Chapter 5, When the Student Dies

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with Christine Lawler

Abstract

For me, supervising doctoral students has been an enlightening process of companionship, compassion, and transformation. Engaging in transformational learning necessitates awareness, experienced guiding, and rituals. I find accompanying a student becoming a researcher to be a passionate investment in an emancipatory process. I have found – as I did with Christine – supervision starts with asking difficult questions, seeking clarification, while gradually building trust and support. Christine's work was situated around the absence of the lecturer's voice in higher education. Equally, there is an absence of supervisor accounts, voicing what happens when a student dies. Christine's writing explains who she was and why this research was important to her; my aim here is to voice this through speaking of her death. Considering Christine's story, I argue that rather than the metaphor of an epic journey of existential heroics and trophies, a metaphor of transition is less discursively power-laden and holds a more relational and democratic approach for modern doctoral studies. Students on professional doctorates can be equally or more experienced than the supervisor. Not all journeys are transitions and not all end well. I consider the ways in which the relationship between supervisor and supervisee can be voiced when the student dies.

Introduction

I still see Christine's face. It was late in the evening in winter, early December. I saw her trudging along as I drove out of the campus. We had known each other for about three-four

years. I stopped and pulled over to say hello and see how she was; she had been in hospital following a severe allergic reaction. She was on her way into the library and looked tired. At the same time, I knew she felt good about her work as at our previous session she had shown me the data that had been so difficult to collect. She had been theming it. Her analysis was going well. But it had taken so long and had taken a toll. There had been a lot of problems at work. She had enough. She had come out of hospital and was just starting to begin working in the library again. That night she was upbeat but looked tired. I was leaving (late) to get home. Two weeks later Christine was dead.

This was my first experience of doctoral supervision. I was part time. I did not know until her funeral that she was three years older than me. I did not know she was a David Cassidy fan. While I was not, I certainly knew who he was and remembered the words to the songs played at her funeral. They were from my teen years too. I grieved that I had missed sharing that; a sharply challenging personal/professional insight. I was devastated by what happened. I even felt somehow responsible. I knew the intimate challenges of her doctoral and professional work; the death was so sudden and extremely shocking. I was not, of course responsible in any way. Christine had a gallbladder problem that became systemic inflammation. It was discovered too late, was unexpected and rapid. She was there one day and gone just a couple later. I knew something of and admired how she faced the challenges of her working life. She was brave and determined, able to look on the bright side. Her ability to help and inspire must have supported a huge range of people. I knew Christine had worked for the same university in the past. I did not know that she had worked at a high level in Further Education (FE). I did not know her full story. I had been brought into a team that had changed several times, suiting other people's and not the student's, Christine's, agenda; initially as second supervisor and then as first. I had no completed supervisions. Neither did any of the other supervisors.

At the time Christine died, so suddenly, her new second supervisor had returned to her home country but we were trying to supervise via cross-European teleconference facilities, to achieve some continuity for her.

In what follows I outline and discusses my experience as a supervisor, when after several years of researching, Christine suddenly died. I draw on her writing about why she was doing research and what it meant to her as she searched for answers. I present Christine's rationale for undertaking her doctorate, tell the lifecourse of her education work, and present what I read at her funeral.

The context for Christine's doctoral programme was that of a 'non-traditional' professional doctorate (an EdD) rather than the more 'traditional' doctorate (PhD) which was my own route (Wellington & Sikes, 2007, p. 724). The EdD includes a two-year taught phase followed by a thesis phase. Most of the candidates are non-traditional students as is outlined and discussed by Christine.

In Christine's absence, as a personal commitment to honouring her work and her narrative that forms part of this reflective conversation, I approached Christine's family for permission to use her name as necessary for my dialogic. I have approached her relatives for consent to refer to and use parts of her work

At Christine's Funeral

Three of us attended Christine's funeral at the local crematorium. The programme administrator who also knew her well, had to take half a day's unpaid leave off work. Being part time, I attended in my own, unpaid time. A colleague who held joint doctoral programme responsibility and who also knew Christine well, came with me when I asked. There was no formal university representation or recognition of what had happened. No flowers were sent.

