

PAPERS

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Life Review and Heroic Narrative: Embracing Pathology and Attention to Context

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Holding the Man (Conigrave, 1995), chronicles a fifteen-year relationship between Timothy Conigrave and his partner, John, and the process of their coping with John's impending death from AIDS related illness. In this article I discuss the autobiography as a naturalistic example of the therapeutic method of life review¹. What result would have emerged if a narrative therapist had assisted in the writing of the book? Based on my friendship with the protagonists, I would have argued for a less negative picture of the author, but Tim's aim seems to have been to represent the relationship in a dramatic form, with the author embracing his own pathology, and the imbalances and unfairness in their relationship. I suggest that employing methods which externalise pathology to elicit 'the heroic'² narrative may have disregarded these goals. I highlight the need to recognise and understand individual pattern and context, and raise alternative, less interventionist positions as appropriate for clients involved in such reviews of their lives.

INTRODUCTION

History is always an ambiguous affair. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our own prejudices, gullibility, and ignorance, as well as on knowledge and analysis (Salman Rushdie 1981: 99-100).

In Year Nine, I was in the same class as Tim Conigrave, at an all-boys Catholic secondary school, along with John and others Tim subsequently wrote about in his autobiographical account, *Holding the Man* (1995). Tim was teased regularly that year, largely due to his somewhat effeminate appearance and behaviour, and his sensitivity. Tim, however, was extroverted, and mixed with both more conservative and less conservative groups. I did not know him well until our final year at school, when a relationship with a mutual female friend led me to spend a good deal of time with Tim and John and a larger group for about two years. I first met John in Year Seven, in 1971. We had close contact throughout school, particularly through our involvement in the same sporting teams over six years. John fitted well into the culture of the school: he was good academically, he excelled at sport, and he was

extremely likeable. Competitive in traditional male activities, he was also capable of being extremely single-minded. I was not surprised when I learned of their relationship, although John had never mentioned it to me, despite the long conversations we had during countless hours fielding in the slips in cricket. I kept in touch until John and Tim left for Sydney in the mid 1980s, and then had sporadic contact with them until they returned to Melbourne just prior to John's death in 1992 at age 31, from AIDS-related illnesses.

Holding the Man follows the course of Tim's life from puberty onwards in the form of a raw and uncensored account, describing how the themes of his relationship with John develop from mid-adolescence into adulthood. It shows how he and John deal with their homosexuality in a heterosexual culture, and in particular discusses the conflict with their families over their sexuality. It details their adaptation to, and coping with, each other's illnesses, Tim's affairs with men outside the relationship, and both families' reactions to John's impending death. Tim himself died in 1994 at age 34, also from AIDS-related illnesses, soon after the completion of the book.

Nor dread nor hope attend
A dying animal;
A man awaits his end
Dreading and hoping all;
Many times he died,
Many times he rose again ...

W. B. Yeats (1933).

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Why do people write autobiographies, and include details that are so intensely personal? Is it, as Yeats would have us believe, that humans have the awareness of death throughout life, and that autobiographies reflect the process of that waiting? *Holding the Man* really represents a life review, where an individual scans his life and selects from his experiences to construct a story with some coherence. This type of review is clearly congruent with individuals facing their own death, and it makes intuitive sense that such a review would have a variety of non-specific therapeutic effects.

This paper adds a personal commentary on the lives and relationship of Tim and John—a double description of sorts. I am hoping that this double description, a feature of many narratives, illustrates how alternative views may intersect with the picture created in the original story. My aims in this process are to reflect on the activity of life review, and to question how the therapist should be involved in facilitating this process.

LIFE REVIEW AS THERAPY

Typically, life reviews have taken place with individuals at the latter end of their lives or at a period where their lives were at risk. Moody (1988), in reviewing 25 years of the use of life review methods, suggested that the psychology of ego integrity and life review together comprise a collective myth that inspires a hopeful view of old age and its possibilities. I would consider that the methods also inspire a hopeful and romantic image of death in general. De Vries, Birren, and Deutchman (1995) suggest that participating in guided autobiography could assist individuals to recall details of their lives, identify their strengths and weaknesses, develop a sense of coherence about their lives, and accept them as they have evolved. Such 'guided' reviews are in some ways close to the approach adopted by narrative therapists, to be addressed at a later point in this paper.

Life reviews have taken place as part of both therapeutic and non-therapeutic exercises. They have been useful in generating qualitative data on individuals, and also have facilitated coping for those at major crisis points of their lives. In the former category, Colby (1994) conducted in-depth life history interviews with 23 adults using the assisted autobiography approach to understand the conscious psychological processes involved in the development of exceptional moral commitment. In the latter category, Rybarczyk, Auerbach, Jorn, Lofland and Perlman (1993) provided one of three stress interventions (General Reminiscence Interview, Life Challenges Interview, or relaxation training) to 110 patients (aged 50–88 yrs) prior to angioplasty. A control group of 34 patients received no treatment. Their results suggested that life reviews dedicated to the evaluation of significant difficulties in the person's life facilitated their preparation for surgery.

