

FINDING SPACES OF CONNECTION AFTER THE SUDDEN LOSS OF A CHILD

BY

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ABSTRACT

The sudden death of a child is a traumatic, life-shattering event. This heuristic inquiry opens space to the voices of mothers who have experienced such a loss and seeks to understand their experience of connection with their deceased child. As a mother who has lost a child, my personal narrative is woven into the framework of the text, exploring themes of connection in nature; remembering; spirituality; loss; meaning making; and motherhood. This inquiry seeks to understand the role of language, societal perceptions and assumptions about grief, and how these assumptions affect a mother's grieving process as she experiences her relationship with her deceased child.

DEDICATION

For Zarah,
my beautiful light of the dawn.

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I would like to acknowledge my family and friends whose unwavering love and support have made it possible to find spaces of connection that made the writing of this thesis possible. Thank you Tina, for teaching me to find space in breath, to Heather for creating safety and containment, and to Sherri for digging beside me through tears, laughter and transformation. Thank you to my incredible “west coast family” for riding the waves with me, to Susie for your grounded strength, and Tania for your lioness love and friendship. Thank you Avraham for opening space to the inner work that formed the groundwork for this thesis. With deep love and gratitude I thank my sisters and mother for a bond that connects beyond words. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my heartfelt appreciation and gratitude for the mothers involved in this study who courageously offered their insights, their reflections and deep love for their children.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I know what it is I am now experiencing.
 I know what the frailty is, I know what the fear is.
 The fear is not for what is lost.
 What is lost is already in the wall.
 Behind the locked doors
 The fear is for what is still to be lost.
 You may see nothing still to be lost.
 Yet there is no day in her life on which I do not see her. (Joan Didion, 2011, p.188)

Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expand
 the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated
 as bird wings (Rumi, 1207-1273)

I begin with these words that hover in and around grief, speaking of sorrow, pain, love, and beauty. My daughter died suddenly three years ago. This is an indisputable fact. After her death euphemistic language quickly made its way into my world attempting to soften the blow of this horrific event. *Sorry for your loss...lost... passed away...* There seemed to be an assumption that these words were as inextricably connected to my child as the death itself. This language of loss seemed to form a necessary casing at times, however inadequate or even insulting it felt.

A relationship that is grounded in intimacy and love so deeply felt beyond words cannot be lost, passed away, passed on. But what becomes of it? What do you do with the intensity of exquisite love and connection when the ground has been swept away? It was suggested early on that I would find a way to hold my daughter differently. I had no idea

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what that meant. How that could happen? The longing to hold, to touch to hear, to smell her skin, ...the senses are denied and so the body shrivels, closes... literally... in consuming pain. When grief floods, breathing space is obliterated. Where are the spaces that support gasping, opening, closing, learning to breathe...again? In part, my thesis will attempt to respond to this very question.

Jansen (2015) states, “the arts have the power to evoke and summon what no longer exists, that which will forever remain absent... In that changeful, slippery place of being in the world in mourning, the arts beckon and enable expression of our grief and a temporal space for mourning – for that which lies in-between” (p.295). Rumi (1207-1273) captures this liminal beauty of grief in his poetry:

Your grief for what you've lost holds a mirror
up to where you're bravely working.

Expecting the worst, you look and instead,
here's the joyful face you've been wanting to see.

Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes.

If it were always a fist or always stretched open,
you would be paralyzed.

Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expanding
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated
as bird wings.

I experience my daughter in the “in-between” spaces within movement, within the space between inhaling and exhaling. A space that is ...inaccessible until I am within the movement, or until the essence of being in the movement is felt within. There is something alchemical about feeling someone's essence, and reassuring to know that even in death my daughter's essence does not have to be “let go”, encased in mournful music,

bound to candle rituals or memories in a scrapbook. “People talk about the alchemy of falling in love, how everything in and around you seems to be different. Why is the alchemy of death not spoken about in the same way?” (Sliep, 2012; Jansen, 2016, p.83)

The intention of this thesis is to open spaces for the voices of mothers who have experienced the sudden death of a child; to open space into their experience of relating to their child after death. Using a heuristic framework, this study will involve an arts based inquiry as part of uncovering essences of meaning in bereaved mothers’ lived experiences. As a mother who has lost a child, my voice will be interwoven into the narrative, forming a reflexive, layered, intertextual piece. This work is also an exploration into the role of language, societal perceptions and assumptions about grief and how these assumptions affect a mother’s grieving process and how she experiences her relationship with her deceased child.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature on grief and loss there is a substantial body of research on bereaved parents after the sudden death of a child (Kreuger, 2006). However, there is a paucity of qualitative research that gives voice to a mother's experience of their relationship with their deceased child after sudden death. Layne (2002) emphasizes the importance of initiating a dialogue around the sudden loss of a child, suggesting that the silence that surrounds such events makes already painful experiences much harder to bear" (p.169). In the following section I will explore various theoretical perspectives on the parent relationship with her deceased child within the grief and loss literature. Following a brief historical overview of dominant paradigms within the literature on grief and loss, I will attempt to explore more specifically the studies that open space to the notion of continuing bonds within the mother/child relationship after the child's death.

Brief Overview

Views on meaning making within the grief process have gone through many permutations. Theoretical shifts have questioned what the grieving process should look like, how long it should last, what is normal and what is not. Entrenched in the language of grief psychology are the assumptions of grief as an illness (Hedtke, 2010), which "have made normal the practices of pathologizing and othering those living with loss" (Jansen, 2016, p.196). Freud's ideas about grief, for example, assumed that in time, mourning will be resolved, and that one gets over the death of a loved one. Freud (1961)

described the work of mourning as that of severing "attachment to the non-existent object. He viewed complicated or pathological grief as the result of the bereaved person's inability to manage the detachment process" (in Zandvoort, 2012, p.33). Interestingly, when writing about his own child's death Freud expressed an understanding of an ongoing relationship with his daughter through memory as natural, inevitable, even normal:

April 12, 1929. My daughter who died would have been 36 years old today...Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely it nevertheless remains something else. And actually this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating this love, which we do not want to relinquish (Translated Letters, Freud, 1961).

Freud's personal experience with losing his daughter seems, in some way, to normalize a parent's need to continue a relationship with their child after the child dies. Despite this perceived shift, "detachment from the deceased became the dominant theoretical paradigm in the wider mental health field" (Zandvoort, 2012, p.34). The concept of grief as "work", involving a process of confronting loss, focusing on memories, and detaching from the deceased, continued to dominate the grief literature for many years (Lindeman, 1944; Stroebe, 1992 in Hedtke, 2010).

Worden's (1982) theoretical approach to grief counseling has had a significant impact on grief literature, therapeutic interventions, and "continued assumptions about the importance of accepting the reality of loss, and saying goodbye to the deceased in order to feel comfortable reinvesting back into life" (Hedtke, 2010, p.86). Similarly, Rando (1988) emphasized grief work as exploring the loss, and reinvesting emotional energy into new relationships and activities. This approach focuses on accepting loss and

adapting to a new life. Hedtke (2010) argues, “While the same assumptions have been dressed up in current terminology, they are still based on the same underlying principle of supporting the removal of energy from the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved (p.93). “Brochures, pamphlets and counselling conversations often employ the psychodynamic ideas of Freud and Rando, without actually quoting the authors or explaining where the strands of ideas seem to connect, encouraging and perpetuating a model of letting go of the relationship as what is to be expected when a person dies” (p.94).

Other theoretical models of grief work have been defined in terms of stages and or phases, (Kuebler-Ross, 1969; Bowlby, 1980; Parkes, 1972; Worden, 1991). Although the stage models vary in terms of phases and sequence, they all focus on the grieving individual eventually moving towards rebuilding their life without the deceased. Bowlby (1980) was one of the first theorists to suggest that continuing attachments to the deceased may provide an important sense of continuity that may facilitate the grief process (Murray, 2016). Bowlby’s (1980) attachment theory explored “the cause-effect relationship between early attachment patterns and later reactions to bereavement” (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005 p.338), suggesting that “healthy or problematic pattern of grief following separation depends on the way a person’s attachment system has become organized over the course of development” (Fraley & Shaver, 1999, p.740). Although Bowlby’s work introduced important theoretical shifts, integral to this approach is the continued presumption that grief is an individual process from which the bereaved

may eventually heal (Hedtke, 2010). The importance of the social context of the bereaved was not of major consideration (Hedtke, 2010, Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005).

Field & Wogrin (2001) argue, “Only in the past decade has there been an acceptance of the notion that we will always, depending on the circumstances surrounding the bereavement, experience a continuing bond of varying intensity with our loved ones” (as cited in Zandvoort, 2012, p.34). Research by Rando (1991) differed from other stages of grief theories in challenging the idea of emotional detachment from the deceased, normalizing the intense grief response of bereaved parents and emphasizing the importance of redefining, readjusting and reintegrating into new relationships and commitments. Wolfelt (1996) and Worden (1991) continued to challenge and change assumptions in the grief and loss literature developing models based on the idea “one could remain emotionally connected to a deceased loved one” (as cited in Jansen, 2016, p.50). Wolfelt (2003) values the acknowledgment of feelings, encouraging people to surrender to grief, and fully embrace the pain of the loss. Wolfelt’s work introduced the notion of relocating the deceased within one’s life through dreams, photos, honouring, memorializing, and rebuilding spiritual connections. Wolfelt suggests that remembering and embracing the past as part of the grieving process allows and encourages the bereaved to pursue a relationship with the deceased, making hope for the future possible. However, the assumption that one does not resolve or recover from grief “became the foundation of this research” (Jansen, 2016, p. 52). Jansen (2016) argues, “Despite the suggestion that in ‘reconciliation’ the individual ‘moves forward’ as ‘the sharp, ever-present pain of grief gives rise to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose’,

the relationship with the person who died is situated in the memory in the ongoing grief journey” (p.52).

Although there have been theoretical shifts from initial notions of acute grief as pathological, there are still many assumptions made in the literature on grief and loss about the pain of grief as something that is linear and controllable, that requires self-mastery, or that is something that can be overcome. In the following section I will explore the notion of sustaining a relationship with the deceased as described in more recent theoretical frameworks.

Continuing bonds

As previously described, expectations and assumptions about “returning to normal” or moving on after a death are embedded in western literature on grief and loss. In many circumstances, parents who have lost a child face societal pressure to return to normalcy as soon as possible, ultimately compromising their bereavement process (Umphrey & Cacciatore, 2011). The continuing bonds theory was developed by grief theorists and therapists as an alternative to the notion of “moving on”, and has been found to be effective in helping parents cope with the loss of a child (Klass et al., 1996). This theoretical approach is based on the idea that a relationship with a deceased loved one continues indefinitely (Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006). Contrary to the notion of “moving on” or “finding closure”, continuing bonds theory encourages parents to focus on connections that still exist and create meaning from the loss (Neimeyer et al., 2006). It is suggested that this continued bond is aligned with a parent’s desire to continue their connection with their deceased child, and to fill a sense of yearning for the deceased

(Hedtke, 2016; Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996).

According to Neimeyer (2001), the constructivist model informs recent shifts in grief literature away from stage-based approaches and pathologizing bereavement towards sustaining connections, and meaning construction. Neimeyer (2000) argues that during mourning, one of the active cognitive processes to occur is “the need to acknowledge the reality of the loss when the person is constantly confronted with the limitations that become apparent when that loved one is lost” (in Murray, 2016, p. 30). Opening up to the pain of grief is an important part of the process of reconstructing a person’s relationship to the deceased, of reshaping identity in the wake of their loved one not being present, and within the social context of his or her world. Neimeyer’s work suggests that meaning making involves sense making, benefit finding and identity change. Meaning is integrated into existing meaning, that meaning is an interpersonal process, and that it may be tacit and preverbal (Murray, 2016). “Loss can trigger the sort of disequilibrium that can challenge a person’s core sense of him or herself. Coming to terms with loss may then mean changing the constructs that one held of him or herself and one’s perception of reality” (Murray, 2016 p. 32).

