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THE HAVING-BEEN-NESS  
AND  
THE BEING-IN-THE-WORLD  
OF TWIN SURVIVORS

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## ABSTRACT

This study uses Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology to examine the experience of being a twin, then being a twin survivor in the world. Heidegger's terminology is selectively used to shape the interpretation of the twins' narratives.

The phenomenological method focuses on participant descriptions of their everyday life; there are no conclusions and no scientific results. While there have been many scientific studies using twins as subjects, there seems to be very few published studies using twin narrative.

Every participant wished to be part of this study because they felt that it might help others in similar situations. They described their life as a twin, their reaction to the death of their co-twin, and the intense loneliness that they have felt ever since. In describing their experiences, they have managed to portray a picture of twinship seldom made so explicit.

The intense reliance on each other that results from living together closely since conception, has a particular impact on their being-in-the-world. Many of those interviewed felt that half of them had gone forever after the death of their twin, and struggled to develop their own sense of identity as a lone twin. As survivors, the participants now view the world differently, and although others may see them as a singleton, they will always remain a twin.

## Foreword

### THE WORDS OF A TWIN SURVIVOR: ONE CANNOT SURVIVE ON ANGER ALONE

*On another continent I sit with my pen in my hand. The area is similar to that of where your cross rests. Mountains surround, giving a serenity and beauty that many people come to admire. The blue green tinted waters of a glacier flow here too. The sun above transcends light rays which bisect, dancing, sparkling like a prize emerald.*

*On the fifth anniversary of the day I last saw you alive, I ventured out in a canoe to be alone, at one with nature, at one with myself, at one with you. It was a time of reflection. Reflections over the last five years since that tragic day; reflections of the life we shared together for over seventeen years.*

*It was also a time of remembrance, for I will never forget you. You are part of my soul, as you will always be. I remember the short time we shared together. That time was your life; short but fulfilled. Fulfilled with happiness, youth, vitality and a relentless quest to conquer challenges and be rewarded with the greatest prize, that of the satisfaction of achievement.*

*For achieve we did. Never believing we wouldn't make it to Europe to wear the silver. We trained, schooled and worked to get there. No one can ever take that away from us, my twin, my friend. With unsurpassed help by friends and family we got there in the end.*

*Your life was short, but it was far from empty. I remember with pain the day you died. The memories are vivid, sometimes sorrowful, sometimes anguishing, even sometimes accepting. In such times anger is the initial reaction, yet one cannot live on anger alone. Acceptance, this is a must. A gift to enable those left behind to cope. During the past five years I have learned to accept your death. At times it hasn't been easy. Like time erodes away a giant angulated razor sharp rock, leaving smoothness, time too has worn away the anger, acceptance left in its place.*

*Here in the Canadian Rockies people also come to test their skill against nature. Most are rewarded. Some will not return, just as we were rewarded for many years, just as you never returned. I am at one with nature now, as we were then. The means are different, the intensity less, but nevertheless, at one. I am at one with myself. I will always be at one with you, my twin. I miss you so much. The tears do not run any more, but the deep loss will always be there.*

*Five years later on another continent I sit with pen in hand. When I think of you a sorrow wells up from the depth of my soul, but with the gift of acceptance I am forced to think of the good times we shared, and a smile appears on my lips.*

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Perhaps the most significant people in my development are my twin sons, to whom this work is dedicated. To Adrian who has learned to live again as a surviving twin, and to Carlton who left us forever one beautiful sunny day, from the river Soca in Slovenia, at the triumph of his young life. A day that began full of happiness and ended in tragedy, with Carlton never to return and Adrian left unable to comprehend the enormity of his loss.

My thesis represents ten years of learning since Carlton's death. A long journey for Adrian and myself, and one that we continue to have the privilege to share with others in similar situations.

It is a very special thanks that I wish to extend to the lone twins who so willingly offered to relive their experiences as a twin, then as a lone twin. I want you to know that I treasure your trust, and that without you this thesis could not have been written.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b> .....	ii
<b>FORWARD</b> .....	iii
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	xi
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>CHAPTER 1:</b>	
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW</b> .....	6
HEIDEGGERIAN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGY.....	6
TWIN MYTHOLOGY.....	16
PARENTAL INFLUENCE.....	18
INDIVIDUATION.....	20
SEPARATING THE INSEPARABLE.....	22
<b>CHAPTER 2:</b>	
<b>RESEARCH PROCESS</b> .....	27
RESEARCH METHOD.....	28
RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS.....	29
DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS.....	31
THE PARTICIPANTS.....	32
RESEARCH OUTCOME.....	32

**CHAPTER 3:**

<b>THEME: BEING IN THE WORLD TOGETHER.....</b>	<b>35</b>
COMPLIMENTING EACH OTHER.....	44
RELATING TO PARENTS.....	47
BEING A V.I.P.....	52
ATTENDING SCHOOL.....	54
BEING ALIKE.....	63
KNOWING EACH OTHER.....	66
BECOMING AN INDIVIDUAL AS TWIN.....	70
STORIES OF TOGETHERNESS.....	75

