Introduction

Six weeks before I was due to start a PGMA, my only brother Warren was drowned. It was a horrific experience and I began this journey as a sheltered researcher thrown into a dark underworld place, full of frozen ghosts and old defenses. This research project became the vehicle through which I could explore my lived experience after Warren’s traumatic loss. This took on a deeper significance for me because of the sudden death of my sister Lorraine when I was five. My sense was that this loss was dissociated from in my body and the body of my family, as a learned response for coping with traumatic loss.

My initial research question was what is my lived experience after my brother’s sudden death? and the underlying questions in this journey were, how alive am I, how do I deal with myself and what brings me back to life? This deeply personal question brought me back to core sharing, core boundaries, and trauma to explore the impact of shock and death in my personal and family history. Through this journey I also deepened in my capacity to confront my own mortality. I learned to stay with grief and to let it teach me, shape me and create me as I searched for healing after Warren’s death.

My hope is that this study will provide a window into some of the challenges faced with the sudden loss of a sibling. I also wish to document a personal transformative journey following traumatic loss as a contribution to the psychotherapeutic literature on the subject.

Research Findings

“When I touched him, I was screaming. I thought that was my first moment of actually knowing that that was it. It was horrific, actually. I was so numb and I remember thinking, I can’t help it, and I just screamed and screamed, and then I remember my dad coming in and taking me, and I thought, ‘Oh my God, I’m embarrassing my family.’”

Tara research participant 2013

As part of this project, face-to-face interviews were conducted with four research participants in order to discover more about the nature of the lived experience of the sudden death of an adult sibling. All four participants said they had never told their story to anyone. This may be consistent with Kenneth Doka’s concept of sibling loss as a “disenfranchised grief” (1989), the grief individualised just when they experience a loss that is not “openly acknowledged, socially validated or politically mourned” (Doka 1989:25).

The main themes that emerged from the research interviews were:

1. The silent, hidden disintegration of the grief experience in sibling loss.
2. Difficulties in how the two families deal with the funeral process and the different needs of both families, particularly when the parents of the deceased were still living. Who is in charge?
3. The profound impact on the sense of self of the bereaved sibling.
5. The impact of stress on the family as a group and how they cope with differences in griefing styles and reforming after the death of a member.
6. How the trauma history and the defenses of the individual impacted on their grieving and integration of the death.
7. Difficulties in both the family origin and the current family of the bereaved developing a new ongoing relationship, without the deceased. This was particularly relevant where there were children involved.
8. Internal ongoing attachments to the deceased sibling. How the sibling relationship continued.

In general the loss of a sibling is seen as less significant than other losses and in adulthood it is rarely considered at all. These finding offer compelling support to suggest that it can be a profound loss experience and that as Safran-Ridha discusses, the act of claiming the loss and composing a narrative of how the loss affects you can be a significant step in moving forward. (2004:9)

Creative Synthesis - Research As Dencannos

Janice asks: “Janice asks: Where do the dead go? And are they happy to be there? Why didn’t they die?”

The research project became Dencannos because it is a way for me to leap the dead and wounded to hit them real and give a voice to the voiceless.

Dencannos can be a conscious practice that gives honor to the orphaned dead of our parents. My research project became Dencannos it because a way for me to leap the dead and wounded to hit them real and give a voice to the voiceless.

References

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Conclusion

This research project explored how traumatic loss of a sibling and a confronta-

The sudden loss of a sibling is a complex intra psychic and interpersonal experience and it can impact the survivor at both many ways. The main contribution of this study could be that it offers some insights into the profound depth and multilayered experiences that are possible after the sudden death of a sibling. It also shows how important it is to understand the different nature of the loss and to be able to talk about the possibility that it may be a hidden silent grief and that validation of this loss may be an important part of the healing process.