

The Transformational Face of Loss: A Heuristic Exploration of Loss with Cornish Miners

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This study examines ways in which loss can lead to individual experiences of change: the transformational face of loss. It is specifically interested in how loss can be experienced, recalled, and integrated as part of the journey towards what Kübler-Ross (1973) calls “acceptance” or Kessler (2019) calls “meaning”. This paper draws on the recollections of five miners who lost both their job and community when the mine they worked in closed in 1996. The heuristic approach (Moustakas, 1990) adopted in this research helped the researcher and participants tap back into their lived experience of loss, enabling a new experiencing and documenting that was both data-driven and creative. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed as an expression of their journey towards change. Participants were asked questions about their sensory and emotional responses to their jobs in the mine environment, how it felt to lose those jobs, both then and twenty years on from the pit closure. Themes emerged that were common to all participants. Those explored in this paper relate to camaraderie and environment. Differences were found in the time participants took to accept the loss and the ways in which they found new purpose.

Keywords: loss, nostalgia, change, camaraderie, environment

This article is based on research completed in 2015 with five men who worked at Geevor Tin Mine in West Cornwall, a place where the old steel headgear above Victory shaft still looms large in the landscape. The mine was closed suddenly in 1996 and remained derelict until it reopened as a site museum early in the new millennium. While visiting the museum in 2013, I felt an eager desire to learn and understand more fully the experience of what it was like to be part of this

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place, and to lose that belonging. I spoke to its learning team manager, who felt that although the historical aspect of the mine closure was well-documented, research into its emotional fallout was absent. He felt that my research into the change that comes with loss was of value, and subsequently introduced me to one of the miners who was working in the mine today as a tour guide. Through him, other miners agreed to take part.

There is a twin focus to the findings: a documenting of the participants' articulations of loss and change, and a presentation of the researcher's creative response which emerges from adopting Moustakas's (1990) heuristic approach. With more than two decades of life between the loss event and the research, this paper sets out to examine what participants valued and lost, and the changes it effected in them, through asking the question: "What is the transformative face of loss?"

The sadness and grief that follows loss is a "reflection of a connection that has been broken" (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2015, p. 227). Five stages of grief - denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance - were identified by Kübler-Ross (1973). In focusing on the process or journey, she demonstrated that loss could, with time and inward reflection, become a space for change and, perhaps, acceptance. Kessler (2019) adds a sixth stage of *meaning* to this grief cycle. By this he means showing *gratitude* for the good and seeking to *honour* the past through taking it forward. To achieve this, he advocates an active response to the event over which you had no control: "Loss is simply what happens to you in life. Meaning is what *you* make happen" (Kessler, 2019, p. 12, emphasis added).

Loveday (2014), in his research on nostalgia and working-class identity, explains that while the loss of a work identity is often undervalued, by looking back, this loss can be examined, articulated, and valued. Nostalgia was not an explicit component of this research at the outset, although perhaps it might have emerged due to the self-reporting nature of my study, and the significant gap in time between the mine's closure and the present day. When a significant relationship or job is lost, Davis (1979) viewed nostalgia as an emotional reaction capable of repairing a discontinuity of the self, which is brought about by loss (known as the Discontinuity Hypothesis). More recent psychological studies (Sedikides et al., 2008; Wildschut et al., 2006) based on this hypothesis have shown that nostalgia can be a positive strategy of integration and a mechanism for maintaining continuity with the self. Common triggers of the nostalgic experience are *sensory inputs*, and common nostalgia objects are settings and people (Wildschut et al., 2006). In fact, my intuitive focus on sense response in my research design inadvertently created a useful nostalgia trigger.

Method

In 2015 I interviewed five men who had been made redundant when Geevor Tin Mine closed. When they lost their jobs, almost twenty years ago, the youngest participant was then in his mid-40s and the eldest in his early 60s. This paper maintains the person-centred and qualitative nature of the research, by referring to individual participant experience while using pseudonyms to protect privacy. At the time of the study, two men (Alf and Evan) worked as guides at the mine museum, and a third (Gus) was a trustee. All three had worked underground, drilling shafts to expose the tin lode and installing timber props to support the tunnels. The remaining two men, a maintenance electrician (Luca), and a carpenter (Chaz), generally worked above ground and preserved no current connection to the mine. This research draws on the memories and experiences of these five individuals gathered in separate interviews. Interviews took place in a room at either the museum or the participants' homes, lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and were voice recorded. A semi-structured interview technique was employed to encourage a relaxed discussion, with open-ended questions to encourage full and personal responses. I was interested in hearing, (1) their memories of working at the mine and how they felt about losing their jobs, and (2) what they have missed most and what they were glad to leave behind.

