

I am Keith Wright's Daughter: Writing Things I 'Almost' Cannot Say

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I am Keith Wright's Daughter: Writing things I 'almost' cannot say

Abstract

I am Keith Wright's daughter: Writing things I 'almost' cannot say is a personal and provocative perspective. Using creative writing and storying I piece/peace together my relationship to/with my father. Always a strong and unsettling presence in my life, his unexpected death forces me toward reconciliation of tensions, identities, wounds and memories. Writing/Wrighting/Righting my stories into being, my particular points of view at points in time, and examining this conflicted yet foundational relationship, helps me remember what I have learned and helps me reclaim what matters to me. Writing the things I 'almost' cannot say – and have not been able to say for most of my life – is a storying in and through the dark, a storying in and through the wounding, and a storying in and to healing.

Keywords narrative, disclosure, fathers and daughters, writing to heal

Preface

With this article I am Writing/Wrighting/Righting my relationship with my father, Keith Wright, a disgraced politician who died unexpectedly in 2015. An only child, my father has been a big feature of my life and has significantly influenced how (and if) I am seen by others. With his death I now have a freedom to write those things I 'almost' cannot say and to reveal my thinking about his life, my life, his choices, my choices, our struggles and strength.

My father had a colourful life. A charismatic teacher, principal, politician and preacher, he lost himself in power and lust. Convicted for indecent dealing of two teenagers and rape of one, my father spent seven years in prison. Whilst he served his sentence, it was a sentence for all the family.

The voices of those who live beside those in the lime-light are not heard in our society. We have voices and stories that need to be heard too. Too often we are overshadowed by the big lives of the prominent people we are related to.

This story is an account of events and my feelings about those events. It is an account of how I am making sense of this relationship and this man.

I am an early childhood educator and I understand the significance of parents in the lives of children. I also understand the importance of reflecting on who I am and what I bring to my work as an educator. Parker Palmer urges the teacher to 'know thyself' for we teach who we are (3). Knowing who we are, knowing the experiences and people who influence us, matters if our work is in education. It matters even if it is not. Those in early childhood education declare our parents to be our first teachers and invariably in one way or another our parents shape us, our ideas, our identities, the way we feel about ourselves, our life trajectories.

Getting to know myself through this writing has not been straightforward. As I have sat again with my pushed-down-deep-inside-memories-and-emotions and opened again to the pain, I have cried and flailed about. I have revisited rage, abandonment, dislocation, loss, injustice, love.

It did not surprise me when, after writing my farewell in the final sentence of this article, the earth shook. I felt the significance. The importance. The shuddering of foundations and footings. And literally. At the time of typing my story's final full-stop, an earthquake struck off the Fraser Coast. And, for 30 seconds on that Thursday morning my office building swayed, my chair, desk and computer shook and rattled, and I sensed the deep shifts inside me and around me.

This writing, and reading of my writing, has shaken me up. But it has also offered a way to synthesise my feelings and thoughts, forcing me toward a greater awareness of myself and my relationship to/with my father. This relationship still troubles me, but it no longer overwhelms me. I feel connected to my feelings and my life story in a way that now allows me to publicly associate my father's name with mine, to include a title that identifies him to me and me to him – although if I am completely honest, reclaiming this space feels very risky and uncomfortable.

Through this Writing/Wrighting/Righting process I am, as Louise DeSalvo describes, 'realigning the essential nature of my being' (5). These 'shocks' of feeling and healing 'shifts' emerging from my writing about my relationship to/with my father are helping me appreciate my textured life, my father's resilience and my own courage (5). As I have revisited events and processed emotions, I have been reminded of the importance of 'exploring our essential nature', 'the textures of our heart and soul' (4) and the power of writing as a therapeutic insight-generating tool. I have also been reminded of the worth of

living and working in ways that open doors to forgiveness and that communicate ethics of kindness, care and compassion. This is important for my profession, for me, for humanity.

