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# Art embodied: tattoos as memorials



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... profound loss, is one fraught with a considerable degree of silence and invisibility in so much that what is often experienced is considered to be unspeakable and beyond representation (Kitzmann 2016, p41).

## The Tattoo Project

This work is drawn from 'The Tattoo Project' - a collective community effort to create a digital archive of crowd-sourced commemorative tattoos and their accompanying narratives (See: [thetattoo-project.info](http://thetattoo-project.info)). As I have noted elsewhere *'As a tattoo bearer myself, hearing stories of love, life, laughter, and loss by persons with tattoos motivated me to create an online community and resource for a particular set of storytellers – persons with tattoos, researchers, tattooists and curious others'* (Letherby & Davidson, 2015, p348).

As embodied art, memorial tattoos, the most readily recognised type of commemorative tattoo, exemplify a creative practice engaged in by bereaved persons. As such, memorial tattoos function to communicate experiences and emotions which may be so intense as to defy spoken language alone, and to engage others in the collective process of validating the experience of loss, assuaging

grief, and facilitating a positive integration of loss for the bereaved (Davidson & Letherby, 2015).

## Griefwork: a shared response

Recently, on a Facebook site to which I belong, someone wrote 'I hate when old people say tattoos are a waste of money...'. Whilst I find it disturbing to hear any kind of disparaging remarks about tattoos or 'old people', I admit to having held similar beliefs prior to 2009. Then, in 2009, while doing volunteer work as a peer group facilitator at 'Bereaved Families of Ontario', I met Helena Stahls, who has since become a dear friend. Helena introduced me to her daughter Donna who, as an adult, some years before, completed suicide. It was Helena's tattoo that initiated conversation, introducing me to Donna, disrupting my assumptions about tattoos and their bearers. Like me, prior to Donna's death, Helena had never considered getting a tattoo, a sentiment shared by many with memorial tattoos. Continuing my earlier research on grief and bereavement, I began 'The Tattoo Project'. It was shortly after meeting Helena, in my mid-fifties, that I got my first tattoos – butterflies in memory, in honour, in validation of my deceased babies, who died shortly after birth. Jason in 1975 and Mary in 1977.

### Helena's memorial tattoo for Donna



Helena says 'A parent's biggest fear is that their child will be forgotten, not by the parents but by other people. Now Donna lives on by our talking about her.'

At the time of my babies' births, perinatal death was not validated as 'real loss' (Davidson, 2007). By the late 1990s, hospital protocols had been established in North America to recognise and attempt to assuage parental grief after the death of an infant. This profound change became the subject of my doctoral dissertation. The key concept developed in my research was **griefwork** as the labour shared and negotiated by grieving persons and caring others (Davidson & Letherby, 2014; Davidson, 2008, 2007). Griefwork, as I conceptualise it, differs from the notion of grief work as that which is done primarily by the individual alone to help make sense out of loss (Katz, 2001).

'Grief work', or Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic notion of working through grief, supposes the ultimate goal of letting go of and separating from the deceased (Regehr & Sussman, 2004; Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999). Launching a new understanding of grief, John Bowlby's (1979) work on maternal-child attachment and loss provided a corrective to earlier psychoanalytic theories. Rather than letting go of and severing ties to the deceased, as a way to move beyond grief, continuing bonds theory understands that bereaved persons maintain an ongoing relationship with the deceased (Field *et al*, 2013; Field *et al*, 2005; Benore & Park, 2004; Klass *et al*, 1996; Klass, 1993). As Packman *et al*, (2006, p817) have noted 'it is now generally accepted that despite the permanence of physical separation, the bereaved remains involved and connected to the deceased and can be emotionally sustained through continuing bonds. Continuing bonds is further recognised as a way to find meaning in loss (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001) and purpose in suffering (Currier *et al*, 2006), and to augment meaning reconstruction (Neimeyer, 2000).

For their bearers, memorial tattoos support continued bonds by demonstrating the deceased not only as a tangible part of the self but also as visible and knowable to others. For bereaved persons, death and grief make up the elephant in the room; although they are very much present, this presence is unacknowledged, and the bereaved are silenced. Memorial tattoos as visual images and art are important to this 'presence'. Weber, (2008, p5) argues that '[i]mages literally help us to adopt someone else's gaze, see someone else's point of view, and borrow their experiences for a moment.' As visual images, memorial tattoos can help others understand experiences of love, loss, and grief.