For the researcher adopting Moustakas' (1990) heuristic approach, there are six phases: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis. Like Kübler-Ross's (1973) stages of grief, they are not discrete units of linear time and activity, but points on a journey. As I wish the participants' data to be primary in the reporting, I will give a brief outline of phases and activity here and refer to pertinent aspects of the heuristic approach where appropriate within the article.

1. *Initial engagement* is to discover a topic of passionate concern that holds personal interest with wider social implications. From this came my research question: What is the personal face of loss? Open-ended questions were formed to help reveal this and these were used for the basis of the interview.
2. *Immersion* allows the researcher's question to evolve on an intimate basis, and to immerse oneself fully in the topic and question. This was achieved by spending time alone in retreat at the coast near the mine, immersing myself in the data and the landscape.
3. *Incubation* is a period of retreating from the question, allowing an inner opening where creative ideas and the seed of connection can be born. This took the form of an individual depiction for each participant based on their interview responses.
4. *Illumination* is where insights spontaneously break through into conscious knowing. It was at this stage that a poem was composed for each participant which picks up one emotional aspect.
5. *Explication* involves periods of inner contemplation, creative thinking and focused analysis, where new avenues of exploration can present themselves.

Common themes from the data were drawn together to create a group depiction of intersecting stories.

6. *Creative synthesis* is a combination of the researcher's own experience, internal reference, and discernment. It was in this final stage that I created a composite poem. From my own journal notes and transcribed voice recordings, a creative synthesis emerged with each participant's relationship to their job and its loss, revealing similar and differing experiences among participants, within myself, and my own experience of loss in relation to theirs.

Moustakas (1990) believed that by exploring each other's biographies we might reveal something about our wider lives and experience. The first three phases helped me to prepare for the interviews by identifying a topic of personal interest, refining it through self-dialogue, and finding questions likely to connect my participants with their emotions, and to connect me with my participants and my own emotions. First, I connected with my own loss and how that might resonate with my chosen context and people. My mother had died, and a breach had occurred in my previously good relationship with my brother, which only began to repair itself years later, after my father's death. As to the connection with the people and the place, I came regularly to this part of Cornwall and felt an affinity with it. The topic I identified was how loss is experienced and what kind of personal change it can lead to. Essentially, "all loss brings up feelings and memories, and for some these experiences may seem uneventful, while for others such loss changes the course of their lives forever" (Van Praagh, 2000, p. 3).

During the *incubation* period I developed a deeper, inner appreciation of what I was seeking, which guided me to the creation of open-ended interview questions. These were formed to draw out the emotional aspect of the participants' experiences related to their senses (i.e. the smells, colours and sounds of their environment) and their feelings about losses and changes they had experienced.

After the interviews, I spent time alone in retreat at the coast near the mine, immersing myself in the interview data (recordings and transcripts), my journal notes, and the landscape, allowing insights to emerge into conscious knowing (*illumination*). The *explication* phase required inner contemplation and focused examination of what arose, which allowed a complete picture of the phenomenon to form. It was in this phase that, from the previously mentioned resources, I created individual depictions (i.e. freeform descriptions of each participant's memories and any emotions that arose in our interaction). Following this, a sympathetic resonance drew me to create a poem for each participant. These incorporated speech samples from the interviews. In this final phase, *creative synthesis*, it is intended that the various elements are assembled to make a coherent whole, so I sought patterns of experience and, from these, I formed a composite depiction. A number of loss-related themes arose, and the two most prominent of these - people (*camaraderie*) and place (work environment) - will be examined in this article. From these emergent themes and my own experience of loss

in relation to theirs, I felt intuitively led to compose a composite poem (Raven), which embraced both the shared and unique quality of the phenomenon of losing something precious. Excerpts from five individual poems and the composite poem is included in the Results section.

Moustakas' (1990) heuristic research design was chosen for this study for three reasons: (1) It offered me the framework to "seek to understand the complexity and resilience of the human spirit" (Blau et al., 2013, p. 99); (2) It endorsed the role of researcher-as-participant which valued connectedness and self-transformation and, (3) the encouragement to take my question, "What is the transformational face of loss?" as the starting point and to respond, as an artist and celebrant, with creative intelligence.