Cacciatore (2014) speaks to “the possibility of creating space” through mindfulness practice to “help grieving parents become more able to approach the intense, painful emotions of grief”, to explore making meaning of loss, and “to begin to reconstruct a relationship with their child” (p. 271). Cacciatore’s work emphasizes the importance of ritual as a way to reconstruct meaning within a particular social context after the death of a child. Rituals “may help parents maintain a sense of continuing bonds with their child, help them cope by offering a sense of control and power, and provide a

means toward posttraumatic growth through the opportunity to honor and memorialize the child” (Cacciatore, 2012, p.167). Diverging from previous grief paradigms, the notion of continuing a relationship with a deceased child through ritualized use of metaphor, symbol, stories or ceremony, is viewed as not only helpful for the bereaved individual in regaining “some sense of control of their very intimate, unique process of grieving” but it “compels others to experience and share the suffering” (p.170). This theoretical shift further challenges societal assumptions about the grieving process and the notion of loss.

Neimeyer (2002, 2012) suggests that in particular, untimely deaths (such as the deaths of children, or stillbirth), sudden deaths or disenfranchised losses have a profound impact on bereaved parents. Traumatic death, particularly when it is one that “violates the natural order” (Neimeyer, 2002) forces the survivor to face unique challenges that resonate in both the biophysical and the psychosocial realms. As a mother who has lost a child to sudden, traumatic death I would agree with Neimeyer in acknowledging the immense physical, emotional changes, as well as the spiritual and existential shake-up that seem to “ambush” the body with traumatic grief. When “your life becomes strange, the ground beneath you becomes fragile, your thoughts make your eyes unsure; and some dead echo drags your voice down” (O’Donohue, 2008) you respond in order to live. Deciding how to live will begin the shaping, reorganizing or reconstructing of a different narrative (Neimeyer, 2006).

The use of narrative, where meaning is part of re-authoring stories, is a way to continue a relationship with a loved one who has died (Hedtke, 2010; 2016). Story can be “an important means of understanding continuity and change within lives over time”

(Hedtke, p.33). Hedtke (2016) suggests, “the practice of remembering opposes acts that sever relational connections” (p.46). “If a person’s stories do not die with the death of the body, we are free to resurrect stories, retell, and reincorporate them into the lives of the living. Remembering expands understanding of time beyond a linear construction in which the deceased are relegated to the past, and instead generates clues to a relational future” (Hedtke, 2016, p.48). In bringing forth stories, remembering moves beyond a private connection experience by “making a deceased loved one visible” (p.53). In contrast to relating to the deceased in terms of what was, or what isn’t any more, remembering conversations hold stories and values of a life that “continues to hold meaning for future generations” (p.62)

Continuing bonds theory supports the notion that cultural worldviews and grief practices impact the way in which people experience their relationship with a deceased loved one (Rosenblatt, 2000; Klass, 2001). The complex links that exist between the grieving process and culture are situated within a socio-cultural context and culturally based belief system (Shapiro, 1995). Rosenblatt (1997) suggests that western society views grief as predominantly an individual process, making it difficult to find the spaces where intense displays of emotion are not only accepted, but supported.

If proper grieving involves engaging in certain rituals and being able to feel, think, and do certain things in a social environment that supports those endeavours, being in an alien social environment can be very difficult for the bereaved. Part of the problem is the absence of people. Many Westerners think of grieving as an individual action, and much of grief therapy is individually focused. Yet the mourning rituals of many societies are complex, elaborate, spread out over months or years, and generally require collective participation (p. 44).

Rosenblatt (1997) emphasizes the importance of the relational aspect of grieving rituals.

The acceptance in society of an intense outpouring of grief, whether through communal wailing, drumming, or other expressions as part of a shared experience, allows for the bereaved to feel supported in their connection to the deceased.

Hussein & Oyebode (2009) explored the relational aspect of continued bonds within a Pakistani Muslim community. Focusing on how relationships to the deceased are influenced by religious and cultural beliefs, Hussein & Oyebode (2009) suggest “the Islamic concept of the continuing existence of the soul allows for a meaningful continuing relationship with the deceased” (p. 908). An important aspect of continued bonds was found to be rooted in the belief that one's actions can continue to benefit the deceased after their death, giving the bereaved a sense of felt security and comfort. In addition, religious mourning rituals also “nurtured the development of the continuing relationship through the sense of shared grief and bonds engendered by extended family and community networks” (p.908), making it the norm for the community to share stories, and have conversations about the deceased.

Doran & Hansen (2006), highlight the importance of continuing bonds within the sociocultural context of Mexican American families. Doran & Hansen (2006) suggest grief is not only an intrapersonal process but is firmly grounded and experienced within the interpersonal relationships of family and community” (p.210). Researchers found that in the death of a child, Mexican American family members, despite age, gender or socioeconomic differences, “sought out and took for granted their need for a continuing bond with the deceased” (p.210), maintaining an ongoing connection through storytelling, faith-based connections, dreams, rituals and feeling a continued sense of

presence. Similarly, the deceased live on in Inuit society in the stories and songs told about them and in maintaining namesakes (Laugrand & Oosten, 2010). The deceased are called upon for advice in rituals originally performed by shamans and deceased namesakes are honored in drum dances during winter celebration.

Immersing oneself in different worldviews of grief and loss opens spaces to explore the meaning of relationship with a loved one that has died (Rosenblatt, 1997). In Japan Zen culture for example, ritualized activity has an “embodied, holistic orientation where the boundaries of life and death are not divisive” (Arai, 2011, p. 67). Ritualized activity in a Soto Zen context “is an event of ideally actualizing Buddha nature, where all is interrelated, impermanent and ultimately empty (of substance and individuation), and in the present moment” (p.67). From the perspective of Buddha nature, “compassion neutralizes suffering though pain may be chronic and death may ensue” (p.67). Arai (2011) describes how, in death, deceased loved ones become recognized Buddhas on a person’s home altar. Women empower themselves and others in experiencing their interrelatedness with all things, especially in the moments of sitting and talking to these Buddhas. “The rituals are designed to make the deceased loved one remain a part of the living people’s lives yet not in the same way as they were in life. The exalted status of death makes them more powerful and their new found wisdom enables them to help their loved one” (p. 68). Klass (2001) suggests rituals rooted in Buddhism are cultural norms where the bereaved family members maintain emotional bonds with the deceased, in the belief that they are being looked after and cared for.

In a slightly different vein and socio-cultural context, Ashkenazy (2014) focuses

on the notion of agency, emphasizing the importance of bereaved mothers' stories in future research on grief and loss. Ashkenazy (2014) argues, "western society defines grieving the loss of a relationship in a patriarchal context that stresses separation-individuation with functional relationships" (p.49). Emphasizing the importance of understanding the "complexity of maternal grief in a way that is congruent with women's subjective realities" (p.49), Ashkenazy (2014) suggests, "maternal bereavement has yet to be explored in a way that intersects "the relationship of spiritual, psychological, emotional, and psychological dimensions of bereavement from mothers' perspectives" (p.49). The lack of research on maternal bereavement points to a silencing of women's voices (Ashkenazy, 2014, Grunnet-Alden, 2008). Perhaps, there is also reluctance or intentional avoidance on the part of researchers to open themselves to the level of pain that is associated with the loss of a child. I would concur with Ashkenazy (2014) in emphasizing the importance of opening and listening to mothers' stories of child loss to better understand the complexity of maternal grief and a mother's desire to sustain a relationship with her deceased child.

Embodied Grief

The physicality of the emotional suffering of grief has been described in terms of "somatic symptomatology such as tightness in the throat, shortness of breath, the need for sighing, an empty feeling in the abdomen, and broken heart" (Lindemann ,1944; Parkes,1970, 1972, in Hedtke, 2015, p.74). "Grief work", a phrase introduced by Lindemann (1944), assumed that by actively working through grief, the bereaved may find respite from searing emotional pain (Hedtke, 2015). Engaging in the tasks of grief work was suggested as a temporary shift that created space and time for the person to

connect with the deceased before moving on.

More recently, research suggests that the emotional distress of grief is thought to mediate changes on the cellular level (Irwin & Pike, 1993; Guddmundsdottir et al., 2009). The research of Guddmundsdottir (2009) and others discusses the physical experience of grief as “embodied”, suggesting that viewing grief as “primarily a psychological, cellular, and neurological phenomenon” (p.255) minimizes the importance of the whole body in the grieving process. Guddmundsdottir (2009) argues,

“Grief, must give weight to the primacy of the body as a vehicle for thinking, feeling, and acting...Emphasizing body as a representation in the mind may cause frustration, fear, and even confusion among those experiencing loss and grief...Pain lives in the flesh as well as in words” (p. 134).

Guddmundsdottir (2009) describes the grieving parent as an embodied being within a situated, relational context. Parent participants involved in Guddmundsdottir’s research spoke of their body’s need to continue the relationship with their child, after the child’s death. The sudden absence of the relationship manifested embodied sensations such as “the body continuing to rock as if rocking a baby to sleep”; an excruciating pain “similar to the feeling of having had one’s arms cut off from the rest of the body”; migraines; severe gastroenteritis; and a heaviness of heart described as “an aching sensation or tension in the midsection of his body from the torso to the belly button” (p.260).

Jansen (2015) suggests that traumatic grief cuts apart layers of meaning embedded in our physical beings. “If meaning arises in our movements, what happens

when the world has lost its meaning... when the physical experience of what occurs *between* us as the potential site of meaning-making is foreclosed? (p.143). Ashkenazy (2014) argues, “the relationship of a bereaved mother’s spiritual being and embodiment is expressed through her body and emotions surrounding child loss” (p.56). With a traumatic unexpected death of a child, a parent’s embodied way of being in the world is interrupted and drastically changed. Metaphors make grief “an entity with substance and impact” (Rosenblatt, 2000, p. 91), bringing forth a palpable image for unbearable pain that is “unbounded, ever changing, and hard to know” (p.91).

The mind-body connection is well recognized in the current literature on grief and loss. More recent challenges to the dominance of medicine and psychology in responding to grief appear in research on the arts and embodiment (Ord, 2010; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014; Callahan, 2011; Akunna, 2015). Ord (2010) suggests that the use of artwork and symbolism can be helpful as a means of making experiences with grief meaningful. Her research explores tattooing as an embodied resistance to the medical model and as a means of shaping, performing, and actively wearing one’s grief as opposed to passively enduring it. Ord (2010) argues that tattooing can be a form of resistance, declaring that grief is permanent, visible, and always present. It does not need to be taboo, covered up, tidied up, sanitized, or put into the right box. The action of tattooing asserts that grief is messy, visible, beautiful, painful, and embodied (Ord, 2010). In the emotional convergence of grief, trauma and shock, “unattended grief lives in the body” (Bates, 2009, p.47). Tattooing offers an embodied way of re-membering, of “bringing pain to the surface to confront and feel the pain” (p.47), of telling stories of love and loss on your skin (Bates, 2009), of “renewing a sense of connection with the

deceased” (p.125).

As Ord’s research considers embodied grief in “bringing pain to the surface” through the act of tattooing, Shaw (2015) explores the modalities of text and dance as they grapple with the “ontological blur” (p.42) of the grief experience. Shaw (2015) considers the “corporeal, kinetic sense of grief” (p.22) in the choreography of Martha Graham’s *Lamentation* (1935), where the dancer moves within the cleaving and releasing of fabric enveloping her body, and how it resonates with C.S. Lewis’s memoir of his wife, titled *A Grief Observed*.

Remarking at his own strange behavior, Lewis writes: “I keep on swallowing. At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is *a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me.*” *Lamentation* renders Lewis’s “invisible blanket” visible; the elastic cloth allows us to see how grief cleaves to the bereaved, constricting her while she struggles to move freely. A contronym, *cleave* can mean both “to cling to” and “to separate from,” and the word possesses an antagonistic bi-directionality that makes it especially appropriate as a description of grief. (p. 26)

Shaw (2015) explores the emotional movement and perceptual shifts that may occur within the embodiment of grief. Describing a grieving mother’s response to a performance of *Lamentation*, Shaw points to the power of dance in opening to such shifts for both creator and spectator.

