

RE-STORYING MY EXPERIENCES OF GRIEF: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

by

Karen Hoshino

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Counselling (MC)

City University of Seattle

Vancouver BC, Canada site

November 30, 2016

APPROVED BY

Scott Lawrance, Ph.D., R.C.C., Thesis Supervisor, Counsellor Education Faculty

Maria Stella, Ph.D., R.C.C., Faculty Reader, Counsellor Education Faculty

Division of Arts and Sciences

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## Abstract

Grief is often misunderstood and feared in Western society, leading to the disenfranchisement, isolation, and marginalisation of the bereaved, their families, and communities. In this thesis, I use the autoethnographic method to explore how my own grieving process after the death of my sister by suicide has been shaped by dominant discourse. I explore how connecting with Nature and Her metaphors can create a sense of belonging, interdependence, and healing. Moreover, I engage with contemporary grief theories and models to explore how our society's focus on the individual and the need to "move on" after a loved one's death can create a sense of alienation and disempowerment, and how we can resist such oppression. I turn to other cultures and nations to find lessons in how to grieve in a more relational, communal manner through ritual and ceremony. I then share my interactions with such narrative practices as "remembering conversations" and "definitional ceremony" to propose a structure and method of inquiry to facilitate a re-storying of a griever's relationship with their deceased loved one. This privileging of the deceased's voice in the bereaved's life and introducing them to members of their "club of life" can lead to a renewed sense of agency, relational identity, and transformation for both the teller and the listener.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the love and support of so many people in my “club of life” who helped make this thesis a reality. I could not have done it without you. My husband, Richard, stood by me as I endeavored to write about and give myself permission to experience, express, and reflect upon my grief journey. Thanks for bringing sunshine and laughter into my days and making sure I was nourished and sustained.

My supervisor, Scott, gave me permission to slow down and pace myself on this difficult journey while providing me with support and inspiration through his connection to Nature and by introducing me to a myriad of authors and poets with whom I could engage. Thanks for believing in me when I wasn’t sure if I could continue and encouraging me to take time out in Nature to refresh. My mentor, Avi, listened and supported me when I just wanted to quit and encouraged me to look within for guidance. Thanks for your presence, compassion, and wisdom. My second reader, Maria, provided helpful feedback and comments.

My parents and brother allowed me to write about my dear sister and supported me along the way. Andrew and Christine, you believed in me the whole way through. My friend and colleague, Janey, inspired me with our discussions about Narrative approaches to grief and sent me Lorraine Hedtke’s thesis. This was a turning point for me in lighting a fire in my heart to re-engage with this research. Thank you.

Most of all to my Creator for sustaining me, inspiring me with the wonders of Creation and surrounding me with a loving supportive community and family.

### Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my dear sister (Sista), Jane, whom I will always love and cherish. Thanks for your spunk, friendship, keen sense of justice, and kindred spirit. It gives me joy to carry your strength and love with me wherever I go. As you said to me, “A sister’s love is forever”.

### **Prologue: Reflections on My Writing Process**

“Fear is a natural reaction to moving closer to the truth.” – Pema Chodron

In attempting to conceptualize this thesis, I knew without a doubt that I wanted to focus on my grief journey since the death of my beloved sister, Jane, by suicide over 4 years ago. In my mind, I had my outline, my structure for where I wanted to go with thesis. I was going to write about nature therapy and grief and loss and share my grief journey. I wanted to emphasize the healing and therapeutic power of nature as a “secure holding environment” (Rabi, 2016), a container and companion to experience connection (attachment), reflection, and transformation in the midst of grief. I had journal entries to share from two silent retreats on Bowen Island on what I had learned and how I had been transformed from being out in nature. I had meditated upon a poem about how grief is adaptive, as ‘normal’ and natural as the seasons:

*Grieving is a natural way to let go of life as you once knew it,  
so you can hold on to what will never leave you and what you will always know.  
Grieving is as natural as nature itself:  
as natural as summer being cropped by autumn,  
and autumn slipping away into winter,  
and winter awakening into spring,  
and spring blossoming into summer again...(Miller, 1995).*

I thought I had come to grips with my grief and got a handle on it. I thought I was in control and that I knew what to expect from my grief. I was going to write a traditional five chapter thesis with a concrete structure or foundation that I could lean on with clear expectations and a timeline. However, this plan though, my agenda and any certainty of where it was going derailed. My sense of control disappeared.

