



Photograph by Anelina

WRITING THROUGH TRAUMA

Inside a Person's Heart: Finding Solace from Stories and Poems

MERNA ANN HECHT

In each setting where I have worked with children and teens who have experienced profound loss, they have told me of the comfort they find in hearing each other's stories; that they feel less alone knowing someone else feels as they do. One student I worked with spoke for many, writing simply that *poems share the loneliness inside a person's heart.*

When we grieve, time as we know it is altered. Our grief takes us on a journey in which time is divided into "before" and "after." Our lives before the loss seem a world away from the changes with which we are confronted during and after loss or upheaval. Our sense of ourselves and our lives can become unsteady and dislocated. A child may not be able articulate this, but experiences it nonetheless.

I have found that stories and poems can provide children with a framework that helps them negotiate the dramatic and traumatic changes in their con-

cepts of time. Because past, present, and future can intermingle within a story or poem, young writers can evoke not only memories, but also imagine a better future, arrived at through courage and resilience.

In my work for the Stories of Arrival Poetry Project, which serves refugees whose lives have been shaped and shattered by the consequences of war, I often feel a sense of inadequacy. What do I say to

In my work...with refugees whose lives have been shaped and shattered by the consequences of war, I often feel a sense of inadequacy. What do I say to them about the immensity of their loss?

them about the immensity of their loss? I find that I can only tell them of the honor I feel, the privilege of witnessing their stories and poems. Even so, I often wonder if writing the poems and telling the stories is enough. I want to assure them of their safe-

ty and of their bright futures, but I cannot, for I do not know if their new lives in this country will bring them the succor and success about which they dream. I know my task is to trust the plentitude of language as it allows us to bring words to our sorrow.

One of the students I worked with in Carrie Stradley's class at Foster High School, just outside of Seattle, is a shy young woman named Bu Meh, who astonished me with the depth and power of her poems.

Bu Meh is from Burma. She is Karen, an ethnic group that has suffered violent conflict with the Burmese army for over sixty years. After much hardship in her country, she spent six years in a refugee

Merna Ann Hecht, storyteller, poet, and essayist, teaches creative writing and humanities at the University of Washington, Tacoma. Formerly a teaching artist with the Seattle WITS program, Merna co-directs The Stories of Arrival Poetry Project with immigrant and refugee youth as a poetry partner with the Institute for Poetic Medicine and with Jack Straw Productions of Seattle. She has recently completed a book titled Companions for the Crossing: Storytelling and Poetry in Bereavement Work with Children. For information on the book's availability contact Merna through the Seattle Storytellers Guild, www.seattlestorytelling.org

Her poetry has continued to give expression to the ache and anguish of her memories and to her hopes for a different and better future.

camp in Thailand. She had not written poetry before coming to this country. When I invited the students in her English language learners (ELL) class to create poems that would serve as a metaphorical box for storing images, memories, secrets, and their heart's truest feelings, Bu Meh wrote about her grief over her father's death.

I will put in my box of memories
The sky full of clouds and birds that could not fly,
the tears falling down my face like a river
because I cannot forget that day my father died,
the day my heart hurt the most,
like a knife
poked into my heart.

It was the saddest day,
my heart was broken.
I saw my father's face
for the last time
in my life.
I will put in my box of memories
the sound of rain, wind blowing
the Biglu river moving fast.... Howl, howl, howl,
a bird singing a song on a tree,
And always my father who loved me.

I think the relief of writing a poem that spoke directly to her sorrow allowed Bu Meh to tell more of her story. Her poetry has continued to give expression to the ache and anguish of her memories and to her hopes for a different and better future. In her second poem, she wrote, in part,

War made you feel bad.
Children hungry, crying, looking for food.
Children starving,
Soldiers killed our animals

Stealing our things,
Burned our farms and our villages.

I remember when I was eight years old,
Soldiers took my father away to have him carry
their weapons.

Soon after he left, I heard the gunshots.
We worked with tears and ate with tears.
I left my country, my community, my possessions,
and
my home.

I hope one day there will be freedom in Burma.
No more children crying, going hungry.
I pray that there will be peace in Burma,
for revolution, and for democracy.
I miss my country.
One day I will return to my homeland.

The losses shared by the young people with whom I worked at BRIDGES: A Center for Grieving Children, were similarly profound. Each was there because they had lost a family member to illness, suicide, or violent death. In my work as a storyteller and poet at the center, I collected and told stories that touched on and celebrated the continuity of life.

After a death in the family, especially the death of a parent, children will often feel that their basic survival is under threat. *Who will take care of me?* they wonder. *What if I die? What will become of me?* Although children may not verbalize these questions and fears, they are a part of their inner story. Many traditional folk and fairy tales from all cultures give the message that nourishment and survival will take place, answering in their subtle and timeless way the “real-life” predicament of a grieving child's fears, questions, and anxieties.

For example, I told a Jane Yolen story called “Greyling” to a group of seven- to nine-year-olds who had lost a family member. The story is about a fisherman and his wife who have remained childless for many years, until one day the fisherman discovers a seal pup stranded on the shore. Upon bringing the seal pup home, the couple is stunned when they realize that the tiny seal



is a selchie, a being who is a human on the land and a seal in the sea. They name their child Greyling, and his mother says, "We will never let him go." Yet, at the story's dramatic end, Greyling is called back to his own realm and swims triumphantly out to sea. Ultimately, though deeply grieved, Greyling's mother comes to terms with her loss and tells her husband, "though my heart grieves, I understand we had to let Greyling go to where his own heart was called."

This tale, like many stories, carries the theme of loss and concludes with a sense of having to let go before reinvesting in life.

After I told this story, I asked the children to write about the images they pictured when they heard it. One of the girls in the group, a nine-year-old who had lost her mother to suicide, wrote,

I see the scenery
and the hut made out of moss
near the cliff,
and I can see how high the cliff is
and the sea.

I think I would be the Mom
because she cried over her "loss"
and I cried on my "loss."

And a seven-year-old whose brother had died of cancer responded with this poem:

We do not want to lose our
children to unspoken sorrow and
grief, knowing that in helping them
tell their stories we can support
them in becoming more whole.

I see the mother crying
because she did not
have a child
then, she realizes she
had to
let her child go

but the child she had
turned back into a seal,
it swam back to the shore,
I will always love my brother.

I am honored to be among those writers and teachers who create the safe spaces that allow young people to bring forth their stories and poems of loss. We do not want to lose our children to unspoken sorrow and grief, knowing that in helping them tell their stories we can support them in becoming more whole. 🐾