Results

The immediate loss

The sudden mine closure, caused by the collapse of the London Metal Exchange, was devastating for all workers in different ways at the time. One participant (Alf) refers to his loss as a bereavement that he "never came to terms with or got over", despite his later return to the mine as a guide. Another (Chaz) recalls that although it was expected, it was still a shock. At the time, the youngest participant (Luca) was initially worried about being unable to pay the mortgage on his new house, but admitted "I'm not too unhappy that the place closed down". He linked this feeling to negative changes and unpleasantness towards the end that had made it easier to leave. It was clear from the older members that longstanding personal connections were broken, as men had to leave their close-knit community to seek mining work overseas in countries like South Africa and Australia.

Camaraderie

Loss of the camaraderie of work friendships was referred to by all participants, and some spoke at length about it. They recognised that, because of the danger, work relationships carried intense trust and responsibility. This resonated with me in terms of the relationship that my father had with his partner maintaining the lines on the railways. In old age, when my father was dying, his work partner planned a visit and broke down when he realised it was too late. The phrases "watch his back", "give him a hand" and "another set of eyes" were used by Alf when describing what partners provided for one another. To lighten the weight of this mutual responsibility, pranks were sometimes played (e.g. nailing boots to the ground, talk of ghosts). This strong sense of camaraderie had a key symbolic locus - the Dry (drying room) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
The Dry



The underground workers described this as a noisy, communal space smelling of stale air and musky, discarded clothes, where men changed at the start and end of a shift. The Dry was the boundary between work life and family or community life, where work quarrels and family problems could be aired and stored away before a shift, or tough days underground packed away before returning to family life. Although it is quieter, it remains an atmospheric place today, regarded as the mine's "beating heart" (Alf).

For this research, the men who work there today (Alf and Evan), both chose to be interviewed there. Evan acknowledged that being there for the interview helped him to connect with his feelings and that, in fact, he regularly sat there "to think what it was and the people I knew here." As it was a site of great meaning to them, I also set their individual poems there. Here are excerpts from those poems, synthesising memories past with life today (italicized words are those taken from their transcripts):

Poem for Alf

You keep me alive with your visits
I feel warm when you are here.
At night I hear the voices
see the people that *joked and laughed*.
I am happy to remember
the *camaraderie, what a wonderful thing*.

Poem for Evan

We looked after each other then we still do now
by the photographs on the wall.
My *heartstrings* are *pulled* as you play your tune
as I remember the fun we had.
You've taught me *well to live my life*
through your photograph on the wall.

The poems written for the men who worked mostly above ground reflected their particular memories: the speed of the cage descending, Luca, and time and the role of the mine's claxon, Chaz. Excerpts of the poems follow.

Poem for Luca

Roll up! Roll up! Adrenaline junkies
Bungee jumping, Skydiving!
Can't compare to the rush you feel –
In the cage
Straight and true *Victory* goes
Down to the bowels of the earth
25ft. per. Sec. I guarantee a surprise
Try it and see
From light to dark then dark to light
Do not fear the Sun God has done it before.

Poem for Chaz

Noise of the mill
Hear it from the houses
A lullaby sending you to sleep.
If you lived very close
We'd know it was time for work
7 o'clock
8 o'clock
Dinner time
1 o'clock
5 o'clock
End of shift.
The *siren/hooter/claxton* calls as –
Father time *regulates our lives.*

The poem written for Gus refers to his ability to tell a story, and the precision needed for a safe explosion underground. This is an excerpt from that poem.

Poem for Gus

Let me tell you a story
Of a sound long ago.
Boom, boom, boom, boom
16 dets. 16 booms
9 feet in
9 feet out
Perfect –
Sleep well tonight.

The environment

The Dry had been a vital human space. It was a place to shore up for the hard work ahead. However, the below-ground environment was not all bleak. Envisioning only darkness, I was surprised by the array of colours Alf described, found in granite: “Purple amethyst, green fluoride, feldspar, ... water ... would run across the face, and ... you’d see all the different colours ..., they’d all blend in together, a bit like a rainbow.” The dangerous unpredictability of the rock was its flipside. The miners had grown familiar with its sounds. The way it “creaked and groaned” revealed its lack of solidity in parts, and the miners learned to listen for these cues of danger (Gus). This reverence for the rock, and their skill for sensing danger, had kept them safe. I noticed that the participants only refer to these special skills obliquely. For example, Gus spoke of the precision timing needed for safe explosions, but losing the opportunity to use and share their skills is never mentioned directly.

Two participants likened the previous landscape around the mine to the moon. Seeing how the land had regenerated since was a positive outcome for everyone. They had clearly accepted the industrial landscape with its “gravel mounds” (Chaz), “arsenic dumps” (Gus), and “the old waste tips that littered the coastline” (Luca) as a necessity at the time. I found one description of the pervasiveness of the iron oxide in the landscape quite alarming and markedly different from today. Above ground, one colour prevailed. “It was red, when the miners came up from underground ... everything was red, the sea was red ... the dust would fly up, the cars would be red, you’d be red” (Luca). In remembering that past they were visibly gladdened by its apparent revival. They admired with awe and affection the more natural and ordinary aspects of today’s Cornish coastline.