We were asked to say something about Christine. I felt it was important to give voice to her own words and found a passage to read at the funeral. I had remembered she had written about what her study meant to her. The programme leader and I edited this down from Christine's work. It was so difficult to take on her voice. I could barely speak for grief but somehow we took turns and read it aloud. This is the longer version of what Christine wrote.

During my decade as Head of Psychology, I taught 16 to 19-year-olds at a Sixth Form College on the South East Coast of England. I developed a love of creating understanding and passion in my students for my subject. However, at the same time, I also cultivated a great contempt for the political nature of the environment within which I functioned and the dominion I felt policy change had exerted on my profession; for I was teaching in a time of great change.

Between 1992 (under John Major's Conservative Government), the Department of Education and Science was renamed the Department for Education. In 1994, the shadow Labour Party introduced their '[Opening doors to a learning society](#)' education policy document, presented at the Party's annual conference. This paper set the stage for new leader Tony Blair to herald his own brand of change both on education curriculum for 14-19-year-olds and on teaching professionals' autonomy. During this time, discourse grew on the need for the UK to encourage lifelong learning, responding to the UKs lower-level skills attainment in the workforce in comparison to more competitive countries, such as USA and Germany.

When Tony Blair assumed the mantle of UK's Prime Minister in 1997, I had fully established myself as a successful Psychology teacher and Head of the Department. Following my experience as an undergraduate of Psychology and as a teacher of the subject, I felt there was

a great disparity between Psychology knowledge for professionals, knowledge developed as an undergraduate and the Psychology curriculum as required by two dominant exam boards at the time. Consequently, I was helping to spearhead a new examination board for Psychology 'A' Level (The Oxford Exam Board). This aimed to give an opportunity for all students (weak and strong) to exhibit their skills in different ways, rather than using a series of essays requiring an excellent memory for snippets of key studies with no real understanding behind their regurgitations. Many young people who would otherwise not have accessed higher education could now shine without compromising the level or quality of teaching and learning.

Within two years, the reigning Government had removed autonomy from teachers and prescribed curricular content and the disbanding of the new Oxford exam board. The numbers of students in classrooms increased to accommodate multiple students sitting AS level alone or continuing on to the two-year programme and my workload had increased exponentially. Due to curricular changes, I now had to fashion a new set of lesson plans to cover two years and collect new resources. I felt disappointed that Government would make radical changes without consultation with the very professionals whose knowledge and expertise they would need to call on to make those changes viable. Having worked hard for four years after teacher training to accumulate materials, knowledge and pedagogic experience, I had been looking forward to gaining back some social time lost, to regain a little of my life out of work and also found myself questioning my own values and belief system.

*My dedication to my chosen vocation had come from achieving nothing at school and taking evening classes whilst working full time to gain entry to University with the aim of ensuring I could teach all students from all backgrounds at all abilities. I now felt I was adopting Milgram's infamous **'agentic state'** where self-reflection, thinking and autonomy had been*

*replaced by the actions of an **'automaton',** driven by a mindless adherence to teaching with no professional input. By now, the college had opted to become self-funded and discourse adopted in staff meetings began to mirror business-speak with talk of profits, league tables and more 'bums on seats'. 'Student' was no longer an appropriate label; now all students were 'customers'. I felt the culture change simply did not harmonise with my own values and beliefs about education.*

Years later, having taken a temporary break from teaching on sabbatical to study a Master's Degree for 18 months, I found my faith was so eroded I could not return and pursued instead a role as Project Manager implementing Leitch's white paper, encouraging the Nation to enter into a 'learning society'. Working closely with the Aim Higher team in North Kent, achievements were satisfying as more young and mature people were attending University then in the past. Many HEIs had become champions of people from non-professional backgrounds, the disabled and those from multi-ethnic origins.

With the intention of reviving my interest in launching a further challenge at an exam system I felt still did not reflect the ethics behind teaching (where pedagogic practice took into account different learning styles, the exam system did not) I decided to embark on an doctoral programme to develop my ideas further. I began to mix with a number of HE Lecturers who were in the midst of the 'massification' period in HEIs and began to reflect on how I'd felt when my pedagogic world had been reconstructed to accommodate radical policy changes.

