

University of Dundee

First my dad, then my iphone

Clarke, Daniel Wade

Published in:
Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung

DOI:
[10.17169/fqs-21.2.3258](https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.2.3258)

Publication date:
2020

Licence:
CC BY

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Clarke, D. W. (2020). First my dad, then my iphone: An autoethnographic sketch of digital death. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung*, 21(2), Article 8. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.2.3258>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

First My Dad, Then My iPhone: An Autoethnographic Sketch of Digital Death

Daniel Wade Clarke

Key words:

fathers and sons;
digital death;
hauntings; loss;
autoethnography;
creative arts
practices; lousy
singing; good
enough; research
poetry; affective
writing

Abstract: Potentially lousy singing and research poetry are used to make sense of losing—soon after he died—my iPhone containing video footage of my father singing. Since I did not back up this digital treasure, not only is he now physically dead, he is *digitally dead* (MONCUR, 2016) too. Considering how bereavement is shaped by digital death, in this article I focus on my experience of grief following this *double loss*. How is a lost video and the device that stored my memories impacting my encounter with loss? Haunting, and being haunted by, digital technology and the lost treasure, I write my way through this combined loss, showing what (im)mortality in a digital context brings me into contact with. I hope this writing connects with and encourages those struggling to persevere with similar technology-based hauntings.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
 - [1.1 Dad is singing \(Sketch 1\)](#)
 - [1.2 Facing the loss of my phone \(Sketch 2\)](#)
 - [1.3 Sketching an outline for the rest of this article](#)
- [2. Death Studies, Digital Death, Hauntings and Narrative Competence](#)
- [3. Going Beyond Scholarship on Death and Digital Mourning](#)
 - [3.1 Methodological approach](#)
 - [3.2 I haunt the video of my dad \(Sketch 3\)](#)
 - [3.3 My dad haunts me \(Sketch 4\)](#)
 - [3.4 Embracing a phone-dad assemblage \(Sketch 5\)](#)
 - [3.5 Slippery phone \(Sketch 6\)](#)
 - [3.6 Dis\(-\)abled relations \(Sketch 7\)](#)
- [4. Closing Thoughts on Digital Death and Mourning](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Introduction

1.1 Dad is singing (Sketch 1)

[Singing]

De do do do de da da da

Is all I want to say to you
Watching my video of him laid out on the hospital bed,
pointing to the screen with one hand and
tapping the beat on his head with the other,
I haven't lost him.
Clocking his nicotine stain-free fingers,
he is alive and full of life with a
freshness and a

glow

I can't remember seeing in years.
A teleportation device,
Bringing me right back to
the moment I hit record when
I knew I had to do something ...

Committing to digital memory
that moment forever;
for a future place and time and person
for my kids I want,
but do not have yet,
to show them that
this is what grandad looked and sounded like when he broke a smile and sang a
song

lousily [1]

1.2 Facing the loss of my phone (Sketch 2)

Wednesday 6th May 2015. I arrived home from the Fife Athletics Club *Midweek Series*—the St Andrews 5km, without my *iPhone*. Tracing back my steps—at least three times—between the car where I parked at the back of the house and the back door; searching the car, the path and the cottage—high and low—losing my mind, my phone and my Dad, again. The next day I called the Police Station in St Andrews, the Fife Athletics Club race organizers and the St Andrews University Cricket Pavilion—where the race was headquartered, to ask if anybody had handed in a phone. [2]

Nobody handed in a phone that night. And, of course, I had not backed up my photographs and videos to the *iCloud*.

Weekly and monthly searches ensued whenever I
slid the seats forward in the front of the car, or
put the seats down in the back or,
took the carpets out to dust them.
Resolved never to see the thing again.
Sometimes life is just like that.

Gone

No! Damn it! I am going to find that phone!

In a frenzied Stanley knife attack,
slicing the
woven strips of webbing tacked on to
the underside of
the sofa,
I ripped it open
but
it's not there.

I sold the car I drove home in
from the race that night and,

I even told the buyer,

"If you find a phone ...

It has on it the *only* video of my father I have and, he is no longer with us.

Will you please return it to me if you find it?!"

He never called. [3]

1.3 Sketching an outline for the rest of this article

This article is structured as follows. First, I provide a description of the various disciplines that have inspired this qualitative inquiry into digital mourning (Section 2). The methodological approach used for exploring the unfinished work of mourning is then described (Section 3.1). Five autoethnographic sketches are assembled (Sections 3.2 to 3.6) to paint a verbal picture of what remains when a digital file is lost beyond recovery, leading to a discussion and conclusion (Section 4) on who to be and how to go on living with digital loss. [4]

2. Death Studies, Digital Death, Hauntings and Narrative Competence

Death studies involves the scholarly inquiry into death, including experiences of dying, bereavement and the lingering instances of grief, mourning and loss in society. For WALTER (2014, p.74), "death studies [are] not a discipline, but an interdisciplinary field, which stays fertile only by providing a place where diverse disciplines encounter and engage with one another." In this article, I draw inspiration from writing related to the interdisciplinary fields of qualitative inquiry (RICHARDSON, 1997); autoethnography (DOUGLAS, 2017; PURNELL, 2017; WYATT, 2017); death studies (WALTER, 2014); bereavement, trauma and loss (GLOVICZKI, 2016; HOCKER, 2010; PAXTON, 2018); organization and management studies (CUNLIFFE, 2018a, 2018b); business management education (MILLER, 2017); narrative medicine (CHARON, 2001) and digital lives (MONCUR, 2016) to explore the ongoing experience of loss. I will now explain how my writing was inspired by these disciplines. [5]