Some circumstances in my life triggered fresh new waves of grief and anxiety that threatened to overwhelm me. The thesis seemed to have a mind of its own. My body became so anxious and my heart beat so fast when I tried to write or even talk about the thesis that I thought I was

having a panic attack. I had to stop and take some time off. I wanted to quit or at least change topics. Was it my soul that was crying out? “Stop! Stop!...Too much!” Too much pressure, too high and unrealistic expectations, too narrow an idea of what “academic” has to mean. My wise mentors suggested that I slow down and take some time to reflect, not just try to “push through” and be productive at all costs.

I read the second chapter of Robert Romanyshyn’s (2007) book *The Wounded Researcher* called “Re-search: Under the Spell of Orpheus” where he discusses this phenomenon of “moments when the work falls out of the hands of the researcher, when the work seems to resist the conscious intentions of the researcher and begins to twist and turn in another way” (p. 47). He argues that we need to see research as “re-search that would keep the soul in mind” and that when the researcher falls apart along with the work and is worked over by it, the soul can begin to be seen and heard. Romanyshyn (2007) connects this to the myth of Orpheus, “a poet/singer whose songs are in service to memory” this poet of unforgetting with the themes of “love, loss, descent into a realm beyond the familiar and known and dismemberment” (p. 50). This is a scary process for someone who wants certainty and a secure foundation from which to work. These Orphic themes, descending into the underworld and being dismembered, resonated not only in terms of writing the dissertation but of the strange and unknown land of grief itself. There are no maps for the trails and terrain of grief and this ‘diving into the unknown’ is terrifying. There needs to be a “letting go” and surrender to the grief process for transformation to happen. This is an extra struggle because we live in a culture that seems to encourage forgetting and moving on.

This reminds me of Romanyshyn’s (1999) book *The Soul in Grief* that he wrote after the death of his wife. In the book, he describes his shelves crashing down with the books and articles of his

life's work. When he dutifully arranged them once again in the same way, the shelves collapsed again. He muses:

I wondered if there was some connection between these two collapses: if these things, these books, a record of my life, were mirroring the collapse of my soul...my initial effort to restore the order had failed...sitting amidst the broken pieces of my life, I repaired the shelves once again and replaced the books in a random fashion. I made this time no effort to arrange them as they had been arranged before. I let the old order die. I let go of what I had wanted. The shelves did not collapse again (p. 5).

As I took time to reflect, I realised that my original thesis plan was too “polished” to capture even a glimpse of my authentic experience. I needed to share a ‘fuller’ experience than simply how relating to nature’s metaphors had brought healing. I realised that I wanted to share how the pain never fully goes away, that grief can come back crashing over you in an instant when you least expect it. I wanted to share about my longing to experiment with different styles, to not necessarily know beforehand where the writing was going to take me. Natalie Goldberg’s (1986) book *Writing Down the Bones* inspired me to write “what your mind actually thinks and feels, not what it thinks it should feel” (p. 48). She talked about writing through tears to “come out the other side” (p. 48) and to let go of the need for the writing to be a certain way and to have a clear destination. Goldberg (1986) argues, “Don’t write about it – enter it and make friends with it” (p. 68). My hope is that writing about my grief will help me to befriend it and not to be fearful and see it as the enemy to be conquered. I wonder, what is the invitation that is alive to me? What is my soul saying? I have hope that this writing can be freeing and therapeutic as opposed to creating more expectations, pressure, and stress in my life. This longing for the freedom to experiment is captured by one of my favourite Mary Oliver poems:



### **If I Wanted a Boat**

*I would want a boat, if I wanted a boat,  
that bound hard on the waves, that didn't know starboard from port  
and wouldn't learn, that welcomed dolphins and headed  
straight for the whales, that when rocks were close,  
would slide in for a touch or two,  
That wouldn't keep land in sight and went fast,  
that leaped into the spray.  
What kind of life is it always to plan  
and do, to promise and finish, to wish  
for the near and the safe? Yes, by the heavens,  
if I wanted a boat I would want a boat I couldn't steer.*

### **A Non-Traditional Structure**

To help navigate the non-traditional format that will follow, I will begin with the *Methodology* section to expose my struggle to write in an “academically appropriate” manner while staying true to my grief experience and desire to write in a more dialogical, narrative format. I explore how working with the autoethnographic method helped me to privilege my experience as a valid way of knowing alongside the literature. This section is followed by *Introduction to Key Concepts*, which gives an overview of some the terms and ideas in the grief and loss literature and my reflections on these themes. This overview lays the context to lead into *My Grief Experience*, which describes my response to my sister's death by suicide and how connecting with Nature helped to bring comfort and transform my experience in a society ill-equipped to deal with grief and death.

Next, *Dialogues with the Literature: Part I* expresses my dialogical engagement with the conventional literature around grief and loss and how staying with my grief experience, while interacting with these researchers and texts, had a profound influence on how I interpreted and viewed my experience. My response and reactions to the texts are written in *italic font* to show my thought process. I explore post-structuralist and postmodernist approaches that question how Western society views grief and death and how these dominant discourses can end up stigmatising and marginalising the bereaved. I uncover research on grieving and death rituals to learn more about how other cultures and nations understand and express grief.

In *Dialogues with the Literature: Part II*, I then focus on my turning point in re-storying my grief process through the transformational nature of Lorraine Hedtke's (2007) bereavement research and practice using Remembering Conversations. Through Hedtke's work, I explore ways grievers can continue to develop their relationship with deceased loved ones and keep their voice alive. I then explore Hedtke's mentors with the Narrative Therapy work of David White (2007) and anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (2007) to provide a broader foundation to understand Remembering Practices. These include Re-membering Conversations and Definitional Ceremony. Weaved throughout these ideas are implications for the practice of grief therapy with groups, families, and individuals.

I then finish with *Discussion: Dissertation as Definitional Ceremony* which explains how this dissertation can be seen as a type of definitional ceremony where the Reader is the audience (outsider witness) who gets to bear witness to my ongoing relationship with my sister. The Reader is introduced to her life and spirit in addition to my personal grief journey and reflections. The hope is that both performer (myself) and listener (the Reader) will be

transformed through this process and that this will have a ripple effect on society and the way we understand grief and interact with griever and their communities.

### **My Hopes and Intentions for this Research**

My hope is to explore how my interpretation of my grief journey is a reflection of Western culture and society which surrounds us. I also intend to explore what other cultures and wisdom traditions have to teach us about how to grieve and how to live. Moreover, I intend to discover how we can adopt or be adopted by Nature as another pathway to wholeness, and to experience freedom and what it means to be fully human and fully alive. My hope is to interact with you, the Reader, to converse with you and dialogue with you (or my imagined perception of you), to see how my story reflects, influences, and interacts with your story.

Dear Reader, as you engage with my writing, you will interact with many ‘voices’, some of whom are part of ‘my community of selves’ that make up who I am (Watkins, 2000). For example, you will meet my grieving self, my resilient self, my author self, and my counsellor self to name a few. Foucault (as cited in Gutting, 2005) argues that the author is not a “single self but a ‘plurality of selves’ who fulfill the author function. ‘As an author this person assumes a variety of roles, corresponding to a diversity of selves: the author function operates so as to affect the dispersion of these...simultaneous selves” (p. 12). Other external voices you will meet are novelists, poets, researchers, and practitioners from the literature around grief and loss. As I engage with all these voices, my hope is that a number of narratives will emerge, not one “correct” narrative about how to grieve or how to love or how to heal those who grieve, but layered, circular narratives of ‘resistance’ to what Western society says is normal. I hope you, the Reader will be inspired and changed by these narratives and see yourself and your experience reflected in what you read. You are an “outsider witness” (White, 2004, 2007; Myerhoff, 2007)