Following a performance of *Lamentation* in 1930, Martha Graham was confronted by a spectator who had obviously been crying. She said to Graham: “You will never know what you have done for me tonight. Thank you.” Graham later learned that this woman had witnessed her 9-year-old son being struck and killed by a truck. Yet, despite her obvious trauma, the woman had been unable to cry before experiencing *Lamentation*. Somehow this choreography involving stretching a piece of fabric was able to produce a result unachievable by introspection, familial support, and professional council. (p.23)

Shaw (2015) points to the important role that the reflexive coming together of different modalities may play in considering the ambiguity of the “porous divisions between living and dead” for both those that are experiencing grief, and those looking into it from a distance.

Summary

Despite the broadening base of literature on continuing bonds and studies focusing on maternal bereavement, there is a scarcity of research that includes mother’s voices and their subjective experiences of their relationship with their child after death. Assumptions that recovery is attainable, and that moving forward equates healthy grief are still prevalent in the literature on grief and loss. More current research is beginning to explore the interrelationships between mind, heart, body, spirituality and community as they relate to the ways in which women connect with their deceased child (Ashkenazy, 2014). There is growing discussion of the importance of re-membering through story, and using creative expression as ways of responding to loss with evolving understanding,

intention, and agency (Hedtke, 2015, Ashkenazy, 2014, Halprin, 2003, Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014, Ord, 2009). Similarly, there is a growing number of interventions and grief models or theoretical frameworks that suggest ways in which a bereaved parent may integrate their relationship with their child as they reconstruct their life. It is not my intention to prove or disprove particular frameworks or approaches but to focus attention on the void in qualitative studies that open spaces for mothers' voices to be heard. In saying this, I acknowledge my assumption that relationships do not die and the role this played in guiding the shape, scope and language used in this literature review. It is my hope that this inquiry will open further conversations that acknowledge and value the complexity of grief, love, and relationship within a mother's process of grief. As one of the participants in my study implied, expertise is eventually found within one's own experience of grief:

intuitively we know if we listen to ourselves what we need...you just have to listen to that that inner voice ...and it's really hard to listen to at that time (in the early days)...cause you feel like you've lost your way... I had to come to a point where I didn't have to have all the answers...that there's mystery around this and there always will be...that takes a long time...you want answers...you really want some surety that they're ok...I feel like now I don't need to do that...I guess that's part of the process too...I need to ponder it or actually know that they (her deceased children) are there...it's like (in the early stages) you're not the expert, somebody else is and then you gradually realize that you are

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Heuristic Inquiry

The intention of this thesis is to give voice to a mother's unique experience of her relationship with her deceased child. A qualitative approach was integral to this process as my aim was to interweave the essence of my own experience as a bereaved mother into the unique experience of the participants. The methodological approach needed to embrace story, artistic expression, embodied experience, and critical exploration of the social context of grief in a way that was reflexive and interconnected. In addition, a qualitative approach supported an exploration of a small group of participants, and the attempt to capture connectedness while honouring individual experience.

Heuristic methodology provided a framework to support my attempt to capture the essence of relational experience. "In heuristic methodology one seeks to obtain qualitative depictions that are at the heart and depths of a person's experience" (Moustakas, 1990, p.2). This challenge is fulfilled through gathering narrative descriptions, dialogue, stories, poems, artwork, and other personal documents in the attempt to depict the lived experience of situations, conversations, relationships, feelings, thoughts and beliefs (Moustakas, 1990). As it was important to incorporate and depict the process of reflexivity, a heuristic approach was a good fit as it "may involve reintegration of derived knowledge that itself is an act of creative discovery, a synthesis that includes intuition and tacit understanding" (Douglas and Moustakas, 1985, p.43).

The heuristic inquiry paradigm is an "adaptation of phenomenological inquiry" explicitly acknowledging the lived experience of the researcher as an essential part of the

research (Hiles, 2001, p.2). Moustakas (1990) describes the crucial processes in heuristic inquiry as “concentrated gazing on something that attracts or compels one into a search for meaning: focus on a topic or formulation of the question; and methods of preparing, collecting, organizing, analyzing, and synthesizing data (p.3). The question or topic that guides the research becomes “infused in the researcher’s being” (p.6). “It creates a thirst to discover, to clarify, and to understand crucial dimensions of knowledge and experience” (p.6).

The stages of heuristic inquiry are described as stages of initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, creative synthesis and validation of the heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). Core processes are associated with each stage. These include identifying with the focus of inquiry; self-dialogue; tacit knowing; using intuition; seeking greater understanding of a quality of human experience; focusing on central meanings of an experience; and placing knowledge and experience in the context of the experiencer's own internal frame of reference. This framework however, is not meant to be linear. Moustakas (1990) emphasizes that “each research process unfolds in its own way” (p.7). Methods guiding the research are to “facilitate the flow of the investigation” and ultimately “to uncover as many meanings as possible and their relations to one another as the phenomenon presents itself in experience” (p.7).

This research attempts to open up a space for bereaved mothers unique experiences in relationship with their deceased child, and in doing so, uncover multiple meanings and their interrelationships. In the following section I will attempt to describe the beginning stages of this unfolding process, referring to the heuristic framework as a way to guide and situate my thoughts, feelings, tacit knowing and emerging

understandings. Acknowledging the reflexive nature of my journey as researcher and bereaved mother within this process, I will begin with text and images that document my early stages of grief after the death of my daughter. Following my personal account, I will open space to the voices of five mothers and their experience of connecting with their deceased child.

Initial Engagement

Moustakas (1990) describes the early stage of heuristic inquiry as “initial engagement”, where the researcher begins with “the internal search to discover, with an encompassing puzzlement, a passionate desire to know, a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected to one's own identity and selfhood (p.3). My initial engagement with this inquiry began in the first few months after my daughter’s death. As a bereaved mother, the question of how to relate to or hold my child after her death infused my being. Its formulation was violently immediate, like being catapulted into the suspended, slow, continuous, falling into nothingness. I was groundless. Grief was my world, my daughter was in every breath, every corner of my existence...my daily rituals, my dreams, my movement through nature, my encounters with others. Initially immersing myself was not intentional...it was survival.

During this early stage of grief I moved between internal and external worlds, stepping into liminal space. The movement was intuitive, an embodied knowing that allowed me to slowly find a safe container. Heuristic inquiry offers a framework through which the essence of this process can begin to emerge. Moustakas (1990) argues that, “if personal experience is going to be a catalyst for inquiry and change, it also requires that

the qualities of tacit knowing and intuition are acknowledged... In the heuristic process, researchers must move between their internal worlds and the external worlds that they inhabit (in Kenny, 2012, p.8).

Initially, the physicality of loss influenced the meaning of everything else. I felt faded, sponged out. Was I still a mother? My body knew the answer to this question long before I could articulate it. Many years after losing her two children, husband, and parents in a devastating tsunami Sonali Deraniyagala (2013) wrote about her process of recovery, knowing that it was in connection with her deceased children and husband that she was able to recover

I have learned that I can only recover myself when I keep them near. If I distance myself from them, and their absence I am fractured. I am left feeling I have blundered into a stranger's life? I am also split off from myself when I don't reveal... I suspect that I can only stay steady as I traverse this world that's empty of my family when I admit the reality of them and me. For I am without them as much as I am on my own. And when I hold back this truth, I am cut loose, adrift, hazy about my identity. Who am I now? (p.240)

Like Deraniyagala, it was only through connection, through holding my daughter close that I was able to reintegrate. In retrospect I acknowledge that this "immersion" (Moustakas, 1990), this embodied knowing, was the beginning of discovering the essence of this changing relationship with my daughter.

Moustakas (1990) suggests, "heuristics emphasizes connectedness and relationship... heuristics may involve reintegration of derived knowledge that itself is an act of creative discovery (p.2). My need to know what being a mother meant after my daughter died guided me through many experiences. The following section

opens a view into my movement through different modalities as I sought to understand what I was feeling and who I was becoming.

An exploration of motherhood

During those early months, the pain of grief was buffered by the protection of shock. My body seemed to know that the immediate intensity of traumatic loss was too much to bear. Still, the grief waves that did escape were furiously overwhelming. Art was a way to find a non-verbal space, where I could safely be in this excruciating pain.



This image was created in the early days after my daughter died, at a time when I felt utter emptiness inside a fragile casing.



Months later the protective veil of shock began to unravel and the emptiness began to feel dark, spreading... oppressive.

One of the ways in which I could safely explore my experience of grieving was within the structure of academic writing. This allowed for a measure of distance, a container for reflection that was needed to be able to wade into such an emotional landscape. The following section contains excerpts from my initial writing about motherhood. It was a beginning attempt to find ways to continue connecting with my daughter, to keep the relationship alive, to move with greater solidity, to integrate some of the fractured pieces.

Twenty months after the death of my daughter - Excerpts from “Striving for lightness of being in motherhood”



This image represents a sense of lightness, grounding, beauty, ephemerality, and connection. There is wind blowing the grass into flowing waves.

I step into this movement allowing my thoughts to move freely, to connect with language that resonates. This is an exploration of my struggle to understand, to accept and to redefine my identity as a mother, and to find lightness while doing so. It is a brief glimpse into redefining my identity, in a sense laying down the bones for further exploration.

I became a mother at 42. This changed my emotional landscape from the inside out. Feeling such intimacy with my daughter opened up my heart in ways that I had never experienced. This changed my relationships with my family, my friends, my students, and with myself. Motherhood was at the core of my identity. Losing my daughter and partner at age 53 shattered my life.

It is difficult to find words that describe the intense clarity and intimacy of motherhood. Basho, a Japanese scribe of the 17th century captured a pure moment or realization of “aesthetic experience and love” (Aitken, 1978/2010, p.65) in his famous haiku;

When I look carefully

I see the nazuna blooming

By the hedge

The essence of the flower...the essence of my connection with my daughter, are at once both natural and extraordinary.

At the core of motherhood was a clarity; a realization of beauty in connection that I had never experienced. It was an opening to a new way of being in relationship. I experienced a sense of belonging to a community of women and their children and discovered richness in the relationships that were formed. With my daughter I felt an exquisite movement of leaning in to emotions that were filled with delight, intense reciprocal love, and thrilling moments of unspoken connection that went beyond lineage, or the biology of parent/child relationship.

Grief is all consuming at first. Losing my daughter was like being swallowed into a darkness that sucked out my breath. Over time I have learned how to breathe, I am learning to feel lighter. Over the last twenty months I have been putting the pieces of my identity back together...a process of rediscovering, replacing, and integrating.

What does it mean to integrate? Rollo May states, “the key to living is achieving authentic being in the world... To do so one must experience life from the core of the self, without filters or excuses” (in Bankhart, 1997 p. 324). “For May, genuine self-affirmation requires personal courage, self-consciousness, uncontaminated awareness, participation in community, perceptual and phenomenological centeredness and a willingness to encounter the unknown (Monte, 1991, in Bankart, 1997, p.345)

In my grieving process I have had to go to my core, to experience aliveness again, to experience life without filters or excuses. It is through a process of opening and closing and reconnecting with my core that I have found ways to form a new relationship with being a mother.

Going through the shock and trauma of the sudden loss of my child left me feeling totally and utterly groundless. Summoning up the courage to feel, to not shut down is monumental. What was most essential for me at that point was to be contained, to be held, to be wrapped up, and to be mothered. This enveloping support allowed me to teeter on the point of being what I was and what I wasn't any more – I just was...in the frightening yet curious state of being and not being.

Rollo May describes the experience of being, as the “I-am” or ontological experience. “This I-Am experience is not in itself a solution to an individual’s problems. It is, rather, the *precondition* for the solution. This experience of being points also to the experience of *not being*, or nothingness” (p.2) As a child opens to its mother’s love, I was able to open to the love that was holding me in those early days. Like a vulnerable newborn this connection nourished me, it helped me to feel the ground again. As Jordan (2008) suggests, “all individuals need connection throughout the lifespan...attachment to others is not only an important facet of relationships; it is a driving force of development and well-being” (in Kietai, 2012, p. 124).