Generally speaking, qualitative inquiry is concerned with understanding human beings' experiences. Following RICHARDSON (1997), "I write because I want to find something out. I write ... to learn something I [did not] know before I wrote it" (p.87). So thinking about writing with RICHARDSON's view on writing as a method of qualitative inquiry, where writing *is* thinking and a process of discovery, being inspired by her approach to understanding experiences helped to draw my attention to becoming a digital mourner to know something about digital death through writing that I could not have known before I wrote it. On this, the autoethnographic stories here "are stories of [and] about the self told through the lens of culture" (ADAMS, JONES & ELLIS, 2015, p.1), that is, a culture of living digitally and digital mourning. Writing with DOUGLAS (2017), PURNELL (2017) and WYATT (2017) in mind encouraged me to consider specific details (e.g., music, hauntings, and surprise), helping me to offer "specific knowledge about *particular* lives [my life], experiences and relationships" (ADAMS et al., 2015, p.21)—a core ideal of autoethnography, to show something about digital culture, "getting it' differently contoured and nuanced" (RICHARDSON, 1997, p.91). Bereavement studies typically examine the impact of death on emotional health and social functioning while studies of trauma and loss typically examine personal losses related to family and health. Thinking of material losses (i.e., digital artifacts) through writings of GLOVICZKI (2016), HOCKER (2010) and PAXTON (2018) for example, helped to draw my attention to personal attachments, opening up continuing bonds for exploration. Returning to RICHARDSON (1997), since I want to unmask the processes that produced this paper and, both non-human *and* "human content keeps invading my thinking and shaping my writing" (pp.48-49); thinking with CUNLIFFE (2018a) and MILLER (2017) helped draw attention to how my identity—as a business management educator—shapes this writing and the writing shapes me, creating a scholarship of possibilities (CUNLIFFE, 2018b). While organization and management studies or business management education scholars typically spend a lot of time answering questions and writing about *what to do*, following CUNLIFFE (2018a), here, primacy is given to figuring out *who to be* not *what to do*. In the context of this writing, then, "I have been writing for and of my life" (RICHARDSON, 1997, p.48) and I am more

inspired to figure out "who" to be with digital death not only "what" to do with it. Narrative medicine is generally defined as clinical practice fortified by the knowledge of what to do with stories (CHARON, 2001). It involves clinicians being able to recognize stories they are part of and where their own stories meet others', allowing them to bring their own stories to the clinical encounter to promote healing. Narrative medicine, then, involves absorbing, interpreting and honoring stories before being moved by them—moved to action. Thinking with CHARON inspired me to consider how my own losses might help make contact with other peoples' stories of loss, building something to act by helping me consider *possible* (CUNLIFFE, 2018b) ways *to be* (CUNLIFFE, 2018a) in my own learning, becoming and teaching practices. Digital lives are generally defined as those aspects of life that are lived online, enabling individuals to live another (digital) life or to live digitally. Digital life is generally defined and evidenced in terms of digital (online) footprints, that is, the traces that are left (online) showing where people have been (e.g., online banking and websites for shopping and socializing). Thinking about digital lives inspired me to write and think about the digital technologies, especially the smartphone, enabling digital life. This, in turn, led to my writing about digital traces and what happened when the digital device storing those traces "died." [6]

The meanings of artifacts and *things* left behind after a death have received considerable attention within death studies, especially photographs (e.g., see HERRMANN, 2005; HOCKER, 2010; WILKINSON, 2016). The role and power of visual art-making (THOMSON, 2018), creative practices (LEATHERBY & DAVIDSON, 2015), performative writing or relief humor (DRESCHER & ENCK, 2015) and, among others, *writerly responses* to death (e.g., BRIEN, 2017) have also been explored, as ways of handling, making sense of, coming to terms with and establishing ways of coping with loss. [7]

The artifacts or things left behind, that is, the *remainders*, HOCKER (2018) observes, *are reminders*—perhaps, reminders of a loving relationship, an absent presence, interactions and conversations (i.e., interpersonal relations) once had. Beyond the meaning of physical objects following death, an area of interest within death studies (GRAHAM, CONSTABLE & FERNANDO, 2015) is the mediating role of contemporary visual technologies and the impact of digital devices on experiences of death and loss. What remains, for example, when a digital file (e.g., a photograph or a video) is left after a death? And, potentially painful to engage with following a death, are there remains when a digital file is beyond recovery? [8]

