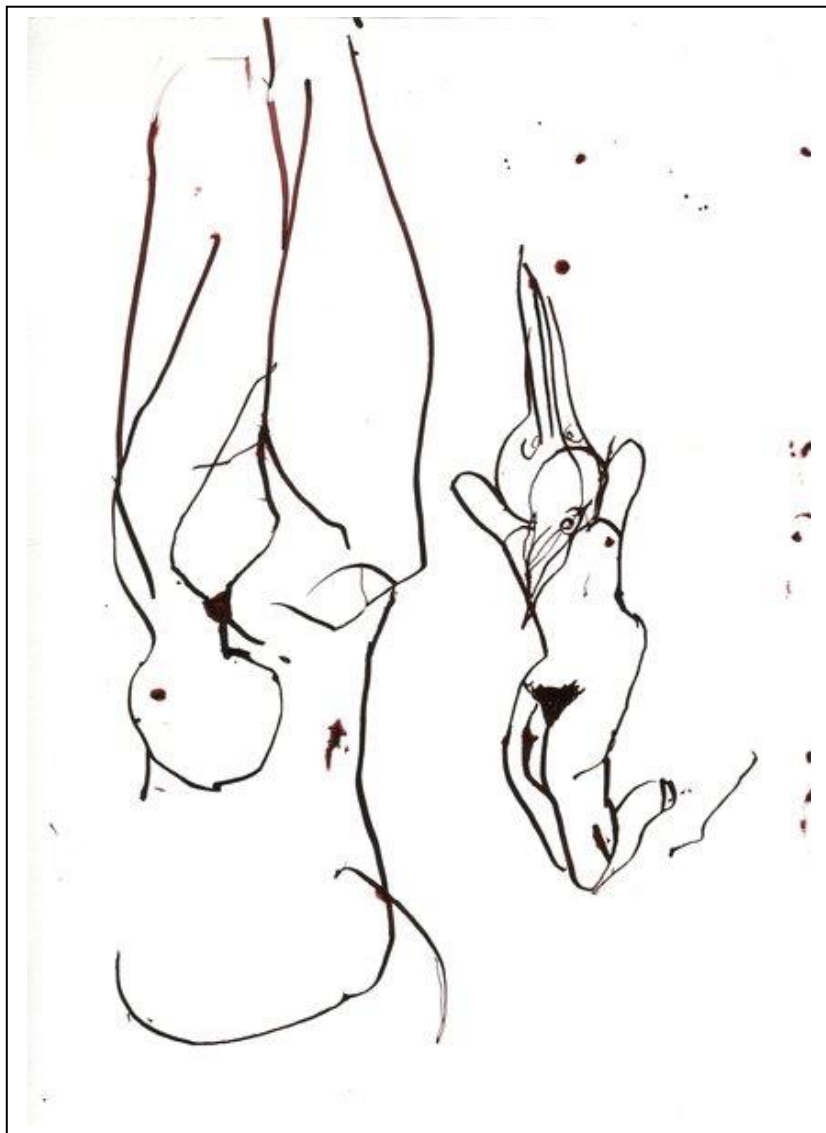


The lived experience of one woman's  
bereavement ;  
a phenomenological  
study

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Drawing by Helen

## **Abstract**

**Aim:** To explore the lived experience of one woman's feelings about her bereavement through an unstructured in-depth interview.

**Method:** Through phenomenological analysis

**Findings:** The transcript of the interview was rich in themes. Three powerful key themes were identified in order to try and describe my co-researchers lived experience and personal change and growth through the experience of the death of her father.

- Continuity and Change
- Identity and Legacy
- Power and Powerlessness

These themes were then compared and contrasted with the literature that I had been read on the subject.

The co-researcher negotiated the loss her father's physical proximity through death by maintaining an on going relationship with him. This provided continuity in that in many aspects initially it took a similar form to the way that they related in life. Further into her bereavement her felt sense experiences of him facilitated a change in their relationship and relating allowing positive identity change, personal transformation and healing. She also consciously chose to continue his legacy by identifying skills of his that she aspired to and incorporating them in her own creative identity. Her story shows us that a relationship after death can be as difficult, complicated and ambiguous as in life. And that it can also have mutuality , it can develop and heal.

## **Introduction and literature review**

In recent years there has been growing recognition in Western bereavement literature that an on-going relationship with a dead loved one can be normal and lead to healthy positive adaptation to grief (Klass, Silverman and Nickman. eds.,1996; Neimeyer et al, 2001; Bonanno, 2009; Valentine, 2008). That is if the bereaved person relates in the here and now rather than in a way that is "held as 'a frozen' entity in the psyche" (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, eds., 1996, p19). With regard to the literature my starting point was *Continuing Bonds; New Understandings of Grief* (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, eds., 1996) which was a groundbreaking book in bereavement theory. It broke away from earlier modernist stage and phase models that were based on Freudian concepts (Field, 2006) and mainly empirical research methods. In these earlier modernist models it was believed that grief was a process of disengagement from the deceased, and that severing bonds or 'letting go' was the way in which people could carry on with life and form new attachments. The authors of *Continuing Bonds* (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, eds.,1996) felt that this was not their own experience of grief nor as practitioners what they had witnessed. When I read the book for the first time it resonated with my own personal experiences of bereavement and of those that I bear witness to in my role as a funeral director. That a sense of continuity and relationship could remain through memory, socially and through a revised inner representation and of the loved one. Incorporating meanings held in the relationship with them.

From an attachment theory perspective Field et al (cited in Neimeyer et al, 2006, p.717) is summarised "constructive reorganization rather than relinquishment of the bond can be achieved by 'internalizing' the lost loved one as an extension of the self to enhance affect regulation through maintaining psychological rather than physical proximity to the attachment

figure, taking him or her as a role model, appreciating that individual's unique legacy, or cultivating a sense of the figure's comforting presence..."

So while the 20<sup>th</sup> century bereavement models describe grief work and the reconstitution goal was of an autonomous individual, the Continuing Bonds model is characterized by reflections on interdependency and mutuality. This is why it is far better suited, especially in the formative days of the theory, to qualitative rather than quantitative research methods. Qualitative research, by Valentine, in her book *Bereavement Narratives* (2008) showed that many of her co-researchers consider their dead loved ones to still be involved in and sharing in their lives; "Their narratives conveyed an intersubjective experience of identity, personhood and agency, in which the relationship between the living and the disembodied dead provided mutual support, validation and empowerment. Such mutual reinforcement served to validate both the bond itself as well as the personhood of both parties". (Valentine, 2008. p127). As Bradbury discussed (cited in Valentine, 2008. p93) the loss is not just of the loved one, but also of that part of our identity that was constructed through the that person.

Valentine (2008, p.141) found that the nature of the after-death continued relationship usually reflected the way people related to each other in life. Further emphasizing both the intersubjective nature of identity and the integration of the dead into the lives of the living.

"For such continuity enabled people to view the world through the eyes of the deceased loved ones and provide a resource for negotiating the disruptive impact of bereavement on their social worlds. Though death may demand that the forms of people's relating change, their character and meaning may continue." (Hockey summarised in Valentine, 2008. p.133)

Modernist empirical researchers and theorists looked at healthy bereavement mainly in terms of a restoration of pre-bereavement

functioning. In more recent 21<sup>st</sup> century research a more phenomenological approach has been taken to bereavement. The conclusions have been that, in fact, personal transformation or growth is a vital component of the mourning process (Hogan, Morse, & Tason, 1996 cited in Pope, 2005).

Throughout the literature that I have read, continuity of the relationship with the dead loved-one often facilitates a way through change and healing; adjustment to the loss and adjusting ideas about identity in order to move forward into the future (Field, 2006; Neimeyer et al, 2011). Pope (2005) describes the deceased as serving a "safe haven attachment function". And Field, Gao and Paderna (2005) go as far as to say that felt sense of presence experiences can "resolve unfinished business" in a relationship with a dead loved one. A phrase used by others is 'post traumatic growth' (Neimeyer et al, 2011).

