SILENT GRIEF: 
NARRATIVES OF BEREAVED ADULT SIBLINGS

By

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy 
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Abstract 

This qualitative research project is a narrative inquiry into the lives of four bereaved siblings; one is myself. The purpose of the project was to explore our mutual experiences of loss, look for patterns, and create a forum for continuing our stories in a new way. Identified as a disenfranchised loss (Wray, 2003) adult siblings are often seen as the least impacted family member when a sibling dies. After such a death, the concern is first directed toward the grieving spouse and children and then the deceased’s parents. Adult siblings are often expected to be a source of strength and support for others. 

Through in-depth interviews and story telling, three participants shared their reflections of, first, living with and, then, living without beloved siblings. Their stories of loss and love are captured both with words and visually through photographs. My stories are woven throughout the text as I reflect upon my grief journey and ongoing search for meaning.
Findings of this research offer a glimpse into the profound depth of this loss and some of the unique challenges faced by bereaved adult siblings. All participants experienced strained dynamics within families of origin as members grieved the loss differently. Elderly parents, in particular, were hesitant to speak of their deceased child, setting a tone of silence within the family. To help “protect” parents from further grief, participants gradually stopped talking about deceased siblings in their presence. Relationships with surviving siblings were also strained as roles were reformed. For the three women participants, passing years did not lessen the emptiness of the loss. The pain was rekindled with each passing family milestone.

All of us were changed by this experience. Sharing stories with an interested listener created another avenue for meaning making and a new way to honour and memorialize our lost siblings. Each of us moved to new understandings about ourselves and our relationships with our deceased siblings, naming the experience as transformative on many levels. Hopefully this study will serve as support for other grieving adult siblings and contribute to furthering research in grief and bereavement.
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“All good research is for me, for us and for them....”

(Reason & Marshall, 1987, p. 112)
PART ONE

“FOR ME”
Joy and Sorrow

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled
with your tears.
And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.
Is not the cup that hold your wine the very cup that was burned in the
potter's oven?
And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was
hollowed with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find
it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.
When you are sorrowful look again in your heart,
and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your
delight.

Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow,"
and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."
But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board,
remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

(Gibran, 2008, p. 29)
Opening Words

When we write, we help construct our identities and the identities of others, and we learn about the world, all through words. In the process of writing, in the journey of finding our way in the world in words, we write many stories, and some are happy and some are sad, and most stories linger in the spaces between joy and sorrow. (Leggo, 2004, p. 11)

I dream in black and white. It’s always the same. You are gone and I am telling people what happened. Almost robot like I recount the details, repeated so many times they roll off my tongue without emotion. Tonight is different. I’m with two people who don’t belong in the dream. We all know it is going to happen – just as suddenly – but I’m trying to get things ready. They are donating money to the trust fund – money they were going to give to you. It’s breaking their company rules. I begin to cry.

How kind of them. The woman who doesn’t belong cautions me about trying to do my Ph.D right now. “A door of sadness will be opened. It will be very hard for you,” she says. I awake. It’s 1:30 a.m. I have slept a little longer than usual. (Brenda, personal journal, November 13, 2006)

I used to worry about loss, about the death of loved ones. I feared it. And then it was upon me – and it was not what I had imagined. It was worse. Behar (1996, p. 175) writes that “mourning…is not replacing the dead but making a place for something else to be in relation to the past…. We bring the past to the present, we allow ourselves to experience what we have lost, and also what we are – that we are – despite this loss.” In the moments, days and then months
following my younger brother’s sudden death, I struggled to cope. Mornings were the worst. I opened my eyes and for a split second felt almost normal. And then, a vague feeling of uneasiness started; like a camera coming into focus and, suddenly, I remembered. The first morning I fell to the floor. It was more than a month before that sliver of time between sleep and awakening stopped being so jarring, my states of consciousness finally coming to some common understanding. Everyday activities took on new meanings. They became points of intersection between the mundane and the profound. My nightly commute on the Go Train was no longer simply a way of getting home. It became my window on the worlds of hundreds of people who I imagined were heading home to “normal” lives. And then, I would think about Brent, and his family, and weep. Peace came only when I stayed at the surface, pretending that Brent was simply away. When I let myself think about him, though, I felt such intense pain. It was beyond physical; beyond emotional or psychological. It reached into my soul and held me to the floor.

“I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it” (Richardson, 2000, p. 924). I did not know about grief, or loss, or transitions. Brent’s death changed absolutely everything about my life. The way I related to my family, my spouse, my deceased brother’s surviving family, friends, work – everything – shifted and I felt like a stranger in my own life. Nothing was the same. I remember losing my way in a familiar neighbourhood near the University. I drove into the city to retrieve readings from the class I missed when Brent died. The package of readings
was not in the designated place so another Professor gave me a set of originals to copy. I made my way to the copy centre a short walk away. Coming back, I got lost. North, south, east, west all blended together and I stood at the corner of Bloor and St. George Streets uncertain about which way to go. A passerby intervened, looking at me quizzically, as I tried to describe the building I needed to return to which, at that point, was within sight. I did not recognize it.

There were no words to convey how dreadful the first few months after Brent’s death were. Everything in life lost its meaning. The order, neatness and predictability was gone and I walked in a fog. Writing became an anchor and a way of trying to make sense of what had happened. Putting words on paper gave me an outlet for my emotions and, later, a purpose to try and move forward.

If I felt so dismembered and disordered I wondered whether other bereaved siblings felt the same. Through casual conversations I began to learn about sibling loss as viewed through the eyes of surviving siblings. Quiet, silent, and stalwart, siblings were often the backbone for their families both before and after a brother or sister’s death. They attended difficult medical appointments as support and often were present as their sibling took their last breath. And, later, they chose coffins. They wrote eulogies. They helped care for the surviving spouse and children of deceased brothers and sisters. They were present for all of this, quietly and painfully absorbing the experience without claiming a stake to their own absolute and devastating loss. I began to think of them and, indeed, myself as silent griever.
Through writing I began a journey of what I came to call “integration.” It was not “healing” but a reordering of everything that I thought was normal and predictable about life. It also helped me redefine my voice as a writer. When the house was quiet and I was alone with my thoughts it was my journal to which I turned as witness to my deep sadness. Having the freedom to express my feelings, to call Brent by his name without fear of making others uncomfortable, gave me some peace. As I wrote, I re-experienced the pain of losing someone who was a pivotal part of what formed my identity. My brother, my little brother, the first “other” for whom I felt a duty of care and concern. My first experience of empathy. My first big responsibility – the protection and safety of a younger sibling. All of these lessons first learned because I had a little brother.

Hunt (1992, p. 116) writes, “If applied research is to be authentic and relevant, researchers must first accept their own personhood, their co-participation in the human venture they seek to understand.” My research comes from a place of pain and a desire to understand the phenomenon of a grief journey and the role that stories play in meaning making after a loss. It also comes from the recognition that there is something unique and profound about losing a sibling, something that is not easy for others to understand unless they also have experienced it. While there are countless books, articles and, indeed, groups for bereaved “others,” there is not much available for adult siblings. One of my goals with this project was to create materials that would be both helpful for bereaved siblings and informative for professionals in the helping communities who came across them. I wanted professionals to have an understanding of
what the experience of losing a sibling was like, to feel it, and know it from the inside. Indeed, all three of the participants in this study eventually found their way into grief therapy, so difficult were their siblings’ deaths to integrate into their lives. Fortunately, they encountered professionals who had some understanding of sibling loss but it is still not considered one of the “big” losses. By placing their stories in this book, I am communicating through words and pictures the experience of sibling loss. “Stories ask readers to feel their truth and thus to become fully engaged – morally, aesthetically, emotionally, and intellectually” (Richardson, as cited in Bochner, 1997, p. 434). And, most certainly, this research effort was, and is, a part of my own meaning making.

In Part One, I begin with a glimpse into my evolution as a narrative researcher. I highlight the epistemological perspectives that informed how I chose to approach this project and how they seemed so perfectly suited to the topic. I also explain why this topic matters, why losing a sibling ought to be part of the grief research conversations, and thoughts on why it is not. In Part Two, I present narratives from three women: Rena, Karen and Catherine. Written as individual chapters, I highlight their experiences of living with and then losing their siblings. Using snapshots from our conversations and short vignettes taken from the stories they shared, I weave together their experiences. I also include photographs to help tell their stories so that you as a reader may know them as people and sense the depth of connection they felt and continue to feel for their siblings. You see and hear me throughout their narratives as I bring my brother Brent into the conversations. He is a part of me now and virtually everything I
think and feel flows through the filter of knowing that he is gone. In Part Three, I begin with an overview of the research method I chose and how it evolved through the process of bringing this work to completion. As part of that chapter I offer reflections and insights on working narratively and on how I wish you as the reader to evaluate this work. As Gilbert (2002, p. 223) so aptly described, “we live in stories, not statistics” and, as such, I include a guide for readers to view this work. This is followed by a review of relevant literature. In a chapter entitled “Discovery and Recovery,” I provide an overview of my findings, and discuss implications for future research. And finally I conclude with commentary on my journey today.
Becoming a Researcher

…The researcher is a person and that person – along with her or his own complex personal history – is a guiding influence in all aspects of a study. (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 10)

“Brenda, please call reception, call reception,” Jeannie’s rhythmic voice comes over the speaker. That’s odd. I return to my office and pick up the phone. John¹ is on the line. “Your brother has been taken by ambulance to the hospital in Barrie. His liver and kidneys are failing.” Instantly I am in motion, directing others to cancel my appointments as I run to the door. I stop at the house and quickly change clothes. John and I continue up highway 400. I call my mom. She has been with my dad in another hospital. He is just two days removed from knee replacement surgery. It’s Friday, September 15, 2:07 p.m. The last day of normal. (Brenda, personal journal, September 15, 2006)

Within 24 hours Brent was dead, mysteriously taken by a strain of strep (streptococcus)² that went wild in his system, misdiagnosed earlier in the week as the flu. We watched and agonized as each attempt by the medical team failed to stop its spread, shutting down each of his vital organs, one by one. There

¹ My husband.

² The New York State Department of Health provides an excellent overview of Group A Strep infections and their potential complications. Brent died from streptococcal toxic shock syndrome (STSS). This is an infection that moves through the body rapidly causing low blood pressure/shock and injury to organs such as the kidneys, liver and lungs. Approximately 60 percent of people with STSS die. Retrieved March 3, 2009 from http://www.health.state.ny.us/diseases/communicable/streptococcal/group_a/fact_sheet.htm
were codes called, a hellish helicopter ride to another hospital in the middle of
the night, crisis after crisis, as Brent’s grip on life slipped away. He died 19 hours
after he was first admitted to hospital at 6:36 a.m., Saturday September 16,
2006. Another case for the medical books. An indescribable loss for us. He was
38 years old, a husband and father of two, and the youngest of three siblings.
The next few days were a frenetic blur of activities. Arrangements made, people
called, memorabilia collected and a story of his life created in picture boards.
There were so many details and duties and difficulties – then silence.

Clandinin and Connelly (1991, p. 272) note that “the narrative inquiry
process itself is a narrative one of storying, restorying, and restorying again.” In
the immediate days following Brent’s death I considered leaving graduate school.
The thought of research, a paper – anything really – seemed meaningless. The
single event of my brother’s death carved a line that split my life into the “before"
and “after.” The “before” represented naïve optimism that the world operated
according to some kind of understandable system of predictability. The “after”
was a confusing jumble of guiding principles and expectations that no longer
made sense. Life was now a dark and confusing place.

At my first graduate class after Brent’s death I sat in the underground
parking lot at the University for a long time before I found the courage to leave
my car. The walk up the stairs and into the elevator was difficult. I felt different
from everyone now – changed in spirit. “How are you?” was a greeting I
dreaded. I wondered how I could possibly walk into the classroom, sit down, and
casually say “hello” to people when everything in my world had shifted. I was no
longer “fine” or “good.” I wanted to scream to the world, “My brother died, don’t you understand? None of this stuff matters anymore.”

Somehow, I managed to stay. It was such a good decision. Coming to class gave me a focus and a formal avenue for meaning making that became critical in my own process of integration. It was also, in a strange way, a break from my dark and sad thoughts. Having complex readings to evaluate, discuss, and exchange was a diversion. I also was gifted with a small group of colleagues in the class who were not afraid to ask, “How are you?” and then listen to an authentic response. What I realize about myself now is that, even then, there was something driving me to find a way to incorporate this new knowledge of loss into my life. Gilbert (2002, p. 236) calls it a “drive to story.” Storying experiences allows us possibilities to create order and make meaning out of meaninglessness. Formalizing my journey into a research project was a way of legitimizing my experience. It gave me something to work toward.

Cole and Knowles (2001, p. 89) write that “we research who we are. We express and represent elements of ourselves in every research situation.” When I first applied to the doctoral program I planned to study my own development as a teacher. I was interested in continuing the autobiographical work I started in a Master’s degree, *Living an Authentic Life; An Autobiographical Account of a Learning Journey* (Marshall, 2002). I realized that throughout my career as an
educator, facilitator, and executive coach,\textsuperscript{3} the times when I was at my best seemed to be when there was a synergy between who I was as a person and my professional roles. Times when there was a schism between the two – when, either through workplace demands or institutional rules, I felt I had to be someone else, to play a role that did not accurately represent my inner self – were uneasy and uncomfortable. I called this my “search for authenticity.” My work of going backward, forward, inward and outward (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) became a way of writing that was easy and natural. It seemed logical to continue with this work in the doctoral program. This time, though, I intended to broaden my scope to include other educators and explore their understanding of “authenticity” in the workplace. I wanted to understand if others felt those awkward intersections as acutely as I, and how they dealt with those points of conflict. In fact, I had just announced my plans in my Research Methods class as a part of our introductory activities. And, then, Brent died.

The stories people tell and how they choose to tell them are interpretations of life (Widdershoven, 1993). My script or set of stories about who I am represents a compilation of life experiences. The ones I choose to tell are reflective of what matters to me. In talking about her work as a storyteller, Joan Bodger (Mawhinney, 2001, p. M 9) said, “I thought I’d write a book and tell what the stories mean, then I realized that the stories tell me what my life means.” Bodger’s words echo what others like Dewey (1938) and Palmer (1998) have

\textsuperscript{3} As a coach I work with senior executives at large corporations to improve their performance in the workplace. Using a variety of psychological assessments and other data gathering tools, strengths and weaknesses are identified. Executives use the data to develop an action plan to address their weaknesses. My role is to assist in identifying these areas and supporting the individual as they implement changes.
said before. We are our experiences. Education is an ongoing process with each experience setting the stage for the way in which the next life event will be interpreted. Learning is a process of discovery and recovery in response to questions that arise from the way we experience our present lives (Greene, 1978). And the way present lives are experienced is informed by what came before.

I have a new lens on loss and the complications and difficulties connected with stories of grief. Stories change daily, ebbing and flowing. Like the rings on a tree that mark its age, this new ring in my life informs even as it nearly severs. Death brings new understandings of the world and forces re-examinations of long held beliefs and truths, surfacing ones previously hidden from view. It was not until after Brent died that I realized I expected him to be my lifelong companion. It was a belief so deeply held that it was part of the fabric of my sub-conscious and, when it was challenged, I lost my place.

Listening to the evening news now is more difficult. Every day someone’s loved one dies. I imagine what their families are experiencing and I wonder about how their brothers and sisters are feeling. I recently watched an interview with a surviving sibling of one of the students killed at Virginia Tech University. He stared blankly into the camera and said something about wanting to focus on the positive aspects of his sister’s life. She died six hours earlier that day. I was angry at the media for putting a camera in the boy’s face. It also brought me

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back to the eulogy my older brother Stephen and I said for Brent. He had been
dead 72 hours. We focused on all the good things that he brought to the world;
that is what you do at funerals. I remember the crowd of more than 500 laughing
at some of our stories. But then, after, when everyone was gone and the
immediate responsibilities attended to, all I could think about was how much we
had lost. I felt no joy in the life he had lived. I felt he was cheated of the life that
lay ahead. His chance to be a father, to celebrate birthdays and family
milestones, to do what everyone else got to do – all of it lost. It was not fair.

“A hermeneutic position holds that stories are interpretations of life. Story
and life are similar, in that both are supposed to have a meaning. The story tells
us in a meaningful way what life itself is about” (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 4).
Reading, writing, and reviewing the stories in my journal helped me create new
meanings. They change over time and the grander story of how I integrate this
loss into my life, also changes. At first I mostly wrote about the pain and shock.
Entry after entry echoes recurring themes of disbelief, a huge gaping hole
planted in the middle of my life. At times, entries are written as letters to Brent
and, other times, simply descriptions of my latest visit with his children, Carter
and Jocelyn. There are attempts at poetry and archived memories from our
childhood – things I do not want to forget. I write Carter’s words, the funny things
he says about life, and the deeply moving ones. Every time I visit, he shares
some thoughts about “Daddy” which, while painful to hear, are things I want to
save and let him read when he is older. His six year old heart feels a deep
longing for his father. He knows on some levels just what he has lost and that
contributes to my own sadness. “You know that story, Finding Nemo? That’s a story with a happy ending because he gets to find his daddy,” he once said to me.

“We are narrative animals. When we try to tell the story of what happened to us, we understand…” (Shields, 2003, p. 22). Writing helps me understand grief. It also helps to re-establish my identity in the absence of my younger brother. “Who am I now?” is the question I continually ask myself. The way I answer changes as each passing day brings new experiences. Knowledge is constructed and the telling of a story is how people construct their lives (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). Individuals are active participants and builders of their own repertoires and the path to meaning making comes from going within, excavating the stories, connecting them, and seeing the patterns. And, for those who have the luxury of writing them, the act of placing the story upon a page can open even more doors for understanding. My stories help me make sense of my world as it is now.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) write that there is no single interpretive truth. This is something I also believe. My version of the events from the night my brother died are simply interpretations. At first I had so many questions about his last 24 hours of life. I soon moved past that day and focused on recollecting images from the funeral. I wanted to know who was there and if we had spoken and, even, what we had talked about. My memories of those days are blurred and, when I think about them, it is as though I am looking through a dirty pane of glass. Today I marvel at how much time has elapsed. There are few people
from Brent’s funeral who have remained present in my life and I wonder at the fleeting nature of those connections. They seemed like such important elements of this story and yet, over time, one by one they have disappeared and the story has continued without my brother’s physical presence.

Meaning is never fixed or absolute but ebbs and flows just as the events of lives continue to evolve. Widdershoven (1993) speaks of the power of stories when fused with other stories. It is through the telling that people come to know the impact of an event or experience and it undeniably will shape how they interpret the next. Meaning is constructed on many levels. It is only through telling my story and the stories of the participants in this study that I begin to understand the magnitude of what has happened (Shields, 2003). And as that comes more clearly into focus I begin a new journey of trying to find meaning. What I am realizing is that without meaning making it is very hard to continue living and perhaps that is why stories are so important. They give us life. “A story, in other words, is a theory of something. What we tell and how we tell it is a revelation of what we believe” (Carter, 1993, p. 9). “A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). My current experience with grief underscores this sentiment. As I unpeel all the layers of loss and unpack what they mean my feelings change. Nothing about this experience is static.

I have not completely left behind my ideas around authenticity. I now realize my interest in authenticity has less to do with the concept and more to do with a way of being in the world. I now feel much more attentive to the patterns
of life and my own story of loss has added to my capacity to help others. “We tell ourselves stories in order to live” (Didion, as cited in Neilsen, 2002, p. 208). In telling stories others may also be helped to live. The act of telling opens the door for others to share their stories and place them within new contexts. This experience gives me greater empathy for my clients, those who seek my services as a consultant. It also gives me a new story about resiliency and strength which can be helpful for others. I want to be an authentic researcher – the same person in life as I am in a research relationship (Cole & Knowles, 2001). “Authentic findings will only emerge from authentic relationships” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 138). I value connections, am an empathetic listener of stories, and am not afraid to place myself within the research text.

“Usually, the theory is there before the story is heard and, thus, the tale works to service the theory that explains it. Moreover, scholarly inquiry is not assumed to start at the site of one’s own experience” (Bochner, 1997, p. 424). Bochner wrote this after the sudden death of his father. He taught a course in death and dying before he knew it on a somatic level and, once he knew, it changed him as a person and subsequently as a researcher. My research begins with my own experience. I was unfamiliar with any theories of grief and bereavement before I began this work. I did not know there was literature to support the prevalence of meaning making in the bereavement process. I only came to know the importance of it through my own experience when I realized that through writing I was trying to recreate meaning in my life. The examination
of my experience through an academic lens came later as I formed my research plan.

I had several goals when I began the research. First, I wanted to bring adult sibling loss into the research conversation. Invisible as a grieving population, in that adult sibling loss is rarely noted, I wanted to create a formal avenue for highlighting the depth of the connection and the unique challenges faced by grieving siblings. Second, I wanted to understand how bereaved siblings integrated this loss into their lives. How did they make meaning from the experience so that they could move forward? From this, I want to create written materials that will be helpful for other grieving siblings. Last, I wanted this to be a joint inquiry. It is “…inquiry with people, rather than research on people” (Hunt, 1992, p. 113) that drew me to the methodology that I ultimately chose. As Rena, one of the participants in this project, remarked, “It would have been much easier to simply give us all a questionnaire” (Rena, July 2, 2009). My choice to use stories and create connections with people over time, came from a desire to create a space to freely have conversations about our siblings. I wanted to break the silence barrier that I sensed many had experienced and create a community of sharing where we might all benefit. I enjoyed listening to the stories of love and longing. It validated what I knew from my own life. That is, siblings matter. Their death matters. The interplay of our discussions added to the richness of the text I was able to create. Our joint stories were bigger than our individual stories and, when we came together, our conversations were peaceful and at times joyful.
Siblings Matter

No one would question the assumption that adjustment to and recovery from the loss of a spouse, parent, child, or close friend is a complicated process.... (Folkman, 2001, p. 563)

“And when did your brother die?” she asked. “It’s been six weeks,” I replied. She scribbled some notes. “Oh, that is very new. We ask that you let four months pass before you participate in one of our groups. You are still in shock. You haven’t really started the grief process yet.” “My God, how could I feel any worse than I do right now,” I thought to myself. I began to weep. It had taken so much of my energy to come to the centre and, now, to find out there was to be no help was hard to hear. “Do you have anything I can read about siblings?” I asked. “Oh… I’m not sure. Let’s look here in the library. You know, I don’t think we do. I know I have one person in our ‘others’ group who lost her brother — but we don’t really have anything specific for siblings. Maybe the two of you could sit together.” (Brenda, personal story, November 15, 2006)

Sibling loss is what is known as a disenfranchised loss (Doka, 2002; Wray, 2003; Zampitella, 2006). It is not typically recognized as being as significant as the loss felt by others around the deceased person. Amongst adults, concern is first directed toward the surviving spouse and children and then for the deceased’s parents. Even in the above quote, introducing this section, siblings are absent from the author’s lens of those who experience a significant loss. I am amazed and disappointed that even a researcher in this
field does not recognize this loss as important. Her view, however, is not isolated to the research community. I saw this first hand and heard it in the voices and stories of the participants in this study. For the first few months people asked, first, how Brent’s wife Susanne was coping and, then, how my parents were. Very few asked about either myself or my older brother Stephen. Considering how close we three were, and friends knew it, I was surprised that others did not extend this same level of concern toward us. I used to talk about Brent with friends and colleagues all the time. We lived with him, ate meals with him, cared for him for 38 years, and yet we were invisible as grievers to all but those closest to the event. It is as though there was and continues to be an unspoken assumption that we (siblings) are adults and the connection to our first family is no longer vital or necessary.

The relationship people share with their siblings is potentially the longest one they will ever have (Gill White, 2006). Longer than parents, or spouses or friends, the relationship with a sibling has the potential to be lifelong. Siblings know each other in ways friends and other blood relatives do not. We have shared bedrooms, bathrooms, holidays, school days, family milestones, meals and a way of growing up that people outside the family do not understand. It is unique in its longevity, intimacy, historical connections, and the nature of how it is formed (Cicerelli, 1995). And unlike selecting a friend, spouse or life partner, a sibling simply arrives. There is no choice but to be in a relationship. There are no formal rituals to “divorce” a sibling or sever the relationship; you are connected for life. There are shared jokes and memories that are so numerous
they form an underpinning of familiarity that can never be achieved with anyone else. My older brother and I always called Brent “Eddie.” His middle name was Edward and this “pet” name was initially meant to tease. It started when we were younger and over the years it just stuck. Everyone around us knew who we were talking about when we called him that – but the name was never used by anyone other than us. It was our private sibling connection. Even in adulthood I still felt Brent was my little brother – the one who needed to be tended to and cared for. And he still responded to me as an older and wiser confidante, often calling me for advice. We played prominent roles for one another in key milestones of our lives. I spent virtually every Christmas, New Year’s Eve, Thanksgiving, and Easter with Brent. This year and last year, his place at the table was vacant. “If not for death, they [siblings] would be with us longer than anyone else on earth” (Vaught Godfrey, 2006, p. 7).

