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**Title:**

**The use of the subjunctive in re-membering  
conversations with those who are grieving**

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# The use of the subjunctive in re-membering conversations with those who are grieving

## Abstract

*The subjunctive voice is often disparaged as no longer of any use in the English language. Here it is argued to have a special place in the construction of possibility in therapeutic conversation with persons who are grieving. In particular, the subjunctive is illustrated in a case study of a re-membering conversation, that is, one in which relational and community membership is considered to live on in a narrative sense after biological death. The argument is that such conversations can produce more sustenance for people in a time of grief than the usual emphasis on confronting 'reality' and accepting loss.*

W. Somerset Maugham announced in 1949 that, "The subjunctive mood is in its death throes, and the best thing to do is to put it out of its misery as soon as possible," (Maugham, 1949, p.323). A few years later, H.L. Mencken agreed, "The subjunctive is virtually extinct in the vulgar tongue" (Mencken, 1956, p. 368). Our intention in this article is to contest these claims. We find an important purpose for this aspect of discourse usage in the development of *re-membering conversations* with someone who has experienced the death of a loved one. We would argue that the deliberate use of subjunctive verbs in such conversations can be valuable in the scaffolding of sustaining narratives for persons who are grieving. We shall illustrate this idea with reference to transcribed extracts from a therapeutic conversation with a man whose daughter had died unexpectedly just over a year previously. This conversation will be presented as a case study and used to elaborate some aspects of *re-membering conversation* as we envisage it and of the value of the deliberate use of subjunctive constructions in such conversations. First, let us review the domain of professional literature in which we are seeking to locate this article.

## Re-membering conversations

The case study we shall present is an example of the general category of therapeutic conversation with persons who are grieving that we have elsewhere described as 're-membering conversations' (Hedtke, 2000; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2003; Hedtke &

Winslade, 2004). The concept of re-membering we are referring to here is drawn originally from the work of the anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff (1978, 1982, 1986). Myerhoff wrote about the response of a community of elders in Venice Beach, California, to the death of one of their members. She argued that a community could negotiate such a death through the creation of 'definitional ceremonies' that served the dual purpose of honoring the dead person as a member of their community and strengthening the survivors' sense of belonging to that community. Such re-membering is much more than mere reminiscing or recalling the past. It involves the reincorporation of the membership of the dead person in the ongoing community of the living.

Myerhoff's work has been picked up and mined for its therapeutic value particularly by Michael White (1989, 1997). In his work, conversations that focus on re-membering are contrasted with a focus on common injunctions in the grief literature (or at least in lay understandings of such literature) for grieving persons to 'say goodbye' to their loved ones when they die. White (1989) entitles one of his articles on this subject, "Saying hullo again..." to underscore this point. Rather than encouraging those who are grieving to accept the 'reality' of the loss, say final goodbyes, separate themselves from their dead loved ones, and move on in their own individual lives, a focus on re-membering re-directs the focus of grieving towards maintaining ongoing relationship with the dead person and seeking comfort in keeping this person's membership current in one's 'membership club' of life.

We are using the metaphor of 'membership' in the sense developed by Barbara Myerhoff (1978, 1982, 1986) as well as White (1997), Hedtke (2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003) and Russell & Carey (2002) to refer to the club of significant others in a person's life (see Hedtke & Winslade, 2004, for an elaborated account of this concept). We are all born into such a club and along the way we add to, and sometimes subtract from, the membership list of this club. Immediate family members usually have a place of significant membership, and friends, colleagues, partners and children are added, and sometimes subtracted, later.

The assumption of re-membering conversations is that a person's membership club serves as a reference point for the construction of identity. In relationships with other members of the club, identity positions are offered and taken up and identifications are authenticated. Identity is thus produced in multitudes of dialogues with others who validate us to be who we are (Gergen, 1999). A membership club constitutes a significant discursive community in which reciprocal exchanges of authentication help develop the meanings out of which people make sense of life. Hence, we can claim that the meanings of a person's life are defined substantially within this club and that these meanings take

on a life of their own. They can even continue to live on after the death of the person to whom the stories are tied.

Death challenges us to redefine such membership and the relationships that live within a membership club. The dominant themes in the literature on grief can be shown to have focused on defining it in terms of what is lost at the time of death. It has been implicitly assumed that biological death coincides with a definitive end to membership status (see Hedtke & Winslade, 2004). Hence, much therapeutic emphasis has been placed on processes of moving towards a stage of 'acceptance' of the loss (for example, Worden, 1991) and of the need to sever emotional membership ties with deceased loved ones.