The use of life review interventions also has been documented in limited ways in the systemic literature. Sukosky (1994) suggested that the use of life review as

a therapeutic tool has been mainly limited to working with the elderly, with fewer clinicians using it in marriage and family therapy, despite the obvious possibilities in the methods. He argued that it provides insight into the past, gives clues concerning present behaviour, and enables clients to face the present more successfully. DeGenova (1991) applied a Bowenian therapeutic approach to the problem of a negative review in later life.

Recently, the use of life review with individuals with HIV has been reported, including both group and individual interventions (Galassi, 1991). Vaughan and Kinnier (1996) evaluated a life review intervention for HIV sufferers. Twenty-seven adults (aged 28–56 yrs) with HIV disease (sixteen with AIDS) were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: a group life review intervention (n = 8), a traditional support group (n = 9), or a waiting list (n = 10). Although analyses revealed no significant differences between the interventions, statistical trends and written evaluations favoured the life review intervention.

Haight (1991) presented an overview derived from a review of the literature from 1960–1990. Of the 97 published articles describing reminiscing, only seven reported negative outcomes; the remainder were positive or non-evaluative in type. Despite general problems related to the definition of the outcome variables that indicated success in the interventions, the study indicated that life review has been widely used, and is either benign or helpful. Most outcome data has related to life review studies undertaken with adults in the context of their imminent death—the category most directly comparable with *Holding the Man*.

Having placed *Holding the Man* in the context of the life review method in therapy, we need now to consider what sort of narrative it is, and how it embodies (or fails to embody) the principles that govern personal narratives in general.

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE STUDY OF NARRATIVES

Completeness and Cultural Resonance

'Narrative closure' (Chatman, 1987) refers to the extent to which a story can be understood in alternative ways; closure is influenced by 'completeness' and 'cultural resonance'. 'Completeness' refers to how open the story is, how many gaps there are in the story, whereas 'cultural resonance' refers to the extent to which the story is able to be understood by the community at large. *Holding the Man* has a low degree of closure, and this alters the experience of the story. The story has large gaps, partly because it is written in sections that are like scenes, with large passages of time in between (I return to this theatrical aspect later in the paper). Consequently, it would be easy to form the impression that perhaps Tim's relationship lacks commitment or a sense of shared purpose. This 'incompleteness' also makes it more difficult to understand the reasons behind Tim's

affairs and the relationship breaks which Tim describes. Similarly, *Holding the Man* has a low level of cultural resonance for heterosexual readers, and I am sure that Tim was extremely aware of this fact. Thus the reader may be less able to fill in the gaps with shared knowledge.

Personal Narratives are not Neutral

Bruner (1990) reflects on the fact that personal accounts, particularly those with (auto-)biographical content, are not neutral documents. They are rarely balanced and even-handed in their treatment of the lives of their protagonists, and reflect the biases and idiosyncrasies of the author. *Holding the Man* presents itself in this way. At first reading, the reader is struck by the intensely personal and private descriptions of Tim and John's relationship. Tim discusses not only their falling in love, but also their arguments, their sexual encounters, the fights and other problems with their families, the intimate details of their illnesses, and finally, John's death and its aftermath. Tim speaks of himself as 'the one who says what everyone else won't say'. He draws himself as extremely sensitive but sharp, with a tendency to push others away initially with sarcastic and caustic comments for fear of them hurting him.

My personal experience of Tim offers me an alternative perspective on the account he offers of himself. As an actor, Tim took roles that were self-revealing; one in particular had him naked on stage for the bulk of the second half of the play. As a playwright, he also used autobiographical themes, as in *Stars in my Hands* (Conigrave, 1994). He presented himself as a person with a very strong need to be cared for and loved, driven somewhat by self-doubt and insecurities, expressive, emotional, with a strong desire for change and stimulation. With friends, he was also a robust person who could talk about a host of intimate and painful topics. He was particularly inquisitive about human emotions and the behaviour of others.

For example, in the second year of my undergraduate studies I asked Tim and John to be involved in an interview as part of a sociology assignment. Both readily agreed to discuss their relationship with me, and to have the interview taped. It was Tim who took the lead in the interview, who revelled in the chance to reflect on their relationship and their sexuality. John appeared to accept himself, his love for Tim, and his sexuality, and had little of Tim's need for analysis of self and others. John's occupation as a chiropractor was ideal for him; it required kindness, practicality, knowledge, a clear belief system, and addressed the physical world more than the psychological. Tim by contrast revelled in the emotional upheaval associated with acting and playwrighting, and also was intensely interested in psychotherapy for many of the same reasons.

From my experience, how Tim draws himself in the book is generally accurate, but he paints himself and his intentions darkly, and leaves out a great deal. This is a clear example of Bruner's (1990) principle that personal

accounts cannot remain neutral. Throughout my reading of the book, I found myself thinking, 'That's Tim's view on this issue', or 'He never would admit this', and so on. For example, when Tim spoke of the other sexual relationships he had been involved in, separate from his relationship with John, he spoke much more of the sexual intent and experimentation in the relationships than about need for intimacy, acceptance, or approval. Similarly, despite his honesty, Tim reduced to insignificance those aspects of the relationship with John that he found difficult or unsatisfying. Since he was writing in the two years following John's death, it is likely that grief would not have allowed him to think negatively about John or their relationship for any extended period. It is likely also that the process of the illness had led to some depersonalisation of John, as well as colouring their relationship with suffering. In addition, as with most people in pain, John reacted uncharacteristically at times, and I would suspect that Tim wanted to see their relationship as basically intact, separate from the process of the illness.