to these stories and you participate in this “definitional ceremony” (Myerhoff, 2007; White, 2004, 2007) that I am facilitating. You will be introduced and given snapshots of not only myself and my grief narrative in dialogue with voices from the literature, but you will also be introduced to, and will witness my continuing relationship to my late sister and all the love and richness that entails.

Don’t be afraid to get ‘personally involved’ in the stories; after all ‘performing’ or enacting stories for an audience brings meaning and purpose, and hopefully transformation.

### **Wider Purpose and Intentions**

To expand upon my intentions for this dissertation, my hope is to be of service to the profession of counselling and health care, to give you an ‘insiders’ view’ of an experience of losing someone you love to suicide and the subsequent grief journey that follows. I hope to contribute to the research around how our society understands grief and how we can question those assumptions to resist the silencing and marginalisation that our individualistic society can impress upon the bereaved. I hope to help link the bereaved, their families, and communities to potentially untapped resources, such as their connection with nature, culture, and ways of exploring and expanding upon their history and relationship with their loved one who died. My hope is to bring comfort to fellow travellers on the journey of grief to help privilege the voice of the deceased in their life and for all of us to know that we are not alone. We are relational beings and we are created for community and connection, to journey alongside one another and with those who have gone before us.

### **Methodology: Wrestling with Academic Conventions**

In the *Prologue*, I shared my internal struggle to portray a tidy, linear version of my journey of grief and ongoing healing that was “academically rigorous” enough to be considered “proper scholarship.” This need clashed with my desire to be authentic and show the messiness of grief and relationships in its rawness and beauty. I realised that I could not fight against myself and against the work that wanted to be revealed. I wondered if there was a way to write my thesis in an authentic manner, being true to myself while adopting a method that was acceptable for an academic audience. This led me to discover the autoethnographic method, which places our experience at the center of our research and studies how our experience reflects upon the wider culture that surrounds us. This approach allowed me to approach traditional research and ways of knowing with a critical, postmodern lens.

### **Questioning the Scientific Method**

My struggle to find a methodology that was a ‘fit’ for my experience made me question my understanding of ‘academic research’ and knowledge. When I think of research, what first comes to mind is the scientific method, the need for objectivity, lack of bias and linear, rational thinking. But then, as I began to read and interact with postmodern, feminist, and critical theory, I realised that what we think of as knowledge does not have to fit into the structuralist or rationalistic “box” (Richardson, 1990; Spry, 2001; Wall, 2006; Hedtke, 2010; Bochner, 2012). What if personal experience and storytelling were ‘legitimate’ methods of research? What about poetry and creativity, and voices from the margins? What if groups who were oppressed in Western society (such as the bereaved, especially suicide survivors) (Ord, 2009; Harris, 2009-2010), were allowed to speak and be heard and given some authority?

This is what drew me to the qualitative, methodological approach of autoethnography, which challenges the traditional ways of knowing found in conventional research with a focus on the personal narrative instead of a pursuit of neutrality or objectivity (Spry, 2001; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, Bochner, 2012). We can divide the word “autoethnography” into parts to better grasp the approach of using the author’s personal experience *auto* to describe and gain insight *graphy* into the wider culture *ethno* (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The researcher becomes the participant, whose own culture and way of being is observed, reflected upon, and analysed. This approach privileges “stories rather than theories...[and are] value-centred rather than pretending to be value-free” (Bochner, 1994 as cited in Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p. 2). Richardson (1990) argues that we humans understand ourselves and our history through our life stories, and thus narrative is a natural fit for research into the “social world”. We use storytelling to help us create and recreate our identities, to ‘make sense’ of our environment, and to communicate who we are to each other (White, 2007; Myerhoff, 2007; Bochner, 2012). The other piece that drew me to autoethnography is the fact that this approach has been marginalized in the social sciences and in the academic world in general (Richardson, 1990; Spry, 2001; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Wall, 2006). It can be seen as an act of resistance against the Western rationalistic, logo-scientific, linear, ‘objective’ way of thinking and conducting research (Spry, 2001; Wall, 2006). Wall argues that autoethnography:

makes room for other ways of knowing...[to] create a space for the sharing of unique, subjective, and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned” (p. 3)

