

## Thanatographical narration in Jane Katjavivi's memoir *Undisciplined Heart*

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### *Abstract*

*Autobiographical writing is the narration of one's own life. This simple act which entails the retrospective narrative in prose has become one of the most contested issues in written discourses. Using Jane Katjavivi's memoir Undisciplined Heart, this paper explores dying and death and the ways culture impacts care for the dying, the overall experience of dying and how the dead are remembered. In the memoir, life writing is often entwined with stories of death and bereavement. As such, the paper argues that thanatographical and autothanatographical narration are approaches used for therapy purposes. It also posits that life writing is not about resurrecting the dead through language or burying them in a mass of words; rather, it seeks to interpret the myriad of interrelations and interactions that exist between death and culture. Thus, culture operates as a vehicle and medium through which the meaning of death is communicated and understood. This paper concludes that thanatographical narration in Undisciplined Heart, allows Katjavivi to contemplate the loss of her friends, chronicles her struggle with grief and also, supposedly provides consolation for her loss.*

### Introduction

This article seeks to show how the narrating 'I' or the self is constructed through death, dying and illness in Jane Katjavivi's memoir, *Undisciplined Heart*.<sup>1</sup> The paper explores dying and death and the ways culture impacts care for the dying, the overall experience of dying and how the dead are remembered. In the memoir, life writing is often entwined with stories of bereavement. It is worth mentioning that approximately a quarter of the autobiography is dedicated to the themes of illness, pain, dying, death, funerals, and conversations about them as well as communicating with the late friends. Indeed, the theme of death is pervasive in the author's self-narration. As such, the paper argues that thanatographical narration (writing about the death of people) and autothanato-

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Katjavivi, *Undisciplined Heart*, Windhoek, Tigereye, 2010.

graphical narration (writing about one's own dying), are approaches used by the author for therapy purposes. The analysis of the language used to write about passing, the related cultural issues and interconnectedness will show how other people's deaths (regardless from which culture they are), their illness and suffering in conjunction with the quest of faith relate to the overall life experience of the autobiographical narrator. Thus, memoir in this paper is viewed as a form of life writing in which death and bereavement play a central role. It is used as an approach to demonstrate how death, dying and illness impact on the author's conception of the self.

Jane Katjavivi was born and raised in Great Britain. She and her family moved to Namibia when it attained its independence 1990. Shortly thereafter she started running a bookshop in the centre of Windhoek to cultivate a reading culture in Namibian society. However the bookshop closed down because of her health issues. She then joined her husband on his ambassadorial duties in Europe. Upon return to Namibia she renewed her passion for publishing and now works at UNAM Press at the University of Namibia campus. The paper gives insight into life in Namibia after independence. Some of the accounts in the author's memoirs allow the reader to live through her experiences of Namibian cultures. Apart from being the wife of a high-ranking Namibian government official, and writing about prominent moments in Namibian history, she also creates awareness of concerns about death.

*Undisciplined Heart* is, according to Jane Katjavivi, more of a memoir than an autobiography. It consists of four parts which remind one of the four seasons. The first part "Embracing Namibia" begins in downtown Windhoek where she runs her bookshop and meets regularly with her friends. It also talks about her childhood and youth in Great Britain and meeting her husband Peter. Part two is set in post-Apartheid Namibia called "The pit of death" in which she describes how her close friends die and also reveals personal thoughts, concerns and events around these deaths. She realises and verbalises her own mortality when she is diagnosed with a heart condition. Part three, which is called "A whole new world", mainly deals with her years accompanying her husband who serves as ambassador in Europe where her health initially deteriorates. She reads about the world religions and consistently reflects on her own faith. Her heart condition receives a conclusive diagnosis and the doctors are finally able to provide the correct treatment. Upon return to Namibia in the final part, "Listening to the wind," she is a 'new' woman. The author finds her own strength and faith.

The author's personal journey is chronicled from the onset of illness to the time she recovers. Running parallel to this journey is the death of three of her friends, Brigitte, Isobel and Victor. These descriptions demonstrate how writing about one's past experiences, pain and illness becomes a projection of the author's present. It awakens her senses and results in a spiritual journey that makes her accept her mortality. This paper argues that this realisation is accompanied by a stronger focus on the spiritual as she recalls the Biblical book of Psalms in chapters 91 and 103. A fundamental element of thanatographical writing is also explored through this deconstruction of life and death.