Making Meaning: Deviations from the Norm

Bruner (1990) highlights the fact that individuals construct narratives in order to make sense of a lack of fit between themselves and the world. I would venture to assert that the process for many who undertake life review is the identification of a pattern in their lives, or the finding of a niche into which they fit. It is likely that the writing of the narrative in itself reduces the sense of being an outsider, and allows authors to be at the centre of their lives.

At various points, I was forced to remember that *Holding the Man* was written by someone who both felt like, and was treated as, an outsider. I remember very clearly going with Tim and John to a nightclub in the early 1980s, with a group of friends. The club had several nights that had been earmarked as 'gay nights'. I was struck by how comfortable and relaxed Tim and John appeared in that context. I had not seen them so clearly demonstrative in a bar or a restaurant. While we were all together at someone's home, they were comfortable being openly affectionate. Once they moved into public, however, their behaviour changed dramatically. Even though I knew them well, I had overlooked the extent to which the constraints society imposed on their sexuality had a regular effect on them.

The time you won your town the race
 We chaired you through the market place;
 Man and boy stood cheering by,
 And home we brought you shoulder-high.
 Today, the road all runners come,
 Shoulder-high we bring you home,
 And set you at your threshold down,
 Townsman of a stiller town ...

A. E. Housman (1896)

Recently the twentieth reunion of our school year was held, with about half of the original 200 present. I was very aware on the night of the absence of Tim and John.

During the night, the century-old school culture emerged easily. After the MC had spoken for more than a minute or two (rather pompously), he was subjected to the same barbs which had once been inflicted on teachers by the students, directed in rapid fire, with an escalation of the level of the humour in the insults. Special tongue in cheek comments were reserved for the most financially successful of the group, perhaps to overturn the pecking order, perhaps due to a spilling over of envy. Yet some changes were evident. Perhaps the most surprising was that early in the proceedings, the MC commented that he had read *Holding the Man*, and thought it was a great book.

Sounds and gestures of support emerged tentatively at first, as if people were testing the waters, just in case the book disgusted everyone else. There were some amusing fake protests from some of those mentioned in the book. There were also some clear signs and expressions of discomfort from those who had been mentioned in the context of adolescent sexual experimentation. In response, there were further amusing comments to these named players, with intimations of blackmail. Interestingly, the MC did not initiate a toast for Tim and John, and I wondered whether he was unsure what the response might be. There was clear support for a toast initiated informally at the end of the proceedings by unlikely individuals, their inhibitions perhaps loosened by alcohol. I am sure both Tim and John would have been surprised at this response. Despite my own cynicism about these types of public displays of camaraderie, particularly accompanied by too much alcohol and more than a touch of maudlin nostalgia, I was struck by what happened. Others from the year had also died, but they were not mentioned. Not only had the book made a difference, but also it is clear that Tim and John were seen as special.

Did death make Tim and John's memory easier for their peers to accept? Is it easier to support dead gay friends than to support them while they are living, and risk some disruption to our own worlds? Would Tim and John have arrived together if they were alive? Would they have attended at all? I am not sure that they would have. How would others have responded? There were others on the night, who, although they did not openly state that they were homosexual, also did not disguise the issue. There was no avoidance of these people, but there was some private derision of those who were more flamboyant. Tim stated (1995) that those who knew about their relationship were supportive. I am not certain whether the situation was so black and white, either then or now.

As in most all-boys schools, homosexuality was feared, and Catholic discomfort with sexuality probably exacerbated the situation. Some of the teaching and religious staff knew of John and Tim's relationship, and there were no obvious incidents which suggested intolerance. Tim and his family received a good deal of direct support from one of the Jesuit community, as Tim mentions in *Holding the Man*. Tim was openly and flamboyantly gay. John was a prefect, academically success-

ful, represented the school in three sports, and in general, personified school values. For many, their relationship unsettled a sense of order in the world, as the apparently conventional and heroic became more complex and shadowy. Both Tim and John were very aware of these issues. Tim describes an incident in a country pub where some locals physically bully the group of friends for overt displays of their sexuality. In the scuffles, one of the locals hits John in the face. Neither John nor Tim tries to retaliate or defend himself. In the face of antagonism, they simply take the path of least resistance.

I have no doubt that Tim's early experiences at the school were much more painful than he portrays in the book. He stood up for himself, but it was a trial by fire, as it was for many. Early in most years there were fights which began with verbal teasing or derision. Generally, the answer to the baiting was a show of physical force, after which the targets were left alone to some degree if they had shown themselves worthy or dangerous opponents—or even opponents prepared to stand up for themselves. If the targets did not defend themselves, they continued to be baited for much of the year. In Tim's case, it could be argued that he let the baiting go on for too long, and continued to be teased in the middle years of his schooling. He was also extremely reactive to the barbs, which simply encouraged further taunts.