This approach can allow voices from the margins that are otherwise stigmatized to be heard publicly. Spry (2001) discusses her experience of performing autoethnography as a “vehicle of emancipation from cultural and familial identity scripts that have structured [her] identity

personally and professionally” (p. 708). This medium provides a critical and reflexive lens to uncover where we have internalized dominant discourses from society and academia and become aware of our “identity fractures” (Ibid, p.708). For example, Evans (2000), in sharing her struggles in completing her PhD thesis, wrote about the interactions between her “scientific self” and “dramatic self” (p. 268). The two “selves” seemed to be at odds with each other, based upon her history of writing ‘scientific papers’ in a neutral, objective voice, coupled with the competing desire of her “dramatic” self to demonstrate that she was “interwoven with the research process, unable to escape from her humanness...” (p. 271). Her struggle resonated with me as in my past academic writing experiences, I had been told “this [your writing] is not bedtime reading, I need to be able to flip through your thesis, read the headings, and find exactly the information I am looking for.” This utilitarian view of research was at odds with my desire to show the ‘messiness of my journey of grief’, to show emotion and engagement with the Reader in a dialogue, as opposed to distance and neutrality.

And yet, this view seems too binary because we are all made up of a “community of selves” (Watkins, 2000) that interact with each other and the world. Spry (2001) argues that “autoethnographic methods recognize the reflections and refractions of multiple selves...” (p. 711), and the necessity of describing what occurs “within” the researcher/observer as a result of the research and writing process. Spry (2001) discovered that “position[ing] [her]self as active agent with narrative authority over many hegemonized dominant cultural myths” (p. 711), allowed her to not only comprehend how these dominant discourses influenced her and restricted her freedom but how she was also a part of the cultural context that restricts and oppresses others. I resonate with this critical reflexive view because I do believe that if we want our world to change, it starts with us: with our awareness and our actions.

This led me to wonder how I would engage the Reader toward transformational change that is possible through this medium. I decided to use relational language to “create purposeful dialogue between the reader and author” (Spry, 2001, p. 713). Therefore, when I interact with my grief story(ies) and the literature, my style is interactive in that I show my thinking and feelings in the moment as I interact with the texts. It’s as if you, the Reader, are a witness as to what is going on ‘in my head’, that you get to be part of my thinking and inspiration process as you and I interact with my “multiple realities” (Baxter, 1992) and my “polyglot facets of self” (Spry, 2001, p. 708).



## **Introduction to Key Concepts**

In this section, I will give an overview of some of the broad perspectives in the grief and loss literature. These include an explanation of the difference between the terms *grief* and *mourning*, our Western culture's unease around death and grief, the potential for growth and transformation through loss, and the spiritual need to 'make sense' of loss with the help of Nature. These perspectives will be revisited in subsequent sections where I share my experience of grief, and engage with voices in the literature.

## **Understanding Grief and Mourning**

In learning to trust in the adaptive nature of grief and move through it, I am inspired by the research and practice of Dr. Alan Wolfelt and Martin Petchel who view the grief process as natural and necessary for renewed wholeness and wellbeing. Wolfelt (2004) differentiates between the experiences of grief and mourning. Grief refers to the internal thoughts and feelings we have after a loved one dies and mourning is the outward display of grief, meant to be shared in community. Mourning can bring healing while keeping our grief bottled up inside can lead to isolation and unhealthy coping patterns (Wolfelt, 2004). Petchel (2015) argues that freely allowing ourselves as individuals and communities to grieve brings us life and peace. Wolfelt (2004) argues against society's pressure to avoid grief and mourning and instead proposes that we embrace it and learn what Grief has to teach us. He takes a stand against the idea of "getting over" grief. Instead the idea is to reconcile and integrate the new reality, to move forward into the "new normal."