According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “memoirs using thanatography as a public form of mourning are finding new ways to tell stories of loss.”<sup>2</sup> This paper posits that life writing is not about resurrecting the dead through language or burying them in a mass of words; rather, it seeks to interpret the myriad interrelations and interactions that exist between death and culture. Thus, culture operates as a vehicle and medium through which the meaning of death or attitude to death is communicated and understood. The paper will also demonstrate that the processes of dying and bereavement are not merely shrouded in euphemisms and masked in medical jargon, but are personalised. This paper concludes that the “personal involvement and the reality of death allowed mourning” and healing to begin.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, we posit that a sense of hope and regeneration is evoked through the relationship between mortality and self-reflective discourse in *Undisciplined Heart*.

## Defining autobiography and memoir

While some scholars refer to Jane Katjavivi’s narrative *Undisciplined Heart* as a memoir, others have referred to it as an autobiography. Although it is not our intention to examine in depth the difference between the two terms, it is imperative that a distinction be made between autobiography and memoir for the purposes of this article. In his essay, “Autobiography and Bildungsroman in African literature”, Apollo Amoko defines autobiography as “an account, typically in the first person, retrospectively documenting the life of a real person who serves as both narrator and protagonist”.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, he says that it is a life memory that “[proceeds] backwards in time”.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it is a reproduction of the story of a real-life character in retrospect and hence it “enacts a reversal of the linear progression of time”.<sup>6</sup> Philippe Lejeune, cited in Amoko’s article, “Autobiography and *Bildungsroman* in African Literature” argues that autobiography “is the proposal by an author to present the reader with a discourse on the self [...] in which the question of ‘who am I?’ is answered by a narrative that tells ‘how I became who I am’”.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the autobiography derives its authority from personal experience and helps to explain the narrator’s identity, hence its insistence on literal truthfulness. Thus, the definition befits Katjavivi’s *Undisciplined Heart* as the narrative is a bid to explain who the narrator we now confront is. Significantly, one of the experi-

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<sup>2</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography. A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2010: 139.

<sup>3</sup> Lynne Ann De Spelder and Albert L. Strickland, *The Last Dance: Encountering Death and Dying*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Mountain View, Mayfield, 1992: 12f.

<sup>4</sup> Apollo Amoko, “Autobiography and *Bildungsroman* in African Literature”, in: Abiola Irele, (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009: 195-208 (195).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*: 196.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*: 203.

<sup>7</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989: 124, cited in Amoko, “Autobiography”: 195.

ences that she focuses on is the loss of her friends and relatives. Hence, we argue that by chronicling the deaths of her friends, the narrator promotes an externalised and dialogical 'I'.<sup>8</sup>

Both autobiography and memoir are covered by the term life-writing. According to Smith and Watson, memoir was used historically by the publicly prominent to chronicle their social achievements.<sup>9</sup> In addition, they note that as a mode of life, it "directs its attention more towards the lives and actions of others than to the narrator".<sup>10</sup> In contemporary use, they point out that the two terms autobiography and memoir are used interchangeably. However, although both terms can be classified under life-writing, the two terms are distinct. As Lee Quinby notes, autobiography focuses on the 'I' subjective that reflects an interiority in its confessional discourse, whereas memoirs emphasize an 'I' subject that is constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others. Implicit in this definition is that the narrator in an autobiography is the persona who tells a story about the self, extending a lifetime back into the past while a memoir refers to life writing that takes "a segment of a life, not its entirety, and [focuses] on interconnected experiences".<sup>11</sup> The recollections do not cover one's entire lifespan but document one moment or period of experience.

Thus, memoirs are accounts of events with the connection to people in various situations. They are stories rather than a chronological account as in an autobiography. They clearly start at a certain point, develop and are rounded off or completed in the end. Reading *Undisciplined Heart* almost feels as if there is a moral to the story when the author concludes that healing cannot be a solely physical process, but requires spiritual connection to others in order for a deeper understanding of oneself to be gained. The moral of the story is that healing cannot take place without other people. Therefore, we argue that a combination of the art of writing a 'story' and psychology as the art of healing the self has a positive or constructive effect on the author. According to Jerry Waxler, a memoir focuses on a key aspect, theme, event, or choice in a life; starts anywhere and can deftly move around in time and place; feels more personal; less intense fact-checking; strives for emotional truths; and can be written by anyone.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, an autobiography focuses on the trajectory of an entire life; starts at the beginning and progresses chronologically to the end; feels more like a historical document; features much fact-checking and very specific dates/information; strives for factual, historical truths; and typically is written by famous people. In this regard, although both autobiography and memoir are based on the truth of one's life, they provide different types

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Lee Quinby, "The Subject of Memoirs: The Woman Warrior's Technology of Ideographic Selfhood", in: Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, (eds.), *De/Colonizing the Subject. The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1992: 297-320.

<sup>9</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*: 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*: 274.

<sup>11</sup> Quinby, "Subject of Memoirs", cited in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*: 274.