There are several possible reasons for Tim's playing down of these painful experiences in *Holding the Man*. Firstly, he had been through far more difficult experiences since. Secondly, he had awareness, based on his work with the AIDS council, that his background was relatively privileged. Thirdly, at school, some level of maturity prevailed in the later years and he developed good friends in a distinct group, which of course included John, as they began their relationship. Fourthly, he idealised his teenage experiences to some extent. His account of this stage of his life is most littered with factual errors, many of them related to his idealisation of John.

In terms of Bruner's principle, it is curious that Tim chooses to downplay the extent of his victimisation at school. He thus positions himself, not as a victim of societal oppression, or as an heroic underdog, but as a person who to a degree accepts the way he was treated. Similarly, and ironically, the reactions of his old school-fellows after his death actually suggest a higher degree of acceptance, even admiration, than they were able to display when they knew Tim as an adolescent. In this sense, the net effect of the book, for both author and this particular audience, is a kind of normalisation, and in this way, perhaps, it could be argued that Tim has in fact posthumously achieved his political aims.

Justification of Actions

Bruner (1990) makes the point that people usually experience their own intentions as good: their narrative serves to justify their behaviours as the only ones poss-

ible. Individuals avoid the confusion or cognitive dissonance associated with actions which do not fit with their sense of self. In *Holding the Man*, however, the picture of the narrator is not all-positive, and the picture of the relationship is unbalanced. Rather, there is coherence in Tim's portrayal of himself as flawed.

Clearly the painting of such a picture had an important purpose for Tim. For example, while he touches on the hedonistic reasons for his affairs, he underplays several of the other possible motivations. Firstly, he and John were partners from age fifteen onwards. Most people, including them, saw them as almost one person, 'fused at the hip' as it were. Even when they had relationship breaks in their early years, they retained very close contact. Their fusion occurred before either had developed clear identities for themselves. Due to having come from a family which was extremely cohesive, this issue was perhaps less problematic for John, who also was surer of his own identity in the first place. Tim may have felt stifled and uncomfortable with the sense of fusion, and he alludes to these feelings in the book. His sexual adventures may have represented his attempts to rediscover his separateness, but if so, he was either unaware of this dimension, or chose to ignore it in writing the book.

Secondly, as can be seen throughout much of the book, Tim had a very strong need to be loved and accepted. Perhaps the affairs helped him feel more adequate, attractive, and confident. He suggests that he was somewhat resentful and envious of John's ability to be self contained. In this way and others, Tim and John polarised each other at times, with the conservative-outrageous dichotomy becoming frustrating for both. Although Tim does not talk of the more prickly, outrageous aspects of his behaviour in this light, it is possible that he was attempting to move beyond the blandness of 'mature' relationships into a deliberate provocativeness—where judgment was somehow defused.

There were other times where he presents himself as acting childish, such as before his sister's wedding, when he openly expressed his distaste at the traditional ceremony. Tim commented to his sister that he was 'being a bit of a jerk'. She replied that he wouldn't be him if he wasn't, suggesting that this pettiness, and perhaps jealousy, was par for the course. Despite his obvious envy of his family's open acceptance of his sister's relationship, and perhaps of the marriage itself, he reflected very little on this part of himself. He appears insightful, unable to focus on his own anger at the world and his impending death. At these parts of the book, his account appears to be written far more as a play, and less as an exploration of his life.

Tim characteristically dealt with relationships where he thought he might be judged by being provocative or acid. As we moved into our twenties, if we had not seen each other for some time, he would often greet me with some outrageous comment or barb, but talk later about being worried whether I had come to see him as weird since I had trained as a psychologist. In this sense, acting unconventional made him less of a static target. My

sense is that he also tested people to see whether he could shock them; those who were not shockable were safer. Tim portrays himself as a person who is full of incongruities and contradictions: humble and self-effacing sometimes, narcissistic sometimes; loyal and 'other centred' sometimes, predatory and hedonistic at others. He does not overtly 'justify' his own actions in the manner that Bruner (1990) suggests is typical of the authors of personal narratives.

Making Meaning of Others' Behaviour

Inherent in narratives is the juxtaposition of the self and the world, with attempts to clarify the part that each plays in life events. Bruner (1990) makes the point that individuals may attempt to shift the weight of the responsibility from themselves to others. This process is particularly evident in *Holding the Man*, and appears related to a lack of resolution between Tim and John's family. From Tim's description, both sets of parents had their struggles in dealing with their sons' sexuality. Tim portrays his own family as more able to understand and accept the facts than were John's family. The issue appears to be at first related to strength of beliefs and family functioning. Tim describes John's family as extremely cohesive, with five boys, a devoted mother, a strict but fair father, family cricket and football games, beach holidays, Sunday mass and strong family values. It is portrayed as an all-consuming experience which moulded him into a person with a remarkable sense of fairness, gentleness, and yet confidence and purpose in life. John's experience of his family's struggles to come to terms with his emergent adolescent sexuality may well reflect the family's difficulty coping with his individuation. Many families, and parents differentially, function well when children's needs are dependency related, but find it more complex to allow their children to express themselves in adolescence and adulthood. Subsequently the transition from a parent-child relationship to an adult-adult relationship is far more troublesome.