I found myself redundant following withdrawal of funding on a change of Government to Conservative under David Cameron (2010) and shortly thereafter, began working temporarily at a university as a data input assistant. By this time, tuition fees had increased massively as

the Conservative/Liberal Democratic Coalition Government had introduced their privatisation. I took a campus bus each morning and evening, populated mainly by students. Student discourse was now clearly concerned with value for money gained through quality of teaching, contact time with lecturers (either in teaching and or personal tutoring sessions) and their perceived need for more support than available. Overseas students (paying fees at double the rate of home students) were particularly vociferous in their opinions clearly indicating they felt lecturers should see them whenever they wished. They also expected them to provide more information, several read-throughs of draft essays before actual submission (in order to help maximise their marks) and seemed particularly concerned that some students were not being contained in lectures (expecting lecturers to manage inappropriate behaviour and conflicts). In support of this view, II even overheard two lecturers talking about serious difficulties in class with students of different and opposing cultures and being unprepared for dealing with cultural conflict.

Whilst reviewing the literature on student study skills for one of the papers I was writing, I noticed that HEIs were being subjected to an almost 'Bourdieusian' discourse unleashed by the research world, requiring a constant awareness of the students they were instructing. Lecturers were asked to adjust for differing backgrounds and personal circumstances, abilities, cultural origins, different levels of understanding English language, deliver pre-entry courses and deliver a very 'customer- focused' service. This approach comprised the majority of writings raising issues of whether HEIs were now 'fit-for-purpose' in a more globalised economy.

Reflecting back on my teaching days, I began to wonder if ... the changes lecturers needed to make for large class sizes, multiple ethnic audiences, pedagogic practices and reductions in

research time had affected their professional practice. A further review of the literature for my preliminary investigation could detect no in-depth staff consultations on managing increased numbers of students and demands on their time.

When completed, the outcome of this mini research project gave birth to the present thesis as a culmination of my growing concern that a profession that I admired and one grounded itself in the value of research, could seemingly be so silent under attack, without riposte.
 (Lawler, C. n.d. Introductory writing for thesis).

Christine's family had never heard her speak this way and were in awe. This was the first time they had heard this kind of 'talk' from her; they did not know that she could speak like this. What those words might mean in a personal familial context, beyond what was being said, had not occurred to me. It just seemed the right thing to do. I had decided I could not and did not want to talk about what I thought of Christine. I wanted to give space for her words, to enable her voice to speak about why she was studying and show what she could do. I was surprised how much it meant to everyone to hear what she had to say; to hear her academic voice. Ultimately, we had really given something back by doing what we did. She was the first person from her family at university and they were stunned and so extraordinarily proud to hear those words. This challenged professional pre-conceived ideas about a duty of care. What had occurred made me even more aware of ensuring I kept in contact with students and mindful of their variously complex lives, despite the onus of contact during the doctoral thesis being contractually theirs.

The work: grief, memories, reciprocity and research contributions

Following the funeral, I grieved. Christine was not a family member. There was no time off work. At the university, I found people did not want to hear about this. When I tried I felt the conversations were turned away, cut off; people wanted to talk about other things. It became a private grief. It felt awkward when I brought my grief up in a professional context. At that time, undoubtably my grief was raw and I was sensitive. Yet, even today, I believe that it is still difficult for colleagues to have a conversation around the death of a student. As a talking therapist in my work outside of academic, I was shocked. I took my grief outside of the academic space and return to it now, with the passing of time. Grief follows patterns. As Christine's supervisor, I wanted what she had done to be valued. I became her supervisor in October 2012. She had had a very difficult time with many supervision changes. She'd struggled to get survey responses sending 1369 emails and finally obtaining 136 replies from 51 males and 61 female lecturers working at six universities across a wide range of disciplines. Her initial data analysis was very exciting. There was wide, overwhelming evidence of lecturers' concerns and fear of speaking up about what was happening in HE. She was in a process of transition and had become a researcher. Suddenly our team, the process we had gone through together and all the work we had done (and all the mending) was gone and Christine's research (her passion that gave meaning to it) and our work with her, all seemed to have meant nothing. The transformative process celebrated though ritual success had evaporated. And I wanted more for her. I wanted more for the participants who had contributed their time to her study. I also wanted my supervisory work and my loss to be recognised. Equally, that felt rather selfish and I was angry that there was no process for this.