More recently, the opposite idea that relationship does not have to end with biological death has begun to surface. The purpose of re-membering conversations can be understood to resonate with other efforts in the field of grief therapy to recognize the role of memory (Attig, 1996; 2000; 2001), of 'continuing bonds' (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996), and of meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer, 1998; 2001; 2002). Re-membering conversations seek to capitalize on the possibility of ongoing relationship in order to further a life that carries on in a narrative sense, long after the physical body is dead. The hope is that this idea can ease the negotiation of the physical change that is brought about by death and provide a conceptual context that is more comforting than conventional grief theory, both for people who are dying and for their loved ones after death.

### **The use of the subjunctive**

The subjunctive voice has a long history, particularly in Latinate languages, of distinguishing grammatically the world of 'what might be' from the world of 'what is'. It is defined in the Webster's dictionary as "constituting a verb form or set of verb forms that represents an attitude toward, or concern with, a denoted act or state, not as fact but as something entertained in thought as contingent or possible or viewed emotionally (as with doubt, desire, will)" (Gove, p. 2276). The Oxford English Dictionary (2<sup>nd</sup> Edn, 1989) uses similar language to describe the subjunctive as, "... employed to denote an action or a state as conceived (and not as fact) and therefore used to express a wish, command, exhortation or a contingent, hypothetical or prospective event" (Vol XVII, p. 35). The Random House Dictionary (1999) adds that it has "largely disappeared in English" (p. 1301), where the function has been taken over by the use of auxiliary verbs such as may and should. It can still be recognized, however, in the verbs used in

conditional expressions such as:

- If the house *were* nearer to the road, we *would* hear more traffic noise.
- Their main demand was that the lawsuit *be* dropped.
- If I *were* a rich man, ...
- *Be* that as it may, ...
- If she *had* only listened to me, we would have all arrived safely.
- They will *be* done, thy kingdom *come*.
- If it *please* the court,
- I move that the motion *be* adopted.

It is often claimed that the subjunctive voice is now rarely used by English speakers in ordinary language and is only preserved in formal situations or by those who are highly literate and slightly pedantic. However, there is research evidence to the contrary. Ann Nicholls (1987) found that the subjunctive, far from being in decline, was alive and well in the speech of students in remedial English classes who were classified as “verbally impoverished” (p. 141).

The subjunctive is sometimes referred to as the voice of ‘as if’. It is the emphasis on the use of the subjunctive to speak of what is contingent, hypothetical, and possible and to speak of thoughts or imaginings in the process of being conceived, considered and toyed with that we want to pick up on here. The folk song, “*If I were a carpenter*”, written by Tim Hardin, is remarkable as an example from popular culture of repeated use of the subjunctive throughout the song to create an imaginary world. The subjunctive ‘*were*’ suggests that the speaker, or singer, is not, in objective fact, a carpenter. The use of the subjunctive, however, enables the speaker to invite his lover into an imaginary reality and to live there, at least temporarily, in the hope that the actual relationship might move in the imagined direction. It is an example of the rhetorical moves that the subjunctive voice makes possible – moves which bypass the world of actuality and argue for a reality on the basis of ‘suppose’.

The subjunctive voice, therefore, is the grammatical form of the virtual zone, the zone of possibility, of what we hope might be, or of what we fear may come to pass. It is not hard to see it, therefore, as a place where significant changes might be envisioned and toyed with, before being materialized. If this is the zone where change is constructed, then therapists should pay it attention.

Anthropologist Victor Turner (1986) speaks of this zone as a liminal phase that is culturally sanctioned in rites of passage as a legitimately different way of being. He explicitly names this zone as a site in which the subjunctive may thrive:

*I sometimes talk about the liminal phase being dominantly in the subjunctive mood of culture, the mood of maybe, might be, as if,*

*hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire ... Ordinary life is in the indicative mood, where we expect the invariant operation of cause and effect, of rationality and commonsense. Liminality can perhaps be described as fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities, not a random assemblage but a striving after new forms and structures, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to post-liminal experience.*

(p. 42)

Psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986) has made a case for the subjunctive within a narrative mode of thought. He contrasts this mode with the more dominant logico-scientific, or 'paradigmatic' mode of thought and argues that 'subjunctivizing reality' (p.26) is critical to our ability to construct plausible and sustainable accounts of the events of our lives – more so than maintaining a simple correspondence with 'reality'. Narrative speech acts, according to Bruner, are productive of a world in the minds of those that participate in them, but this world is necessarily a 'subjunctive world' (p. 26). Says Bruner:

*To be in the subjunctive mode is, then, to be trafficking in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties.*

(p. 26.)