Our *physical*, *social* and *digital* lives are becoming increasingly complex and interwoven, with synchronous and asynchronous aspects (MONCUR, 2016). It follows then that having such interwoven lives complicates and impacts how life and death are experienced, creating ambiguities over where exactly death is located and when it occurs. As a scholar of digital lives, MONCUR notes that *physical* and *social* death are relatively "straightforward" (p.108), observing that in developed countries, physical death will most likely come in old age and might be marked by "the issue of a death certificate, disposal of the body, and often a

ceremony of farewell" (ibid.). The moment when social death occurs however, for MONCUR, can be imprecise, as it can be "hastened" or "delayed." Near the end of physical life, social identity and interaction "... can wither, leading ultimately to social death" (ibid.). Social death can be brought forward by "the onset of conditions associated with memory loss and personality changes" (ibid.), but it can also be delayed until long after physical death as the bereaved may host public acts of remembrance, for example. But what of our *digital* life that "quickly becomes a multi-faceted one ... scattered across multiple physical devices including smart phones, laptops and cloud storage" (p.109)? From this, MONCUR argues that, in the absence of a universal digital "off" switch, digital death is less precise than that of social death and as a result, "we can linger on in cyberspace indefinitely" (ibid.). When digital photographs or videos are the remainders, we may feel haunted by the "string of code" (OSVATH, 2018, p.36) stored on a device or left lingering—deleted, lost and inaccessible—in cyberspace. Digitized remains, then, might have implications for how "griefwork" (DAVIDSON, 2018, p.34) and mourning is experienced by those left behind. But what of our technological devices, such as the "death" of a digital device? [9]

There is a view which holds that the loss of a digital device or digital information is akin to experiencing the death of a human (OSVATH, 2018). In this view, we mourn the "death" of a device and grieve the loss of the digital creations stored on said device (especially if such files are not backed up) just as we grieve the death of a loved one. OSVATH (p.34) notes that "digital technology is inseparable from our life. It is not far from the truth that you and I are 'wired into existence through technology'. That's why ... information loss ... is a form of death." VAN BUSKIRK, LONDON and PLUMP (2017) note: "Every person you meet every day is fighting a battle you know nothing about" (p.410), and at any moment, those around you could be fighting a losing battle with digital losses. OSVATH (2018) describes how he lost every digitally archived possession of his last four years of life and work, including photos (he tells us that he even "threw away the decaying and fading old personal photographs after scanning them and retouching them through digital technology" [p.32]), music (he transferred all his CDs to his hard drive before "donating the discs to a charity" [p.35]), letters, audio recordings, papers and research projects. Apart from the insights into mourning offered by OSVATH, the nature of digital loss, including loss of digital creations, is relatively underexplored. OSVATH (p.34) observes, "there are very few personal narratives about data loss in the scholarly literature." He also notes that the type of loss associated with digital possessions is different to, for example, losing a loved one or losing material possessions in a fire; because for him, there and then he was "encountering a new form of grief, a new form of loss, without an established system for coping" (p.32). OSVATH continues: "The root of the problem is the nature of the 'binary states of digital artifacts because losing a string of code on a device does not support a ritualistic letting go'" (p.36, citing words from a personal conversation with Mike DONNE). This brings us to the question, how might we begin to think and feel (i.e., conceptualize the letting go of) the loss of a digital device with digital creations stored on it *and* what of digital mourning for the loss of such digital treasures? Bringing the idea of digital death to bear on the death of

a father, maybe this calls for ways to better *absorb* digital loss and *listen to* the potential "hauntings" (PURNELL, 2017, p.86) of our digital devices. [10]

In the context of a VHS—analogue—home recording, while seeking his mother's voice and desiring her presence following her death, PAXTON (2018) notes that by playing home videos of her talking, "seeing her move and hearing her speak on these tapes will somehow *resurrect* her. Somehow *resurrect* me" (p.1, my emphasis). In such ways, we may continue to have a connection and a relationship with the dead, potentially facilitating the creation of "affective bonds"; that is, bonds which are *felt before they are thought* (THOMSON, 2018) and continue after death. On this, HERRMANN (2014) notes that by playing videos we act as if we are "ghost hunters on television and in movies" and we "haunt, searching for understanding, looking for connection" (p.329). We also haunt technological cyberplaces and in doing so, we "bridge the past and the present, examining the remains" (p.331). Resurrecting videos bridges a felt sense of connection—a connection that might be with *others*, with *oneself*, or with *meaning* (SUTTON, 2017). [11]

Both analogue and digital remains—and the technology enabling their creation—have "thing power" and "matter energy" (THOMSON, 2018, p.3). That is, these nonhuman things have a power to animate and to act upon humans and, THOMSON (ibid.) invites us, "to think and feel what matter, mattering, art, and death provoke and make possible, and about what is released and contained in nonhuman materials and spaces." From this, I take up THOMSON's invitation to consider, what is released when digital—nonhuman—remains are beyond recovery? [12]

This inquiry into affective bonds brings me closer to *affective writing* which for SUTTON (2017, p.463):

"demands an open self, ready (or not) to receive the other. Demands complicity, reflexivity, vulnerability, receptivity, an openness ready to engage. Affective writing places me at risk, allowing the vulnerable self to emerge. [...] Affect requires the radical other. Assumes it. Demands to be affected by another." [13]

In the entanglement, then, of father-son-phone-video-lost treasure-digital mourning (HOCKER, 2010), the digital remains (as radical other) that haunt me are complicit in shaping and informing my experiences and who I am becoming. Who I am becoming is, in turn, shaped, in part, by the stories I tell myself and others, about my experiences and how they have impacted upon me. This brings me to *narrative competence*, a term used in narrative medicine to describe "the competence that human beings use to absorb, interpret...and respond to stories" (CHARON, 2001, p.1897). It is also defined as:

"the entire set of skills involved in the ability to identify, listen to, tell, understand, be touched by and act on the stories that one is exposed to. Simply put, it's the ability to take in and understand stories, and the ability to tell them" (HAY, 2015, §5). [14]

