

A CHILD'S JOURNEY THROUGH LOSS

Donna Rogers and Paula J. Bickham
Louisiana Tech University

The following interview was conducted by Donna Rogers in an elementary school located in south Arkansas. At the time of the interview, Ms. Rogers was a practicum student being supervised by Paula Bickham. In January 1995, a seven year old boy was referred to Ms. Rogers for counseling by the student's teacher. At that time, he was acting out, fighting, becoming very angry with others, and not accepting responsibility for his behavior. During his first contact with Ms. Rogers, he stated that he hated everyone except his kindergarten teacher.

Even as a kindergarten student, Justin (an alias name) has had academic and social relationship problems. His father may have been an alcoholic and it appears that there was ongoing family violence between his parents. In the fall of 1994, Justin's father was killed in an automobile accident. At the time Justin began seeing Ms. Rogers, he had just begun to deal with the loss of his father. The following transcript is of Donna Rogers and Justin's third session.

Justin: ...hurt my hand. 'Cause you know when you do this...it like moves a muscle and how you bruise a muscle it pulls your blood up and down. It pulls my blood up and down and it's hurtin' my skin.

Donna: It really hurts. It's sore.

Justin: Yeap. And I have bruises that hurt myself. I had a bruise because I been holding my book bag. It feels like it's breaking off my arm when I carry my book bag because it's so heavy.

Donna: Uh, huh. You feel real weighted down.

Justin: Mm hmm. I had 3 books in there and a lot of toys. Well not too much toys. And I also have a huh what do you call it? I also have a clap thing you get from McDonald's one of these you pull back the thing and Pow! I have one of them and my arm just hurts, 'cause I been carrying it.

Donna: So you've been carrying around a lot of things then with you. And it's starting to hurt now.

Justin: 'Cause when you put off the weight its, its, I got use to it and then it went back up and threw blood up and hurted.

- Donna: Sometimes it's kinda hard. You, you have all these things that are weighing you down and when you let go it hurts then too.
- Justin: And, and when it's only one side it hurts woser because it ain't level. And all the blood's going to that side.
- Donna: It's nice to have somebody help you.
- Justin: What's inside that door?
- Donna: Uh, that where I keep those puppets and those information and posters that I do in the classes.
- Justin: You know what I done in here before?
- Donna: What?
- Justin: Like the sheet that had animals stick down on another thing. And it had you put them where you wanted to put them. That's fun.
- Donna: You like that.
- Justin: Uh huh. Do you have one?
- Donna: Not that I know of I don't.
- Justin: What all do you have in there though?
- Donna: It's just pretty much boxes and things.
- Justin: That's what I was talking about, like one of them. (Client points to a poster on the wall.)
- Donna: That's what it looks like. Like that little poster.
- Justin: My whole body is hurting for some reason. Walking and everything. . .
- Donna: It sounds like you're kinda tired, maybe.
- Justin: I ain't. I had to wake up in the middle of the night 'cause my Mom had to come pick me up. And when she got over there, the place, we hmm, we, Mamma started talking awhile and she said, "Don't go to sleep, we're about to leave." And then we're not about to leave, then we leave, then it was time for the bus. That's why I'm tired.
- Donna: You didn't sleep very good then.
- Justin: 'Cause you had to wake up early and go to sleep early. And it fun when you don't, when it ain't no school day. And when it's not a school day, we have to do the same though.
- Donna: You have to get up early even when it's not a school day.
- Justin: Well, not early. I, we get up but, we go to bed the same time as that, um, we suppose to, I don't get very much sleep.
- Donna: You don't sleep very much.

Justin: No. I can't because I have been, um, um, like my Mamma said, that next time my stomach started hurting, it's been hurting me a lot. See, I had this stomach problem where I had gas all built up in there. I took an x-ray and I had gas all built up in there, and my Mamma and I know that I had it was hurting me, like for a year or something when Greg was bothering me.

Donna: When Greg was. . .

Justin: Uh, huh. It was hurting me then. and my Mamma told me next time it started hurting, because it been hurting, and my Mamma thinks it's going to start again this year. And my Mamma said I'm going to go to a children's hospital place and I don't want to go.

Donna: That's scary, to have to leave what you're use to.