The celebration of possibilities is expanded by Mikhail Epstein (2001) into a proposal for the 'philosophy of the possible'. Building on postmodern and poststructuralist thought, Epstein argues for the 'possibilization of reality' as a foundational philosophical project rather than the 'realization of possibilities'. For this project, the subjunctive mode of thought is necessary and Epstein finds it, far from dying out, proliferating everywhere. It is the foundation of all kinds of virtual thinking, aided by computer technology, but also in the growth of economic worlds based on credit and insurance, where the key indicators are not current wealth, but plausible accounts of subjunctive futures. The same modes of thinking are present in the shaping of politics by predictive polls and in stock market trading in 'futures'. The subjunctive mode also features predominantly in the ability of terrorism as a strategy of war to produce a fear of what might be, inflamed by media stories that extrapolate all the angles on such possible events, even when these reported possibilities far exceed terrorists' groups actual military achievement (see Jacques Derrida's explanation in Borradori, 2003, for this subjunctive effect of terrorism). But the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks did not invent the

use of the subjunctive in relation to weapons and warfare. Most of the second half of the twentieth century was dominated by the working out of the Cold War, which was to a large extent subjunctive in its form and in its effects, at least in the European theatre.

Michel Foucault extends a subjunctivizing tendency to his attitude to knowledge. While maintaining a passionate interest in the search for truth, he invokes a spirit of play towards his own (and by implication others') writings. They are what he is wondering about, wondering whether it might be possible that this is the case, rather than what he has positively discovered to be true. In one such instance he says,

*What I say ought to be taken as 'propositions', 'game openings' where those who may be interested are invited to join in; they are not meant as dogmatic assertions that have to be taken or left en bloc.*

(Foucault, 1989, p.275.)

Such an approach to knowledge renders it much more fluid than conventional scientific theory. He offers a willingness to play with possibility, in the chance that it might prove useful, rather than with the intention of discovering the underlying nature of things. The subjunctive allows us to enter what Foucault eloquently evokes elsewhere as the "... still silent and groping apparition of a form of thought in which the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality ..." (1977, p. 50). This is the beauty of the subjunctive mood.

### **The Narrative Connection**

Michael White and David Epston (1990) have articulated a narrative perspective in therapy that embraces this subjunctive mood and prefers it to the more common therapeutic insistence on confronting reality (such as the realities that lie hidden in the unconscious or in environmental contingencies). They draw explicitly from both Bruner and Turner (1986) in advocating for subjunctive thinking.

*The narrative mode of thought, on the other hand, is characterized by good stories that gain credence through their lifelikeness. They are not concerned with procedures and conventions for the generation of abstract and general theories but with the particulars of experience. They do not establish universal truth conditions but a connectedness of events across time. The narrative mode leads, not to certainties, but to varying*

*perspectives. In this world of narrative the subjunctive mood prevails rather than the indicative mood.*

(White & Epston, 1990, p. 78.)

Out of this subjunctive perspective, narrative therapists seek to establish with their clients viable counterplots to entrenched problem stories. But they are not alone in this use of the subjunctive. Other therapeutic approaches are also engaging increasingly in the use of the subjunctive mood, particularly those that place an emphasis on the construction of therapeutic change as a function of shifts in discourse. Steve de Shazer's miracle question (de Shazer, 1991) is formulated in the subjunctive. Harlene Anderson's & Harry Goolishian's (1992) 'not-knowing position' invites therapists forward into conversations that feature subjunctive thinking more than indicative diagnostic certainty. Anderson (1997) articulates this perspective further and invokes the idea of 'possibility conversations' (p. xvii). Tom Andersen's (1990) reflecting dialogues are focused on increasing the range of possible voices in ways that might be said to subjunctivize the future.

Our attention was drawn to all of this musing on the subjunctive out of a noticing about the language in which the dead are commonly spoken about. Sticking to the indicative voice leads us to speak only about observable realities in this domain. The discourse of death, as we have come to know it in modern, western conversation, consigns relationships quickly to the past tense when someone dies. This quickly limits the ways in which re-membering conversations can develop. Moreover, exclusive use of the indicative voice requires us to move rapidly from the present to the past tense after someone dies. When a person's last breath is drawn, or perhaps more exactly, when his or her last breath is exhaled, the person customarily becomes described with a new set of verbs. They are no longer entitled to live in the world of 'what is' or 'will be', where action and agency exist. Instead their lives and identities are assigned to a past tense. "He was very fond of music." "She was a leader in her field." "They were married for fifty-two years." The deceased quickly inhabits the world of 'was' in relation to those who are still living. This single, simple act positions us as distant from the memories of those who were once breathing. The change of tense echoes a culturally practiced nullification, evident in other social practices in the modern world. Removing the present tense places the connection somewhere that is not as accessible to those who remain alive. To speak otherwise calls into question a person's ability to grasp the reality of the death and risks being marginalized with pathologizing terminology. Such discourse practices dislocate us from our loved ones and dis-member their lives, and our connections to them. They are

sometimes assumed to be necessary to the grief process itself.