Connidis (1992) studied 60 sibling dyads aged 25 to 89 to explore the effect of life transitions on what she called the adult sibling tie. For the majority of those in her study she found that siblings remained an important and valued connection throughout life. And, although some participants noted there were times when they were in less frequent contact with their sibling, for the most part the closeness of the sibling tie was something that participants felt could be rekindled or mobilized when needed. “Siblings remain life long parts of most adults’ social networks” (White, 2001, p. 566). Further studies have shown that the average adult has contact with a sibling once or twice a month for 60 or 70 years after leaving home (White, 2001). I expect this frequency will continue to
increase as younger generations are more apt to use the internet and email as forms of communication, making it even easier to stay in touch. Participants in White’s study did not grow up using contemporary technologies. Maintaining contact with siblings was done through letters and phone calls.

All three participants in this study spoke with their siblings regularly, some even daily. They enjoyed outings together, lunches, shopping, week-ends away and time talking. I spoke with Brent several times a week and we got together socially monthly. He emailed me regularly and sent pictures of his children. I am the God Parent to his daughter Jocelyn. He was the executor of my will and had power of attorney over my life and my affairs in the event that both John and I were ever incapacitated and unable to make decisions. I continue to delay a trip to the lawyer’s office to make the necessary legal changes. Goetting (1986, p. 704) writes, “perhaps the most important task of siblingship throughout the life cycle is that of providing companionship, friendship, comfort, and affection.”

Recognizing how much Brent’s death impacted me I was surprised at how little support there was to deal with adult sibling loss. The local chapter of a community based bereavement support organization had groups for widows, friends, parents, children who had lost parents – none for siblings. There was a huge library of resource material available and not a single article or book specific to sibling loss. Even the counsellor I spoke with was mystified that they did not have anything to give me. Eventually I did find a few books, Sibling Grief (Gill White, 2006), Surviving the Death of a Sibling (Wray, 2003) and Letters to Sara: The Agony of Adult Sibling Loss (McCurry, 2001); however, it was only
through my own persistent efforts to find something relevant. It was as though it had never occurred to anyone in the helping fields that there was something profound about my loss. The authors of these books, all bereaved siblings, were inspired to write them because they also felt isolated in their grief. Like them and the participants in this study, I have been on my own to try and make sense of wide ranging emotions.

Gill White (2006) created a website called the Sibling Connection\(^5\) dedicated to individuals who have lost their siblings. Initially, the idea to create a resource came from the experience of losing her sister in childhood and how that haunted her throughout her adult life. Later she expanded it to include a section for those whose siblings died in adulthood and much of her counselling practice is now focused on bereaved siblings. She suggests that there are some common grief responses. Many siblings find they must seek a new identity, separate from the one developed with their sibling. As there has been much research to suggest that birth order plays a role in how individuals relate to the world, suddenly losing someone from that order creates a crisis. In our family, Brent was the youngest and also was the one who had young children. Family events were planned around his children. Suddenly, we face those same events without his family of four. Without the energy and activity of Brent’s children, and his easy going presence, we must relearn how to relate to one another. There is no one refusing to eat or spilling food on the floor or demanding to leave the table. Our new “adult only” table is often silent.

Many individuals who come to Gill White find they need to work through the trauma associated with the death of their sibling – especially in cases where death was sudden and unexpected. Never comfortable at hospitals, the sights and sounds associated with trying to keep Brent alive were, and still are, difficult memories. I am troubled by the last few minutes of his life. I replay Susanne’s scream, and the physician telling us he is gone, over and over. I remember the nurse asking me to drink orange juice. My knees buckled as the physician pronounced him dead. I also remember how he looked and felt just before he passed; his features distorted and discoloured, machines performing every function for him, his arm, cold to the touch. I have never talked about this part of my experience with anyone in my family. I can tell, they do not want to know.

Through her contacts with bereaved siblings Gill White (2006) isolated five healing tasks: Learning about sibling loss and the grief process; allowing oneself to grieve; connecting with other bereaved siblings; telling your story; and, finding meaning in the loss. Although I see some similarities with my experience, I am not comfortable suggesting a preferred “way” or process for others. I also struggle with the word healing – preferring to think about grief as a long term process of reintegration, a way of learning to live with the loss.

“Everyone deals with grief differently.” This is a common refrain I have heard since Brent died. I see it in my family and also in the families of others I have come to know since his death. Within my family, I am the one who initiates stories and attempts to bring him into conversations. Others in my family are quiet, reserved, and private about their feelings. My parents rarely mention
Brent’s name and, from my vantage point, sometimes it feels we pretend he is simply away. As time passes I better understand their need to remain silent. They both came from backgrounds that equated silence with strength. Difficult and sad events were never spoken of and I think part of their hesitance to share is to protect us from their pain. On the odd occasion, when I have cried in front of them, they sob. I think they are crying for me. At first, there was pressure to gather for key family milestones and to be “normal.” As each event approached, I experienced intense episodes of stress and sadness. I worried about every aspect of the gathering and how people would feel. Should I light a candle? What will I say? How will others react? This perceived need for “normalcy” has shifted over time. We no longer gather as frequently and when we do, we are better at working around Brent’s absence. I still feel responsible for trying to minimize everyone’s pain, however, it is getting easier.

Each of the participants in this project echoed a similar pattern within their own families. They all struggled to reform and establish new ways of communicating with one another. “The grave does not obliterate the place of the sibling in the family” (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996, p. 233). Even as adults, our siblings remain an important part of our family and their absence is stark. Our families are never repaired.

Reason and Marshall (1987, p. 112) write, “all good research is for me, for us and for them.” My interest in meaning making was motivated by my search to re-establish order in my life. That meant delving deeply into the experience of grief to understand why losing my brother was so profound. I needed to
understand what made our connection so strong and why severing it early was so traumatic. I also wanted to understand how my process of meaning making was similar and different than others. As I read more and found less about adult sibling loss I realized there was a gap. And that gap was an opportunity to create something unique, in both form and process, to add to the research texts. I also felt there was an opportunity, once I had come to some new understandings, to educate professionals and lay people in the bereavement field about this unique kind of loss.

For the three people who were part of this research, each deeply appreciated the opportunity to talk about their siblings and participate in a project that promised to help others. It was also a chance to document feelings and stories that were important elements of their family histories, storing them for future generations to read. Each has already shared earlier drafts of the narratives I created with family and friends, inviting others into their evolving stories. From this work, I hope to create support materials for community based support groups to retain in their libraries ensuring that the next bereaved sibling who comes for support will not leave empty handed. My hope is that by reading stories from others they will know that they are not alone and their feelings are real and valid.

And last, for the research community, I believe the findings or discoveries, as I call them, of this project add to the body of literature about loss that may spawn other research. In the literally hundreds of research articles on grief and bereavement that I read, adult siblings are strikingly absent from most. The
research tends to be on widows, parents who have lost children and children who have lost parents. In a field dominated by the disciplines of psychology, medicine, and nursing (Neimeyer & Hogan, 2001), and a bias toward quantitative research, an adult learning lens and choice of narrative as an approach also offers other perspectives. And by having made adult sibling loss the focus on my research, new conversations about grief can begin.
PART TWO

“FOR US”
Eighty-two-year-old Lillian, in a pink-flowered robe, was dressed up for the occasion. As the nurses wheeled her into her younger sister’s room, she started to complain, “Becky, your room is so dark and stuffy. Why don’t we go up to my room where it’s sunny and there’s a better view?”

Rebecca, after more than seventy years of counteracting her bossy older sister’s power, smilingly ignored her and greeted the psychologist who had come to the nursing home to interview them about “sibling relationships.” The two women were each other’s last surviving connection with a large family that had once included their parents and four brothers, all of whom had died.

“Did having a sister make any difference?” the psychologist asked Rebecca. She straightened a trace. Spreading her parchment hands palms up and shrugging quickly, she flashed a glance of irritation to let the interviewer know that he had missed the obvious. “Of course it makes a difference! I know I have a sister! She’s my flesh and blood. And I don’t even have to see her all the time. To have a brother, to have a sister” – she paused, groping for the right words for her deep feelings. “To know they’re just – around – that’s all I need to know...” (Bank & Khan, 1982, p. 3).
Rena & Cookie

Figure 1 – “Sisters,” Source: Family Photo, Rena, 1993
Cookie

(April 3, 1944 – August 8, 1997)

I was sitting with her when the porter came to take her up to intensive care. “They’re taking you now.” She had the oxygen mask on her face but she lifted it and said, “Are you coming with me?” Those were the last words she ever spoke to me. (Rena, June 11, 2008)

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6 This photo was taken on Mother’s Day 1993. Cookie died later that summer. Rena carries this picture with her on all her travels.
I met Rena in Montreal at the Association of Death Education and Counselling (ADEC)\(^7\) 2008 conference. It was my first academic presentation (Marshall, 2008) and the first time I formally spoke about sibling loss. I had one hour to speak. A quick poll at the beginning of my session confirmed what I expected would be true. In addition to being grief professionals most of the attendees were themselves also bereaved adult siblings.

I built audience participation sections into my session, however, I was unprepared for the number of people who wanted to talk, some tearfully, as they spoke about the loss of their sibling. One woman asked if she could read a poem written in memory of her sister. Another told the story of witnessing two elderly sisters lying side by side in a hospital room, one near death, holding hands across the aisle. Later in the day I saw that same woman again in the lobby of the hotel. She told me about her brother who died when she was 12 years old. She was now in her seventies and her eyes welled as she recalled watching her mother open the telegram delivered to their door advising the family that he died in battle. These experiences further reinforced for me that there was a place for my research; that it would matter to people beyond myself. I closed the session with a PowerPoint presentation set to music which flashed memorials written for deceased siblings that I had collected from the newspaper. When the music ended, the room was silent. A woman sitting in the front stood and thanked me for my presentation and then turned to the audience and suggested

\(^7\) ADEC is an interdisciplinary organization in the field of dying, death and bereavement. It has nearly 2,000 members from a wide array of fields. Additional information may be found on their website. Retrieved March 3, 2009 from http://www.adec.org/about/index.cfm
“everyone ought to hug.” It was very moving to be amongst people sharing similar losses.

Rena, was a member of the audience. She waited to speak with me afterwards and gave me her telephone number letting me know that she was from Toronto. I did not realize it at the time but she also was a bereaved sibling and wanted to learn more about my planned research. I assumed she was working in the field and was looking for someone to connect with who lived locally. She told me later that there was something that had compelled her to attend my workshop even though, for professional reasons, there was another session that was more relevant to her work. This one, she thought, would be for her.

We met a few weeks later in a local coffee shop. Rena quickly recounted the story of her sister’s death, showing me some pictures as she did so. One, in particular, was well worn from being carried around many years, carefully packed to go with her on all of her trips. At this meeting, I also learned Rena was soon to be ordained as a Rabbi and that her Rabbinic thesis was in the area of bereavement. She wanted to be one of my participants. At that time my research plan was already established and I wondered if I could accommodate another participant. I also wondered how I might be able to engage someone in conversations who very clearly was already well entrenched in the field. I thought about it for a few days, made some changes to my plans, and then let her know I was pleased to have her join. I had found a third participant.
Getting Acquainted

When she was in Grade Six or Seven, my mom took me to watch her in a school play. I was very young – we had an almost ten year age difference. I remember Cookie walked out on the stage to do her part and I yelled, “There’s Cookie!” We always laughed about that later. (Rena, June 11, 2008)

Rena chose to meet me either at the University or at my home. Although I was willing to travel to meet with her I sensed she wanted to keep our work somewhat removed from her immediate family. Unlike Karen, whom I knew from childhood and Catherine, whom I had connected with through business, Rena and I were strangers to one another when we began. We were separated in age, religion, and our family situations were very different. She had been married twice as long as I had and her children were grown adults and well into living independently.

Where we did connect was with the loss of our siblings and the place and role they had played in our respective families. Rena was the youngest of three children. There was her brother Shane, who was 13 years her senior, Cookie, 10 years older and, then, herself. Rena described her sister as the “glue” of the family, the one that got along best with everyone and who was a favourite of her parents. Like Brent, Cookie was the hub around which everyone revolved. She

8 Pseudonym for Rena’s older brother.
brought people together and made them feel good about themselves. We laughed about the collective memories of our siblings who were gifted with more patience than either of us. Both, it seemed, were the ones best suited to handle the idiosyncrasies of aging parents. It sounded as if Cookie and Brent were of a similar temperament, easy going, kind, and caring. We even joked that “perhaps they now knew each other in heaven” so similar were their roles in our families.

Rena and I also shared an interest in the academic side of grief and bereavement. She had practical experience in leading grief groups and conducted funerals as one of her professional roles. I enjoyed exchanging ideas with someone who was passionate about the field while at the same time I worried that my newness might leave her feeling a little short changed. She was modest about her accomplishments and took our work together very seriously. We got to know each other through our stories and I looked forward to our regular meetings. While our losses were different there was a commonality in the way we each chose to respond to that loss that I found comforting.
**My Big Sister**

And I remember when she got her first job. She always used to buy me things from Laura Secord. For Halloween there would be a chocolate pumpkin or a witch, all these different things that they sell. She was always thinking of me that way. (Rena, June 11, 2008)

Cookie was a wonderful presence in Rena’s life from the day she was born. “She was always very loving; she was like a little Mommy” (Rena, June 11, 2008). Through the eyes of a younger sister, I could hear Rena’s deep admiration for her older sister. Cookie made Rena feel safe in the world. “She was my big sister and so that meant that there was a lot of protection there. A lot of protection and comfort and companionship and fun” (Rena, June 11, 2008). As kids she remembered Cookie as the one who took the most interest in her, almost like a “really fun” parental figure. When her sister married and had children Rena became the babysitter. And later when Cookie moved from their home in Montreal, to Toronto, Rena soon followed and they formed their own tight family unit. Their relationship evolved over time; Cookie was her mentor, confidante, friend and partner in so much of her life. They spoke on the phone daily and spent hours together doing, what Rena later called, “ordinary things.” She smiled at the memory of picking up the phone and hearing her sister say simply “me.” It was their private sibling connection.
Brent and I had that same link. We talked almost everyday, never usually about anything of high importance, just a comforting presence in the middle of the day. His number was programmed into my cell phone for ease of dialling in the car. We both had long commutes to and from work and we often passed the time chatting while driving. We called them our “traffic calls.” For the first few weeks after he died I called his cell phone just to hear his voice. A couple of times I even left a message. It was unbelievable that he was physically gone yet, through technology he seemed alive. As long as I could hear his voice, I felt I still had a link. And then one day, when I called, the number was disconnected.

Cookie died from non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 1997. Nearly 11 years had passed when Rena and I began our interviews. I was not quite two years removed from Brent’s death and for the other participants, seven and eight years respectively. Many of Rena’s memories focused on the last four years of her sister’s life when she battled cancer. It was hard to select happy stories as many of the more recent ones detailed the progression of her sister’s illness. Rena was a nurse in a prior career and so her recounting of her sister’s illness was very detailed. She remembered each medical event very clearly and painstakingly walked me through all the stages, attaching dates and times to each. I learned, from talking to her, cancer was only the underlying issue. As the disease progressed, and her sister’s immune system weakened, she became a host for many other painful disorders, some life threatening on their own. She went from medical crisis to crisis always just barely hanging on.
At that point, I was working at Women’s College and she was at Toronto General, so every day on my lunch break, I would go to see her. On the week-ends, same thing. I never missed a day. All the staff knew me there. I remember one day, she had such bad diarrhoea, like she was a mess. And I said, “Okay, I’m going to get you into the bathtub.” I was wearing a suit. She said, “You can’t do this.” I said, “I’m going to get you in the bathtub and we’ll call for the nurse.” I couldn’t go out and come back in and leave her like that. And she always remembered that I got her into the bath; I cleaned her up. (Rena, July 2, 2008)

Later when I re-read Rena’s transcripts I tried to look beyond the descriptions of the disease and medical appointments and find the overarching story told. I saw this time period as representing a fairly dramatic shift in their relationship. With the lead role in Cookie’s care Rena moved from being the adoring younger sister to the more protective older sister, committed to helping Cookie make it through each crisis. She was there for all the physician appointments and kept her extended family apprised of Cookie’s ever changing condition. Her sister’s illness, and her role as caregiver, became the central focus of her life during that time for she was with her sister every day. We did not talk much about her own children or other relationships or how she managed her own household. All the conversations revolved around what happened with Cookie.
Rena’s devotion reminded me of my grandmother and her sister. They lived together for more than 30 years. My grandmother moved in with her sister when my grandfather died. She was the younger of the two and from the outside it appeared that she always deferred to her older sister. My great aunt seemed to be the “boss” of the house and made all the decisions from where furniture could be positioned to what they were going to eat each day. But when my great aunt had a stroke and needed extra care it was my grandmother who stepped in and ensured she could return to their home. She bathed her, prepared meals, looked after her pills and without her sister my aunt surely would have lived in a hospital facility. They lived well into their nineties and, when my great aunt died, my grandmother died soon after.

Rena’s care helped keep Cookie alive. Her daily visits, liaisons with the medical team and constant attention was a lifeline for her sister. She played a role in every decision surrounding her sister’s care. Cookie was the main focus in Rena’s life throughout her illness.
The Void

It’s all about the void that’s left. Suddenly there’s a gap, and that person isn’t there. And it’s not a matter of someone not living in the house...but she had such a significant part of my life and she wasn’t there anymore. And no one to answer the phone at the other end of the line to come in and say, “Hi, guess what I did at work today?” Or for her to call.... (Rena, June 11, 2008)

As I discovered, with each of the participants, there was a deep and ongoing sadness about losing a sibling. Rena was devastated by Cookie’s absence. “So even though I’ve been married to my husband for now 33 years, I didn’t grow up with him. We didn’t have the same family of origin and the same way of looking at things that our parents had taught us,” she said to me. “I would be terrible at making a decision so she was always the person I would bounce things off of and there wasn’t that partner anymore...” (Rena, June 11, 2008).

The place that Cookie held in Rena’s life was not replaceable. She left a “gigantic hole,” the same description I heard from each participant. Rena likened it to a scar or disability that remained after a serious surgery. You simply had to find a way to work around it. Rena’s comment about the special nature of the connection she had with her sister, and how it differed from the one she had with her husband, would soon be echoed word for word by Karen. For both of them, the connections felt to their siblings were in many ways deeper than what they
had with their spouses. Links as blood relatives from the same family superseded everything else.

From our very first conversation I knew that Cookie was the family member with whom Rena felt most connected. Although Cookie did not attend university she applauded Rena’s academic accomplishments and made her feel special for everything she did. “She went to school vicariously through me…she always thought, ‘good for you, if that’s what you think you want to do and you can do it, then go for it’” (Rena, July 2, 2008). The two of them were alike in their approach to life. It was like they formed a smaller sub-family unit within their birth family where they created a mutually supportive environment. I could tell how much Rena loved her sister. And later, when she showed me some of the greeting cards her sister had sent her, I was struck by the deeply emotional words Cookie wrote to her. It really seemed like a very, very special relationship.

I had once worked out that my parents would die and given the fact that women outlive men, I would probably outlive my husband. And she would probably outlive her husband and the two of us would be together. I mean, we’d have our children – but the two of us, we’d be together.

Through all those other losses, we would have each other. (Rena, July 2, 2008)

One of the hardest hurdles for Rena to overcome was accepting the loss of a future with her sister. She felt sad seeing other sisters together out shopping or having coffee, feeling like she had been denied what would have been such a
lovely, long term connection. She assumed Cookie would always be part of her life. I smiled at her story for I had a similar unspoken assumption about Brent. As my husband John was older than I, I also assumed that a time might come when I would be on my own. Being alone was something I feared. I took a little comfort knowing Brent, as my younger brother, would always be available to help me. I could buy a home near him and share in the joy of his children, being their special “aunt Brenda.” Because of the kind of person he was, and his dedication to family, I knew he would include me in his life. John even referred to Brent as my “back-up spouse.” Brent was someone who he could count on and that gave him a lot of comfort too. Like me, John was overcome with grief over Brent’s death.

“It just wasn’t supposed to work that way. We were…supposed to grow old together” (Rena, July 2, 2008). Rena said this many, many times in our conversations. As I discovered with the other participants, there was an unspoken expectation that our siblings would be with us our entire lives. We could picture and accept our parent’s eventual death and even that our spouses might predecease us. None of us ever imagined that our sibling would die. It just was not supposed to be.
Family Relationships

I remember going with her to that first day. The strangest thing is I even remember exactly what I wore to the appointment. The nurse was great and explained everything to her. I was there for support. She was pretty sick the next day. The nausea started very quickly and those six months were rough. She had about six chemo sessions. I went to nearly every one of them. (Rena, July 2, 2008)

Rena’s lead role continued after her sister’s death. She stayed with Cookie’s body until it was taken by the funeral home, as is the custom in Judaism. She helped organize the funeral and delivered the eulogy. And later, when Cookie’s husband needed help with packing up her clothing and other belongings from their home, Rena was the one who did it. She recalled how after the room was packed and all of Cookie’s things moved out, she wept, saying to her brother-in-law, “now this room is empty of her.” Rena was available for every difficult task while her sister was alive and then, even, after her death. She took her role and responsibility as a sister very seriously, almost as if by doing these things, she was extending their bond beyond life.

Taking on this role was not without personal cost for Rena. I had heard others express a feeling of being entitled to feel sadder about their sibling’s death than other family members because they had endured the most or had the closest relationship. I recalled one of the audience members from the
presentation (Marshall, 2008) at ADEC sobbing as she described how her remaining siblings distanced themselves after the youngest sister’s death, the silence continuing to this day, years later. Although nearly 11 years had passed since Cookie’s death, Rena still felt deeply saddened, even angry, at her brother for not coming through for her sister in the way she expected. “Nobody grieves the same way and nobody grieves the same individual. I grieve the sister who was my older sister. He grieves his younger sister” (Rena, July 22, 2008). Her brother never made it to Toronto to say “good-bye” to his sister, not truly believing that she was as near death as Rena described to him. I also sensed Rena felt abandoned with her grief within her own family. They never acknowledged the dreadful nature of the experience of caring for her dying sister. Rena was with Cookie through every step of her illness and, after the funeral, the rest of her family stayed with her only briefly and then returned to their homes in Montreal. Rena was left to sort through her grief on her own.

*It can’t ever be. That jigsaw puzzle can’t ever be the same picture,*

*because a piece is missing. And I think the piece that’s missing becomes the central piece. Like, wherever the main focus of the picture is, it might be in the top corner, I don’t know, but I think that is the piece that’s missing. There’s something huge in that one little piece that’s lost.* (Rena, June 11, 2008)

“My parents did not talk a lot about her. My mother, not at all. My father, a little bit. But my parents really were never the same” (Rena, July 22, 2008).
Rena’s parents were in their eighties when her sister died. Elderly, they struggled to cope afterward and both died within a few years of their daughter’s death. During that time though Rena and her brother took on more responsibilities for their parents. Things that were easy became difficult and they required more care. They also lost their zest for living. “Before when I would go with Cookie to visit there was always a great joy…everyone would come over…my father loved that. And after she died…they were very happy when I would go…but there wasn’t that joy…. The spark was gone” (Rena, July 22, 2008).

There is a similar tension in my family. Whereas before we had laughter and jokes at family get togethers now, without Brent, there is a sadness that permeates. At Christmas this year, Susanne came with Jocelyn and Carter. There was a point when the gifts were being opened that I looked around the room and thought to myself that the numbers were off, someone was missing. I had to think about it for a few minutes and then it dawned on me who it was. It bothered me that I had not realized right away that it was Brent.

As time passed, Rena noticed tension in her interactions with her sister’s adult children. For the first several years they continued to get together for special religious holidays. And then, very unexpectedly, Cookie’s husband Harold died and it became harder to maintain the same connection. Rena also went away to school for several years which created a physical distance from her sister’s children. She recalled that she and her niece differed in how they wanted to remember Cookie. “There were times when I wanted to talk about Cookie and
she would say, "I don’t want to talk about it” (Rena, June 11, 2008). Rena wanted to bring her sister into the conversation and found it painful to leave her out.

Similarly in my family there are striking differences around the ways we choose to remember Brent. I like to see his face in the photographs I have placed throughout our home. It keeps his image fresh in my mind and reminds me of the many activities we shared together. Stephen keeps photographs in his office. My parents have created a beautiful wall of memories but it is in the basement in a room behind a door that is always kept closed. His lacrosse and hockey sticks are carefully placed on the wall amongst photos and other remembrances of his achievements. Their choice to keep this wall private is in many ways symbolic of their grief, which they choose to keep to themselves. Our conversations unfold in a similar manner. When I tentatively share a memory of Brent, I am usually met with silence. The conversation quickly comes to a close and changes direction. They are uncomfortable so I do not try to force the conversation to go further.

Rena described her family after Cookie’s death as a “matrix that got rearranged and never worked quite so well again.” Without Cookie in it, the relationships were different and strained. She did not talk much about how her own immediate family had changed other than to say her children knew it was okay to talk about Aunt Cookie and that, after she died, Rena changed as a parent. She found it hard to hear her daughters argue. Having had such a peaceful and loving relationship with her own sister she wanted her own children
to feel the same about one another. She wanted them to understand how lucky they were to have one another and to recognize the specialness of the relationship. Every one of the participants expressed a similar sentiment. After having and then losing such a close relationship, they wanted their children to understand and value what it meant to have a close sibling.
**Making Meaning**

I love travelling. I always used to bring something home for her when I would go on a trip but then after she died...I couldn’t. The only thing I could ever bring for her is a stone to put on her monument. So that’s what I do. I’m always looking for a stone to bring back for her. And then I go visit her and put it on her monument. There are lots of stones there.