Removing the need to work in an unhealthy and dangerous environment was a positive outcome. Accidents happened and deaths were, and continue to be, hard to bear: “awful”, “terrible” (Chaz) and unforgettable. Luca had lost five of his age-group peers from accidents in one year and cited many others from cancer. When asked to recall a memorable event, two mentioned pranks, but the others described the sight and sound of fatal accidents and the smell of clean-up chemicals. In fact, Luca expressed anger, on behalf of himself and others. “They got away with murder down there really. Putting people to work in places that they should never have been working.” For some, particularly the two above-ground workers, they overcame the loss of their jobs by acknowledging that, in retrospect, it had been too dangerous, and they were lucky to have survived when so many had not. The change that came with redundancy was ultimately positive for them.

Some took the opportunity to work on site at the museum and use their skills and memories to transform their lives and those of others. After one particular accident, Evan developed a new appreciation for life and a desire to change. He explained the realisation that, “he [who had died] didn’t really live his life, and you think, well, I’m

going to change mine,” which Evan did, particularly when the mine’s closure gave him full opportunity. Despite having a work-related disability from his time at the mine, he found purpose for himself in the museum job. Gus, who became a trustee, said: “It done me a favour, to get out of this”, meaning the wet, harsh conditions. Gus was a great story-teller, and he became involved in recording and archiving the miners’ stories for museum visitors to listen to. All three underground workers (Evan, Alf, and Gus) saw value and found meaning in remembering and retelling their individual stories, those of their colleagues and of the mine itself, which stretches back for centuries.

In the final step in the heuristic process, *creative synthesis*, I sought to make visible and transform the personal and social phenomena of loss in a poem. The culmination of our combined emotional energy was my poem, “Raven,” from which this is an excerpt:

Spirits of the past visit level 14
Silently sounding the colours of the rock
Opening cracks and fissures of knowing.
I fly on raven’s back renting apart black as pitch, into
White granite, reflecting the light of a lamp
Guiding the way to freedom and change.

The bird seemed like a natural representation of our newly combined consciousness. Honoured in Native American tradition, the raven is seen as a brave, playful bird (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020) while also representing “the darkness of the void” (Sams & Carson, 1999, p. 101).

Discussion

The participants in this study appeared to use their working life experiences to give their lives meaning, while retaining some emotional and/or physical connection to their collective past. The two participants who did not maintain significant contact with the mine after the loss did remain in contact on a personal level and had enough interest to be included in the study.

Every participant valued the camaraderie of the job and certain aspects of their work environment. Strangleman (2012) suggests that shared lives and a shared frame of reference helped, in the past, to “humanize work”, which seems particularly apt to those working in the inhumane conditions that these men describe. The therapist and researcher, Geoffrey Greif (2008), suggests that men communicate best “shoulder to shoulder”, doing an activity with friends, rather than sitting talking “face to face”. It is unsurprising that solid, inter-dependent relationships are so important to staying alive. This research shows that the miners already lived with loss (the deaths of colleagues) and had managed the grief by acknowledging it to the degree that they were able, while still continuing their own dangerous work.

Ceasing to work at the mine seemed to allow space to acknowledge the fear and experience unresolved grief. Indeed, Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2015, p. 229) describe how “unfinished business from old wounds and previous losses” are known to “resurface” in later grief. This complex grief was coupled with a realisation that they were alive and had a second chance.

It was clear from the individual depictions that the two participants who went on to work elsewhere (Luca and Chaz) recalled more of the problematic aspects of the job and their relief of having escaped it. They tended to recall fear of being underground (Chaz), the number of deaths and the poor behaviour (of the Management) that went on toward the end (Luca). Both men seemed to maintain self-continuity and ease lasting grief by acknowledging the toll the job had long been taking on them, and the necessity of breaking from it. Not being fully underground workers, they both had trade skills that helped them find work in other contexts (i.e. the jobs themselves were not becoming extinct). Perhaps their ages and life stages also had some bearing on their feelings about Geevor. Luca was the youngest participant. He had worked a shorter time at the mine and had more working years ahead of him. Chaz, the eldest, had done the job all his life, and missed it, and was the nearest of the five participants to retirement.