The use of subjunctive constructions allows us a way around this problem. We can continue to include a dead person's voice in the form, "She would have enjoyed this gathering tonight," or "He would have been proud of you today." In such sentences, the relationship of the dead with the living is invoked grammatically in a way that can continue and need not be marked by a harsh distinction between the indicative present and past. The moment of death thus takes on linguistically a less definitional significance for the relationship. Grief can be released from the insistence on 'accepting reality' in the process. The significance of biological death is thus reduced in the experience of grief. Instead, the subjunctive possibilities for how a relationship might be continued in a new form are opened up and membership can be re-introduced. Let us illustrate the kind of conversation that becomes possible if we take seriously the relationship between the subjunctive as grammatical construction and the ongoing process of constructing a relationship in the face of grief.

### **Example of a re-membering conversation**

The conversation that can illustrate the use of the subjunctive in a re-membering conversation took place at a workshop that Lorraine conducted in Maine in October 2003. Lorraine spoke with Kirby who introduced his daughter Beah who had died some thirteen months previously. This conversation was witnessed by a group of about fifty people who were attending the workshop and was transcribed from a videotape afterwards.

Here is how the conversation started.

*L: I really want people to hear & be introduced to Beah. Beah died?*

*K: Yes, She died in a Virginia in a car accident one year ago September.*

*L: How old was she when she died?*

*K: Sixteen.*

*L: I'd like to get a sense of who Beah was before she died. What kind of child was she and what kind of teenager? Tell me a little about her.*

*K: She was a very strong person. She brought so much to life. She was very focused, and had a forceful personality that came through, because she was so articulate. She did have a forceful way of speaking, even with her soft voice. I remember her telling me last August that she could convince anyone of anything, and that her mom thought she should be a lawyer. She could talk to her friends and apparently persuade them of things they hadn't thought of. Quite proud of this...*

*L: How did she do this – How did Beah convince anyone of anything? K: She was persuasive, articulate, and creative... I remember her being able to think on her feet. Sometimes she'd take a stand that wasn't popular, on some issue--I think she enjoyed defending a different point of view. Yet she'd still connect with people through her charm.*

*L: When you look back on years when she was younger, was there something that you noticed about her as a young child that she was persuasive at influencing? K: She was certainly persuasive with me... though I didn't think of her as more persuasive than other kids. I thought of her as quite grounded, and very smart and very analytical. She was able to connect the dots... I remember tossing out answers to her questions about whatever--like, "we can't go because it's raining", with the amount of information I thought appropriate for a 5-year-old. But she'd analyze information, even at 5 years of age, and point out the inconsistencies. I really appreciated this.*

I (Lorraine) was asking Kirby first to introduce us to Beah and specify the who, what, where, and when of her life. The questions that followed were to assist Kirby to provide more description of Beah. The intention was for Kirby to bring forth some memories about Beah over time. There had to be many places from which Kirby might select out recollections. Re-membering is always selective. Therefore, there was an assumption that there would be moments that might serve his present re-membering better than others. Lorraine's questions inquire especially into appreciative aspects of Kirby's and Beah's relationship.

In his responses, Kirby began to scan his memories as he spoke elements of Beah's identity into being for me and for others in the room. At first, he spoke in general terms summarizing hundreds and thousands of family interactions into some sort of narrative shape. If we take stories to be constitutive of life and experience, then it is perhaps fair to say that Beah was coming alive for us in his telling. In a culture where the dominant discourse values realism, this is not the usual way that we tend to think, or speak, about the dead. But in narrative thinking, there is not the same need to be constrained into only realistic perspectives and conversations. Therefore we would argue for the deliberate choice of the kind of stories that can serve as a foundation for Kirby's future and for the future of his relationship with Beah. This choice requires the kind of appreciative inquiry (Hammond, 1996) that selects out such stories for attention. The next exchange illustrates this kind of inquiry.

*L: It's tricky being the parent of a smart kid. If she could deconstruct your logic that you*

mentioned— what would she say you did well by her in the parenting of a smart child?

K: I think that she'd appreciate that I also go to my ground. I think she felt safe to have different opinions from mine. My way of parenting made it easy for her to talk; I tried to make it easy for her to respond and feel comfortable.

Asking appreciative questions like this opens connections that are honoring of Beah's life and her particular gifts that were part of her contribution to Kirby's membership club.