Before I could begin to conceive of what it meant to be a mother as part of my identity, I literally needed to work from the ground up. Digging in the earth, transforming my backyard was a process that allowed me to interact with the environment and with others in a way that was healthy, and revitalizing. I spent many hours in my garden. This was an opening, a relational act of creation. It gave me the opportunity to ground myself, to connect with my daughter through nature. The appearance of a butterfly, a dragonfly, beads of water on the spider’s web were steps into a liminal space where I could gaze in wonder, appreciate the beauty, talk to my daughter, feel her presence. It was a meditative, contemplative way to enter into my beliefs and values that shape my identity.

Unruh & Hutchinson (2011) suggest that traumatic events “interrupt life and open up opportunity for the contemplation and questioning at the heart of spiritual processes, which contributes to identifying the values, beliefs and commitments that shape self-

identity” (p.571). The physicality of gardening allowed my safe container to expand into the natural world. Being in nature provided focus, a focus that was filled with movement and breath. The breath provided a conduit for the emotion...an opening that allowed the emotion to dissolve and settle. Moss (2003) talks about the soul as “something deep and essential about a person”. It is rooted in our memory and personal roots. “Soul has a sensory richness that is first auditory, with sounds and voices; second visual, with snapshot memories and images of primordial places of one's life; and third olfactory, with the rich fragrance of childhood” (p.485). In the garden I was able to begin opening and reaching into a sense of aliveness, a feeling of intimacy that is rooted in memory and experience of love.

According to Moss (2003), breath is connected to the human experience of the soul: “Some physiological functions, especially respiration, appear to be closer to the human experience of spirit. The word *spirit* derives from the Latin *Spiritus*, with a root meaning of breath. The Greek *pneuma*, or breath, is also the soul. In Genesis, Yahweh breathed life into the man and “thus man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). For the Hindu, the individual soul is *atman*, from the Sanskrit for breath”. (p. 485). Like physicality in nature (moving meditation), the practice of yoga has been an important way for me to connect through the breath to a deep inner part of myself. It was in the moments of connecting or integrating that I was able to feel vitality and lightness, and hope.

As I grappled with motherhood, I realize that my pivotal moments of movement occurred within safety, containment, and within relationship. It was only within safe connection that I could open myself to the intensity of feeling, the essence of my

daughter, and my love for her. My relationship with my daughter did not stop when she died. However, it took great courage to let her out, again. The act of acknowledging the gift of motherhood stirred together parts of myself that had remained fragmented.



On my daughter's birthday the first year after she died I was compelled to share her image, our image as mother and daughter in a public forum with enormous pride.

This marked a huge shift. It was a moment of lightness, of vitality...and a moment of knowing pain and love at once.

Three years after the death of my daughter

Over time I have learned to contain and titrate grief...but it builds and at times, still breaks without warning. I am ready to risk writing without the safety of a structure that distances.

Two Mothers

Holding space

reaching around like a thin, solid membrane that is held by a need, a commitment to not flinch

or flinch on the inside

down in the entrails where movement doesn't show

Inside that space is rattled energy, weeping sores, love hovering under the skin met with soft resolve to be

*there
holding*

*later the membrane dissolves bit by bit
slowly
but the holes gape at a certain point when shape has lost its purpose and the rawness
inside is now on the outside unprotected*

*Later...
excruciating
painful cusp teetering between the slide into sorrow or not
now
this teetering is on a narrow edge
and after three years the not, the looking into, softening into something else is still...
what is it...
sometimes joy
sometimes pushing ahead
sometimes feeling a full heart stepping into intimacy...with someone else
other than you
for a moment
of being only there, here, without you...with whoever the you is
it's the moment of touching
stepping into eyes
or surge of energy that wrap us in a moment
and then
I step into your room and still look...
look for something where I can hold that moment where there is nothing but you...and
I...
and the memory of stories before bed
or kissing your forehead as you fall into sleep
is excruciating*

A new space opens. Love and pain spill together, differently...covering, uncovering,
healing, ripping, in a changing relationship.

Thirty-six months after the death of my daughter



This image came to me in a dream. A gift.

*“It is in the spirit that emotional alchemy takes place –a spirit not divorced from the body but that flows from what the body knows. When we can broaden the story of our suffering from a place of rootedness in the body, emotional alchemy happens quite naturally”
(Greenspan, 2003, p. 26)*

The act of tattooing was a statement. It was painful, emotional...a way to resist others’ perceptions of strength...to symbolically bring my daughter up from the bones into my skin. It was an opening to speaking Zarah’s name.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH DESIGN

As I moved through the non-linear process of engagement and immersion, I became increasingly connected to other mothers who had experienced the sudden death of a child. When I listened to their stories of their children and of moving through grief, I wondered about how they were experiencing their relationship with their child. Were they grappling with motherhood in a similar way? Do they feel connection? How does this happen? My decision to create a research study was guided by a desire to open space for women who have shared a similar lived experience of losing a child to share their stories. My intention was to uncover the essence of their experiences.

“Moustakas (1990) argued, “It is through self-dialogue and talking with others that the final process of heuristic inquiry can be identified: the ‘internal frame of reference. The experiences and stories of participants will illuminate and bring into focus the internal frameworks of researchers ...it is by bringing this internal frame of reference into fuller view that the portrayal of an experience can be said to be heuristically valid because it comes from within” (Kenny, 2012, p.8). In terms of research design it was important to open space for bereaved mothers to reflect on and verbally articulate their experience. Using heuristic research methods as a way to provide a structure and organization to the study’s design, I decided to incorporate an expressive arts experience with an open-ended group interview, encouraging self-reflection and dialogue. Moustakas (1990) argues, “Ordinarily, such interviews are not ruled by the clock but by

inner experiential time. In genuine dialogue, one is encouraged to permit ideas, thoughts, feelings, and images to unfold and be expressed naturally” (p.9).

An essential part of the research design was providing space for participants to be able to access and reflect on intense emotions that may arise. Creating an arts-based experience provided a way to both honor and empower their articulation process. McNiff (2007) suggests that it is through “the use of our hands, bodies and other senses” that we are able to enter into and activate dormant dimensions of the mind in ways that are simply not possible through descriptive and linear language (p.33). The expressive arts provide possibilities to bring into awareness mind-body connectedness, helping to communicate stories of fractures, wounds, grief and loss (Sherwood, 2008). Using art to initiate self-expression was also an important way to give voice to silenced women whose experience has been situated within a predominantly male western discourse on grief and loss (Huss & Cwikel, 2005). By incorporating an arts-based experience into a heuristic framework my intent was to provide a safe structure for participants to individually and collectively connect.

Data Collection Methods

The study involved seven participants and myself as researcher coming together for four hours. I had previously met or knew of all of the women who participated in the study because of our shared experience of losing a child. I shared my intention about the kind of research I was undertaking with each participant who all volunteered to become involved. In order to accommodate the needs of the participants, we met in two separate groups, the first consisting of five participants, and the second, of two. The participants

were invited to create a collage that explored their relationship with their deceased child, considering the meaning of connection within this relationship. A collection of materials including paint, markers, beads, yarn, pencil crayons, pastel, glue and assorted fabric were available. Having the opportunity to interact with different art materials gave participants an opportunity for reflection and engagement with their senses and emotions. Each participant had the opportunity to share their process and thoughts about their work with the group, without interruption or time restriction. A safe space for individual sharing was created by the participants attentive caring and compassion. After each participant had finished speaking, the other participants responded if moved to do so, resulting in rich conversation.

My role during the group process was to facilitate the art experience and conversation. As a researcher, certified art therapist and bereaved mother I was transparent in identifying the boundaries of my experience in order to have an open mind to the unique experiences of each participant while facilitating the group. Questions and responses that reflected on the women's individual process and experience included: What is it like for you to look at this collage from a distance? How was it for you to go through this process? As conversations emerged, open-ended questions followed the spontaneous rhythm of the group. The intent of our experience together was to share at a chosen moment in time the essence of each participant's connection to her child. In an attempt to acknowledge the depth of their experience, my responses were unstructured, reflective and intended to be free of interpretation.

Tapes of the art debriefing and conversation were transcribed and collages were

photographed. Description about pauses, inflection, and tone of voice were included in the transcriptions in an attempt to capture the quality of the interactions. The participants had the option to review the transcriptions and have all data related to their participation withdrawn at any time. I have been mindful of the vulnerability of each participant entering into a process that is potentially so emotionally charged, respecting their option to withdraw from the study at any point.

Participants

The seven participants involved in this study are courageous, compassionate women who gave themselves openly to the process. They are mothers to five daughters and three sons who all died suddenly. Four of the deceased died of drug related complications, two from tragic accidents, and one from a fatal illness. The number of years since the death of their children ranges from 10 months to 16 years. The participants are all Caucasian, university educated, and working professionals. Three of the women are married, and 4 have other children. Despite these similarities, the richness of the conversations emerged through their unique experiences. Pseudonyms have been used in order to protect the confidentiality of each participant.

In writing the following descriptions I chose to limit the biographical information, hoping that the words and images that emerged at a particular moment in time will speak for themselves. In doing so I acknowledge my intention to open space for mother's voices to be heard, as well as the complexity of representing another's identity while honoring confidentiality. These are but brief introductions to the women involved.

an accident, the other of an illness. She has two other children and a grandchild. Patricia is a retired nurse and since retirement has become an avid writer and gardener. She has found great comfort in silent meditation over the past ten years.



Patricia's collage

Tanya is in her mid forties and runs her own business. Her daughter died four years ago in a car accident at the age of 21. Tanya is married and has a son. She has found hiking, gardening, and her faith to be helpful in moving through grief.

Jess is in her mid-forties. Her only child, a six year child daughter, died in an accident just under a year ago. She owns her own business to which she has returned on a part-time basis.



Jess' collage

Meg works in the health care system supporting youth at risk. She is in her late forties.

Meg lost her only child five years ago from drug related causes. Her son was twenty when he died.



Meg's collage

Sue is in her mid-fifties. Her daughter died five years ago from drug related causes at the age of seventeen. She is married and has another daughter. Sue and Meg are good friends.



Sue's collage

Data Analysis

The process of transcribing, listening to, dwelling in the words, images, and intonation of the five women who came together at this point in time was very much a deliberate process of turning inward, “seeking a deeper, more extended comprehension of a quality of theme of human experience” (Hiles, 2001, p.3). Moustakas (1990) refers to this process as “indwelling” which “involves a willingness to “gaze with unwavering attention and concentration into some aspect of human experience” (p.15-27).

After transcribing the audiotapes I revisited the voices and photographs of the women’s artwork, entering and re-entering the material over time, attempting to understand the individual participant's experience as a whole (Moustakas, 1990). Taking time to remove myself from the material, I once again entered an immersion process reflecting on the emerging themes.

CHAPTER V

CREATIVE SYNTHESIS

“The final step in heuristic presentation and handling of data is the development of a creative synthesis of the experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p.14). A creative synthesis may be developed as “an aesthetic rendition of the themes and essential meaning of the phenomenon” that, in supporting the researcher’s “knowledge, passion and presence” maybe expressed through narrative, story, poem, work of art or metaphor” (p.14). In this chapter I will attempt to synthesize the themes that emerged in the women’s conversations, and how they “illuminate” the themes in my personal narrative. Trying to stay true to the essence of the women’s experience I have incorporated direct quotes from our conversation and images of their artwork. In this interweaving my intention is not to offer an interpretation or discussion about my findings, rather to lay bare what was shared in a way that intermingling voices can be heard. I attempt to bring forth the essence of the experience, through direct quotes as well as “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the silences, the quality of voice, and the communal engagement in conversation. In keeping with the intention of this study, I have tried to reveal the profound courage it takes for a mother to look into her connection with her deceased child, with senses wide open, if only for short moments in time. I attempt to honour these mothers’ voices and the complexity of the relationships described, by presenting the core themes in a way that most closely represents their non-linear thought process. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality of the participants involved.