By taking us into the world we share with the dead rather than the living, bereavement creates a strange state of being 'betwixt and between', which is characterised by a loosening of the usual conventions and categories to render the social order more fluid and transformative (Valentine, 2008, p.86). All the authors that I have referenced emphasize the diversity of expressions of grief. Valentine notes, with regard to grief in the West, that we no longer have strongly defined cultural structures (such as religion) so people have more scope to creatively construct their relationship with their dead loved one in idiosyncratic ways (Valentine, 2008, p126) though they may use available cultural scripts to express this (Valentine, 2008, p.2)

This research provides an account of Helen's unique story by presenting a co-created narrative. My aim was to try and understand her experiences by identifying powerful common themes compared and contrasted with the literature that I'd read and by some psychotherapeutic analysis (using the following Transactional Analysis models: personality adaptations and the Ok coral (Joines and Stewart, 2002) in my discussion. My aim also was to engage in

a reflexive process following the interview in order to try and understand my part in the research.

Most of the research that I have read has been comparative studies with a number of participants which has been analysed and then the findings divided into themes. The findings of this research represents one woman's unique experience of her father's death, and her experience of the world as she negotiates her way through her bereavement. As every bereavement is different my hope is that an in depth study of one person and her deeply personal world shows fully the complexity and ambiguity that can be experienced, as well as the personal transformation and growth.

## **Methodology**

The research was undertaken collaboratively with Helen to explore her lived experience of her bereavement through her father dying. I used a phenomenological qualitative approach. My aim was to understand and describe her unique experience and how she negotiated the loss of her father in order to carry on with her life. I chose to not structure the interview. Her bereavement experience may have been distressing/difficult so I felt that an open-ended narrative would be safer for her in that she could choose what aspects to discuss. Also by allowing the story to unfold, I felt that there would be less chance of me directing it too much towards preconceived ideas that I had.

Qualitative research is now considered to be vital in understanding people's experiences of bereavement. Empirical research doesn't take into account people's subjective experiences and minimizes the roles of inter connected relationships. In fact Klass, Silverman and Nickman, eds., (1996, p.20) go as far as to say that previous modernist models of grief were based on "inadequate assumptions about the nature of self" and that they were based on "inappropriate social scientific methodology used to study bereavement".

Helen is 35 years old. She is a talented and prolific artist and musician and respected by her contemporaries. She lives in a large shared house in Yorkshire with friends of mine. She has no children. Her Dad, also an artist, died six years ago when he was 87. His death was expected due to his old age. Her Mum is still alive. She has one brother and two half siblings. My immediate sense of her was that she had been resilient in bereavement as described by Bonanno (2009) and that she wasn't suffering from complicated grief as defined by Neimeyer et al (2006, p.725-731). I would have been wary of stimulating difficult memories and emotions particularly as she isn't in therapy of any kind and there was only so much after support that I could offer.

Prior to the research I had met Helen briefly on a number of occasions at her home (the shared house) in a social context. I was interested in the fact that there was something about her creativity that connected her to her deceased father. I approached her initially with an e-mail explaining the research that I was hoping to do and asking if she was interested in being a participant. She seemed eager and said that she would love to and would have "lots to say". So I felt confident that she wasn't agreeing in an adaptive way but that she felt that it was something that she would like to do and might gain something from.

Once Helen had agreed to the interview I phoned her and we clarified some specific points and boundaries. I made sure that she understood that it was research not therapy. We discussed issues around confidentiality. Considering that we know a number of the same people I was particularly careful to make sure that she knew that our interview would be confidential. I made her aware that she could stop the process at any time. Also I decided that I wouldn't use her real name in the write up in order to preserve her anonymity.

I booked a neutral private venue, as agreed with Helen who had said that she didn't want to be interviewed in her home. It was a

dedicated therapy room close to her home. I booked it for two hours anticipating that she might want some time to talk after our recorded interview. We briefly went over confidentiality and boundary issues again and permission to stop at anytime. Helen read and signed the informed consent form.

Once we were comfortable I started recording our one hour unstructured interview using a digital recording device. My aim was to ask open, non-directive questions so that Helen could tell me her story. I tried to set aside my expectations and be with her experience wholly. Occasionally I enquired into what I thought I heard her say in an attempt to get her to clarify what she was saying. There was a relational element in that we co-created the narrative.

At the end of the hour, I switched off the recording device and offered Helen some time just to chat about her experience of the interview. We continued chatting for another fifty minutes. A few days later I checked in with her to offer support if she required it. About a week later, because of some of the issues that she hinted at, I got in touch with her and offered to put her in touch with someone locally if she felt like she needed some therapeutic support. About six weeks later I e-mailed her to clarify some facts such as dates and ages.

I asked a secretarial services to transcribe the interview for me (see appendix). Making sure that they understood confidentiality issues. I checked the transcript that was sent to me against the recording to check it was accurate. I listened to the recording about thirty times which was rich in themes. I analysed it phenomenologically, identifying the key themes that best described her lived experience. I then reflected upon their significance.

With regard to Helen's felt sense of presence experiences, I make no attempt to define them as psychic or interpsychic. I reflect on the experiences as powerful events that have very real consequences and meaning for her. For her, I think she negotiates



them as both, allowing them to be 'psychologised' and 'real' (Bennett and Bennett cited in Valentine, 2008, p88).

This research provides an account of Helen's story by presenting a co-created narrative alongside common themes. It is just one version of her story, which I recognize could change with time (even over the course of the interview), influence and input.

## **Findings and analysis**

### **Continuity and Change**

Helen describes her continued relationship with her dad after his death. Partly this is manifest by a very potent felt sense of presence and what she describes as 'contact' with him. In some ways their relationship also has continuity in the pattern of relating that it takes. For example, he can be elusive and she may have to wait for attention. But when she gets it she feels that it is powerful and potent and 'wise'. Before her dad's death their relationship had quite a degree of difficulty and conflict, which she also feels continued after death. But it is through the continuity of their relationship after death that cathects change and transformation and healing.

Firstly she described their relationship in life as difficult at times. Some distance because he was so much older than her (58 when she was born). Helen describes their relationship as continuing in a consistent way to before death;

Helen."Yeah all that kind of troublesomeness, I felt like I was still having a conversation about it with him after he died, ..."

In one way their relationship continues in a very real sense of presence that she feels. Initially she uses the word 'conversation'; but when she described it further the felt sense

of presence seemed more like visceral feelings rather than actual words. It seems very natural to her though she acknowledges that it may seem extraordinary to others. She doesn't actually see his form; it seems to be a very powerful kind of 'knowing'.

"[He'll] just be back or just shine back or something, like you just feel they're there..."

And,

"you can sort of really feel their...warmth coming, coming through."

For some time after his death she is wrestling with guilt. Feeling the presence of her dad seems to comfort and uplift her and she welcomes it. She craves it but it was often elusive, particularly after he first died. This felt presence was more prevalent as time passed. She felt like she would have more of this contact (love) when they'd further negotiated their differences;

Helen: "But then that, for me, when I didn't feel my Dad, and I didn't for a long time, it felt like there was something we had to work out, you know, that I would do once we'd work it out, or I would have access to it more you know, once we'd worked it out."

The 'it' in the above being the felt sense of presence of her dad that became more available as time went by. The majority of the time when she feels her dad's presence it is welcome and soothing. But on one occasion, at the funeral home, it is a shock as she feels him suddenly wanting her to leave.

Helen describes that over a period of about six years they did 'work it out'. That their relationship now has what she describes as a new 'lightness'. This transformation is summed up in her re-telling of a particular incident that troubled her just before he died. It was the last time she saw him alive. She visited him at the retirement home. He seemed very small and vulnerable and he was asleep. She didn't feel like she should wake him, and she didn't feel like she would know what to say to him. So she took

off her coat and placed it over him, hoping that he would recognize it as a sign that she had been there. This troubled her and she says she felt guilty and worried that this had been confusing for him. This was a worry that she returned to over a number of years after his death. But she describes lately a 'breakthrough', which led to a new 'lightness' in their relationship.

Helen: "And it feels like retrospectively he now knows that I left the coat there; as at the time maybe he didn't you know so. It's like this shower of kind of, it's like tears or something... just a shower of, it feels like a shower, that's what it feels like. It feels like...there's like that intensity and there needs to be a release, it feels like I'm waiting waiting waiting and there's this release, and it's from him to me."

The repeat of the waiting really powerfully conveys time passing, the felt anticipation and powerlessness as she waits. Release is repeated. Does that mean that in the waiting she was confined or held back or does she feel a release from feelings of guilt? The shower of tears. A lovely metaphor of purity, cleansing with sadness. Forgiveness? She describes this feeling of release taking him to another level. Are they his tears from above over her now that he's on a higher level? Or do the tears belong to both of them? Sometimes it's difficult to tell what's her and what's him.

