety mechanisms into their costing. When the case went through, the company came to court confessing their despair and grief over what had happened to such a valued worker. They spoke of their company policy on safety and Toolbox Meetings, which had regularly taken place. They directed condolences to our family, and appeared most humble. They were subsequently convicted and fined \$25,000. Outside, we were happy. The records read that Ross should have been made safer at work. The fine was a token of the situation, but to us the conviction was paramount, and now we could try to move forwards with our tattered lives.

The following February, the WorkCover solicitor rang me to advise that the company had appealed the severity of the sentence. We were understandably astonished, the peace was short lived and we were off to war again. When I asked the solicitor when this had happened, she advised that the appeal had been requested the day of our case but the WorkCover personnel hadn't wanted to spoil our Christmas. The thought of an appeal was killing what was left of Mum's soul and mine. They had pleaded guilty! What on earth were they appealing, the meagre fine? But, led by one director they came to court with all new tactics; now it was everyone's fault but theirs. The crux of the appeal

appeared to have the fine reduced to one of non-conviction status. Their counsel went to the extremes of trying to have their fine reduced by Ross's funeral costs. Fortunately the judge did not see it their way, and the fine and the conviction were upheld. We emerged from the court victorious, yet feeling degraded, and depleted of energy.

The first journalist to report Ross's death couldn't even wait until we arrived home, and gave a deplorably inaccurate account of Ross's details and what had transpired. As with the Police Officer I had spoken to, he arrogantly suggested that nothing wrong had occurred, and it was Ross's fault. I'm sorry I bothered to contact him. He indicated clearly that he really didn't care.

One Sunday morning Mum rang me most upset. Having opened the Sunday paper there was Ross's photo with a hopelessly incorrect statement about Ross's case. They had not even had the common decency to contact us first or to advise us of the article. Upon speaking with that journalist, it became apparent that she was more interested in sensationalism than accuracy. When the first court case was successful one journalist reported it, however, WorkCover's significant win at the appeal was not going to be printed. After a number of interviews and no printed story, it was obvious to us that the media did not want to print the truth. We had a confirmed conviction of a company, the first and only one of that year, and they didn't want to acknowledge any of it. WorkCover helped us tremendously and paid to have advertorials placed in both papers, so we managed to send our message despite the disgraces of the powers that be in the newspapers.

When an accident happens and a death occurs, the burden of grief is immense on immediate and extended family, workplace colleagues, management through to political representatives. Grief is like a shock wave, a devastating earthquake through the substance of the family and workplace. It breaks people's spirits and lives, both at home and work. It requires more understanding, compassion and encouragement, and less criticism, judgement and intolerance. Grief stricken victims desperately want to feel better. This is not "getting over it" - it is finding a comfort zone. It begins with opening the heart and mind to messages of love and understanding from many directions. The day I listened to Loretta Brennan's beautiful voice, that said everything is to be all right, I think I opened my heart more to see the things that could make that happen.

Recently Mum and I were put in to contact with the Managing Director of the company for whom Ross worked. He has visited us at Mum's and Ross's home twice and we have spoken endlessly about the entire scenario regarding Ross. It was important for us to know that he knew ALL of the circumstances of the tragedy and the case. This man has shown us a great deal more compassion and in particular understanding of our pain than so many others, but most importantly has acted as a result of that. He has assured us of his own commitment to encouraging every person in the workplaces of that enormous company, to understand the need to care for each other enough to make sure they are all safe. That memorable day was made even more special by a beautiful bouquet of gerberas and Irises which arrived that afternoon with a lovely hand written message. There have been subsequent meetings with this special man who we hope can become our friend.

We cannot bring Ross back But we can continue to honour his dignity in life by pursuing an understanding and a healthy synergy in the workplace.

The day that one man listened and showed us his understanding and commitment to Ross, our family, and his hundreds of workers and their families, I saw a glimmer of light return to my Mother's beautiful green blue eyes. She rang me the next morning and said, "I think my healing may have begun." Now that Mum is healing, I think too, so am I.

Paul Mayfield

I have been asked to speak today, not as a relative, but a representative of an employing body, and also as a minister ... following the death of Les Hopkins after falling from the ceiling of our church in Kensington.

Michelle, I honor your journey through grief and pain ... towards resolution. I also want to honor Les's family and friends who are present this afternoon. The accident was only eight months ago.

I was first involved as a Minister soon after Les fell four metres onto pews. Although sustaining horrific injuries, Les was conversant when taken by ambulance to hospital.

I helped debrief those who were first on the scene and rendered first aid. We talked through the first shock waves of regret, guilt and denial. The conversation served as a reality check, before negative impressions could be rehearsed. It helped differentiate between conjecture, and what was substantial. We finished with prayer, lamenting the accident and seeking Les's well-being, for we understood his condition had been stabilised. My Anglican colleague and other members of Hotham Mission staff went to tell Margaret (Les's wife) what had happened.