And what of memorial tattoos as art? *The Oxford Dictionary* defines art as '[t]he expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power'<sup>1</sup>. My attention here rests on the 'emotional power' of tattoos as body art. Not all tattoos are what one or another of us might understand as works of art, as they are drawn and inked with varying degrees of skill. They are, however, for me and for their bearers, 'art', as they are visual human creations representing profound human experience, able to elicit strong emotion. Memorial tattoos open dialogue and expose the elephant in the room, as it is more socially acceptable to talk about visual images and body art than about death and grief.

Once dialogue has begun, memorial tattoos serve as a translator of an experience of love and loss into a language more readily understood by others (Davidson 2011, 2010a & 2010b). Once others become engaged in the dialogue and begin to acknowledge and understand grief, the collective task that is griefwork can begin. Angie Duhig and I (Davidson & Duhig, 2016) have argued, however, that while memorial tattoos embody memory and meaning, for others, additional narrative is often required for meaning to be communicated effectively, and with affect, and therefore for effective and affective griefwork. Moreover, even when a tattoo is clearly a memorial, for example citing RIP along with birth and death dates, further narrative elicits far more nuanced meaning. Who was this loved one, and what meaning does their life hold for this tattoo bearer? This visual and narrative information together translates subjective meaning in a way that it can be co-constructed into meanings that are intersubjective or shared (Davidson & Duhig, 2016). Shared meaning, key to griefwork, is significant to grieving individuals because preserving, continuing, and sharing bonds is important to them.

1 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/art>

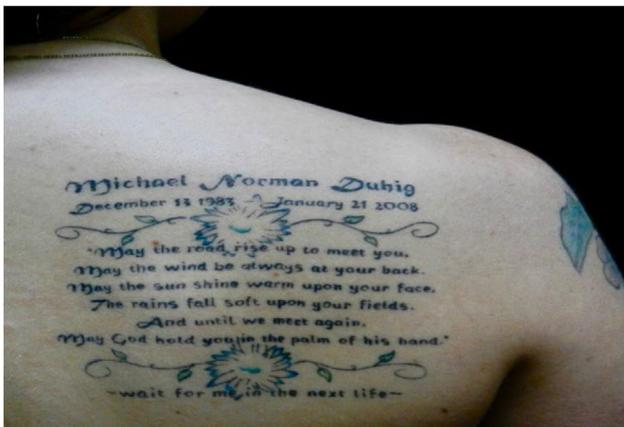
## Tattoos as memorialisation: five central features

Through interview and focus group data examining the meanings memorial tattoos have for their bearers (Davidson 2011 & 2010a), I found memorial tattoos to have five central features including: their ability to continue bonds; their permanence; as help adjusting to loss; for opening dialogue; and as visual representations of change.

### Continuing bonds and tattoos

First, illustrating memorial tattoos as a testament to bonds with the deceased, Angie Duhig notes the following about her tattoo in honour of her brother Michael.

'The reason I chose text was because I wanted it to symbolically reflect how proud I am of all of his accomplishments, academically as well as recreationally, and I felt that the use of text symbolised achievement, chosen as a reminder of him as a role model to me. The content of the text is a poem that I really like, one that describes the process of loss paired with the belief that this is not final and that this bond will continue and reshape in some other form and place' (Davidson & Duhig, 2016, p67).



Angie's poem for her brother Michael. 'Wait for me in the next life' or 'And until we meet again'

Next, looking at Phyllis's tattoo, we meet Daniela. While I have never met Daniela personally, I have come to know her through her mother Phyllis's memorial tattoo, and further through Phyllis's narrative. Phyllis has told me that Daniela, a bright and beautiful teenager who loved soccer, died by suicide as a result of being bullied in school. And now, this bond has been shared, and you too have been introduced to Daniela.

### Phyllis's memorial tattoo for Daniela



Photo © Chavisa Brett.