Core Themes

During the process of sharing their narratives individually and collectively, the women spoke of a unique, sustained mother child bond that continues to evolve. The data reveals that each mother is deeply connected with her child, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Connection is represented in terms of being ever-present, desired, and existing within the liminal spaces of dreams, natural and spiritual realms. Several core themes emerged during this process; connection in nature, connection through re-membering, spiritual connection, connection in loss, connection through meaning making, and motherhood. In the following sections I will explore these themes as they emerged through direct quotes and images.

Connecting in nature

Zarah means beautiful light of the dawn. A year after my daughter Zarah died I walked for a month. I walked into the dawn each morning for days and kilometres, hearing and seeing the trees, fields, sky and animals waking up. It was in the early hours of the morning, where space opened between night and day, that I found “whispering life” (Sliep, 2012), a space that invited me to be with my daughter in a way that was painful, invigorating, and continuously changing.

Sliep (2012) speaks through images in nature as she describes her grief process: “For days I did free writing about the whole process. Prepared to enter a black hole without expecting I will come out again. The opposite happened, exhaled and sprayed through the blow hole before diving back into the depths of the ocean, parting the seas, enfolding me in vast spaces, vines cling, evergreen forget-me-nots whispering. Life is lived between the spaces where pieces of moss weave intricate patterns which you see

best down on your knees” (p.77). Images of the natural world appeared in the participant’s artwork, representing important openings to speak about their children. Animals, flowers, trees, clouds, sunrises, sunsets, wind and rainbows were integral to the images and narratives. Spending time in nature; walking in the forest or in the desert, hiking, gardening, and being on the water, were described as a source of great comfort, holding moments of vitality and feelings of connection. Some of the women talked about miraculous, spontaneous occurrences in nature that gave them the feeling that their child was sending them a message or a sign. Others talked about special places in nature where they could find space to open to their emotions; to feel, to cry and to remember.

Jan spoke of a special place in nature where she feels safe to open up to her emotions.



I started with the tree in the background...there was a place that I went to when my son died, so that's what I...you talked about connection...a place where I could go there...where I could safely cry.

Similarly Patricia spoke of special places that bring her a sense of connection to her daughters.

I guess to me when I want to be with them I go to a special place...I journal a lot...yes and silence in the forest...and that they each had a special place..so ..my daughter Lia had a horse so we visit the horse at the ranch every year ..and Maya loved the lake so we visit the lake every year.

Sharon's place of connection is represented in her collage by a tree trunk, symbolizing a special location that has since become a place of remembering and revitalizing in nature with her family.



The tree growing on the angle is to represent the special place we have for my son ...he took us there ... it's a little climbing spot...it's very magical and we since planted a tree there so the greenery in front is symbolizing that tree

Jan spoke about an animal encounter on the water soon after her son died.

*I was taking it (the new boat named after her son) home and some loons started to dance in the morning... as I was pulling it out of the harbour and as soon as I got in the open we were surrounded by orca whales ... I've never seen that before and so the whole notion of **needing** the connection*

Similarly, Jess speaks about the remarkable appearance of rainbows being a conduit for communication with her daughter.



I just knew right away...one day a short time ago...there was a rainbow in front of my house you have just never seen...I've never seen it in the world...it was a rainbow that was so bright and huge and I was leaving the house and my god this is ridiculous look at and I thought this is for sure a message from my daughter ...usually they're gone like in a few minutes it would dissipate but this thing was crazy and it lasted for hours

There was a sense of beauty and underlying darkness as Jess described her creative process and the symbolic importance of the rainbow in her collage. Stating that if it was solely up to her, Jess would have made the entire piece look “like a black hole”. However, she described her daughter as being so powerfully intertwined with her own identity, that it overpowered the blackness. Jess spoke about the power of connecting through the colour, grandeur and the magically, sustained quality of rainbows.

Flowers and trees were common images, described by some of the women as representing experiences and memories of feeling connected to their child.

Jan: Where the Red Fern Grows was his favourite book so I planted a red fern and it's really doing well so that's the plant that sort of connects with me and us

Patricia: and the tree...my daughter was a writer and on the front of her journal she has a tree and it looks like a body...the trunk is a body and the branches are the arms and there are flowers...when she was a child she remembered walking along and seeing forget-me-nots and seeing a hand reaching out... the leaf on the left(pointing to the collage)...there's a little hand because I always know when I see forget-me-nots it's like...I see that fairy hand



There was resounding agreement when Tanya spoke about “looking up” to the sky in the context of connecting with her daughter and feeling comfort.

and that became the whole theme hence the sunshine and the sunshine on a cloudy day..so I don't know about you guys but I find that I look up a lot
All: (immediate, loud, group response) yeah...totally
Tanya: and I'm always ... at the sky obviously sunrise and sunsets have become a theme for me and we take comfort we've got about a million pictures of sunsets and sunrises but I just find that the garden and the clouds and the sun brings me so much comfort

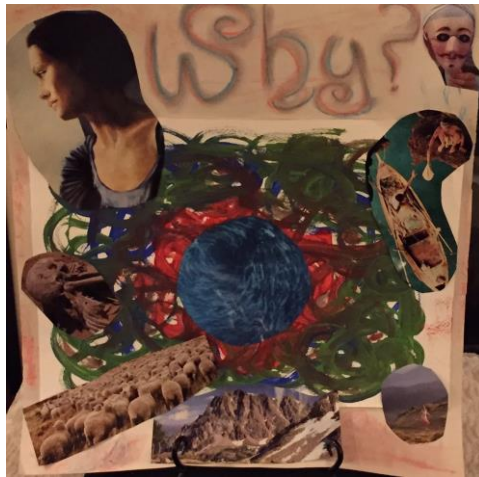
Nature was represented and spoken of as an opening to liminal space where the women felt the presence of their children within and around them. Patricia spoke about connecting through silence in natural spaces, and how the silence brings lightness, expansiveness and serenity. Patricia speaks of the liminal space of silence in nature.

Because that's how it feels at the beginning...like you will never be in balance again (referring to the image of the precariously placed rock in her collage)...there's this impossible thing...but underneath there's light... a 30 day silent retreat in the desert brought me great peace and healing...I am very drawn to silence...in the desert...and the special place at the top(referring to her collage)...is like I guess to me when I want to be with them I go to a special place and I think as the years go by there's less and less room for your grief because...I'm not saying people forget but they don't really want to bring it up cause they don't want to make you cry and so you really have...I have to make sure to make time for that...I think I'll always need that so I journal I journal a lot...yes...and silence and the forest

The sentiment of wonder at the way that nature opens up to spiritual signs that help her feel connected to her daughter, is voiced in Tanya's description.

the birdbath my mom bought us a birdbath for her little garden and the most amazing thing happened we put this bird bath in and it was winter and I looked out the kitchen window and I thought somebody had left a bottle or something in the birdbath and I went to have a closer look and there was this magnificent overnight ice sculpture that had formed and it looked like...this ice sculpture it had like angel wings. It just formed up overnight...about that big I don't know how it happened it was incredible...I don't know how it happened...but apparently those things can happen

Meg also spoke about connecting with her son through silence or quiet introspection, however, in contrast to Patricia's description of healing and peacefulness, the quality of her description and image is filled with longing and sadness. Being quiet is described as an attempt to connect with her son, to find her son "in her mind".



so sometimes I try to connect with him so I've got this lady here who is looking very forlorn and is just silently trying to find a way to find him and I and I become very quiet and see if I can find him that way and connect with in my mind more than anything...trying to find him and I saw this picture and I think that's what I look like just kind of just like that...

Describing her creative process Meg's voice became soft and wistful as she gazed at the "forlorn woman" who represents her trying to connect silently, in her mind, with her son. This was followed by a deep sigh and consideration of the meaning of mountains and sky. A heavy sigh followed this description. Meg stared at the image of the forlorn lady then moved quickly to the mountains, as if the quiet of stillness was too much to be with. Moving in nature seems to offer a space where she can be alone, where her body can "feel him more". Although the theme of seeking is ever present, there is a sense of invigoration and agency within Meg's words.

and then (sigh) I thought about the mountains and that is actually where I feel the most connected to him is when I'm up high...I go up high and I feel him...more so...when I feel closer to the sky...(long pause)...(soft) and I often do it alone when I go up because that's my connection time even though I wouldn't say it's perfect it's finding him that way but it's...it's slightly better than other ways...so I do it a lot...a lot...I'm trying to find him and that's what it is people are always saying wow you're hiking you're in such great shape but I'm looking for my son I'm up there I'm looking for him...I'm trying to connect

In the women's descriptions there is a sense that the spaces of connection involve a stepping into a liminal space, or, as Maddrell (2010) suggests, "a threshold place" where space becomes "endowed with meaning and significance", (p.4) related to personal events, experiences and relationships. Maddrell suggests these liminal spaces become places sacred to the memory of the deceased, sacred openings to emotional landscapes.

Liminality has been described as the state of being 'betwixt-and-between' the middle stage in a rite of passage (Turner, 1974, 1982, Maddrell, 2010). "Liminality is the state between "two defined identities and freed from the normative obligations they imply there is an ongoing movement within absence presence" (Pearce, 2014, p.5). Pearce (2014) questions what it might mean to view grief as a liminal space, where "the usual order of things is suspended" (p.5), where the person grieving is in a state of becoming, a space that opens to exploration, a space in between the living and the dead. Meg finds her place close to the sky, Patricia by the lake or in the forest, Deborah by the river where her son climbed, and Jan on the water, and I found the early light of the dawn.

Spiritual connection

As the women spoke about their process, as they gazed at each other's images there was a sense of entering into a space that was apart from the ordinary, held by respect, and veneration. There was a sense of the sacred in the connections that were being described and the connections developing between the group members. Spirituality has been defined as a search for the sacred (Pargament, 1999, Ungureanu & Sandberg, 2010). Searching for the sacred in signs, in the transcendent, in liminal spaces in nature, and in transformation, were themes that emerged in the artwork. Experiencing a spiritual

connection with their deceased child, whether through dreams or momentary occurrences, seems to be a way that all of the women feel their child's presence.

Tanya referred to the spiritual connection that she feels with her daughter in the context of the beauty, serenity and transformative quality of the natural world. She spoke about her daughter being a sort of spiritual guide that comforts and watches over her, represented by two large blue eyes sketched in the center of her collage.

the eyes I drew are her eyes...I just thought that eyes are the window to the soul and this whole connection and continuation and everything I feel spiritually that she's still with us that she can still see us... her soul is still with us and the eyes are just the windows to that...yeah she had beautiful eyes and I miss looking into those eyes that's important to me

I find I get a lot of comfort through walking I love hiking and walking and I find that's very spiritual for me...butterflies...metamorphosis are butterflies spirituality are I think are so in tune with each...as well she metamorphosized into something even more beautiful and I love butterflies I've got a lot of butterflies always in my garden so (pause)...just hope...so that one day (pause)...as hard as this life has become there's still hope and there's still...I know that I will see her again one day I do truly in fill my heart believe that

Tanya speaks about her daughter's presence as a support in being able to find joy, the metamorphosis wrapped in her own desire to transform pain into joy, tears into beauty.

Patricia talks about the spiritual life of children and how her grandson seems to be able to access that spiritual realm, where her daughters are. She seems to take comfort in feeling connected to the essence of her daughters through the lineage of her living grandchild.

I'm reading a book the secret spiritual life of children and I'm telling you it makes you realize that they see sooo much and we have our six week old grandchild living with us and he looks at you...but he looks beyond you in a way...I've always said to him what are you seeing? Because he's always looking and smiling and I think oh...and oddly or comfortingly he will look at a picture of Lia and Maya (deceased children) that I have and smile every time he sees it and

I think...so (emphasis...pause) you've already met them...you've already met them...you know...(pause)...so it's kind of comforting.

and also the continuity thing with...like I look at my grandson and Lia and Maya's baby pictures and I see the same little face and eyes and sort of that carrying on that..

There is a sense in these descriptions, in the quiet understanding that held the room, that spiritual connection is something that is beyond words, that encompasses the presence of their child, and that provides a sense of comfort. Stepping intentionally into liminal spaces takes immense courage. Everything is held at once when that connection is felt – pain, sorrow, love...