My next involvement was as a representative of Les's employer (Hotham Mission). I met with a representative from WorkCover and the Building Unions. I stated that, "...every precaution had been taken to ensure work safety". The WorkCover representative raised an eye-brow, pointing out that no harness or safety-net had been erected. I remember the shock and sense of culpability.

Soon after that, we heard that Les had died. It was Pat, the Union representative who consoled me. Les was loved by all our staff. He painted the manse I live in, and had shown me photos of his trip to China to visit Mark his son, and pictures of fishing on the Murray.

I remember the horror I felt as I overheard their calls on a mobile-phone and realised this was the 10th fatal fall for the year, precipitating an immediate cease work in the Building Industry across Victoria. I felt sick inside, as I anticipated media scrutiny that would follow next day.

Next, I'm the Minister again. That evening, our congregation ordered a floral tribute to be placed in front of the Church building. The family said later, it was so helpful to drive past and know that the Church was not locking the accident away and endeavouring to keep it silent. We organised a viewing of the accident site for members of Hotham staff & the child care centre where Margaret worked.

Then there was the Service the following Sunday. We met in the hall. It commenced with an announcement to all who were affected; members of Les's family, staff from the

Neighbourhood House, the family of a child whose baptism was cancelled; and members of a Spanish speaking congregation who use the same buildings. People were invited to file into the church precinct, proceed up the aisle to the place of the fall, and light a taper as a way of consecrating the space.

In the Service of Worship, we affirmed Les's strong sense of vocation; the irony, that he died making the ceiling of our church safe for others to work in. We endeavoured to support the family through pastoral visits and a follow up service later that month.

* * *

Recently I was helped by Rev John Bottomley to reflect on my experience as 'Employer & Minister' in this tragedy. That session influenced significantly the way I approached Holy Week and Easter Day. There are several associations I would make:

The first centres on Forgiveness: Les's family honored the congregation by wishing to be present in worship the next Sunday. And the Church was able to honor the family through knowledge of and respect for Les. This mutual honoring enabled potential fear, animosity, or resentment to be dissolved. As we contemplate the first anniversary of Les' death in August, forgiveness is a sign for us of resurrection.

The second connection I would make relates to the theme of Les's memorial service. It was Work & Worship. The Church frequently focuses on 'faith & worship' at the expense of the workplace. Although not intentionally, perhaps more through lack of regard, the workplace is deemed 'God-forsaken'! The nature of Les's work in our worship-space and the manner of his death have altered that!

Thirdly, we are learning through Les's untimely death.... that resurrection is a callfrom private pain to public responsibility.

In The Age on Good Friday, Caroline Jones wrote, 'Out of grief, loss and failure comes the promise of new life.' But we are accustomed to regarding grief, loss and failure as a curse.

A poem by Mary Gilmore: [Never Admit The Pain']

Never admit the pain,
 Bury it deep;
Only the weak complain,
 Complaint is cheap.

Cover thy wound, fold down
 its curtained place;
Silence is still a crown,
 Courage a grace.

There is connection here, with Thomas ...the Twin (JOHN 20:19-29). Perhaps he was absent when Christ first appeared to the disciples, because, for the second time in his life, ...one, like his other half (his twin), had been torn away. He more than the others was acquainted with loss. And in grief, he sought his own company.

If this was the case, we can begin to understand his skepticism. He didn't want anything

to do with a 'presence' whose hands and feet didn't bear evidence of living gamely in the workplace, and perhaps the political arena also. Perhaps it was familiarity with grief (and failure) that qualified him to be first to acclaim 'resolution', ...the significance of Jesus risen!

Here, frayed edges, fear & doubt (stones which are rejected), become the cornerstone upon which life is built together again. Grief, loss and failure are the very spaces that the Holy Spirit indwells, resulting in the discovery or recovery of worship. This constitutes faithful and effective witness!

May the power of God ...through trial, persecution, suffering and heartache, lead you into communion all your days. Amen.

3. Christmas Memorial Service

The Urban Ministry Network Partnerships in Grieving Program has held a Christmas Memorial Service the past two years for those people bereaved by a work-related death.

Bette Phillips

This last year has been one of challenges and changes. I have discovered that life can be happy again. I have found a new "normal self" and now I am almost back to where my life was prior to when my only son Dean died in his work place, nine years ago. I thought this would never happen again for me. For the first time since his death I am in paid work again. I have a wonderful, supportive relationship, and a very full life.