**CHAPTER 4:**

<b>THEME: BEING IN THE WORLD ALONE.....</b>	<b>80</b>
FEELING LONELY.....	92
LIVING WITH THE MEMORIES.....	98
FEELING A PRESENCE.....	101
SHARING WITH OTHERS.....	103

**CHAPTER 5:**

<b>DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>APPENDICES: .....</b>	<b>117</b>
APPENDIX 1: INFORMATION SHEET.....	117
APPENDIX 2: CONSENT FORM.....	118

## INTRODUCTION

This study examines twin survivorship by using Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology to explore the experiences described by twins about their life as a twin. Traditionally, twins have been used by researchers as valuable subjects for exploring environmental and genetic influences of society. There are also many twin studies in the field of mental health and education, where deviations from the norm are explored by researchers. There is a common assumption that twins provide the perfect control for experimentation on a variety of issues other than to examine twinship itself.

A search through the literature provides an extremely limited amount of information about lone twin survivorship, suggesting that further research in this area is needed. There appears to be little evidence of research involving descriptions about twins by twins. International writers who have published research include Segal (1989), Siemon (1980), Rosambeau (1987), Koch (1966), and Cassill (1982). It is the author's belief that only twins can really describe what it is like to be a twin. By using a phenomenological approach to guide this enquiry it is hoped to uncover their understandings of their experience.

*If a goal of nursing science is to uncover not only factors that compromise well-being but also those that facilitate it, then discovering the personal and cultural meanings and strategies that enable individuals to cope with*

*crisis in constructive, and self enhancing ways is essential (Stuhlmiller, 1994, p.323).*

A clearer understanding of twin survivorship will allow health workers to provide more appropriate support when they encounter people in this situation. This enquiry suggests that once born a twin, a person remains a twin throughout life, despite being viewed by the world as a singleton. The writer's previous involvement with the International Twin Conference in Wellington (1990) indicated that there are surviving twins who have not resolved their grief up to fifty years later. Many survivors of perinatal twin death experience feelings ranging from profound loss to a constant feeling that something is missing from their lives. This suggests a need for understanding the complexity of twinship, and its influence on the surviving twin when their co-twin dies.

The overall aim of this study is to describe the experience of what it is to be a twin, and what it is to be a surviving twin. Modern technology has increased the likelihood of twin births. One study participant, in her seventies, commented that when she was at primary school she was always noticed because twins were quite uncommon. Today multiple births are not so rare. Consequently twin death can be expected to increase, but as yet there is little in the way of any support system in place to aid the surviving twins. Certainly New Zealand has no such system in place.

Society adopts a specific attitude towards twins which may influence the nature of the relationship twins have with each other. This must also be shaped by the proximity twins have to each other from the time of conception. Since human time began, twins have played a significant role in the mythology of countries around the world. They are assigned importance in many cultures, and in some they have been regarded as having magical powers related to the sun and moon (Siemon, 1980). According to Scheinfeld (1967), interest in twins can be traced back as far as records exist, and it also goes well beyond fact into the realms of myth, fantasy, folklore and fiction. The Bible has several significant stories. There are many mythical stories of twins. Even astronomy has Gemini as a twin constellation.

To have the ability to know just how life is for another person is regarded by others as a rare and exciting ability. Twinship is the closest association between two human beings, and because of this it is fraught with psychological hazards. At the 1990 living twin conference participants were asked why they were attending. Responses included:

*meeting other twins with similar problems;*

*to see if I am normal;*

*my relationship with my twin is so special;*

*I want to meet others that feel the same way, and I need to find my identity.*

One twin stated, *When I married, if my husband had died it would have been hard, but to lose my twin is unthinkable.*

The degree of difficulty experienced by a surviving twin in restructuring their life after the death of a co-twin seems to depend upon the kind of relationship the twins had with each other, and the feelings they have about being a twin. This study confirms that the way twins view their relationship is influenced more by the intensity of their perception of similarity than by the degree of physical likeness. For some twins there is no separation even in adulthood, and for these people co-twin loss is a hurdle they may not be able to overcome without support. Such people may never see themselves as individuals or be able to form intimate relationships with others.

*It is the reluctant twins, moulded by societal expectations, parental attitudes, and physical similarity into a bond they did not choose, but which is an integral part of their identity, who experience emotional distress when separation forces them to be individuals rather than a unit (Siemon, 1980, p.388).*

In this thesis, chapter one is a review of selective literature beginning with an overview of Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology as it is used in this study. Twin mythology is then discussed, and how twins have been used throughout time to portray a different way of being. The effects of parental influence on

twinship are highlighted, followed by comments on the importance of twins becoming individuals, and their need to gain their own identity. Completing this chapter is a further discussion on the effects that being a twin has on a twin survivor, and the difficulties that this close bond has for the surviving twin.

Chapter two details the research process, while chapters three and four present the research outcome organised under two main themes. Chapter three focuses on the theme of living in the world together. The experience of living life as a twin is discussed using the words of participants to illustrate the major theme and associated sub themes.

Chapter four focuses on the second theme of being in the world alone. Twin survivorship is discussed using the perceptions of participants to support the presentation of the major theme and sub themes.

Chapter five is a brief final discussion. Consistent with the research approach no conclusions are presented; no recommendations are made.