Sharon: there's some sky in the background because like Tanya I do look up and see different things up there for sure...so um...so yeah I tried to make it about the essence of him...I guess...I think about him every day obviously how amazing he was...(long pause)...(sounds of crying)...and just how much I miss him...I miss hugging him...

“Water does not disappear it just moves around. We want to scoop it up. So when it is returned to the stream, it is sad. Viewing death from this perspective recognizes the affection and sadness, as well as the transformations of nature” (Arai, 2011, p.65)

Connection through remembering

“How to not fall apart when falling in memory but gather glimpses of connection that increase my being your being our being inside more than apart I fall towards us” (Sliep, 2012, p.73)

It was a year before I could speak my daughter's name without falling apart. Two weeks into my month long walk across Spain I allowed stories to begin trickling out. "What was she like?" Heaviness sloughed away, at least for a moment, as I remembered, and shared Zarah with my walking companion. This was a moment of remarkable, physical and emotional shifting.

Remembering "becomes a platform for making a person's life visible". It "affirms that a bond be continued" and offers a renewed sense of agency to the bereaved (Hedtke, 2016, p. 46). As Hedtke suggests, remembering the deceased in our daily lives is not strongly encouraged in western society. "Undercurrents in conventional grief psychology models have, at times, unwittingly led to the invisibilizing of the deceased"... This omission not only obscures the life of the deceased person, but also inflicts unnecessary pain upon the immediate family and friends, as well as all possible future connections"(p. 46).

During our conversation, the women agreed vociferously that societal assumptions about death and grief made it challenging to re-member their children, comfortably, with others.

Sharon: our culture is...well sort of less...I don't know what the right word is less inclusive of death or grief...I don't know what's the right word

Jess: uncomfortable

Jan: scared shitless...that about covers it

Sharon spoke about the importance of making the ritual of connecting with a deceased child more explicit, not just for her and her family but to integrate death and life more fluidly into society.

Sharon: yeah like when you go to Mexico and

Others: yeah they have a day

Sharon: yeah and perhaps it goes even beyond one day that you know we...we have a little altar in our house for our son and then we actually have his ashes in the living room and...a little healing rock on it and pictures and you know no one ever comments on it or that way of keeping connection

Tanya: people do their thing...turn around and watch their P's and Q's

People turn around, turn away from the suggestion of such intense pain. Their bodies close and protect, uttering the words 'I can't imagine'.... What would it be like if we **did** imagine, if we summoned the courage, as a society, to turn toward death and grief, to listen without fear, to open conversations? Where might those public spaces exist?

Later in our conversation the participants spoke about the challenges of finding such spaces in the context of our health care system where practitioners offer ways to numb the pain or turn away altogether when faced with a woman grieving the sudden loss of her child. Tanya spoke about her one and only experience with counselling support.

Patricia: you mean all those people we didn't get much help from...and they didn't make it go away either

Tanya: I just find that people who haven't been through this process how can someone who hasn't been through it actually help you...like I remember we sat down for a family session...it was a skype session and we all sat there and this counsellor had no idea what she was getting in to...we were their first family and the counsellor was like a deer in the headlights

Jan shared her frustration with a diagnostic approach to grief.

Jan: mine was the time frame...we've talked about that..

Patricia: yeah the seven months

Jan: it just made me it made me feel abnormal, and that I was the problem...what was the matter with me...it's still a part of your life...I made it through the first year and feeling the waves and then thinking what's wrong with me I should be getting better now

Patricia: thou shalt not should thyself

Jan: as soon as I took myself off of what I was supposed to do I just kind of went with it and then I was fine

Tanya and Jess shared their thoughts about medication in responding to the pain of grief.

Tanya: I know that when I went to the doctor for something else shortly after I lost my daughter and she said you may need to take something and I...I know a lot of people have to but I just had to say no...because if I numb it now I'll have to face it at some stage

Jess: absolutely

Tanya: so it's no use prolonging it and numbing it now...just deal with it cause I think I would have ended up being addicted or something to the actual thing that was making me feel ok

All of the women spoke about the importance of talking about their child, in relation with others as a way to move within the pain of loss. Sharing stories and bringing their child into the present is described as being an important part of feeling a continued connection. The participants shared similar feelings of responsibility in terms of not allowing their child to be forgotten by others. This was a part of their job of being a mother.

Patricia suggests that practices of remembering need to change, to respond to changes in identity, changes in relationship, and changing memories. As she described the process of creating her collage, Patricia spoke of a ritual that has evolved over many years, a quilting project that brings together some her daughter's friends. She talked about the importance of coming together, of sharing stories, of piecing together different experiences of her daughter creatively, in community.

Patricia: I was kind of drawn to the yarn as well because we are doing a quilt for Lia, myself and her friends and so that started to get pieced together...so each friend did a square about what Lia meant to them so that's been 10 years in the making so you can't be in a hurry but I think that's part of the deal is that it's...I don't actually want to finish it if truth be told because it's been such a wonderful process and we gather every year on her birthday and talk and don't do much quilting...it's it's been really wonderful and it's sort of like I think when you talk about them being forgotten you realize that they won't ever be...no...like people email me all the time...I saw this today it reminded me of Lia...I saw this...and so I've come to the conclusion that they won't be forgotten and it's not ..I think you feel this huge job as mothers to make sure they're not...but you don't have to carry it because they have friends that will never forget them...

Hedtke (2016) suggests that the act of remembering through a continuing “storied connection” (p.46) is not only a “private experience of continuing a bond with the deceased” (p.46) but a political act that opposes the intentional breaking off of relational connections. Creating a quilt in a community of women, Patricia has created a practice of remembering, a ritual that is relational, empowering and generative. It is an act that refuses the “dominating influence of patriarchal discourse” that continues to live in the “undercurrents of conventional grief psychology” (p.46). Later in the conversation the women spoke about the importance of agency in the act of remembering. There was a sense in the force of the women’s statements that being “told what to do” or how to remember was confining, wrong, and sometimes oppressive. They voiced their distaste of the idea of memorializing, or remembering in ways that were described as compartmentalizing (creating a scrapbook), or keeping their child in the past (lighting a candle in a dark room). Heads nodded in agreement as Jan spoke about the notion of remembering as something that you do as part of grief work.

Jan: in my perspective the remembering is always there it’s part of your body...the way he frames that intuitively feels

Patricia: it’s compartmentalizing

All: yeah...

Researcher: it keeps your child in the past?

Jan: yes – that’s a nicer way of saying it

Patricia: I guess it also doesn’t allow them to change...our memory to change it keeps them in that and of course that’s not true...they change...we change

A few women spoke about the intentionality of remembering, about being the one that had to take the initiative to talk about their child with others, to make sure that their stories are told. Patricia expressed that this role can become burdensome at times. She

spoke about the weight of taking on the inevitable role of educator, of having to teach people about what grief means in the context of losing a child.

Patricia: and it feels sometimes like, I think you know you have this education role right...teaching people what grief means like to lose a child and you have to show them that you don't want them to not be talked about you don't want them to be not mentioned and sometimes I get tired of being the educator

All: yeah...yeah (loud voices, immediate response)

Patricia: but at the same time you know people watch you to see how you react even your children watch you to see how you react so they know what they can do ...there's a lot of weight in that role and my family was not a talking family...and my mom thought that if I went back to work that meant I was better so I had to really say no...it's not...and really almost lead people

Sharon: yeah...I think that will always be the way...if I want my son talked about I have to bring him up...whether it's family or friends

Patricia: well it gets better...at least my family would never...they would freeze when I mentioned their name and now they talk

Remembering shifts how we think of identity and grief (Hedtke, 2016). Sliep's (2012) sentiments about others' response to her changing identity after the loss of her child reverberate through Patricia's thoughts about family and societal assumptions,

"I get a sense that people are still waiting for me to come round, to be like I was or at least to present back to the world the me they had known. Anything else creates a position of discomfort, maybe a concern that all is not well with me" (p.82).

Remembering actively creates meaning. It is the "active development of a relationship that sustains and grows over time" (Hedtke, 2016, p.46). The women talked about the importance of sharing stories, creating rituals or projects that not only acknowledge their child's existence, but also reinforce their essence that continues to be present and vital in those that remember.

Sue: I do find that I will bring up my daughter's name in a conversation...I find that if I bring her name up then it opens up for them they can feel they can talk about it too but if it's not mentioned it's really tense and I know my other daughter gets mad at me sometimes for bringing her name up...she did at the beginning more...she thought that I was making everyone uncomfortable by bringing up her name...whereas I thought (pause) I bring up her name you'll know that I feel comfortable so you can too

In response to Sue speaking about a mural that had been created by her daughter's classmates in her memory, Meg noted:

*Meg: things like that help so much...not that they **help** but...they help...just the whole process*

Researcher: How does it help?

Sue: to me it's helpful because people still remember

Meg: yeah...don't forget about my child...it's so huge right...and when people do (pause) they're acknowledging that they lived

Sue: yeah

Connection in loss

The phrase "letting go" within the context of grief literature is often associated with disconnecting with the loved one who has died. While the participants' images and conversation spoke of painful loss, they continued to feel a deep connection with their child. Exploring these connections they spoke of loss, not in the negation of their child's existence but in aspects of their own identity, of their sense of purpose and in the intimacy of embodied love.

Several of the women talked about connecting with their child in their dreams, particularly in the first few years after they died. Jan described a dream where she felt the loss of her son, the loss of identity, and a sense of peace

"the night that he died I actually had a dream that I realized three days later that he was probably saying good-bye to me (pause, voice quivers) and the dream he had he was in the dream he was basically he was standing there and we were kind of losing touch...he wasn't pulling away but we were losing touch and then when

I woke up he was just standing there...there was just light and he was kind of just standing there...I remember I woke up feeling dead...and it was feeling like he was ok (emphasis) he was letting me know he was ok...so there was a sense of peace with that but also the sense that I would never be the same

The conversation touched on a sense of connection in both the recognition of loss and intertwined sense of responsibility. In considering the collage and taking in the image, Jan spoke softly, acknowledging the huge sense of loss under the complexity of what her son means to her. Directly tied to that loss she describes a sense of responsibility in making sure that others know her son, especially her granddaughter who was born after her father died. Jan talks about this sense of responsibility in terms of “making a bridge” which is connected to her finding peace. Her words reveal an ongoing challenge with attempting to represent the complexity of her son, while acknowledging the pain she feels as a mother whose child died after years of struggling with substance abuse:



*the memory of who he could have been and knowing his daughter doesn't know him and so those are the angers (reference to the jagged lines in the collage)... for me the process was interesting cause it started with finding peace and then it was finding what depicts him and then it was actually in terms of where was the overlap...where was the connection...so those are more **him** and that's more **me** (reference to image of person standing under the sun) in finding peace in the middle*

it's sad in many..um what does it look like...I think...I'm not sure... (teary, quiet, shaky voice)...sad...knowing that there's places...I'm a different person...and that piece is better...but also...(long pause, voice quiet) the loss...(long pause) that there's connection in the loss but also feeling that I need to be the person who

makes the bridge as well, I see that as my role really clearly with my granddaughter..it (referring to the collage) doesn't capture everything...and so for me...just how all inclusive and how much there is and how much complexity...and it's something I fight about cause I know that when I say he had addiction issues he gets slotted in a particular way...and it's so important for me to say no no (voice is stronger) that was just...there was just so (emphasis, voice strong) much more there

Patricia also speaks about the felt sense of responsibility as well as an enduring tenacious connection in always being a mother.



on the top there's a polar bear with her cubs cause you are always their mother...you are always the mama bear...yeah

For Tanya, the ugliness of grief lies under the bright images of sunrises, full sun, cupcakes, and yellow sunflowers that form her collage. She acknowledged that under the prettiness there was the “ugliness” of grief, sorrow and pain but it is important that she is able to turn the ugliness of pain into something beautiful.

yeah that's basically it...it's airy fairy and bouncy and doesn't really have the grief in it which is...underlying all that prettiness there's ugliness that I'm trying to turn the ugliness into something beautiful because her life was beautiful and I don't want her life to be I don't want to just be sad...yeah...I talk to her as well.. I just want her life to... I want her legacy to be beauty not just tears and pain and I've got to the stage in my life now where I can actually go a day which I never thought I would be able to without crying

Tanya's words echoes Jan's previous acknowledgement of connecting within the sadness and pain of grief, as she spoke about emotional changes over time, holding on to the lessening or transformation of pain, yet not wanting to let go

...but just to give all you moms that are at a stage that is younger in grief than my four years...it does get easier...it does...and I know you don't feel like that now but it does get easier...I don't know about you...everyone is different I don't ever want to let go...I don't because it's part of me and it's actually made me a better person...I've learned so much about myself and what you're capable of...but

Sharon, Jan and Patricia agreed with the importance of allowing themselves to feel deeply, and to feel connected to their child, whether this meant talking to their deceased child or about their child with others with others.

