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Article

Tolkien's Stories of Loss, Abandonment, and Hope: Healing Through Fantasy and Action in Life and in the Workplace

Peter Devenish-Meares

Abstract

This reflective paper examines how J.R.R. Tolkien's narratives of loss, abandonment, and eucatastrophic hope offer a meaningful interpretive lens for understanding grief and trauma within contemporary workplaces. Drawing on Tolkien's literary theology, Campbell's mythic structure, and current research on organisational responses to loss, the paper explores how stories can illuminate pathways toward recovery, communal support, and renewed purpose. By integrating narrative reflection with evidence-based insights, it argues that compassionate leadership and trauma-informed workplace cultures can foster healing analogous to the fellowships and restorative moments found in Tolkien's legendarium.

Keywords: J. R. R. Tolkien; loss; grief; trauma; reflection; myth; Joseph Campbell; recovery; healing; workplaces

Introduction

A story to begin...

The apartment was silent, the kind of silence that made Staff Sergeant Marcus R. feel more alone than the desert ever had. Three months out of uniform, he no longer recognised the man he was without his unit, his mission, his brothers and sisters. The medals on his coffee table stayed in their box; they felt like relics from a life that had cost too much.

The civilian job his cousin found for him only deepened the ache. People thanked him for his service but never asked what it had taken from him. At night, the same question returned: *What was it all for?* Eight years of sand, loss, and impossible decisions, only to come home to a quiet room and a world that moved on without understanding.

He didn't know then what he was searching for. Not advice. Not fixes. Just someone who would sit with him in the dark and not turn away. Someone who could hold the truth that healing isn't forgetting. Its someone who is there, encourages real self-care and helps carry the weight without being crushed by it. It's discovering that even in the deepest valleys, a hand may reach toward you when you least expect it.

He couldn't see that hope tonight. But the story he would one day tell. The story of the person who finally listened, who helped him breathe again—had already begun, quietly, long before he realised he wasn't walking alone.

As a psychotherapist, chaplain, and cleric, I am deeply invested in supporting people as they seek hope, healing, and rest amid life's profound challenges. This calling is especially meaningful in my work with military veterans, who often carry the weight of trauma, loss, and the struggle to reintegrate into civilian life after experiences that have forever changed them. Veterans face unique challenges including combat-related trauma, moral injury, survivor's guilt, and the loss of comrades and the military community that once provided structure and purpose. Many return home to find themselves navigating grief, abandonment, and a desperate need for hope in environments that may not understand or adequately support their journey toward healing.

J. R. R. Tolkien

Tolkien's narratives of loss, abandonment, and hard-won hope offer a distinctive lens through which to understand contemporary experiences of grief and trauma, including those emerging in workplace settings. His legendarium, shaped by personal bereavement and the devastations of war, provides a mythic grammar for exploring how individuals navigate suffering, meaning-making, and the slow work of healing.¹ This reflective paper draws together Tolkien's literary theology, mythic structures, and current research on workplace trauma to consider how stories can illuminate pathways toward recovery, communal support, and renewed purpose for those carrying heavy emotional and moral burdens.

J.R.R. Tolkien's stories offer profound healing for those experiencing loss, abandonment, and the need for hope. His work is deeply rooted in his own experiences of childhood trauma. This includes losing both parents at a young age and his service in World War I, where he witnessed the horrors of trench warfare and lost close friends. His understanding that stories can help us process grief and find meaning resonates particularly with veterans who have experienced the realities of war. These themes resonate powerfully not only in our personal lives but also within workplace environments where trauma, loss, and the struggle to maintain hope are increasingly recognized as critical issues affecting employee well-being and organizational health.

The Core Themes of Healing

Recovery, Escape, and Consolation

In his seminal essay *On Fairy-Stories*, delivered as the Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St Andrews in 1939, Tolkien argues that fantasy must achieve recovery, escape, and consolation. Recovery means regaining a clear view of the world, seeing it with fresh wonder rather than taking it for granted. This is what he describes as seeing things "as we are (or were) meant to see them" (Tolkien, 1947/1964, p. 77). Escape isn't running from reality but into it. It is about recognizing the world's beauty and our call to be heroic not that we may ever call it that! Consolation is what Tolkien called the *eucatastrophe*. This is "the consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'" (Tolkien, 1947/1964, p. 86). He explains that this joy "denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief" (Tolkien, 1947/1964, p. 86). These principles apply not only to personal recovery from loss but also to navigating the complex emotional landscape of workplace trauma.