### Permanence and tattoos

Second, tattoos become permanent markings on the body to be carried until the bearer's own death. Grief is an embodied experience – the griever feels their grief physically, emotionally, socially, and behaviourally (Davidson and Stahls, 2010). As Martel (2016, p32) notes 'The body is not an object, but a living process more aptly captured by the term *embodiment*.... We are our embodiment and our tattoos become a part of this process, changing with us, moving with us, tightening, sagging, and fading with us as our skin lives and dies.'

Although some bearers of memorial tattoos have had minor changes to their tattoos, I have never heard anyone say they regret their tattoo. Our memorial tattoos, then, are permanent embodied representations of love and loss. That our tattoos, like our loved ones, remain with us until our death is key to their import as memorials.



Betty-Lou and Pete tattoo

Betty-Lou says 'The word "Sentebale" [in Sesotho], meaning "Forget me Not", is a message to Pete that I will never forget him. I felt that my memories were not enough and I could carry Pete on my body.'



Pamela and 'Mama' tattoo

Pamela says “‘Mama’ my beloved grandmother, may not be with me physically, but she is with me mentally and emotionally, and forever will be. The white jasmine flower symbolises amiability and attachment and, in a sense, means - I attach myself to you.”

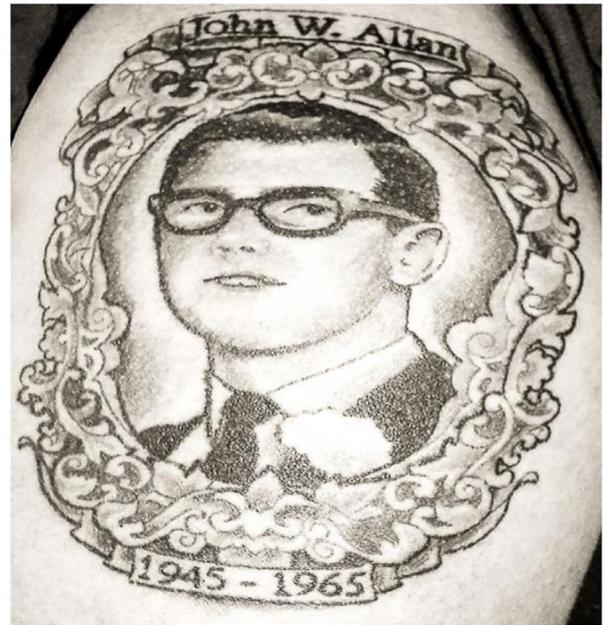
### Adjustment to loss

The third central message memorial tattoos hold for their bearers is that they help them adjust to loss and incorporate it into their lives in meaningful ways.

Sharing her brother Dan and speaking about her adjustment to his death, Mandi says ‘Cherry blossoms represent a warrior in battle and speak to the effect and power and strength to overcoming adversity.’



Mandi's tattoo for her brother Dan. Photo © Chavisa Brett.



Bill's tattoo for his brother John

About the loss of his brother John, Bill told us ‘My older brother John was my protector.... This piece continues to bring a sense of his *presence* that was not there before. Now, I feel more comfortable with things.’

### Opening dialogue

Fourth, and central to griefwork, is the capacity of memorial tattoos to open dialogue. Death is still ‘the elephant in the room’ – an awkward and taboo subject that gets little talk time. Tattoos invite casual conversation and once open, bearers of memorial tattoos use the opportunity to talk about their loved ones. This lifts stigma, helps to normalise death and assuage grief.

Heidi shares her deceased parents’ story through conversation about her tattoo saying ‘I wanted people’s attention and I wanted people to ask me about it so that I could tell my parents’ story and that way I was keeping their memory alive. It’s the first verse of their song, which is *Sailing* by Rod Stewart.’



Heidi's parents' song on her leg. Photo © Chavisa Brett.

If death is a difficult dialogue, mental illness and suicide can be even more so. Grieving the loss of their children to

suicide, these two dads have shared their stories, and their public attempts to create change.



Mel with Shayne's portrait on his arm

According to Mel 'We ... have been very open about Shayne's suicide wanting to fight the stigma associated with mental health. I use his portrait as a remembrance of his short life, and now when strangers on the street ask me about my tattoo I can start a conversation ...'