<sup>12</sup> Jerry Waxler, "Memory Writing as a form of Therapy", 4 August 2009, <<http://memorywritersnetwork.com/blog/is-writing-a-memoir-therapeutic/>> [accessed 22 July, 2016].

of insight into the person's life; the autobiography being more factual and chronological while the memoir relates life on an emotional and relational level. With this conclusion, for the purposes of this paper we argue that Katjavivi's *Undisciplined Heart* is a memoir since it foregrounds key themes and events that shape the author's perspective and does not project a trajectory of the entire life of the narrator.

## Death in Namibia

General experience with death in Namibia is more common than in the European setting. On the one hand, the family structures differ. Central and Northern European cultures are individualistic, whereas African cultures are largely collectivistic. The conventional European family unit is significantly smaller than the African family which always includes the extended family members and also clan members. Thus death in the European setting appears to occur far less frequently than in an African setting, as Europeans do not consider members of the extended family as close. In addition, they also might not live in the vicinity. In the African setting families can be much larger in number, counting 1<sup>st</sup> degree cousins as brothers and sisters, and 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> degree cousins would also be considered close family in many ethnic groups. In addition, losses through sickness, accidents or early deaths are more likely than in a European (Western) setting.

It seems, to the European observer, that Namibians deal with and accept death quicker than expected. In the event of death the expression 'Death is part of life' can be heard during the mourning period and 'Life goes on, you don't have a choice'. As the family environment is much larger there is also enormous support from family members and friends, whereas in the European situation the loss and mourning might have to be shared by a few family members and friends only or even by one person. In Namibia the general belief of the survivors is 'It's not my time yet' or, 'I/we have to expect death any time' whereas in Western cultures there is a tendency to question death when it happens unexpectedly or to younger people.

Katjavivi became a Namibian long before she moved to Namibia in 1990 and knew very well that the Namibian situation was different from the English traditions that she was familiar with. Although during the war many families had lost numerous loved ones, she stereotypically experiences and renders the experience of death as the ultimate surprise and loss. Now at a mature age, she finds this death experience dominating her thoughts around her own mortality.

Also of interest to this paper is the extensive travelling to funerals, which is illustrated by the author when she attends Victor's funeral in Nigeria. We argue that she adopts the Namibian view of death cutting across immediate family and national boundaries. On the other hand, she deals with Brigitte's passing differently, as she makes an effort to visit her before her friend dies, but does not fly to Germany to attend the funeral. Hence, she finds herself practicing Western as well as African cultures pertaining to death and funerals.

## Narrative of grief and mourning

*Undisciplined Heart* is a memoir which focuses on death, dying, grief and mourning. The narrator gives an account of her inability to register her close friends' deaths. The second part of the book titled "The pit of death" leaves no doubt about the fact that the author experiences death to be difficult to deal with. She starts off this part of her life with "Death has stalked us this year" (p. 77). This section of the autobiography is an account of events important to her in 2002, of the dying and deaths of two of her closest female friends Brigitte in Germany and Isobel, and a male colleague and friend Victor Nwankwo, a Nigerian publisher. The passing of these people seem to have a long lasting and painful effect on the author which, besides the feeling of total failure, seems to lead to a sort of spiritual death which results in the decision to end her career as a bookseller. The closing of the bookshop stands for the closing of the chapter in her life that was meant to bring reading and education to the Namibian nation. The death of the bookshop coincides with the passing of her friend, Brigitte, in January 2003 (p. 105).

Katjavivi gives details with clinical exactitude of her friend, Brigitte's death after she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She narrates, "Brigitte had endless treatments, various operations, different bouts of chemotherapy, and continued life as normally as possible" (p. 79). As she tries to register and cope with her friend's illness, she says, "You do not want people you love to suffer, to collapse slowly and painfully, to be eaten up by disease as well as medication taken to try to defeat it" (p. 81). Nancy K. Miller states that in a memoir, the author writes about death twice, the other's and one's own. According to Miller, "every autobiography [...] is also an autothanatography".<sup>13</sup> In addition, Egan asserts that autothanatography "focus[es] on illness, pain, and imminent death as crucial to the processes of that life". In this respect, we believe, as the author mourns the death of her friends, she also is "grieving about [her] own mortality and the menace of life threatening illness".<sup>14</sup> After Brigitte's death the narrator comes to a conclusion that:

Death is not an end, but a beginning. It is an incident in the 'life of the ages,' which is God's gift to us now. It is the escape of the spirit from its old limitations and its freeing for a larger and more glorious career. We stand around the grave, and as we take our last, lingering look, too often our thoughts are *there*, and we return to the desolate home feeling that all that made life lovely has been left behind on the bleak hillside [...]. Yet the spirit now is *free*, and the unseen angel at our side points upwards from the grave and whispers, "She is not here but risen." The dear one returns with us to our home, ready and able, as never before, to comfort, encourage, and beckon us onward (p. 82, emphasis in original).