In John's situation, this pattern was complicated by the clash between the family's beliefs and John's homosexuality, around the time that it became clear that he and Tim were not only homosexual, but also a couple. It was almost inevitable, in retrospect, that John's death and the dealing with issues of John's sexuality at his death would also become a source of conflict between the family and Tim. These events point to the fact that major life cycle transition points are most likely to trigger conflict due to the increased need for adaptation and variation of roles.

According to Tim's account, the conflict revolved around whether homosexuality was contrary to Catholic doctrine. This issue drove a wedge in the relationship between John and his father, and the family did not openly show their support for John's relationship with Tim, except perhaps around John's death. My reading of this conflict is that Tim himself had difficulty placing himself in John's father's shoes. Tim's family had

accepted his sexuality more easily, and were more accepting of his open displays of his sexuality than most of their world in the late 1970s.

Interestingly, Tim does not comment on any issues apart from religious ones. He does not speculate on John's parents' possible sense of the loss of their early dreams for John, their wish for him to have children, their possible wish to become close to a daughter in law (especially as they had no girls), their concern about John's coping with the social demands of being gay, or their general confusion. While it is easy to make political decrees about how parents should behave in the face of their children's emergent sexuality, many parents struggle. Sexual orientation is still considered by some to be a matter of choice, despite increasing research to the contrary (LeVay, 1996). I suspect that Tim's flamboyant expression of sexuality made it even more difficult for John's family to accept. The emotion inherent in Tim's account of the conflict with both families at the time that both he and John were in their late teens, some fifteen years before, indicates the power of these events. I suspect that if Tim had developed a more substantial and respectful bond with John's family prior to John's death, the sense of hurt related to this initial lack of acceptance might have been reduced.

From Tim's description, several events occurred around John's death that were especially significant and painful. The first was that John's family and Tim disagreed about the distribution of John's possessions, and in Tim's view, the family disregarded his and John's decisions at this point. Tim was also upset that John's family had decided that John was to be buried in the family plot. The second was that, against Tim's wishes, there was at the funeral no explicit or public recognition of Tim and John's fifteen-year relationship. If John was unmarried but had a female partner, would his relationship have been honoured and openly acknowledged? In the premature death of a child, I would imagine that there a basic urge to reclaim one's dead child psychologically and physically. I am sure that many families yearn to 'take their child back home', and legal ties may often make the difference in how these painful scenarios are played out. I have wondered why Tim did not fight harder for what he wanted. I am sure several factors were at play: he and John had no legally binding relationship, he was ill with HIV at the time of John's death, and he was negotiating the course of his own grief. Tim was used to being socially and culturally invisible and unacceptable due his sexuality. It would make sense that he was not prepared to fight on these issues, and he appeared to want to save his energy for other battles. These incidents highlight the way conflicts are played out in families when a source of shame for the family is made public, and illustrates the power of parents' desire to 'reclaim' dead offspring.

Tim was galled by not having his relationship recognised in a public manner. However, because he saw himself on the fringes of society, I am not sure whether he considered the funeral a place where he could receive public support. I remember looking at him on

the day of the funeral, imagining what it must be like to lose your life partner. I could only imagine the depth of sorrow and despair, yet Tim appeared detached, was jokey, breezy, and cynical, and only when he was carrying John's coffin from the church did he appear sombre. Later at a private gathering he was more expressive.

Tim had done much of his grieving before the funeral, in the months before and the days after John's death, as the book suggests. The funeral was a public forum; so in a sense Tim was back at school, protecting himself from those who could have wounded him with their barbs, at a time when he was feeling the loss so badly. He writes of a brief conversation with a Jesuit ex-headmaster, a man who had been close to John, who had said to him at the funeral, 'Lost your little mate? Very sad, you've got some hard times ahead.' The sensitive remark had an impact, perhaps because Tim had expected to be blamed as the one who 'had led John astray'. This possibility, while it may seem absurd from the outside, is not so absurd in the context of the thoughts of others. John did not conform to the stylised, media version of the effeminate homosexual male, and in some ways Tim did fit that stereotype more. Some of their peers at school had spoken about Tim 'making John gay'. Both were aware of this stereotyping of their relationship. Tim may well have acknowledged this issue in the *double entendre* contained in his book's title, *Holding the Man*, which alongside the obvious meaning of embracing one's lover also has the meaning (in Australian Rules football) of illegally tackling a player.

Tim suggests that he had developed a bond with John's mother, particularly around the time of John's death, which appeared to soften his position on the conflicts between him and the family. I have asked various people to identify the part of the book that touched them the most. The majority have spoken of the description of John dying in Fairfield hospital, and where Tim and John's mother spent time with John. Many empathised most with the loss experienced by John's mother. I am sure the fear of offspring dying is fundamental to all of us.