Funding from the Victorian Workcover Authority has enabled the Urban Ministry Network to employ me as the Co-ordinator of the Partnerships in Grieving Program

During the past 6 months we have developed several support programs for families, workers and employers bereaved by a work related death. It is my own personal experience of losing Dean, who was electrocuted at his work, which has given me a depth of understanding and empathy to our clients. I am able to walk some of the way with them on their journey towards healing. Some are still lost in the wilderness of early bereavement. Others have been in the wilderness of their grief for many years, as I have been.

Like them I have longed for a way to open - to open a path that leads me through this difficult time. And in my work with them, I can see how sharing our grief is making a difference. Some of the paths ahead have been smoothed out; some of the mountains in front of us don't appear as impossible. We gain strength from one another as we remember our loved ones lives, and their tragic deaths. Often what we share is tough to speak about, but afterwards there is a sense of a new smoother path ahead.

We have conducted training programs for Management, Human Resource Personnel and OH&S Officers. Our training has focused on a much needed holistic approach to crisis management, bringing a human aspect to OH&S in the workplace.

When I share my story of Dean's death, or tell the story of other families and companies we know who have been affected by a work related death, I see how those who listen are

moved. It touches their heart, and soul, and they want to look at how their hearts and soul can be part of their work. They want to see changes in our workplaces so that human life is respected and valued

Sometimes our training programs sound like a voice crying out in the wilderness. But they hold a vision born of the tragic loss of those who have died from their work, and we who have grieved their loss. It is a vision that upholds the absolute value of human life.

There has been a healing for me in working to live out this vision, because I am closer to Dean's spirit. I feel his hand at my back, and I know his spirit in my heart. I can hear him saying the last words he spoke to me on the telephone before he died – "I love you too wench".

Through my work, I have been led onto a path of healing. But it is a path that has also thrown me back into the wilderness

This was especially so in the last two weeks. During a training course I was running at a company for case managers of apprentices I was requested to "have a word" with one of the participants. I had mentioned during the day that due to the company Dean worked for not "getting around" to completing the paperwork for his superannuation payments, I was deprived of a \$50,000 death benefit.

The case manager from our course thought that what I had told the group shouldn't have happened. He helped me make contact with relevant people, including the Industry Superannuation Board. They informed me that the company was in breach of the regulations by not filling out the paperwork for compulsory superannuation. But more importantly, I was advised the solicitor at the time was negligent in his duties in not informing me of my rights.

The solicitor who was supposed to represent me even made excuses for the company that employed Dean. He went so far as to dismiss the fact of their negligence, saying it was just "slack". He told me it was not worth acting on. He also said it was fanciful to think Dean would have taken out superannuation anyway. But the issue we were talking about was the compulsory superannuation which was the employer's legal obligation to pay. I was hurt at the time by this injustice, but felt that the solicitor would know, as he was an industrial accident consultant.

Almost from the beginning I had misgivings about the solicitor a friend had referred me to. Now, nine years later, this buried wound has surfaced

In Luke's gospel, John the Baptist is described as proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. My challenge I realise, is that I am not ready to forgive my solicitor for his negligence. There is an injustice between us. His patronizing attitude and his failure to listen and act appropriately compounded my grief. I am not ready nor able to forgive him the hurt he did me by his failure to honor and respect Dean's life.

Healing is important to all of us, and it is important for our grief to be resolved and our questions answered.

For me at this time on the ninth anniversary where I still grieve for losing Dean, I can feel stronger knowing that his death has not been in vain as I work with the families who come to us for support. I feel blessed at the life I have now, for the people who support me and give me the courage to work helping other families, workers and company managers as they too come to terms with their grief.

Yet there is still a wilderness. I was blown out of the water when my path led me back to some painful unfinished business surrounding Dean's death. I was literally stopped in my tracks. An old back injury became so painful because of the sudden stresses of my grief piling up on me that I could barely move. All the unanswered questions surrounding Dean's death surrounded me again in a very physical way. I didn't know which way to turn.

However today I do not fear the wilderness in the same way as when Dean died. Today I know the blessing of Dean's love for me. I know his love is at the heart of life. And I know that this love will once again open a way forward for me, for the work of justice in our world, and for the renewal of health and safety in our workplaces

Joann Stenton

The 26th July. What a momentous date! It was the day after Bob and I first met. Two years later it was the date that Bob proposed marriage to me in the early hours of the morning so that I could wear his ring to work and we could announce our engagement.

Two years later, on Sunday 26 July, 1993, was the day that the doctors informed me that Bob was in renal failure and had only hours or days left to live. It also happened to be my birthday.

Bob lasted 7 days in a toxic state, in and out of delirium but in constant discomfort and agonising pain that was only relieved by increasing doses of morphine. It was a week of torture, my hell on earth, watching Bob's torture and toxicity of renal failure. He declined before my eyes. I refused to leave his bedside, even for a cup of coffee unless a close friend or family member was with him. This was a direct result of my not being allowed to see my father after he died, and I was determined that no one was going to remove Bob before I had said a final goodbye.