Of interest in this realisation is the similarity between the Western perception of death and the worldview of the many Namibian communities. In most Namibian communities,

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy K. Miller, "Representing Others: Gender and the Subjects of Autobiography", *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 6 (1), 1994: 1-27 (12), cited in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*: 138.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*: 138.

death is viewed as a mere passage from the human to the spirit world. In other words, there is a very thin line between the dead and the living. Anene Ejikeme also observes that among the Ovambo, the largest ethnic group in Namibia, “life and death were not seen as opposites, but intimately connected.” In other words, death is seen as a

transition between worlds, as one went from this world to the next”. The ancestors were often referred to as the ‘living dead’. This is a belief that seems to be common among the different Namibian ethnic groups. The ancestors play a significant role in the lives of the people and they “continue to be called upon to assist their relatives in this world.”<sup>15</sup>

We believe, as the author mourns Brigitte’s passing, she expresses this connectivity between the living and the dead. She shows her grief publicly through the memoir. Writing becomes a narratology to confront and counter the cancer. This process is also complicated by her sudden illness as her heart begins to fail. We concur with Smith and Watson that memoirs are a form of grief work, a way to seek repair and compensation.<sup>16</sup> Through her memoir, the author seeks consolation and is able to express her grief. By chronicling the deaths of her friends, she crafts a new platform that enables her to redefine Brigitte’s illness, suffering and death. In the process, articulating her friend’s death through memoir-writing she finds comfort and consolation.

## Death as a political statement

According to Smith and Watson, “narratives of grief and mourning address larger social, cultural, and political issues.”<sup>17</sup> When the narrator receives the news of the assassination of her friend and publisher Chief Victor Nwankwe in Nigeria, via email, the shock is instant and powerful. She remembers the physical shock and writes, “As I took the news, I could no longer breathe” (p. 83). She gasps and “could not speak” (ibid.). In the final stages of the shock she writes “I never dreamt that when I went to Nigeria, it would be for Victor’s funeral” (p. 84).

Katjavivi introduces a new jarring discourse in the death of her personal friend Victor. She examines Nigeria’s political struggles, the civil war from the perspective of memoir-writing. The memoir gives centrality to the narrator’s quest to understand and explore the political situation in Nigeria. She combines the political, death and memoir in ways that situate the narrator and the narrated problematically within Nigeria’s civil war. At a time she wanted to visit Nigeria, the country was still suffering under the Abacha military regime. Victor says to her, “It’s not a good time to visit Nigeria [...]. Come when we have a democratic government. Then you can also come home” (p. 84). By so doing, we argue that she questions and destabilises the coherence of the ideology of the civil war in Nigeria. She dialogues implicitly with the civil war but never engages with it substantially.

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<sup>15</sup> Anene Ejikeme, *Culture and Customs of Namibia*, Oxford, Greenwood, 2011: 45.

<sup>16</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*: 139.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

The Nigerian civil war of 1967 to 1970 soon after independence was one of the most devastating wars on the Africa continent. The civil war was supposed to bring about the political unification and integration of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria: Hausa-Fulani in the north, Igbo in the south east, and Yoruba in the southwest. When the eastern region seceded in 1967, calling itself the Republic of Biafra war broke out. By the time it ended almost two million people had died, the economy had ground to a standstill and the country was suffering acute political and social instability. It is against this backdrop that we argue that remembering the civil war through Victor's death is evidence that the narrator and many other people bear the scars of their exposure to this war. In addition, we argue that remembering such violence is a "political act, representing a constructive engagement with a fractured past and a moral judgement of its significance".<sup>18</sup>

Victor's family interpret his death as political. His brother blames the local state authorities for the killing (p. 86). Though he was not a politician, Victor "was critical of the state government" and his family also believe he was killed by the state agents, the police. After, hearing the gunfire, the guard goes out of the compound and sees "a police car driving down the street" and "Victor was in his car just outside the house. He had been shot point blank" (p. 85). Victor's killing is followed by other killings, "two lawyers and a university professor" (ibid.). Thus in Katjavivi's memoir, the political and death coexist in a substantial way and jar on each other. We thus posit that the memoir expands its boundaries to include not only the death of Victor but the death of the nation, Nigeria.

