**Collaboration: Poetry, Counselling and Psychology**

*The dead don’t go till you do, loved ones.*

*The dead are still here holding our hands. Jackie Kay, ‘Darling.’*

Words can provide powerful medicine for healing the scars left by loss. It makes sense to bring poets, counsellors and psychologists together to discuss this difficult topic. Deborah Alma’s Poetry Pharmacy is giving out poems on prescription. Many poets have a background in treating the mind. Romalyn Ante works with young people as an NHS counsellor; Seni Seneviratne is a psychotherapist; Cheryl Moskowitz is a psychodynamic counsellor.

What makes the commission for *Magma: The Loss Issue* unique is the range of different therapeutic perspectives that the poets engaged with. The University of Central Lancashire’s Arts for Wellbeing network hosts over seventy academics passionate about everything from art therapy to positive psychology. At the university, eight poets were paired with eight counsellors or psychologists to discuss loss. Jackie Kay worked with neuropsychologist Andrew Churchill, Malika Booker with positive psychology researcher Lowri Dowthwaite, Jennifer Lee Tsai with person-centred counsellor Olwen Sutcliffe, Zaffar Kunial with person-centred counsellor Bridget McSweeney, Khadijah Ibrahiim with counsellor and writing therapist Amy Tempest, Romalyn Ante with person-centred counsellor Pat Blackmore, Nick Makoha with counselling lecturer Niomi Wilkinson and Jhilmil Breckenridge with integrative psychotherapy lecturer Imelda Hatton-Yeo.

Each poet, counsellor or psychologist received an information pack containing insights about everything from how to make a memory box (an exercise popular with bereavement counsellors) to Robert Neimeyer’s idea of life imprints, drawn from his research on the psychology of grief. This meant that they not only benefited from their discussion in pairs, but they were also able to range more widely into different theories about loss.

Three counsellors from a hospice in Preston, and two writers on the Young Enigma LGBTQ+ literary mentoring scheme, were also able to take part. We began by talking about different kinds of loss. The discussion took in everything from devastating losses of homeland, youth and eyesight to the mundane annoyance of losing an argument or your phone signal.

**Grief: ‘the price we pay for love.’**

Counsellors and psychologists then told the poets about their ways of approaching loss. ‘Allowing them space and time to talk’ was a simple and effective way for people suffering after loss to open up to a counsellor. Jackie Kay was discussing ideas with Andrew Churchill, who specialises in neuropsychology and mobility. Andrew Churchill described how patients who have lost a limb may experience a ‘phantom limb.’ Jackie Kay’s poem ‘Phantom’ explores this idea.

Psychologists and counsellors alike had heard of Colin Murray Parkes’s research on loss. Parkes’s memorable idea that grief is ‘the price we pay for love’ was one that we returned to.

**‘Grief song is a body dancing to a jagged melody story.’**

Poets then described how their writing engages with loss. ‘I’ll read you a poem,’ Jackie Kay said. She recited ‘Darling’ to Malika Booker and Andrew Churchill. It was an unforgettable moment.

Zaffar Kunial stressed the importance of craft, which helps to distance the writer from the rawness of loss. Performance came up as a way of sharing experiences and turning loss into a rewarding experience, for Young Enigma poet Chanje Kunda. Malika Booker mentioned her long poem ‘Nine Nights’, about Caribbean mourning rituals. The ‘jagged melody story’ of grief is one that poets can capture through narrative and performance.

From writing a verse-play about the therapy process to using mythology to make the personal universal, the discussion generated many exciting ways that poets, counsellors and psychologists could continue working together beyond the *Magma* collaboration. Some poets have stuck closely to the ideas exchanged with counsellors and psychologists. Others have made exciting and innovative links to further aspects of loss. We hope that the ideas they have shared will lead to fresh ways for poets and therapists to explore the healing power of words.

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