Stories That Address These Themes

The Lord of the Rings

This work is saturated with orphans and the abandoned. Most protagonists lost one or both parents during childhood. Frodo, Aragorn, Faramir, Boromir, Éowyn, and Éomer all experienced devastating early losses. Yet the story shows how:

Hope persists even in darkness: When Sam sees a star shining through the clouds above horrific Mordor, he realizes the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty forever beyond its reach. This moment reflects the experience of many employees facing workplace crises. This is dawning recognition that current difficulties, however overwhelming, are temporary compared to enduring values and meaning. But that only come if someone stops to notice, listen and care.

¹ A **legendarium** is a collection of legends, myths, or interconnected stories that together form a coherent mythic world. The term is used in literary studies, medieval scholarship, and especially in Tolkien studies.

Wounds can be acknowledged: Frodo's trauma is permanent, and his only hope of finding rest is by leaving with Bilbo and Gandalf for the Havens, where he can go to a place of eternal soothing and healing. Not all wounds heal in this life, and that's honest. Similarly, workplace trauma experts acknowledge that the grieving process can take years and may never be completely over, though individuals can learn to incorporate grief into their lives in healthy ways (Spring Health, 2024).

Community sustains us: Sam's simple, practical hope is enough for both hobbits when Frodo loses all hope. This mirrors the importance of workplace communities in supporting employees through loss. Research indicates that creating a culture of mutual care where colleagues talk openly about grief and discover creative ways to support one another is essential for healing (Trauma-Informed Network Resource Center, 2025).

Characters Who Embody Hope

Aragorn literally means "hope" (Estel in Elvish). His healing powers represent how hope restores life to those stricken by despair. The contrast between Théoden (who chooses hope) and Denethor (who chooses despair) shows that we have agency even in our darkest moments—a crucial lesson for employees navigating workplace trauma who must make daily choices about how to respond to their circumstances.

Éowyn's journey is particularly moving. She wakes from near-death with suicidal despair, seeking only death in battle. But through Faramir's love and the defeat of evil, her winter passed, and the sun shone on her. Her story illustrates the *transformative power* of connection and purpose, themes that resonate with employees who feel isolated or purposeless after experiencing workplace loss or trauma.

The Hero's Journey: Unexpected Helpers in Dark Times

Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth, or hero's journey, provides additional insight into how Tolkien's characters navigate loss and trauma. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell describes the universal pattern: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell, 1949, p. 30).

Central to Campbell's framework is the concept of "supernatural aid"—the appearance of helpers and guides at critical moments when the hero faces seemingly insurmountable challenges. Campbell observes that "one has only to know and trust, and the ageless guardians will appear" (Campbell, 1949, p. 73). This theme resonates powerfully throughout Tolkien's work and offers profound comfort to those experiencing workplace trauma: help often comes from unexpected sources when we are most vulnerable.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo receives aid from the most unlikely sources. These include, Tom Bombadil, the Elves, Aragorn the Ranger, and ultimately Gollum, whose obsession with the Ring paradoxically enables its destruction. Sam Gamgee, a simple gardener, becomes the steadfast companion who carries Frodo when he can no longer walk. Gandalf returns from death to continue guiding the Fellowship. Even the Eagles, appearing at the Battle of Five Armies and at Mount Doom, represent Campbell's principle that "forces of nature" come to the hero's aid at the darkest hour.

For veterans and employees facing workplace trauma, this pattern offers hope: compassion and assistance often emerge from unexpected quarters. A colleague previously unknown may offer crucial support; a manager may demonstrate unexpected empathy; a seemingly small gesture from a coworker may provide the strength to continue. The hero's journey teaches that facing adversity is not a solitary endeavour. Someone would suggest that a greater power even called in places "the universe" conspires to provide helpers, though they may appear in forms we did not anticipate, let alone easily recognise.

A living example from Joseph Campbell (2008) helps here:

A young police officer arrived at the cliff expecting only to keep someone talking until help arrived. The man standing at the edge barely spoke. His eyes were hollow, shoulders shaking, the world behind him already fading. The officer didn't offer clichés or quick fixes. He simply stayed, listening, letting the silence breathe.

When the man finally stepped forward beyond the barricade into the void, the officer reacted without thinking. He grabbed the man's jacket, anchoring his own body against the rocks, pulling him back into the world he had already left in his mind. They collapsed together on the ground, both shaking, both alive.