Sharon: I think it's good to have these days too when... like I know you were saying it's hard to go to a grief group...because it's sad but and this is sad we are all talking about but it's really important I think because we go sometimes in our daily life and it's not like we are pushing it out but we are marching on and um and sometimes... it's like what we feel we need to do but it's good to...

Jan: I agree I find I go numb...and I don't want to live life numb

Patricia: I find it interesting because I talk to my daughters who have died more than I talk to my children who are alive I don't know if that's good or bad but it's because they are ever present because...there's no need to pick up the phone...I talk to them all the time

Jan: my son is the same I talk to him most days (Jess and Tanya nod)

There was a sense of shared relief among the participants in being able to safely acknowledge and validate talking to their dead child. Curious about Patricia's comment, I asked in a later conversation if she was open to elaborating on her thoughts about talking to her deceased daughters. She explained,

I feel like they're around me...I don't have to seek them out...that's something you go through (pause) wondering where they are but now I feel they are always here...it's been 11 years for Lia and 16 for Maya...has it changed over time...oh yes...everything changes over time for the first time you spend at least I spent the first while just trying to keep my head above water for starters and then you try to

figure out what you believe...and so it takes a long time at least for me to settle in...really the comfort feeling knowing that they are still around me

Similar sentiments emerged in a dialogue between Meg and Sue who admitted talking to her daughter with an assertive lilt and smile. She chuckled as she described how she acknowledges the “signs” that appear.

Sue: I find little things are very comforting and then you acknowledge them right

Meg: I get panicky...cause he's not here...like I'm like...I don't know

Sue: I find those signs, like those little things they comfort me and they give me peace now whereas before it might have been more despair or upsetting now I find it more like oh good (emphasis) you're still here...you dropped by you popped up for a minute...sometimes it's a little annoying like it used to be for a long time her razor was still in the shower and it would fall down every time I would get in the shower and I like are you trying to bug me (laughter) yeah cause it used to do it before when she was alive her razor would fall and it was just an annoyance then and then it was like oh you're playing tricks on me now you're falling on the ground just to tease

Researcher: that mama bear daughter relationship

Sue: yeah

Meg: the bugging

Sue: so you know I acknowledge those signs and I do speak out loud or I have a little smile or whatever I do find them comforting but it's in all of these emotions and things they're I wouldn't say they happen every day but they still happen... they just do start to drift towards a little bit of hope now (referring to the collage) and you know you don't get angry as often

M: it all softens



Sue: yeah the empty (referring to her collage) is still there but it's not as prominent as it once was... the storm yeah once in a while you get that turmoil but it started there in that chaos that round and round

Sue describes an emotional shift in the metaphor of the passing, weakening storm

towards a calmer movement towards hope. In this calmer state she is able to acknowledge “signs”, occurrences where she feels connected to her daughter, appreciative of the memory or feeling of her child’s essence. The feeling of “emptiness”, accompanying the chaotic swirling storm (like the eye of a hurricane) immediately following the loss of her child, is described as becoming less prominent over time. Sue states that with this shift, she is able to acknowledge the presence of her daughter in her life without falling into despair.

The conversation seems to open a door for Meg to imagine a different way of perceiving her own grief. During the conversation Meg reflects on her metaphor of the circular chaos within swimming fish, considering the possibility of what might happen if the swirling were to slow down to “moments of calm where you can handle it better”.

M: like my fish

S: yes

M: maybe the fish (pause) slow down...(speaks slower)...maybe it gets slower...instead of at the beginning where you're like

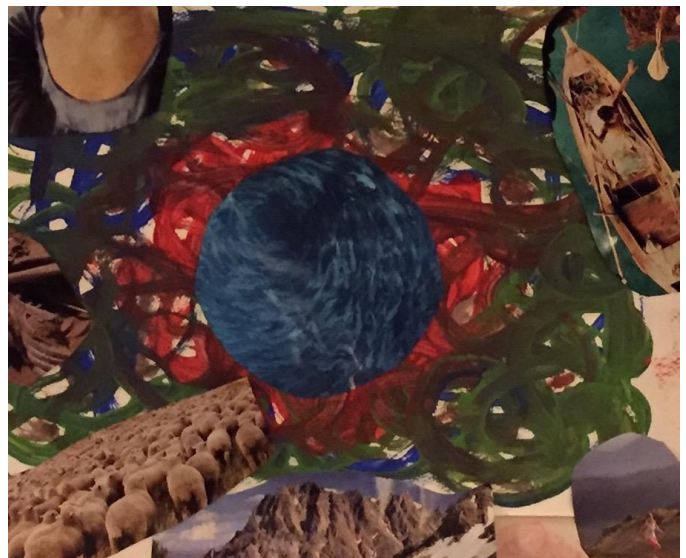
S: yeah swirling it just sort of drifted towards

M: cause it isn't just fast anymore where you wake up and you're like ahhh

S: mmm mmm

Researcher: so there are moments of more calm

M: there are moments of more calm where you can handle it better that...like you said...all of these things still happen but just, they happen softer and slower but they still come



Earlier in the session Meg described the feeling of being stuck in the exhausting cycle of grief as she continuously seeks connection with her son.

Can you see the fish...it's just all fish...that's what it feels like for me...not just in trying to find him but it's just like the whole grief thing it's it's like this and I'm like...achhhhh...it's exhausting...you're going around and around...and oh I was just here...back in...move forward move forward move forward right what does Dory say keep swimming and off you go and you find yourself swimming and back in the same spot...yeah ..looking looking seeking seeking...and never finding...I think that about says it all about that

Researcher: a churning feeling

M: it's a churning...well it's confusing too right...like that's where the paint came (referring to the painted lines in the collage) like I don't (emphasis, strong voice) know where to go...so I look I'm always looking trying to figure out...just how how do we do this...how do we do this now.

The sense of calm that Meg considers in the fish slowing down is implied in the mountain image in her collage. It appeared that the emergence of these different visual metaphors, and in particular the possibility of the fish slowing down, opened up spaces for Meg to reflect on a different way to safely stay with emotions and thoughts...integrating physical and emotional self to be able to withstand the presence of her son in her life without being physically there.

The experience of the death of child takes your breath away (Attig, 2001). In the traumatic sudden loss of a child a mother's breath is disrupted. Life is shattered. We breathe shallow spurts of air into a body that feels unfamiliar, unsafe, groundless, and disconnected. In slowing down we take the time to breathe into our suffering.

Connection through meaning making

The process of searching for purpose or finding meaning in life is described by several participants as a way of maintaining a connection with being a mother in a new

way. The theme of identity change was linked to finding a sense of purpose. Where Sue described the challenge of defining herself as a mother in relation to her living daughter and her deceased daughter, Meg speaks of her need to live for both her and her son.

Meg: there's always something else that you look ... (pause) forward to like for me I didn't have another child then I didn't have a husband and then I was completely lost on what am I living for and then it was... what is my purpose... that became huge... what is my purpose... and that was that I live for him I need to live for both of us and to do that will be my purpose what I do I will always think of him and what would he expect from me what would he want me to do what would make him happy all those sorts of things and then I lived... I began living for the two of us

Several women talked about the need to create a sense of purpose beyond caring for their immediate family. Tanya spoke about creating a legacy from her daughter's life in adopting a child. Her desire to turn sorrow into something beautiful, of benefit to another is wrapped up in finding a sense of purpose.

I just want her life to I want her legacy to be beauty not just tears and pain... a brighter future... she's brought us around to this place where we are actually even though we are older we are adopting a child ... we can't give our daughter a future but we can give somebody else a future because of her

Similarly, Sue and Meg spoke of the importance of making meaning of their children's death. They agreed that their collaboration on creating a video aimed at informing teens about the dangers of street drugs was a powerful way to stay connected to their child and to help others.

S: and I don't know if you felt the same way but I found making the video totally therapeutic

M: absolutely therapeutic... and that's cause we were doing that for our children

S: right and it felt really therapeutic but I also felt when it stopped and it sort of stopped abruptly

M: it was a loss... another loss

S: it was like grieving that all over again... it was

Researcher: and you did it quite soon after didn't you

S: we did it 5 months after and we were in the schools 5 months after
M: but it was therapeutic cause we were doing something for our children...to help...this is what happened to you so now we're gonna save the world
S: but when that ended I felt like I was grieving all over again cause that was another loss of that whole...it had a purpose..
M: that was our purpose
S: and then we didn't again
M: you're always finding your purpose

There is a sense in Meg and Sue's conversation that they poured themselves into creating a project that would fill a void, to make meaning in response to the death of their children. And yet, as their dialogue implies, there is no apex to the story. Their movement through meaning making has not been linear, nor has it offered resolution.

Making meaning of loss is a process that is painful, layered and multidirectional. Meaning making, can involve "sense making, benefit finding, and progressive identity change" (Neimeyer, Baldwin & Gillies (2006, p. 735). Neimeyer (2010) suggests that making sense of traumatic loss and creating meaning through continuing bonds in response to sudden death of a loved one is an important part of this process. Popular theories of grief may "offer a partial window on the experience of loss" (p.67) but "these approaches also draw attention away from the dialectical process of delving into the most painfully invalidating features of the loss narrative, and seeking a more coherent framework for grasping their ramifications for our ongoing lives" (p.67). "Exploring the 'felt sense' (Gendlin, 1996) of evolving understanding, often first registered as a bodily, rather than cognitive awareness" (Neimeyer, 2010, p.73), opens to layers of movement within the dialectical process of meaning making.

In a later conversation with Patricia, she commented on the study in terms of process of creating a collage within a safe community.

we went deep immediately it was a supportive safe environment so weren't afraid to go there...and that doesn't exist a lot...words can be cumbersome, they can get in the way whereas art, you're alone...you are doing your own journey...sometimes words pull you into the other person's journey so I think that part was necessary to focus on what you were feeling.

Neimeyer (2010) suggests that finding ways to articulate in “figurative rather than literal terms” may open space for going deep, in an unencumbered way, and creating “fresh new possibilities for construing and doing life differently” (p.73). I concur with Neimeyer, acknowledging the importance of creating safety as part of the articulation process. It was evident that the participants not only “went deep immediately” but, as suggested in Sue and Meg’s dialogue, going through this process in a safe community opened space to reflection and movement within each individual.

Motherhood

Grieving parents have described their bodies as suffering from emptiness, mutilated in agonizing pain, a physical presence of a weight bearing down on the heart (Gudmonstoddir, 2009). “Losing a loved one means losing not just a body but also one's bodily engagements with it. It means losing a set of postural habits formed in the rooms, halls, beds, sofas, and cars those bodies shared. We love others with our bodies until their bodies are gone. Then we continue to love them by expecting their presence (Krasner, 2004, p. 222). Krasner (2004) suggests that our bodies remember what our conscious awareness may not know, nor want to know. This physical awareness of loss serves as both grief and memorial (p. 230).

The loss of identity as a mother reverberated throughout the participants’ conversation. Several mothers shared thoughts about the shock of finding themselves physically inhabiting an identity that was strange and unfamiliar. Jess speaks of the

profound depth of connection and joy that defined her as a mother, and in three short words we feel her identity stripped away.