This was one of my many times in the wilderness – falling down the ravines and groping my way up again, feeling isolated, utterly alone, not knowing which way to turn. Blindly, falteringly traversing every mountain and hill, which seemed insurmountable each time I encountered one of them.

“The voices ring out in the wilderness.” Other people's voices that may have been well meaning from their point of view, but were devastating to me.

- “Why are you so upset?– life must go on you know”
- You must have greater faith and believe that he is going to get better.”
- You must be strong enough for both of you.”
- You've been divorced – it can't be so hard for you!”
- You're young – you'll meet someone else.”

These are the voices of my so-called “work-mates”

Support in the workplace – I found very little of this, but many of these people were also grieving for Bob, missing his melodious voice and cheery manner as he went about his work as a plumber in the hospital.

It had been difficult facing the questions when I returned to work without Bob after our marriage. When people inquired about our honeymoon, I would relate the events and Bob's diagnosis. But it was devastating dealing with the reactions of many people immediately after he died.

Help where help is needed?

No, there was very little of that, which I largely attribute to our cultural attitude to impending death and bereavement. During this time I felt that although I always considered Bob in all that I did, as he did with me, I ceased to have any entitlements in other people's eyes. I must always think of how it would affect Bob before I acted upon anything, and at no time should I show him if I was feeling sad. Although I loved Bob dearly, I started to resent feeling I had no right to express my feelings, as though I had ceased to exist, except as a support for Bob.

This is what I encountered in the place where Bob and I had met and worked. The hospital that had poisoned my husband – exposed him to cytotoxic drugs and killed him.

Because I worked in the same hospital, I felt I could not bring their negligence in to the open. This has made it very difficult to deal with my sense of injustice about Bob's death.

One of the issues raised as a result of staff around the hospital becoming aware of Bob's illness was that it was brought to our attention that there were a number of other members of staff who had also been diagnosed with cancer.

It transpired that four of them had been exposed to cytotoxic drugs that had been used on patients suffering from cancer. By this I mean that these four staff members (and possibly others) had been handling soiled clothing or excreta from the patients who were undergoing treatment for particular diseases and were not informed about the dangers involved with this.

Now these cytotoxic drugs are known to cause cancer if a person has prolonged or frequent exposure to them. Therefore, staff handling body waste or soiled clothing were supposed to be told when a patient was undergoing such treatment so that they could wear protective clothing when they were likely to be vulnerable to this exposure.

One of the good things that came out of this was that Bob consulted with the Health and Safety Officer at the hospital to consider how this issue of exposure to cytotoxic drugs could be addressed. A Policy & Procedure was subsequently developed for informing all staff likely to be exposed to such hazards, including that there be an allocated place on each ward where staff could find out when a patient was receiving this type of treatment.

Many people thought that this was a bit like closing the stable door after the horse had bolted, but we felt that if it prevented others from suffering the same misfortune it was worthwhile, and the deaths of these four people would not have been in vain.

When the causes of a work-related death remain hidden, it is very difficult to find healing and reconciliation with what has happened. People bereaved by a work-related death under any circumstances, need a place to express their grief and talk about how work is not always a good place to be. It can also be dangerous to life. At times like this it is important to address the issues as they arise. I think it would have made a difference to me, because then I would feel that my grief was accepted in all its facets. We need a safe place to share how work doesn't fully value all aspects of human life.

In addition, I think and feel that it is important to be non-judgmental towards people in their attitudes or expressions of grief. God calls us together to support and accept one another in our loss, irrespective of whether the one we loved died from work stress, a traumatic incident, work-related suicide, or industrial disease.

No one person can completely understand the manner of expressing grief or loss in another. Some may throw themselves into frantic work (as I did), another may withdraw and become introverted. Others may not have any outward expression of grief. None of these things mean that one feels more or less grief than another. It is just the unique variation of the individual.

Nor is the timeframe a factor or indicator of the degree of loss. The feeling of loss or isolation can strike like a bolt of lightning at any time. Even years later something may trigger these feelings. Again the manifestation of the loss incurred is experienced according to the unique disposition of each person.

I have told you part of my story. It is one story amongst a multitude, but it may alert you to be non-judgmental about the behaviour of others. Many thought that I `managed very well`, but they were not around at 2 a.m. when I was trying to contact the `Grief Line`. Nor were they around at the first Christmas after Bob died when I was down at the beach, with the water beckoning me. It would have been so easy to have just kept on walking out beyond my depth to meet Bob in a watery grave. But God was there. I could not see his imprints in the sand, but that was probably because he was carrying me back to reality.

