Chapter 4: 'Willie you will live longer than me': An autoethnography reclaiming mothering my first-born.

4.1 Preface

The following article was written as a 'stand alone' piece for the *Journal of Family Studies.* It has been accepted (subject to some changes) by this journal for a special edition on motherhood in 2016. It is the story of mothering Toni, my first-born. As it is written as a complete story, it necessarily contains some parts that may appear repetitive to the reader of this thesis. The style of this autoethnography pays particular attention to anchoring the personal story with the academic literature in a manner that suits the form of the journal.

This article is co-authored by my academic supervisors. Although it is my personal story, without the considerable guidance, encouragement and editing by Dr Yoni Luxford and Prof. Frances Crawford I doubt that this paper would have materialised.

Chapter 5: Rodney's Baptism Certificate

5.1 Preface

This article about mothering my second child, Rodney, was also written as a paper for publication. It is an autoethnography, presented in a style to meet the author requirements of the journal *Qualitative Inquiry.* It has been submitted awaiting outcome of review. It too is co-written by my academic supervisors Dr Yoni Luxford and Prof. Frances Crawford. Though it is my personal story, I am indebted to the many hours of guidance, editing and encouragement given to me by them. This paper is less structured and more flowing than the previous chapter, with more reliance on writing from 'personal narrative'. As before, the reader of the whole thesis may find some repetition necessitated by filling in the background of the story.

Chapter 6: Derek, Maria and Me

6.1 Preface

'Derek, Maria and Me' was written as a piece of creative nonfiction for submission to the feminist motherhood publishers, Demeter Press, hopefully to take its place within an anthology of stories about motherhood.

Creative nonfiction has become the accepted name of a new, emerging genre of writing although, of course, people have written creative nonfiction almost since the beginning of time. Gutkind (2012, p.7) the founder and editor of the magazine *Creative Nonfiction* defines it simply as ' true stories well told'. The genre includes poetry, essays and memoirs. The 'creative' aspect does not refer to making up or embellishing writing, but instead to the way the author 'shapes and presents information.'

It will be submitted for review during 2015. Non-fiction's roots are in journalism and to suit the genre, few references and no headings are used. It will be submitted with myself as single author but with acknowledgements to my academic supervisors, Dr Yoni Luxford and Prof. Frances Crawford.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Coming to the conclusion of this thesis presented particular challenges for me. I began the thesis by writing the three chapters of stories about mothering my three children (Chapters 4, 5 & 6) and then the introduction. Halfway through the introduction I got stuck. I was completely immobilized with writer's block.

Of course I could push down the computer keys and create words but none of them seemed to make sense. With my deadline approaching rapidly, I was desperate. I could not sleep, felt nauseated and I was buzzing frenetically around the house getting nothing done. After about two weeks of desperation I went searching for a local counsellor. My theory was that finishing this thesis meant leaving behind my children. That word that many health professionals and the media frequently use came to mind, 'closure'. Language matters and has bodily effects that are not always understood. I did not want my children closed away. The psychologist gave me some simple techniques for changing my tack such as being kind to myself instead of bashing myself up for my shortcomings. She instructed me not to write for four whole days. It was a rule that I had to break. I started writing again and this time it was not onerous but joyful: a sense of pulling it all together.

Part of the joy, I realized, was that I had liberated myself as a mother, and my children from the dark shadow that had encased them. It was so very different from the idea of closure. Before, I could only associate my children, or for that matter anyone else's children, with trauma and tragedy. My love for Toni, Rodney and Derek was associated with excruciating pain. A dark cloak of grief weighed down my shoulders. The pain and the cloak were gone. What remained was unencumbered pure love for my children.

I am curious about others having similar experience. In my professional experience as a palliative care nurse and now a celebrant I know that people

often do not die well. Perhaps others can only associate their loved one with the trauma of their death or the pain of their grief. Perhaps they too, like Poulos' (2006) family, hide their dead away, imprisoned in the dark shadows, not knowing how to free them.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

To conclude this thesis, I return to the research question and ask:

> *How does writing myself out of the dark shadows of my three children's deaths, reclaiming my identity as a mother and recalling my children's lives add to the body of knowledge of motherhood and maternal bereavement?*

Using Richardson's 'writing as method' (2000) and the methodology of autoethnography has allowed me a free rein to wander around in my stories and prioritise the layers that hold the most intensity. The threads of story were then merged with scholarly strands that were chosen for their fit within the pattern that was creating itself. Each thread enhanced the others, giving it texture and form.