I just used to think my god you are so wonderful...how did I ever get so lucky...and...I used to think well if I could freeze this right now because you are just so...where we are and ...how we are is just so happy and innocent and all about fun and joy and love and belief and Santa and everything magic...I remember thinking just to remember this...remember this time if I could just bottle this...and the short time I had and she was gone

Losing touch. When so much of being a mother is embodied, felt, savoured through the senses, losing physical touch with my child is inconceivable. Jansen (2016) suggests that we “experience loss not just through the psyche but primarily through the body, the sensorial inaccessibility to the one we yearn for leaving the griever discombobulated and necessarily pulled out of the physicality and safety of that relationship”(p. 301). Sliep (2012) speaks to the physicality of such yearning as she writes, “Sleepless I ride waves of nausea my maternal body has invaded me my breasts are heavy and ache with every memory tumbling haphazardly contractions come and go but there will be no release by delivery no reward at the end my breasts have started lactating I lose track of time” (p.69).



The physicality of grief permeates Meg's collage. The description of her continuous seeking is powerfully represented in the image of the circular movement of the fish.

As I listened to Meg speak about her relationship with her deceased son I could feel her struggle. She described the placement of the images in her collage as representing a feeling of churning on the inside while trying to achieve a sense of calm on the outside.

Researcher: so the calm is more on the outside and the churning is more on the inside

M: oh yeah... yeah that's actually really good because you can see the calming things I try to do to balance out all the chaos that's going on inside I should have placed the dead body though somewhere else...the skeleton. I don't like where I placed it

R: where would you place it?

M: probably in the centre...I would like it smaller and in the middle of the fish cause it all revolves around everything and it comes out from that...now that I see it I would have liked to have done that cause it all starts with the death (pause) all of that other stuff came from that

I felt a deep, grinding pain and profound emptiness as Meg spoke of her desire to move the skeleton into the middle of the churning fish. I could feel the embodied struggle of her relationship with her son in the suggestion of an image that places death in the centre.

I spend a lot of time reaching for him...trying to find him cause my relationship with him (pause) now that he's gone I don't think it's very good it's not an easy relationship...he's...and it's all because he's dead that's why I put that there...all of this is because he's dead because if he was here this would not be difficult...I would love him every day...and I still love him but after four years I'm still

figuring out how to love him when he's not here and that's the chaos in the circle

Meg's description of the chaos in the circle brought back feelings of my own inner turmoil around motherhood. I felt the oppression of grief, when space closes in. Our bodies hold grief in our memory, below our awareness, sequestering sorrow in our senses (Van der Kolk, 2014; Levine, 2005). Opening to exploring the emotions and sensations of grief may take many forms, may open doors to responses that allow the intensity of pain to surface and release. However, assumptions about grieving behaviour or rituals in "the dominant story of grief as psychological" (Gudmonstoddir, 2009, p.255) make it difficult for those experiencing intense grief to allow the body to speak its pain in ways that may appear odd, or diverging from the norm.

As Meg's comments speak with such poignancy to the immeasurable pain of the loss of identity as a mother, Sue's thoughts about motherhood articulate a struggle that can be felt at a visceral level.

I find when I go out in public I often think do these people know my story? Do they look at me as that person...not just somebody in the grocery store? ...I'm trying to find out who I am now...am I that mother of a dead child?...Who am I now? I'm different but who am I?(long pause) the whole identity thing I'm different I'm not who I was but I don't know how to...it's just defining what my identity is now...I struggle with that

The other participants shared stories of similar concerns. Jan's description of waking from her dream speaks to the pain of losing touch with her child accompanied by a lost sense of self. It takes courage and intention to look into and feel the connection, to feel the loss of touch. The shared images and conversation highlight the intense pain and love that lives within these openings. In our conversations the participants spoke of spaces that

they have found or created that allow them to hold this intensity safely.

As researcher, mother of a child who died, and emerging counsellor, I wonder about the different spaces that practitioners might create in meeting, holding and perhaps matching the fluctuating intensity of emotion within a grieving mother. In the following section I will attempt to explore the implications of creating such spaces for counselling practitioners.

CHAPTER VI

REFLECTIONS

Implications

This inquiry supports the notion that relationships do not die, and that a mother's desire to sustain a connection to her child after death is part of her natural grieving process. Sustaining connection is a process that may be intentional, serendipitous, spiritual, symbolic, or embodied, and may change over time. The voices woven through this narrative speak of reviving, re-establishing, and recreating meaning and identity in the wake of losing a child to sudden death as part of a non-linear, multi-dimensional process grounded in connection rather than pathology.

An important implication of this inquiry is that counselling practitioners ask themselves how they may support bereaved mothers in finding spaces to breathe, in feeling vitality, and eventually thriving. This is no easy task. Cohen and Bai (2008) suggest, "It is difficult to be receptive to another's suffering when we are so affected and distressed by the story of suffering that we find ourselves recoiling from the reality of this suffering person and wanting to run away (p.50). Several participants spoke of situations where they felt those, who were presumably in a supporting role, do just that. I think of Tanya's story of her first and only encounter with a counsellor who bolted like "a deer in the headlights" after their initial meeting.

As Patricia stated so succinctly, " intuitively we know if we listen to ourselves what we need...you just have to listen to that that inner voice and it's really hard to listen to at that time cause you feel like you've lost your way". Her words pose a difficult challenge for any counselling practitioner working with a mother who has lost her child.

Not only do Patricia's words ask counsellors to step into a mother's "space of unbearable suffering" (Bai & Cohen, 2008) and hold her safely when she feels utterly groundless, but to stay with her over time, be with her in her anguish as she is finding her way, opening space for her inner voice to be heard.

Spaces of connection have been described throughout this thesis. Liminal spaces, spaces of embodied resistance, and spaces where symbolic representation offered a way to explore beyond words. It is my hope that in listening to the multiple voices represented in this inquiry practitioners may further reflect upon and create spaces that resist "the normalizing gaze" of models of grief that "universalize an experience that is incredibly personal, diverse, and often indescribable" (Ord, 2009, p.200).

As the participants implied in their conversation, practitioners need to be more intentional about reflecting critically and mindfully about the assumptions embedded in the current discourse on grief and loss, the social context in which they were conceived and developed, and how language associated with these models may affect bereaved mothers experiencing the complex effects of shock, trauma and grief.

I turn once again to the participants' words.

Tanya: The whole new normal thing...uchhhhh

Jan: Precisely

Sharon: the whole notion of acceptance...

Jan: there's nothing normal

Jess: I know that phrase really bothered me too

Tanya: It infuriates me to be told that this is what you are supposed to...that you're going to do this and you're going to do this and then this is going to happen...no...for me anyway that's not how it happened

Patricia: I agree...anything that puts you in a box...that you're supposed to do stuff gets my back up

Jess: It's so ironic because everybody knows that grieving can be...it's so personal and everybody does it differently

The participants spoke of assumptions embedded in the language and the theoretical approaches that they encountered during experiences in the health care system that left them feeling misunderstood and “boxed in”. Phrases like “grief is a process of discovery” and “new normal” were examples of language that assumed a particular grief response and that clearly misrepresented their feelings and experience. Additionally, there was a shared sentiment expressed that the grief support that they experienced within the health care system was, at times, offered in a way that felt mismatched to their personal grief process.

Another question to consider is how to therapeutically open spaces that allow the trauma of the sudden death of a child to be explored and released. Murray (2016) reminds us of the importance of safety and respect in this process

Disabling, paralyzing, all-encompassing intrusion, fear and powerlessness seriously alter the life of the traumatized. The traumatized person may never fully be the same again. It is indeed presumptuous for us who have never experienced truly paralyzing anguish to presume that understanding what it feels to be traumatized is easily gleaned from reading about it...the most important thing we bring to our care of the traumatized is respect for their pain, for their fear, for their sense of being overwhelmed and for the way that trauma may paralyze their ability to function normally or adaptively (p.49)

I hear the participants’ voices echoing through mine as I feel the vestiges of waves that left me groundless after my daughter died.

Jan: there were different times where I thought of it as waves and there were times when I knew the waves...I needed to let them be and sometimes I needed to back away otherwise I knew it would drown me...I gradually found that I could sit in the waves longer...I just remember I was rereading something I had written...realizing how numb I was in many ways for the first...for a long time...that was an ok place to be...it's not like you're moving along and then suddenly yeah...it lets you sit longer and longer when your body knows you can
Sharon: Isn't that part of what being in shock is whether you are on drugs...or not
Jan: waves...can't stop the waves...go to learn to surf them

Patricia: it's just that the big waves come less often and I have greater trust that I can handle

Sharon: well it's new territory for everybody I mean we don't know

The ways in which we make sense of death are shaped by language and social context (Hedtke, 2002; Murray, 2016). My personal metaphors of grief have changed over time. The transformation of these metaphors in language and images is inextricably bound to my changing relationship with my daughter. Listening to the voices represented in this inquiry I would suggest that opening the language of death to the client's metaphors and symbolic representation, through stories or visual expression, may offer ways for emotions and embodied grief to intermingle and evolve over time (Hedtke, 2015; Rosenblatt, 2000; Thompson & Neimeyer, 2014).

Finally, a woman who has lost a child faces daily reminders that her experience as a mother is something that is not to be talked about easily, in public or private spaces. It is easy to feel marginalized when you feel avoided or shut down. It is important to consider the ways in which we can open spaces that allow bereaved mothers to have a sense of agency in making meaning of their experience. Sliep's (2012) words illuminate my personal narrative

“In my experience it was not knowledge but staying close to the process that helped me find a way. It is not that there is no place for knowledge or theory but that we should be mindful of how we apply this in the helping professions...I did not want to go through predetermined stages of grief and loss or whatever framework experts on grief management would try and fit me in...I did not write for therapeutic purposes, although it all also had a therapeutic effect, but because

the writing offered a space where I could freely express and wonder out loud. I wanted to walk my own journey. I only wanted support to inhabit the time and space I needed without judgment (p.62).

In closing, I return to the suggestion offered to health care professionals at the beginning of this inquiry to allow for time to listen, witness, acknowledge, and nourish mothers as they experience their unique grieving process. “Then we will be able to create space for new stories to emerge and open up doors for possibilities of being and living that otherwise might never transpire (Gudmundsdottir, 2009, p.266).

Conclusion

This study began with my desire to open space to listen to the voices of mothers who have lost a child to sudden death. To explore spaces that support gasping, opening, closing, connection, and learning to breathe. This has been a demanding and lengthy process, involving continuous movement between my personal narrative and the internal worlds of the seven women who participated in the study. Moustakas (1990) suggests illumination “may be an awakening to new constituents of the experience thus adding new dimensions of knowledge (p.29). While reflection is fundamental, unraveling the mystery of the inquiry is dependent upon the tacit knowledge process. Illumination proves a pathway for the creative process of understanding and meaning to develop” (in Martyn, 2008, p.30).

Doing my own collage was a necessary part of this creative synthesis. As I reflect on my process and the images that emerged over time, I am aware of layers of relationships, experiences and changing metaphors.



my collage 2016



"gazing into fire" 2013



final mosaic for Zarah's
Sunrise Garden 2014

It is through continuous movement with and evolving understanding of my embodied grief that I have found ways to hold my daughter differently. It has been and continues to be a slow process of moving through the physicality of psychic pain and finding a sense of vitality, feeling aliveness in those spaces where pain and connection touch and release. It is a process of breathing into and out through my core, finding space where life can feel consolidated, balanced, if only for what seems like a moment. I have found ways to allow my body to speak its pain.

My intention in composing this narrative was to move toward deeper

understanding of what it means to a mother in continuing a relationship with a child after the child dies. The process of moving into and away from the data over time allowed the women's images and conversation to "illuminate" aspects of my personal experience in continuing a relationship with my daughter. I have attempted to 'depict' (Moustakas, 1990) the participants' experience of their relationship with their child acknowledging that any representation only captures moments within a particular social context. I have attempted to weave together these moments integrating my intuition, personal knowledge and experience with the themes that emerged through the process of working with the words and images. It is my hope that this narrative "holds a mirror up" to where each mother is "bravely working" within layers of pain, sorrow and love, seeing the joy in the "deepest presence" of their child "in every small contracting and expand" (Rumi).

In conclusion, there is no "conclusion". The inquiry continues. I have a greater understanding of how to hold my daughter Zarah differently, and my comfort with this has eased.

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