“And the rugged ways made smooth”. Well, not for me! But as I look back I can see that these rugged paths have been filled-in and smoothed out. Although I could not see or feel it at the time, I believe God was alongside me in my trials and tribulations. When I could not pray, others were praying for me, supporting me in a variety of ways.

But despite this, Christmas, like my birthday, is a particularly difficult time for me as it was a significant time in the life that Bob and I shared – a time for celebrating the birth of Christ and all the joys associated with life. Living and loving together until death did us part.

So now as I look forward it is my Christmas wish that I may be able to assist in smoothing the way for others so they can find their way out of the ravines and traverse the mountains and hills. I hope others may not feel so alone because I have been in many of those ravines and climbed those hills and mountains, although not actually in your shoes but in similar painful ones - and have surmounted the horrors.

Part of the salvation God brings is the opportunity for each of us to make a difference. Those of us who have been bereaved are equipped for this task as no others, for we know in our hearts the spirit of those we love. Our remembrance reminds us of the ultimate value of life, and plants a vision in our souls of a society that has a love of life as its driving force. This Christmas, we who are bereaved by work-related deaths may sound like a voice in the wilderness. But by God's grace, we have the spirit of our loved one's to inspire us. We can draw upon our combined strength to make this difference in the workplace. And by God's love, we know the direction we must follow.

This is my faith and my hope when the wilderness of my grief surrounds me.

May each of you know God's love when surrounded by the wilderness of your loss and grief.

RECONCILIATION AFTER A WORK-RELATED DEATH: A perspective from Christian spirituality

1. Introduction

Issues of spirituality have arisen consistently in the Urban Ministry Network's Partnerships in Grieving Program. The four preceding narratives evidence this, as those bereaved by a work-related death seek meaning in the midst of tragedy, and healing for their grief and trauma.

This report reviews some of the literature in this field in the light of the preceding narratives. The literature review focuses on Christian reflection on these issues. As an agency of the Uniting Church in Australia, the UMN stands in the Christian tradition.

While the UMN is committed to working with people of other faiths in the PIGP, this intention has not progressed due to resource constraints. At the present time, it seems more fruitful to clarify and enrich the tradition out of which the UMN provides this service. Best practice in a multi-faith environment may well depend upon each faith being securely rooted in its own tradition.

2. Work-related death as cultural crisis

Adrian van Kaam sees the breakdown of structures of meaning as characteristic of the experience of death and a typical phase in the pattern of crises that are part of human existence in Western culture (Whelan 1997). The world as we have known it is shaken and may end after a work-related death. This is not only the end of our world with a loved one or work-mate, but also the death of networks of relationships, structures and assumptions about the way the world is. It "not only affects personal integrity; it takes a terrible toll on our ability to relate to others." (Fischer, p.158)

After her brother died, Michelle Ehlers reported that she was treated like a leper at work. Joann Stenton also found her work-mates comments on her bereavement devastating. In response to crisis, our cultural pattern is to blame the victim. (Fischer 1993) So Michelle's employer told her 'to get over it'. Jo noticed that during the time of her husband's illness, she 'ceased to exist, except as a support to Bob'. Michelle describes the impact of Ross's death as like 'a devastating earthquake through the substance of the family and the workplace. It breaks people's spirits and lives.' For Jo, the death of her husband led to thoughts of suicide. 'It would have been so easy to have just kept on walking out beyond my depth to meet Bob in a watery grave.' The very structures of meaning needed to live crumble in the wake of work-related deaths.

At the heart of this crumbling of the structures of meaning is the loss of meaning of working itself, especially for men.

"Work is the natural course of action a man follows to find his role, niche, position, and in many instances, the shape of his soul." (Cottle, p.98)

So when work causes death, it not only does violence to the person killed. It also challenges the source of meaning at the heart of contemporary masculinity. No wonder then that corporations close rank against the bereaved, as if to ward off the challenge they symbolise to the meaning of life.

The crisis in our culture is deepened by our cultures dominance by the post-Enlightenment world's rationalistic mind-set (Whelan, 1997). This mind-set believes human beings are "the pinnacle of beings and the human mind is experienced as an instrument of control or manipulation." (Whelan, p.4)

Work is the means by which men in particular "wish to believe they can *personally control* the future's content. A man cannot view life as grand mystery, each day delivering something new and different. Tomorrow takes form, a man imagines, because of what he accomplishes today." (Cottle, p.101) Work-related death strikes at the very heart of this belief.