Justin: And I have to stay there over night. and your Mom have to pick you up in the nighttime.

Donna: You feel alone.

Justin: Uh, huh. Lonely.

Donna: It sounds like, Justin, maybe things are built up and maybe bottled up inside of you and it really hurts 'cause it can't come out.

Justin: Uh, Huh. Like, um, I'm scared to go to a place where there's no kids that I know. And I'm scared that I'm going to get hurt a lot because I, when people doesn't be my friends, I don't have but two and I don't know how many friends I have. I know a lot, but they're not my friends. This boy, his name is Shawn, he's my friend and he has more friends than I have.

Donna: It's kinda hard to get close to people sometimes.

Justin: Uh, huh. Like strangers.

Donna: Not sure if they'll accept us or not.

Justin: Like everybody on the playground. it seems like they hate me. Because how mean I've been 'cause, how mean I been to everybody.

Donna: You've really been mean to your friends.

Justin: Uh, huh. Like I don't know how rough I play but I play rough with them. And I don't know cause they don't tell me.

Donna: Maybe it would be easier if they told you that you were hurting them, and that might stop you.

Justin: I will stop.

Donna: You would stop.

Justin: Because they're my friends. And now I don't have that many friends because they're not my friends no more because I was playing rough with them, they didn't tell me. And no people, only one person on the bus likes me, that is Christopher.

Donna: It's really hard, hard not having anybody to talk to and to play with. And maybe all this stuff bottled up inside of you maybe could be relieved a little if you had some friends to help you.

- Justin: I don't feel good either. And I still ain't going to that hospital thing because I don't want to tell my Mom 'cause I don't want to go that hospital thing. I keep on hurting, we don't have no pills. And my ear is stopped up and I can't even hear out of it. And I went to the doctor about it. And I still cannot hear out of it 'cause gook got clogged up in there. My Mamma, we don't have very much of those things you clean out your ears. My Mom finally bought some but she doesn't use them very much. So, um, things get clogged up in there a lot, behind my ear drum. It like soaks through my ear drum, that's how watery it is, it soaks through my ear drum. Just like inside my ear drum.
- Donna: Sounds like you have stuff that's keeping you from hearing very good.
- Justin: I can only hear out of this ear. I know I can't hear out of this ear because when I cover this ear. I cannot hear very loud. And when I cover this ear, I can hear loud. Because it seems like it's echoing in there. It echoes in there when I cover this ear.
- Donna: You've got this stuff inside of you that, that is all bottled up and won't come out and it's like you have a lot of noise in your head. It's real confusing. A lot of things going on. It hurts.
- Justin: I have been having like inside of this ear. It seems like something is in that gook and it's saying, it's screaming in there. It's like screaming inside that gook.
- Donna: You have someone screaming inside your head.
- Justin: Because it seems like in that gook that someone is screaming because they don't want to be drowned in that gook. And it's screaming, it hurts my head.
- Donna: It hurts when someone's screaming inside.
- Justin: And it's echoing and only in this ear.
- Donna: They're afraid that maybe they can't get out.
- Justin: Yea. Like they're trying to get out. out of that ear and they can't.
- Donna: Like they're trapped. and they don't know what to do.
- Justin: Like I am.
- Donna: You feel trapped. Like you don't have anywhere to turn.
- Justin: My dad died, and it's been hard for me and my Mom and all them. I felt like, it seems like I cannot cry and because I can make other people cry with my songs about him, see, I was on the bus and singing this song and these two girls crying 'cause it was so pretty on that, and I didn't 'cause it was hard for me to cry, 'cause my tears were up, it felt like my tears were locked up in there, like down here in here, it felt like it was locked up in a cage.
- Donna: There's all these things inside of you.
- Justin: That's locked up.
- Donna: Yea. And they can't come out. Even though sometimes you want them to.
- Justin: It seems like the key is lost to all of them.
- Donna: The key is lost.

Justin: To all of them. It seems like, because, it seems like every single key like fell out.

Donna: You've got these locks and you can't find the key to fit them, to open them back up again.

Justin: 'Cause it seems like so many, because every day it seems like that a new one locks up, and I lose the key. And then I have so much it feels like I have so much keys in there, it's hard to go through them, they're so heavy.