The physical state of the buildings and roads attest to this 'death' as the buildings in Enugu are "in need of repair. They look run down and dirty from the red laterite soil that the heavy rains had splashed onto them over the years. The side roads are full of potholes" (p. 84). The dilapidated state of the roads and the buildings is symbolic of the unstable political state and the violence in Nigeria. Even the road to Victor's office is in a "terrible mess, full of potholes, muddy and slippery after the rain" (p. 85). Hence, the memoir in this case explicitly links the personal and the political narrative. According to Smith and Watson, such a memoir becomes an "act of mourning not only personal loss but collective vulnerability and communal loss."<sup>19</sup> The Ajalli priest at the final church service says, "Do not weep for Victor. Weep for yourselves and for your children. Weep for Nigeria" (p. 86). One might argue that the narrator uses the memoir not to draw comfort by writing about the grief but "underscores the vulnerability" of innocent people.<sup>20</sup> The aim is not to chronicle the loss of a friend but to showcase the brutality of the civil war in Nigeria. Using the memoir platform, it would seem we are reminded that "remembering is oriented not to the past, but to coming to terms with the past in a

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<sup>18</sup> Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm, *Remembering Violence: Anthropological Perspectives on Intergenerational Transmission*, New York, Bhergahn, 2012: 18.

<sup>19</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*: 139.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.: 140.



present that is continuously troubled by it".<sup>21</sup> It is this fragmented and painful past that the author comes to terms with as she remembers, transmits, and experiences the death of her friend Victor through her memoir. The recognition of past violence and death in the process of self-writing enables the author to articulate her pain but more significantly, it leads to closure.

## Death as a quest for the spiritual

The article is also concerned with the portrayal of personal analysis of the author's life. By writing about the death of her friends and her own illness and the encounter with her own death the author eventually comes to terms with it towards the end of the book. Firstly, the swift consecutive deaths of her friends Victor and Isobel take her by surprise. Victor, an editor and public figure who was shot in front of his own house, was the victim of an assassination. Isobel collapses and dies in a clinic in Cape Town. The narrator is overwhelmed and starts questioning her own existence. These events literally bring her life to a halt as she is trying to make sense of their deaths. She falls into a depression with a feeling of defeat, morbidity and plays requiems for herself (p. 104). After receiving a pacemaker, she starts worrying about death in general and eventually her own existence, its vulnerability and the fact that illness and possibly death could seize her any time as she has continues to have problems with what doctors call her 'undisciplined heart' (p. 123).

Religion and spirituality are mentioned sparsely at that stage. The accounts revolve rather around the events surrounding her and her own being. She receives a posthumous message from Brigitte through a medium (p. 112). Following this the author becomes aware of her spirituality, or begins to question its very existence. From a spiritual point of view the author travels from being somewhat oblivious and inexperienced about terminal illness or sudden death. When fate forces her to deal with her friends' deaths her spiritual journey starts in a most interesting way. Firstly, she is in shock and disbelief, followed by the awareness that it could happen to her at any time. Her journey takes her to another level of spirituality where she starts investigating her own faith and religion in general. Having been raised as an Anglican, she progresses to a state where she expresses awareness of the atrocities that the church committed in Africa in the name of God, to developing a curiosity and investigative spirit to find out as much as possible about world religions. She eventually arrives at a definition of religions for herself.

When she falls seriously ill, the author, who is a passionate reader, takes only one book to the hospital, the bible. It appears that in her physical weakness the bible embodies spiritual strength and symbolises the only connection to God. There she is visited by a friend, Celia who refers to Psalm 91 which has helped her through difficult times. She also refers her to Psalms 46 and 62 and from there she reflects on them. She prays for protection in Psalm 46 and prays for healing in Psalm 62. She starts creating her own version of faith of Psalm 46 and contextualises it as follows:

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<sup>21</sup> Argenti and Schramm, *Remembering Violence*: 17.

God is the world  
She will not be overthrown  
And she will help us at the break of day (p. 246).

Significantly, she demystifies the traditional belief that God is male and refers to God as woman. She celebrates strength and resilience in womanhood. Her faith is strengthened as she fights the infection she suffered in her heart. In an interview by Janet van Eeden of LitNet, Katjavivi says that,

being ill certainly challenges [one's] about life and death. You wonder what human existence is all about. You search for meaning. I found strength in a growing sense of the connectedness of all beings – myself included – which can be expressed in terms of energy or the life force or what we call God. It helped me realise that the end of my physical being would not be the end of my essence or spirit.<sup>22</sup>

She finds strength and the will power to live after exploring the writings of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and African prophets. In the ancient Hebrew of the Psalms, she learns that there are no gender-specific pronouns and that God is above the concept of gender in the Judaic tradition (p. 246). We argue that in order to connect with all human beings, she deconstructs the gender boundaries that are constructed and fixed by society and believes in a God who is human. Consequently, she summarises the most essential elements of the psalms and looks for more inclusive terminology, looking for the 'She' (p. 426). This results in her own statement of faith (p. 253):

I believe in God, Father and Mother of the universe,  
Maker of all things, visible and invisible,  
the source of love, On whom we can call for protection  
to strengthen ourselves  
and find our way in the world.  
I believe in the Absolute, the Creator,  
The source of energy and light and life,  
The spirit that is within all living things,  
In which we are One.  
Who has many faces and many names.  
I believe that I am part of something bigger than myself,  
A part of Life, a part of creation.  
I believe that we are Fire and Water,  
Yin and Yan,  
Creator and destroyer,  
And that the life force of which we are part  
has those same characteristics of opposites,  
Like lightening, like electricity,  
Cracking across the universe,  
Creating/giving life,  
Destroying/burning,  
Burning/healing.