(Rena, August 11, 2008)

With Rena, my conversations about meaning making were much more direct than with the other participants. She was already familiar with it as a concept in grief work, understanding the importance many researchers placed on it as a means of recovery. She was easily able to reflect on her life and select the aspects she felt were reflective of her own journey. At times she shared a story and then realized she had not thought about it in a very long time. And often that made her smile. As I looked back on the transcripts of our conversations, I realized we talked about meaning making in one form or another almost every time we got together. It was ingrained in her life.

With the other participants, their siblings died suddenly and unexpectedly under what could only be described as unusual conditions. Their time of death was difficult to pinpoint and both deaths were traumatic. For them, part of their meaning making came from trying to understand the actual circumstances surrounding their sibling’s death. How they died and what lead up to their death
were critical questions. Rena was an active participant in her sister’s care during her battle with cancer and was present at her death. For her, then, this part of the experience seemed like it was already settled. “In a weird way I couldn’t believe that she died. On the other hand it was a relief that she, finally was out of pain…” (Rena, June 11, 2008). In her eulogy for Cookie, Rena spoke of moving from praying for her sister to survive to praying for God to take her and relieve her pain. She saw it as one of the last loving acts to do for Cookie, knowing that when Cookie’s pain ended, hers would begin. “Things happen. I don’t believe that there’s some larger force that decides…. It happened. She got cancer” (Rena, August 11, 2008). As I reflected on the conversations we had over the summer, I realized that I never heard Rena question why her sister got cancer in the first place. She certainly felt it was unfair that she lost her sister but she was not looking for an answer as to why. I wondered if she already made sense of that years earlier when Cookie was first diagnosed. Perhaps if we had met then, the story would have been different. Now, though, it was clear that she accepted her sister’s explanation. “It was the luck of the draw.”

In the immediate days following Cookie’s death, Rena and her family sat Shiva.9 This was the first of several structured stages of mourning provided for in Judaism, all designed to gently support and guide mourners through the initial coming to terms with their loved ones’ death. I was struck by the deep thought and care behind determining these stages for they invited community support,

something that appears to be critical in the grieving process. Every morning for 30 days Rena went to the synagogue and recited the Mourner’s Kaddish\textsuperscript{10} in memory and honour of her sister. Spoken in community with other grievers, this lovely prayer, is uplifting and positive. It is tradition to recite it every day for one year for a parent and 30 days for a sibling, a spouse or a child and, in busy and frenetic lives, is a huge commitment. Rena honoured this tradition as a further act of love for her sister and at the end of the 30 days gave a tzedakah (a donation) to a charity in memory of her sister. These rituals were important for Rena and helped to support her during the early days after her sister’s death. “And that certainly was very important for me and very helpful….Other people at the synagogue knew that I had lost my sister and so there was a lot of enfranchisement there” (Rena, August 11, 2008). Rena continues to honour Cookie every year. She lights a Yarhtzeit candle in her home at sundown on the eve of the anniversary of her death and the next morning attends synagogue to once again recite the Mourner’s Kaddish in honour and love for her sister.

Coming from a Protestant Christian background I was unfamiliar with these formal Jewish ceremonies. There was no equivalent in my religion. After Brent’s funeral there were no formal religious guideposts to help us along or bring us together. We had to create our own and that was where the differences in how we each dealt with our grief began to show. I invited everyone to our house for dinner on what would have been Brent’s 39th birthday. It had only

been six months since his death and I could not let the day pass without
honouring him in some way. I made a short speech and my brother Stephen’s
wife read some poetry. It was very emotional. I saw how difficult it was for my
parents and, at that moment, I knew I would not hold such an event again. As
Rena described the formalized symbolism present in Judaism I could not help but
long for something similar in my own life. Somehow I felt that if there was a
greater body than I that sanctioned a ritual of some kind our family would have
an easier time coming together and sharing our grief.

It was several years after Cookie’s death and I came home to find a phone
message for me from Canadian Blood Services. It was too late to call
them back and so I spent the whole night imagining why they would be
calling. I couldn’t sleep. I had provided a blood sample for Cookie’s
bone marrow transplant a few years before. I hadn’t been a match for her
but suddenly I was so excited that maybe I was a match for someone else.
Maybe this will be a legacy for Cookie. Maybe it’s a child, or someone
about to get married, I thought. I could hardly wait to call them the next
day. I ended up matching on the first six markers but not for the second
round of testing. So, in the end it didn’t work out, but for that short period
of time, there was a lot of meaning there. (Rena, July 2, 2008)

Rena described the initial years after Cookie’s passing as an active search
for meaning. She wanted to find a way to make her sister’s death count for
something, describing herself as always “doing” things. She volunteered with
local charities and got more involved with her synagogue. “I was always needing to do something conscious…. I think I always felt that if I didn’t do something tangible, then I wasn’t really doing something in terms of meaning-making” (Rena, August 11, 2008). And, then, she made the ultimate shift by deciding in her late-forties to make a huge career change and attend Rabbinical school. This was a five year commitment that saw her leaving home to study full time in Israel and the United States of America. “I knew when I entered Rabbinical school that in four years, when I have to do a thesis, I have no idea what it will be but I know it will be in the pastoral area. That I knew for certain” (Rena, August 11, 2008). Although Rena acknowledged that she was not certain this last decision was a direct result of her sister’s death, she did feel that it certainly had influenced her choice and that likely her sister was “guiding her along this road.”

I related very strongly to Rena’s need to “do something.” Shortly after Brent died I applied to be a Big Sister11 and signed up with Bereaved Families of Ontario to train as a grief group facilitator. I also took unpaid days away from work to visit and play with Brent’s children, feeling like it was the least I could do for his family. I needed to actively seek out ways to make his loss matter. Although I did not feel there was anything I could do that would in any way make up for his death, I felt a deep sense of responsibility to try and contribute to the world more fully than I had before. It was also during this time that I decided to change my research focus to adult sibling loss and I quickly began connecting

11 This is a not-for-profit organization that matches adult volunteers with children in the community who have been identified as needing additional support. Retrieved March 3, 2009 from http://www.bbbsy.ca/en/Home/AboutUs/default.aspx
with researchers in the field of thanatology. It was through those connections that I found myself submitting an abstract and subsequently presenting at the conference where I met Rena. These were all externally obvious signs of meaning making. And in perhaps one of the more dramatic shifts, like Rena, I made a fairly significant career change when I resigned from my job as a management consultant so that I could focus my energy on finishing my research. I assumed that somehow the universe would take care of the financial implications of my decision and hoped that a new path would emerge as part of this process.

Rena also changed as a person. Cookie was always very patient with others. After she died Rena found she also had more patience with others, especially, her parents. She was also more sensitive to people who were grieving and more willing to “go out on a limb” for those faced with tragedy. “I will call that person and I’ll go approach the individual, when it would be a whole lot easier not to” (Rena, August 11, 2008). Since Brent’s death I am also much more comfortable talking to people about their grief. Whereas before I might have avoided the topic now I do not hesitate to ask people how they are feeling. I am no longer afraid to open that conversation; I know I can listen with care. I liked Rena’s new philosophy. “I don’t want people to feel…that they’re in a society in which everybody won’t talk about it” (Rena, August 11, 2008).

And it’s almost like she’s faded into the background. And even though I have internalized her and I can recognize the connection that we had, she’s just not there. I can’t reach her anymore. That’s probably a healthy
thing but to have had something so precious and to have lost it...

Sometimes I wonder if I even had a sister. Was that real? Did we really do all those things? Even though she’s not completely gone, I know that a part of her is with me spiritually but tangibly she’s not. (Rena, July 22, 2008)

As we were nearing the end of our interviews Rena told me about her plans for the upcoming fall. She was starting another year long course, this one at a hospital to focus on pastoral care. She was to be the religious person on-call to help people deal with the last moments of a loved one’s life. I thought about the strength and compassion required for that kind of role. It also took me back to Brent’s last night when we were informed of his death and then, essentially, left alone in a sterile waiting room trying to absorb what we had just heard. I rocked back and forth, covering my head with my arms. I had to remind myself to breathe. Rena would be the person walking into that kind of situation, trying to offer comfort to deeply wounded people. Only a special person would have the strength to do that and not be overcome by what they encountered. “Have I found a meaning for her death? No. Have I tried to learn things from it? Yes. Have I been successful at that? Well, not all the time” (Rena, August 11, 2008). Rena smiled as she said this.

The most I’ve talked about losing my sister has been in these sessions. I never get to talk to anyone about her...really to any great extent. Unless I meet someone for the first time and it comes up and you know, people will
say, “Oh, what did she die of?” It’s mostly the clinical questions. But to
talk like this, about…ordinary things. (Rena, August 26, 2008)

I was pleased when Rena shared this thought with me. I understood what she meant for I too had enjoyed the freedom of talking about Brent without the “swoop backwards,” as Karen would later describe it, that I typically got when I mentioned him. When I met with Rena, we talked and laughed about our siblings without either of us feeling like we were crossing into forbidden territory.

Even though Rena was the first person I interviewed I wrote her narrative last. I started and stopped many times, struggling to find a flow and capture the essence of our conversations. Part of my struggle came because I knew how much this meant to her. “I feel like I’m doing something very important, on many levels” (Rena, August 11, 2008) she said to me more than once. She was the first of the three participants to use the word “legacy” to describe what we were creating. It was a legacy for her sister. I felt the weight of this responsibility and worried that my writing would not live up to her expectations. Cookie was such a large part of Rena’s world and I wondered how I could find words to describe the depth of such a special relationship.

And this...these were earrings, I remember I was with her. She bought a suit. A yellow suit and she bought these earrings to wear with it and she never liked them because they’re clips and they hurt her. So she said, “Do you want them?” I said, “Okay.” I never wore them either. I don’t really like them, but....(Rena, August 26, 2008)
For our last meeting I invited Rena to bring some items that reminded her of Cookie. I was interested to see the kinds of things she kept, anticipating that each would prompt a story. There were earrings which, as she held them, evoked a memory of when they were purchased. There was an old El Penon coffee tin which had sat on her counter for many years. There were cookbooks, well worn and used. There were a couple of very special greeting cards. In one, Cookie had written a short poem. “Sisters, sisters, laughing, loving, sharing, togetherness. In good times and bad times, what is so dear as sisters like you and me…” (Rena, August 26, 2008). I asked Rena if she thought her sister had composed it herself. “Yes” she replied. “She was always doing things like that.” Rena seemed to enjoy showing me each item and talking about why she had it. There was a story for each and, as we talked, she recalled other stories. It had been a long time since she had looked at any of these things and it made her feel happy. “It’s kind of strange. It’s almost like going to the cemetery…. I don’t need to go as often as I used to go” (Rena, August 26, 2008).

I met with Rena to go over this chapter. I wanted her to feel comfortable with a first draft, to feel that it reflected the relationship she shared with Cookie. “I feel like I have come full circle” she said to me. “It’s been such a positive experience.” When I started my research I was not certain what I would hear from people about meaning making or even if they equated the changes in their lives with that term. I expected that I would need to ask a lot of questions to uncover these shifts, however subtle in order to understand the larger story that played across them. With Rena, her awareness of her own process made
that easier. She was able to articulate how the changes made in her life were connected with her sister. However, moving to a new level of integration of Cookie into her life was unexpected. There was something in the process of sharing, recording, reviewing, and ultimately creating a narrative that helped her see and feel things that were new. Our work together created another story and another avenue for meaning making that she now applied in a new way.
12 Cookie gave Rena this cookbook and the two of them used it often when preparing meals together.

13 This was a favourite recipe of Cookie and Rena.
14 Cookie brought this tin of coffee back for Rena from one of her trips. Rena kept the tin long after the original coffee was used up and it has sat on her kitchen counter for many years.

15 The name on the notepaper is “Arlene.” This is Cookie’s given name although Rena always called her Cookie. Inside was a very touching thank-you note to Rena for all the love and care she gave her sister during her illness.
Karen & Brian

Figure 7 – “Teenagers,” Source: Family Photo, Karen, late 1970s

16 Brian just had his wisdom teeth removed the day before this was taken. Karen and Brian are leaning against the tailgate of his truck.
Brian

(December 13, 1960 – September 19, 2001)

I came out to the parking lot after work and Ev was waiting for me.

That’s weird I thought. “There has been a fire at your brother’s house and he’s missing,” he quickly said. Oh, he probably slept over at one of his buddy’s houses. He’ll turn up soon I thought. Even after they identified human remains, I still didn’t believe it was Brian. (Karen, June 11, 2008)

Figure 8 – “Uncle Brian,” Source: Family Photo, Karen, late 1980s

17 In this picture, Brian is holding Karen’s oldest daughter. Karen has special attachment to it because even though Brian had a baby of his own at the time, he still wanted to hold her daughter. “Because she was important to me, she was important to him” (Karen, February, 2009).
I have known Karen since I was 11 years old. She was one of the first people I met when my family moved to Agincourt, a small suburb in what is now the City of Toronto. Karen was a part of my social circle through high school and into my early twenties. The first one of our group to marry and have children, she experienced everything “adult” before the rest of us. I remember her as eternally happy and helpful, always willing to lend a hand to anyone in need. She also seemed to know from an early age the importance of being inclusive. She made time for the underdogs – the kids in our class who seemed to be on a different wavelength. Never one to make fun of or tease others, my memory of Karen was of a kind, helpful person who stayed out of all the “drama” of teenage years. She was a wonderful part of the fabric of my early life.

We lost touch in our mid-twenties and did not reconnect again until our late thirties. By then she had weathered many difficult times. She was just finishing the challenging “teen years” with her two girls – one of whom was already nearly finished University and the other just getting ready to attend. Her husband, a man I had known since their very first date and whom we had giggled about as a “great guy who would buy us drinks,” had battled and survived a near death bout with cancer. Her father, now stricken with Multiple Sclerosis, was very ill and close to being admitted to a long term palliative care facility. And, her older brother, Brian, had died suddenly in a house fire. I learned all of this very quickly in one of our first reconnecting conversations. I remember feeling shocked about her brother not truly comprehending the depth of her loss. And a
couple of years later, when we attended the funeral for the brother of another mutual friend, I remember feeling the most sympathy for his surviving spouse and our friend’s elderly parents. I did not really think about how difficult it was for our friend to have lost her younger brother. I had no sense of the layers of loss that entwined for her. If one believes that life presents one with lessons to be learned, these two experiences were forerunners for what awaited. Less then two years later – almost to the day – Brent died.

“Stephen, come now,” I wail into the phone.... “It’s not good. Please come now.” “Okay,” he says. Then I hear it. I still hear it and it has been two years. A scream. One that reaches beyond your soul. I turn the corner. I know what the doctor has just said to Susanne and is going to say again. But when she says it, I still drop to the floor. “But he’s only 38,” I sob. “It was just the flu.” She shakes her head and the nurse makes me drink some orange juice. The doctor disappears. The nurse kneels down and gathers me close to her. “We don’t know why these things happen. They just do. And there are no regrets. Okay. It doesn’t matter if you had any arguments or sadness. Never any regrets.”

(Brenda, personal story, 2008)

Karen came to Brent’s visitation at the funeral home and met with me a couple of times over the next few months. She seemed to deeply understand how I felt and let me talk and cry and talk some more. Later, as the idea for a research project formed, Karen quickly volunteered to be a part of it. When we
sat down for our first research conversation more than 18 months had passed since Brent’s death. I wondered how the conversations would impact us; if they would flow easily or if they would be punctuated with grief and sadness. I also wondered how it would impact our friendship.

As we met throughout that summer I came to know Karen and her brother Brian on a different level. She was still the kind person I remembered, always thinking and doing things for others but there was now a sadness present in our conversations. And, just as she had been the front runner for all the happy adult events awaiting us, she also suffered yet another first amongst our group of friends with the sudden death of her father in the midst of our scheduled interviews. I only found out when I arrived for our scheduled meeting and noticed flowers in her home. She had not wanted to interrupt what we were doing or put me in what she called an “awkward” position, so she had said nothing. The funeral had already passed. Her father’s death was sad on many levels but most acutely as another milestone experienced without her brother Brian. As she put it, “I know I would have written a way funnier eulogy if he’d been with me. I just thought, ‘Why I have to do this without him?’ He should have been here” (Karen, August 15, 2008).

Our friendship made the conversations easier. We moved seamlessly back and forth between our respective stories. It was comforting to talk to someone who knew Brent as I think it was easier for her to be with someone who knew Brian. As our conversations drew to a close I felt sad that we would not meet together as frequently. I had looked forward to our meetings as they were...
always mixed in with stories about her children and family. There was a blending of old and new lives that made it easier to talk about the sad parts. And, as with Rena, we laughed a lot.
My Big Brother

My grandmother bought us these helium balloons. Brian and I were playing a game where we tied a tennis ball to the string and watched it float. Of course the ball quickly fell out of the string and the balloon took off into the sky. I remember Brian looking through binoculars and giving me updates about where it was. “It’s passing over Woolco plaza. It’s over the ocean now,” he said. “It’s heading to Europe.” I thought, wow, is he ever smart. He knows geography! (Karen, June 15, 2008)

Karen was the youngest of three siblings. Brian was two and half years older and her sister, Aileen, six years older. I always assumed Karen’s strongest relationship was with her sister; however, as we talked I learned that it was actually Brian with whom she had shared the deepest connection. I knew Brian from when we were kids. Because he was older I never really spoke with him much but I remember just how much alike they were. The family resemblance was striking. They had the same eyes, facial structure and, as I came to learn as we talked, the same “essence.” Karen recalled that as children, they were often mistaken for twins. Whether it was the closeness in age, or obvious genetic similarity, they formed a tight team and it was with him, that Karen found her strongest ally. She thought of Brian as her friend and protector, and the one with whom she could laugh the hardest. It was always the two of them out shovelling snow, ganging up on her older sister or just hanging around together.
When I was 17 I saved up all my money and went to visit him out in Edmonton. We had so much fun. We went out to a bar one night where they had these telephones on each table. Brian and I spent the night making crank calls to other tables and we just laughed our heads off. I’m sure everyone thought we were crazy. (Karen, June 1, 2008)

Brian left home early, eventually following the building boom of the 1980s to Edmonton where he worked in the trades. It was obvious as we talked about Karen’s trip west how much she enjoyed their visit. “The two of us were young and it was probably one of the times when we were the closest…because there were no wives, there were no boyfriends…” (Karen, June 26, 2008). As we talked about that time I could tell that when the two of them were together there was an ease to their relationship that transcended anything they had with their friends. Brian made Karen feel very special and all of his girlfriends knew the important place she held in his life. There was a comfort and feeling of safety knowing her big brother was in the world and always available to look out for her.

When I asked Karen for words to describe Brian, the first one that came to mind was “gentle.” He was someone who went through life simply going along with others; not wanting to make waves or needing to hold the spotlight. As a boy, he was “squished” between two sisters who took control of most of his socializing. And as an adult he found a partner who played a similar role. He simply “went along.” She also described him as safety conscious, laughing as she said it. It was hard to picture the goofy sort of guy I had known from high
school as this ultra careful adult. Karen recalled a family reunion where she arrived at the hotel only to find that her reservations had been cancelled. Her brother had arrived first and quickly decided that it was not safe enough for the children. There were several baseball teams staying at the hotel and he was concerned that post game celebrations would lead to drunken players wandering the halls. He cancelled everyone’s reservations and rebooked them all at a new location. Karen smiled at the memory. Her brother was looking out for her yet again.

Most of our meetings happened at Karen’s home. She was most comfortable there. It took me a while to get used to the rhythm of the constant motion around us. The phone ringing, teenagers coming and going, a daughter’s boyfriend and his dog arriving and needing to be fed. It was very different than any of the other interview settings which were quiet and controlled. As we talked, though, I soon learned how this interplay of energy was something Karen loved and missed the most about her life with her brother. His energy, his three children, the chaos of family gatherings were things that Karen loved. When he died, all of that disappeared.

*Brian and Carrie (Brian’s wife) always had Thanksgiving, my sister had Christmas and we had Easter. I still remember that one Thanksgiving where we gave all the kids ‘whoopee cushions.’ It was crazy. Everyone was screaming. I don’t think I ever laughed so hard. And then there was that Christmas where we did a breakfast with Santa and we all stayed at this hotel. Brian went down to the pool with all the kids and we were
supposed to follow and we didn’t. Then we get this phone call, “Ah does anyone care that I’m down here at the pool with seven children?” And we just laughed…. (Karen, August 8, 2008)

Karen has no memory of holiday gatherings or even how she made it through the day during the first year after Brian died. What she does remember is an all encompassing feeling of sadness and deep loneliness. Previously, always a cheerful person, now, her personality changed. She was angry and jealous of people who had living siblings, especially, if they did not value the relationship. She resented being denied the opportunity to say goodbye to her brother and to tell him how she felt about him. She felt “ripped off.” She took down all the family pictures. “…I took them down just because they weren’t…, they weren’t part of my life anymore…. I thought if I just didn’t have them up, then maybe I’d feel better…” (Karen, June 26, 2008).

Brian and his family were previously a big part of Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter celebrations. Karen and her sister began inviting friends, extended family members, and neighbours to all the holiday meals to fill in the void. “I can’t replace having his kids there but there is a square and I’m trying to fit a circle in and it’s kind of fitting, so it feels a little better…” (Karen, Aug 8, 2008). Bringing unrelated family members into what were traditionally family gatherings changed the tone of the conversations. No one felt compelled to talk about Brian which seemed to be the family’s new way of coping. “The more people, the easier it is and then nobody has to talk about it” (Karen, July 24, 2008). Having a larger
group satisfied a need to keep the conversation light and not bring up the obvious – that there was an entire family of five missing.

I have learned that the experience of grief is very personal; it often divides rather than unites families. Nowhere is this more noticeable than within a family as each member copes with the same loss differently. In our family we have stopped getting together as a group for many of the holidays now. The first Thanksgiving after Brent died we gathered at Stephen’s house. Susanne came with Jocelyn and Carter and we lit a candle in his memory and later sat in a group and tried to share some memories. It was very hard though and I remember my parents struggling to maintain their composure, almost as though hearing the stories was agony for them. We have not gathered for Thanksgiving since. For birthdays we try to combine them and for the last two summers have met at Stephen’s home for a meal. Brent died on my dad's birthday so we now let that day pass without any acknowledgement for my dad or for Brent. It is so hard to know what to do.

“I know it’s cold but I bet you can put your tongue on that aerial.” I did and of course it got stuck. “Statistically, it never happens to someone twice in a row. It’s a fact,” Brian said to me very calmly in his big brother voice. I did it again. He was wrong. (Karen, June 28, 2008)

“It’s like you end up living the default” (Karen, July 24, 2008). You live with what is left and simply try to make the best of it. That means in many cases, creating a new relationship with surviving siblings with whom you may not have
previously been as close. Brian’s absence forced closeness between Karen and her sister which is comforting on some levels and yet feels artificial on others. It was Brian with whom she really felt connected and so there is a quiet tension about their “new” relationship. They both know that it has deepened only because of Brian’s death. This is complicated by the knowledge that the relationship between Brian and Karen’s older sister was not a strong one. Karen finds it difficult to talk about Brian with Aileen and so never does. She knows how her sister felt about her brother when he was alive. It makes it virtually impossible to have a conversation about him in death as she feels their grief over his loss is just so different.

Stephen and I are closer since Brent’s death but it does not replace what either of us has lost. My connection with Brent began in childhood when, as an older sister, I cared for him. He was the first person I felt responsible for and that feeling of protectiveness was an ongoing theme in our relationship. We spent lots of time together as children and as young adults our relationship continued to develop. We played on sports teams together, walked our dogs together, went mountain biking, and talked most days. He was my confidante and counsellor and we used to laugh at so many of the same things. I shared a different relationship with Stephen. We did not grow up socializing with one another as much and so do not have the same foundation of shared stories to draw upon now. I know he also had a special relationship with Brent. They played hockey on the same teams, went fishing together and took ski trips. I cannot replace that connection for him anymore than he can replace mine with Brent. Brent was the
hub in the wheel of our family and with him now gone we must reform what we mean to each other.

To an outsider Karen and Aileen appear to be very closely connected. They socialize together often and talk on the phone regularly. They work together to jointly shuffle their collective teenagers to jobs and other after school obligations. And even though Karen sees Aileen more often than she saw Brian, and they do more activities together, it does not replace the lost connection. She still longs for the special feelings she shared with her brother.
Family Pain

It was just easier to have two [services]. My parents were distraught, blaming Carrie for leaving him alone. So we had a memorial at their church and then we jumped in the car and drove out to the memorial Brian’s wife was having in Peterborough. It was so hard. She had left him just weeks before. Took the kids, said terrible things to him…had hurt him so much. I kept quiet and just went along with everything. I did it for him. (Karen, June 15, 2008)

Karen’s relationship with her parents changed almost immediately after Brian’s death. Karen and her sister organized a separate funeral to ensure that their parents would not have to interact with his estranged wife. Their anger at her for leaving the marriage, likely a normal reaction in any break-up, was magnified by Brian’s sudden death. Karen felt extra pressure to ensure Brian’s funeral included elements that might offer some measure of comfort for her parents. In speaking about her two daughters’ and her nieces’ involvement she said, “We made them sing this song from camp that had actions…and I remember Rachel saying, ‘I don’t even know the words, why am I doing this?’” I told them to “just do it…because it looks good for the family….and it will make grandma and grandpa happy…” (Karen, July 24, 2008).