This article, then, is my attempt at affective writing and it joins with other voices on the subject of affective or continuing bonds (PAXTON, 2018), severed connections (SUTTON, 2017), healing (BRIEN, 2017) and meaning making with artifacts (HOCKER, 2010). TAMAS writes (2016, p.112): "The point, if there is one, is to alter the emotional terrain of someone's lifeworld, including my own, by nudging toward the possibility of thinking or feeling differently." This has led me to the question, what might thinking and feeling differently about the permanent loss of video footage of my father entail? In summary, I wonder what bringing narrative competence into contact with digital mourning, to absorb and to (re)tell my story might entail. [15]

3. Going Beyond Scholarship on Death and Digital Mourning

My aim here is to bring narrative competence—borrowed from narrative medicine—into contact with death studies to explore possible answers to the question, what might thinking and feeling differently about the loss of a video of my dad entail, *and* are there any remains when a digital file of my dad is lost? In doing so, by bringing digital loss to bear on father loss, in this article I extend OSVATH's (2018) writing, as it takes digital mourning into the realm of son-father relations. I will now detail the methodological approach I have taken. [16]

3.1 Methodological approach

My methodology is an amalgamation of *autoethnographic bricolage* (SUTTON, 2017), *sketching* (GLOVICZKI, 2016) and *layering*¹ (RATH, 2012). Foregrounding personal experience (*auto*) in an attempt to represent (*-graphy*) cultural experiences (*ethno*), (ADAMS & MANNING, 2015), I bring together memories and layer thoughts, showing the unfinished work of mourning. This is a creative autoethnographic *mash-up* (NESTERUK, 2015; TAMAS, 2017) about a "lost treasure" (HOCKER, 2010, p.868), depicting a process of putting myself together again (SUTTON, 2017). To do this, I rip and mix as if I am a DJ (PRESS, BRUCE, CHOW & WHITE, 2011). Instead of mixing 12" vinyl records, I spin, rip and riff off of other scholars' stories to "see with new eyes" and "offer readers the opportunity to create a new vantage point on their own lives" (NASH, 2004, p.60). This involves grafting words and fragments of sentences together from other people's writings, my own journals or research diaries and earlier iterations of this article. Using sentence fragments in this way, riffing off experiences and imaginations, the writing produces chaos and repetition (ADAMS, 2015). My poetic autoethnographic inquiry about learning to articulate my relationship with loss and the feeling of being haunted by a technological trauma comes to life and starts taking shape. Hence, *first my dad and, then my iPhone*. So this is not only an autoethnography about grief and loss: "Maybe it is. It could be" (SUTTON, 2017, p.458). Maybe it is about *digital mourning* ... [17]

TAMAS (2017) observes: "Autoethnography [... is ...] about making a space that we can project ourselves into, a *mash-up* of micro and macro, inside-out and

1 The dinkus, a line of three asterisks, is used to indicate a layering of writing/thinking.

outside-in, where what is, was, or will be might become a little *slippery*" (p.112, my emphasis). Just as mobile phones can seem sleek and slippery, often falling from our hand, with autoethnography things can slip from our hands while creating a space we want to project ourselves into. So it is that by absorbing, listening to and articulating my story, things "might become a little slippery" (TAMAS, 2016, p.112). With such slipperiness in mind, this writing is inspired by PURNELL (2017) who writes about haunting memories, inviting us to *embrace* our hauntings, *face* them and *use* them to help others. Herein lies my connection to autoethnography. So I resurrect and revisit my hauntings through a *mashed-up* process of sketching, layering and ripping off of others—through research poetry and potentially *lousy* singing—to paint a verbal picture of what remains when a digital file is lost beyond recovery. I use these hauntings to (hopefully) connect with others experiencing similar losses and in doing so, provide a direct response to OSVATH's (2018) call for more "personal narratives about data loss" (p.34). [18]

OLIVER writes (2010, p.27), "Our strength as scholars lies in our conceptualization of phenomena in alternative terms." My scholarship, then, is in conceptualizing the phenomenon of digital death in terms of digital mourning that may be released following the loss of digital data beyond recovery and, showing development of the ability to *absorb* and *retell* digital loss to "go on" living with narrative competence. The sketches and layers I have cobbled together have therefore been created around the idea of facing, embracing or using that which haunts us. There is not really a plot *per se*, just repetitions of my staring at a video, details on losing my *iPhone* and poetic fragments on being haunted by the *lost video* and *lost viewings*.

[Humming and tapping the beat on my leg]

De do do de da da da
Is all I want to say to you

[Singing and tapping the beat on my leg]

De do do de da da da
Their innocence will pull me through [19]

Kitrina DOUGLAS (2017) writes:

"We have to find spaces within our institutions where people can experiment and find different ways of knowing, living, and relating. It [does not] have to start with something as complicated as writing a song or a piece of music. To begin, perhaps a beat is all that is required" (p.107).