A year ago you came
Early into the light
You lived a day and night,
Then died; no one to blame.

Once only, with one hand,
Your mother in farewell
Touched you. I cannot tell,
I cannot understand

A thing so dark and deep,
So physical a loss:
One touch, and that was all ...

James McAuley (1971)

Tim understood some of the depth of John's mother's feelings, and expressed that in indirect ways in the book. I think he was aware of her special loss, a loss that was different from his own. I believe that they mutually supported each other, cared for John cooperatively, and

grieved together. Tim also saw the comfort that John received from his mother as he was dying. Despite these shared experiences, Tim placed the bulk of the responsibility for the lack of acceptance on John's family, conforming to Bruner's principle that those who construct personal narratives do so in part in order to 'redistribute responsibility' for painful events from self to others.

CONTEXT AND MOTIVATION IN LIFE REVIEW

Examining Tim's story in the light of Bruner's principles has yielded a complex, contradictory picture. *Holding the Man* is clearly a biased and personal account, yet its biases are not consistently, or even mostly, determined by a need to justify its author's own actions, or to present him in an heroic light. Instead, Tim seems determined to tell his story in the same way that he lived his life as a gay man: here I am, warts and all, take me or leave me: it's up to you. For Tim, this life stance represents integrity, preserved even in the face of death. So are all life reviews inevitably unique, or are they constructed in predictable ways?

McAdams, Diamond, de St Aubin, and Mansfield (1997) analysed the life reviews of 40 highly generative and 30 less generative adults with similar demographic profiles, to identify the extent to which the two groups constructed different identities. McAdams et al.'s study suggests that commitment stories reconstructed by highly generative adults sustain and reinforce the modern adult's efforts to contribute in positive ways to the next generation. The authors also speculate that these life reviews are inevitably connected to the culture and context in which the story is developed, and the perceived value in the community of the themes developed in the review. These findings could very easily be applied to *Holding the Man*, and highlight the need to understand this life review in context.

Tim's motivation for telling this story is not immediately obvious. My reading is that Tim had multiple interconnecting motives. First, I think that telling the story made him and the relationship less invisible. Second, it allowed him to express his love and grief to John concretely, in the same way as building a monument to a dead child, and he may have seen the book as a gift to John. Third, it may have allowed him to express his anger and his disappointments, as well as his gratitude, in a context where he did not have to explain or apologise to anyone for what he felt. Fourth, it seems as if he was trying to redress an imbalance in his own life; attempting to find a place where he did not have to speak half truths, and thus could purge himself of regret and guilt. Fifth, I suspect that telling the story allowed him to prepare for his own impending death, creating some closure by defining a sense of meaning. Sixth, I believe that Tim was offering the story of his life as a piece of 'work'. Both Tim and John were in their early 30s when they died, a period that would normally have seen the coming to fruition of their study and training in their own specialised areas.

Mostly however, the book expresses Tim's sense of life as theatre, with all the great elements of tragedy—love, lust, infidelity, betrayal, violence, and death. While Tim wanted to be accepted, at times he also revelled in the position of the 'devil incarnate'. I suspect that part of him loved to imagine the discomfort of the Catholic establishment reading about him having sex with a model Catholic schoolboy. There is no doubt that there were some expressions of discomfort after publication. Tim's personal anger was translated into a political goal: for others to recognise and to accept homosexuality (a goal which was also a direct reflection of his work in AIDS activism).

Interestingly, MacCormack (1997) has argued that therapy is better understood through analogy with theatre than through analogy with narrative. Tim's life review, written in scenes, and encapsulating much of the dialogue of the major players, could be seen more readily as the text for theatre rather than for a novel. The full context of *Holding the Man* thus includes not only Tim's personal and political motives for writing it, but the social climate (varyingly homophobic) in which the book would be published, and the artistic form (theatre or movie script) in which it is cast.

ISSUES FOR THERAPY

Specifically, would the process have been more helpful if Tim had produced a story that also chronicled his achievements and positive qualities in more detail? Would it have been better politically for Tim to emphasise the fact that he had cared for his partner in a selfless and intimate way until his death? Would it have been helpful for him to present the other side of the picture in relationship to John's family and the conflicts? If Tim was in fact searching for meaning in his own life, in what ways could a hypothetical therapist have assisted with that process through input into the narrative?

If Tim had spoken to a therapist in advance, saying that he wanted to address a series of issues related to his life before he died, and as part of this process, tell the story of his relationship with his life partner, what story would have emerged? As that therapist, I think I would have been tempted to suggest that he present more about the way he felt, so that the impression of his egocentricity and insensitivity would be placed in context. I would also have encouraged him to make other figures in the story more 'real', rather than leaving John and his family, in particular, as cardboard cutouts. There were multiple layers of emotion and thought that he left unexpressed, as well as significant events that he omitted. Whether I was to wear the hat of a friend or a therapist, my response would have been similar.