She continues to feel responsible for trying to “manage” her parents’ pain. Immediately after Brian died she removed the video of his wedding from her
parents’ home, afraid her mother would watch it and ruminate over his death. Karen did the same with the cassette recording of her brother’s funeral. Over the years her mother has asked for it many times and Karen simply avoids giving it to her, telling her that it is put away or she will get it next time. She knows she will never give it to her and yet this is a conversation that is avoided. “It’s almost like I think I’m protecting her but who am I to think that I am protecting her?” (Karen, June 26, 2008). Not only do they avoid talking about Brian, they avoid having conversations about the real reasons why Karen does not want to give her mother the video or the cassette. Her mother’s grief and anger about Brian’s death permeates their interactions and Karen believes watching the video or hearing the cassette will make it even worse.

After Brian’s death her father’s Multiple Sclerosis worsened and he sank into a deep depression. He remained at home for the first few years, his medical condition gradually worsening. Karen found it hard to visit him as he became increasingly more despondent about losing his son. He had been a distant parent all through Karen’s life and listening to him review his own behaviour and sob in regret was difficult for her. Eventually he was placed in a long-term care facility and it was there that he died very unexpectedly one evening. I had the feeling that her father’s death came as a relief for Karen. He was one less person for whom she had to try and help manage their grief.

In addition to becoming responsible for her parents’ mental health, after Brian’s death she took on more of the social connecting responsibilities within the family. She became the “point person,” called upon to handle everything that
came up. She was the one notified by the police about her father’s sudden death and had to inform her mother and sister. When her mother was invited for special occasions with family friends, Karen now accompanied her. Taking on these new roles came at a cost. I perceived an underlying resentment that her extra contributions were unnoticed. She was simply expected to do everything.

In my family I also feel compelled to try and fill the void for my parents. I call them more frequently and visit more often. I still remember the pain in my mother’s voice when she said, “First you notice the calls aren’t coming anymore, and then you realize they won’t be coming again,” and then broke down into sobs. I felt helpless. Sometimes I feel like most of the responsibility to do this has fallen on me. Growing up I watched my mom take care of her parents and so it feels that this too is my role. Even though it is self imposed it is difficult. I try to compensate for Brent’s absence, as though that were even possible. He used to call them a lot and, because he had children, he had stories about their lives that were interesting and upbeat. With him gone there is more time to fill and my life and stories are not nearly as compelling. I often struggle with what to share, knowing that any attempt at recollecting stories that include Brent, will cause them pain.

Webster Blank (1998, p. 18), herself a bereaved parent of an adult child, writes about the special difficulties elderly parents face when they lose a child. “It is late; life is winding down; they have less energy, flexibility, and resiliency to cope with the tragedy.” In my view, no matter how old parents are when their children die, they struggle to continue parenting the remaining children. Almost
instantly, the surviving adult children feel the need to step in and take over, our parents suddenly fragile and seemingly unable to cope. As children we are not accustomed to seeing parents in this way. Within hours of Brent’s death Stephen and I were with Susanne making funeral arrangements. My dad was in hospital recovering from major surgery and my mom was in a state of shock, having to care for my dad while at the same time trying to comprehend what had just happened to Brent. I remember driving her up to the florist in Barrie to meet Stephen so we could pick flowers for the funeral. The day before, he was alive. I gently kept my parents informed about how the funeral would unfold, when the coffin would be open, what roles each was to play. At the visitation, when the line of visitors (which swelled into the hundreds) stretched outside and beyond the parking lot, I was the one asked to go and ask my parents to shorten their conversations with the people who had come to pay their respects. And, in the months that followed, I found myself acting as the bridge between them and Brent’s wife. Even now, I am conscious of trying to mediate miscommunications for them, often trying to smooth over some of the rough spots that arise. It is a very emotionally draining role to play and likely not one that anyone who has not been in this situation would ever imagine happens. Part of not speaking about our departed sibling comes from a desire to go along with however our parents have decided they wish to cope with the death of their child. If they do not want us to bring up their name, we do not.

Karen’s mother cannot talk about Brian without being angry about the way he died. She blames his wife, certain that if she had not left him, others in the
home would have noticed the fire that night. For similar reasons she lost contact
with Brian’s children, her grandchildren. Her bitterness cuts off any possible
rejoicing in happy memories about Brian and limits what Karen can tell her about
his children. She remains in a dark emotional place about his death and Karen
finds it easier to avoid the topic than face all the despair.
The Children

Oh my God, they’ll have nothing. How will they remember their father?

Everything is gone. The house was burned to the ground. There was

absolutely nothing left. Even his car was burned beyond repair. I

immediately started going through all of my pictures. I put together a box

for each of them and shipped them out right away. (Karen, July 15, 2008)

Karen’s immediate concern after the fire was for Brian’s children. They
did not attend their father’s funeral, a decision made by Brian’s estranged wife.
This decision is something that continues to trouble Karen today. “So my biggest
worry is...someday it’s going to hit them. Someday they’re going to have a
breakdown...and not that I wish it on them, but someday they’re going to need to
talk to somebody that’s not their mom” (Karen, June 26, 2008). Karen resolved
to stay connected with Brian’s children, to be ready for that call. Even today, she
continues to send them greeting cards, letters and notes. She speaks on the
phone with them and stays up to date on their lives. “The most important thing
for me now is the healing of the kids” (Karen, June 26, 2008).

I know and understand this feeling and need to remain connected. I want
to support Brent’s children in any way I can. Brent was the kind of parent who
got down on his hands and knees to play with his children. Whenever Carter
was going to party or a social occasion, they talked in advance about some of the
social rules. And then Brent would say, “and what’s the most important rule? ‘To
have fun,’” they would chime together. It became known as “Daddy’s rule.” My
desire to be an engaged aunt comes from wanting to live “Daddy’s rule,” and
maintain the link. The children were so sad when Brent died, even his 18 month
old daughter Jocelyn would say “Daddy home now?” for weeks after. Susanne
was consumed with grief, just trying to keep the family on track. Visiting during
those initial weeks was my way of demonstrating support and attempting to give
the children moments of time when grief was not the focus. I hoped I was a
distraction. Like Karen, I took on this responsibility willingly and gladly. Over
time, I have become a favourite babysitter and Jocelyn and Carter look forward
to “adventures” with aunt Brenda. Susanne builds time into their lives for me.
They know I am their father’s sister and I like that our connection is important to
all of us. When I am with Susanne and the children, I feel happy and that I
belong. “Daddy” is a regular part of our conversations. Our shared stories are
comfortable, easy and often joyful.

Brian’s eldest daughter is soon to be married and Karen is considering a
trip out West for the wedding. She has not seen her niece since the summer
after Brian died. She returned to Ontario for a visit and Karen accompanied her
to see the burned out ruins of her home. I ask Karen what prevented her from
visiting her nieces and nephew sooner. “I don’t know. Maybe because I have no
one to go with me,” she replies. I can tell she feels pride in the accomplishments
of her brother’s children. One is attending university, one is to be married, and
his son is doing well in high school. She also admires her sister-in-law for raising
the children on her own. But, even as we talk about the positive changes in their
lives, I still hear a sadness for the lost opportunity to be more involved. I feel lucky to have been given an opportunity to be part of Brent’s family. For both Karen and me, the role of aunt was an important part of our identities. Karen loved being considered the “favourite aunt” and took great joy in planning events for everyone. Joining her family with Brian’s was one of her favourite experiences and to have lost all of them so suddenly, was another layer of loss that was very painful. More than once she mentioned how others always noticed the physical resemblance between her niece and herself. That genetic connection through her brother was very strong.
Remembering

I was pulling out place cards for Easter the other day and there are these Easter hats I’d made for Brian, his wife, and each of his three kids. I’d written each of their names on the front of their hat. I thought, come on, like, throw them out, like really, throw them out. But I put them back in the box. I don’t know why I want to keep them. I just think that every Easter I’d like to open up the box and see them…and remember there was a time when we had Easters together…because you don’t want to forget.

(Karen, August 10, 2008)

“I think about him all the time…and it makes me angry if somebody forgets. ‘Oh I didn’t know you had a brother.’ ‘Yeah, I did”’ (Karen, June 26, 2008). Even though it is seven years since Brian’s death, Karen continues to miss him. She described it as a longing for everything to be in its place. She no longer feels whole – a piece is missing. In the first year after Brian died she felt a pressure to get over his loss quickly. Her family wanted her to be “normal.” Her friends struggled to understand why she had changed and why she was so sad about Brian. It was only after seeing a counsellor, at the insistence of her husband, that she began to feel a little better. “I think that somebody just had to validate the fact that I should be feeling that terrible and it was okay…” (Karen, June 26, 2008). “I think that having permission to grieve makes you feel better because you think, well, maybe I shouldn’t be feeling so bad, maybe I should be sucking it up….I’m sure my mom’s feeling worse, or maybe Carrie’s feeling
worse or... so I guess everybody should be feeling worse than me and so you kind of keep, just going and going and going, thinking, well, who am I to feel that bad...” (Karen, July 24, 2008).

Most people do not understand how traumatic it is to lose a sibling. There is an informal grief hierarchy that places more or less significance on a death, based on where a loved one fits in the overall framework. Universally, it is understood that the death of a child is likely one of the most difficult experiences a parent can have. The loss of parents or a spouse are also seen as very trying and sad events. Somehow, though, the loss of a sibling is not regarded similarly. The card, shown below, illustrates how easy it is for people to forget that this is a difficult loss.

![ADEC Memorial Card](image)

Figure 9 – “ADEC Memorial Card”

The words on the second part of the Memorial Card call to attention that other losses deserve to be named. Mother, father, husband, wife, spouse, significant other, son, daughter, grandmother, grandfather, friend, other, are all listed.
Where is brother or sister? This memorial card was passed out at the 2008 and 2009 Association of Death Education and Counselling (ADEC) conferences. Even at an event designed to attract experts in the bereavement field, people with intimate knowledge of death and grieving, siblings were forgotten.

“Burrrrrp. Oops. Pardon me,” Grandma says. Brent and I exchange a glance. The corners of his mouth are twitching ever so slightly. “Burrrrrp. Oops. Pardon me,” she says again. We are used to this. Grandma is eccentric and we’ve been taught to simply ignore the oddities. Tonight is different though. Maybe it’s because we are goofy teenagers. Maybe it’s because we are sitting in the dining room using all my mom’s best silver and china. Maybe it’s the way Mom just keeps the conversation going like nothing has happened. We lock eyes again only, this time, Brent lets out a guffaw as he tries to quell the laughter that is building. My shoulders start to go up and down as I try to hold it together too. We both sputter.

“What’s gotten into you two?” my grandma asks innocently. Brent starts to cry and excuses himself. I soon follow and we stand in the kitchen doubled over with laughter, tears running down our faces. (Brenda, personal story, 2008)

Karen’s story about the Easter hats catches me every time I read it. It captures so well that feeling of deep, deep loss. A sibling knows the background to the family stories that are playing at any given time. With a glance, they understand all the weird family dynamics and instinctively know where those
dynamics arose. Brent knew that Grandma Allen sold Avon door to door for 20 years and lived in a house that was filled from top to bottom with “stuff.” Often a visit would consist of standing on her driveway chatting as an invitation inside meant that her odd collections would be visible. And she used to burp really loudly. Brent knew all of this without me saying a word. Similarly, Brian knew what the Easter hats meant. He knew the story behind the story.

Brian’s death at such a young age, being “out of order,” as Karen termed it, was something she mentioned many times in our conversations. “It wasn’t the natural sequence that things should go, so do I keep on remembering him until the natural sequence isn’t there?” she said. “Will it be okay finally when I’m 90? At least then it will make sense that he is gone…” (Karen, June 26, 2008). Her father’s sudden death in the midst of our interviews was difficult but not as impactful as the death of her brother. “I think it doesn’t break my heart as much, because that’s the natural sequence of life, whereas my brother should have been beside me…and he’s not” (Karen, June 26, 2008).

Karen looked forward to the times when she and Brian would get together for week-ends. The children were all the same age which just added to the joy. The cousins loved each other and liked to be part of one another’s lives. She pictured weddings, family gatherings and continuing the circle for years to come. “It’s like I have lost that one other person in the world who I could always count on. My relationship with my brother was beyond my relationship with my

18 My maternal grandmother.
husband. We were the same genetics. The same blood. We had each others’
backs. For always” (Karen, February 13, 2007).
I forgot about the time change so I woke up at six o’clock in the morning and I was so excited we were going to have a family reunion. I’m knocking on Brian’s hotel room door, meanwhile it’s four o’clock in the morning for them because of Alberta time. And he’s laughing and yelling at me at the same time. Take the dog and get the hell out. We laughed about it later. (Karen, June 11, 2008)

In reflecting on our multiple conversations I saw Karen’s meaning making processes as a combination of tangible, active events which eventually evolved into more subtle changes about the way she viewed life. Initially, Karen focused her energies on trying to understand and integrate the facts of Brian’s death into a scenario that made sense. There were subtle innuendos from others that perhaps the house fire was not accidental. “Was your brother depressed?” people asked. Brian was at Karen’s home just days before the fire and she replayed that particular evening over and over, re-examining their conversation, looking for a trace of despair or depression that might provide some context for the fire. The idea that her brother might have taken his own life was upsetting and implausible. She invested hours tracking down, and then reviewing, the police and fire marshal’s reports, reading between the lines, in order to make sense of the technical jargon. “I think part of it was just trying to figure out what happened and trying to make sense out of it” (Karen, June 26, 2008). Had he fallen asleep while smoking? Maybe alcohol was a factor? Or maybe an intruder
had entered the home and Brian had died in a struggle? A few of Brian’s possessions had survived the fire. One of them, his day timer, became especially important as Karen went through it page by page, searching.

“...People say things about a fire, like, do you think it was accidental? And you’re going, well, ‘yeah,’ and then you think, ‘maybe there was a sign.’ But there was no sign” (Karen, June 26, 2008). In the end Karen reconciled herself to the fact that it was an accidental fire – as all the reports indicated. There was nothing more to explore. While his death did not make sense from a “how life should unfold” perspective, she moved past the innuendos and accepted that the fire simply “just happened,” as it does for countless families every day.

As a part of his funeral, grievers were invited to make donations to the Boy Scout Troup to which Brian and his son belonged – a decision made by Karen. Camping and the outdoors was something that her brother loved and this was a way of connecting his life with a positive activity in the present. The troop purchased new camping equipment with the donation and sent Karen a letter and badge commemorating their anniversary – something she kept in her memory box.

Karen also very quickly gathered together as many mementos as possible for Brian’s children. It was important for her that they have something of their father beyond memories of their last few months together. Those months were filled with strife as Brian and his wife’s marriage deteriorated. That Christmas, and for several to follow, she initiated a new tradition of sponsoring an underprivileged child, a boy, through a local charity. She and her daughters
selected Christmas gifts specifically for him and although she never explained to her children why they did so, it was in memory of Brian.

As time passed, Karen developed ways to keep Brian’s presence alive on a spiritual level. Most years she made it down to the Canadian National Exhibition to see Brian’s old girlfriend. Because of the way things had ended with Brian’s wife, Karen did not feel they could talk of shared memories. Sherry, on the other hand, Brian’s girlfriend before he met his wife, was someone with whom she could share happy memories about her brother. “It’s a touch of him and knowing that somebody else didn’t forget” (Karen, June 26, 2008). Being around someone who knew Brian well and loved him was comforting. Gradually she also began to share funny memories of her brother with her friends at work. There she could bring up a story and laugh without the awkwardness or pressure she felt when talking about him with family members. Karen’s husband and children witnessed her deep despair when Brian first died and, thereafter, “walked on eggshells” whenever his name came up. Staying connected with his children, first through greeting cards and letters, and more recently through online social networking technology sites also provided important connections. The recent birth of his grandchild was bittersweet. “Brian would have loved to be a grandfather,” Karen said to me.

On another level, there were lessons that came out of Brian’s death that Karen incorporated into her life. When I asked her about finding her way through

19 Pseudonym for Brian’s previous girlfriend.
the initial depression, Karen said she did not think her brother would have been happy seeing her so sad. “I think I just realized, slowly, very slowly, that he wouldn’t have been happy with me behaving that way” (Karen, June 26, 2008). She also changed as a parent. She reinforced with her two daughters the importance of supporting one another. Karen wanted them to understand that siblings were special and she became upset whenever her daughters fought with one another. She encouraged her husband to reach out to his siblings. “Go, spend the day with your brother because those days are important and you will never forget those days…” (Karen, July 24, 2008).

Brian was a kind person who always wanted people to get along. Karen found that after his death she, also, became more empathetic towards others. “I’m a lot more forgiving of people and I’m a lot… more…. I mean, I…. I let things go…. I don’t ever want someone to leave me or to walk away from me and then life changes and it’s never the same” (Karen, June 26 2008). In the past, where petty disagreements may have annoyed her, now, those same things simply did not matter. She also found herself more willing to reach out to others. This was especially true when she heard about someone whose loved one had died. Whereas before she might have procrastinated about sending a sympathy card, now, she picked up the phone and called and made a point of writing a short note in a card. She was the first to volunteer to help at various church functions, cooking meals, organizing events, and being willing to help out – always saying “Yes.” “His principles and his theories and his…his kind of life you know, these are the things…I’ve learned; I need to respect that…because I think he was a
good person and I think that his heart was in the right place....” (Karen, August 8, 2008).

When I asked Karen if she felt she was somehow better for having gone through this, she said “No,” for that would be like saying Brian’s death was acceptable. There was no “balance sheet” that could ever make things right. “I think I’ve resigned myself [to the fact] that it will never make sense” (Karen, August 8, 2008). I understood her reaction on a personal level. For even though there are things that have happened since Brent’s death that are positive and uplifting, like the relationship I now have with his family, I would give it all back to have him alive and able to live his life. Having said that, though, a big part of re-establishing my own operating principles or equilibrium has come from taking steps, and making changes, that extend positive energy into the world. And although Karen did not label it as such I believe that this was what she was doing also.

Karen talked about a heightened sense of intuition for people who needed help. She called them little “twings,” fleeting thoughts about taking action or calling someone that she used to believe came from nowhere. Now, though, she believed they were coming from Brian. “And now when I have a ‘twig’ I believe that I know where it’s coming from.... I think he gives me nudges...they’re never a mean-spirited nudge” (Karen, August 8, 2008). We had an example of this just before our interviews began. I carry a Blackberry communication device with me

20 Karen invented this word to describe her feelings. It is pronounced as it is spelled – twings.
everywhere I travel. Five minutes before my scheduled presentation on Sibling Loss at the ADEC conference (Marshall, 2008) I happened to glance at it. Karen sent me a message asking me to get together for dinner and wondered how I was doing. I had not yet begun my research and she did not know I was in Montreal. This was one of those moments where she felt like Brian had given her a message to reach out.

I saw the personal changes that Karen made in her life, especially regarding how she dealt with others in pain, as being one of her primary methods of re-ordering the way she operated in the world. Being able to help others in distress, to reach out and be kind to someone who needed comfort, was a way of honouring all the good things Brian brought to her world. She still missed him, still longed for his presence at family events, but found a way to integrate his spirit into her living world. And being part of this research gave her a chance to reconnect with happy memories about Brian in a tangible way. It also gave voice to the deep loss she felt and created a new opportunity to talk about her brother.
This is Brian’s day timer. It was in his truck parked away from the home so escaped the fire. Everything in it is exactly as Karen found it. As she held it she remarked that she could still smell the scent of his cigarettes.

Brian was at Karen’s home a few days before he died in the fire. He brought over this book and she remembers him reading some of the poems aloud and “laughing his head off.” Red Green is a fictional character on a television show. Retrieved May 29, 2009 from http://www.redgreen.com/
These are Brian’s stilts which he used when installing drywall on ceilings. As we looked at them Karen noticed that his initials were engraved into the metal.

This badge is from the Scout Troup to which Brian and his son belonged. Karen made a donation in Brian’s memory after his death and they sent her this badge along with a letter of thanks.
Catherine & James

Figure 14 – “Siblings,” Source: Family Photo, Catherine, 1960s
James

(September 3, 1962 – August 15, 2000)

I just felt this sensation that, for whatever reason, I needed to get home, like a panicky feeling inside. I pulled up to my house and every light was on and I wondered “What the hell was going on?” I had just missed the police coming to the door. (Catherine, July 3, 2008)
"I’m on my third round of antibiotics for Strep" I heard her say to another participant. I froze. Instantly, my professional and personal worlds collided. I was in the midst of delivering a management education workshop; my first attempt at public speaking since Brent died and I was working hard to compartmentalize my grief. My role as a facilitator was complex. I needed to engage people, teach new skills and connect the content of the workshop with the participants’ day to day realities. The client was paying thousands of dollars for this session and expected me to be in top form. There was no room for sadness so I tried my best to create a mental divide between the “before” and “after.” Brent was simply away. I constantly reminded myself not to cross over for, if I did, I knew it would release a flood of emotions that would be hard to control. And yet, with this casual comment, my internal façade was broken and I fought to keep the memories of Brent’s last hours out of my mind.

By chance, on the next break, I found myself alone with Catherine in the hall. “You best be careful with that Strep,” I said. “It’s a nasty bug, it can be very serious.” And then I added, “My 38 year old brother just died six weeks ago from it.” I do not know why I disclosed this fact. It was probably my way of bringing Brent into my living world that particular day. I think by trying so hard to force him out of my consciousness I was fighting the natural order of things. Catherine’s answer shocked me. “My 38 year old brother died too – five years ago.” I gasped. “He was found in a river at the bottom of a bridge. We don’t really know what happened. I still feel bad because I wasn’t there. All my life I
took care of him and yet at that one moment, when he needed me the most, I wasn’t there.”

The workshop continued with both of us sharing parts of our stories on breaks. At the end of the day Catherine gave me her business card and invited me to call. I was struck by the synchronicity of our meeting and kept her card in a safe place. More than a year and half later, when I had long since resigned from the role that took me to her company, I sent her a note. We met for lunch and I told her about what I was planning. She quickly volunteered and within months our interviews began.
My Little Brother

I remember walking with my brothers to Sunday School. My brothers would take off after the fire engines and I would go to class. They'd meet back up with me on the way home so it would look like the three of us all went. I never told on them. They only went on days where they got something – like Easter where they got a chocolate egg or Christmas when there was candy. I was the responsible one who went all the time.

(Catherine, August 13, 2008)

We met at Catherine’s office, usually her first appointment of the day. I wondered how meeting at her workplace would influence our conversations. As someone familiar with corporate life I anticipated frequent interruptions. I also wondered what it would be like for Catherine to move from talking about her brother back into business mode without a break in between. With the other participants, we always met on days when they did not have obligations immediately after in case our conversations proved to be emotionally difficult. I worried about the impact of trying to fit my conversation with Catherine into what, otherwise, was a very busy day. From my experience, the workplace was not a place that welcomed these kinds of conversations.

Our interviews, however, progressed easily throughout the summer and into the fall. Catherine’s office was very quiet and we were never disturbed. She remained calm and composed throughout; her answers factual and direct. It
seemed like she had already spent a lot of time thinking about her brother and her own emotional reactions to his death. By the time of our first meeting I was just finishing interviews with Karen and Rena and the essence of their collective stories became part of my conversations with Catherine. I sometimes interjected experiences the others revealed, or ones from my own life, which often prompted new stories. I felt comfortable talking with Catherine. There was something about our shared loss of a younger sibling, a little brother, that connected us in a unique way. We both knew what it meant to feel responsible.

The bell rings. It’s 1:25 p.m. and everyone is lining up to go into class. I look toward the junior kindergarten area of the playground – the place where I had dropped Brent off just a few minutes before – my job of getting him safely to school complete. And yet, there he was, running away from all the others going into class. He took one last look at me, smiled and then was gone. My eight year old brain was faced with such a terrible dilemma. Do I go after him or do I go into class? “Brenda, let’s go,” my teacher called. (Brenda, personal story, November 2008)

I remember that day like it was yesterday. I fretted about Brent for the rest of the afternoon, looking out the window of my classroom, hoping to see him returning. I could not wait for the school day to end at which point I raced home to find him happily riding his bike outside. Apparently he wandered into the local Doctor’s office and spent the afternoon playing with toys in the waiting room.
After a while the receptionist realized he was there alone and called my mom to come and get him.