[Tapping the beat on my leg again]

De do do de da da da
Is all I want to say to you [20]

DOUGLAS observes a number of concerns and tensions when wondering why more social scientists do not include music and song in scholarly outputs, one of them being, for example: "we should only use those skills and communication strategies that we have highly developed. It would be an injustice to...sing out of tune. What damage it would wreak!" (p.103). But there are extensive precedents for using autoethnography incorporating creative arts practices such as poetry (and singing!) in the social sciences and elsewhere (DOUGLAS & CARLESS, 2018; LEGGO, 2005; PRENDERGAST, 2006; RICHARDSON, 1997). So, in keeping with DOUGLAS, I think, really? And echoing her thinking, to sing (fragments of) a song, must one *really* learn to be a proficient singer? [21]

No. I am not a singer and I have not been to music school. But to begin with, I just wanted to share that beat with you². It was a beat that haunted me and one that I haunted (HERRMANN, 2014) for several days and weeks after my dad died away in 2014. From that, I want to suggest that sometimes, perhaps *lousy* singing can be *good enough*. Borrowing the words "lousy" and "good enough" from LAHMAN et al. (2010, p.47), I write this article, in part, to stake a small claim for *potentially* lousy but good enough research singing. Because just as I have done with my recent efforts in carving a place for potentially lousy research *method poetry* (CLARKE, 2018) singing—lously—I would suggest, does not necessarily always wreak havoc.

[Inquisitive, half-smile]

So, my first proposition is this:

Look.

No havoc

—I hope—

is being wreaked here.

(But of course, you,

my audience and fellow writers / readers on loss,

will have to be the judge of that ...).

*** [22]

The digital death of my father haunts the *Apple* technology. The video could be in the Cloud somewhere and if only I could access it, my dad would be less dead, he could become undead, preserving the past and present of our relationship. Adopting a *man on the moon* logic, I am sure the video could be retrieved somehow, it should be possible. As WYATT (2017) reminds, however,

"What is possible ... may not ever become—*manifest*. [It is] a risk we take in writing. In living. The manifest suggests the obvious. [But] Clarity is not everything. *We need*

2 This article is based on a shorter paper that was first presented in a panel titled "Autoethnography: Loss" on May 18, 2018, at the 14th Annual International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. In June, 2018, a revised version was then presented at The 5th British Conference of Autoethnography, Bristol, UK.

the hidden and the obscured too. That is where the *possible* may lie. The promise. The hope. The *surprise*" (p.81, my emphasis). [23]

Adapting HOCKER's (2010) words, "I feel pulled at by the insistent ghost," the specter of my dad, "from a recent past" (p.864). What promise and surprise is there in a *lost video*? Where in this mash-up *is* the possible? [24]

3.2 I haunt the video of my dad (Sketch 3)

Repeatedly playing the clip,
traveling back in time
to be with him,
I can forget,
even if momentarily,
that
he is gone.
The video ends, so I
go back to the beginning.
Sometimes I
sing with him,
sometimes I
smile.
Out of routine,
sometimes I
just watch,
sometimes I
cry.
*** [25]

Given the technology-enabled possibilities and widespread use of digital devices in our culture, it is important to consider the ways digital technologies and possessions inform our experiences of who we are becoming. OSVATH (2018) observes that, for example,

"[w]e know that approximately 25% of all computer users lose some type of data every year" and so it is perhaps unsurprising then, that, "most of us are terrified by the prospect of losing our digital possessions, so we are constantly ... archiving, backing up and saving" (p.33). [26]

How we make commitments in our daily lives and construct meaning then becomes an issue because, when digital remains are lost beyond recovery, albeit embarrassing for OSVATH to confess, such loss "rendered me into a psychological state of wanting to die" (p.42). When digital possessions are

beyond recovery, *digital mourning* and ghosts might be released. But before getting lost, how does the daily use of video shape my experience of grief? [27]

3.3 My dad haunts me (Sketch 4)

Holding the *iPhone*, holding the video, holding him:

I carry him about with me,
in my pocket.

I want to hold him in my hand, so
I can see the video, again.

I don't grieve the loss of the device, just
the future moments where

I can't see the video, again.

Singing lips and dancing hand,
my body does the *do do do* and
throbs with the *da da da*,

reminding me of us being in the same place.

Reminders are reminders, Joyce Hocker says,
this *is* presence. He *is* with me.

Pure movement on
a two-inch screen.

I play at
being son
again.

Unsayable excesses,
when I lost my phone,
I lost my dad,
again.

What is released when the "... *at least* ..." lot and "... *just think* ..." sayers say:

"At least
you have the memories" ...

"Just think,
what did people do before the iPhone?"

This is not helpful because

I don't want
just *the* memories.

I want

liquid assemblages of my dad, providing
queer intersections with him in time and space³. [28]

3.4 Embracing a phone-dad assemblage (Sketch 5)

Home from work,
I make my way down the steps, leading to
the back door of the cottage.
In autumn, the sides of the steps are full of mushy leaves and
in summer, they become miniature, dried up
little river beds.
A scintillating flash of silver
catches my eye.
Times, places, dates, events, pasts, memories, presences, feelings
scramble,
ebb and flow into one another ...
I check the date.
Tonight is the day of the St Andrews 5km run,
I am gutted I'm not racing. But, who cares?
Exactly one year to the day.
I find my phone.
Maybe I will find my video. [29]

3.5 Slippery phone (Sketch 6)

Beginning May 2016,
I put the phone in a *New York Bagel* bag
fill it with dried rice and,
leave it for 10 days.
Not wanting to get my hopes up,
phone sitting in the docking station,
I perch on the end of the bed and
stare at the screen.
Wait.
Wait there!
The white "Apple" logo appears.
Seconds turn to minutes:
The more I stare, the longer it takes to
take its charge.

3 Adapted from WILKINSON (2016, p.395): "Loss pulls together scenes, atmospheres, flows, and blockages, liquid assemblages of the individual with queer intersections of time and space."