Despite the difficulties, I was determined to ask about posthumous doctorates. The programme leader supported and helped me and together we collated the chapters that I had. But we hit problems. I had a copy of Christine's preliminary survey data analysis and had gone through a

later version on her laptop with her. I had seen that she had completed 14 interviews which she was working on at the time but these had not yet been sent to me. They were on her computer. It was a few weeks before we felt able to ask her family. The laptop was locked. Nobody knew her password. There was an onus of proof. Meanwhile my questions established that there was at that time no policy for dealing with the posthumous doctorates at the university where I worked.

Thinking of time spent with Christine brings other things. Sitting over a desk together, shared discussions, intellectual excitement, the colour of the desk, the grain of the wood sparks a memory, a sensory ethnographic link.

Another time.

Another desk.

A colleague and fellow postgraduate student. Nick.

Memory comes fast now, along with realising how long it has been since I have thought about this and a concern not to forget. It was during the very early years of the Aids pandemic. We worked at the Courtauld Gallery. I had finished my joint honours in Art History and French and was just starting my own doctorate at UCL. I had not known him as long nor as well as others working there. But I really liked him and we were forging a fast friendship. He was intellectually clever and so much fun. He'd been in New York. We shared cups of tea, rapid discussion and our love of art. The colour of the desk where we sat. The wood of his coffin. Wood panelling in his parents' house in North London. Huge bunches of white lilies everywhere. The smell of lilies. His family talking about the importance of his work, wanting

to publish it. Study formalised; made important. A passion. A spar of wood from the wreck of a life; something to cling to in a storm-dark sea of grief.

This thing of the value of a person's work resurfaces here. Formally known as their contribution to knowledge, it is not more important nor certainly more real than their life. But for that individual it represents a particular passion and the investment of years of time. Sharing that passion is a communion of valuing. And yet this academic intellectual thing is also work, involving a role, a performance, a status and an institutional requirement for success. And for an academic these are fundamental parts of self and of identity (McAlpine, Jazvac-Martek & Hopwood, 2009)

Thus, ultimately, the question I asked was should Christine's work be recognised by a posthumous doctorate? I had seen enough work in supervision to know she had really good results from her phenomenological pilot study, through her data analysis of survey responses across several universities and the interviews she had themed. I had seen this analysis but I did not have it, nor her latest chapters. She had been ill and in hospital and not sent them in. So, honestly, there was not enough evidence. She was certainly working at doctoral level. She had decided to use a critical realist approach, aligned to her own beliefs and allowing her to stratify and get behind and underneath the questions she was asking. Her work was far beyond that of an MPhil upgrade, a process that was not in place for an EdD. I was left wishing I had been sent more of the analysis.. That might have been enough. But what I could find was not enough. The findings were preliminary.

Christine 13th August 2014:

Just an update. *I've managed 5 more interviews this week so far and have another planned for*

next week too. This will make 14 and I think I'll stop there. I now have 136 surveys with only 4 of them with partial answers.

From August through September, I supported my mother in her late 70s caring for my terminally ill stepfather at home until his death.

Christine: 21 September 2014 10:21

Thanks for catching up with my communications and thanks also for the planning table you sent through.

This will also help with report progress…to consider my extension request until April 2015.

Meanwhile, I am still analysing quantitative data and also concentrating on fleshing out and updating the literature review I have drafted.

I've just been moved to a less intensive role in the Jobcentre so will be happy to come home with more energy than in the past.

I do hope your family is well and coming to terms with their loss. Best wishes, Christine

There were further meetings and emails in the interim, as Christine continued working with her data.

Jennifer: 7 December 2014 at 17:09

Hi Christine,

This is really coming on and will sit well beside your work on methodology and the quantitative context from surveys - great work Christine. You are in that heavy duty work phase and the challenge is to keep it all coming and for us to keep getting it back to you.