*When I was in Grade Two the teacher invited me up to the front of the class to sing a song for everyone. Well, I guess I liked it too much because I refused to sit down and soon found myself standing in the hall. I remember looking down toward the kindergarten room, and there’s my little brother, standing out in the hall too. The two of us both in trouble at the same time!* (Catherine, July 31, 2008)

Like me, Catherine grew up feeling a deep sense of duty or responsibility to keep her younger brother safe. There were four siblings – an older brother, Allan, Catherine, James and then a much younger sister, Jo-Anne. Catherine described herself as her “father’s favourite” and her brother James as “my favourite.” A troubled child, James was constantly in battles in the playground and in the classroom. Catherine quickly established herself as his protector, charging into groups of kids to save him at recess, never fearing for her own safety. Her protective arms continued to reach around him at home where his challenging behaviours were often met with punishment, anger, and misunderstanding. “I think I loved him or felt I had to – because no one else did” (Catherine, August, 2008).

She described her family life as difficult. Both her parents came from “tough backgrounds.” They had a hard time parenting having had very poor role models themselves. They were even more ill equipped to handle a child who,
from an early age, demonstrated behaviours that were out of step with what other
children of the same age demonstrated. James was different. Looking back,
Catherine now believes James likely suffered from undiagnosed ADD\textsuperscript{25} or
ADHD\textsuperscript{26} and perhaps a learning disability. He struggled in school and was
labelled a “bad kid.” At home, her parents were very hard on him and she often
intervened on his behalf. “He was always needing to be taken care of. He was
always in trouble or something” (Catherine, July 31, 2008). Feeling responsible
for James was a theme in all our conversations. Catherine felt very strongly that
it was her role to step in and help him; she just knew no one else would do so.
She saw herself as his only real ally, the one person who understood and loved
him unconditionally. “And still to this day, I feel that I really was the only one who
truly cared for him the way he deserved to be cared for” (Catherine, July 31,
2008).

\textsuperscript{25} ADD or Attention Deficit Disorder is a term used to describe a pattern of behaviours seen in children who
often struggle with learning. The Canadian Mental Health Association has a very informative website with
additional information on this disorder. Retrieved March 3, 2009 from
http://www.cmha.ca/BINS/content_page.asp?cid=3-99

\textsuperscript{26} ADHD or Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder is similar to the above with an added component of
poor impulse control. Additional information may be found at the web site noted above.
The Dark Side

I saw him grasp at finding different things in his life. At one point we got a phone call from him and he was in a donut shop in Niagara Falls. He had hopped into a truck with this musician who was going to hit the big time in New York City. By Niagara Falls she had run out of money. She went in to use the washroom and took off on him. So it was this whole series of people just, you know, not coming through for him and so we brought him back to our house and tried to convince him to stay in Ontario. We’d help him get a job, and all of that, but he wanted to go back to Calgary and that was the last time I saw him. (Catherine, July 31, 2008)

When James was in his teens he moved out West with his high school sweetheart. He was a talented photographer and, for several years, seemed to do very well. When his marriage disintegrated, it sparked a slow slide into a very dark life, eventually finding him leading a hand to mouth existence. Catherine recalled this time as difficult. She often received long rambling phone calls from him at odd hours of the night. Privately, she wondered if he was suffering from a mental illness or perhaps had fallen victim to substance abuse. His life seemed out of control and she worried about him constantly. “We were really close. Of all my siblings he’s the one that I mothered” (Catherine, July 31, 2008).
“He would always have these big ideas – great big ideas – and then the next day he would be really down about that great big idea that was so awesome the day before…” (Catherine, July 31, 2008). I asked Catherine if she ever felt frustrated by her brother’s inability to carry things through. She replied that she was always “in his corner” and felt it was her role to be supportive hoping that, at some point, things would “come together.” It was one of those big ideas that brought James to Niagara Falls that day years ago. Catherine looks back on that time sadly, feeling like it was the fork in the road that could have changed the outcome. “I guess I very much had that… feeling for him, like I would have done anything to protect him” (Catherine, August 13, 2008). She drained her bank account, giving him everything. Years later, she found out her younger sister had done the same. They wondered what happened to the money they gave him. Even now, eight years later, Catherine is still tortured that she did not do more to help him. “We should never, ever have let him go back and should have recognized that something was seriously wrong with him and taken action to help him sort his life out” (Catherine, October 4, 2008).

We were the explorers. We would get up in the morning and we’d be gone. On a weekend we’d pack a paper bag lunch and off we’d go exploring in the Don Valley and parks nearby. We’d get on the streetcar and go to the Toronto Zoo which was the Riverdale Zoo at that time. And then we’d go visit my grandmother who lived in Cabbagetown all by ourselves and we were about 9, 7, 5 years old. As long as we were home
by the time my mom was calling us for dinner that’s all they cared about.

(Catherine, July 31, 2008)

Catherine smiled as she recounted this story. I could tell how much she enjoyed the memory of romping around Toronto with her brothers. Like me, she grew up at a time when children had lots of freedom to come and go. As they grew older Catherine and her brothers shared friends, having big parties in their home with everyone bringing along their own group. The traits that provided James challenges as a child only added to his personality as an adult. Catherine described him as “funny, off-the-wall, different, very extroverted” (Catherine, October 4, 2008). He was someone who “lit up a room” and collected friends wherever he went. I had this impression that he was the ultimate party guest, comfortable talking to anyone, and full of fun and interesting stories.

She remembered a trip out West when he took Catherine and her husband “off roading” in his Jeep. They plunged through a river in the back country, water leaking in through the doors, her brother laughing the whole time. There was nothing that frightened him; he loved the adrenalin of the adventure. At the time, he lived in a small, simple home which Catherine described as something like “the run-down home on the old hit television series Green Acres” (Sommers, 1965). Sheets for curtains, walls needing painting – very basic conditions were all that he needed. James did not put on airs or need to have things look a certain way. Everyone was welcome at his home at any time. The connection she felt to him was evident.
I felt a similar connection with Brent. As a child, I kept a medical dictionary under my bed. When Brent was not feeling well he would come to me and, together, we would look up his symptoms in my book. “I think you have either….” and I would list off all the possibilities. He was on his way with his children to watch me compete in a triathlon when he first felt ill. He never made it to my race, instead, calling to let me know something was wrong. We talked every day that next week and I began to worry that he was not getting any better. I convinced him to go the hospital. He went, following my advice like he always did. They hydrated him and sent him home with “the flu.” A few days later he was dead. Although I never felt like a mother to Brent, I realize now how much I enjoyed being his “big sister,” the one who he came to for advice. I think I miss mattering to someone, the way I mattered to him.

As I got to know Catherine better, I learned she, like James, shared a love of the arts. They were both creative in their own ways. He loved photography. She loved decorating, acting and being a part of her daughter’s singing career. I asked if she thought this similarity contributed to the special connection they shared. Within their family, they were the only two who had artistic leanings. She had not thought about this before but acknowledged that she and James communicated in a way that transcended words, almost telepathically. And perhaps, their connection as artists contributed to that ability.
So my husband said to me, “Well, your brother was found dead.” Of course, I have two brothers, right? So, my gut reaction is, “Which brother?” I remember saying, “Which brother?” And then I was... just comatose after that. I was just numb. I wanted right away to talk to my older brother and I remember saying, “Call my brother. Call my brother,” and he kept saying, “Are you okay? Are you okay?” I told him to phone my brother because I needed to know... in my mind, I needed to make order of this. (Catherine, July 31)

Catherine boarded a plane westward the next day and, with her mother, brother, and sister made the funeral arrangements. As I write the words “funeral arrangements,” I realize they are a comfortable way of compressing what were likely some of Catherine’s most difficult days into a couple of words. She wanted to see James – a memory she holds with both gratitude and regret. “In some ways, I regret doing that [seeing his body] but, in other ways, I’m so glad that I did because I would have always wondered, ‘what if they got the wrong guy’” (Catherine, July 31, 2008). She later went to his apartment to pick up his few belongings. Too distraught to speak at the service, her teenaged daughter delivered a eulogy. Afterwards she recalls simply feeling numb. “It was an overwhelming grief for me” (Catherine, August 13, 2008). There was a deep sense of guilt over how her brother’s life had turned out. She felt there she could have done more to help him and wondered why someone so special died so
tragically. Always his protector, she felt she had let him down in his most desperate moment.

For a long time afterward it was difficult to function. An entry from Catherine’s journal, reprinted below, describes her deep, sadness. Reading this is like seeing a page from my own journal, so strikingly similar are the words.

It’s been almost six weeks since James died and still it has not sunk in. I keep forgetting and then remembering with such a jolt that my heart leaps. I will never see or talk to him again. I feel this huge, deep sadness inside that I can’t make my way out of. I take pills every night to sleep and am terrified of lying awake in the darkness. How do you keep going and pull yourself out? The days are easier than the nights – I can keep busier. I have a sense that no one really understands that I am dead inside.

(Catherine, personal journal, October 2, 2000)

The sadness Catherine felt and continues to feel mirrors that of the other participants. Each one expressed the overwhelming nature of their grief, consuming them beyond what they felt anyone could possibly understand. It was a never ending dark place; something only another bereaved sibling could feel. To me Catherine appeared to have a very full and satisfying life. Her children were grown up and doing exciting things with their lives. She had a varied and active career and many outside interests kept her busy. And yet, she expressed an ongoing sadness. It was for herself but also for the life her brother never got to lead. He never got to feel like a winner and that was something that troubled
her deeply. I gently asked if she thought there would ever be a point in her life when there would be enough going on that she would not feel his absence so acutely. “I don’t think your heart, the piece that loved my brother, can re-grow and love somebody else instead” (Catherine, October 4, 2008).

As with Karen, Rena, and me, Catherine’s other family relationships were strained after James died. She was angry at her mother for not helping her brother when he was small. She was angry at her older brother for not intervening when he saw James spiralling downward as an adult. And she felt very alone in her own family. Her strongest ties were with her brother James and her father. Her father died nearly 20 years earlier and, with them now both gone, she felt disconnected from everyone else. “They were bonds that I never ever had with anybody else. So I miss that… I feel like my family was taken away from me” (Catherine, August 13, 2008).

Catherine’s anger reminded me of how I felt about a co-worker who was the same age as Brent. He was more than a colleague; he was my friend. I liked that he had children the same ages as Brent’s children. We used to chat about them and, like Brent, he was in sales and was fun to be around. Unlike Brent, though, work seemed to be the place where he felt most alive and he worked very long hours, confiding in me that he knew he was short changing his family. After Brent died, watching him continue to “short change” his family became increasingly difficult. It troubled me deeply that he did not spend time with his children. Even on his days off he found a way to get involved in our business dealings. I began to resent him for having the chance to do everything that my
brother could now never do. He was wasting his time on things that I felt had no meaning. I am sure my colleague had no idea why I stopped talking to him and began to avoid him at the office. I did not understand it myself until I wrote these words about Catherine.

As time progressed Catherine’s relationship with her remaining siblings and her mother changed. Her older brother, with whom she had already begun to grow distant from before James died, now felt like a stranger. Since the day she flew home from his funeral they have not spoken about James. Neither does she speak with her mother about him. “You kind of feel your way around and you get to know subconsciously what you do and don’t talk about” (Catherine, July 31, 2008). Catherine has thought a lot about how the other members of her family dealt with James’ death. She concluded that part of their ongoing communication struggles came from how differently they had all experienced and expressed grief about James’ passing. It drove a wedge between them all, something I experienced in my own family, an experience with which both Rena and Karen concurred.

“For me, because of the closeness of our relationship, I guess it was very much like losing a child” (Catherine, July 31, 2008). The revelation that in many ways James had felt like a child to Catherine came during our interviews. After each meeting I sent Catherine a transcript of our interview. We began the subsequent meeting by talking about the themes raised in the previous conversation. “I didn’t realize how…much I thought of him as almost a child to me and how…my relationship kind of transcended sister to more of a mothering
role” (Catherine, August 13, 2008). She was surprised by the number of references she made to “needing to take care of” her brother. As she described her life growing up it was as though she had stepped in to fill a gap for her brother. She watched him struggle, telling me “he was always on the short end of the stick” his whole life. “I feel that I was the only one who ever really loved him” (Catherine, July 31, 2008). With his death, she wanted to see some expression of remorse or guilt from her mother; an acknowledgement of the role she might have played in the way his life had turned out. At the same time though, she chose not to directly confront her mother about this or force a conversation about James. Karen and Rena both felt compelled to try and protect their parents from further grief. While I did not hear those same sentiments from Catherine, she did choose to protect her mother from her own angry feelings about what had happened. And, even in the creation of this text, Catherine wanted her mother to be somewhat shielded.
Changed as a Parent

I remember one day my daughter crying, telling me she wanted her old mother back. I guess I was just off the deep end and didn’t even know it. I was a walking zombie probably for at least a year afterwards. (Catherine, July 31, 2008)

Although unaware of it at the time Catherine’s sadness over her brother’s death drastically changed her as a parent. Looking back, she felt guilty at being unable to be more present for her children during the early months of her grief. She was too overcome with her own sadness. Karen, also, struggled as a parent during the first year after her brother died. For both Karen and Catherine that time frame is very blurry. They have few distinct memories of how they parented save for the feeling of being in a fog. I found it interesting that both women wanted me to interview their daughters about what they were like during this time. They even used very similar words to describe what they thought their children would say. “Ask them…they’ll tell you I was crazy.” And they both acknowledged that once they made it through those “very dark days,” the deaths of their brothers caused them to change as parents.

One of the most important teaching lessons Catherine passed on to her children was the value of their connection as siblings. It became part of her messages to her daughters; to take care of one another and to appreciate the special bond that they had. “I tell them, you know, you only have each other.
And you need to know that blood is thicker than anything else and no matter what happens in your life that you two will always be there for each other. You need to be there for each other because friends will come and go” (Catherine, August 13, 2008). She felt a sense of pride at the growing closeness she observed between her two daughters. Although she still worried that they did not appreciate each other enough she was encouraged that they seem to be moving closer to each other. Karen also expressed the same sentiments. They both wanted their children to understand and value their relationship as siblings.
Making Meaning

He had this old metal horse and buggy. It was very small, built for a two year old. Anyway, James carted it around with him and kept it for all those years. And then something bad must have happened because he took it to the pawn shop. It was sitting in the window. When he died his friends went and bought it back and gave it to us. I have it here in my living room. It mattered to him so it matters to me. (Catherine, October 4, 2008)

As I discovered in my conversations with Karen and Rena the concept of meaning making is multi-layered. For Catherine, there was meaning that needed to be made around the events leading to James’ death. What actually, physically, happened to him? And, contextually, what were the circumstances that lead to him being on that bridge at that time? Similar to Karen, Catherine poured through technical paperwork from local authorities with the purpose of making sense of the details. Her brother’s death was listed as “suspicious” and yet there was no further investigation. Although found in a river, he had not drowned, and there were signs of trauma to his body. “You see these investigative shows where they spend all this time caring about how somebody died and then in real life it doesn’t happen that way” (Catherine, July 31, 2008 ). She went to the bridge, walked down to the water, and looked up. There was nothing that he could have hit. Not satisfied with what she read and heard she had his medical reports reviewed by an Ontario coroner. Had he been hit by a
car and then fallen over? Perhaps he had been in an argument and then been tossed over? Or, she wondered if he had deliberately jumped. The corner indicated there were signs of trauma and left it at that. She resigned herself to the fact that she would never really know what really happened that night. It was clear though from our conversations, that even eight years later, she still felt guilty that she was not there to save him, as she had done so many times when he was a little boy.

Her brother’s death started Catherine on a new path. After making her way through the deep depression that followed, she began rethinking everything in her life. “Am I happy in marriage? Am I happy in my career? What am I doing to make my life more meaningful?” (August 13, Catherine, 2008). Looking back she believes she was depressed for about two years before she sought professional help. Similar to what Karen expressed, Catherine felt she had already suffered serious blows in life and did not understand why the universe was presenting yet another challenge. As a teen, her beloved grandmother was brutally murdered in her own home by a teenaged neighbour. Her father, the parent with whom she had felt most connected, had died when she was in her mid twenties. “And then the harsh reality of losing somebody again, made me think, oh God, who knows, that life isn’t fair and there’s no rhyme or reason to why or how things happen. It just isn’t fair” (Catherine, October 4, 2008).

Part of Catherine’s meaning making was about coming to some conclusions about life; specifically that the world really did not revolve around the concept of fairness, that “good” people lived long lives and “bad” people died
early. “I think we come with a date stamp on our necks” she said to me many
times during our conversations. For Catherine, part of restoring order was to
formulate a new view and logic to explain her loved ones’ deaths. Coming to
believe that individuals were “date stamped,” their deaths pre-destined, was an
important layer in Catherine’s restructuring of her belief system. By
acknowledging that James’ death was determined by a greater force she
accepted that it was not her responsibility to keep him alive. It was his time to go
and there was nothing she could do to change that. We talked about this
concept several times during our conversations and, even though I felt Catherine
wanted to accept James’ passing as inevitable, I sensed that she continued to
harbour guilt about it. During one of our last meetings I directly asked her about
this and she acknowledged that part of her still felt she could have done
something to change the outcome.

I asked Catherine if she kept any mementos of her brother. Initially she
said “I don’t have much.” At the following meeting she described several of many
objects she had, acknowledging her own surprise at finding so many. We both
smiled. We decided to meet at her home so we could walk around and look at
each item while we talked. I was immediately struck by the prominent location
the mementoes had in her home. The horse and buggy was set in the middle of
the living room. No one could sit in the room without commenting on it – thereby
prompting a story about its origin and how it came to be. In her bedroom, a
framed picture of his Jeep sat directly in front of her bed; the first thing she saw
every morning. “This was his prized possession…he took that picture, because
he loved this Jeep and it represented everything that he loved…that kind of encapsulates who he is…” (Catherine, September 11, 2008). We meandered through her home and Catherine pointed out other small items. A silver flask, a small Indian carving, an urn created by an artist friend of her brother which had been delivered too late to be used at his funeral. Each item, carefully displayed in elegant cases, and each had a story. Even outside in the garden, Catherine placed a rock from the river where he was found. She liked having it close, like having her own private sanctuary. As we talked about each of the items that day it seemed that Catherine was carrying on the attachment to these items on behalf of her brother. “...I can’t ask him what these meant to him but obviously they meant something, so I took everything that I could get because I felt…. ‘Who else would appreciate it?’” (Catherine, September 11, 2008).

There were three milestones that coincided with my meetings with Catherine. The first one was the marriage of Catherine’s oldest daughter. As the day approached Catherine had mixed emotions knowing that both her brother and father would not be there. As a wedding gift to her daughter she had one of the few remaining photos taken by her brother turned into several pieces of art. She gave it to her daughter on behalf of James. Her daughter had eulogized him at his funeral several years earlier and they had a special bond. There was also a memory table at the service for other loved ones who had passed away and a donation in their memory was made to a local charity by the bride and groom. On this special day, Catherine kept her brother present.
We also passed what would have been James’ 46th birthday and the anniversary of his death. Like Karen, Catherine preferred not to treat the day as one of significance. “I don’t really acknowledge it as a day different from any other day because I think about him all the time” (Catherine, August 13, 2008). I found it interesting that where both Rena and I attached great significance to the day our siblings died, both Karen and Catherine preferred not to do so. I wondered if it was because, for them, there were a lot of unknowns around their siblings’ deaths and perhaps the last day of life was not seared in their memory. For both Rena and me there was a clear demarcation between “before and after.” We were both at the hospital when our siblings took their last breaths, the line between life and death was clearer.

One day, I was coming along highway 401 not far from here and the Louis Armstrong song – What a Wonderful World – came on the radio. They played it at his funeral and I started to tear up and I’m thinking, you know God, I never want to hear this song again. Then all of a sudden, the sun breaks out of the clouds…and this light comes down, like the sun, just beautiful sunshine. (Catherine, August 13, 2008)

Catherine described a new spiritual connection she had with her brother. He was not gone, just on another plane, where she could still speak with him. The only difference, now, she said was “he could not answer back.” “I believe that you go onto another world, that he’s on another plane of existence. We just can’t interact. But he’s there, he’s with my dad, he’s with his dog, whatever.
He’s still there” (Catherine, July 31, 2008). She recalled a visit with a psychic who told her that her brother was “happy and content.” Once she heard that he was no longer in pain she was better able to integrate his death into her life. Although she continued to feel sad she was comforted to know he finally found happiness. This realization was another turning point in her life. “And that was kind of the beginning of my road to feeling better about myself and everything that had happened…” (Catherine, July 31, 2008). It was the beginning of looking at life through a different lens.

“It’s given me a little more courage in my life to try to do some things that I may not have ever done…. I’m not going to leave any stone unturned” (Catherine, October 4, 2008). Part of the way Catherine has made new meaning in her life is by being “brave and adventurous.” As I write those words I think of the story she told me of James racing his Jeep through the river. His excitement and zest for adventure has become hers. She has changed jobs many times, feeling the itch to move every few years. She took up acting, trying out for television commercials, even a reality show. “I am no longer afraid to simply try things,” she said to me. “I’ve figured out how to go on and find joy in my life, but I think I’m always trying to find things to keep me finding joy” (Catherine, August 13, 2008).

She became more caring, especially, of the downtrodden, people on the street living moment to moment. “I am probably far more receptive to helping people in need. I have never looked at anybody else on the street the same way as I did before my brother died” (Catherine, October 4, 2008). James’ sad spiral
downward was a vivid reminder of how quickly life can change. It also emphasized for Catherine how difficult life can be for people who struggle with mental health issues. Today she no longer passes people on the street without handing them money. She looks beyond the figures sitting in front of her and wonders about their stories, what brought them to that point. Catherine also took this “message” of sharing into her parenting style. “Always be kind…always. Help people who are less fortunate than you. If you’re lucky enough to have…wealth and happiness and everything in your life, share it. Because it’s no good having it all alone,” (Catherine, August 13, 2008) she told her children.

She learned to tell people she loved them and to be more open about her feelings toward others. The realization that people could be present one day and then, suddenly, gone was what propelled her to extend herself this way. “So if you want to go see that person you care about, you better go, because there’s a possibility there isn’t a tomorrow” (Catherine, October 4, 2008). Although their expressions of caring were different I found it intriguing that both Karen and Catherine now seemed to operate from a place of immediacy when it came to reaching out to others. As soon as they had the slightest sense that someone needed help they both reached out without delay. Similarly, they both made a point of encouraging their children to do the same. From our conversations I knew that this knowledge and new way of being in the world had not come immediately or easily for either Karen or Catherine. They went through a period of darkness before they began to find their footings in life again.
“And why does it matter to you that there is a story about James that continues?” I think because he was a very special person. At least, he certainly was to me and I’d like the story told in my terms versus my older brother’s terms or my sister’s terms. Each one of us has different memories and I’d like mine to be on record. (Catherine, October 4, 2008)

Like Karen, and Rena before her, Catherine was grateful for the chance to talk about her brother. She saw it as a way to tell and record the story of James’ life so that she could pass it down through the generations. “This way, we have a family history. No one else is telling the story. As far as I am aware, there is no one else in my family that keeps a journal, or does anything like that, so when we’re gone one day, everything will go with us” (Catherine, October 4, 2008). Our work together also gave her new opportunities to talk to people about James. At a recent corporate dinner she told colleagues about our interviews and the purpose of the research. A long conversation about her brother and his life followed where normally this would not have happened.

For Catherine, there were parts of James’ life that she still struggled to integrate and accept. I could tell the harshness of his experiences as a misunderstood little boy and later as an adult, just slightly out of step with the world, were painful memories. “A bright star, who never got to shine,” she said to me sadly. Perhaps that was why the psychic’s words were so important for her. Finally, he was at peace. James’ death was part of an accumulation of grief over other lost loved ones and reaching some new understanding about the world and
rules it operated by were important for Catherine. There was no balance sheet.
There was no way to pay dues and thus be exempt from further grief. Deaths
were predestined and there was nothing that could be done to change that.
This shirt belonged to James. In the pocket is a small slip of paper with a phone number on it.

James had this toy from when he was a little boy. Just before he died he sold it to a pawn shop. After his death, his friends bought it back on his behalf and gave it to Catherine. She keeps it in her living room.
Catherine is not sure where this carving is from. She wonders if James made it when he was a little boy.

The significance of this flask is unknown. It was found amongst James’ belongings.
This urn was created by an artist friend of James’. It arrived too late to be used at his funeral. It is sitting on a table just inside the entrance to Catherine’s home.
PART THREE

“FOR THEM”
When Great Trees Fall

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down,
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes light, rare, sterile.
We breathe briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines, gnaws on kind words unsaid,
promised walks never taken.
Great souls die and
our reality, bound to them, takes leave of us.
Our souls, dependent upon their nurture,
now shrink, wizened.
Our minds, formed and informed by their radiance, fall away.
We are not so much maddened
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance
of dark, cold caves.