Helen: "And recently I felt that with the, with the whole coat thing (laughs), that...he'd kind of reached some other, some other level or something."

So there is complexity, interconnectedness, that his forgiveness can take him to 'another level'. The relationship has mutuality, one still affects the other. His 'new level' he seems to take on more all-seeing psychic abilities or maybe purely understanding;

Helen: "And it feels like retrospectively he now knows that I left the coat where as at the time maybe he didn't... "

The coat narrative shows us the on going process of wordless negotiation, culminating in 'knowing' and understanding.

She believes that retrospectively he now knows and understands things that are going on internally for her, like her intentions. Like he sees things through her eyes. Or that he can see inside her, see the real her, her essence. Now he knows and understands her on a level that he hadn't in the past.

Helen: "I feel like it's a sort of integrity thing, it's like he's watching my integrity and he can see whether I have it or not..."

## **Legacy and Identity**

As well as Helen and her dad's relationship continuing through felt sense of presence he also continues with her changing sense of self, her identity. Who she is now after his death.

Art was central to her dad's identity/personhood and it is also to Helen. Her dad was a successful artist and respected teacher. She is very proud of him and the work that he produced. His artwork embodied him. Immediately after his death Helen pays tribute to him through this creative medium. A medium she is comfortable with herself and transcends words. When he is dead she goes and draws his body at the funeral home. And for his wake she creates a space in his home for his paintings to be displayed. She explained why she did this;

Helen: "Just to create the world that he'd created with the paintings and to, you know... so it's just him."

Artistically they shared a bond. In life creative practical guidance and know-how from him characterised their relationship as did her occasional rebellion against it. Helen's rebellion

subsides and she wants to carry on learning from him so she accesses his old teaching notes.

Helen: "I mean artistically I've sort of tried to carry on, carry through things that he, he began or, or trying to still learn, you know things that he taught me..."

At the same time she feels like she is carrying on his legacy;

Helen: "So I feel like I'm coming back to that and I'm trying, I want the same, ... I want to do the same I want to learn the same, erm and I feel like that is carrying on, carrying it through and I think we all do that."

She describes with awe her admiration for his skill as an artist.

Helen: "his pencil line it's very, there is real intensity in the pencil line, almost as though he was feeling whatever it was he was drawing. As well as making his mark."

This phrase summarises a lot I think. The visual, the seeing, and the creating of an image is very powerful to Helen. Sometimes I wonder if this way of doing things, communicating connecting, in a non-verbal way might be more natural, compelling, or even real to her. As someone that distances from feelings during our interview (by using the third person) perhaps feeling is easier or more vivid in seeing and creating? When she draws her dad's dead body maybe the seeing and the doing of the drawing help her connect with him in a way that they knew together, or enables her to express something about him/them in a way that words or thoughts cannot. Done in a way of expressing, connecting with the world that they both shared. She is there at the funeral home feeling what she is drawing (him) and making her mark on the page and marking the moment/occasion. Although she rebelled in life about her dad trying to 'make his mark' on her artistically, in that they had differences in opinions about creative processes, now the rebellion is gone and she sees value in his perspective. She

integrates some of his identity into her, creating a new maturity. Redefinition of herself without the overbearing living presence of her dad. But it is not wholesale; it is a negotiation.

Helen: "Yeah, and I think we all do that, I think that's why people have children... their skills can be passed down on the way, the seeing can be passed down. I think for a long time I wanted to rebel against it and I think in the end you kind of find some place where you can do them both... sort of meet your own way and their way and you bring something new to their way. "

'The seeing' is an important and repeated phrase. This 'seeing' isn't just about viewing, it's about feeling , interpreting and understanding; done in quite a visceral way. She also feels a connection from appreciating seeing things in the way that he did. Enjoying seeing things and getting visceral pleasure. This connects them, she uses the word 'reaches' but it's almost as if she feels more value if she feels that it is shared with him. He sees 'through me'. He continues in a way through her. 'Reach' suggests the act of moving to connect through space.

Helen: "I remember him enthusing about things when he was alive... finding something so wonderful and you know, his eyes are shining and you can kind of get goose bumps from him appreciating something like that ...in that way, like a landscape or...a sunset or just something...But that sort of enthusiasm (pause) which sort of, it reaches, it has a reach doesn't it...I feel that he can still reach in that way or through me ..."

## **Power /powerlessness**

In the continued relationship Helen has with her dad after his death sometimes she seems to give him all the power. I feel her helplessness as she waits, waits, waits the yearning in the repetition of waiting. The time passing by. At times the way she

speaks sounds as if she has no power and she is at his mercy almost, pleading;

Helen: "[I'm} wanting to resolve it and kind of asking over and over, I asked over and over for, ever since he died..."

The way she describes it is as if the power is with him; in that it is he that can 'release' her, it is from "him to me". The release is what she feels when he 'shines through'. The word release also suggests a confinement. The waiting a sentence. She can be released by the visceral feeling of contact with him when he 'shines through', his warmth and love.

By contrast to this felt helplessness as she waits for his healing love she takes a huge responsibility for his after death well being and feels like she has enormous power. She thinks he might be damaged by their difficult relationship in life and the unresolved business between them. That she may have had such a power that she has influenced his after death happiness or even location, she uses the word purgatory. That she has a responsibility and the power over his after death fate. She takes great responsibility for his happiness, has power over his happiness after death.

Helen: " and then there's all that guilt there 'Oh God, you know, what did I do?" And you kind of feel like they're sort of in purgatory and you've sort of got to help them get out of it in some way..."

So she waits for him to release her; and he can be released by her. The other has the power. It's like no one has their own power. So she is in this position that she has "got to help", she is duty bound, and yet in the early stages after his death she didn't feel his presence much. And she is never able to summon him. She waits. That is quite a dilemma and in actual fact places her in a kind of limbo too. A painful powerlessness.

## Discussion

This research supports the idea that it is often healthy for continuing bonds to persist after the death of a loved one (Bonanno, 2009; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, eds., 1996; Field, 2006; Valentine, 2008). Helen feels comfort from the very visceral feelings that she has when she feels her dad's presence. Initially their relationship seems to continue in a pattern that reflects how they related in life, as Valentine (2008, p.141) suggests. In life he was fairly unavailable, it seems that he held the power and would be available when he felt like it. The times when he did this in life were considered as special, considered and wise; bestowed like a gift. Their relationship doesn't continue in the same way though. After death it evolves over time and seems to heal; there is forgiveness and forgiving. And Helen feels that their relationship becomes lighter as she feels that he comes to understand and know her. Over time she comes to experience him as the 'perfect parent'; understanding, attuned, able to understand Helen and all loving. Feeling the power of his love leads to a subsiding of her feelings of guilt.

This fits in with much of the literature that I have read that suggests that when a bond/relationship is maintained that it can aid positive change and adaptation, not just returning to pre-bereavement functioning, but actual growth (Field et al, 2005; Pope, 2005; Neimyer et al, 2011).

With regard to identity and change, Valentine (2008) identified the intersubjective nature of identity. And how that could validate both the bond with the dead loved one and the survivor's reassessing of their own identity. Helen identifies increasingly through her bereavement with aspects of her dad's personality. In fact, she actively chooses to incorporate some of his ideas about not only producing paintings and drawings but his way of 'seeing'. Sometimes she even feels like he is seeing and experiencing beauty through her. So these experiences were providing a powerful source of connection as well as enhancing the experiences for her.



The qualitative researcher's literature that I've read notes the diversity of expressions of grief and ways in which bonds and relationships are maintained. (Klass, Silverman and Nickman, eds., 1996; Valentine, 2008). But that people often use available cultural scripts to explain themselves (Valentine, 2008, p 2). Helen described herself as not being a Christian or believing in a god in a conventional sense. But in telling her story she used words like purgatory and described her dad being released from this state and going up 'levels' and also of his contact being like omnipresent love shining through. Which I would identify as bearing similarities to a Christian cultural script, imagery and a loving God.