Doctoral work: typologies, students and studies

For some time there has been a recognition of the huge variation within and between doctoral programmes' or what Usher (cited in Wellington & Sikes, 2007, p. 724) has called "a diversity of doctorates" studies by a population that is mainly mature, diverse and not homogenous. Many such students are academic staff, some are extremely experienced practitioners in teaching, health sciences, business who at this stage in their careers have become educators in HE or FE. Others are practitioners working externally who aim to fulfil career objectives or who want to research a specific aspect of their work to advance themselves in that field. Some are Education students who carry on studying after master's degrees. Some are funded by their workplace, there are occasional scholarships and some self-fund.

Research by Wellington and Sikes (2007) explores intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors for such students and carefully picks apart previous general notions of performance to think about professional attitudes and confidence. Christine demonstrated her awareness of the context of this HE market early in her writing. Her doctorate was self-funded and followed a part-time route, essential for those also working full time. She began in October 2007 and had an extension due to ill health. And in her past, her fractured employment had indeed contributed to nuancing professional and personal confidence and fulfilment.

More recent research (Hutchings, 2017; Lee 2018) acknowledges the broad, diverse demographic changes discussed above, emphasising group relationships and strategies that nurture. Lee (2018) in particular calls for investment by universities in time for development and research in supervision of modern doctorates beyond the patchy picture of supervision and supervisory team development across the UK. Indeed, the professional and personal labour that supervisors do on behalf of their doctoral students can be enormous. Hughes and

Tight (2013, p. 773) summarise professional aspects: "we can, though, give more explicit recognition to the PhD as a form of work that has involved graft, skills, time, training and painstaking attention to a specific subject of study over a significant period of time. In such a way it is akin to craft, where the intellectual value of the thesis is the primary consideration".

In my experience of working part time, the level of contact hours for doctoral supervision is exploitative as it does not recognise or represent the necessary engagement to properly support student work. Lee (2018) concurs that workload provision for supervisors is frequently an issue. Surveys reported various tensions that challenge both supervisors and their students and that are indicative of the need to care about self and other. For Lee these present opportunities for universities to invest in supervisory development and research such as exploring cultural and disciplinary differences within teams. There is a large gap around understanding what the personal and professional relationships within a modern doctorate require.

In Christine's supervision notes, something I have not looked at for some years, I find unexpected and generous consideration of my questions and issues of workload. Early in 2013 she wrote: "*I have forged a good working relationship with both supervisors who have stretched my thinking, guided my development and given time out of hours to help accommodate my availability issues. Many thanks to both*". While supervision notes are written for continuity purposes and to mark milestones, this is a reminder of out of hours additional effort and are a gift from a thoughtful student with a generous nature.

Hughes and Tight also emphasise the essential work of supervisors and students: "Both the doctorate as work (and, primarily, a product) and the doctorate as a journey (or primarily a

process) – and thus all variations along the spectrum between these conceptions – represent and necessitate sustained work by student and supervisor…." (Hughes & Tight, 2013, p. 773). Several authors have drawn attention to the metaphor of a journey for doctoral study (Hughes & Tight, 2013; Whisker et al., 2010) and of a transformative journey or process in particular (Stevens-Long, Shapiro, & McClintock, 2012). But English literature easily demonstrates many and different forms of journey, and perspectives. Consider, for example thinking with Bunyan's (1678) *Pilgrim's Progress* (the slough of despond etc) focused on effort and getting to the other side with an end in mind, versus Chaucer (1387-1400) in whose *Canterbury Tales* the stories and companions really matter. I now engage with this concept to argue that relational aspects are the more critical. Until this paper and in reflection, I had separated my previous research experience and engagement with notions of doctoral journeys, from teaching about them and thinking about them.

Reconstruing an interrupted Journey

In my writing as a doctoral student, the doctoral 'journey' involved writing about the nature and structure of a doctoral thesis as a hierarchical and patriarchal structure, akin to the structure of heroic epic derived from Ancient Greek Culture, underpinning notions of Western philosophical and psychoanalytic culture. I equated this structure with mapping and theories related to a masculine form of successful orgasmic display from which a female bodily experience was excluded (Patterson, 1993). This of course indicates the problems from a feminist perspective of the power relations I would associate with the institutionalised processes, practices and structures embodied within the academy that define the structure of a thesis and re-present that journey in a typological form. The mapping that sets out in an introduction written in retrospect, like a territory to be conquered or what will be done and how, the dependent order of chapters that head towards a singular conclusion, and the flurry