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always irregularly.
Spaces fill with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us,
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

(Angelou, 2006, p. 47, used with permission)
Methodology and Methods

Narrative and life go together and so the principal attraction of narrative as a method is its capacity to render life experiences, both personal and social, in relevant and meaningful ways. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10)

“Oh my God, I can’t tell this anymore,” I suddenly thought. The group was waiting for the end of my story – waiting to hear me say, “and my brother Brent...” I stopped. I felt that familiar sick feeling, the one I get when I’ve forgotten and then remembered again. “Who was he now? My brother who died, my ‘late brother’ or was he still just ‘Brent?’” I was too far in so I replaced him in the story with Stephen. I managed to salvage the moment but I felt disjointed after. The story wasn’t true anymore and it wasn’t fun to tell. (Brenda, August 13 interview with Catherine, 2008)

Narrative as method and methodology seemed like a natural fit with the experience of grief. “...Death is an event that changes the meaning of survivors' lives forever...” (Ellis, 1993, p. 725). Just as I told stories to help make meaning from my brother’s death I believed other bereaved siblings might find benefit from doing the same. I also knew that, in keeping with the tradition of narrative inquiry, I would be in the process of living, telling, reliving and retelling my own story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) as the research progressed. Narrative allowed for this kind of flow, to story, and restory; it was “as much a philosophy as a method” (Gilbert, 2002, p. 237).
Shabatay (1991, p. 150) writes that “when we share stories from our lives, we begin to open ourselves to others and perhaps nowhere are others more willing to come close enough to hear them as when they are being told a story.” I knew my own experience with sibling loss would be a key component in my research. Because of our shared loss we had conversations about our siblings in a way that others unfamiliar with the experience could not. It was not simply me asking questions and expecting answers. We talked back and forth, in conversation, more like friends than interviewer and interviewee (Cole & Knowles, 2001). My position as an insider (Farnsworth, 1996), helped me understand and relate to the intimate stories that I heard. Interjecting stories of my own life helped to unfold new ones and prompt deeper discussions. “One way of knowing about others’ intimate experiences is to reflect on our own” (Ellis, 1993, p. 725). It also gave me new insights into my feelings and, while enlightening, these were at times depressing. It was difficult to learn that passing years did not dampen the loss or sadness. It remained constantly rekindled with each passing family milestone.

In preparation for interviewing these three women I completed a facilitator training course with Bereaved Families of Ontario York Region (BFOYR). That experience showed me the power of community and the power of simply listening to someone's story of loss. I also learned the emotionally exhausting nature of this role and the importance of self-care in grief work. As a result I built in extra time between my interviews in order to give myself time to reflect and recharge. I also adapted some other approaches for my work. One of those was to let the
participant begin her story wherever she wanted. As Gilbert (2002, p. 232) noted from her work using narrative, “whatever they identify as the starting point for their story of loss, I accept as the point at which we need to begin.” This method was a powerful experience in my facilitator training and proved to be a great entry point for the first interview with each participant.

I met with Karen, Rena, and Catherine twice a month over a four month period, completing more than 35 hours of taped interviews. Our meetings were relaxed and informal, more like conversations. In line with what Johnson (2001) called in-depth interviews, my experience and stories were obvious to the participants; they knew me and knew Brent (through me) and my place within the text. My goal was to create an authentic connection, to let “the principles of reflexivity, relationality, mutuality, care, sensitivity, and respect guide the development of questions for conversation...” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 73). Together we agreed upon the topics for discussion which we reviewed regularly throughout our time together. Our conversations wove back and forth, from their lives to my life, and across a multitude of timeframes. It was not a linear process but more like a meandering walk through the past, present, and future as we talked about the roles siblings played in each of our lives before and after their deaths.

Each meeting began with a review of transcripts from the prior meeting and discussions about emerging themes. As well, I invited Karen, Rena, and Catherine to edit or change the transcripts so as to ensure they reflected the stories they wanted to tell. It was a way of including them in the analysis of the
data, to “sift out, from their wealth of experience, stories to tell us” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 119). I knew it was ultimately my responsibility to ensure the least possible harm to each of them (Phtiaka, 1994) and providing multiple opportunities to engage in decisions about our joint creation was one of the ways to ensure this. Each person’s story had features that made these conversations and review meetings especially important. And as everyone chose to use her own name and the name of her deceased sibling I encouraged reflection about the impact of their stories on other family members. I soon realized that this choice to be visible placed additional responsibilities on me as researcher.

The notion of informed consent (Cole & Knowles, 2001) more typically associated with preserving anonymity and protecting participants from harm, seemed more complex when I moved from field texts to written texts and began to formulate potential conference presentations. “What constitutes respect and compassion in the minds of this researcher / participant pair is the nature of the implicit contract between them” (Josselson, 2007, p. 539). The participants’ obvious presence, both visually through photographs, and poignantly through personal stories caused me to reflect deeply on this notion. I shared their narratives with each one more than once, each time offering to meet and discuss their reactions in person. I also shared sections where their stories were more prominent. I was conscious that even subtle language changes during the editing process might alter the overall “feel” of a section. At times, my stance as a researcher was questioned. “At what point will you own this?” colleagues asked. Narrative researchers have a higher duty of care in the creation of their
Karen, Rena, and Catherine were between the ages of 35 and 55 and their siblings had died within the preceding 12 years. I defined “siblings” as someone with whom the participant shared both biological parents and lived within the same home while growing up. My choice to work within these parameters was deliberate. First, from reading and speaking with other bereaved siblings I observed that the most acute time of transition came within the first few years following their sibling’s death (Gill White, 2006). Changes in how they processed that loss continued for years after; however, the immediate years following the death appeared to be the most profound. Second, I believed that part of feeling disenfranchised came from societal / cultural expectations around the importance or perceived lack of importance of the sibling connection into adulthood. Once individuals moved away from home and began their own families, society generally views the family of origin as less important to their well-being. By selecting participants who were in their mid-thirties to early forties at the time of their sibling’s death I assumed each person would be well onto their own lives apart from their family of origin. As well, the death of a sibling within this age range would still be viewed as “out of pattern.” Losing a sibling at age 80 represented a “normal” lifespan. Losing one at age 40 was not. And last, I anticipated our shared age demographic would invite more connection. As
Edwards (1993, p. 185) notes, “researchers bring their own life experiences to their research, and they structure what the research is about.”

Although my overarching goal was to explore the meaning making processes of each person there were other parts of their experience that I wanted to understand. I was interested to know what a “sibling bond” looked like for each individual. I listened and looked for stories of sibling connections, when they first formed, and how they evolved as they aged. I also wanted to know if and how they kept their deceased sibling present in their lives after death. Silverman and Klass (1996) were the first to suggest that “continuing bonds” with the deceased was a normal part of the grief experience. Rather than trying to leave the relationship behind it continued in a new form. Silverman and Klass’s work normalized what had previously been considered an unhealthy response to grief. It was not necessary to break ties with the deceased in order to move forward. In fact, part of moving forward in grief came from renegotiating this relationship. Last, I wanted to understand the ways in which participants were silenced in their grief. It was with respect to this last point that I experienced one of the more significant surprises in this work. All three women felt silenced in their grief; however, the primary source of that silencing was not from the place I first anticipated, a finding I will discuss in a later chapter.

...A qualitative design is emergent: One does not know...what to ask, or where to look next without analyzing data as they are collected. Hunches, working hypotheses, and educated guesses direct the investigator’s attention to certain data and then to refining and/or verifying one’s hunches. (Merriam, 1988, p. 125)
While interviews were my primary method of gathering stories I also invited the women to share meaningful photographs and artefacts as part of our conversations. The use of artefacts and photographs within a narrative inquiry framework is not uncommon (Bach, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) and can serve as an “eliciting technique” (Harrison, 2002, p. 92). “…Photographs provide a basis for narrative work; there are stories about photographs, and there are stories that lie behind them and between them” (p. 105). The photographs prompted stories which added to the richness of our conversations. It was as though the images transported the participants backward in time. They helped to recapture the moment and the feelings associated with that event “…now revisited in this moment of the viewing or retelling or exploration of meaning” (Pinnegar, 2007, p. 248). Rena’s photo of Mother’s Day, the last one shared with her sister was especially important to her. Karen liked the photograph of Brian holding her daughter. For her it symbolized how much her brother cared for her.

I left our conversation about artefacts until our last meeting for several reasons. On a practical level, most of the interviews occurred outside the women’s homes, making transportation of items more difficult. As well, I knew from our conversations that this was a task they wanted to be thoughtful about. And the passage of time since their siblings’ deaths made retrieving items more difficult. Last, I thought these conversations would be more comfortable once we had established a relationship. With Karen, because we met in her home, and likely because of our pre-existing relationship, her ‘memory box’ was often at the table with us for each interview. She pulled items and photographs from it as we
spoke. At our last meeting we walked into her garage to find Brian’s drywall stilts. They were buried deep amongst other stored items. Finding them prompted a story about his life as a tradesmen. Rena enjoyed searching and then selecting the items to bring, noting that it was “many years since I’ve looked at these things” (August 26, 2008). For Catherine, our walk together through her home to look at James’ possessions reminded her of how present he continued to be in her life. Our conversation about each one seemed to re-ignite special feelings of closeness. She was surprised at the number of items she had.

Cole and Knowles (2001, p. 87) write, “we try to ask questions about the artefacts that will uncover their meaning at the time or their importance or significance in a life.” Rena’s artefacts represented “ordinary things,” echoing a theme she shared many times in our interviews. She missed the everyday interactions she used to share with her sister. For Karen, most of Brian’s possessions were lost in the fire so her choices were few. However I was struck by the connection between the book of poems and the photograph of Brian holding Karen’s daughter, both carefully preserved and brought forward for our conversation. Just days before the fire Brian had left the book behind for Karen’s now teenage daughter who was recovering from back surgery. He thought she would find them funny. The same child who he held as a baby prompted the visit with the book. Karen also felt comfort knowing that his stilts “are in there somewhere.” With Catherine, many of the items she saved had unknown origins or meanings. She kept them simply because they were important to James. The
theme of protection so evident in our conversations about James was present again as she spoke lovingly of keeping his remaining possessions safe.

My analyses began during the interview conversations when we discussed emerging themes from the prior meeting. That discussion became a part of the transcript, creating a written record of our evolving conversations. I also kept a reflective journal to record my own emotional reactions to the work and information gathered. I photographed all the artefacts, anticipating a physical record would be helpful as I moved deeper into the analysis phase of the project. I also wanted to leave open the possibility to include visual representations as part of future academic presentations (Marshall, 2009). However, as my writing evolved, I realized both the family photographs and the images of the artefacts could play another role within the text. For the reader, I saw these images as another way to tell these stories, to evoke emotion and connection to each participant. As Weber (2008) notes, photographs can make stories more memorable. “Images elicit emotional as well as intellectual responses and have overtones that stay with us…” (p. 45). I also liked the contrast of beginning each narrative with pictures of people and ending with pictures of physical items. Their siblings now gone, connections were maintained through physical things. For Rena, Karen and Catherine, I also saw this as an opportunity to continue their stories. I knew the importance each placed on their participation in the research. By placing images within their narratives, I saw it as another avenue for story reconstruction. Every time they viewed these images in the future, they would
have another opportunity to restory and reflect on their meanings (Harrison, 2002).

Once I completed all the interviews I worked separately with each person’s narrative, reading and re-reading the transcripts while listening to the recordings. I also looked at the images of their treasured artefacts as I listened to the tapes again. I highlighted quotes from each interview transcript and then looked for themes within the selected quotes. Those themes became the bedrock for the various sections of each person’s narrative, letting the simple vignettes anchor the reader into the broader story of connection. It was painstaking work and I wrote many drafts before landing on a version which I was comfortable sharing.

I completed Karen’s chapter and gave it to her first and met in person soon after to review it. Karen enjoyed the interplay of our stories within the narrative and did not want to make changes. The same sentiment was expressed by all three women. They liked seeing our work come to life in print and were pleased with the stories I chose to represent their experiences. Each one invested much of herself in this work; I was so grateful. For me, the creation of the individual narratives formed the cornerstone of my writing and, once I had their approvals, other chapters evolved around their three stories.

In the next round of analysis I looked for themes among the three narratives, trying to draw a larger picture into focus. I also returned to the research, professional and trade literature, reviewing articles I had read before
and finding new ones to go along with knowledge I was uncovering. At this stage, I asked each participant to select a few photographs of their siblings to complement their respective narratives, expecting that their selections might also give me additional ideas on how to refine the text. I liked the feeling of closeness I saw in the photographs and decided to place the images in prominent locations within the text. Through photographs each participant and her brother or sister became real people. As Weber (2008, p. 45) notes, “images can enhance empathic understanding.”

Tuchman (cited in Richardson, 2000, p. 942), writes, “the writer’s object is – or should be – to hold the reader’s attention…I want the reader to turn the page and keep on turning to the end.” My goal with the narratives, in particular, was to first please each individual story teller and then to make an emotional connection with the reader so that the reader might understand the depth of each person’s loss. For me, stories have always been an important element of my writing and I wanted to be a good story teller (Wolcott, 1994). I hoped that what I created had a plot and identifiable characters with whom the reader could identify. I wanted readers to know Karen, Rena, and Catherine and gain a sense of what it means to have and lose a beloved sibling. My research would not have served its whole purpose unless others wanted to read it.
“Unlike quantitative work, which can be interpreted through its tables and summaries, qualitative work carries its meaning in its entire text” (Richardson, 2000, p. 924). A narrative, is more akin to a work of art. The appraisal of the piece lies within the hearts and minds of the reader. There is no search for truth, no theories to prove or disprove or even a burning question to answer. A narrative invites the reader to restory his or her own life along with the participants and, perhaps, come away from the experience with a new way of looking. And while that continues to be my belief, I accept that even a work of art or a narrative, in this case, is evaluated and judged against some set of criteria.

“What makes a good narrative?” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). My search for elements to include as part of a “reader’s guide” for viewing this work was challenging. There is no clear consensus on terminology, approach or style of writing. Narrative is continuing to evolve and invites multiple perspectives (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Chase, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Craig & Huber, 2007; Crites, 1971; Freeman, 2007; Girden, 2001; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995; Josselson, 2007; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007; Plummer, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1995). Clandininn and Connelly’s (1990) assertion from nearly twenty years ago still rings true today. “It is currently the case that each inquirer must search for, and defend, the criteria that best apply to his or her work” (p. 7). And so in this section, I will highlight the principles that guided my work.
“What narrative researchers hold in common is the study of stories or narratives….These researchers usually embrace the assumption that the story is one if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experience” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). “…Narrative inquiry is aimed at understanding and making meaning of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 80). The starting point for any narrative is story and an understanding that every story is in motion. The stories we tell represent interpretations of events that are influenced by the events that preceded them. In this way our experiences, and the way we interpret them, are constantly changing. “Stories make explicit the meaning that is implicit in life as it is lived. In stories we aim to make clear and intelligible what life is about” (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 9). By sharing the story we change the story.

In narrative, an inquirer simultaneously explores temporality, sociality and place (the three dimensional inquiry space) throughout all phases of their work (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006). In this study, I worked in this space by narrating the stories across and through multiple time periods, social contexts and places. The grief over lost siblings in the present, and sadness over the loss of a future together, is understood through the lens of how that relationship was formed. It also takes on new meaning when narrated within society’s response to sibling loss and my own experience of loss. By using snapshots of conversations, short vignettes and at times stark dialogue, I pieced together fragments of lives to create a bigger story. My story is intertwined throughout as I lived, told, retold and relived my own experience of
loss. “Narrative inquirers bracket themselves into an inquiry” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). “We begin in the midst. We end in the midst” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 187).

“When intimacy is part of the story, illuminating the interplay between researcher and researched is essential if we are to understand how the research relationship influences fieldwork and interpretation” (Busier, Clark, Esch, Glesne, Pigeon & Tarule, 1997, p. 167). A researcher’s presence ought to be obvious throughout the work both in word and through inference in what and how the work is presented (Cole & Knowles, 2008). This study begins with my story and readers see and hear it throughout the text. I was the first participant (Hunt, 1992). The intersection of my life with that of each woman is transparent and my presence as a researcher evident through all elements of the research design. I chose the participants, guided the interviews, selected quotes and vignettes to include and wrote the narratives that followed. I wanted to be present without being overwhelming. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 81) note, “we are in the parade we presume to study.” This work comes from my story and to write it otherwise, is not possible.

“To do good research, one needs to be a good human being” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). In narrative work, relationships are central to the experience (Josselson, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). There is an interactive quality between the researcher and the participants (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007) that is present through all phases of the inquiry. “One way we see narrative inquirers honouring the relational aspects of their inquiries is by consciously
inviting participants to live as co-researchers” (Craig & Huber, 2007, p. 272).
Through description of processes, I attempted to capture the essence of the research relationships I developed. My care and concern for the participants guided every step of this inquiry. Constructing their individual narratives was the most difficult aspect of this work. However, each woman’s joy at seeing her stories joined with others gave me much pleasure. Karen shared her narrative with friends and family members at Christmas this past year. Rena told me “you captured our relationship” and thanked me for including the special greeting she and her sister shared. Catherine felt pleasure at seeing James’ and her story in print. These were the most personally rewarding parts of this work. Our time together opened space for creating new connections and stories and being part of that was a wonderful growth experience for me.

“An ethical attitude requires that we write about other people with great respect and appropriate tentativeness and that we recognise that what we write may be read by the person we are writing about” (Josselson, 2007, p. 553). I believe this “ethical attitude” is an extension of the relational aspects of narrative work. My understanding of informed consent shifted during this process. Now, I view it as part of an ever evolving relationship that extends into the future. I think of the three women in this study as my friends. I do not want to hurt them, cause them embarrassment or make them uncomfortable. Although each signed consent forms that detailed many different possible uses for this work, I will still consult with them as I move forward with other publications. They signed those forms before we embarked on this experience. A commitment to working
narratively means that I must remain open to the possibility that their feelings and stories will continue to change and they may no longer wish their stories to be presented in this manner. I am also especially sensitive to the importance of these stories within each participant’s evolving relationship with their deceased sibling. For Rena, Karen and Catherine, this was the first time their story of loss was honoured. It is also a memorial for their deceased siblings and that is something I must also honour. Josselson (2007, p. 550) writes “…the more public the published work is to be, the more participant consent should be sought at each stage of publication…” This is a heavy burden but one that is fitting. When I learned Rena would be present for my presentation at ADEC (Marshall, 2009) I took extra steps to ensure she would be comfortable with the content. I anticipated that being part of the audience might make her more vulnerable and, as such, spoke with her about the contents and the photographs in advance. I was prepared to remove or change anything that might have made her uncomfortable knowing that doing so would leave me in a difficult position. And now that the possibility of this work becoming published is more real I will continue to involve each participant as I move forward. My work comes from their stories. I do not own them and this understanding continues to guide my decisions.

Another defining feature of “good narrative” is a feeling of connectedness, a “narrative whole with a sense of aesthetic completeness” (Clandinin & Connelly, 200, p. 167). This unity extents throughout the work, from the literature chosen, methods and methodology and ultimately with the final product. This
work evolved together. Revisions in one chapter always led to changes in another. The entire work was and is constantly in motion. Central to its construction was the presence of stories – mine and that of the participants, and how they intersected throughout. Our research conversations were an interplay of both and I carried this theme throughout this work. In earlier chapters I outlined how and why I chose narrative as an approach. I wanted to “begin with experience as lived and told in stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 128). In keeping with that approach, I wove multiple stories throughout this work. There is my story of loss, my story of personal growth, and my story as an emerging researcher. These stories are told through vignettes that introduce each section and the stories told within the text, the quotes I chose, and the research I cited. There are the stories of the three participants, their experiences of loss and love for their siblings and in some cases transformation. There is also the larger story of sibling loss that unites us. These represent but a few of the main threads I carried throughout the work. And as further commitment to this methodology, I chose to weave references to academic literature throughout the piece, further demonstrating my understanding of the approach.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 71), in referring to narrative works, write “…our principal interest in experience is the growth and transformation in the life story that we as researchers and participants author.” Their position suggests that “good” research ought to move people, that it count for something beyond its value as a research paper. This work has the potential to prompt new levels of understanding about sibling loss that may change the societal script that places it
at the bottom of an imagined “grief hierarchy.” I recently attended a meeting with executives from a local grief support organization. Although convened for a different purpose, I mentioned my research, and soon fielded questions about sibling loss. One woman acknowledged that the death of her child years before had drastically altered the lives of her remaining children. There was nothing at the time to help them. Others in the room, although not similarly bereaved, recognized their own misconceptions about sibling loss. For two years I have attempted to make sibling loss part of the conversation within this organization. And, on this particular night, it was.

All three participants also experienced personal transformations, most coming after we completed the formal interview conversations. Karen’s transformation, captured in a later chapter is particularly impactful. She feels differently about Brian’s death and their relationship. She also redefined her connection with his wife and children and just recently decided to accept the invitation to attend her niece’s wedding. Rena also is experiencing changes. She saw her photographs and stories presented to an audience. I recounted the story of how we met and introduced her. The audience was surprised and reacted warmly to her presence. “The whole experience was wonderful,” she told me later (April 18, 2009). Finally, on a personal level, I am transformed. When I began I only saw the darkness of losing Brent. Now, I feel a lightness and energy that is new. I have ideas for creating a community based educational experience about loss. Although, in the early stages, I envision creating something that will encourage individuals to explore their loss rather than run
from it or attempt a “cure.” I gained so much from the access I had to alternative forms of expression, like arts informed work, narrative and auto ethnography. I want to bring that experience to a larger audience.

“There are multiple audiences – participants, imagined reading audience, inquirer. Research texts that emphasize any one to the exclusion of others lose impact” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 485). The audience for this work is broad, encompassing bereaved and non bereaved individuals, professional counsellors, therapists and academics and I attempted to appeal to them all. One of the hallmarks of “good” qualitative research is the richness of the representational accounts presented (Cole & McIntyre, 2004, p.14). Using words, photographs, quotes, and stories I tried to bring the participants experiences to life. I wrote conversationally so as to invite this broad array of readers to follow along with me. At the same time I hoped this would mark the beginning of new research projects within the field of death education so was conscious of ensuring the work was grounded in relevant grief and bereavement literature.

“A narrative is not ‘the’ truth, there may be multiple views on the same event and each one has an element of truth to it” (Gilbert, 2002, p. 229). I make no claims for absolute knowledge, truth, or attempt to generalize my findings to a larger population. My purpose was to write from the perspective of four bereaved siblings, look for patterns, and create a forum for continuing their stories in a new way. “The core of postmodernism is the doubt that any method or theory, discourse or genre, tradition or novelty, has a universal and general claim as the
'right' or the privileged form of authoritative knowledge” (Richardson, 2000, p. 928). In keeping with postmodernist and poststructuralist traditions our stories are continuing to evolve and change. Even as I formulate final drafts I add new stories and awakenings. This is a fluid process without an end point.

“Some of our most important moments of truth come when life has given us a terrible blow” (Atkinson, 1995, p. 41). “But it is not the ‘facts’ themselves that one tries to redeem through narrative tellings. Rather, it is an articulation of the significance and meaning of one’s experiences. It is within the frame of a story that facts gain their importance” (Bochner, 2001, p. 153). Story helps us feel whole and bring order to our experiences (Atkinson, 1995). It is through the telling that we make connections and begin to see and live our experiences differently. It is “in a real sense the construction of a life” (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 129). We need to tell stories in order to move forward and grow from our experiences. I never knew how much I loved being an older sister until Brent died. In a moment, the role vanished. I realize now that many of the stories I tell about Brent are intertwined with my attachment to the role. Similarly, Catherine gained new perspective on her role in James’ life. Reading the transcripts captured a layer of meaning she previously had not seen. “It is through stories that we relate our life experiences and through reflection reap their meaning in our lives” (Krmpotic Schwind, 2003, p. 22). In the end, stories are all we have.
Family and community pressure to be over grief may be based on a number of false assumptions about grief. Some people may not realize that attachments endure and that some losses are so big and so painful that one cannot ever get to a place where grief has ended. The pressures for people to get over grief also seem to be based on a very simple view of what a loss is. (Rosenblatt, 1996, p. 50)

“I was wondering if I might be able to take some unpaid time away from work,” I carefully asked. As soon as the question passed my lips, I immediately knew what the answer would be. Her ever so slight hesitation and furrowed brow told me more than the carefully worded response that followed. It was a difficult time for the firm. I was a really important resource. The rest of her commentary faded into the background as I choked back my tears. It was clear that four days of paid mourning and four days of vacation was enough for me to be fine. (Brenda, personal story, October, 2006)

“The view of grief most accepted in this century holds that for successful mourning to take place, the mourner must disengage from the deceased, and let go of the past” (Silverman & Klass, 1996, p. 4). The idea that there is a right and wrong way to grieve is probably one of the reasons many bereaved adult siblings feel they need to stay silent. First, sibling grief is not recognized as being as significant as that of other loved ones. And, second, maintaining a long term bond with a dead brother or sister is out of step with what society (at least in North America) believes is the “appropriate” way to deal with loss. Everything I
have read about sibling relationships for example, (Bank & Khan, 1982; Cicirelli, 1995; Lamb, 1982; Gill White, 2006) speaks to the strength and importance of such connections. The belief that successful grieving entails letting go of that relationship is counter to everything I have experienced. The Internet is filled with living memorials to dead brothers and sisters.\footnote{The following websites and blogs are for deceased siblings. Retrieved May 29, 2009 \url{http://www.aish.com/spirituality/odysseys/The_Day_My_Brother_Died.asp} \url{http://www.rd4u.org.uk/personal/brother.html} \url{http://tedishere.blogspot.com/} \url{http://www.sibloss.org/memorials/welcome.html} \url{http://www.adultsiblingsgrief.com/memorials.htm} \url{http://childsuicide.homestead.com/MemorialSites.html}} Most days I read the memorials section of the newspaper and find messages for siblings who have passed away, sometimes many, many years earlier. Siblings are permanently etched by the loss of such an intense relationship.