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<sup>22</sup> Janet van Eeden, "Author of Undisciplined Heart, Jane Katjavivi, in conversation with Janet van Eeden", 27 July 2010, <[http://argief.litnet.co.za/article.php?news\\_id=90419](http://argief.litnet.co.za/article.php?news_id=90419)> [accessed 22 July, 2016].

I believe  
That we acknowledge and recognize the life force  
And give it different names  
At different historical ages,  
In different times,  
Across time and culture, We make the connection,  
We search for the pattern and the meaning,  
And we call this God.

She calls it her time of reflection and revelation when she acquires 'knowledge beyond the everyday consciousness'. We argue that this awareness further leads her to her realisation that she is 'part of the collective heartbeat'. She finally arrives at a point of acceptance of physical death and where she is no longer terrified (p. 254). Even though she is disappointed that her husband's profession takes her to another country, Germany, where she does not really want to live, because of its history, it is there that doctors find out what her real problem is and are able to help her. Spiritually, she grows through the experiences of not always being able to influence herself and comes to the conclusion that there must be a higher power that frees her from the deadly virus in her chest. Healing from her illness also frees her from fear of death and leads to her spiritual healing. She comes to the realisation that without spiritual guidance and faith, physical healing cannot take place. She calls it her renewed faith. She concludes by giving thanks with Psalm 103:

Bless the Lord, O' my soul:  
My innermost heart, bless his holy Name.  
Bless the Lord, my soul,  
And forget none of his benefits.  
He pardons all my guilt  
And heals all my suffering.  
He rescues me from the pit of death  
And surrounds me with constant love,  
So that my youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Concluding with a quote from the bible she ends her spiritual journey and completes the quest taking divine words from the bible, the book of her Anglican upbringing. The spiritual quest runs parallel to her physical wellbeing until she reconnects with her faith. In her earlier years the author is spiritually distant, but as she physically weakens she moves closer to God and, at which point her health begins to improve again.

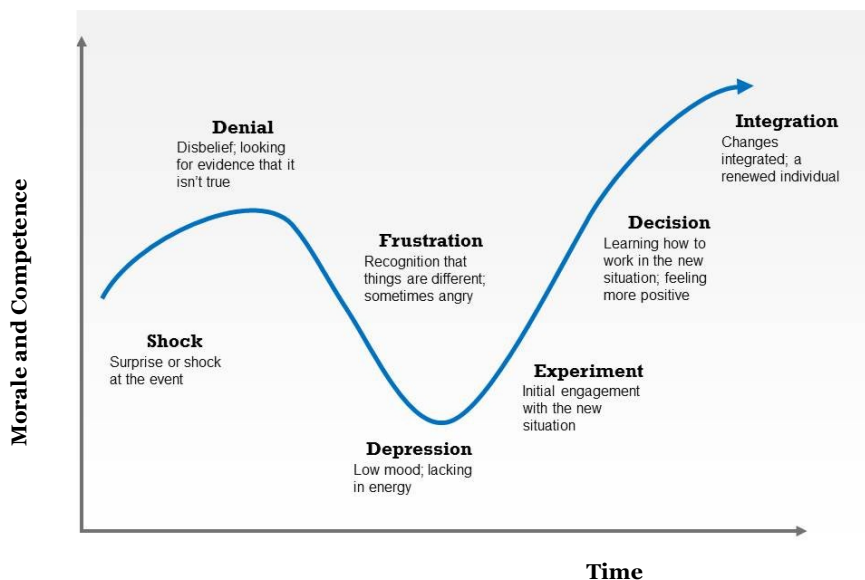
## **Life writing as therapy**

When writing about her own story Katjavivi offers the reader an insight into the uniqueness of the events that she considers important in her life and by reading about them one relives them as if one were a spectator. Writers often describe journaling or writing as sentences and ideas pouring from their minds onto paper often involving information that they were not aware of. The flow of the written words is soothing, as it has left a restless or disconcerted mind.