Note that the semicolon included in Mel's tattoo is part of 'The Semicolon Project', a non-profit movement to de-stigmatise mental illness, embraced and embodied by Mel in memory of Shayne.

And from Jason:

'My daughter Hailee died by suicide just two days after her 13th birthday. She faced severe and pervasive bullying at school. I have advocated for suicide prevention since her passing. In June of 2015, Nevada passed *Hailee's Law*, strengthening our bullying laws, empowering teachers to deal with bullies, and providing for almost \$18 million in grants for social workers in schools.<sup>2</sup>



Jason with a chest piece tattoo for Hailee

Bereaved persons find creative ways to commemorate and to integrate their loss into their lives in meaningful ways, only one of which is through memorial tattoos. It is not unusual for family members and friends of the deceased, sharing a collective grief, to have the same or similar tattoos in honour of their deceased loved one. Participants in my research also found socially active ways to integrate their loss into their lives in ways that are meaningful beyond themselves and their immediate circles. For example, because Donna suffered from both bipolar disorder and Crohn's disease, Helena raised over \$120,000 for the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of Canada through an event called *Just Gotta Skate*. Donna was a professional ice skater for whom skating was a relief from her pain. Angie Duhig and her brother Rob hold an annual golf tournament to raise funds for a scholarship in their brother Michael's name. Mandi and her brother Dan, a gifted musician, shared a special bond through music. Now, Mandi and her family hold charity concerts in honor of Dan. Mel commits random acts of kindness in memory of his son Shayne.

Helana, whose sister Kara died before Helana could donate a kidney to her, later donated a piece of her liver to an eight year-old boy so that his parents would not have to experience such loss.



Helana with a tattoo for Kara on her arm. Photo © Chavisa Brett.

2 This is now a law in the U.S. State of Nevada. See <http://www.reviewjournal.com/news/father-school-received-bullying-report-daughter-s-suicide>

## Change: before and after

You will often hear bereaved people mark time as before and after the death of their loved one, and note that they will never be the same as they were 'before'. The fifth central feature of memorial tattoos is that they are embodied and visual representations of change in their bearer's personal identity, as well as representing the ongoing process of enduring and integrating loss and grief into one's life and identity in meaningful ways.

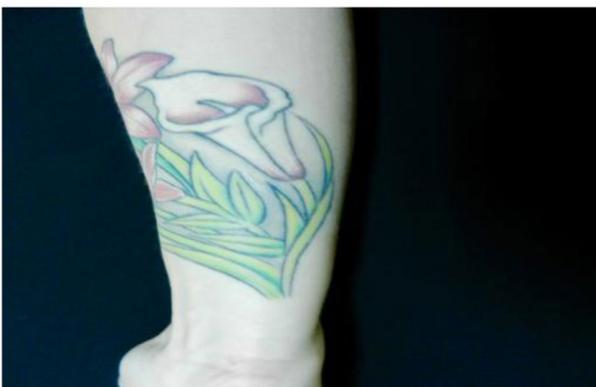
Eva has described this process after the death of her son Dan. Eva's tattoo is a Slavic solar symbol, chosen because she called Dan 'her sunshine'.

'I was surviving and looking like I was doing okay from the outside ... and perhaps it was just my perception that people were forgetting what I had been through and how my life had changed forever. And maybe they didn't even realise that I had changed forever, that even though my outside looked the same ... my inside had been scrambled and reassembled in a very different way. And so I felt that I had wanted an external reminder.... I wanted them to remember.'



Eva's Slavic solar symbol tattoo for her son Dan. Photo © Chavisa Brett.

Describing herself as a 'troubled kid ... quickly progressing from experimenting with cutting,' DM's tattoo of the bouquet planted with her dad is a reminder to her that she would never cut again. She says 'I would never have those thoughts that I'm going to be selfish and take my life, and leave my mom and my sister alone.'



DM with Calla Lily on her arm

## Concluding with 'saudade'

In general, for most of us, grief has no conclusion; the best we can hope for is its integration in support of 'good grief'. 'Saudade', as was explained to me by a mother grieving the death of her son, and which she has tattooed on her arm, is a Portuguese word that signifies the love that cannot be fully articulated, but that will always be felt. What this research makes visual and tangible are the narrated stories of love and loss experienced and shared by bearers of memorial tattoos.