of success that exhibits and displays what has been done, all have gendered and cultural variants in Freud's mapping of the unconscious and in Willhelm Reich's (1979) theory of the orgasm. I did not one to choose nor consider a singular form of 'Truth' but a plural, interdisciplinary and complex offering where many readings of the same sorts of data related more the extrinsic factors of a female experience (my own) rather than the narrow confines of any singular academic discipline. In short, the possibility of multiple meanings existing at any single time and being of equal value within the mind of any individual, offered for me a different way of thinking about texts, data and ultimately about life. I do not think this was easy, nor indeed complete but for me it was a principle that I wished to argue and indeed demonstrate. This was praxis for me, a practical demonstration of personal and academic beliefs or theories structurally embodied. For this reason, I dislike and distrust "classic journey stories" yet Hughes and Tight, of course make enormously important and valid points; they are experienced supervisors and experience tells.

In short, I have baggage around whether the doctoral journey (in the form of heroic epic) is an appropriate 'metaphor we live by'. It's basically a gendered structure universalised to indicate a period of transition or change. So, just as notions of journey are gendered and culturally laden, they are also universalised and form part of therapeutic talk and linguistic revision, presenting further challenges. Ultimately it is from our experiences that our perceptions, belief, and positions form. These are the ontologies that inform the academic episteme that form and inform thinking, writing, and research. For me this is less in the Mills' (1959) sense of the sociological imagination and of everyday lives (although sometimes it can be) and more in the Friedan (1963) sense of 'the personal is political'. It is located less in the existential phenomenological *dasein* of Heidegger's (1927) learning about ourselves through encounters with strangers and more precisely in Irigaray's (2008) discussions of the

relational and ontological intimacy of how we share breath with others and the earth in which we live (Still, 2012). Relational encounters are complex. On professional and Education doctorates supervision happens in teams. Each differently makes connections with the person being supervised and as supervision progresses what should happen is a switching process where the supervisor becomes more of a mentor or indeed a coach as the student becomes the expert in their own work. In the traditional model students are recruited to the subject in which the main supervisor is usually an international specialist. The relationship is hierarchical and the democracy of outcomes can present challenges. In the modern doctoral model, the flexibility of supervisors is desirable for being able to facilitate the process and the team; subject knowledge is usually spread within the team.

The second student I supervised was different, reaching and passing her viva during an extremely serious, life-threatening cancer. But she had major amends. Her medication made writing physically impossible, her fingers simply could not function. Yet she was so near. Initially she hoped she could manage. I felt torn about being encouraging, wondering whether this might not feel like unnecessary pressure. Her husband tried to help. She kept hoping. She never spoke about whether her brain could cope nor any psychological challenges. She kept trying to manage but despite extensions time ran out and contact was lost. This is a liminal hiatus frozen in time, a moment when the student is caught like a bird hovering on the edge and unable to simply take off. She had retired. I do not believe there could have been any sense of risk to the university. In an instance such as this, I believe there is a moral obligation, or even a transactional obligation in the commercial sense, for a university to be supportive.

The sense of personal fulfilment that a student gains from their doctorates is suggestive of a personally transformative experience (Keefer, 2015). This resonates with what my successful doctoral students have said. Keefer's international study of doctoral students across five countries and nineteen disciplines established conceptual liminal narratives including a "sense of isolation, lack of confidence and impostor syndrome, and research misalignment" (Keefer 2015, abstract). These emotions convey a loss of self that implies something of Durkheim's sense of anomie, a loss of known identity, a liminal position created by being in-between in terms of belonging. A doctoral student in the thesis phase steps out of the structured frameworks of taught courses and far beyond any research module. It is significantly different to anything they have ever done and significantly larger than most if not all can perceive because it is not of their experience. Keefer uses threshold concept theory as a means of supporting students during doctoral rites of passage. Moving away from journeys, I had written another chapter in my doctoral thesis on threshold rites in the form of labyrinths as a means of enacting/reading text and life associated with early bird dances and tree worship. The importance of peer community and need for companionship through periods of isolation, resonates with this sense of moving into and through different intellectual spaces in which learning belongs to the learner and is enacted by them, where there is metacognitive transition (Livingstone, 2003; Zohar, 1999). This movement across (*trans-ire*) a thinking-space as a linguistic and neurological expression, is transformative. Metacognition is a higher order skill which I would like to define here as "networked thinking that produces new knowledge". It comes about within a person, in relation to group processes and also within a supervision team that work well together with the common purpose of supporting the student's work. One of the most conceptually difficult classes I teach doctoral students in groups is an experiment in the ability to move outside of themselves; to understand positioning and perceptions applied through writing differently to