Ghosts haunt the technology.
I can't wait any longer.
I pick the phone up,
I type in my password.
Wrong.
I can't remember my password.
I try another one.
Wrong.
Change rooms.
Another.
Wrong.
Phone is Disabled, but
only 1 minute.
Try again.
Wrong.
Slippery phone.
Slippery video.
Slipping away.
Irretrievable,
once more.
*** [30]

Now there is a blockage. I feel angry that the insistent presence of his videographic ghost falls on me and the remainder—the phone—reminds me of the *lost video*. The digital file has allowed me to create an idealized version (OSVATH, 2018) of my dad but now he is gone and I feel "resistant and resentful" that I have to clean up this mess (adapted from HOCKER, 2010, p.864). With OSVATH (2018, p.29), I am in a "permanent state of anger-filled denial" regarding the grief resulting from this digital death. [31]

3.6 Dis(-)abled relations (Sketch 7)

Late for work.
Showered. Dressed.
I slip the iPhone into my pocket.
I have acquired a new phone,
so I am going around
with
two phones—one in each pocket.
I carry him around with me, all day.
I take it out every now and then to look at my screensaver:

My dad and I, smiling together.

I haven't given up.

So

I try again.

Another password.

Wrong.

Phone is disabled for 5,

then 10,

then 15 minutes.

Sunday 30th May, 2016.

I plug my phone into the laptop

Go to iTunes, again.

And, again,

I try another password.

Wrong.

Blocked for 45 minutes.

And after the 10th try,

the phone is

Disabled.

Good and proper.

*** [32]

This, then, since like WILKINSON (2016) "I refused to take the precaution of creating backups," is a story about a "catastrophic encounter" (p.400) with *triple loss*: First, my dad. Second, my *iPhone*. Third, after finding the digital storage device but unwittingly disabling it, I face loss again. And what cost is the *lost video* exacting upon me? I recognize that his "body will no longer be able to be photographed [or filmed] again" (p.398) and this is what I am left with: A phone with mud in every nook and cranny that will take a charge but will not let me in. The possibility of maintaining a continued bond by generating a felt sense through constant replays is slipping away from me and us. [33]

4. Closing Thoughts on Digital Death and Mourning

My back is up. I feel unsettled. My *wearing of the past* (WILKINSON, 2016) is no longer a possibility because I cannot carry him around with me—in a video—in my pocket: he cannot get into me through my ears and through my eyes. I cannot carry him with me everywhere I go as RANDOLPH (2003) carried around with him in his pocket the ring his father gave to him before he died. So what? And, now what then? What *is* possible? [34]

PURNELL (2017, p.87) argues that,

"[w]e need to face the shadowy manifestations of our autoethnographic hauntings, and some of these hauntings are so much a part of who we are that we need to not only embrace them but also use them to help others." [35]

From this, it might just be possible for me to grieve *better* by facing the ghosts and learning to live with technological trauma. I was able to consume the loss of my dad daily. I can still do that, to some degree and, my emotional bond with my dad and the *lost video* continues. I can still stare at the swollen, dried out *iPhone* I keep on top of my hi-fi speaker in my study at home and go to the movies in my mind. Although I am scared to throw the broken phone away, it is the *lost video* that scares me the most. So my loss is multi-layered and through dabbling with sketching (GLOVICZKI, 2016) and layering (RATH, 2012), but also through bricolage (SUTTON, 2017) and "creative mash-ups" (NESTERUK, 2015, p.148), I have tried to convey some of what it is that digital death has brought me into contact with. When digital possessions are lost beyond recovery, *digital mourning* is released. So too is the realization that death cannot be cheated by storing memories on a device (OSVATH, 2018). [36]

HERRMANN (2014) reminds us that "[a]utoethnographies bridge the silences of these private inner sanctums, allowing us to tell the truth about what makes us uncomfortable and what scares us" (p.335). Losing the footage has scarred me but through the autoethnographic process, using poetry "to manage self and world" (VAN BUSKIRK et al., 2017, p.400) and—thinking or writing with the concept of haunting—I have come to understand the associative pain and emptiness of losing the footage anew. [37]

Digital loss frustrates physical loss. And we, who—maybe unwittingly—exacerbate our sense of loss, need to practice self-care and forgive ourselves for our "childlike resistance toward digital archiving" (OSVATH, 2018, p.29). I often tell students that when they have to rewrite work they have lost, the writing they produce tends to be better than that which they have lost. Through informal feedback, this has been confirmed to me, time and time again, by students who have later found their *lost writing*. Maybe this is what I have done here with my grief resulting from the death of a digital storage device containing the video of my dad singing. The video, that was a "form of memory that I actively created, acquired, shaped, and curated" (p.31) has been lost and I have created, acquired, shaped and curated a new original in my mind and here, on the page.