Lorraine is also interested to find out more about Beah's membership club. How was it constituted before she died and how might it continue to take shape? Questions were also focused on who else might still hold Beah's membership card in their wallets.

L: Tell me a little about Beah and her Brother? Her brother is older or younger than

her? K: Yeah; Dave is 18 months older. Those two are almost like... they're almost like the sun and the moon.

L: Which of them would be the sun, and which the moon? K: In some ways they are both my sun... but I guess between them, Beah would be the sun, with her brilliant blonde hair and upright ball et posture, and she was more competitive too. Dave is more diplomatic, more gentle.

L: What would Dave say he enjoys about being Beah's big brother? ... What does Beah give him?

K: Wow--what she's give him. I think he'd be thinking about... so much joy, and so much connectiveness. They've always been each other's best friends; they've never lost that. Even in their teens... you know, I spent my teens fighting with my siblings, though ultimately we've become close. And Dave and Beah have had their fights, but for them it's so different. Theirs is such that they'd see each other on the street and she'd run up and jump into his arms--he's a big guy--and he'd carry her around. I was just that kind of closeness. They have a really good relationship... but they are really different too.

The use of the subjunctive becomes noticeable in these questions and its use relates to the purpose of re-memorizing conversations. In order to keep Beah's membership alive it is necessary for her relationships with others not to be simply one-way. Her voice needs to speak through, and in, these relationships. Without her physical presence, her voice needs to be constituted in the subjunctive through the ventriloquism of others who know her voice well enough. We cannot ask what Beah did say. Hence, the questions asked were phrased in the form, "What would Beah say...?" The subjunctive formulation invites her voice to be present in the form of a speculation about her

preferences, values and relational identities. There can be no certainties here about what she would say but the subjunctive voice allows her ongoing life in the world of possibility.

Lorraine, and the others in the room, serve as the audience for the telling of some stories from Beah's perspective. Stories, of course, need an audience before they can be told. The most obvious place to start to constitute her voice as living on in other people's membership clubs is with her immediate family. Gradually, however, the audience becomes a necessary part of the story and she enters our lives, even though our knowledge of Beah has no indicative reality and is purely subjunctive. Further examples of subjunctive speech illustrate this.

*L: Can I ask you some questions about the time in the last thirteen months since she died? Is that OK? (He nods.) This has been a huge change obviously. Are there times now when you would have a sense of being connected with Beah?*

*K: Yeah; yeah. There definitely are. There've been times when I've felt, and still feel, that she is with me. I feel that she has lived beyond death, that she has personal agency and has reached out to me in very distinct ways. Also, in other ways, feeling together with her by noticing how she manifests in the environment, like seeing the things that matter to her.*

The emphasis here is not on what Kirby's sense of loss has been in the last thirteen months. The question is predicated on the assumption of ongoing presence. But this presence has to be spoken of tentatively and referenced in the subjunctive voice. It is a step beyond asking what Beah 'would say' too. Her voice is speculatively constituted here into an aspect of something larger - a whole field of relational connection. Lorraine's intention here is to construct not just a conversation in the immediate present but a road map for ongoing relationship. Kirby's answer is noteworthy too. Particularly striking is that he does not answer in the subjunctive. He speaks in the indicative, moving beyond the tentativeness of the inquiry. The question gives him the opportunity to assert what amounts to a reality for him. It is clearly a reality that he takes solace from, as the next extract from the conversation illustrates.

*L: What things would she want you to continue to notice... that really does matter. What would she want you to know?*

*K: There are things she wants me to know. I guess, how valuable life is, and to embrace life... the way she did. Go for the gusto. That's probably the primary one... And that she*

loves me.

Again the question is asked in the subjunctive voice, inquiring this time into a future trajectory for her membership in his life. Again his response to an inquiry about a possibility moved grammatically in the direction of an indicative actuality. “There are things she wants me to know”. Beah’s voice is no longer heard as a distant memory or wistful, but as strong and real. The use of the indicative positions her as a current and active member in Kirby’s membership club. Her voice and Kirby’s began to merge at this point. His internalized Beah was speaking, but as an internalized voice, it was folded back into his own. He was, therefore, also speaking of his own identity. From a social constructionist perspective, this is one of the purposes of therapeutic conversation – to construct in language a path forward in life through strengthening and thickening identity stories. In re-membering conversations, the subjunctive can be employed to this end. Here, it invited Kirby to grow places of identity and agency that incorporate Beah as a resource in his life rather than as a place of lost identity. Carrying her voice of strength might help him to weather the difficulties that death brings. Further questions were directed towards bringing forth this resource.

