

Listening for Echoes: Hypertext, Performativity, and Online Narratives of Grief

Kurt Lindemann

I shouldn't be starting like this, at the beginning. This story doesn't start at the beginning. It starts in the middle. Well, actually the beginning of the end. I stand at my door, watching my brother leave. Did I know this was the last time I would see him alive? I rewrite the scenario in mind, filling in the gaps that disrupt the narrative, spaces between letters and chasms between the words. I insert periods, commas, and colons. And when I'm done, I somehow understand that I knew that was our last time together.

This is how I start this story. But I started grieving his loss long before that last parting, while he was still alive. He was only three years younger than me, and we were close. As I felt us becoming adults, men, I realized we could never go back to the two little boys lying in the same bed, giggling after the lights were supposed to be out.

I think about what Anthony Giddens says about narrative and the self: our identity is constituted by our ability to keep a particular narrative going, one that we (re)write with each new cleave in our sense of the world around us, each jag in the plotline of our lives. I've done this as I think about the communication between my brother and me. Giddens says that through this process I gain ontological security, a grounding in tentative surety and at least some measure of predictability when I get up in the morning, my narrative of self not etched in stone but chalked onto a sun-dried sidewalk, skies threatening rain.

But I also make sacrifices for shoehorning my experiences into a linear, predictable plot, however fleeting. I lose a certain amount of verisimilitude, of multifacetedness. I lose the sense of what it was like to experience that jarring loss. I lose the jagged rhizome of emotions linking disparate thoughts together like a rusty chain buried in hard-packed earth. The process of unearthing this chain does not always occur in a linear progression.

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The night I found out my brother died, I received a text message on my cell phone. This was 2001, so the flip phone was primitive by today's standards. Text messages were only used in emergencies, and they were so rare and exotic a form of communication I wasn't exactly sure I received one until the second beep on the phone.

The message was short and simple: I LOVE YOU.

I frantically checked for the number from which it was sent, half-believing that my brother was still alive; when the sheriff of Prescott County called earlier that night to tell me Mark had fallen 30 feet to his death during a hiking trip in Sedona, I kept insisting it was a joke my little brother was trying to pull on me.

When I tell the story of that moment to others, I end it there. "What happened?" people ask. I don't tell them. It sounds better to me that way. I leave the gap in the story, allowing them to fill it in how they like: a grieving brother finding solace in a text message. A spiritual presence, analog and undefinable, traveling through digital circuitry.

Here's the other part of it. I didn't know the number that appeared. I sat the kitchen table deciding whether I wanted to call it. I wanted to believe his spirit contacted me one last time. I didn't want to think that this was just coincidence. I wanted to believe, but I had to know. I finally called the number. A woman's voice answered. "Wrong number," I mumbled and hung up. But in my private story of that moment, the one I tell myself when I think about that night, I didn't call back. That's what I want to have happened. So I continue to write it that way. And this is where Giddens fails me. I write what I know to be half-true until I'm sure that what I write *is* the way it happened. This surety, this predictability, is illusory but necessary.

Mark died right before the Internet became what it is today, with social media platforms, Facebook photo albums, vanity websites, and personal blogs. Still, I sometimes Google him in the hopes of finding something he posted, or something one of his friends posted, remnants of a life of which I wasn't aware.

I sit at the computer, not sure what I expect to find. When my brother died over 10 years ago, he was almost 29 years old. Seems like I barely got to know him. I want to read about him. I want to be surprised by pictures I never knew existed posted by his friends along with a story that will tell me something I didn't already know.

We embody excess in grief and trauma. Like the language and symbols we use to attempt to understand and communicate our grief, grief itself spills over with meaning (Grey; Lindemann, "Tales"; Lindemann, "Access-Ability"). Trauma, which can be defined as a disruption in our sense of the world not easily reconciled with the narrative we've constructed of ourselves and our lives, creates a canyon. We tell stories, build symbolic bridges to cross it.¹

¹ I conceptualize "stories" here as tellings of a particular moment or event, and "narratives" as longer, more wide-ranging discursive constructions linking together multiple, related moments or events.