Natalie Goldberg suggests that powerful writing emerges from deep within our spiritual and emotional core.<sup>23</sup> When such authentic feelings burst from their hidden places, the writer feels a lift and clarity – Katjavivi describes it as realising that she was not only writing about what happened in her life, but ‘her own journey’. Towards the end of the book Katjavivi writes about revealing to her friends that she has been writing the book. “I have been writing about Namibia and about all of you.” She shares how she felt when having to move to Europe and when confronted with her own deaths and illnesses and those of her friends. She explains that when she “became engaged in the writing process” she “began to realise that this was also a story about her own journey” (p. 289).

Of interest in mapping the narrator’s journey through illness and the experience of death at close quarters is the Kübler-Ross change curve. The Kübler-Ross change curve describes a person’s reactions to the death of a loved one or the news of terminal illness. We note that the different stages (shock, denial, frustration up to integration) represented by this model resonate with the stages that the narrator goes through during her illness and when she loses close friends. For *Undisciplined Heart* we have chosen to use the Kübler-Ross change curve (fig. 1) to interpret and describe on two levels as the experiences of death and illness overlap during the related events. Thus, we posit that the Kübler-Ross change curve measures the narrator’s reactions to the events in her memoir by morale and competence on the Y axis and time on the X axis.

Fig. 1: The Kübler-Ross change curve



<sup>23</sup> Cf. Waxler, “Memory Writing”.

## **Expression of shock, denial and frustration**

The stage of shock occurs on receiving the news of the event, in this case the deaths of her friends. Firstly, she loses her close female friend Brigitte, who passes away after a long battle with cancer. Although the author knew the end was near when she last visited her friend, she experiences the news as if being “flooded with a terrible mixture of grief and relief” and is reminded of Dr Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a Dream’ speech. The terrible mixture of grief and relief sets in when she sees Brigitte as being freed from her “long and hard suffering”. Although it is the thoughts that come to her mind, the reader is inadvertently taken to the memory of Dr M. L. King’s voice when delivering his famous speech in 1969 (p. 81).

The narrator is first taken ill when visiting northern Namibia for a workshop. She is exhausted, tired and “hides from the world” for a couple of days, thinking she is “taking care of herself” (p. 90). One night she wakes up with intense pains across her chest, but when she is about to go to the hospital, they disappear. She falls ill again with the same intense headache and chest pains shortly after that. Unconsciously aware of the fact that something is terribly wrong with her health, she has extensive tests done, tries to rest while listening to Faure’s Requiem, and “fears decay” (p. 90). This is the first time that her thoughts revolve around her own death. She remains tired and worn out until she decides to close the bookshop. She feels she has failed, so, in a way, the bookshop also dies.

When writing about her friend Isobel she uses a simple statement to lead the reader into the lengthy account of Isobel’s death and funeral “A few hours later, the world turns” (p. 96). Indirectly this general statement expresses her shock, but also includes all other family members and friends who are affected by Isobel’s death. When receiving the news of the death, her “Oh no. No”, reaction is symbolic of denial. Outside the shop she can no longer hold back the tears (p. 101). The shock is expressed as denial followed by a deep feeling of sadness. During that time, her physical weakness returns. She repeatedly takes days off to rest, has difficulty getting out of bed and doing her daily chores, and, eventually, noticeably, also loses weight. She shows denial in these actions, is frustrated at not getting better and finally admits to her friend “her depression, feeling of defeat and the morbidity, playing requiems for herself” (p. 104). She is unable to make a decision about her state of health. In her depression, she even feels unworthy of telling a doctor about her fatigue.

## **Experiment, decision, integration**

Ultimately, she surrenders, closes the bookshop and makes an appointment with the doctor the same day (p. 105) The decision to end her contract and make an appointment marks her first step towards acceptance of her ill-health. In addition, the loss of the bookshop and the first anniversary of her friend Brigitte’s death coincide. Thus, she is at the very bottom of the Kübler-Ross’ change curve.

We note that it is her friend Deedee who stays close to her, reassuring her and encouraging her to make a decision. The author gives her credit by acknowledging that it is “Deedee who saves my life” (p. 105). The decision to see the doctor results in her having a pacemaker implanted. Being in disbelief and denial again when first hearing the news her response is “I don’t understand what this means” and “pacemakers, but I know nothing about them” (p. 106). When the word ‘transplant’ is mentioned her reaction is, “[t]he second word I recognise is ‘transplant’ and there is no way I can deal with that one” (p. 106). When she realises that getting a pacemaker is just a ‘procedure’, but not surgery, she concludes “I live” (p. 110). Interestingly, this is her first positive remark. Just moments before the procedure, she still feels absolutely lifeless and helpless, expressing her disbelief of what is happening to her. One can feel the resignation in her words, “I still can’t take in what is happening to me, but there’s nothing I can do; my fate is in the hands of others” (p. 110). However, shortly thereafter, her confidence returns when realising the ‘procedure’ is quick and not complicated. She states “I live” (p. 110). Her newly gained confidence can be attributed to her engaging with the new environment.