Writing our parent/child stories into being – writing about events and feelings, about our particular points of view at different points in time, and examining what we think we have learned in our conflicted or ruptured relationships or through our moments of connection – matters.

Christopher Poulos describes how father-son relationships can be ‘complicated’, and ‘bogged down in painful shared histories’ (197). The same is true of father-daughter relationships. Of my relationship with my father.

The role of our fathers in our lives, whatever those relationships, whether marked by presence or by absence, influence us. They constrain. Impact. Our relationships with our fathers accompany us through our lives, remaining meaningful ‘both through and beyond life’ (Wyatt and Adams 119). Often complex, and painful, the father-son/daughter relationship is one that ‘grows, scars, inspires, and informs’ (119).

I agree with Poulos that ‘writing about these relationships is tricky and fraught with tension’ (197). Poulos interrogates his own writing and whether he is ‘violating the rule of silence and secrecy’, and ‘airing dirty laundry’ (199). I too worry about this. But I take up Poulos’s call: ‘If we are to overcome the painful, destructive forces of family conflict, we simply have to talk and write about such things’ (199). We have to write the things we ‘almost’ cannot say.

What follows are stories, intense stories. Stories of pain and loss. Stories held inside for eons. Stories that are helping me reconfigure my sense of being and knowing. They are, as Susan Walsh describes, stories written *in* the dark, *to* the dark, *through* the dark, *with* the dark (2).

And, perhaps like Poulos, this autoethnography has moved me toward re-writing the terms of my relationship with my father. Toward a ‘breaking free’ to investigate other ways of ‘being-becoming’ Keith Wright’s daughter (Walsh 8).

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

Church

I remember in church, I was small, I leaned into you, wishing the man at the front would stop speaking. You rubbed the top of my hand, gentle strokes and round and round. It felt

nice. Loving. A sensation. Pleasant at first. But then after a while, after too many back and forths and round and rounds, I'd had enough. It felt uncomfortable. Like pain. I withdrew my hand.

This seems to be a pattern that has repeated itself again and again four decades on. And I wonder about father concepts. Heavenly father. God as father. How can my relationship with father God, not be affected by your father role in my life? And I have to say, as father role models go, you don't score well. One of the biggies is 'love'. God is love. I don't think you understand that word 'love'. What it means. What it costs. Why didn't you love my mother? You always chose 'infatuation', 'adoration', weak red-cordial versions of love. And of course you got stuck on 'lust'. Your moral code completely off. Adulterer. Fool. Rapist.

You were a lay preacher. You prayed hearty wordy cringe-worthy prayers, especially when there was an audience. Especially when I had my friends around for dinner. Grace.

I needed grace.

You had dreams and visions, some kind of line to God that I wished I shared. But didn't. I didn't like your kind of churchiness. It never felt authentic. Remember that time we went to some healing service. You wanted my wonky eyes fixed and I had to have enough faith. I tried to have faith. I really tried. But I had/have an alternating squint. Long-sightedness. No binocular vision. It was blurry, as it always had been, long after the man laid his hands on my forehead and prayed his prayers. I couldn't see properly and my turned eyes were worse without my glasses. You were cross that I didn't have enough faith, that I put my glasses on again. But you didn't have to play in the playground, be bullied and called 'four eyes with the cross eyes'.

Yet, I reflect now and wonder at your resilience. Perhaps, your faith was real. Without faith would you have made it through? Would you have been able to weather the shame of having your secrets laid bare for all to see... ..without faith?

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

The news

When I was young, and you were home, the news was blaring into the house. So loud. So invasive. I got to hating the introductory tune that signalled the start of the radio broadcast of the National News. But the television was just as bad. So many channels, news bulletin

after news bulletin. Camera angles, sound bites, over and over again. The wrong splice or clip could misrepresent you. The context removed. The reporting biased. It made you angry. I got to hate the news because it always featured you. And deleted more of me. And I could never watch the shows I wanted to watch because you were home and the news was your life and your work. And later, when it all went pear-shaped the news was something to be feared. It was hard to stand the shame, the waiting, anticipating the awful story coming next. And now I just hate the news full stop. Don't like it in our home at all. My husband knows to mute the television and watch the word bar if I am near. Sometimes I can't even bear that and walk downstairs. Away.