I leaf through the stacks of books next to my laptop. We're thinking about grief in new ways now. Recent theorizing has disputed Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief,² forwarding the notion that progression through these famous stages is not linear nor often complete (Bonanno; Konigsberg). We don't experience trauma or grieve in a linear fashion, nor are the stages we have traditionally come to accept as "normal" discrete or exhaustive. However, we all tell stories about our trauma and about the resulting grief. Stephanie Houston Grey explains that trauma, from the Greek meaning "severe wound," arises from ruptures in our social cohesion, gaps in our "symbolic terrain" (203) that destabilize cultural narratives. Certainly, trauma is not always collective. But, often, trauma involves others; we tell stories to make sense of things. Through the telling, we piece together parts of a seemingly disparate chain of events. In this way, stories help us deal with grief resulting from trauma. We come to an understanding about how and why things happen; accurate or not, we fit this understanding into our narrative of self (Giddens). As such, stories can also be cathartic as a sense-making process, and a form of grieving (Ellis) as we work through our grief by talking about it; we may not know what we think until we see what we say about it.

While we may make sense of such experiences through a (re)construction of our experiences in a story-like form, with the rising action, a climax, and dénouement of a Frytag Pyramid,³ the communication of narratives in this manner may not only misrepresent trauma and grief, but position the reader as a distanced voyeur rather than active participant (Tamas). These narratives may also unduly gloss over the embodied experience of such trauma, something perhaps better represented in a non-linear writing form, like poetry or art (Lindemann, "Tales"; Mingé). As we work through the jumble of thoughts and feelings resulting from trauma and grief, we may go back and forth in time between seemingly disconnected events, tell events out of order, and question our own memories. This process is itself part of grief (Lindemann, "Accessibility"). The linearity of grief narratives can mask the visceral, embodied nature of grief (Fox, "Re-membering"; Lindemann, "Tales"). Performative writing, then, with its insistent resistance of the boundaries of genre and its recognition and embrace of partiality (Pollock), seems well-equipped to explore the experiences of grief and trauma.

Trauma and grief is messy. About a year ago, I read the Facebook posts from friends across the country: [our friend and colleague John Warren had passed away three weeks after being diagnosed with Stage 4 Esophageal Cancer](#). He was 36. I had been writing about my brother's death, which happened over 10 years ago. Now the two have converged in my sense-making processes, and in these words. In this narrative. I'm making sense of things, putting words in a certain order in an attempt to understand if they fit together. In an attempt to make them fit together. Maybe I do this because, for John, there was a virtual, public space for our grief and with my brother

² The traditionally accepted five stages of grief are denial, bargaining, anger, depression, and acceptance.

³ Commonly used to analyze the dramatic structure of a written work, this includes exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement.

there wasn't. With John, I got to say goodbye. Sort of. According to Giddens, it's my ontological imperative to make these things fit together as part of my overarching narrative of self. But I find myself noting the ways these two events don't fit. I set them side-by-side in my memory and follow the contours of disconnection.

How do I write *this* story? How do I write absence into the spaces between these words?

Grief is the flipside of presence. We can't have one without the other. The thing is, my brother's digital absence makes the grieving process more difficult. His absence online chisels out this canyon between us into a grand chasm, separate worlds, as if they never—not once—existed on the same plane. I'm no more accurately aware of this than when [Googling Mark's name](#). Don't be fooled, none of those entries are him. I checked. [This link is all I've come up with so far](#).

Did you see the other name in the story?

I've never met Jeff, only talked with him on the phone as he told me the story of how Mark slipped off a cliff ledge, how he grabbed Mark's belt and tried to pull him up. But Mark was too heavy and he had to let Mark drop.

I remember calling Jeff's parents in the middle of the night when I first got the call about Mark from the Prescott County sheriff. I called several entries in the phone book, apologizing for waking people up, explaining in a panic that I needed to talk to Jeff. Finally, a faint, groggy voice answered. His mother.

"Hello?"

"Hi, um, this is Kurt Lindemann. Mark was my brother."

"Oh— [she calls out husband's name], it's the brother."

I talk to the father, who doesn't give me Jeff's number. Instead, the father asks for mine and tells me he'll relay my message. Half an hour later, Jeff calls me and we talk.

He told me how he scrambled down the mountain, screaming for help, how he tried CPR as two passing hikers ran out of the canyon for cell phone reception.

He told me how he propped Mark against a tree and Mark waved his hand, as if to tell him, "You can't do anything now. It's okay."

He told me all of this over the phone. I've never looked into his eyes, touched his shoulder, or sat in silence across from him.