The majority of the research that I read was qualitative and was mainly semi-structured interviews with 12-26 participants with findings set out in themes (Coyle and Steffen, 2011; Nowatzki and Grant-Kalischuk, 2009; Valentine, 2008). This kind of clarification was essential for me in understanding the subject and I really enjoyed reading it. The themes identified resonated with my own personal and work experiences of bereavement. But I found with this project that there was so much more ambiguity, complexity and contradiction in Helen's narrative. This was because it was one person's story in depth rather than bits of people's stories sectioned to illustrate themes. I felt that the majority of the research that I read afterwards seemed over simplified and positive out look particularly about felt sense of presence experiences. Some of the researchers acknowledged the limitations of their research in that they were far more likely to get people volunteering to be interviewed who have had positive experiences (Coyle and Steffen, 2011.). Those that have had scary or difficult felt sense of presence experiences might not want to feel the flavor of them again by retelling the story, or they might feel inhibited due to feeling embarrassed. But researchers Nowatzki and Grant-Kalischuk (2009) didn't acknowledge these limitations at all and painted a very romantic picture of these experiences always being positive and soothing. Also during the

duration of this project I have been talking informally to friends about the themes including felt sense of presence. Many of them have shared their own personal experiences with me. The majority have been soothing and helpful experiences and the continued bond has been helpful for them in positive adaptation to their bereavement. But one friend told me that he had been woken up suddenly in the night feeling his dead alcoholic aggressive father breathing into his mouth. It was very scary for him and it is not something that he usually tells people about, preferring to try and forget it. I wouldn't want people like my friend to be missed in this area of research. But I am not sure what the answer is because they are, I think, less likely to want to share it.

In terms of the Transactional Analysis literature I was aware of Helen's Creative Daydreamer personality adaptation. Joines and Stewart (2002) describe the Creative Daydreamer personality adaptation characteristics as: withdrawn passivity, detachment, daydreaming, and avoidance (p.84). Her passivity was apparent to me in the dynamic of waiting for her dad to make contact. Although she desired and yearned for contact she felt it was only he that could make it happen. The passive with drawing quadrant (Joines and Stewart, 2002, p9-10) shows us that they prefer to wait for others to initiation (Joines and Stewart, 2002, p.16). And in a typical creative daydreamer dynamic she feels overly responsible for his well-being, caretakers him and worries that she has overwhelmed him and left him in some kind of suffering 'purgatory' state.

In terms of Creative Daydreamer detachment Helen mainly refers to herself and her experiences in the third person using 'you' rather than 'I'. Moving herself away from her feelings and displaying Be Strong Driver behavior (Joines and Stewart, 2002, p.53). As she talked she displayed very little emotion across her face and her body language remained quite closed. I think for Helen maybe non-verbal communication through her artwork and music is easier, or she feels can carry more value and depth than verbal communication. And that is something that maybe she shares with

her dad. This links in with the magical 'seeing' (understanding) that she feels she develops that is something that she aspired to that he had. She comes to share this with him.

People with a Creative Daydreamer personality adaptation try to meet their needs through fantasy due to feeling that they can't make demands on other people. An important aspect of creativity is fantasy. If you were to view this narrative and her felt sense of presence as intrapsychic you would say that she has met her relational needs through fantasy.

Through this process in terms of the OK Corral (Joines and Stewart, 2002, p215-220) she has changed their relationship from an I-U- to I+U+.

Helen displayed racket feelings of confusion and blankness (Joines and Stewart, 2002, p182) when many of her sentences tailed off or ended with "oh I don't know..." Which made the narrative of her story more difficult to follow and stimulated the same racket feelings in me.

The picture that I've added at the beginning, created by Helen, I think conveys this creative daydreamer process; the splitting off from the other and oneself. Though I haven't been told the subject matter of the drawing.

## **Reflexive Analysis**

I acknowledge that I started this project with preconceived ideas about continuing bonds and felt sense of presence experiences. With regard to myself I have had one felt sense of presence experience of my grandma. It was a very simple feeling of my grandma visiting me shortly after she died. It was very lovely and soothing and took a similar form to Helen's described visceral feeling of her 'shining through' and feelings of love and warmth

and understanding. In my work as a funeral director I'm in quite an honored and in a unique position in that people often share there felt sense of presence experiences with me. By nature of our contact (short meetings when arranging a funeral) these experiences stories are told briefly and simply. I think that I'd developed quite a simplistic romanticized view of these experiences. They were usually beautiful, soothing experiences for people that were very welcome and transformative.

So I found myself quite surprised and sometimes over whelmed by the sheer complexity and ambiguity of Helen's narrative. Her felt sense of presence experiences had been mainly good and welcome but there had been one that was more difficult when he related very differently (at the funeral home).

As I listened to the interview again and again (around thirty times) I felt like I understood less and less. The more that I listened the less I seemed to understand. Which contrasted to my experience in the interview when it all seemed straightforward and to make perfect sense. Maybe my own creative daydreamer personality adaptation was being stimulated by Helen's? Or maybe just being in the position of trying to write up a project that I have been resisting doing, and felt I didn't have the ability to do, brought on my own racket feelings of blankness and confusion.

During our interview though her racket feelings of blankness and confusion led her to not finish sentences. Often they tailed off or she would pause and finish with "...oh I don't know". I cringe when I listen to the tape and notice the transference when I try and rescue her by filling in the blanks. Putting words into her mouth was the wrong thing to do and may have polluted the findings.

At times I felt frustration when Helen diverted from feelings towards narrative by using the third person or by not answering my questions about feelings. I usually get quite affected and drawn into people's telling of these kind of experiences but I felt at a

distance from her.

With regard to my impact on Helen she expressed to me with some warmth at the end of our follow up chat that she had really enjoyed the experience (interview and chat). Relating a difficult story can be cathartic (Valentine, 2008, p.9) and I think it was for Helen, who doesn't seem to share her thoughts and feelings about her dad much with others. I think she does this through art and music, but that is more of a presenting her internal world for a subjective interpretation by others rather than a dialogue. I think our conversation served to validate her experience especially around felt sense of presence. Her family think she is 'mad' when she mentions it and she projects that other people would also think so. Therefore she doesn't share these experiences with many people. I think it was validating for her to hear that I had had one; and this led to her feeling free to discuss her felt sense of her dad in detail. Leading to quite a rich and varied amount of information.

On a personal level; I didn't know how to convey this to her. I felt disappointment in my heart that she gives all credit for the transformation of her and her dad's relationship to him. Her reality was that those potent communications came from outside herself. I think she has played a very powerful part in healing and transforming their relationship, enhancing her ego integrity and sense of wholeness. I long for her to feel that credit.

## **Relevance**

My goal was to try to understand phenomenologically my co-researcher's unique experience of her bereavement - I think that I achieved this to a certain extent within the limitations of such a small-scale project. This was qualitative research; the advantage of which is that it can inform in a way that other types of research cannot. Though, because this piece of research is so specific to the individual, it is more difficult to use

comparatively.

Because the project was small I had to explore themes in limited depth. Or leave themes out entirely. The transcript was rich in material. Her dreams alone were very interesting, as were her family dynamics and history, but I didn't have the space to look at them. If I had then I could have produced a richer picture of Helen's experience. There is no ultimate truth in this kind of research; this is just one unique co-created story and interpretation of it on a very small scale.

In considering how the study could have been modified if I were to repeat it. I think I would have clarified more. And I would not have tried to fill in the gaps when she tailed off or seemed blank and confused. Also I would have used a video camera so that I could have studied Helen's body language. This might have aided de-confusion for me when I started digesting the information post interview.

With regard to future work it would be great to see some research done around difficult or ambiguous felt sense of presence experiences. But I am not sure that I have would be the one to do it as I don't think I would have the ability to do justice to it.

I think the research could raise awareness of felt sense of presence experiences. Considering that it wasn't that long ago, about thirty years ago, that it was still often being pathologised (Steffen and Coyle, ) . Helen's story shows the complexity and ambiguity of her continuing bond with her dad and the felt sense of presence experiences. So can add depth and inform in ways that comparative studies maybe cannot.

In concluding, I would like to thank Helen for boldy sharing her story with me, who she hardly knew. And for generously allowing me to interpret and share it.