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

Shells

I have a vivid childhood memory of us collecting shells together. We walked the beach, our mission to find two types. A collection. The curved black and white ones. The pointy orange ones that look like tepees with stripes and speckles. Even now, I still look. And foundations creak within. Sometimes I pick up a shell, pointy orange, hold it in my hand, and feel the weight.

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

Coffee, white bread and peanut paste

Why should the smell of coffee send me to you? And childhood associations. Neither of us like coffee. We don't like the smell. Let alone the taste. Driving to the hot bread shop to buy the wonderful white loaf (that mum wouldn't have allowed, but knew we would buy), the memory returns when I smell bread cooking. And we slathered it with peanut paste. You liked smooth. So that is what mum bought. But I like crunchy. I never buy smooth, I buy crunchy.

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

Identity

You entered politics the year I was born. You worked hard. You had charisma and drive. A handsome man, you looked good on television and your message was always clear and intelligent. You were learned and knowledgeable. You cared for the underdog. In our small

town, you rose to prominence. You were passionate, outspoken, a politician completely. It wasn't your fault that people made associations. It wasn't mine either. But, it became something I dreaded: introductions.

I used to silently plead, every time, please don't.

Please see me for me.

But to no avail.

"This is Alison, Keith Wright's daughter."

"This is Keith Wright's daughter, Alison."

"...Keith's daughter."

"...the daughter of Keith Wright."

The murmuring of my primary school peers: She only won the spell-a-thon because her father is Keith Wright.

The high school teacher who didn't know me but stopped me at the door as I entered her class for the very first time: You think you're somebody because you are Keith Wright's daughter. Don't go expecting special treatment in my class!

My father: What will people think if you wear that? Remember you're my daughter. You need to behave Alison, you are my daughter. You can't wag school, smoke cigarettes, go out with that boy. What will people think! Remember who you are. This kind of behaviour can spoil my reputation.

The too-perfumed purry-voiced woman loitering in my father's office: Hello there Alison, I bought you a little present, you don't really know me, you don't know I am having an affair with your father (I do now, I'll add you to the list), but I want to impress you because you are Keith Wright's daughter.

The bully on my afternoon bus: I spat on that girl as she was hopping off the bus because my parents hate her father, she is Keith Wright's daughter.

Me: I don't want to go to the Pizza Hut for tea dad, for you to complain again about the soft drink being watered-down, demanding samples for the Consumer Advice Bureau, making a fuss, for the whole restaurant to know that at that table sit Keith Wright and his daughter.

A local hooligan, who I do not know, driving along busy Gladstone Road (I am riding my bike home now, avoiding the bus): Hey, wind down your window while I slow down and get closer. HEY! YOU STUPID FUCKING BITCH, YOUR FATHER'S A CUNT, GET OFF THE ROAD! HA-Ha-Ha, did you get a load of that? What a laugh. She got such a fright she nearly fell off! Fuckin' hilarious!

Keith Wright's daughter – traumatised, shaken, confused, disbelieving, scarred.

Visibly invisible.

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

The sentence

I'm in my twenties. A young teacher, newly married: Did you see the news, the papers? The charges. The rumours. Headlines in the news, day after day. Newspapers in the staff room at my workplace, newspapers that I feel compelled to relocate. The principal can't look me in the eye. He went to teachers' college with my father. The staff know who I am. You can hear a pin drop. Conversations stop when I enter the room. Or there's the not saying anything, just a big gaping silence. A silence that is so loud I think I might collapse. I am given a school transfer – oh the shame of association.

My husband: Don't you go to the court with your father! I don't want to see you on the news tonight. I don't want people knowing you're Keith Wright's daughter. It'll affect my career. I'm going away while the second trial is on. I can't cope with the fact I'm married to Keith Wright's daughter.