The rationalistic mind-set denies any reality that is not empirically verifiable or provable in some way. This deformed and deforming mind is reflected by the responses to Michelle Ehlers of professional men confronted by the deeply disturbing questions arising from Michelle's brother's death, when, for example:

- The Australian police asked Michelle by long-distance telephone to London whether 'your brother wears an Akubra hat'.
- The union official who boasted, 'I predicted 6 this year, 4 more to go'.
- The Coroner's office pathologist who could only give 'explicit and horrendous details of Ross's injuries' in response to a query whether Ross felt pain when he died.

"It is a mind obsessed with information and calculation, a mind dislocated from the whole person, unable to 'know' in the Biblical sense of that word." (Whelan, p.4)

When confronted by the ultimate questions of death and life, the bearers of our culture's rationalistic wisdom reveal their supreme irrationality. They deny the depth of their encounter with these ultimate questions by retreating into an illusion of control. They focus on 'the facts'. Ironically, the pragmatism of their 'wisdom' simply serves to deepen the bereaved's experience of violence and violation. They cling on to their work and it's illusions in denial of the violence and destruction work has brought.

"For in working a man believes he has made sense of life's mystery, and found reasonable methods of avoiding vexing metaphysical questions. In work, the irrational, the incalculable becomes calculable, the meaningless assumes meaning." (Cottle, p.102)

The cultural crisis revealed by work-related death is also characterised by religious confusion. (Whelan 1997) Faced with the break-down of the structures of meaning and the domination of the rationalistic mind-set, the Church has also lost its ability to speak clearly and credibly to the questions raised by work-related death. Work and faith have been segregated into separate spheres by both secular and theological intent. As Paul Mayfield noted, the Church has deemed the workplace 'God-forsaken'. Only 'the nature of Les's work in the Church's worship-space and the manner of his death have altered that!'

The violence of a work-related death can take on the character of an encounter with evil in the world.

"Such suffering is not random or abstract, but an experience of evil directed at our person. It threatens a (person's) trust in God and raises many faith questions: Was this somehow God's will? Where was God when I was so in need? How could God love me and let me go through this? What kind of world is this? (Fischer, p.159)

A work-related death reveals a depth of crisis in our culture. There is more than an experience of the loss of a loved-one or work-mate to be faced. There is something deeply amiss with the structures and ideology of work and family, of science and religion. Trust in God may also be gone. Unless we can face this, we remain captive to the situation, which in Christian tradition is called our 'fallenness'. The central revelation of the Bible is that our 'fallenness' is a call "to recognise and live in the light of ... the One who saves." (Whelan p.10) Paradoxically, in recognising our 'fallenness' we meet and experience the God who 'saves' by reconciling us to God and to one another.

"The first act leading to reconciliation is repentance, followed by forgiveness, and if possible, acts of restitution." (Wink 1997, p.18)

3. Reconciliation and repentance

"No reconciliation, no forgiveness, and no negotiation are possible without repentance. The biblical teaching on reconciliation and forgiveness makes it quite clear that nobody can be forgiven and reconciled with God unless she or he repents ..."
" (Enquist, 1995, p.300)

All parties to a conflict are wounded, and the unhealed wound remains at the heart of the ongoing conflict. (Hoffman 1994) Paul Mayfield's narrative reveals how much Les' death wounded the management and staff at their workplace. Paul spoke of his sense of shock and culpability when it was pointed out there was no harness or safety-net in place. Acknowledging this is a hard truth to speak. It is the confession or acknowledgment of past complicity with the prevailing system of power relations and values.

We can repent because God has forgiven us our participation in the world where workplace deaths occur. (Wink 1997). Yet repentance will mean a different response from the employer and work-mates of the person who died from the response of the bereaved family. The employer is legally responsible for the occupational health and safety of the workplace, and this responsibility is at the root of the pain and alienation experienced by all parties. Taking the side of the bereaved family

"is a *means of repentance* on the part of the (employer). ... true repentance requires a change of place within the system and embracing the cause and interests of the victims. It is to put myself on the same side as those from whom I seek forgiveness and reconciliation." (Moore, p. 46)

Paul Mayfield describes how the Church agency that employed the person who died began to address this root problem. 'Les's family honoured the congregation by wishing

to be present in worship the next Sunday (after Les died). And the Church was able to honour the family through knowledge of and respect for Les. This mutual honouring enabled potential fear, animosity, or resentment to be dissolved. As we contemplate the first anniversary of Les's death ... forgiveness is a sign for us of resurrection.'