However, it will emerge at a later stage that her ordeal is not over. For now she continues to struggle with her fear of “falling asleep and never waking again.” At this stage she feels that “the dividing line between life and death is tenuous and insubstantial” (p. 112). She slips in and out of gaining confidence, doubting herself and feeling useless. From fearing death she moves to a stage where she wonders about the circumstances in which she might die. In a conversation with her doctor she asks the absurd question “How will I die?” She is suddenly obsessed with the thought of dying, but not being dead. Her doctor assures her “Don’t worry”, “you can die” (p. 114). Gradually she accepts her situation and appreciates help from others such as being driven to and from town and having her groceries carried. She slows down and makes more positive statements that prove she is accepting of her new situation. When seeing her family members she says “I am surrounded by love” (p. 116). In addition she attempts to make sense of how it could have happened that she “fell off the mountain” (p. 116) and to “accept her recovery and to give thanks” (p. 119). Visits to the church seem to help her recuperate and gaining more confidence. However, during her recovery she has a setback which can fortunately be treated. The doctor explains it as “undisciplined heart”. She encourages herself to accept the pacemaker by saying “I must accept the balance this gives me and not fight against it” (p. 123).

## Integration

She moves to Brussels when her husband is appointed ambassador and she gets used to her new life, which also includes travelling within Europe. By now she has adjusted to the pacemaker on which she is totally dependent on, and takes things slowly. She shows respect for her new situation and avoids situations that might upset her heart. This is reflected when she walks uphill slowly, “walk a bit and rest a bit” (p. 194) and when she states that “After coming to Brussels, my health has improved and I’ve grown stronger.

My pacemaker has kept me balanced, and the medication has controlled the extras heart beats, disciplining my heart” (p. 239). She has fully accepted and integrated her condition into her life. She notes, “I’ve discovered that if I rest and sleep, I usually rise again refreshed” (p. 239). This statement shows the respect she has developed for her condition.

When she learns that her heart function has deteriorated further, she does not panic or show signs of fear initially. Instead, she “strangely feels pleased with the diagnosis and does not take in its implications” (p. 239). But on learning that it can become dangerous, she is overwhelmed with fear just as she was three years earlier. However, she tries to be strong when learning that she needs to another, more powerful pacemaker. She encourages herself by saying “I know I need to let go of my fear, but I can’t” (p. 245). It is once again outside forces, three of her friends who redirect her focus from fear to comfort, when they refer to Psalm 91. The three separate references to the same psalm comfort her and she finally reads it:

Whoever goes to God for safety,  
Whoever remains under the protection of the Almighty,  
Can, say, ‘You are my defender and protector, you are my God, in you I trust.’  
You will keep us safe from all hidden dangers and from all deadly  
diseases.  
Your will keep us safe from all hidden dangers and from all deadly  
diseases. Your faithfulness will protect and defend us,  
We will be safe in your care (p. 245).

Interestingly, she discovers that though the Psalm 91 versions that she reads are different, they “all hold the same core” (p. 245). As an editor and publisher she pays attention to the nuances of words that could easily change the impact of the text. With this realisation, she finds strength through seemingly coincidental references to certain psalms and spirituality and starts reading the bible, the only book she had taken to hospital. Her effort to find strength causes her to reword some of the psalms for herself (p. 246) and ends in her ultimately accepting death and ending her fear (p. 254). She has now entirely integrated her illness and vulnerability into her life. At the end of the book there is a clear closure and optimistic outlook on the near future, the return of the entire family to Namibia and the disappearance of the virus from her heart.

## Conclusion

This article showed that central to the thanatography genre is the textual presence of death within the narrative. We note a continuous engagement with death in the chapter “Pitfalls of Death.” It brings the “stark physicality of the suffering” each particular death causes but at the same time “creates a sense continuity with and completion of something essential in the character and individuality of the [author]”.<sup>24</sup> The author’s illness becomes a feature of her selfhood as she establishes clear links between writing

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<sup>24</sup> Anthony O’Keefe, “Mortal Interruptions: Autobiography, Death, Thanatography”, *East West Cultural Passage*, 4, 2005: 12-28 (21).

and death. We conclude that *Undisciplined Heart* is a thanatography in which the author writes about her dying and the death of her friends. In this sense it is inherently a chronicle of death and mourning; writing that both mourns and revivifies. Through thanatography and memoir writing, the author tries to make sense of illness, death and dying, and also attempts to show how she continues to create relationships with the dead. Significantly, she articulates how experiences of loss may be shared and how personal writings about death and mourning reshape her identity.

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