He couldn't cope. And he didn't cope, and our marriage ended.

The trial: Microphones, so many, shoved in my face. Cameras filming, cameramen running, shouting, accusing, yelling, pushing, suffocating.

Inside.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

The verdict

is

GUILTY.

The media: We're staying out here because Keith Wright's daughter is stuck in the court building. We're waiting her out. It's dark now. The staff in the law building won't let her out the back way, so we're going to get some great footage. Late night news. Front page spread. A rushing body racked with grief. Life changing.

Seven years of prison served. Or is it a lifetime? Seven years of weekend visits, scans, screening and searches, showing identification to prove I am me, taking off jewellery and abiding by dress codes. Checking for the presence of journalists before scuttling to queue inconspicuously in the line to get in, and then out again. Forgetting to breathe. Trying not to drink water beforehand to avoid having to use the disgusting visitors' toilets outside. Where you learn you have to bring your own toilet paper and torch (or pee in the pitch black and shake off the drips). You don't have any rights and these experiences remind you of it. You

are scum too, your father a convicted criminal, so suck it up Keith Wright's daughter. It doesn't matter how many letters you write.

This was all so hard for me. What must it have been like for you? You didn't say much. You kept conversations light. But you were humbled, brought low, made vulnerable, exposed to danger, humiliated, so publicly. Again and again. Year after year. Long after your 'release' from prison. Were you ever released from prison?

So I take great care to preserve and keep sacred and private and safe my new life. My new family. I am fortunate. Blessed. A good and steadfast man. Two beautiful children. Because I have known fear, bear scars, I feel protective of them, of us. I don't want this pain seeping into or poisoning my beautiful new chance.

I have a little girl, eleven. Tomorrow is my birthday. I will be 47. She has been planning excitedly for days, planning surprises, wrapping presents, making cards. At ten pm I get a call. Your father has passed away overseas. My birthday comes. Her smile so big, so generous, full of expectation and joy. I have to wipe away her smile with the news. She doesn't know that I am Keith Wright's daughter. Or what it means. Does anyone? Two surnames on and I have found anonymity. My daughter doesn't know about his past, his convictions, the sentence that we all live/d out. She had a Grandad whom she loved and who's gone forever.

We do not listen to the news that week, or watch TV together. I cannot bear the media coverage or what would follow if she saw and understood. She is an innocent. I have yet to explain to her the complex web of sordid stories, facts, and myths. She is not ready. I am not ready. Once it has begun, we bear the guilt and shame, whether it is ours or not.

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

Entitlement

Your widow has developed an unhealthy sense of entitlement. She arranged your funeral without talking to me. I found out the date, time and location of the service via a group email. I am your only child. This wounded. Still wounds.

The day before your funeral, a lawyer's letter arrived in my inbox advising me she was contesting your will. Did she think about the impact of this timing? The impact of this action for my children? Did she think about my children? Your wishes for your grandchildren? What they are going through? What all of this means for them? She positioned herself as a grandmother figure. This is not my experience of what grandmothers do. Shedding family so quickly, easily, brutally.

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

Remembering

I didn't get to go to your funeral. I couldn't after that. And I was worried about the media coverage. Anxious for my children. Anxious they might be filmed and exposed to the public eye, their identities tainted in moments. Anxious they would find out your history and hear words like prison, rapist, sex offender, paedophile... This wasn't the right time for an unveiling of your life to them. They know now, but they didn't know then.

I had to protect them. You have to understand. They are here. You are gone. So we didn't go.

But we remembered you on the day of your memorial service. We shared stories about you.

Your grandson: Grandad taught me how to play chess when I was two. I remember he told me I was really good even though I knew I wasn't very good at all. He let me win and he made lots of mistakes on purpose. Every time we got together we would play chess. Sometimes we would play eight games of chess in the same day. Chess was always something we did together when we saw one another. In our recent games together Grandad had to really concentrate or I would thrash him. I have a love of chess and this is because of Grandad. These are fond memories for me. I loved Grandad and he loved us. It was good we got to spend some time together recently.