Reclaiming my mothering self was central to this thesis. It has taken me on a journey through the culture of the 1970s to the present day. On this path I found, within the literature, the means to articulate the bewilderment and grief I have carried with me since the 1970s. I know now that I internalized feelings and thoughts that could not be expressed because the 'feeling rules' imposed impossible restraints (Hochschild, 1978). Giving expression to my reality is liberating as it frees me from harbouring the shame of being a somehow deviant person trying hard to appear normal. The literature provides a means of understanding how the prevailing culture foisted upon me ways of being that I had no control over. Other stories of mothers bereaved in previous eras of Australia's history now proliferate in popular and academic literature telling me I was not alone in thinking that there was something wrong with me (Sands, 2008; Thompson, 2007a, 2007b & 2010).

But this thesis contains more than a description of the callous culture of pre the mid 1970s. The memory box mementos led me into Toni's story to the joy of mothering my first born, the mother/daughter relationship and my guilt-ridden ambivalence to mothering, particularly during her illness. Derek's Maria helped

me remember enjoying the young Derek and, as she remained with him for his lifetime, Maria has become symbolic of our inherent and unbreakable connection. Prior to writing from Maria's place in Derek's life, my view of his life was blinkered by trauma and how my ability to mother him had been compromised.

My search within the motherhood literature situated my experience within frameworks of theory. Works where theory was less obvious or absent allowed me to feel less alone by reading of the trials and joys of other mothers. The motherhood literature within this thesis can be divided into two strands. One is seemingly ungrounded in the personal, theorizing about aspects of motherhood. These theorists included: Bowlby and Ainsworth's 'attachment theory', Ruddick's 'maternal thinking' and Chodorow's 'reproduction of motherhood'. The other is best represented by the ground breaking work of Rich (1986) writing about day to day mothering whilst being inescapably bound by the patriarchal society in which we live. To me Rich shines a beacon on 'the truth', articulating the unease felt by discontented mothers. Both have their value but it is the first strand, the theorists, that tend to set unattainable standards for mothers, causing frustration and guilt. The second talks about the 'real' experience of mothering, often exposing the cracks in the theorist's argument.

My 'truth', written within the framework of autoethnography is relational, written to draw readers into it to actively create for themselves connections with their own lives. Whereas social scientific enquiry present a logical stream of concepts, ideas and facts that is read passively with the purpose of simply absorbing it, each reader of autoethnography comes from a different background and position identifying with or resisting parts of the story depending on their own history (Sparkes, 2002).

It is, therefore, difficult to gauge whether this autoethnography speaks to others or what the reader may learn from it about themselves. Nevertheless, I refrain from seeing this thesis as mere self indulgence and am heartened by Bochner and Ellis (cited in Sparks, 2002, p. 217) question: 'If culture circulates through all of us, how can autoethnography be free of connection to a world beyond the self?'

This thesis contributes to opening the discussion on maternal grief when all of her children die. The literature is particularly silent in this realm of mothering experience. The complexity of accumulated loss compounded by cultural norms that restrict the expression of grief is revealed. As seen in the story of Derek, my adult son, the compounding of grief from Rodney and Toni's deaths affected my ability to mother him. Cultural norms also inhibit childless mothers telling their stories of loss within the everyday world (Harris, 2009-2010)

It also raises questions regarding the ambivalent feelings of mothers common to many women of well children (O'Reilly, 2010; Rich, 1986). I have not found any literature that investigates feelings of ambivalence within the turmoil of caring for sick and dying children. I feel vulnerable in having revealed that 'I wished it was all over' in Toni's story. I hope that my story allows other women to disclose their own vulnerabilities so that we can paint a clearer picture of caring for sick and dying children.

In regard to grief, some theories of grief have dominated the public realm and influenced the 'feeling rules' that govern the way in which the bereaved express or repress their grief (e.g. Kübler-Ross' 'stages', 1965). The 'feeling rules' are invisible but are bewildering and alienating when transgressed (Hochschild, 1978).