Technology is what I'm left with as I try, over 10 years later, to track this person down. I got up the nerve to follow up on the one solid lead I thought I had, the one phone number that might re-connect me to the last person to see my brother alive, a man I've never met in person and barely talked to on the phone. I finally made the call.

Me: Hi, Jeff. This is Kurt... Kurt Lindemann

Silence.

J: Um, I'm going to need more than that.

Me: You were friends with my brother, Mark? You went hiking with him...

J: Sorry. You must be looking for someone else.

Me: Really? Oh, I'm sorry.

J: No problem. There have been a few other calls like this for me. I'm sorry I can't help you.

Me: Well, thanks anyway.

Wrong person. At first I was suspicious, as his is a unique name. Not John Smith or anything like that. Yes, [internet searches have turned up a few matches](#), but I thought for sure the probability of a person with same unique name in the same state was too low for the match to be a coincidence. Is he just trying to avoid me? Was this, in fact, the right person?

I can't imagine he'd lie to me, especially after so long. The intervening years have dispersed my grief, transforming it from a sharp, acute pain to a chronic ache spreading across my days like a late summer sun. Hasn't it done the same for him? Does he feel like I do? Isn't it time we met? Of course, he hasn't made an effort to track me down to talk to me, so maybe the guilt I sensed when we first spoke on the phone 10 years ago has been lapping at the edges, filling his conscience until he's weighted down, unable to move. I know the feeling.



I go online. A lot. Looking for something, anything, about Mark. Call it procrastination. Call it research. Either way, I'm reminded of the excesses inherent in online narratives, in the hypertext that dots these webpages. The reader can choose what to click on and may choose not to click on any highlighted portions at all (Sloane 20-21). Each click may lead to another page, another site, more links: a web of roots, some connected and some trailing off into darkness. Similar to constructing a narrative of self (Giddens) to make sense of trauma and the resultant grief by going through personal records and pictures (Fox, "Tales"), there is—to paraphrase Derrida's famous argument—nothing outside the text of grief narratives. And as I construct my own narrative of grief, wending my way through this digital maze to track this man down, I realize there is nothing that is outside my grief. And that he and I are connected forever. He's part of this narrative. I have to meet him.



Jeff and I talk a few more times after the initial conversation. We make arrangements for him to take Mark's cat. I call him right before leaving for Tucson to make sure he's still available. He tells me he just can't do it.

I head over to Mark's apartment to feed the cat, refill its water, and give it some company. I'd been going over there and checking in on the cat until I got things sorted out. I walk in and everything in the apartment is as Mark left it, but the cat's gone. I notice a hole in the window screen. I search outside, looking up in the leafy green trees, the Arizona sun piercing the sparse shade and thinning my summer shadow. I call. No answer. As if it knew Mark's several-day absence has signaled the end of its stay there. I call again. I call. No answer. Damn.

I called Jeff's number again a few years later, and spoke to his girlfriend. She told me they had broken up, that she didn't have his new number and didn't know where he was. I wanted to ask her how he was doing, how he was handling it, but her staccato answers telegraphed a frustration with Jeff and their relationship, an anger, a done-with-it-all attitude.

I'm still calling, getting used to the contours of my echo, listening to what they say about me, about my relationship with my brother. It almost sounds like an answer. Almost.



I'm back at the computer, its cold screen flickering back at me in my dark office as I search for another lead. I come across someone who might be his mother. I imagine her voice: "It's the brother."

I send her a Facebook message:

Conversation started March 18, 2012



Kurt Lindemann

5:29pm

Dear Judy

Please excuse this message from someone you don't know, but I believe you might be able to help me.

I'm trying to locate a person, Jeff Giljum. He was a friend of my brother Mark's, and was there when my brother died while the two of them were hiking in Sedona in 2001.

I talked to Jeff a few times but lost touch with him shortly before I was supposed to drive down to Tucson to see him. I was hoping, if you are related to him (and if so, then we actually spoke on the phone once), you might be willing to pass my information along to him and ask him to contact me: kurtjindemann@gmail.com

If you are related and do talk to him, please let him know that I hope he's doing okay. Every time I think about what he must have experienced that day, and having to live with it since then, my heart breaks. I know it must be tough, and I was hoping that, after all these years, he might be willing to just drop me a line so we could reconnect.

If you're not this person, I apologize and thank you for taking the time to read this.

Kurt Lindemann

No response.

I told you this was messy.

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