For Karen, Rena, and Catherine, the ongoing connections they have with their respective siblings was evident in all our conversations. Karen was kinder. Catherine viewed homeless people differently. Rena was able to comfort families as they watched loved ones die. All of these changes came because each one had lost a sibling. It was a way of honouring lives with something positive in their lives lived. Their siblings’ place in the family, however, was never filled. The entire family unit changed, shifting and swaying, never quite able to recapture the joy that they used to share before the death. The ongoing sadness felt at the loss never went away.

And, yet, there was an outside and inside pressure that each of us felt – to move on with our grief. I first noticed it within the context of my work. My boss
and co-workers did not understand why, months after Brent died, I continued to struggle professionally. I stopped having lunch with colleagues, saying "good-morning," or smiling. I avoided team meetings and after hour functions. I did not want to be around laughter or engage in what I now considered frivolous conversations about nothing. Even I did not realize the profound impact grief had on me until I was writing Catherine’s narrative and, suddenly, it dawned on me why I had stopped interacting with one of my former colleagues. I did not see this when I was in the situation. It was only afterwards through a retrospective lens that I recognized my anger toward my colleague as being an offshoot of my grief. Both Rena and Catherine shared similar stories of bosses and colleagues who were “out of touch” with what they needed. Catherine recalled her boss saying, “I know just how you feel. I had to euthanize my dog last week.” Although there are those for whom a pet is their closest companion, for Catherine, comparing James’ death to that of a pet felt disrespectful in that moment. A colleague of mine said the very same thing. In her case the pet she referred to was owned and cared for by someone else. She visited this pet only occasionally. I was speechless. I did not see the similarity between her experience and mine and her words were not comforting. Later that day she called me to her office. I thought she wanted to apologize. Instead she excitedly showed me the kit she had just purchased at the pet store to make a garden ornament in memory of her friend’s dog. She smiled as she pulled it out of the bag, commenting, “Isn’t it cute?” Her comments made me feel as though my sadness was unusual and perhaps out of step with what I “should be” feeling.
Rena recalled a boss who refused to let her take sick leave as additional bereavement days, suggesting instead that they ought to be vacation days.

“To experience a continuing bond with the deceased in the present has been thought of as symptomatic of psychological problems” (Silverman & Klass, 1996, p. 4). Most times when I speak about this project with someone from outside the grief community there is an automatic recoiling. My parents, in particular, always so supportive of my academic progress, are hesitant to ask me about the progression of this project. For the first year, we avoided the topic. Even when I travelled to Montreal and presented (Marshall, 2008) at an academic conference, a huge milestone for me, they did not inquire of the experience. Months later my mom admitted she was afraid to do so. I wondered if they thought my continuing focus on Brent was unhealthy. Even I began to wonder if there was something wrong with what I was doing.

Recently I felt a subtle shift. My mother has initiated conversations about this work and where I am in the process. We talk about the drafts, the process of getting feedback, and how much energy this takes. I confide my fears about getting stuck and perhaps not finishing. She encourages me to stay with it and reminds me of previous academic accomplishments. We do not talk about Brent or his role in all of this or how he is represented in the stories of experience. We talk around him. My mom offers “I think this has been good for you.” It feels better knowing she supports what I am doing for it was hard to keep this part of my life out of family conversations. Recently she asked when I might graduate and if she could attend the ceremony.
The Rules of Grief

Wortman and Cohen Silver (2004) suggest that Western society has certain norms or grieving rules that both influence treatment choices and also the level of support individuals feel from others when it comes to grief. Their review of literature uncovered the following set of beliefs or assumptions about how the bereaved should react to their losses. First, after a loss, individuals go through a period of intense distress and, if they do not experience distress, this is indicative of a problem. I add that, within that level of distress, there is a range that is considered acceptable, depending on levels of connection to the deceased (Doka, 2002). Second, successful adjustment to loss requires that individuals confront and work through their feelings and that continued attachment to the deceased is pathological. Indeed, there continue to be many therapists who actively work with their clients to help them “disengage” from a deceased loved one (personal conversation with bereavement counsellor, January 15, 2007). Third, within a year or two, most people recover from their loss and return to earlier levels of functioning. None of the individuals in this research claim to have “returned to normal.” Each was profoundly changed by the death of her sibling. And, finally, “many people continue to view recovery as the endpoint of the bereavement process and still evaluate bereaved people by judging whether they are taking ‘too long’ to reach this endpoint” (Wortman & Cohen Silver, 2004, p. 418). Grief is likened to an illness in which there are key healing milestones that must be reached within specific periods of time. There is an assumption that grief will end and individuals will recover. That is possibly why, after a while,
bereaved siblings stop talking about their deceased brothers and sisters. There is an unspoken pressure to stop “dwelling on the dead.” There are only a handful of people around me who are comfortable talking about Brent. Most grow silent or change the subject. They do not know how to have a conversation about someone who is physically departed yet, for me, spiritually present.

The idea that grief has an end point that, somehow, one can cross a line and no longer feel the pain of the loss, is out of step with current thinking which emphasizes a continuation of the relationship. “Memorializing, remembering, knowing the person who has died and allowing them to influence the present…” (Silverman & Klass, 1996, p. 17) is more consistent with the way bereavement is looked upon currently. Emphasis is now placed on “negotiating and renegotiating the meaning of loss over time” (p. 19). In my own experience I feel as though I continually unpeel new layers of loss. It is not just Brent’s physical presence that is missing. I miss our friendship, my role as an older sister, the way our family of birth related to one another. His voice, while still present on his home answering machine, feels different now for I know he is not there. When I receive emails from his wife, his name is no longer a part of the signature tag. His shoes and coat are missing from the front hall closet at their home. All of these changes are logical and understandable and yet, they are reminders of what is missing. I also just miss feeling happy about life in the way I did before I knew tragedy. I liked being naive.

“…Death ends only a life: it does not end a relationship” (Bank & Kahn, 1982, p. 271). Rena missed going shopping and visiting the local coffee shop
with her sister, a place they used to frequent. She missed the daily phone call about everyday events. Karen missed the frenetic energy that her brother and his children brought to their family gatherings. She missed the opportunity to spend week-ends together and visit back and forth. Brian was her buddy – the member of her family with whom she could be “goofy.” Catherine missed just knowing her brother James was in the world. Although his safety and happiness was an ongoing worry for her she loved their special connection. They could interpret one another’s thoughts without words.

To understand what influences long term grieving there needs to be an understanding of what has been lost. Rosenblatt (1996, p. 50) says, for most people, “all that is lost is not realized at one point in time. There is, instead, a sequence, perhaps extending over one’s lifetime, of new losses or new realizations of loss.” In spite of passing years, each participant continued to miss her sibling, especially as new milestones in life emerged. For Karen, the death of her father and the birth of Brian’s grandchild, brought forward new layers of sadness. She wished that her brother was present to help her through her father’s death. She felt sad knowing how excited Brian would be to have a grandchild. For Rena, her ordination as a Rabbi served as a special moment when her sister’s absence was noticeable. Cookie was a strong supporter of everything that she had done, and to celebrate this achievement without her sister was difficult. For Catherine, her own daughter’s wedding brought renewed sadness. James had taken such a special interest in her daughter and to have him missing at such a happy occasion was difficult. For me, I feel sad watching
Brent’s children pass milestones; Carter learning to skate, Jocelyn going to school. I enjoy a view on their lives that should have been his.

**Silence**

Doka’s (2002) coining of the term “disenfranchised grief” to describe his observations about those who are, and are not, entitled to experience grief is an important contribution to the way sibling loss, particularly adult sibling loss, is viewed. The original three contexts he proposed suggested that mourners are unsupported in their grief when there is a lack of recognition for the relationship, lack of acknowledgement of the loss, and exclusion of the griever. Essentially, grievers did not have the right to grieve. They felt excluded from grief rituals and so were unable to access community support after the death of their loved one. He also acknowledged that these “griever rules” are different across societies and cultures. In Western society there is a general belief that kin-based relationships merit some kind of grief reaction. Yet, as mentioned earlier, even within that sphere the sibling relationship, especially, adult sibling relationships seem to be absent from most of the research.

Researchers have paid more attention to the impact of sibling loss during childhood or adolescence than in adulthood (Balk, 1990; Davies, 1991; Hogan & DeSantis, 1992; Martinson & Gates Campos, 1991; Packman, Horsely, Davies & Kramer, 2006; Robinson & Mahon, 1997; Walker, 1993). There is agreement amongst researchers that the loss of a sibling in the early part of life is a
tremendously significant event that has far reaching impacts. When a sibling
dies in childhood, parents are left to make huge decisions around the level of
detail to communicate to the other children, how to handle the funeral, how to
deal with the deceased child’s belongings and so on. It is said that “the surviving
sibling becomes a double orphan, losing not only a sister or a brother but also an
emotionally available parent” (Bank & Khan, 1982, p. 273). Children are also
impacted by how the parents deal with their own grief and what resources are
rallied to help them deal with the loss of their sibling. Each participant in this
study experienced deep distress over the changes in their family as a result of
her sibling’s death. Even as adults, their parents’ grief significantly impacted
them. Both Karen and Rena talked about finding ways to protect their parents
from feeling worse than they did. For Karen it meant taking control and removing
a video tape of her brother’s wedding from her parent’s home, pretending that it
had been misplaced. For Rena, it meant not talking about Cookie in front of her
parents. Her mother, especially, found it too difficult.

Hogan and Desantis (1996) studied 157 adolescent bereaved siblings and
isolated several recurring themes. Siblings had a permanently changed reality of
their self and family, recognizing that the death of their brother or sister set their
life on completely new paths. They worried about becoming ill and found it
difficult to engage in activities for which non-bereaved siblings found fun. There
was a strong sense of guilt for feeling happy and, in some cases, for merely
living. The “death of a sibling is permanent and irrevocable and shatters all
expectations and anticipations of the surviving sibling for a shared future that is
not to be” (p. 250). They had difficulty concentrating and ruminated about their sibling’s death. Almost all of them expressed a strong desire to reunite with their sibling. There was also a strong ongoing attachment to the sibling, demonstrated by continuing to have conversations with their deceased sibling, wearing their clothes, and maintaining artefacts that belonged to their brothers and sisters.

Many of the themes or post death experiences noted for adolescent siblings are representative of what I heard from the three participants. They each changed, as mentioned earlier, sometimes in profound ways. They had ongoing attachments to their siblings, finding ways to keep their memories alive. All of the participants kept artefacts as reminders of the relationship. The lack of future together was such an acute and sad recognition by both Karen and Rena in particular. Both of them looked at other sibling relationships longingly, wishing that they could have had the same with their own. In my view, the death of a sibling at any age is a difficult and life changing event.

**Meaning**

“Coherence is an achievement, not a given. This is the work of self-narration: to make a life that seems to be falling apart come together again, by retelling and ‘restorying’ the events of one’s life” (Bochner, 1997, p. 429). The acknowledgment that traumatic events and losses have the potential to shatter a person’s “assumptive world” (Janoff-Bulman, as cited in Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006), the structures and expectations individuals maintain about the way life will
unfold, is not new. And the resulting need to search for meaning after a trauma, is well documented in the grief literature (Attig, 2001; Davis, Wortman, Camille, Lehman & Cohen Silver, 2000; Fleming & Robinson, 2001; Marwit & Klass, 2001; Michael & Snyder, 2005; Neimeyer, 2000, 2001; Neimeyer, Baldwin & Gillies, 2006; Shimshon Rubin, 2001; Nadeau, 2001).

Examining this concept against the backdrop of cognitive, trauma, attachment, and constructivist theories, Gillies and Neimeyer (2006, p. 32) proposed three categories of meaning reconstruction: “making sense of the death, finding benefit in the experience and undergoing identity change.” Forward and Garlie's (2003) study of bereaved adolescent siblings revealed that the search for new meaning was a core variable in the grieving process. Individual participants described “searching for how this tragedy fit into their life, how it had permanently changed them and how they learned to go on living knowing their sibling was gone forever” (p. 6). Similarly, Batten and Oltjenbruns (1999) suggest a key outcome for bereaved adolescent siblings was a changed world view, one that they created through the process of meaning making.

The drive to re-establish meaning or equilibrium after a loss appears to be well entrenched. I saw this in my own response to Brent’s death. Within days I was writing in a journal and actively looking for ways to regain a sense of purpose. Brent’s death was seemingly so random and unexpected, I lost faith in my expectations about the world. And, things that seemed so important before, were now inconsequential while others were magnified. The question “How are you?” was suddenly heightened in intensity and exaggerated in importance. It
felt disloyal to Brent’s memory to answer with a trite, “I’m fine, how are you?” And yet, when I replied, “Not so well. My brother died,” I was often surprised at the lack of empathy in the response. The bigger questions, ones around purpose and how to fit this experience into my “operating schema,” were ones I tackled only gradually and, in retrospect, unintentionally. Ellis (1993, p. 728), in a personal account of her brother’s death in a plane crash, writes, “the sudden loss of my brother threatened, like nothing before, the meaning I had socially constructed for my life, which was that life was by definition meaningful.” Her vivid story of first learning about and then managing through the first few days after her brother’s death resonated with me deeply. I could feel her pain on many levels. We both expected to live long lives with our brothers. How could anything make sense when that fundamental truth was proven false?

“…A struggle to find significance in the loss is especially acute when deaths are traumatic or “off time” in the life cycle…” (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006, p. 46). For Rena, Karen, and Catherine, their siblings’ deaths were “out of pattern” and “off time.” For Rena, Cookie was her closest family member, the one with whom she felt the deepest connection. She took great pride in their close relationship, her joy evident in the photographs contained within her narratives. She looked forward to the many things they would do together in the future. Catherine thought of her younger brother James as akin to her first child; her role as his protector cemented at an early age. His death at the age of 38 ended the possibility that he might finally find his footing and become the “bright star” that Catherine believed he could be. Karen’s brother Brian adored her and was likely
one of the few people in her life who put her first. She loved the wonderful
energy that came from bringing her family together with his and the special
connection they shared. He was her “pal.” Each of these women struggled to
rebuild their “assumptive worlds” in the absence of their siblings. “My sibling was
supposed to grow old with me.” I heard this statement many times during the
course of our conversations. Their early deaths were epiphanal moments,
around which they needed to reorganize so that their lives could be retold (Cole
& Knowles, 2001).

The women changed old thinking patterns, questioned long held beliefs,
and came up with new ways to understand the world. Karen felt her brother’s
presence in her heightened intuition. Catherine established a new belief system
about death. Rena became more active in her community. All of these changes
were part of regaining a set of structures from which to understand life and now
death. And their understandings and meaning making continues as they
renegotiate the meaning of their sibling’s loss in their present lives. “Often the
meaning realized by the bereaved are that life is more painful and
challenging…personal growth often does not mean becoming less distressed,
but learning how to become someone who can carry the weight of her or his
distress” (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006 p. 53).
Discovery and Recovery

One thing remains constant about our humanity – that we must never stop trying to tell stories of who we think we are. Just as important, we must never stop wanting to listen to each other’s stories. (Behar, 2003, p. 18)

Mom called to let me know that Brent’s monument had been placed in the cemetery. Stephen and I decide to go see it together. Unexpectedly, Mom is there when we arrive, shovelling a path through the snow to make access easier. She is crying. Through her tears she offers explanations for her choices – the font, the stone, the wording. I understand better now her need to fill this moment with words. As she looks down the row of headstones, she comments that others have chosen shapes – an angel, a scroll, a book…. “I don’t think Brent would have liked a book,” I quietly say to Stephen. He laughs. We both know why that comment is funny and it feels comforting. (Brenda, personal story, January 2009)

My initial interest in exploring sibling loss came from being shut out of support services within my community. Not only was I deemed to have arrived “too early” in “the grief process” to participate in a support group, for example, sibling loss did not merit a group unto itself anyway. Bereaved siblings were included in a group labelled “others.” This incorporated anyone who was not a bereaved parent, spouse, or child. Those losses were seen as more significant than any other and individuals met together in separate groups lead by facilitators similarly bereaved. I remember reacting to both the exclusion from
support and also to the name “others.” I wanted to talk to someone else who had
lost a brother or sister. I experienced many challenges within my family that I
believed only another bereaved sibling would understand. I was worried about
my parents. I was worried about Brent’s family. To be included in a group
labelled “others” gave the message that my loss was not significant.

I also noticed I was outside the primary circle of support in light of all the
other individuals impacted by Brent’s death. Even I placed my grief at the bottom
of the list, feeling that Susanne, Brent’s children and my parents surely were
feeling worse. I did not want to burden them with my own difficulties and worked
hard to maintain my composure in front of them. Rena, Karen, and Catherine felt
similar pressures to be strong for other family members. We also soon realized
that even somewhat sympathetic listeners outside our families grew tired of “the
death” story. There was subtle and not so subtle pressure to move on and “be
normal.” Two weeks after Brent died, a neighbour asked how I was. “Not so
well,” I replied. “Oh. Still sad about your brother?” she said with genuine
surprise. Similarly, Karen recalled a friend saying, “I thought you’d be over it by
now,” when she was especially sad one day. At work, my boss responded to my
tears with, “Look at it this way, now you have an angel looking out for you.” I
inferred from her comment that my sadness was misplaced and I ought to be
“looking on the bright side” by now. And while none of these comments were ill
intended, the underlying message received was, “You should be fine by now.”
As time went on, we were further silenced from recollecting any happy stories
about our siblings. Beginning a story with, “I remember when my brother
Brent…,” made some people uncomfortable. They averted their eyes, fell silent or simply changed the subject without acknowledging what I said. Within our families it was worse.

I assumed the absence of informal and formal support made these losses more difficult to integrate. Education was one way to initiate a change. Surely if people understood the depth of this loss, the multiple layers bereaved siblings need to negotiate, they would be more empathetic. Finding only a small number of articles and reports on sibling loss, and most of them about children and adolescents, I saw a gap to be filled. My choice to explore meaning making strategies was an opportunity to help myself while, at the same time, to create a foundation of knowledge from which I might help others. And last, I wanted to connect with participants on a personal level and create the community we were excluded from when our siblings first died.

The experience of researching exceeded my expectations. The individual conversations were comfortable and poignant and each participant thanked me for the opportunity to participate. And, while there are links and themes across our stories that speak to the profound nature of this loss, I discovered an unexpected commonality which opened a door to think about sibling loss differently. Yes, we were excluded from community support. And, most definitely, the loss was multi-layered. However, there was something integral to meaning making that was missing for all of us. To that discovery, I now turn.
“Why is losing a sibling so traumatic?” Earlier in this process my answers were, in retrospect, relatively obvious to anyone who had lost a sibling. A companion is lost, someone who helped form an identity. Roles played since early childhood and carried on and expanded into adulthood suddenly vanish. There is a lost opportunity for a future of family connectedness and the comfort of knowing that a close relative will be present and available to help later in life also disappears. And, in old age, the opportunity to look back and share highlights and lowlights with someone who was present through it all is gone. All of these things contribute to the pain of losing a sibling. Their presence is felt in every aspect of life.

“Our personal narratives are not merely a way of describing our lives. They are the means by which we bring order…” (Gilbert 2002, p. 224). Sharing grief in community, that is, with others, is the underpinning of many community based self-help bereavement groups. Adult siblings are often excluded from such opportunities and are further excluded by the community at large which places the loss of a sibling lower on the grief hierarchy. And, while these two “exclusions” contribute to the challenges faced by bereaved siblings, more striking in this study was the way each participant was silenced within her family of origin. Even amongst family members grieving the same person, in depth conversations about the loss were absent. Over time, those patterns remained,
removing an important pathway for meaning making; the opportunity to tell
stories.

This insight came to me after a colleague remarked that the participants
were not “celebrating” their siblings. He knew someone similarly bereaved who,
although deeply saddened by her brother’s death, found joy by sharing stories
about him with her living brother and other family members. In fact, he
remarked, “that’s the bulk of what they do when they see one another.” I
wondered about this for quite a while. “Why were none of us celebrating?” Or
perhaps we were and I was missing it due to my own sadness. Then I realized
what was different for Rena, Karen, Catherine, and myself. Unlike my
colleague’s friend who was free to talk openly about a deceased sibling, we were
not. We were separated from our stories, first while grieving and later when
speaking of our deceased siblings amongst family became taboo.

“Our stories inform our lives and our lives, in turn, are shaped by our
stories. We need to create stories to make order of disorder to find meaning in
the meaningless” (Gilbert, 2002, p. 236). Part of recovering meaning is
acknowledging that what was lost was meaningful. For many different reasons
none of us felt the depths of our grief and sadness were well understood. And
perhaps that contributed to this research initially coming from a sad place. Later,
we missed the opportunity to share happy stories within our families. This was
mostly driven by the reactions of our parents, who we felt needed protection from
further sadness. “We make meaning by creating and exploring our stories in
concert with other interested parties” (Gilbert, 2002, p. 224). Family members
are an obvious first choice but, for participants in this study, that avenue was unavailable.

Siblings are uniquely positioned to be part of stories that extend across entire lives. They know us from birth until potentially well into our eighties and nineties. They see us grow and change and are part of a fabric of experiences that makes life meaningful. I remember my fortieth birthday party. Brent would remember it also for I have photographs of him stuffing some of the “designer” cupcakes that formed the centrepiece of my table into his mouth. He was present at my sixteenth birthday party where I served alcohol to a crowd of underage teenagers. Brent was my official “bouncer” and helped several guests into the backyard as their stomachs’ rebelled against the red wine punch I made. He is in a photograph from my eighth birthday. In it, I am yelling as I reach for his arm. His four year old hand is plunging into my chocolate cake. It is rare to have a friend present at all of these milestones. Siblings are there first because they are part of the family and later, by choice, when they become friends. They have the potential to be with us longer than any other family member. When they die, we lose the opportunity to create new stories together. And, when others are uncomfortable remembering stories from earlier days, we cannot celebrate the relationship we had.

Each participant expressed pain over strained family relationships after her sibling’s death. Avoidance was a common theme. Our parents’ sadness and grief, and our desire to avoid making that worse, was a key influence. It was too painful for them to talk about their deceased children so, by proxy, we no longer
talked about our deceased brothers and sisters. Nadeau’s (1998, 2001) work in family meaning making offers some insights into the factors at play. In her study she conducted interviews with bereaved family members spanning multiple generations within ten families. She grouped findings into three categories: the strategies by which families made sense of death, a typology of the meanings themselves, and related patterns of family meaning making. “Storytelling was the most common meaning-making strategy. It was used by all families in the study” (Nadeau, 2001, p. 340).

She also uncovered “meaning making inhibitors,” factors that limited a family’s ability to find meaning. “Cut-offs” referred to extended non-contact amongst family members. Other inhibitors noted were: family rules that limited open sharing, lack of family contact, and absence of family rituals. Each participant in my study experienced at least one of these inhibitors and, over time, problematic communication patterns lead to other changes within the families. Karen’s family invited non-family members to events to fill the void created by Brian’s missing family. Rena grew more distant from her brother. In Catherine’s family, contact was already sporadic and, when they did come together, they never spoke of James.

Our siblings’ deaths also highlighted the differences in the way we connected to remaining brothers and sisters. Rena was not as close to her older brother and had residual anger about his role in her sister’s care. Catherine, too, felt anger toward her older brother and his hands-off approach in James’ life. Karen, although not angry with her sister, knew the discord that existed between
her brother and sister making it uncomfortable to talk about Brian with her after his death. The differences in the relationships and individual differences in the way siblings from the same family dealt with their own grief made story telling difficult and, mostly, absent.

For Karen and Rena there was the additional loss of being cut off from stories about their nieces and nephews. In Karen’s case, her brother’s family moved out West and, after his death, they have not seen one another again. They spent years celebrating family milestones together and suddenly the entire family was absent. For Rena, she continued contact for several years but gradually, over time, it faded. Additionally, her niece was uncomfortable talking about Cookie’s death which was another obstacle to sharing stories. For Catherine, James did not have children so she did not have such an opportunity.

Within my family it is Susanne, John and more recently Stephen, with whom I can most easily share feelings and recollections about Brent. There are no uncomfortable pauses; we even laugh at shared memories. I reminded Susanne recently of the bright orange fleece jacket she and Brent bought me many Christmases ago. I still remember Brent explaining why he picked such a bright colour for me. “This is so you won’t be shot by a hunter while you’re out walking on your property” he said with a straight face. I wear that fleece almost everyday and when I do, I think of that story. There is a comfort in recounting it in community with someone who knows the other side.
“We continue to author our own life stories as we reflect, interpret and reinterpret what happens in our lives and we tell and retell our stories to other people and ourselves. Meaning, then is embedded in our life stories…” (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006, p. 38). Telling stories is vital to our well being. They allow us to see experiences differently, build on them and potentially grow in our understanding of our place in the world. The presence of siblings in storylines is a part of our social discourse. In a quick review of top rated television shows I counted more than ten where the relationship between siblings was central to the plot line. There is *Brothers and Sisters* (Olin, Berlanti, Osusu-Breen & Schapker, 2007), a story about adult siblings living apart but being very much involved in one another’s lives. *Two and a Half Men* (Loree & Aronshohn, 2003) is a comedy about a divorced brother and his young son living with an older brother who is completely opposite in personality. In *Hope and Faith* (Johnson, Levisetti, & Bruce, 2003) the story revolves around the strange antics of a former soap opera star forced to move in with her older sister and family. As I reviewed more television listings, I realized that siblings were present in virtually every one. Although not always the central plotline, they were there, quietly making an entrance during key moments in the character’s development.