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## **Appendices**

Signed consent form



## Consent Form for Qualitative Research Interviews

Title of Project: "The lived experience of the death of a parent"

Rosie Grant is undertaking research for submission as a small scale project as part of her coursework for the Manchester Institute for Psychotherapy (MIP) in Manchester. This involves new qualitative research into the thoughts, feelings and beliefs around the interviewee's parent's death. One element of this work involves individual interviews asking people to discuss their own experiences of the death of one of their parents. MIP understands that you are willing to be interviewed by Rosie. It is important to MIP that only people who want to do so participate in this study. We make sure of this by asking you to sign this form to confirm that you have freely agreed to be interviewed.

You should also be aware that you do not need to answer any particular question and that you may stop the interview at any time. The interview will be digitally-recorded and you will be given a chance to review and amend the transcript in due course. Any personal details will remain anonymous and I will not intentionally reveal your identity to anyone outside the research/supervision team. Whilst interviewees' identities will be revealed within the supervision team, the data will be anonymous before it is discussed with the team. The contents of the interviews – including yours – will be analysed and written up during the course of the Research. This written work may include quotations from some of the interviews, including yours. Neither your own name nor any of your other personal details that would identify you will ever be associated with these quotations.

We would be grateful if you could confirm, by signing this form, that you are happy for us to use the recorded interview or extracts from it in this way.

I confirm I have freely agreed to be interviewed for this project and that the recorded interview or extracts from it may be used as described above.

Print Name: ..... *Bridget Hayden* .....

Signed: ..... *[Signature]* .....

Date: ..... *10/12/11* .....

## Transcription of interview

RG: Oh yeah that's great. Also I'm just going to make a few little notes briskly as we go along 'cos we'll go over the recording. I'd like

once we've finished we can maybe have a chat about, about what's been said.

RG: Right so Bridgette, I just want to ask you a couple of things just to check a couple of things. Your dad died three years ago?

Helen: Six years ago

RG: Oh, six years ago?

Helen: 2005

RG: So, do you want to start at the beginning and tell me..

Helen: Erm as in when he died?

RG: Yeah

Helen: Erm, well my dad was er born in 1917, so he was eighty seven

RG: eighty seven

Helen: No 1914, god I don't know...

RG: So he was quite a lot, he was an old dad?

Helen: Yes, yeah he was an erm old dad..erm so I was always like, you know, when I was a kid, I was always like, worried that he was going to die any minute, you know, so it was kind of erm, just always expected that he was going to die any minuet, so it was a bonus that he lasted until I was what, like, twenty nine, thirty or whatever.

Erm and yeah I mean, he just, had a heart attack in his late seventies, up until then he'd been really really strong, you know, a really strong person, like physically and then he had a heart attack. He didn't even know that he'd had a heart attack and then sort of progressively he had, more and more problems and was taking blood pressure tablets and all the rest of it, you know, and he had arthritis, and then kind of got to the point where he couldn't move his hands, his hands had always very been very articulate, you know, they'd always been, he was very precise erm, like his handwriting was extremely, it was exquisite really like in comparison to people's now a days erm, and then yeah, then he wanted, wanted to die you know, he was fed up 'cos he couldn't do anything erm and..

RG: And how, how, what, he spoke to you about this?

Helen: Yeah he cried in front of me and my mum, you know, it was about, well he got more and more fed up and then sort of, I had, I was talking about it last night erm so I was doing my final show when he was getting really really severely ill so this was in 2000..

RG: Art Show?

Helen: Yeah so I was doing my Degree Show. And so it was really difficult for me to go down there and erm, the night that he went into hospital I didn't know he had gone into hospital I had a dream that he was living in the potting shed in the house on his own and the he was really relieved and really happy, you know, he was strong but he was old and strong.

RG: In the potting shed?

Helen: In the potting shed, yeah and it was like I'd gone to visit him in the potting shed and he was just really, just brimming with happiness you know, basically just because he had got away from my mum which is a terrible thing to say but that was how it felt in the dream then I walked outside and I don't know what, if, how relevant this is or anything, but I saw this like perfect frog on the floor, you know when you see things so clearly in a dreams you can smell , the, the air and everything and I could see this frog just breathing, just standing very very still...

RG: This is in the dream or.....?

Helen: In the dream.

RG: Oh right.

Helen: And then the next day erm my mum rang me and told me he had gone into hospital the night before. And I went to see him in hospital I think I went straight down. And he was, he was just really pleased, he was really happy that he was like, he thought he was just going there for a rest you know, erm but it was because he was, he was basically like, incontinent and my mum couldn't cope with it you know, she was you know, trying to deal with it but couldn't, you know, loosing her patience and everything, and she, he couldn't really walk either so she was having to carry him to the loo and stuff like that so, yeah so there he was in hospital just like, smiling his head off asking me over and over again what time it was and I kept telling him you've asked me and my interpretation of that was that mum always used to come in just when he was trying to have a nap, she used to come into the living room and say it's time to feed the dogs, you know it's six o'clock, time to feed the dogs, so he was in this state of like (in take of breath) I've got to feed the dogs, except he didn't have to feed the dogs, it was all ok. But he ended up staying in the hospital for three months and thinking that he was going to go home and then they found him a place in a home, in an old people's home erm then he lasted about a month erm and died soon after his birthday. And I think I went to see him twice when he was in the erm, old people's home, erm or three times, once with my mum and we, we always tried to make a joke out of death you know, because it was always so, you know imminent for him, so we always tried to make a joke out of it...

RG: Through your, your entire life?

Helen: Yeah and it only started to stop being funny, like right towards the end, and it wasn't funny any more erm. Yeah my mum and me are kind of a, sort of a team you know, I don't know, it was just really difficult to know what to say and then, erm ...

RG: To your dad in the home?

Helen: Yeah I think the last time I saw him where I really felt... felt that I saw him was when he was in the hospital. And I, I don't know, I think it was something to do with me having like made an effort to look good that day or something but he kind of went 'Helen!', like this, (opens arms looking up embracing posture) you know, as if like 'Oh, oh..' you know and so that was like my last good memory of seeing him.

Erm and then the last time I saw him he was asleep and he was absolutely tiny, 'cos he was always like a really stocky, like muscular person but he was absolutely tiny just asleep under his blanket and I just didn't want to wake him up because he just looked so peaceful you know and I didn't know what the hell to say to him either you know, 'cos what can you say?

RG: (Agrees) and how did you know when he died?

Helen: Erm well what I was going to say about that, was that I put my coat over him so he would know that I had been there and it was the coat that I was wearing when I saw him the last good time in the hospital erm, and then, then I went back to Leeds and then erm I was living in Leeds and I didn't have a phone, so my mum phoned my ex-boyfriend who, erm came round and told me and he was, is a very sensitive person he knows what to say in the those kind of situations and you know and that was, so that's how I found out, from him.

RG: Can you remember how you felt when you heard?

Helen: Erm just sort of fluid sadness, I mean it was just, you know it was very, it was like the ideal way to be told you know? I think, I was glad to be told by Mick and in person and you know, and he sort of sat down so he was on my level first and you know, rather than that sort of distance of someone telling you over the phone, or someone standing a long way away he is actually sat there close to me like and just, you know, just cried, it was fine you know, that part.

The funeral arrangements and everything were kind of, 'cos I don't know if you like, picked up on it but my parent's relationship was kind of erm, was kind of complicated, like my dad was twenty five years older than my mum and he'd met her through teaching her so they'd had this like very; and then they eloped too Liverpool; he left his wife to be with my mum. He had two, a son and a daughter with his first wife and a son and a daughter with my mum and so there was always this very sort of strained relationship, you know, between the two of them, and my dad was quite a super successful painter and my mum was very resentful that the family all thought that he was wonderful and everything and erm despite the fact that he had left his wife and you know, so she was like, I think one of her comments was 'He wasn't a wonderful man', you know like, she was quite, cutting. Erm so anyway, so we had all this, all the family, all the other family coming up for the funeral and I wanted to make, 'cos my mum's got this great big house, and I wanted to make this one room, there is this posh room that doesn't get used very often, and I wanted to put all his paintings up in there and have the wake in there. So I was trying to get on with this and do this and do it without disturbing my mum too much, which is just a contradiction in terms and she got very offended that I was taking her pictures down and putting his up and I was like, 'For God's sake, you know, when you're dead, I'll do the same for you.'