The movement Paul describes was made stronger by Les's family choosing to worship with those responsible for their loved one's occupational health and safety. For the bereaved family,

"taking sides is the *means of loving one's enemies*. It is first of all an acknowledgement that those who cause my ... suffering are genuinely enemies. This is to acknowledge the reality of the conflict, and not to trivialise the profound suffering (experienced) ... It is to acknowledge the need for reconciliation and thereby to create its genuine possibility. To love my enemies rather than to hate them is to be committed to their welfare and their best interests." (Moore, p.46)

Michelle Ehlers describes something of what it means to love one's enemies. She describes the work environment at the time her brother died. 'The workplace was filled with profiteers and bean counters who did not seem to include workplace health and safety mechanisms into their costing.' The enmity she felt intensified when the company appealed the severity of their sentence. 'We were off to war again. ... The thought of an appeal was killing what was left of Mum's soul and mine.' Yet Michelle desired a release from this bitterness. 'We emerged from the court victorious, yet feeling degraded, and depleted of energy.'

There is both a bitter hatred and a passionate desire to be free of the burden of this bitterness. This is the longing that prepared Michelle for the experience of Sister Loretta Brennan singing at a memorial service. As Michelle listened, she 'felt a sudden and certain reassurance, one that said 'everything is going to be all right.' ' Michelle described the movement that 'begins with opening the heart and mind to messages of love and understanding from many directions. The day I listened to Loretta Brennan's beautiful voice, that said everything is to be all right, I think I opened my heart more to see the things that could make that happen.'

Reconciliation requires an acceptance of feelings of enmity, anger, bitterness and revenge. Fischer suggests:

- Recognising and validating the feelings.
- Exploring the personal and social origins of the feelings.
- Finding ways to use these feelings for spiritual growth.
- Clarifying the relationship between these feelings and forgiveness. (p. 177)

Repentance is the movement away from all that characterises the Domination System, and in particular the movement away from violence towards enemies. When Michelle's heart changed towards those responsible for her brother's death, God's love for her, already freely given, could be accepted.

"The healing process should bring a deepening conviction for the (person) that God is on (their) side and the side of life and wholeness, not on the side of violence." (Fischer, p.161)

4. Reconciliation and forgiveness

"Forgiveness does not mean that we condone or accept the behaviour of the perpetrator. The victim does not turn a blind eye to the crime, but rather frees herself from ongoing psychological torture, thus clearing a path by which she can seek justice that is motivated, not by revenge, but by the pursuit of universal change and transformation. Harboring enmity and seeking revenge only perpetuates the power of the oppressors to lord it over their victims long after the deed was done. Thus, at the most fundamental level, forgiveness spells liberation for the victim." (Wink, p.15)

The act of forgiveness means

"I will no longer allow this experience to dominate my life. I will not let it continue to make me feel bad about myself. I will not let it limit my ability to love and trust others with my life. I will not let my memory of the experience continue to victimise and control me." (Fortune, p. 209)

When Michelle Ehlers opened her heart to 'messages of love and understanding from many directions', she was ready and able to be open to the opportunity to meet with the Managing Director of the company for whom Ross worked. When this opportunity was realised, Michelle pursued justice motivated by a desire for transformation.

This justice began with ensuring the MD 'knew ALL the circumstances of the tragedy and the case.' The spirit of the meeting encouraged the MD to be compassionate to the grieving family, 'and in particular (to be) understanding of our pain'. Then, as a result of that exchange, the MD acted in a spirit of transformation. 'He has assured us of his own commitment to encouraging every person in the workplaces of that enormous company ... are all safe.'

The final movement in that process of forgiveness was the healing that began for Michelle and her mother. 'The day that one man listened and showed us his understanding and commitment to Ross, our family, and his hundreds of workers and their families, I saw a glimmer of light return to my Mother's beautiful green blue eyes. She rang me the next morning and said, "I think my healing may have begun." Now that Mum is healing, I think too, so am I.'

Here, forgiveness opens the way for liberation for the victims of a loved-one's tragic death. The wounds remain, but they can be transformed into a new kind of wholeness as people discover new strengths within themselves and their relationships. (Fischer, p.163)

Wink draws attention to false forgiveness, especially that based on the adage "forgive and forget". He says,

"The very attempt to forget something places it in the centre of conscious attention. We should never try to forget our life's most painful experiences anyway. Forgiveness is offered with full knowledge of the offense. We must never forget the ways we have hurt others, lest we pretend to be better than we are, and we must never forget the way others have hurt us, if for no other reason than to protect ourselves against its repetition." (Wink, p.19)

Bette Phillips tells how something her solicitor encouraged her to forget (the employer's negligence in completing her son's superannuation papers) remained in her consciousness and has again come to light, seeking justice and healing. Jo Stenton recalls how being denied opportunities to remember her husband's death at the place they both worked has made her healing and reconciliation to what happened very difficult.

5. Reconciliation and restitution

"Reconciliation means, finally, reestablishing love between two or more estranged parties." (Wink, p.16)

As Michelle Ehlers declared after several meetings with the MD of the company her brother worked for, 'this (is a) special man who we hope can become our friend.' Their new relationship was symbolised by his gift of flowers.

