

## Chapter 6

# Reflections of Emotional Truth Narratives

### ABSTRACT

*This narrative provides fictional examples based on factual experiences of patients who worked with a health coach and the story of a grieving daughter who experienced her mother's death. Factual truth focuses on facts, while emotional truth focuses on the emotions associated with a memory. Sometimes when life brings difficulties, discussing the emotional truth of events through the writing process can provide a coping mechanism for emotional trauma and insight of a path forward leading to better days.*

### BEYOND TRADITIONAL HORIZONS OF WRITING

As the character of Nick memorably reflects in the novel *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925), “so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (p. 180). While memories of stories often pull us back into the past, they don't define our future. Expanding the horizons of how writing becomes implemented leads to innovation. Differences exist between happening truth (the factual truth of events people experience) and story truth (the emotional truth of how each person interprets the events). When I explain this concept to my students, I tell them to look at the clock. The exact time is a factual, verifiable truth. We count the desks in the room to learn another factual truth. Then I tell my students when they leave the classroom, if a friend or family member asks them what they learned in English class, each student will share a slightly different story, and each story represents the individual emotional truth of the person who shares it. I tell myself the emotional truth of an event and sincerely believe it, but a photograph of that event shows I wore a different sweater than I remembered. Details may be different than I remember, although my experience remains a true story.

## **USING EMOTIONAL TRUTH TO PROCESS GRIEF**

My mom died when she was too young to die and when I was too young to lose her. Almost eighteen years later, I still look for meaning in the narrative. Edelman (2020) explains the reason for this as, “organizing disordered thoughts into a coherent, manageable account is what helps us make sense of a crisis and fit it into a larger system of personal meaning” (p. 142). I used writing, specifically fiction writing, to cope with my grief in the immediate aftermath of losing my mom. One week, in the midst of the pandemic, I reminded my students to tell their parents they loved them. My mom and I knew we loved each other, but I didn’t know the last conversation we had would be the last time we ever spoke. Edelman elaborates, “a sudden loss offers no opportunity for a logical progression of cause-and-effect relationships that lead to an inevitable conclusion” (p. 175). If I want to spiral into a dark mood, I can relive every moment of that horrible afternoon and wonder if anything could have been different. I’m a writer; I want the narrative to make sense. Because it doesn’t, I wrote a different, redemption narrative. I became determined to make my mom’s senseless death have meaning by using my loss to help others. According to Edelman, “finding a balance between acknowledging the gravity of a distressing event and creating a narrative that includes redemption scenes appears key toward achieving hope, sustenance, and positive long term adjustment after a trauma or loss” (p. 251). Maybe I tried to find too much meaning in a tragedy, because my mom would have been happy with any decision I made which made me happy. Nevertheless, my journey of discovery helped students in my classroom while simultaneously helping me feel better, so I have no regrets.

During pandemic times, I use my past experiences with grief to help me with my present reality. Soukup (2019) believes, “struggle and pain and adversity aren’t fun, but they do make us better. It’s where we learn how to be stronger and wiser and humbler and more patient and empathetic” (p. 158). I agree that adversity isn’t fun, but what are the options? Give up on life or move forward in life? Sometimes it feels easier to not try. After my mom died, whenever I found myself in those moments of darkness for more than a day or two, I knew to get help from my doctor or therapist. If you are reading these words and feel despair, contact a medical professional. There are people willing to help and your life is too valuable. There is hope, and there is light in future life. My life story would have been different had I not lived through this loss, but my narrative became part of who I am. I honor my life story, just like Hale (2018) honors her narrative when writing, “it was time to let it be. To let it all be. Not to let it all go, necessarily, but to let it be” (p. 143).

## **MEMORIES OF MARILYN**

Winter in Kettering, Ohio was more brutal than usual this year. Marilyn Kepler Bird looked out the window of the hospital at the blizzard. She had been a patient in the hospital for some minor medical tests and felt ready to go home. However, no one was going home in this storm.

Things seemed serious. The hospital employees who had been snowed in at the hospital were on the front lines of dealing with any medical crisis. The doctors and nurses on call were snowed in at their homes and could not travel to the hospital to provide relief. In this era before cell phones, patients couldn’t send a quick text home to let loved ones know they were okay. The landline looming on the desk at the nurses’ station provided the only lifeline to the outside world. The phone started ringing. No nurses stayed at the station; they needed to be dispatched to various parts of the hospital to help patients.

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