Your granddaughter: Grandad gave me a boost for literacy because he always gave me his literacy books and I still have them. I love reading and I've read the Harry Potter series and the Deltora Quest series and many other books. I know Grandad was a big influence in that.

Grandad would talk to me like an equal, not like a little girl. He liked introducing me to big words and new words.

I remember there were always games at his house, and lots of things to do. It was kind of like being at preschool. When I was very little I remember playing together at the pool and being excited that I could jump into his arms from the step and he would catch me. I couldn't swim but I knew that he would catch me. I loved Grandad and he loved me and that is the most important thing for me to remember.

Me: Your Grandad, my dad, was a GREAT teacher. He was a passionate educator and was passionate about education. As a child I remember that he made learning fun and interesting, and because I was playing I didn't even realise I was learning. He could turn an everyday activity like hanging and pegging clothes on the line into a game where I was learning. I remember him conning me into scratching his back, with a game where I had to scratch a letter of the alphabet on his back and he had to guess it. He was appallingly bad at the game, and it took me a long time to recognise that this was a ploy for an extended back scratch!

Your Grandad gathered knowledge and used knowledge to deliberately improve his life and the lives of others. He was motivated by a desire to share his understandings and expand opportunities for people, particularly in terms of literacy. He had a great sense of humanity. He was dedicated to human rights and to helping 'the little guy', the everyday person through their everyday struggles. During his life he befriended many people, helping them to solve the problems they faced or connecting them to support networks and services that could help them. This served him well when he encountered his own troubles. For every situation he found himself in there was somebody who looked out for him – and they did this because he had at some point in their lives responded to their needs or their family's needs and assisted them. Your Grandad helped a great many people in his life both directly and indirectly. And, he was a really hard worker, persistent, an eternal optimist. He loved us. I know that. I am so pleased that our last words to each other were 'I love you'.

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

Shame

Your big brother has died. My uncle. Just a few months after you. It was hard to read his funeral notice. Your name was not there, was not included with the names of your siblings. You were part of this family. A brother to four. It made me sad. But the tentacles of shame coil around so many throats, across so many of our lives.

Funerals remind you of what you have lost. They take you back in time, to love and loved ones. Three weeks ago at your brother's funeral, your name and image absent from the ceremony too, absent/left out/missing from the family photos and stories that formed the service, I say my first goodbye to you. You and your brother looked so much alike. My son and I find the family resemblance disconcerting. We cannot view the photographs, the video footage, without seeing you. My son holds my hand tightly, as choked with emotion he whispers: "He looks so much like Grandad".

We meet up with people from the past. It is awkward. Unpleasant. Your identity purposefully erased, yet me being at the funeral is a glaring reminder. The air is thick with hurt and shame and blame and grief. Words full of unspoken. Hours of stilted tongue-tied conversations and embarrassed moments with family and people from our lives – people who we only see at gatherings like this. People I haven't seen or talked to in years. Followed a few days later by...

...an email from a girl-now-woman I care about:

"Seeing you on Friday reminded me of what I would like to explain. I am one of your father's victims. He molested me while he was staying at our house when I was 13. I had to tell my mum, after he'd told me not to tell anyone, when she came home from work that evening, what had happened after she'd left the house that morning and during the evening before. She rang and spoke to your father that same night and I don't think they saw each other for years after that. I guess you can imagine how you would have felt had it been your daughter. That is the reason that our families did not meet together after that time. I don't hold anything against you and never did. I realise this might be very hard to read and I am sorry for that. If you don't feel you ever want to talk about this that's ok too and I understand."

I Feel... ...Dis em bod ied.

I am in SHOCK.

Emotions TOO BIG for words.

My breath is knocked from my lungs.

I.

Can't.

Breathe.

My heart is pumping.

THUMPING.

Breaking.

Again.

Dad!

Who.

WERE.

You?

Did you do this?

What did you do?

How.

Could.

You?