*L: As the moments come and go when pain of death has washed over you, what has kept your strength in this? K: I haven't had the sense of that as "strength". There had plenty of people say to me "you're being so strong, ya don't have to be so strong", that sort of thing. But I haven't experienced myself as trying to be strong, or as strong.*

*L: Would Beah say that she sees her dad as doing some of the last year as parts of strength? K: Yeah.*

*L: Would she define parts of the past thirteen months for her father that he has acted from a position of strength, you think? K: Yeah.*

*L: In what way might she say that her father has acted with strength?*

*K: Maybe in being careful about how I think of her, so as not to close doors. There trial to remain open to her coaching me how to be her dad now, and ask her how to approach this.*

*L: When she answers you, how have you noticed that from her?*

*K: Generally there been hesitant to talk as if I knew, so maybe I can hear her. I have felt connection with her via things that mattered to her, like when I'm outdoors, or exercising. That's been one way that there heard her.*

*L: As we talk about her now, how is this for you? K: Really good. It's lovely feeling her – I*

*can almost feel her hand on my shoulder encouraging me.*

The conversation continues here to flow more between the subjunctive and the indicative, rather than between the present and the past. It is in this flow that we can construct narratives that breathe life into ‘possible’ identity stories for people – even for people who are no longer breathing. It is not just the words that create these possibilities, but also the grammar that connects the words. For example, Kirby does not define himself as strong when asked directly in an indicative construction. But when we revisit that same quality of his strength through the subjunctive evocation of his daughter’s voice, he steps into a story of strength. Through her subjunctive reflections, and his re-telling of these, he can re-incorporate strength as a useful aspect of his possible identity.

Grammar defines and constructs the relations between people, as well as between words. We were not grieving for a lost relation between Kirby and Beah so much as building possible new points of connection between them, as well as between them and others in his, and her, membership clubs of life. These points of connection were spoken into existence in response to ‘non-realistic’ (which is not the same as ‘unrealistic’) subjunctive questions. In the subjunctive mood, new possibilities could be explored. The door into the playful world of ‘as if’ could be opened. Stepping through this doorway enriches the range of identity stories that can be shared with loved ones.

There is particular therapeutic value in resurrecting the subjunctive for this purpose. The resurrection of the subjunctive from the Gehenna of English grammar can also bring dead persons back to life. In the subjunctive world, life can be breathed into relationships without the harsh light of indicative reality shriveling them up before they can grow. By using terms like ‘were’, ‘would’, ‘as though’, ‘what if’ and ‘might’, we can materialize the imagined. It is this ‘as if’ manner of speaking that affords enough flexibility to remembering conversations to bring to life those who have died.

When Kirby takes up the subjunctive possibility that his daughter’s voice and presence are available to him, as if in the present tense, he is, in a way, re-authenticating her membership and agency in his life. As his response is spoken in this indicative manner, his experience flows from the virtual into the real. It is real to the extent that he acts on it and thereby materializes it. This subjunctive inquiry therefore serves the purpose of scaffolding with Kirby some specific ways in which Beah’s life continues to hold agency.

Let us be clear here that we are not advocating that we should only speak in the subjunctive mood, or in the present tense when referring to people who have died. Such a formulaic manner would be contrived and might not assist anyone to grow closer to those

who have died. We are instead suggesting that there are times when we can invoke the imaginary field of possibility through using the subjunctive mood judiciously, rather than relying always on the action-oriented, indicative mood. The interplay of the two creates an ebb and flow within which to construct identity. So let us return again to Kirby and Beah to notice further opportunities for creating such possibilities.

*L: What things would she want you to continue to notice that really do matter? What would she want you to know?*

*K: A couple of times I felt like she was giving me a sign. But generally, it's just been sort of sensing her and feeling connected with her, feeling love from her.*

*L: I was wondering if there were times when you might feel more connected than at other times?*

*K: I think most of the times when I've felt her presence, I've been outside. Being in nature seems an important part... and sometimes it happens when I write to Beah, or to her best friend; or when I write to Dave.*

The work that these questions are doing is to further detail the possible relational world for Kirby and Beah. The questions continue to be subjunctive in shape. Kirby's responses continue to increase the number of ways in which Beah's voice, and membership, live in reality and assign these effects to particular times and places. Each of these moments can potentially be explored to develop a story and construct it into a significant memory. Then such stories, or memories, can be woven into Kirby's sense of his own identity. We operate on the assumption that identity strength, or character, grows through the incorporation of multiple voices, rather than through the common humanistic mantra of "knowing your own self." Therefore, we would encourage Kirby to strengthen his story of himself by incorporating Beah's voice into his experience of himself. For example:

*L: If she were here now, giving us advice, how would Beah say you were doing with all of this? What would she tell me that she is proud of her dad about since she died?*

*tap0 K: Probably that I have not stepped back from the things that mattered. That I've embraced people who showed up for her and show up for me...*

Re-membering conversations can be thought of as a therapeutic method of assisting identity development, not in a series of stages or age-related tasks, but in bringing to life imagined possibility – materializing subjunctive realities. It speaks to a

process of self-actualization, if you will, not in the traditional Maslovian sense (Maslow, 1956) of the self emerging from within, but in the social constructionist sense of personhood being produced as a product of conversation (Gergen, 1999). Such actualization can increase agency in one's life through affirming membership clubs and strengthening connections with other members of these clubs. When we speak in this manner, we are actualizing a preferred reality that affirms for Kirby what he values and seeks to develop further in his life, and we are summoning Beah's voice to affirm this. Once such identity formulations have been articulated, it is also possible to continue their life into the future. For instance, it was important to inquire about how the road map of Beah's membership would continue to be drawn.

*L: As you go forward, what do you think she'd want you to carry with you to the future about the gifts she's given you? K: What would she want me to carry? L: If she wants you to go forward, what else would she say she would want you to take forward into the future that would connect you and her together.*

*K: Probably her radiance, her personal sense of having a core, the strength of knowing who she was; and how to move forward. I think she was very grounded.*

*L: When you do that - when you move forward in a grounded way, as she's advising you, what does that look like in Kirby's life? K: Probably, not forgetting everything she means to me... enjoying life. But at the same time standing up for the hard issues.*

So far, we have shown how the subjunctive mood has been used to articulate relationship and identity in relation to those who hold stories in their memory of Beah's 'actual' life in the past – for example her brother and her father. But this does not exhaust the possibilities of re-membering conversation. Besides referencing previous connections and accessing the ongoing presence of Beah's voice, we can use the subjunctive mood to build possible relationships into the future with people whom Beah has yet to meet. Beah's membership club might continue to grow as Kirby introduces her to others in his life. The following question explores this future possibility:

*L: Down the road, when Dave has children and you're a granddad, how might you want you and Dave to be telling Beah's stories to her nieces and nephews... What parts of her would you want celebrated? K: Her infectious joy... her very special love. I'd want them to know Beah as a particular person... I think her concreteness was something to be celebrated; and her brilliance. She was able to be kind of hard-headed, to figure things*

*out and be a leader, and yet be creative too. She did some incredibly creative, playful things...*

Kirby was also invited to speak about how her membership club might be growing as a result of the conversation we were having. This afforded Kirby a say in how other people in the room would hear the tellings.

*L: If people were to see this tape outside of this room, what would your hope be for them by being introduced to Beah?*

*K: Maybe that there's tremendous value maintaining the connection. One needn't fear everything being lost when someone dies. Beah has given me the chance to really look at my life and at what I want, how I care for others. That has helped me immeasurably in finding myself in all this. All I have to do is look out at the universe in a different way to feel safer, oddly enough. I think I've reached a point where I know I have lost her in one sense; but in another sense I haven't lost her. She does manifest all over. That's something I could not have said before. I appreciate more of that.*

This question allows the conversation to move into the immediacy of the present – that is the indicative present in which Kirby is speaking in front of a room full of fifty people, who are being introduced to Beah and are to some degree incorporating her story, and Kirby's, into their own consciousness. Again it is noteworthy that the use of a subjunctive question leads to movement towards material reality. On the assumption that it would mean something to Kirby to hear about the audience's response, those present were then asked to speak to how they were listening to Kirby's and Beah's story. In this way, the original story gets retold through different eyes. Each retelling adds to the richness of the original story as a series of folds are created (Hedtke, 2003). However, the audience was not invited to objectify Kirby or Beah by providing insight or analysis or offering commentary as to what stage of grief they thought Kirby was experiencing. Instead, they too were asked to speak to subjunctive possibility and then to anchor this possibility in action. The spirit of this inquiry is based on Tom Anderson's (1990) use of "reflecting teams" and Michael White's description of "definitional ceremonies" involving "outsider witness groups" (White, 1995; 1997; Russell & Carey, 2003). The questions the audience members were asked were:

- *How has hearing Beah's stories touched and moved you?*
- *How might she continue to live on in your membership club of life and what*

*would you want this to mean?*

One of the first comments came from a man about the same age as Kirby. As he spoke, tears streamed down his face and he barely could speak these words:

*I'll be going home tonight to the sun in my life, who is my sixteen year-old son, and will be looking at the time I spend with him in a really different way thanks to you and Beah.*

The following day, he returned to the workshop and told the group how he had gone home and hugged his son and told him how much he loved him. Another woman made meaning of Beah's story in relation to a political cause. She referenced Beah in terms of cultural practices that de-voice girls and women and she told Kirby how she was inspired by Beah's story.