In many ways that discovery is symbolic of the relationship shared with brothers and sisters. Even when they are not part of the central story in our lives, their presence is felt. They are vital to our sense of self and connect us across so many different spheres of our lives. When they die we instantly lose those threads and, when we cannot tell stories about them, it causes deep pain. I
remember a man seeking me out after a presentation (Marshall, 2008). Although he was not a bereaved sibling he faced challenges with his two adult sisters from whom he had grown apart. “Your presentation made me think about how much I’d miss them if they were gone,” he said. “I’m going to try and work things out.” As I think is the case for most people, the relationship they share with their siblings is one that is taken for granted. It is unfortunately only in its absence when the depth of it is most acutely felt.

**Story Recovered**

“This was better than therapy,” Karen said to me recently. We were at my home scanning some of her photos. “What was it that made it better?” I asked. “Because it wasn’t about fixing me or telling me to do something differently. I got to talk about Brian and it made me remember all kinds of happy memories. Before, all I had was the funeral and his death. Now, I can think about our relationship and how lucky I was” (February, 12, 2009). We continued to talk about the process some more as our conversation floated from the photographs, to our present lives and back to our experience in this project. When Karen turned to say “good bye” that night, she paused. “It’s not over, right? We’re not done yet, are we?” “No, for sure, lots more to do”, I replied.

All of us embraced this experience. There was passion and joy every time we met. No one missed an interview or needed to reschedule or left early for another appointment. Each participant made our meetings a priority. Gilbert
(2002) noted that participants in her research often found the interview process therapeutic. I wondered what made this process so positive? “Was it the interviews? Was it reading the transcripts and seeing words on a page? Was it the conversation?” Later, as I formulated my “discoveries” from this research, I realized the answer was not to be found in the parts. It was our joint creation, both product and process, that gave the experience its value.

“…Experiences have little value as long as they are not connected to, or, as Proust says, fused with stories…. It also holds for experiences that are supposed to change our whole life, for example experiences of deep love or grief. We only become aware of the significance of these experiences by telling stories about them and fusing them with other stories. (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 7)

Sharing stories, freely and openly talking about siblings, gave Rena, Karen and Catherine another lens through which to view their relationships. Their siblings came to life again with an interested listener. Exchanging stories and experiences was mutually helpful. After one of our last meetings Rena said, “Cookie is here. She is at this table” (August 26, 2009). I did not completely understand what she meant at the time. Now I think I do.

Participating in this study opened a door for Rena, Karen, and Catherine to bring their siblings into new conversations. With so many years now passed it was easy for others to forget that they once had another sibling, and new friends, were unlikely to know. As Rena said to me, “When people ask me if I have brothers or sisters, I answer differently depending on who is asking” (August 26, 2009). Now though, when people asked them, “What have you been up to?” they sometimes talked about our research. It was neutral, and easier for others
to listen without feeling uncomfortable or afraid. Others could ask questions about the research process which, by proxy, allowed for a conversation about their siblings. “I tell everyone about it,” Catherine said to me at one meeting. “And then I tell them all about James” (September 11, 2009). Being part of this research project created a non-threatening way to talk about their siblings with more people. It was easier to inject a story about their siblings into the conversation for they now had a socially acceptable reason to be included.

Within their immediate families most silence patterns remained although, in some cases, they shifted slightly. Karen’s husband and children, who previously “walked on eggshells” regarding anything to do with Brian, asked few questions about her meetings with me. “I’m meeting Brenda,” she would say and typically that would end the conversation. No one inquired about the process or how it felt to talk about Brian. Karen also told her mom about my study and she also refrained from asking questions. Most evenings when I was at her home, her adult children were present, coming and going from the kitchen, trying to tip toe in and out without disrupting our flow. And, on more than one occasion, when the tapes were turned off and Karen and I were just chatting as friends, they tentatively joined the conversation adding some of their own memories of their uncle. Perhaps my presence made it safer to talk about him or perhaps seeing their mother comfortable with the conversation helped. Catherine shared our transcripts with her eldest daughter and they laughed and recalled other stories as they read them. Her daughter often corrected Catherine’s recollections, adding in new details and providing another perspective on the
memory. “We really enjoy reading them,” she said to me. “It makes us remember other stories too” (September 11, 2009). Rena also told others about our research.

“How to encompass in our minds the complexity of some lived moments of life? You don’t do that with theories. You don’t do that with a system of ideas. You do that with a story” (Bochner, 1997, p. 425). By telling a story, you change a story and that is what each person was able to do. Karen came to a new understanding about her relationship with Brian because she had the chance to review their lives together again in a fresh way. Recounting stories out loud changed their meaning. The experience also prompted her to have a conversation with Carrie, Brian’s wife, something she had not done in years. “We laughed and joked and it felt really nice,” she said to me. “Stories are somehow important for our identity: They tell us who we are” (Widdershoven, 1993, p. 6). Rena also felt the research experience took her to a new level in her relationship with her sister. Over coffee she recounted a story of a patient she was counselling. In addition to struggling with her own health issues, the patient was deeply saddened by the sudden loss of her brother. Rena shared a little about Cookie and immediately felt a shift, the other woman acknowledging how comforting it was to talk with someone who knew what it felt like to lose a sibling. Catherine gained deeper insight into her relationship with James and felt pleased to now have a permanent record for future generations to read.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most satisfying parts of this work came when I shared drafts of the individual narratives with each participant. Their
reactions, their heartfelt gratitude for being included, were beyond what I imagined possible. This reaction is ironic in light of the special care I took to outline what I now refer to as a “disaster recovery” plan in part of an ethical review protocol. Even I envisioned the conversations might evoke emotional distress and, in preparation, engaged an outside grief counsellor as additional support. I also discussed this potential with each participant in our first meeting and was careful to reinforce that this was not therapy. Given what I now know, I am struck by how different the experience was from that picture. A conversation about a deceased loved one was expected to be difficult and yet it was liberating for each of us.

The importance of story telling for bereaved individuals is a tenet of every community based support group I have encountered or reviewed since Brent’s death. Amidst the safety of other similarly bereaved individuals, participants are encouraged to “tell their story.” Facilitators, also similarly bereaved, are trained to simply listen. A Google search for online bereavement support groups easily brings up hundreds of resources from which to choose. The notion of sharing within community is carried forward into cyberspace. The Healing Story Alliance of the National Storytellers network33 is an organization whose purpose is to “explore and promote the use of storytelling in healing.” The site lists among its resource materials a large bibliography of books written by bereaved individuals about their experience of loss. Similarly, local bookstore shelves are lined with books written in memory of lost loved ones. A recent review of trade publications

on “grief” at Chapters / Indigo Bookstores brought forward a wide selection from which to choose, many of which were written by bereaved individuals. The books on sibling loss Sibling Grief (Gill White, 2006), Surviving the Death of a Sibling (Wray, 2003) and Letters to Sara: The Agony of Adult Sibling Loss (McCurry, 2001) were all written by bereaved siblings. The need to be heard, to share a story of loss appears to be universal. “As time goes by, stories serve to bind experiences together, maintaining them in relationship to each other as parts of distinctive memory segments” (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 3). Stories help to maintain a connection with memories of loved ones.

**Implications**

I remember learning “how to conduct research” during my first year of university in 1982. We talked about samples, selection methods, and the need to keep work free from biases. We learned about “t tests,” “r tests” and levels of “significance” and the differences between “reliability” and “validity” in findings. Those “samples,” as they were termed, and the “populations” our research applied to were nameless and faceless. I never thought of them as people with stories and lives. As I reflect on my journey as a researcher, and this work in particular, I smile at how far from that approach I am today.
Learning about narrative inquiry during a Master’s degree program (Marshall, 2002) and later arful research practices\textsuperscript{34} while doing a thesis, changed the way I look at research. It gave me a foundation from which to think about my project differently, to invite people, not “samples” or “subjects” to participate; to continually find ways to bring them into our co-creation, and to place their needs at the forefront. It also gave me freedom to acknowledge and build from my own experience; to begin with my story as a central part of the work. And the validation I feel from the participants who leave this experience changed, even in small ways, is humbling. It is hard to imagine working in any other way.

Most of the research I read within the death studies genre was consistent with a positivist tradition (Balk, 1990; Hogan & DeSantis, 1992, 1996; Neimeyer, Baldwin & Gillies, 2006; Marwit & Klass, 1996). Even studies utilizing qualitative approaches (primarily interviews) seemed more similar to positivist works in both design and report write-up when contrasted with my view of qualitative research (Batten & Oltjenbruns, 1999; Davies, 1991). And, while I choose to work differently, I recognize and respect the important contribution these studies make to the field of death and dying. Creating models of coping and coming to broader conclusions about how people perceive and respond to loss, creates a simpler entry point for bereaved individuals first seeking assistance. Kübler-Ross and

\textsuperscript{34} Faculty and graduate researchers associated with the Centre for Arts Informed research frame their work through the arts, or art forms. Information about the centre may be found on their website. Retrieved May 29, 2009 from http://www.utoronto.ca/CAIR/airchome3.html
David Kessler’s five stages of grief\textsuperscript{35} model, long since acknowledged as out of step with current thinking, remains a familiar construct for many people. Thinking about grief as steps in a journey with a start and an end is comforting and easier than realizing it will be lifelong. It helps normalize a difficult and bewildering experience and offers hope for an end to suffering.

As a researcher it is easy to believe that the group most likely to benefit from one’s work is situated in the future. Findings or “discoveries” are supposed to help others. It is unusual (but not unique) to engage in research where a stated goal is to make a difference for the participants (Cole & Knowles, 2008). Most often participant stories, experiences, and knowledge are viewed as data that will help the next person. While I hoped participation in this study would be helpful for individuals, admittedly a key goal was to gather information that would benefit other bereaved siblings. I never envisioned that the process could be so powerful for the participants themselves.

As part of my submission for the ADEC conference (Marshall, 2009), I had to categorize my work as representative of one of the following: personal experience and reflection, practice report, research report, or scholarly paper. Presumably, my choice of category would influence who might select my session. In 2008 I attended sessions from within all of these categories. The practice reports along with the personal experience and reflection seminars seemed to attract mostly counsellors, therapists and guests who had a personal

connection with the topic. I found the speakers more inclined to use multi-media as part of their presentations and to use a more conversational style with audiences. In the sessions labelled “scholarly papers” and “research reports” the presentations were formal, the presenters speaking from prepared notes. I remember one in particular where the speaker was more animated than most. Her research on bereaved parents and their ability to continue parenting was interesting and yet, not moving. The participants were not named, their identities shielded, and I learned very little about who they were as people. I wanted to know such details. This year I chose “research report” (Marshall, 2009) as the category most representative of my work. And yet, in reality, my work does not fit neatly into any one of these categories. It covers them all.

Cole and McIntyre’s\textsuperscript{36} work on Alzheimer’s Caregivers is a compelling example of the way personal experience, research, and practice can come together cohesively and where “the researched,” benefit from the experience. Their use of installation art, comprised of stories and remembrances of both the people lost and those that cared for them, speaks to multiple audiences. Participants are visible through stories, photographs and artefacts that hold meaning. In some cases, participants are present while the exhibit is in place and find joy in witnessing their story come to life for others. Many participants stay in touch with Cole and McIntyre well beyond the official “end” of the research, providing “updates on the health or passing of their loved one or with

\textsuperscript{36} Cole and McIntyre are researchers at the University of Toronto. Their work focuses on caregiving and Alzheimer’s disease and encompasses a wide range of research activities. Additional information is available at their website. Retrieved March 25, 2009 from http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/research/mappingcare/home.shtml
further contributions or even just to maintain the connection” (A.L. Cole, personal communication, March 9, 2009). I like thinking about research this way; that it can inform and help both in creation and in completion. Participants gain as much through their participation as others gain from the end product. This “discovery” is exciting to me and I feel my study, while small, offers another perspective on research in the death and bereavement field.

My study also raises questions about timing of what grief workers refer to as “interventions.” There is an ongoing debate within the death education and counselling field about the value of grief counselling and other types of post bereavement support (Neimeyer, 2000; Jordan & Neimeyer, 2003; Schut, Stroebe, Van den Bout & Tergehhen, 2001). Many believe most individuals will return to normal levels of functioning without intervention. And for those who support the use of interventions for “high risk” grievers, optimal timing is suggested to be within the first 6 – 18 months post death (Jordan & Neimeyer, 2003). From a medical perspective, grief is viewed as a state from which one must “recover.” Any kind of support then, individual or community based is labelled an “intervention.”

In this study, the participants were many years removed from that critical timeframe. And, all had undertaken grief counselling and, in the eyes of the grief community, might be considered “recovered.” And, yet, they gained new perspectives from this experience and were pleased to be part of it. They told their stories and in the telling, changed them in positive ways. This runs counter to current discussions about the timing of “effective interventions” and who might
benefit from them. I wonder how many participants are excluded from research because they do not fall into this timeframe. They are not easily accessible or visible as they have faded into the community and likely no longer are actively seeking support. If one accepts that stories are always in motion, the timing of any “intervention” no longer matters. Whenever it occurs, there is a possibility for growth and change.

A recent presentation (Marshall, 2009) also highlighted a growing need for information on this topic. Many who attended the session were social workers, looking to enhance their knowledge of sibling loss. One social worker shared a story about an elderly man she recently encountered. His sister, with whom he had lived for years, died. When the social worker responded with “I am very sorry. What is that like for you?” The man told her she was the first person to acknowledge his loss. Another shared the story of identical twin sisters, one of whom died suddenly, leaving behind two very young children. She was working with the surviving twin. One of the complications was that the surviving children of the deceased sister now saw the living twin as their mother. They were identical in appearance. Other stories followed and several social workers approached me afterward to “offer” their clients as potential subjects for future work. Each of them acknowledging that this loss, previously unaccounted for in their practices, was becoming more and more common. They were looking for strategies to help. I was especially pleased to learn that one returned to her workplace (a grief support centre) and used what she learned from my session to conduct a presentation on sibling loss for her colleagues.
I also fielded a question from a pastor, himself a bereaved sibling, who wondered about the grieving process when the relationship with the deceased sibling was not close. He spoke of losing his sister to cancer and the residual sadness he felt about the unfulfilled potential for a strong relationship. Others in the audience nodded in agreement. He suggested research along this line would be a helpful addition to the literature. All three women in this study characterized their relationship with their deceased sibling as their closest. Even the passage of time did not alter that feeling. Previously I might have assumed that those without close relationships might suffer less. And yet, this one individual raised an idea that took my thinking along different lines. And what he had in common with Rena, Karen and Catherine, was a desire to tell his story.

Dr. Heidi Horsley, an expert on sibling loss, ran bereaved sibling workshops for 9/11 sibling survivors of firefighters. She heard over and over that they did not feel their loss was validated or acknowledged. They did not receive the services that were allotted to the widows and children of the deceased firefighters nor did they receive the public recognition that was given to other family members. It was not until the fourth year post 911, that siblings read the names of their brothers and sisters at the public memorial (H. Horsley, personal communication, May 6, 2009). It is interesting that such a large public organization did not offer the same level of support to sibling survivors as was offered to widows and their children. I wonder about other large organizations

37 Dr. Heidi Horsley is co-founder of the Open to Hope Foundation an on-line bereavement support resource. The foundation was created in memory of her brother. Retrieved May 11, 2009 from http://opentohope.com/
where death is a potential job risk. In the Canadian military for example, what kind of support is offered to siblings of soldiers who die? Similarly, how do our police and fire departments handle support when a firefighter or police officer dies? Perhaps there is an opportunity to examine how such organizations currently deal with bereaved siblings of members who die in service.

While doing anthropological fieldwork in the Peruvian Amazon, Hunter (2007) observed a family’s Luta Cacharina; a grief ritual to mark the end of a one year period of formal mourning. In this instance, the ceremony honoured their sister. The family gathered together to tell stories, eat and drink in honour of her life. Toward the end of the evening a village priest arrived and called the eldest sister and eldest brother forward to participate in the last element of the ritual. The sister removed a black arm band she was wearing, and the brother removed his white formal shirt to reveal an everyday shirt underneath. These items, along with some of their deceased sister’s clothing were put away, marking the end of their formal grieving period. This experience happened many years before the author’s own experience of losing her father and was recounted in her review of the role of rituals in the grief and bereavement process. In it she concluded that “ritual occurring later in the grief process remains a missing piece for many individuals whose socio-culturally practiced grief rituals stop with the funeral service and burial of the dead” (p. 155).

“Rituals provide a vehicle for the expression and containment of strong emotions…” (Romanoff & Terrenzio, 1998, p. 698). They are cultural devices that help grievers understand and deal with complex emotions. The absence of
ritual seems to be a predominantly white, Anglo Saxon phenomenon. As noted earlier, within Judaism there are several post death rituals, several of which Rena continues to honour. Similarly, within the Italian community, (R. Sturino, personal communication, May 15, 2009) there are several community sanctioned post death rituals. At 30 days, there is a mass at the same church where the funeral was held, and a gathering afterward. This is repeated on the one year anniversary, although the gathering afterward is not as elaborate. The influence of culture, and subsequently on grief rituals, is a topic of interest within the grief community (Bordere, 2009; Lalande & Bonanno, 2006; Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998). And while it was not the focus of this study, there were differences noted between Rena’s experience, of post bereavement support within the Jewish community, and Karen and Catherine’s experience. And certainly my own experience and longing for ritual to help my family grieve is evidence of its potential for benefit. Examining the relationship between, culture, ritual, and level of support for bereaved siblings might be another area of interest for future studies.

While small, my study has invited interest from many different perspectives. And the opportunity to use it as a starting point for ongoing research into sibling loss is evident. My interest continues to be about stories and how important it is to provide opportunities for people to tell their stories. The need for social validation and recognition for what has been lost seems critical for helping individuals integrate their loss into their lives as lived. “If there is no social recognition of the individual’s relationship with the deceased, then
there is no socially sanctioned status into which to transition” (Romanoff & Terenzio, 1998, p. 707). Siblingship is something that western society appears to place lesser value upon. Again at the ADEC conference in 2009 siblings were left off the memorial card. And when I once again opened my session acknowledging that omission by the organization, the audience was shocked and angered. Those in attendance who were bereaved siblings felt unacknowledged again. Two had already voiced concerns to the conference organizers. Finding ways to educate others about the impact of this loss continues to be a prime motivator for me and will guide any of my future research and practice.
Real lives are not like fiction; there can be no comfortable sense of closure, all the loose ends tied, solving the puzzle of a life. (Sullivan, 1995, p. 15).

“Aunt Brenda, tell me a story about Daddy,” Carter asks in his little boy voice. I’m back to my wedding day. It’s a couple of hours before we are to leave for the church. Brent is sitting at our family kitchen table, pen and paper in hand. “Ahhh…what’s your bridesmaid’s last name again?” he asks. He has left his speech writing duties until the last minute. Incredulous, I stomp out of the room. Of course Brent comes through with an amazing speech later that night and all is forgotten. Carter laughs. “Oh…I’m just like him,” he proudly says. “Tell me another one,” he shouts in excitement. “He’s my Daddy too,” pipes in Jocelyn, as if to be reassured that the man she knows only from pictures can be in her stories too. We continue for eight more stories, each one ending with Carter’s words, “Tell me another one!” I am running out of steam. “Okay, last one,” his mom interjects. “Don’t worry, you’ll have your whole life to ask Aunt Brenda for stories about Daddy.” (Brenda, personal story, December 2008)

Susanne, Carter, Jocelyn and myself were in Niagara Falls to look at the Christmas light displays. As we walked around the city Carter shared memories from his last visit. “Daddy and I went in that building there,” he said pointing to the indoor gym. His memories seemed untouched by the more than two years
that had passed since Brent died. I was happy sharing this evening with the group but sad that Brent was missing. He would have been so excited for us to be out together. I can picture his smile and the knowing glance he would flash at me as we listened to the kids’ excited comments about the lights. And, we probably would play a version of human bumper cars, each of us with a child on our backs, screaming with laughter as Brent and I crashed into one another. My eyes well as I write this, my heart and mind reminding me, yet again, how much I miss him.

“Part of finding new meaning was accepting that the pain would be with them forever” (Forward & Garlie, 2003, p. 22). I have accepted that sadness will be an ongoing part of this story. As Rena, Karen and Catherine expressed, there is an emptiness that cannot be filled. A sibling’s role in life is difficult to categorize; their absence is forever noticeable and it hurts. Sometimes it is a deep longing, just wishing I could pick up the phone and speak with him. Other times, it is a shock, almost as if another, deeper, part of me just learned of his death. Mostly though it is an inner knowing that Brent is gone and life is forever different.

There are positive changes also, ones that previously I would have felt guilty to acknowledge, as though any movement forward was disloyal to Brent. I am a more helpful sibling, a more interactive aunt, and a better friend. I offer help willingly and gladly and adjust my plans to support whenever asked. I love playing with Brent’s children and thinking of fun adventures for us. I make time in my life to visit. I have a new level of patience and energy to simply enjoy a
moment with his children and, through them, I have recaptured joy from my own childhood. Susanne makes it easy for me to play, even buying “adventure” clothes for the kids, knowing that we are likely to find our way into a stream or river, and return home wet and muddy. She is okay with all of it.

I am transformed by this experience. When I began this project I was very sad and could not envision feeling differently. Today, I am energized and moving forward personally and professionally. Already multiple projects are underway. My script has changed. I see opportunities to take this experience and help others. For my family and Brent’s friends, plans are underway for a celebration, a large gathering. All will be invited to bring artefacts and photographs as reminders of Brent. Together we will share stories and I will capture the event through photographs, audio recordings and video which, later, will be transformed into a memory book. Brent was a kind person who valued personal connections. He always made time for people. This event will honour that part of his spirit. I am confident the process of coming together will be positive and perhaps transformative for many who participate. Our joint creation, an idea born of this research process, will be joyful.

For the community, I am planning a series of workshops under the umbrella term “Exploring Loss.” Through a mixture of conversation, artful inquiry and education I hope to create a community of support that encourages personal reflection and growth. I was blessed to be amongst an artful community of scholars when Brent died which presented me with new ways to integrate this loss into my life. I want to bring those opportunities to others so they too might
know the power of story telling in its multiple forms. Professionally, I recently re-established my practice as an Executive Coach. My specialty now includes bereaved individuals, people trying to integrate and cope with a loss within the context of challenging work environments.

Many ask how I will celebrate the completion of this project. There is an intertwining of joy and sorrow in this accomplishment that is difficult to convey. This work required more from me than anything I have ever embarked upon. It was harder, more emotionally draining, and intellectually challenging than I imagined possible. The passion and energy required to conceptualize, write, share, read, revise and write more required a commitment to which I have no comparison. My drive and determination came because of this topic. At this point in my life no other would be worth the effort. That conclusion is difficult to reconcile. My brother’s death gave me a research project.

I remember the day my mom brought a newborn Brent home from the hospital. I was so excited. A little brother delivered just for me. I sat vigil by his crib, endlessly stroking his soft head. His brown eyes, barely open, blinked at me. I loved him before he was born. He was my playmate, my living baby doll, my friend and, as he grew into adulthood, my protector. He used to joke that I was “book smart” and he was “life smart.” He always did his best to entice me away from my desk where I sat for hours studying and writing papers for school. “Let’s play catch,” he would call, and toss my glove at me. In front of our house, we threw the ball back and forth, ramping up the velocity of each pitch. I can hear the sound of our leather gloves snapping under the force. Sometimes I
threw it directly at his face, the impact of the ball in his glove causing it to snap backwards into him. “Brenda,” he would say incredulously. My mean streak always superseded his. The intensity of our throwing continued to increase until a wild pitch ended the game.

My mind is filled with stories about our life growing up. I miss Brent so much. His baseball glove sits beside my computer – a reminder “to have fun” and take a break. Thirty minutes of catch never impacted any of my exam results. I wish I knew that then. He would no doubt be amazed at the hours I spent at my desk to complete this. “Holy,” he would say. “Let’s celebrate with a Dairy Queen blizzard” and off we would go on his motorcycle or in his car with the top down and music thumping. I conclude there is no meaning to be found in his death. The search is to find meaning within myself, to find ways to “be and be better” (Angelou, 2006, p. 47). My story continues.
Brent

(February 19, 1968 – September 16, 2006)

The buzzer sounds signalling my few minutes with Brent are over. My hands are resting on his arm. His chest is heaving, tubes and machines are trying to help him. “We love you Eddie,” I said as I got up to leave. He smiled weakly and nodded his head. Those were our last words.

(Brenda, March 11, 2009)

Figure 21 – “We Three,” Source: Family Photo, Brenda, 2001

38 Brent has the goatee. This is the last picture taken of the three of us.
References


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