Donna: There are many...

Justin: Keys

Donna: That you don't know what to do, don't know which one to use.

Justin: Like I don't know what to do.

Donna: Just don't know which one to use or where to start.

Justin: It seems like I have found only one key and that is to my memory box. It seems like, 'cause I can close my eyes and it's like a memory goes up and up like a screen.

Donna: So you're starting to be able to remember some things you couldn't remember before.

Justin: Like one time when my Dad was not dead, I could remember all the fun times because I did not, 'cause I did not have the key lost.

Donna: It really hurts because you kept trying to find the key to remember.

Justin: I have a key to everybody's. I have a key to everybody's memory box of mine.

Donna: And you just opened your Dad's back up.

Justin: Yea, because I can only find his. And it opens all the stuff of my Dad in my head. So, I'm keeping them keys locked up in a safe place. I'm afraid I'm going to lose that key where I cannot, cause I have them locked up. I'm afraid I'm going to lose that key that opens that box that has all the other keys in it.

Donna: So, you don't know what to do. For so long, you've locked these doors 'cause you didn't want to have to deal with any of this stuff. So it was just easier to just lock them up and now. . .

Justin: And now I want them out.

Donna: But you're not sure how to do it.

Justin: Mm hmm. Cause I have so much keys in there, and I want them out so I have more room for nicer memories, not mean memories. Like the screaming and when my Mom and Dad had fights and all of that. And all of that stuff. I'm trying to get out the mean ones so I can have them locked up, so I don't have to remember them.

Donna: Um, hmm.

Justin: Since these, I have been going through, there's one thing that can make me unlock every box. My teddy bear. I've had him for seven years and I'm seven right now. And I've had him for as long as I've been living. And I had him when I was first born. It's a woman who gave it to me. I can't remember her name. I think it was my Dad who gave it to me. And I still have it, and I sleep with it every night and every day. I like that teddy bear so much. See, he had a red hat on it that said January 1989, I mean 1995, it had 17 on it cause that, okay, it has January 17, 1995, and that was my birthday. That's my birthday. And then that's my teddy bear that can only open up that, um, my teddy bear remembers how I felt when it was my birthday. How happy I was. And it feels, it feels like I've got every key that locks up to every box. And I can start remembering the happy thoughts.

Donna: So you've found the key.

Justin: It seems like.

Donna: Your teddy bear has been there through everything, good and bad.

Justin: Mm, hmm.

Donna: He's been the only person you can count on to stay there.

Justin: Unless we have, uh, like a file in the tip of that box. All my boxes, even my Dad's memory box will get locked up again.

Donna: So you're afraid of losing the teddy bear because he's the only one that understands you.

Justin: And that can unlock, I mean that can find all the keys and they're just lost. That's the only thing that can remind me of everyone 'cause he has a memory box that, like he's, like has a memory box that he's got all the keys to already. And there like, it seems like I have an antenna, and he has an antenna and that when they are close together, that's when I touch his memory box and see what's all in there.

Donna: 'Cause he can remember everything.

Justin: 'Cause he's a teddy bear, and he like, he has a memory box and he doesn't lock em up.

Donna: Like maybe you did.

Justin: Um hmm.

Donna: He didn't shut everything out.

Justin: 'Cause he forget to shut it and all that. I'm having a hard time though. Seems like that when my Dad died that's when I first knew it, when I first heard it, it went into my teddy bear's head and my head also and then, then that had the key in it and start, like, if I'd had something sad, he'd pass a key in it, because that's the key, because I, when I, if I, if he dies like, if somebody dies and I know them real well, and I have memory boxes of them, then I cannot have no fun times with them again, so the key is like, so the key it has it, and it goes off in my head, and I find it and I unlock the box, the box.

Donna: So when something bad happens your, the memory box just locks and, um, then it goes back into your, into you mind and then you have to find the key later.

Justin: Un huh, yea, um, like somebody dies and I know them if I have a memory box of them, and then I cannot have happy thoughts with them so the key just like pops up and it stands up and says "I'm the one that goes to the memory box one" and just like runs up and down and moves its head and unlocks.

Donna: And then you can remember again.

Justin: Um hmm.