So all that was, and then we fell out over that and we had a humanist funeral with a woman who came just around and kind of interpreted what we were saying in her own way and did a kind of weird sort of skewey, not quite there sort of funeral for him er which my mum was very pleased with but the rest of us were like, where the hell did that come from,

you know that's just... But luckily er, Martin, his, Dad's other son from his other marriage, he did a speech and that was, that was the one that kind of, you know...

But the humanist woman was kind of talking to this great sort of amphitheatre of people that weren't there you know, we were all down here and she is talking out here to these, to, to nobody really and saying things which weren't really right at all so. Well that was weird. Erm.

RG: Can you remember what the first few weeks were like after the funeral?

Helen: Erm, the funeral felt very kind of, it felt very disjointed and very...erm. (thinking) Well we had, he was cremated so that, the next significant thing was erm, all his children: that's me and my brother and Martin and his sister, and there'd always been this kind of, strained relationship, we'd never really like all been together without Dad and my mum there or without one of the family there; so we all went out to Sussex which is where he was from, with his ashes.

RG: Oh lovely.

Helen: Erm and just drove around, Martin drove us around all he places, like their Grandma's place, places we never seen you know, this was his old life.

RG: So you must kind of maybe not know you're half siblings..

Helen: No.

RG: Very well?

Helen: Well there were kind of like Aunties and Uncles that came along that Mum cooked and complained about them behind their back but made these main meals and looked after them then like bitched afterwards, so you know it was always this, kind of like - better not like them too much 'cos it might offend mum you know. Erm we kind of knew each other but were kind of wary, wary of each other, you know, in that way.

RG: And how long was this after the funeral?

Helen: Actually thinking about that was probably um a couple of months later, it was still the summer it was the same year, or maybe it was (pause)I don't know, you know I just know it Summer, it might even have been a year later, 'cos I remember Martin saying that he'd had them in his house, like, sat there you know, like Dad's in the cupboard kind of thing, you know. So, and he, I think he must have had, I think it was probably a year later on the anniversary or something, so...

RG: So you visited places he, that your Dad had been connected to?

Helen: Yeah, we visited their old family house and the place where him and his first wife went on holiday I think, and then we went to Blind which is where, the first time he had ever been erm, away from his parents. Apparently he joined the Scouts and pretended to be a Christian just so he could like, go on, go camping to get away from his parents, so that's where we ended up putting the ashes, was this spot where they'd been camping because it was the first, it was like him without any of our association and was really just a place for him you know. And that was, just felt like the perfect place, just by a tree by

the river in Blind and so we were all there together and like, Matthew, my brother, my actual brother, was like dull, like doing the ashes like a robot and I was like 'No no no, stop stop stop!' And I just said 'I've got to put my hand in'. So I put my hand in and, then we all did it one after the other until they were gone. Then after we put them all on the ground there was erm, there was, it was in the middle of day and there was like a gun shot like, a couple of gun shots like in the distance so it felt like it was sort of, a gun salute or something you know. It was really well timed, what ever that was.

Erm, but you asked me about the weeks after and all I can remember about the weeks after the funeral with like my mum having a go at me for (laughs) trying to make the... I don't know, we just fell out a bit, which we do from time to time and it's always ok as long as I concede in someway or just, you know just... you know...

RG: When you wanted to fill the room with his paintings what were you wanting to do there that your mum disagreed about?

Helen: Well, she just didn't want her paintings taken off the wall, she..

RG: What were you creating?

Helen: Erm, a kind of. (pause) Well I remember Martin saying they looked like they were intended, you know. Having them all there in the same room and seeing this progression, because, I mean the paintings that we had started from his life with my mum, so there were lots of my mum that he'd drawn, he'd drawn my mum and painted my mum and there were some of you know, the places that they'd sort of lived together, you know like landscapes all from their lives together erm.. And it was just a case of like just curating an exhibition of his basically, like (pause) as a mark of, just to appreciate them, so people can appreciate them and erm.

What was I trying to do? (thinks) Just to create the world that he'd created with the paintings and to, you know, have that as a (pause) a sort of erm tut, mono thing, you know, so it's just him..

RG: And did you manage to achieve that or did you...?

Helen: Yeah yeah, definitely. I mean everyone was really like 'Wow' you know, and we also had a drawing, a pin board where I gone through all the old photos of him and found everybody that was there at the funeral and found a photograph with each person.

RG: Oh lovely!

Helen: So you know even Hazel who's my niece, who's like, who was two years old she met Dad, so there was even a picture of those two together and so yeah so everybody was included on this. And him and his ex-wife aswell and, just so that everybody was, felt a part of it you know.

RG: (agrees)

Helen: So that was really good. And then erm, Elsa his ex-wife died very shortly afterwards and Martin said that they did the same thing for her, so I think it was like, a really (pause) a good thing to do you know. Er yeah. (pause) The weeks afterwards, I just don't know I think I was just like, 'cos I'd just had my degree show and then that and then, I don't know what was going on really, I was just , it was all a

bit of a blur. I just remember (pause) just sort of flailing I suppose. Mainly because like my mum was just so unsympathetic. She gets very upset when she loses a cat or a chicken or a dog, and obviously she was upset but she just didn't know how to (pause) how to express it and she was even saying "Oh Matthew cried when he went to see him", and I'm like "Yeah?" you know (laughs) so? It was very odd.

RG: So there was an opportunity to go and see your Dad at the funeral home or...

Helen: I did actually go and see...

RG: In the nursing home?

Helen: Yeah, I did actually go and see his body and I don't know why I did, I don't know why, it was weird, it was weird. And I took a sketch pad with me, so that must have been why I wanted to, I must have just wanted to draw him and it was very odd because like, my dad has like, he was always asleep on the sofa like aw, you know and they glued his jaw you know, to try and make then look pretty don't' they, and erm, the chap from the funeral home was "I'll just make sure he looks alright before you go in", and I think that's what he must have been doing, like making sure his jaw was stuck together (laughs). And then this ridiculous sort of silk dressing gown, you know. (long pause) So it was all kind of taken out of our hands, you know, my mum just didn't want to deal with that part of it, you know, she was like, whatever, you know just, yeah. Yeah, so I went to see him and drew him and I drew a couple of pictures, three or four pictures and I got one that looked right, looked like him in that state. I didn't want to touch him at all (pause) erm and then I just kind of felt like just, get out get out, I felt this, like he just didn't want me there, and I don't know, you know, what that was but it was very very strong like urghh, from the other side, or whatever, so I went. And then Anna, my half sister, erm she went after me and then we were, she was just hanging out while we were sort of doing the funeral and everything, and she was talking to me on the porch outside at my mum's place and she said "Don't tell your mum, I put a photograph of Elsa under Dad's hands so they'll burn together." You know, so that was really insane. I was suppose to keep it a secret from my mum which I didn't you know. Erm, yeah.

RG: Do you remember how you felt when you saw him at the funeral home?

Helen: Erm. I just remember being struck by like, I mean, he had, he had (laughs), he had a really big nose anyway but because he'd lost so much weight, I, I remember thinking, just, more like, you know, how, how he looked like and his, his stomach was like concave pretty much concave, I think must just have not been eating anything and I just remember like 'Why, why has he got this stupid dressing gown on'. I... um. It seemed a little bit false or something and he was such a non, he wasn't like that you know, he was very real and very, you know, very earthy and it just seemed; the whole thing, like the funeral and the cremation just seemed kind of poncey or fake you know, these people, I mean (pause) obviously they are doing their job and they did it very well, like particularly the guy who ran the funeral home who was very very sensitive when he came round and seemed to have enough depth to like hold all this, grief for people carefully you know, erm.

So that, that was okay, it's the kind of (pause) the standards of it, you know the, the, it just seemed like you couldn't really choose, there was limited choice, "So you can have this kind of coffin", you know.

RG: That's funeral services in the UK!

Helen: And then they just get, it's so rushed and you're just like "Well, hang on a minute like, don't we get to choose like what tie he wears?" or something or. (pause) But I think that was largely due to my mum just wanting it over with and done with, you know. So that whole thing of being rushed was pretty awful, erm. And cremation itself is; 'cos that was the other thing, my mum was like "I think he wanted to be cremated?" and really it was her choice, so.

RG: Yeah.

Helen: I don't remember him ever saying one way or the other what he wanted but it was very much driven by her perception of what, she thinks, you know.

RG: Yeah, erm, I mean Cremation is a very, you don't get very much time at the Crematorium. So I think it's great that you did that Retrospective of his work or, or part of his work...