Later, the police officer would say he could do nothing else. In mythic terms, this was the *Rescue from Without*. This is the moment when help arrives unbidden, when the person cannot save himself, and another steps in to help restore life, meaning, and the possibility of return. Healing begins not with triumph, but with the unexpected hand that refuses to let go.

Campbell further explains that the hero's transformation through adversity serves not only personal growth but communal benefit. The hero returns from the ordeal "with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (Campbell, 1949, p. 30). Similarly, those who have navigated workplace trauma or loss often develop profound capacity for compassion and can become the unexpected helpers for others facing similar struggles. Their own journey through darkness equips them to recognize and respond to suffering in ways that those who have not experienced such trials cannot.

Applying Tolkien's Wisdom to Workplace Loss and Trauma

Understanding Workplace Grief and Trauma

Grief is a universal human experience that permeates every aspect of a person's life, including work performance. The grieving process can take several months, a year, or longer to work through, meaning grief comes with employees to work (Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, n.d.). Workplace trauma encompasses exposure to life-threatening events, workplace violence, loss of colleagues, organizational aggression including bullying and discrimination, and unsafe working conditions (Shortlister, 2024).

Like Tolkien's characters who carry the weight of childhood loss throughout their journeys, employees bring their grief into the workplace. Research shows that in the United States, employees are typically allotted only three days of bereavement leave. It is offered as enough time for a funeral but is very far from sufficient to process a significant loss fully (Spring Health, 2024). Inadequate bereavement policies cost the United States over 75 billion dollars due to distressed employees forced to return amid their grief (Trauma-Informed Network Resource Center, 2025).

The Fellowship Model: Community Support in the Workplace

Just as the Fellowship of the Ring provided mutual support through their darkest moments, workplace communities can become places of healing. Everyone grieves differently, and recovery takes time. Some grieving employees may be too numb or overwhelmed to communicate what they need (Employee Assistance Program, n.d.). Supportive responses by managers that allow for individual reactions and validate the core human need for belonging enable the workplace to stabilize and resume smooth operation.

The hardest part of the grief journey is that it is yours alone. No one can know what you are feeling or experiencing. Your boss and coworkers cannot read your mind, nor do they know how to help (SOCAP Global, 2020). Like Sam's unwavering support for Frodo, colleagues can provide consistent presence even when they cannot fix the pain. This involves withholding judgment when employees express difficult emotions, showing you care, and offering compassion throughout their healing journey (Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, n.d.).

Eucatastrophe in the Workplace: Creating Moments of Hope

Tolkien's concept of eucatastrophe which is the sudden joyous turn, can manifest in workplace settings through compassionate listening, even kindly leadership and organisational support. When leaders acknowledge the impact that loss has on employees and demonstrate understanding that this can be a difficult time, they create space for healing. The wrong thing to say is nothing at all; showing that you understand and care helps boost employee morale (Employee Assistance Program, n.d.).

Organizations can provide eucatastrophic moments by offering flexible bereavement policies, mental health support through Employee Assistance Programs, and creating a culture where employees can share their stories and find that others are also struggling. When we share our stories, we find we are not alone in the sorrow, exhaustion, or self-doubt (Hostile Workplace Recovery, n.d.). This communal recognition breaks the shame and shatters the stigma around workplace loss.

Practical Strategies for Supporting Grieving Employees

Drawing from both Tolkien's narrative wisdom and contemporary workplace research, organizations can implement several evidence-based strategies:

1. Being present and being prepared to act tenderly: despite our own fears and sense of inadequacy.
2. **Acknowledge the reality of loss:** Like Tolkien's honest portrayal of permanent wounds, organizations must recognize that not all grief resolves quickly. Grief manifests as tearfulness, withdrawal, increased anger, anxiety, and difficulty with daily functioning. There is no single right way for grief to present itself (Spring Health, 2024; Workplace Strategies for Mental Health, n.d.).
3. **Provide adequate time and flexibility:** Grief experts recommend taking 20 days of leave for close family members, though most companies only offer three to five days (Lost and Found Ozarks, 2021). Organizations should consider flexible work arrangements, reduced hours, or help catching up on workload (Employee Assistance Program, n.d.).
4. **Offer professional support:** Employee Assistance Programs that cover trauma recovery, grief, and loss support should be central to employee well-being strategies. Fast access to mental health services without barriers like copay hassles or limited appointment availability allows employees to get care when needed (Spring Health, 2024; Shortlister, 2024).
5. **Create spaces for open conversation:** Like the council meetings in Tolkien's work where characters shared their burdens, workplaces can curate spaces for talking openly about grief regardless of position. This involves using positive language such as "I'm here if you need to talk," "I know this is hard, what do you need?" and "Let's take a walk, I want to listen to you" (Trauma-Informed Network Resource Center, 2025).
6. **Maintain ongoing communication:** Communicate regularly with grieving employees. Stop by their office to check in throughout the week. Remember that holidays and anniversaries can be especially difficult times. Stay in touch with employees who must leave or have not yet returned to the workplace (Employee Assistance Program, n.d.; Lost and Found Ozarks, 2021).
7. **Support self-care practices:** Encourage employees to bring tokens of comfort to their workspace. It could be a favourite photo, teas, blankets, or other grounding reminders. Keep trusted contacts available and support participation in activities like yoga or counselling that aid healing (SOCAP Global, 2020).