Donna: But right now you're not able to remember a lot of things.

Justin: I know because everybody hadn't remembered had not died, and when I was first born, I had a great, great, great, great, old, great grandma, she's my great, great Grandma, okay, my Mamma she has a, my Mamma and her other Mamma and then the other Mamma, she died when I was born, and I could not even see her. I only have a picture of her, one picture of her, and I have like one picture of me and my Dad. I was sitting in his lap and he had this little thing, it was broken, it had like stuff wrapped around it and he was, he was on crutches, and we still have those crutches, and they are all shiny and everything because they have not used them in a long time, and now I only have two, I have three memory boxes open. I have one that has nothing in it, and I'm trying to find someone that I can put in it. That one is only for my great Grandma that died when I was not, when I was just about to be born. I need a memory box of, I need, I have a memory box of her, but it ain't. but it hadn't not had nothing in it until I can find that one. And then the key just like stands up, and I can find all the names on it.

Donna: So when you find this missing information, then you think that maybe you'll be able to...

Justin: Find all the keys.

Donna: And figure out where they go to unlock it.

Justin: I have three memory box open, that's my Uncle Buddy. I mean I know how many memory box I got open 'cause they're so little.

Donna: 'Cause there's not very many.

Justin: Um hmm. There's not that many and I have a lot more that has to open, now I find all the missing pieces that I can, they're all together, then I have one big memory box.

Donna: Sounds like you have this, this puzzle to put together and you're missing some pieces 'cause you can't remember everything that happened.

Justin: Yea. I find missing pieces then it's like, it's like one big memory box in my head, and then they can all fit in there.

Donna: Then maybe all the noise will go away that's in your head and the screaming that's going on and all this stuff that's built up inside of you that needs to be released maybe when you have something to help you.

Justin: All I have to do, it seems like I have a hundred pieces missing.

Donna: You have a lot of searching to do.

- Justin: Uh huh, but I find my searchings in that one big memory box that opens 'cause there's no key to it, When it opens, there's like a key in it 'cause I finally had it put together and after I had them put together I'd have to put them in mine, in a big old circle and then it seems like there's one little thing that is missing, to put in there, in it, and when I, after, when I find all the missing pieces, it's gonna be like people that has been, that's has been in a cage, that need to help me but they're in a cage, and then when I find all the missing pieces the cage would open and they would help the memory box to get in there and then they're about to get in and open it and all the memories would go down into that big one and have like a big giant screen that tells me everything.
- Donna: Okay, so let me see if I understand what you're talking about Justin, you have your one memory of it and that's the screen that's helping you a little bit, and, um, there's one thing that can help you remember things, and that's your bear, the teddy bear that's been with you through everything, and it seems like you have all these missing pieces, hundreds of them you still have to find and once you find those and put those together...
- Justin: The circle then, they would go and all of them, then they could all fit in the box, and when I have one missing, I have all of them together except one. I can't, I can still, I cannot put them in there together like some big old circle thing that, I have to put them all together to open up the cages, people out of the cage.
- Donna: And so once you have that the pieces all together, and all those people that are caged up can help you.
- Justin: Open that big humongous memory box.
- Donna: And open your memory box so that you will remember.
- Justin: And all the screams will go out and all the happy thoughts will go in.
- Donna: So you can start having happy thoughts.
- Justin: Instead of mean thoughts.
- Donna: Instead of mean thoughts and you can have people come in and help you and all the stuff you had locked up inside can be released. You can let new things come inside.
- Justin: And when that happens then I'll have the happy thoughts locked up, but there's going to be one key and all the other keys I get out of my attention, get out of my head, get out of my teddy bear's head 'cause he needs the keys.
- Donna: 'Cause he helps you. He saves them, and he's always going to be there.
- Justin: Uh huh. He like has them. And like that one memory box, he puts all the one memory box in that box and all the pieces he then puts them in that box. Then I find a missing one and then I use the key.
- Donna: And you lose the key when you have an extra one because you have it saved.
- Justin: If I lose that big humongous key that goes to the big memory box then, then there, then there no be, then I cannot open it never again 'cause I keep that key and there's only one key that can ever fit that hole. And it will take me like a year to get one more and find that key. And then I have to start all back over and tell my teddy bear that I need all them keys and keep all them keys together, and then I can make the big key over and I could unlock it and I could, like, take all the missing keys out and give them back to

my teddy bear. And he like has like a game and it, like, the keys go, like, that in it, and then that memory box be open, and I'm going to leave it open.