Helen: Um.

RG: At the house. And that's kind of the public, farewell isn't it? Do you remember any kind of things that you did privately?

Helen: Well the cre...the, the ashes, that was very private and then talking to my brother 'cos we all went down to Martin's, to to, 'cos he lives near Sussex, he lives in Brighton so that was like convenient to go round, erm, you know, go round all the old haunts and everything so me and my brother had a really good chat that night and had a cry and everything and...

RG: A chat about?

Helen: Just about Dad you know, him ringing and stuff an (pause) and (pause) you know, so that was our private time (long pause) erm tut. Yeah. (pause) And then (long pause) I don't know, and then after then, just like "phuw" nothing really. The family kind of spilt apart after after he died; 'cos he had Anna, he had Grandchildren as well from his previous marriage and one of them was really upset that we hadn't invited him to kind of do the ashes, so he's fallen out with Anna, his mum, about it, he's fallen out with me about it; he's fallen... everyone except for Martin you know. He won't talk to me anymore and, you know so, there's no reason really for us to stay in touch any longer and...

RG: Do you have people you talk to about your Dad's kind of... or, you know, do you, talk about him to people?

Helen: Yeah well I mean I've found people recently who know people he knew because he used to teach in Bradford and used to live in Leeds and he used to teach in Liverpool. And then I bumped into someone, I was just doing work experience and I was supposed to go around galleries and things and try and get work experience and one of the people that runs a gallery in Horseforth knew someone who was really good friends with him in Liverpool so there's a few people who've popped up that used to know my Dad so I mean...

RG: Did you meet the one who was good friends?



Helen: Yeah I went to his opening and just said hello and he was like "Yeah I heard about your dad." And so, I mean but that's in relation to his work really more than anything else. I talk to people, erm, I sort of, I don't know, I don't, I don't really talk much about him.

I talk to everyone about him because like, you know, I just do but I mean, as far as like the very personal stuff goes, I think I'd probably keep, you know I'd cry about that on my own and think about it a lot very privately and erm, sort of feel like I've had a little sort of contact with him myself so, I mean you can't really sort of talk to people about that can you, they'd just think you were nuts, Or my brother, I mean my family anyway, my brother thinks it's like something you just sort of make up to sort of be able to deal with it and to me maybe that's true but..

RG: You mean contact with your Dad?

Helen: Yeah, and recently I really felt like we had this sort of break through, I felt, I felt really guilty 'cos, about the coat thing you know the putting my coat over him, I was thinking "God he's just, he probably just woke up and was really confused and he doesn't even know where it came from and everything and so it was really bothering me for, until very recently. And all the things and all the stuff you know, you have with your parents, like me and my Dad fell out in a big way like, a couple of years before he died, erm and then there's all that guilt there "Oh God, you know, what did I do?" And you kind of feel like they're sort of in purgatory and you've sort of got to help them get out of it in some way you know, erm (pause) and that, you know, so that, it was, there was a lot of that going on with him that you know, I felt like that right he's inaccessible now, I can't, you know like sometimes you feel like you're trying so hard that you really want to believe that you're talking to them but you know really that they're not there and then sometimes they just come out from nowhere and it's like this is, it feels... (pause) ....just be back or just shine back or something, like you just feel they're there, that you know, and I think you can invent that and you can kind of know that that wasn't really right, and then other times you can sort of really feel their sort of warmth coming, coming through. And recently I felt that with the, with the whole coat thing (laughs), that he was like, you know, that he'd kind of reached some other, some other level or something. And then also like talking to people like erm who've also lost their parents or someone who was important to them, like I'd spoken to someone who lost their Grandfather, who I'm, I'm really close to, you know, I'm close to this person and (pauses, clears throat) he's talking about it and er, you feel like there's this little community of people that er, as you meet people on, in this plain and they're kind of meeting each other or they can kind of hear you talking about them and then there's sort of like, in, it felt like they kind of knew each other his Granddad and my dad.

RG: When you talked to your friend about his Granddad?

Helen: Yeah, it felt like they'd kind of, you know, met, because they both had a vested interest, you know.

RG: Yeah. When my Grandma died about eighteen years ago, I felt her presence very very distinctly with me erm. I hadn't really expected her to die and I went to a park and I sat down and felt her totally with me. Yeah, and then I was very disappointed when I didn't feel that with my mum and everyone was saying "Oh I can feel your mum around." and I was thinking "Aw I can't."

Helen: (agrees)

RG: So, yeah, it is, it's very powerful.

Helen: But then that, for me, when I didn't feel my Dad, and I didn't for a long time, it felt like there was something we had to work out, you know, that I would do once we'd work it out or I would have access to it more you know, once we'd worked it out.

RG: So there was a patch in the bereavement when you didn't feel very connected?

Helen: Yeah definitely, yeah. I felt...

RG: And then you felt more lately?

Helen: Yeah, yeah.

RG: Oh right.

Helen: Yeah.

RG: And, you mean, do you feel like, you mean your relationship has changed recently then or...?

Helen: Yeah I just feel like something's changed. (pause) That there's been that there's this, some lightness that was missing has come like, that there was like a kind of resentment from him and I felt guilty and I felt resentful towards him in some ways as well and, you know. 'Cos he was very, old fashioned in terms of what women should be and everything and I was... he was quite proud of me in some ways but then also like 'I'm a woman' and you know so he would be very sort of desternant with my brother and "urgh" and with me it would be like, almost like too much like "eugh" no don't touch me there, kind of thing, you know, which I didn't really, it didn't bother me and then suddenly it really bothered me and I'd tried to sort of explain it to him like how uncomfortable it made me feel.

RG: When he was alive?

Helen: Yeah. And it never really sorted itself out you know, it was always... well I fell out with him for a long time 'cos I remembered something or I thought I remembered something which was kind of like really disturbing and you know I was like Jesus, you know, God, did that really happen? I didn't know if did or not but I felt like I'd had a regression where I'd gone back to... 'cos he used to bathe me and I just felt like really intruded upon and like went back into being a kid again like just for an hour or so and then after then I just didn't speak to him for a couple of years because I thought well if that's true, you know.. I don't...

RG: Did you ask him about that?

Helen: Erm... No! I told my mum expecting that my mum would be like really horrified and kind of, leave him or something (laughs) but she didn't. Erm and got really really depressed and thought that it kind of explained everything that was wrong with me you know,

"A-ha, that's the missing link!" whatever. Erm, I never asked him about it but she was extremely tactless and like told the whole family and kind of, just you know, I was like. It just became embarrassing.

RG: That's terrible that she did that!

Helen: I know. Erm. And then we made up and I because just thought, well I don't want to like, I don't want him to die, like while I've, you know, completely fallen out with him so we made up and it was just the same, there he was like and I remember his hand here (puts hand on hip) and I was like (sighs) yeah well (laughs) so there was that going on at the same time as this (pause) bond which was erm. Yeah all that kind of troublesomeness, I felt like I was still having a conversation about it with him after he died.

RG: Hmm.

Helen: And erm... and we've worked it out, maybe I've deluded myself I don't know, but I don't know, it's so complicated isn't it, I mean?

RG: Sometimes, I don't think it matters knowing how things work. I think what matters is that they are working. And it seems to me that you're telling me that your relationship has moved towards healing and got easier and I think the word you used was 'lighter'.

Helen: Hmm. Yeah definitely.

RG: More, kind of later.

Helen: Yeah, I mean 'cos like; it's hard to say isn't it because I remember him enthusing about things when he was alive and him kind of, you know, just like, finding something so wonderful and you know, his eyes are shining and you can kind of get goose bumps from him appreciating something like that you know, in that way, like a landscape or I don't know, a sunset or just something, you know. And then, and then the other side of that sort of resentment and the bitterness of being (pause) of things not being as you would want them to be and (pause) so I suppose for, yeah, it is difficult to explain. But that sort of enthusiasm (pause) which sort of, it reaches, it has a reach doesn't it .....

RG: You like that enthusiasm? So you enjoy the same things? Are you saying that you'll look at a sunset and (pause) have feelings in the way he did, so is that what you're saying?