Where the hell was your moral compass?!!!

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

Ch/urning

Do you know what it has been like for me, Dad?

What I thought I knew of you, what I thought I knew to be true and not true, I know not now. I still bear it six months after you are gone, dead, dust, when I put the awful green cactus-like canister of ashes into the garage, because I don't want to see it anymore.

[EMBED IMAGE OF URN – CENTRED]

Figure 1: His ashes



Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

Your will

Hand written. Do it yourself. Of course. From years ago. Empty promises all through my life. Bragging to others what you would bequeath. Meaningless large numbers on a page. Numbers you don't have anymore. Spent on others, spent on ego. So, what did your dad leave you, Alison? Nothing... ..ness. Emptiness. Disappointment. Questions that can never be answered. Sick feelings like motion sickness, the nausea and bile creeping upwards. Will. It. End.

Pieces/Piercing/Peace-ing

Divorce

A few months before you died, perhaps a premonition, I felt a separation.

I had begun this writing, this putting of words to paper:

“My father has always taken up too much space in my life. I want to detach and be indifferent. I am ready to be estranged. I said this to him. He responded with distress. Then I read a quote about trying to come to know my father in a new way, ‘by honouring my father for who he is, rather than who I expect him to be’ and I entertained the notion that ‘perhaps compassion and forgiveness can, in the end, take us by surprise’ (Poulos 201). This causes me to ponder. I recognise I love him. I have forgiven him many times. But, for me there are conditions now. Unconditional love... ..I can’t do it anymore dad. I need you to ring me on my birthday. Please remember. Please ring. It has been two consecutive birthdays now where you have not remembered my birthday. You don’t have ten children. You have one. You don’t have ten granddaughters you have one. How could you forget to ring her for her birthday this year, too! Dad, I do not want us to be hurt by you anymore.”

My father divorced my mother, after his many affairs. He was settling on one of the floozies. He was my mother’s first love, her only love. He didn’t see her worth. Her wonderfulness. How amazing she was. How real. Or, if he did, he swept it aside. Yet, he knew her forgiveness. She felt soft towards him after everything, even in her own last breaths.

Dad, your leaving mum had so many consequences. She relied on me, leaned on me. Needed me so much more. I loved her madly, but my life was always interrupted by caring for her needs. I juggled my own family guiltily, my need to work, stretched always for time, asked for so much. There were hospital emergencies, most months of most years of my life. Mum stopped counting at 37 operations. She didn’t want her sickness to define her. So many times I wished you were there to help, to share the load. To wait with me at the hospital and repeat words of hope or comfort. To just be in the room.

And when she was gone. I thought you might be there for me. I thought having lost your own mother so young, that you would know the significance of it. That you would step

up. Phone more. Care more. Remember our birthdays, her birthday, and call, connect, try. Try harder. But you didn't.

Your default position has always been your work, working, striving, doing. Burying, hiding, pretending, becoming. What....? What for?

And now, is it any wonder that I want to divorce myself from your hold?

To separate. To sever.

To re-write the terms of our relationship. To reclaim.

Always too busy. Always so important. Always putting on a show.

Nothing authentic. It makes me so tired.

Fathers are meant to be there. To guide. To help. To love.

To remember.

Not to hurt.

Or, dismember.

I have your ashes in that ghastly green ceramic urn, your photo pressed into the side. It makes my stomach ch/urn and turn. Emotions burn. And I yearn...
...to be free of you.

You loved me. Of course you did. I was your daughter.

I loved you. Of course I did. You were my father.

But, I want to let you go now.

I want you to go.

I am letting you go.

I am letting you go.

Bye dad.

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Figure 1: His ashes

(picture of green urn – supplied separately)

Author biography

Dr Ali Black is an arts-based and narrative researcher at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Her research and scholarly work seeks to foster connectedness, community, wellbeing and meaning-making through the building of reflective and creative lives and identities. Ali is interested in storied and visual approaches for knowledge construction, representation and meaning-making and the power and impact of auto-ethnographic writing.