Our Partnerships in Grieving Program has not had time to see how employers may translate such transformed relationships with genuine acts of restitution. Restitution may involve both a response to the grief and trauma caused, and action to ensure the tragedy of work-related death does not happen again. At its heart, the fullness of reconciliation called forth by work-related deaths is the transformation of work itself. Reconciliation with all those bereaved by work-related deaths

"ultimately cannot be achieved apart from a transformation in our patterns of work ... Work that fails to reconcile us with others contributes to isolation, individualism and the deterioration of human community. In contrast, good work is that which enables us to live together meaningfully and well." (O'Donovan, pp. 113-114)

Bette Phillips is motivated by her son's death to seek a transformation of patterns of work. She has 'conducted training programs for Management, Human Resource Personnel and OH&S Officers. Our training has focused on a much needed holistic approach to crisis management, bringing a human aspect to OH&S in the workplace.'

6. Reconciliation as a process

"Reconciliation is a process with discrete steps, but in practice these steps vary from case to case." (Wink, p.21)

It takes time to work through powerful and legitimate feelings. At the same time, systems have an investment in staying the same, and may intensify their resistance as those seeking reconciliation change their behaviour. This resistance can also affect the reconciliation process.

Bette Phillips describes how a support program for bereaved families is beginning 'to open a path to lead me through this difficult time. ... I can see how sharing our grief is making a difference. Some of the paths ahead have been smoothed out; some of the mountains in front of us don't appear as impossible.' But even as this healing path has led Bette to new opportunities to seek justice and transformation in the workplace, it has thrown her back into a fresh struggle about an injustice done by her son's employer and compounded by the apparent negligence of her solicitor. In telling her story to a group of

case managers for apprentices, Bette was given new information that has re-opened an old wound and called her to seek again healing and justice.

"Victims of violence and suffering must tell their own story over and over again in order to escape the narrative of the lie. As they recount their own narrative, little by little they begin to construct a new narrative of truth that can include the experiences of suffering and violence without allowing those experiences to overwhelm it. This includes, in the first stage, establishing a kind of geography of violence and suffering; that is, bounding it so as to tame its savage power. The more that the violence is so bounded, the less formidable it becomes. Without such boundedness, it roams at will in the life of the victim devouring, like the roaming lion in 1 Peter 5:8, whomever it will. The ministry of reconciliation at this stage is a ministry of listening." (Schreiter, p.71)

The narratives of this project are critical contributions, not only to the healing of the individuals concerned, but as models of the reconciliation process. None of the narratives recorded is static. At UMN we have heard the narratives evolve and develop as the journey of healing and reconciliation for each person has evolved.

The project has facilitated and encouraged our listening to these changing stories. It has strengthened our appreciation of the role of narrative as a healing tool. It has also opened our eyes to the diversity of ways people experience the movement of grace in their lives, and reaffirmed our conviction that this grace is a divine gift in the movement to healing and reconciliation.

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**REPORT TO URBAN MINISTRY NETWORK:
towards best practice in justice and healing for people bereaved by a
work-related death**

1. Providing people with an opportunity to tell their story is a powerful healing process. The grief narratives support people to find threads re-connecting their lives, which have been so fragmented by the violence and trauma of a work-related death.
2. As people tell their stories, the truth of their experience begins to take shape. Being able to speak the truth evokes a healing spirit.
3. It is important for people to speak the truth of their experience in public. This is a powerful validation of their suffering, and honours the person they loved who died. Equipping people to speak the truth of their experience in public is a work of justice that addresses the injustice people experience with work-related deaths.
4. The Church is privileged to be able to offer a public platform for people to speak the truth. In worship, this takes on the further redeeming value of speaking the truth before God.
5. Many bereaved people have an experience of spirituality through their sense of connectedness with their loved one, but they have little language to speak of their experience in a secular society. The Christian faith provides a language and symbolic world to address this mystery, and in this exploration, many find healing and a movement towards reconciliation.
6. The depth of injustice experienced through a work-related death leads many to an awareness of a cultural crisis facing our society. In turn, the yearning for reconciliation and healing calls forth a desire for cultural and social transformation. UMN programs need to address the nature of work, and the priorities of our social life and economic system. While this is a broad scope, the work of reconciliation can progress through practical steps in the pursuit of justice, training for occupational health and safety, remembrance of those who have died, and personal acts of repentance (support for victims, loving one's enemies)
7. UMN needs to explore with families, employers and legal practitioners ways to achieve practical reconciliation that is not paralysed by the adversarial legal system engulfing the area of work-related death.
8. A mature Christian spirituality needs to seek ways to relate to other faiths to share the fruits of the PIGP and to discover how those bereaved from other faith and cultural backgrounds seek justice and healing.