Helen: Yeah, yeah, I feel that he can still reach in that way or through me if I'm sort of...I don't quite know what I'm trying to say. Well definitely, I mean artistically I've sort of tried to carry on, carry through things that he, he began or, or trying to still learn, you know things that he taught me, like I had a dream that he kind of showed me this drawing, he always used to draw things when I was a kid like 'cos he could just make it up and hold them up and it would be this funny thing and it was drawing this erm, this cartoon or something, ah (sighs) I don't know.

RG: So, so did you say that you are completing projects that he started or...?

Helen: Well he has got stacks and stacks of teaching notes at the old house at mum's house. Erm... colour theory and his paintings are very

intense and very considered erm and so (pause) yeah, so they're kind of abstract but they are based on something real, you know a landscape or something he was very insistent that you would draw from reality even though it might not look like it at the end you know, you draw that from reality and his pen, like I was saying about his writing, his pencil line it's very, there is real intensity in the pencil line almost as though he was feeling whatever is was he drawing as well as making his mark. So I feel like I'm coming back to that and I'm trying, I want the same, you know, I want to do the same I want to learn the same, erm and I feel like that is carrying on, carrying it through and I think we all do that.

Yeah, and I think we all do that, I think that's why people have children in a way so that they, you know, their skills can be passed down on the way, the seeing can be passed down. I think for a long time I wanted to rebel against it and I think in the end you kind of find some place where you can do them both you can be, you can, sort of meet your own way and their way and you bring something new to their way. So..

RG: So, are you saying that your attitude to your own art work has changed?

Helen: Er yeah, definitely, yeah. I think got I've less sort of careless about it, so. (pause) Yeah, I, oh, I remember him, 'cos he was very critical and I remember him saying something like "Oh you know, that's not right" or something about my drawing and I'd say something like "Well Picasso gets away with it" and he was like "Well that's different" and I was like "Why is it different?" You know it just seemed very, prejudiced like, well you're a girl, you know it always seemed like that was going on so I always felt that I had a lot to prove that I could be as good as a man even though I was a girl. But I feel like that's what has levelled out, I don't know, maybe just in myself like. I feel like it's, I feel like I've proved whatever it was now and that he's kind of (pause) that it doesn't matter so much if he disapproves because I know what I'm trying to do. Erm, but also, yeah, I don't know (long pause) I don't know what happens like, 'cos you kind of feel their judgement when they are alive and then, it's er, and I felt like, I suppose what I mean is that I felt like his judgement was, has gradually diminished and that's why he's become lighter or the relationship has become lighter because..

RG: So do you still feel his judgement there?

Helen: I feel like it's a sort of integrity thing, it's like he's watching my integrity and he can see whether I have it or not and it's just and it's just a very distant objective thing it's like, it's not kind of unforgivable if I don't have it, it's just like, well you're here today or you're here today or here..

RG: So more of an acceptance?

Helen: Just a kind of a monitoring without it being..

RG: Judgemental?

Helen: Terrible if you fail you know, it's like it's got this distance that recently you know...yeah.

RG: So, so by saying distance you're saying that this presence is still, I think, you're saying that this presence is still here?

Helen: Erm (pause) erm yeah, yeah I do think , I do, I do think it is. I mean, I don't know what it's like for you but it's like some days they are like miles away and you can't get hold of them like now and again they kind of pop up.

RG: What's it like when, in those times when he pops up? Is that, that comforting or is it spooky or is it scary or...?

Helen: It's, it's never spooky or scary it's, it can feel like I'm trying to sort of continue an argument with him that started when he we were alive, when he, when we, when he was alive and that sometimes he's got time to answer and sometimes he hasn't you know so. He was very sort of reticent anyway and only said things if he really meant them you know so...he would just use a few words and he wouldn't be, ever feel pressured to go on and on about something so it would be a very sort of skilled kind of, crafted few words which kind of summed everything up, so it was kind of like a similar thing, like waiting for that, waiting, waiting or kind of getting impatient because they're not there and then, and then I might have a dream or I might have like a breakthrough like, erm, like the one the other day with the coat. And I'm kind of like imagining it, so I'm imagining you know the coat and I'm imagining him and I'm imagining how he must have felt being on his own waking up with the coat. And it feels like retrospectively he now knows that I left the coat where as at the time maybe he didn't you know so. It's like this shower of kind of, it's like tears or something, like erm, just a shower of, it feels like a shower, that's what it feels like. It feels like erm, (pause) you know that (pause) when there's, (pause) when there's like that intensity and there needs to be a release it feels like I'm waiting waiting waiting and there's this release and it's from him to me and that's how it feels.

Helen: Yeah I mean but sort of in an astral tears, you know, that kind of thing.

RG: And that's nice?

Helen: Yeah.

RG: Yeah.

Helen: Yeah, of course. (laughs)

RG: And how's your relationship at this point today then?

Helen: Erm, well I don't know really, I don't... (long pause) Because of that happening recently I suppose I can sort of feed off it or you know it feels like the last interaction was nice, pleasant so, it feels like that is still carrying on but I feel erm, like he doesn't want to be bothered for a bit. There's like stillness now, erm (pause) so yeah it's settling this feeling, settling in a new kind of, 'cos it's always like the last significant thing that you feel towards that person isn't it, like maybe you have a dream and then that dream sets the tone for the next few months until you have another dream that sets the tone so you're kind of always going up in stages.

RG: How often do you dream about him?

Helen: Erm not very often now, I had a few dreams about him. I'm just trying to think; I had a dream of eating his nose in a restaurant

somebody had brought a plate of food in a really posh restaurant and I was half way through it and I thought 'This tastes familiar!' (laughs) but that was quite soon after he died. That was pretty weird erm; then the one where he was drawing cartoon and we had these massive cakes and my mum was there and it was all very jolly you know. Erm (pause) but actually not very often. I might have written them down, if I've written them down then I'll copy them up for you and send them, send them to you...

RG: Oh you've written, written the dreams down since he died?

Helen: A few, a few of them. Erm. Actually not really that many. Erm (long pause) I think, I think I probably had a couple that I've forgotten and what I can remember is you know there's like two states of him, there's this like weary state you know, as he was older, the weary state and the kind of you know, fulfilled state that he had like lived his life and he was happy, you know in the day and in the moment kind of thing. I mean the one with the frog he was very much like that he was very sort of like that; yeah I've written them down anyway, I've... I'll.

RG: So they are quite varied these dreams aren't they because the one with the frog in the potting shed was, nice and comforting and he was happy and able and then the one with the nose, which was pretty, you described as quite weird.

Helen: Well yeah!

RG: And then the one more recently with the coat where you felt resolved.

Helen: That wasn't a dream. That was me like consciously...

RG: Oh right.

Helen: Kind of, you know, wanting to resolve it and kind of asking over and over, I asked over and over for, ever since he died like so I've only really just had a kind of...

RG: Response?

Helen: Response. Yeah.

RG: And what was, in, in your relationship before he died was that a similar pattern or would you get an answer straight away to your questions, was he kind of available?

Helen: No you'd always have to wait. And he might sort of, go on about something which wasn't relevant or he might have completely missed the point erm, but I think that was because he was coming towards the end of his life, he was very sort of full of reminiscences and things so he was like very much in his own, wanting you to listen to him and erm. So I wouldn't say he was available but when he was available he was very, very special and very wise what he was saying, it was always very wise. (pause) And yeah he wanted to sort of impart advice but it wasn't always the advice that you were after and he misunderstood, a lot I suppose with the kind of gender thing you know, he misunderstood that but then he was a man wasn't he, so it was kind of inevitable? Erm. (pause) Yeah I don't know, I don't know, I (long pause). 'Cos a lot of it was like, to do with the family dynamic, so to do with (pause) him, sort of needing a friend or something as well, I don't know, I don't know...

RG: Oh right! So you two were like allies?

Helen: Yeah we could be, yeah because my mum was quite aggressive in a lot of ways and (pause) erm towards him, like she wouldn't let him rest or anything. She was an insomniac so she was always quite resentful if he was asleep, you know, sort of banging the sofa and waking him up and so (laughs) so yeah he needed an ally and he also used to tell me about his, his life with Elsa and how he used to cheat on her and things...

RG: Oooph!

Helen: You know, yeah things like that, that; him reminiscing basically erm yeah, so I just used to sort of listen and (pause) yeah, er. (long pause). I've forgotten what your question was.

RG: So have I. Erm, so I think this might be quite a good place to stop recording here. Thank you.

Helen: Ok.