Yet, looking at the finished book, I think that encouraging an alternative story would have been missing the point. Initially, I did not really see why Tim had written it. It was only after the third reading that I began to understand some of the reasons. Even though I had known Tim well, I only began to sense the complexity of his motivation for writing when I considered the anti-

heroic picture of himself that he presented, and when I reminded myself that his 'life frame' was shaped more by drama than by other artistic forms. As a piece of drama, the work evokes empathy for the protagonists, and amplifies the tension between good and evil. The sense of Tim as the *bête noire* increased with each reading, and with it an understanding that the story was as much a commentary on good and evil as a picture of his and John's relationship. At this point I realised the potential for therapeutic error.

Despite my knowledge of Tim, I would not have considered this issue of 'life as drama' unless he had raised it directly, in part because I am more oriented to the expression of life in a written, rather than acted, form. I had not asked the right questions about the process, or about the context. I needed to ask a variety of other questions: what are the central emotional aims for this person in this life review? What is the medium of expression that orients the person in his/her story? How does s/he want this review to be experienced? What is the central message he/she want to convey? What is the central ambiguity, incongruity or pathology about self that s/he wishes to express?

Reading the story in this light, I believe that the process of writing itself was extremely helpful to him. The book allowed him the opportunity to present his story without the need to be fair or complete, to explain his intentions, or to balance the ledger; as such the book presents with a *low* level of narrative coherence (Chatman, 1987). In *Holding the Man*, people can appear unidimensional, and the story does not necessarily fit together well. While these may be aesthetically questionable features, they may have represented the nature of Tim's experience. When he had HIV, he may have not stopped to reflect on his own motivations for affairs, he may have experienced the world as a disjointed set of characters, where he was unsure of how the parts of his life interconnected. He wrote the story while he was dying, and he recognised that his time was limited. Surely this issue would have affected his desire to 'say it all', the last chance, with no more time to wonder about exactly what to say. There have been many other instances in literature of authors who, in the face of death or in response to trauma or tragedy, have chronicled their experiences. It would appear to me that in general they have not created 'heroic narratives' with themselves at the centre of their world (Monette, 1988, 1994). In contrast, these accounts appear to take on the same 'warts and all' quality as Tim's.

How relevant then is the double description of the therapist? While I may have suggested that Tim was a more complex and generous person than he himself presented in *Holding the Man*, I am not convinced that the therapist's role is in the area of reinterpretation or reframing of the self, or the presentation of the client's self and life in a particular light. The role of the therapist may be primarily to help individuals articulate what they wish to achieve in such a review, or what they are achieving or have achieved as they make their way through the work. These aims may not be clear until

the work itself is completed, as in this case. My double description, while perhaps interesting to the reader, may not necessarily have been useful to Tim, for whom the very writing of his story, uncensored by the need to present himself as kind or fair, achieved his own aims. In the light of notions of how emotion is contextually bound and constructed (Harre, 1986), therapeutic approaches, even when attempting to honour the words of the client, may inadvertently shape their expression.

On reading Tim's story of his relationship with John, I wondered how a narrative approach (Friedman, 1993; Hoyt, 1994; White and Epston, 1990) would have addressed the task of helping him construct his story. Which view would have been supported, purposely or otherwise? Would the therapist have encouraged the picture that Tim paints? Would the therapist have been determined to 'see the other side of the coin', and have Tim make more of his kind, vulnerable, selfless, and committed side, to balance the picture in the book? I am sure that most therapists, irrespective of theoretical allegiance, would have striven for this type of balance. The narrative therapist may have been inclined to seek a more complex picture of the self rather than of others in this case.

White and Epston's (1990) version of the narrative model tends to direct clients to address specific family, contextual, sociopolitical and individual issues via a process of therapeutic questioning. Their questions do not focus on the understanding of problem-maintaining systemic patterns, but tend to be individually focused, abstract, complex, and reflexive, and are offered without necessarily validating the client's current behaviour or beliefs. As Nichols and Schwartz (1995) state, the questions posed within the narrative model 'are rhetorical, designed to help people realise that: (1) they are separate from their problems, (2) they have power over their problems, and (3) they are not who they thought they were' (465). Such rhetorical questions assume that the therapist has a special understanding of the client, which may not be the case. Within the framework of the narrative approach, these questions are designed to confirm the client's experience. However, therapies that construct significantly different realities have a greater potential for 'missing the mark', producing unhelpful expert-non expert dichotomies, leading to processes which are therapist centred rather than person centred. The paradox of the narrative approach is that, despite the strong value placed on client experience, cooperation and collaboration, the methods may inadvertently replicate the practices of structural and strategic approaches (e.g. Minuchin, 1974; Haley 1981) that have been criticised as over-reliant on rationality and therapist intervention (Leupnitz, 1988). Both postmodern and traditional systemic approaches may be tailored to the specific theories, ideologies and templates of the therapist, with less focus on the individual needs of the client or family.

Narrative therapies have suggested that problems are caused by the internalisation of problematic external 'discourses', and are rectified by their externalisation

(White and Epston, 1990; Freeman, Epston, and Lobovits, 1997; Winslade and Epston, 1997). Gibney (1996a, 1996b) argues that this model, among others that deal with pathology as separate from the person, risks iatrogenic effects in therapy. He has argued that pathology has been framed as a result of the 'outer' becoming the 'inner', with the person being accidentally recruited into a process that is oppressive of him/her. He asks:

Does the method—the observing, the one way screen, the clarity of vision—bring with it the externalisation of pathology, the possible ignoring of the problem of suffering (and people's experience of it) and the hubris of 'correct vision' that leads to marginalising and possibly damaging others? (1996b: 184).