what they know. It is a form of transition that supports metacognition. And it involves stepping out into an unknown space, knowable only through experiencing it, a threshold. But this chapter is about another kind of transition, the death of a student and the supervisory relationship. The most obvious aspect is pragmatic: the award. When a student dies there is a tension between different perspectives relative to academic awards. The institutional perspective reflects the need to maintain academic standards. A further question relates to whom the award serves; who benefits? The award is of no benefit to the individual student, who is dead. It is of considerable benefit to the grieving family, one consisting of recognition rather than something that can be used and research into non-traditional students' main motivations for undertaking doctoral studies supports this (Wellington & Sikes, 2006). But another potential beneficiary is the supervisor. Professionally the supervisory career demands completions and institutional recognition of good work at an appropriate level. Therefore, it is important to ask the employer to examine and consider this aspect too.

Grief is individual and collective. It comes in stages and over time its meaning shifts, along with our individual and collective cultural experiences of death. The recognised Kubler-Ross model (1969) of a five-stage process has informed and nuanced other developments (McCoyd & Walter, 2016; Okun et al., 2011). Bereavement behaviours shift with our lifespan (Stahl & Schultz, 2014). Just as research builds on the past, experiences, feelings and memories are contextual and seem differently cumulative (McClelland & Chappell, 1998). I have felt it was important to let time pass to write this paper. My motivation for this piece was originally prompted by a short conversation with a colleague who told me she had had a supervisee who had died recently, close to finishing. I have heard similar stories from other supervisors. As a supervisor, I have experienced other examples of serious illness and death events for students of which it does not feel appropriate to detail here, heart attacks, deaths of parents and other

family members, serious illnesses in children. Supervisors are partial gatekeepers for personal information. Doctoral supervisors in teams and individually are involved over long periods of time in meeting and discussing many aspects of students' research and sometimes their professional and private lives. This is a close relationship that takes place over an extended period of time that guides the doctoral transition. It carries a professional level of exchange and intimacy rare in other aspects of teaching. It is important that policies are in place to consider what should happen in the event that a student dies, especially given the changing demographics of modern doctorates because it looks like this is sadly not unusual but also because in the transition involved in doctoral study, the award forms the ritual of completion for everyone who has supported the student, their families and their supervisors.

Concluding comments

Finally, this piece is written in part to give space to Christine's voice but also to speak about death; to promote discussion and conversations from supervisor perspectives about something that is simply not discussed. There is some small research on the difficulties for a student when a supervisor dies, I could find none on what a students' death means for a supervisor; the personal is silenced. And as I question the role of a supervisor and mixture of professional and personal care involved, I turn again I turn to Christine's words. She used a different metaphor, also gendered. She talked of giving birth to a thesis. This is a different metaphor that describes a common enough female experience. One in four pregnancies end in miscarriages. She did not have children. Her thesis remained unfinished. When a baby dies in utero, there is a terrible silence. A first trimester UK cultural rule of thumb suggests the experience is not so bad if it happens early on. As such, it is externally graded and subject to public codes of behaviour. Yet, despite being surprisingly common, the taboo on talking about miscarriage is pervasive and is one leaves all involved feeling isolated and in need of

support. Even while recognised, this taboo continues as pervasive and persistent over time (Letherby, 1993; Davidson & Letherby, 2014). In extending the metaphor, commonly enough used of producing a book, this is a miscarriage. But it is so much more because in this case, the mother involved has died and that is the reason for the miscarriage. Of course, this is painful, yet I found that nobody wanted to talk about this with me in a professional, let alone a personal context. Whether there is a taboo in place for supervisors or not, we urgently need to start talking about doctoral student deaths.

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