Donna: Leave it open so you can have all your memories and remember everything.

Justin: Maybe like lose, they like fly way up and I can like catch them. Um, it, has like a wooden net inside my head when they try to go out, and then I, you know I have to go find them again and have like a net to catch it and to throw it back in.

Donna: So they would be free to move around they wouldn't be all trapped and pushed together and causing you so much pain.

Justin: And it would not like loose out of my head and not be like that again 'cause if it was that again, I would like have to find them all back and put them back in the box.

Donna: And that would be really hard to do. It seems like maybe you're afraid to leave, leave your teddy bear if you go to the hospital.

Justin: They'd have to give me another teddy bear.

Donna: But you might not be able to figure everything out.

Justin: And I might not like that teddy bear, and I forget why that teddy bear had to go with me and it might get thrown away. Then all my keys they might just fall out and all my, all the memories back in.

Donna: So you would lose all the memories.

Justin: Um hmm, and I might lose that teddy bear and have the bad thoughts all over cause of that memory box. That big memory box was open for the bad memories to go in and they like come out and go right back in my head and go in there and that's the memory box that keeps them, and it would like keeps them, and there's like, a, has like a cord that goes up let the screen move, like on big camera that takes pictures as it goes through. And if I lose that teddy bear, I lose all the happy thoughts. They like get loose again.

Donna: And you just now got some of them back.

Justin: Um hmm, and then I have to go and find all of them and that would be so hard, and when I find all of them, that would probably happen again. 'Cause when I find all of them that teddy bear would make them go and look again 'cause I'd have to have that key and I'd just keep it with me.

Donna: Sounds like maybe that um, you are, you want to find all these pieces and find out the memories, but then you're scared that if you do find them all, then something will happen and you will lose them all again.

Justin: Well, if I lose that teddy bear, when I have not all of them together, it would not, it would only allow like five to go out. It would be easy to get them back in. It would be not like hard.

Donna: Like it is right now.

Justin: Uh huh, they get all, I already had like five pieces in there right now and I had like a thousand trillion little men more to put like in there and there's, like one box that has all of them locked in but I cannot find it in my head.

Donna: Somewhere in there, and maybe you're afraid it's drowning, and you're not going to be able to find it.

Justin: It's like looking all around in my body trying to get away from it or get it to let me find it, find it.

Donna: Afraid that maybe you'll remember some things that will hurt you.

Justin: That's why my memory box all runs from me, like through my head, through my legs and everything, and my arms and my head back and forth.

Donna: Maybe there's some memories that will really hurt when you, when you open that box.

Justin: Uh huh, it, see the thought all go and go and go, and I remember each one of them as it goes out and that goes into habit.

**Tape ends here and the therapist reflects client's last response and then summarizes the session.

This session demonstrates the natural healing force existing in children to overcome loss and deal with the process of grieving. On his own, the client was able to spontaneously create meaningful metaphors that facilitated his ability to convey his phenomenological experience. The counselor's ability to comfortably stay with the child's world, gave him permission to stay with and explore his internal perceptions.

This session was a turning key in the counseling relationship, as Justin began talking more openly about his father's death, the subsequent impact it has had on his life, and his feelings of loss, anger and sadness. Donna Rogers continued to work with Justin throughout the remaining of the school year. Before school ended in May, Justin's teachers and his mother noted that there had been a decrease in his disruptive behavior, better peer relationships, and an increase in accepting responsibility at school and at home.

Policy Statement

The Person-Centered Journal is sponsored by the Association for Development of the Person-Centered Approach (ADPCA). The publication is intended to promote and disseminate scholarly thinking about person-centered principles, practices, and philosophy.

All materials contained in The Person-Centered Journal are the property of the ADPCA, which grants reproduction permission to libraries, researchers, and teachers to copy all or part of the materials in this issue for scholarly purposes with the stipulation that no fee for profit be charged to the consumer for the use or possession of such copies.