Why Tolkien's Stories Heal: Implications for Workplace Culture

Tolkien understood that the greatest story ever told was not fiction but historical reality. In the epilogue to *On Fairy-Stories*, he writes: "The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy" (Tolkien, 1947/1964, p. 89). By placing hope in transcendent reality, Tolkien helped readers feel the truth of ultimate meaning and the hope of reunion with lost loved ones. He understood that we

live between suffering and redemption. This is about acknowledging real loss while trusting in eventual restoration: however impossible it seems at the time and where despair becomes our only friend.

In a letter to his son Christopher during World War II, Tolkien elaborated on eucatastrophe's deeper meaning: "I coined the word 'eucatastrophe': the sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears... And I was there led to the view that it produces its peculiar effect because it is a sudden glimpse of Truth, your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back" (Tolkien, 1981, p. 100). This "glimpse of Truth" resonates with those experiencing workplace trauma—the recognition that current suffering, while real, does not represent the whole truth of existence.

His works don't offer cheap comfort; they acknowledge that there is the pain of separation, loss, and often guilt for things we did and things we failed to do. But they also insist that even when we cannot see or feel hope, it remains—like gravity when we walk without thinking about it. Tolkien further writes that eucatastrophe "does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance" (Tolkien, 1947/1964, p. 86). This honest acknowledgment of suffering's reality makes the promise of eucatastrophe all the more meaningful.

Similarly, effective workplace grief support acknowledges that addressing grief requires seeing employees as whole, complex human beings. This is far more than their productivity (Spring Health, 2024). Companies that fail to honor grief perpetuate a culture that ignores the complexities of human existence. When organisations implement compassionate policies and create cultures of mutual care, they embody Tolkien's principle that even when we cannot see or feel hope, it remains, like gravity when we walk without thinking about it.

The stories remind us that eucatastrophe, that sudden joyous turn, is possible even when all seems lost, and that this isn't naive optimism but recognition that darkness, however overwhelming, is temporary compared to the eternal light beyond it. This perspective can transform workplace cultures from places that merely tolerate grief to communities that actively support healing, resilience, and post-traumatic growth.

Conclusions

Tolkien's narratives of loss, abandonment, and hope offer more than literary escapism—they provide a framework for understanding and healing from trauma that applies directly to workplace environments. His honest portrayal of permanent wounds alongside the possibility of eucatastrophe mirrors the contemporary understanding that grief is not linear and healing takes time, but that hope and community can sustain us through our darkest moments.

Although far more reflection and emotional investment is needed this paper encourages healing practitioners to integrate such as Tolkien's wisdom with evidence-based workplace practices. These include adequate bereavement leave, accessible mental health support, flexible work arrangements, and cultures of open communication. Organisations can become true fellowships that help employees navigate loss while maintaining dignity, purpose, and hope. Like Sam's unwavering presence for Frodo, workplaces can provide the consistent support that enables healing even when the journey is long and the path uncertain.

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Professor Peter's career weaves together service, scholarship, and clinical care. Almost 20 years ago after 25 years in the corporate world, he began his vocation as an Army chaplain. Experiences listening to stories of moral injuries, grief, and quiet resilience deepened his commitment to understanding trauma and meaning-making, leading him into a doctorate and post-doctoral research focused on ethics, spirituality, and integrative pastoral care. Alongside his academic work, he has

served as a board director across health, community, and mission-driven organisations, bringing strategic insight and steady governance to complex environments. His clinical formation as a psychotherapist adds yet another dimension, grounding his leadership in deep listening and compassionate presence. Across these roles, Professor Peter tries to bridging world: the military and the academy, governance and pastoral care, research and lived experience by supporting people to restore dignity, strengthening communities, and supporting those who carry heavy stories.

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