Albeit a new original *writing* rather than a video, the felt sense of my deceased dad renders a continued bond possible. Accomplishing this, similar to sharpening the focus of a rewrite for a lost essay, I have embraced research poetry and singing, marshaling "thing energy" to sharpen my narrative competence. [38]

When we grieve and *absorb* digital death, *digital mourning* can open new possibilities for maintaining a continued bond. This story contains my digital loss, serving to contain my digital mourning. The death of my phone has had a curious ability to animate my memories of my dad, helping release a newfangled "guide" for *digital mourning*. Borrowing from HERRMANN (2005, p.342), "With no guide, I became my own guide," working at developing my narrative competence to help with digital mourning and healing. My point here is, when it comes to digital mourning, use no guide. Be your own guide. [39]

By losing the phone, getting it back but losing the video, then writing about it—I got to do my losses again and again. I have lost my digital footage but I now have this story. My loss of the video resulting in grief is contained by this story. This story is my new original I can retell to my son when the time feels right (at the time of writing this, he is 12 weeks old). Drawing from organization and management studies and business management education literatures, CUNLIFFE (2018a) reminds us that our experiences shape us (i.e., our alterity) and we research what we become; so here, through my slippery writing, I am learning and performing to learn to *better manage myself* (MILLER, 2017) and encourage others to persevere with their own struggles. [40]

Of course, in an essay of this sort, "the intent should never be to offer the final account; instead, we should give the best account we can in our given circumstances. Doing so opens the door to dialogue" (PELIAS, 2015, p.610). As this is my story and truth, that is, my *narrative truth* (BOCHNER, 2016) about digital death and digital mourning, the knowledge contained within these lines "is necessarily personal and provisional" (NESTERUK, 2015, p.148) and always open to revision (ELLIS, 2016). As somebody who researches and teaches organization and management studies, I recognize that our evolving digital relationships hold multiple possibilities—some good (all that storage!), some ill (digital loss rendered OSVATH into a psychological state of wanting to die)—for the people we are becoming. It is my hope, however, that with the help of this writing, "enabling and ennobling" relationships between people and with object-world relations can be forged for us to develop and enrich the kind of "narrative competence our future professional lives will require" (NESTERUK, 2015, adapted from pp.150, 143). I hope this human writing for human readers can be an open door to dialogue and, in turn, a contribution to an *ongoing human conversation* (BADLEY, 2019) about human and nonhuman losses (not merely a contribution to some kind of disembodied, detached, "scientific" knowledge). I am eager to see what we can make of these attempts ... [41]

Seeing our digital devices as emotional vampires, sucking our soul and lifeblood dry (HERRMANN, 2014), due—in part—to our digital losses, we could become stricken by our inability to perform "digital storytelling" (NESTERUK, 2015, p.143)

in the future through unlimited replays of our (now) *lost videos*. Or, with HERRMANN (2014, p.336), "through our autoethnographic writing, we can connect ..., [encourage and] commune with those struggling" with similar technological losses.

*Using my loss, I am
writing to learn to
manage myself better and
in whispers but sometimes also with screams,
I echo HERRMANN (2014) when I say,
if you are dealing with technological traumas:
"You are not alone. We are in this together" (p.330).
I also echo OSVATH (2018, p.33) in saying,
"Well, you certainly are not alone."*

[Singing and tapping the beat on my leg]

De do do do de da da da
Is all I want to say to you
De do do do de da da da
They're meaningless and all that's true

And oh! One further layer and a question to finish on:
Did my *lousy singing* wreak havoc? [42]

References

- Adams, Tony E. (2015). Review: Jane Speedy (2015). Staring at the park: A poetic autoethnographic inquiry. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 16(3), Art.12, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-16.3.2416> [Accessed: May 14, 2018].
- Adams, Tony E. & Manning, Jimmie (2015). Autoethnography and family research. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 7(4), 350-366.
- Adams, Tony E., Jones, Stacey H. & Ellis, Carolyn (2015). *Autoethnography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Badley, Graham F. (2019). Post-academic writing: Human writing for human readers. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 25(2), 180-191.
- Bochner, Arthur P. (2016). *Coming to narrative: A personal history of paradigm change in the human sciences*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Brien, Donna L. (2017). Writing death and dying. *TEXT*, 45, 1-5.
- Charon, Rita (2001). Narrative medicine: A model for empathy, reflection, profession, and trust. *Jama: Journal of the American Medical Association*, 286(15), 1897-1902.
- Clarke, Daniel W. (2018). On the (im)possibility and bliss of telling my dad, "I love you". *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 19(2), Art. 14, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-19.2.2903> [Accessed: May 28, 2018].
- Cunliffe, Ann L. (2018a). Alterity: The passion, politics, and ethics of self and scholarship. *Management Learning*, 49(1), 8-22.
- Cunliffe, Ann L. (2018b). Wayfaring: A scholarship of possibilities or let's not get drunk on abstraction. *M@n@gement*, 21(4), 429-1439.