It seems to take time to change the 'feeling rules' but aligning them with modern grief theories by allowing and encouraging the bereaved to continue their connection with their dead loved one would alleviate much suffering (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996). While most academic interest in grief resides within the psychology arena, it is the cultural norms within society that have the power to severely compound the already shattering experience of the death of children. As Harris (2009-2010) argues, the bereaved are 'oppressed' by the social rules of Western society. He calls for 'engaging the academic community in reflective analysis of social structures and their impact on bereaved individuals' and the education of the public in the complexity and diversity of grief. I endorse Harris' recommendations. The need for research to explore and make explicit the

feeling rules surrounding maternal (and paternal) grief is paramount in reducing the social impact of the death of children.

Researching the literature and writing and re-writing my story have been more therapeutic than I could have imagined. Like other autoethnographies, my story cannot be generalized to *the* account of mothers of multiple losses. I do hope, though, that parts of my story resonate with readers. I am hoping that this is not just my therapy but that others will leave this paper with a little more understanding of their own world and feel less alone.

I feel like I have been constricted like the narrow end of a megaphone and now I am opening out. The megaphone is also a good metaphor for the act of broadcasting my story for others to read: a liberating and terrifying experience.

I am toying with the idea that Goffman (1963) may not be completely right about 'identity'. Goffman's brilliance in articulating the unseen and unacknowledged 'rules' within everyday life in the post war years is not disputed but today we live in a different era. He speaks of identity as if it is fixed and unchangeable and, although to some degree he believes it can be managed, his premise is that others set our identity.

OReilly (2010) questions what defines motherhood. She suggests rewriting the accepted norms of how mothering is done and reclaiming women's power. She argues that mothering within a patriarchal society involves women having all the responsibility for their children and none of the power. Empowering motherhood, she says, by encouraging women to fulfil their own needs, involving others in their child's upbringing, challenging the idea that the only feeling a mother has towards her child is love and challenging beliefs that how children 'turn out' is determined by them. It sounds simple, just change how mothering is done and provide a different role model to daughters and within a couple of generations the meaning of mothering is changed. Thus, the potential exists to defy cultural norms by re-writing how 'good' mothering is done and creating new conventions. Of course, it is not as easy as it sounds but I do see the young mothers I come across today living closer to empowering ideals than we did.

I believed that my identity as 'the mother whose children died' was unchangeable. Of course, I am that person but I am curious about the possibility

of constructing other identities. By writing myself into a new reality, I accept myself as the 'mother of children'. Toni, Rodney and Derek remain as real to me as live children though, of course, I cannot join mother's conversations about what they are doing, and they do not change but remain the ages they were when they died. I am hoping that the shift in my own mind will shine outwards so that rather than the tragedies of my life being all encompassing, people see the love that a mother had for her children. I do not deny all of my harrowing experiences with moment of joy in between but believe it must count for something. Perhaps I could hold my head up high as the woman who 'knows' more than most, a wise woman.

I hope that this thesis has made a contribution by creating an awareness of the obstacles in the lives of mothers with sick and dying children. Although there have been radical changes in the health care system there remains the need for health care professionals to understand mothers' primal need to protect and be integrally involved in the care and decision making about the care of their infants and children.   No doubt, for hospital staff, it takes some skill to negotiate the care of an infant with a 'tiger' mother. Having been a nurse most of my life, I have some sympathy for the difficult role they must sometimes play but just a simple awareness and acknowledgement of the experience of mothers within their institutions would make life easier for both parties (Heermann, Wilson, & Wilhem, 2005).

The idea of exploring my experience of mothering by writing from my children's lives rather than their deaths by using saved mementos, as a catalyst to entering the story, was an invaluable gift. For myself, I am happy that the reader knows something of my children. They live on for as long as they are remembered. The process of writing has changed me; my children are now here in the light rather than the dark. I reclaim being a mother knowing that death cannot diminish this primal role within my identity.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Icarus flew until he was so close to the sun that the wax holding his feathers melted. We only think of his death and failure. As J. Gilbert (2005) says, *Everyone forgets that Icarus also flew'*.

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I now say:

My children lived and I will always be their mother.

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