On reflection, I see that the poems I wrote for Luca and Chaz are somewhat playful in tone and upbeat, celebrating aspects of their work that they had loved. Key words in Luca’s are “roll up”, “rollercoaster”, “ride of your lives”, referring to the fast-moving lift (cage) that transported miners between levels underground. In Chaz’s poem the focus is on the sound of the pit’s siren that “regulates our lives” and helps to create a “safe” workplace. Perhaps I was keen to salvage and honour the positive memories.

The underground workers took an opportunity to maintain their physical and emotional links with mine and workmates in the new phase of their lives. Research by Hinojosa and Hinojosa (2011), in a similarly tight-knit and dangerous military context, reinforces the psychological strength offered by retaining connections. They describe how those leaving the military are encouraged to draw on their previous support network to help them adapt to their new lives, rather than attempting a clean break. This behaviour was adopted by some of the participants in this study and others outside of it. Alf organised annual reunions for miners wishing to maintain a connection. He reports that attendees talk mostly about the past, but this is surely not uncommon – reunions are accepted to be an exercise in nostalgia. From a sociological perspective, nostalgia too can be effective as a kind of critical tool (Loveday, 2014), to re-view the past.

That these men have a contemporary role in the mine might, to some, suggest arrested development, a stalling in one of Kübler Ross’s (1973) earlier stages of grief (e.g. denial or depression). Indeed, one miner admitted that he was yet to “recover” from the loss. However, rather than a stalling, the participants’ individual depictions suggest an integration of past endeavours with present ones, a transformation of their previous

work-based identity. These men purposefully generated something constructive out of their loss, by joining a project that reconnected them with their local community and beyond. They sought to honour the history of the mining community, including their contemporaries who died, by looking to the future. Recording and archiving miners' personal work stories for visitors to listen to, as Gus did, is an act of connection and of hope. This seems like one interpretation of Kessler's (2019) description of finding *meaning*. Needless to say, these men are not defined by or confined to the roles I have described in this research, but it is a continuing strand of self-identity. Perhaps it is propelled by Davis's (1979) concept of *nostalgia* – a largely positive emotion that revives memory, in this case, to enliven the education of others.

I view the process of this research as a transformative one. In drawing together participants' sense experiences and memories to reflect their ongoing journey through loss, I was transformed by how their experience spoke to me and my loss. The heuristic process involved self-searching and reflection, going deep within myself, as my journal notes remind me. I felt the emotions surrounding the death of my mother and difficulties with my brother. In self-dialogue, I inquired whether I had lived my life more fully in the wake of my losses. The process gave me a deeper appreciation of my own losses and my own need for community. It is my hope that the participants' journey of loss has, like mine, been positively affected by taking part in this study. Doubtlessly, some of the sights, sounds and feelings of their working life were pleasant to revive, especially those related to people, but others remained painful. I am grateful for their willingness to re-engage with their experiences during the interviews, and their courage.

Douglas-Klotz (1999) proposed that even in the darkness of grief, change can occur, that “a new self is born when the various members of a community, whether inner or outer, change and come together in a new relationship” (p. 144). In this research process, the miners were repositioned again as a collective of individuals with intersecting experiences. The poetry booklet, which I produced and sent to each participant, marked the end of our creative journey together. On receiving it, I hoped that each person would slowly read through the unnamed poems to find their own memory portrait and find resonance with it. In the seeking, I hoped they might read the poems for some of the other participants, and finally, our collective portrait ‘Raven’, and also find resonances there. Each component, I believe, reflects the wonderfully varied and resilient face of loss.

Conclusion

This inquiry into the transpersonal face of loss set out to investigate the experience of individuals dealing with loss and respond to those experiences creatively, with the heuristic method as my guide through the process. Rather than setting out to prove a hypothesis, I looked for patterns as they emerged in the individual depictions. The miners missed the intensity of relationship with people and place, they felt unvalued and fearful for the future. At the time, Geevor's closure was experienced as a broken connection (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2015), and at an individual level, a discontinuity

of self (Davis, 1979). I concur with the conclusion drawn by Loveday (2014) that, while the loss of a work identity is often undervalued, by stopping to look back, the loss can be examined, articulated, and honoured. Indeed, a variety of oral history projects set up today, do just this. As technology changes our patterns of life and work, and certain types of work disappear, such recall is especially important. Some degree of rehabilitation and re-valuing was possible for these participants, either in finding agency through moving away from what they knew, or in adapting their skills to a different purpose. Those involved in the museum's educational programme are passionate about preserving both the stories and the mine buildings. They seek not just past remembrance, but future engagement, by building new reciprocal relationships with the wider community. What have I learned about the transformative face of loss? It is complex, changes with time, generating new relationships with ourselves (and our experience), and with those with whom we share our memories.

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