Similarly, I have suggested (Kennedy, 1995) that error in 'second order systems therapy' may be related to a lack of attention to contextual realities, which may be a function of adherence to theoretically coherent but therapeutically flawed methods in the face of problems with specific therapeutic requirements (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988; Hoffman, 1985, 1990). I have also proposed that insufficient focus on causal and maintenance factors, or lack of understanding of individual patterns and pathology, may reduce the generalisability of therapeutic gains. In view of these concerns, examination of primary documents such as *Holding the Man* allows a more complex picture of the need for expression of individual pathology, the shameful, the secret, and the unexpressed. In the context of greater attention to solutions, exceptions and restorying, rather than to pattern and process, such text oriented approaches could easily have engaged this protagonist (Tim) in a search for heroism in his life. The heroic narrative, as opposed to that which is more painful and troubling to express, may ignore particular individuals' aim of embracing their own 'pathology' at the end of their lives, or their need to tell the story of those parts of their lives which were riddled with insincerity, selfishness and denial of responsibilities. In the use of personal testimonies in therapy with victims of political oppression, where survivor guilt raises many of the issues expressed in this life review, there is a heavy emphasis on the account of the individual rather than the therapist's active reframing of the events (Agger, 1994; Cienfuegos and Monelli, 1983; Jensen and Agger 1988).

Holding the Man alerts therapists to how individuals and cultures resolve their losses naturalistically, outside the context of therapy. Individuals and families face their impending deaths with a desire to express their inadequacies, failures or lack of courage. Why do we imagine that the construction of more hopeful, alternative stories of themselves will automatically replace their stories of themselves as weak, insincere and cowardly? Does creating a story of oneself as a hero make one feel or behave like a hero in reality? Does the therapeutic literature provide solid evidence to back up any such assertions? Despite the recognition of the need to address such clinical-research issues (Greenberg, 1986), an insufficient number of process studies have been

undertaken to allow clear consensus on whether personal narratives are in fact transformed in therapy (Coulehan, Friedlander and Heatherington, 1997). Ellis (1992), within the framework of Rational Emotive Therapy, has acknowledged the complexity of changing one's beliefs, and the need for recognition of the levels of change required. Are we able to distinguish between when the embracing of pathology is liberating and when talk of problems simply represents 'more of the same'? Are we able to recognise when therapeutic talk of heroic characteristics and solutions is news of difference and when it is insensitive, simplistic, and idealistic? Clearly, well trained therapists of all persuasions are able to recognise when and how it is appropriate to intervene and when it appropriate to 'sit with' the current understanding of the client. Nevertheless, issues of timing and context in intervention in the narrative therapy domain need to be more fully explored, as to date there has been a relative lack of attention to these issues.

The guiding principles of systemic approaches have been attention to context, and the recognition of pattern. Often the central issues that connect the lives and activities of individuals, and their frame of reference, which allows a contextual understanding of their actions, are not immediately obvious to the therapist. In my initial responses to *Holding the Man*, I failed to consider these issues, although I was responding to a life review written by someone whose frame of reference I knew well. I would suggest that these non-specific therapeutic principles need to be elaborated more fully in those approaches that are focused on the discovery of the heroic narrative.

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis illustrates the individual needs of the person attempting to resolve loss and prepare for their own death. I would suggest that as therapists working with clients at these life stages, we need to embrace the position of 'not knowing' as a *belief* rather than a *technique*, in order to encourage the expression of their individual needs. I would argue that the role of the therapist is to simply stand beside the person at this stage, avoiding constructing, shaping, or censoring the content.

My own process in the writing of this paper has also shown me how writing material with autobiographical content is inherently multifaceted in its purposes and meanings. Such works are at once private and public, personal and political, subjective and objective, apologetic and vengeful. This process has emphasised the need to see the complexity of the process, and struggle to understand the work and the author at those many levels. The process of commentary on such work has also illuminated to me how, as in therapy, such commentary is never neutral, objective, unbiased or devoid of intention.

Interlocking aims and motivations have triggered my attention to this life review. I hope that the aims expressed in this paper have been achieved for the

reader, as I am aware that the unexpressed aims have been satisfied. Equally, I hope that these ideas reflect the spirit of Tim and John's lives and the book; an exhortation similar to that of Dylan Thomas (1952): 'Do not go gentle into that good night'.

Notes

¹Thanks are due to Hugh and Maureen Crago for their insightful comments regarding these and many other aspects of the paper.

²The term hero is used in this paper in the conventional sense; a person 'admired for achievements and noble qualities' (Fowler and Fowler, 1964: 573). The use of the archetypal heroic character in literature is well documented. Although beyond the scope of this paper, there has been broad discussion of the psychological and mythical context and meaning of the hero in history (Campbell, 1949).

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