- Davidson, Deborah (2018). The need for bereavement support following perinatal loss. *Bereavement Care*, 37(1), 31-34.
- Douglas, Katrina (2017). Where's the beat? An autoethnographic manifesto in search of rhythm, music and lyrical understandings. *International Review of Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(1), 101-109.
- Douglas, Katrina & Carless, David (2018). The long run: A story about filmmaking as qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 26(3-4), 281-290.
- Drescher, L. Hailey & Enck, Suzanne (2015). The literacy of pain: Narrating identities in the face of death. *Departure in Critical Qualitative Research*, 4(3), 27-50.
- Ellis, Carolyn (2016). *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Gloviczki, Peter J. (2016). Learning persistence through sports: Three autoethnographic sketches. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 21(5), 447-450.
- Graham, Connor; Constable, Martin & Fernando, Jeremy (2015). Guest editors' introduction: The aesthetic of death and after-death in an Internet age. *Visual Studies*, 30(1), 32-36.
- Hay, Kate (2015). Narrative competence is the new must-have skill for professional service providers. *Colliers International*, <https://knowledge-leader.colliers.com/editor/narrative-competence-is-the-new-must-have-skill-for-professional-service-providers/> [Accessed: June 31, 2019].
- Herrmann, Andrew F. (2005). My father's ghost: Interrogating family photos. *Journal of loss and trauma*, 10(4), 337-346.
- Herrmann, Andrew F. (2014). Ghosts, vampires, zombies, and us: The undead as autoethnographic bridges. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 7(3), 327-341.
- Hocker, Joyce L. (2010). It's all come down to me: Meaning making with family artifacts. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 863-870.
- Hocker, Joyce L. (2018). Reminders: Sorting through possessions after a death. *Psychology Today*, April 11, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/building-resilience/201804/reminders-sorting-through-possession-after-death> [Accessed: May 7, 2018].
- Lahman, Maria K.E.; Geist, Monica R.; Rodriguez, Katrina L.; Graglia, Pamela E.; Richard, Veronica M. & Schendel, Roland K. (2010). Poking around poetically: Research, poetry, and trustworthiness. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(1), 39-48.
- Leggo, Carl (2005). The heart of pedagogy: On poetic knowing and living. *Teachers and Teaching*, 11(5), 439-455.
- Letherby, Gayle & Davidson, Deborah (2015). Embodied storytelling: Loss and bereavement, creative practices, and support. *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 23(4), 343-360.
- Miller, John A. (2017). Lessons from management 101: Learning to manage ourselves. *Journal of Management Education*, 41(3), 335-345.
- Moncur, Wendy (2016). Living Digitally. In Sebastian Groes (Ed.), *Memory in the twenty-first century: New critical perspectives from the arts, humanities, and sciences* (pp.108-112). Basingstoke: Springer.
- Nash, Robert J. (2004). *Liberating scholarly writing. The power of personal narrative*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Nesteruk, Jeffrey (2015). Digital storytelling: Bringing humanistic inquiry to management studies. *Journal of Management Education*, 39(1), 141-152.
- Oliver, Christine (2010). The goals of scholarship. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 19(1), 26-32.
- Osvath, Csaba (2018). Enter time machine: Grieving 1.67 terabytes of digital possessions. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 7(3), 27-52.
- Paxton, Blake (2018). *At home with grief: Continued bonds with the deceased*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Pelias, Ron J. (2015). A story located in "shoulds" toward a productive future for qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(7), 609-611.
- Prendergast, Monica (2006). Found poetry as literature review: Research poems on audience and performance. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), 369-388.
- Press, Mike; Bruce, Fraser; Chow, Rosan & White, Hazel (2011). Rip+mix: Developing and evaluating a new design method in which the designer becomes a DJ. Presentation for *The 9th International European Academy of Design Conference "The Endless End"*, May 4-7, 2011, Porto, Portugal.

- Purnell, David (2017). Autoethnography as hauntings. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 10(1), 85-88.
- Randolph, Roger (2003). My father's ring. *Journal of Loss & Trauma*, 8(3), 217-220.
- Rath, Jean (2012). Autoethnographic layering: Recollections, family tales, and dreams. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18(5), 442-448.
- Richardson, Laurel (1997). *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Sutton, Timothy M L. (2017). Heart murmur. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 23(6), 458-464.
- Tamas, Sophie (2016). Written raw: Omissions, overshares, and the shameful ethics of personal narrative. In [Norman K. Denzin](#) & Michael D. Giardina (Eds.), *Qualitative inquiry through a critical lens* (pp.119-124). Oxon: Routledge.
- Tamas, Sophie (2017). The shadow manifesto. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 10(1), 110-113.
- Thomson, Jody (2018). Materializing dying: Art and mattering. *Qualitative Inquiry*, Online first.
- Van Buskirk, William; London, Michael & Plump, Carolyn (2017). The poetic workspace. *Journal of Management Education*, 42(3), 398-419.
- Walter, Tony (2014). Organizations and death—a view from death studies. *Culture and Organization*, 20(1), 68-76.
- Wilkinson, Alex (2016). Encounters with—and accounting for—loss: The wearing of the past. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 22(5), 395-405.
- Wyatt, Jonathan (2017). On a mission: A manifesto for autoethnography. *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 10(1), 81-84.

Author

Daniel Wade CLARKE is a senior lecturer in management and marketing at the University of Dundee School of Business. His scholarship centers around issues related to organizational space and place. He studies business management education and customer experience, as well as son-father relations and experiences of loss. His interests are framed by a desire to develop evocative forms of understanding through use of imaginative-creative and expressive representations including autoethnography, research poetry and visual imagery.

Contact:

Daniel Wade Clarke

University of Dundee School of Business
Nethergate, Dundee, DD1 4HN
Scotland, United Kingdom

Tel: +44(0)1382 386 804

E-mail: dclarke@dundee.ac.uk

URL:

[http://discovery.dundee.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/daniel-clarke\(b81339bd-6a79-4c21-aab2-7dd4cea11eb6\).html](http://discovery.dundee.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/daniel-clarke(b81339bd-6a79-4c21-aab2-7dd4cea11eb6).html)

Citation

Clarke, Daniel Wade (2020). First My Dad, Then My iPhone: An Autoethnographic Sketch of Digital Death [42 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 21(2), Art. 8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.2.3258>.