*I want to thank Beah for showing me about girls who keep going on. I am really interested in how girls make it and how they have voices and make space for themselves. Every time I read in the paper about a girl dying suddenly, I feel like another light has gone off. Now I am seeing that is not the way it is – it doesn't have to be that way. So now I feel safer.*

Yet another woman reflected similarly on how Beah's voice would live on for her in a very tangible way. Again a subjunctive question allows a personal story to grow to a place of political action.

*Thank you for sharing your daughter. I am also a counselor and just the way that she stood up for others who didn't have a voice. I'm a coordinator of our Bully Prevention Program. It is so nice to see girls, like your daughter, who have voices, standing up to help those who don't have voices. I'd like to share her story with students, if that's OK with you?*

Here, the subjunctive expressions of Beah's voice – the voice of a dead person – are being referenced as strong enough to motivate others and to have a potential impact on anti-bullying practices. Meanwhile, Kirby is getting to hear about how his telling of Beah's story means that her voice, far from being silenced, is continuing to have life and be heard. He has described Beah as strong and opinionated, and he now hears her being

storied as helping to champion the cause of others who don't have a voice. There is some lovely irony here in the possibility that a dead girl's subjunctive voice can speak powerfully enough to stand against silencing practices. In each of these reflections, the power of the imagined comes to life. In each response, a reality is materialized. Beah's voice was continuing to live on in several new families and new communities that were being constructed in the moment of speaking. Lastly, Kirby was invited to re-tell the story one more time, this time including what it meant to hear of the retellings from the audience. The question now was framed in the indicative, using action-oriented verbs.

*L: People will have different experiences of meeting her today. What does it mean to know that people will be touched by her? What does that mean to Kirby, Beah's dad? K: Remembering... Appreciated...*

*Feels good to share. Feels great! I want to shout 'Beah' from the rooftops. The last thing I want to do is move on. That doesn't make sense to me.*

The conversation ends in place of joy and hope. And this hope is now being spoken of in the indicative voice. The path that has been taken to arrive here, however, has required the judicious use of the subjunctive voice to construct inquiry in an acceptable grammatical form that enables a speaking into a world of possibility rather than actuality. As a result of this inquiry, some possibilities are taken up and entered into, first in words and then in actions. The subjunctive has been used temporarily for the purpose of scaffolding this development. If the use of discourse is a social practice as social constructionists contend (see Burr, 1995), then we need to take account of the particular grammatical forms and words used in conversation because they are constitutive of social relations and lived realities. This case study, as far as it goes, lends support to this argument because it illustrates the materialization of relationship and identity conclusions out of tentative possibilities. It also supports the deliberate deployment of the subjunctive for therapeutic purposes and contradicts Somerset Maugham's too hasty rejection of its usefulness. We would also contend that such "trafficking in the world of possibility" allows the exploration of meanings that are more comforting and sustaining for people who are grieving than an emphasis on indicative reality can provide.

We should be clear, however, that we are not seeking to establish a prescription for re-remembering conversations, nor for the use of the subjunctive. They may not be indicated in every instance. This is not a definitive article based on indicative, empirical data. Indeed, it could be said to be still premature to subject the concepts we are speaking

of to rigorous empirical testing. They need more time to mature before being ready for such inquiry. We have presented more of an exploratory rumination on the basis of a possibility, backed up by a case study. It is an invitation to others in the field of grief therapy to explore with us, rather than a definitive statement, much less a prescriptive one. We therefore seek further exploration in the grief literature of the options that ensue from a focus on materializing subjunctive possibilities.

## Notes

1. We would like to acknowledge the generosity of Kirby for agreeing to let us use this conversation in this article. We would also like to thank Kirby's daughter Beah for the way that her life speaks in these pages. Kirby has read this article and made the following comments about it: *It's refreshing and invigorating to have a chance to talk about my wonderful, irreplaceable girl in a way that recognizes her presence, here in the room with me, as I experience her -- tangible, visceral; full of associations, and poignant; REAL. She will always be vital and alive to me. I'd rather share her than be alone knowing her value. I am grateful for this gift...*
2. An earlier version of this paper was presented in a keynote address by Lorraine at the Dulwich Centre Summer School of Narrative Practice in Adelaide, Australia in November, 2003. We would like to acknowledge Cheryl White, David Denborough and Virginia Leak for this opportunity and for encouraging the development of these ideas.

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