I noted earlier that my first two tattoos were butterflies to represent the short but meaningful lives of my babies. I told the tattoo artist to leave space between the butterflies for my living son - to have my babies near their sibling. A few months later I added a perennial flower to that cherished place.

As was the practice at that time, when my babies died they were whisked away without my being able to see, hold, or even name them. I was told to 'go home and have another *one*' as if I would feel no great loss, as if one baby could replace another. I received similar comments after leaving hospital as well. I was 'put under a time gun' to 'get over it'. Others did not consider my babies to be part of my family. Efforts to do so by me were shut down. I grieved alone and in silence until, many years later, I began researching perinatal loss and, shortly after, found my way to 'Bereaved Families of Ontario'.

As an embodied representation, my tattoo now integrates my babies into my family portrait demonstrating and continuing a family bond, opening dialogue, marking permanence and adjustment, and illustrating my identity as a bereaved mother. It allows me an amenable medium by which to open dialogue and continue with others in my griefwork.

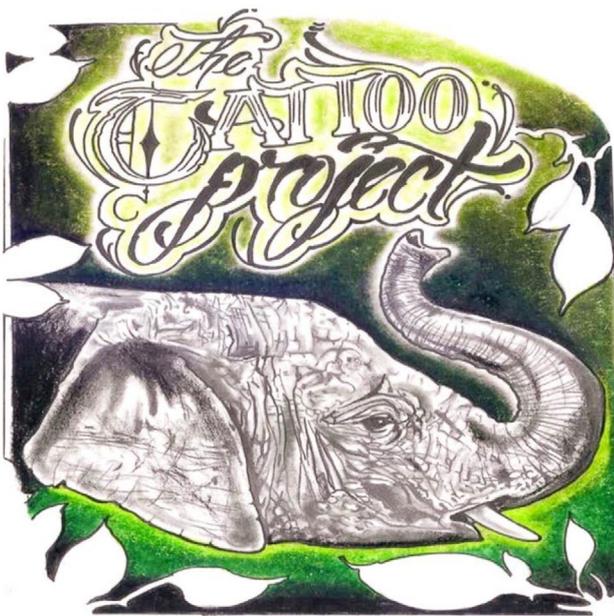


Deborah's family portrait tattoo

I integrated my losses into my life visually through my tattoos and also through my research, conference presentations, and contributions to the scholarly literature including *The Tattoo Project: Commemorative tattoos, visual culture, and the digital archive* (2016). 'The Tattoo Project' has as its objective to create a digital archive for

commemorative tattoos and their narratives. The project puts a public stamp on social research and is directed at the co-production and mobilisation of knowledge. The goals of 'The Tattoo Project' are fourfold: first is to create a repository for commemorative tattoos, a forum which will enable the public to share their commemorative tattoos and contextualizing narratives, empowering users to make the project a social tool of their own; second, the repository will be a cultural heritage site, which will preserve and circulate this unique artistic form of expressing and memorialising contemporary, lived experience; third, is to provide scholars with a digital database for analysis; and fourth is to develop ongoing relationships among academics, professionals and the public (with and without tattoos) (Davidson, 2016).

My latest tattoo commemorates this project. Her name is Ellie (the name my deceased father called Eleanor, my mother, who is also deceased). This is also now 'The Tattoo Project's' logo.



Deborah's elephant tattoo

Elephants form communities and have rich social bonds that provide a major component of their survival. Elephants demonstrate 'emotional contagion' which means that if an elephant is in distress the others try to soothe and protect it. For example, elephants are known to exhibit grief at the loss of a family member. Members of their communities provide social support to the member who is grieving the most – rather than rushing the elephant through grief – they keep to her or his pace.

Unlike the 'elephant in the room' of humans, that which is present but intentionally avoided, elephants see, face, and communicate. In short, elephants participate in griefwork. Let us learn from them.

## Notes

Participants' first names, or in one case a pseudonym chosen by my participant, are used here.

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