## **A Cultural Context of Grief-Avoidance**

In our grief-denying culture, there is often no space for these reflective conversations about loss and death to be voiced. We assume that the bereaved should quickly "get over" their grief and

move on with their lives (James & Friedman, 2009). We are uncomfortable around grief and therefore want to “fix” it, “tame” it or pretend it does not exist (Winokuer & Harris, 2012). This is especially true for survivors of suicide, like myself with the stigmatized nature of suicide, which is still taboo in our culture. Due to these societal messages, pressures, and expectations, it is easy to view Grief as the enemy to be conquered. As I reflected in my journal:

Grief, you scare me, overwhelm me, make me want to run away and hide myself away from you. Close the door of my heart, lock it tight and throw away the key. You are a monstrous creature bringing an intensity of emotion, disorientation, and pain that I’ve never felt before. I fear you will destroy me, swallow me whole, crash over me. Better not to face you, better to hide behind the smile, to show the world that I am coping...And yet in acknowledging your presence, I find some relief...” (Hoshino, Personal Journal, 2016).

In acknowledging that we live in a society that is afraid of death and views suicide as taboo, we can start to uncover our own fears and take steps to express ourselves and ‘make our voices heard.’ In doing so, we can find others who also feel silenced and marginalised. We can begin to ‘make sense’ of our suffering and find not only despair, but also hope.

### **Grieving as Facilitating Growth**

When we view grief and loss as a normal and necessary part of being fully human, we can start to see not only the crippling pain but also the learning and transformation that can occur as we move through, instead of run away, from Grief. In particular, with the traumatic grief surrounding a sudden, tragic death such as suicide, researchers have found that survivors may perceive positive impacts arising from terrible events, commonly referred to as Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996, 2004; Neimeyer, 2012; Winokuer & Harris, 2012). Winokuer & Harris (2012) argue that this growth “is not a direct result of exposure to these types of events, but rather it results from the struggle that an individual engages in with the new reality in the aftermath of these events” (p. 37). Tedeschi & Calhoun (1996) found three broad

categories of positive outcomes: changes in the view of self, others, and the world. Altmaier (2011) echoes the possibility for transformation to arise out of bereavement, which include the ability to view ourselves and others with more compassion, the empathy to walk with others in their struggles and the courage to acknowledge and live with our own pain. Furthermore, Donaleen Saul (2008), whose brother died by suicide, speaks of “an unexpected blessing from this journey is the intensity with which we experience life – its joys as well as its sorrows. Along with deep sadness, I have experienced an aching sense of awe at the beauty of nature or at how much I love my brother and others in my life” (Saul, 2008, p. 23). Her use of the expression “aching sense of awe at the beauty of nature” really resonated with me as it seemed to speak to my profound experience of connection with Nature since my sister’s death. For instance, as my sister’s favourite colour was pink, I would feel a wave of loss mixed with wonder whenever I saw a brilliant pink sunset or flower, as if somehow she was smiling down on me. Reading Saul’s book, *Did you know I would miss you: A healing journey*, in the aftermath of my sister’s death, gave me hope that healing and transformation, not just survival, could occur after such a devastating loss, and that I could re-emerge from the struggle more fully human.

### **Grief as a Spiritual Process of Meaning-making**

As I began wrestling with life’s big questions in the wake of my loss, and turning inward to attempt to understand my experience, I began to engage in the process of meaning-making. Neimeyer (1998) argues that “meaning reconstruction in response to a loss is the central process in grieving” (p.110). Especially regarding a sudden loss, a bereaved person’s entire belief system and framework around how the world works can come into question. It’s the re-examination of seemingly stable long-held beliefs (Currier, Irish, Neimeyer & Foster, 2015). They can wrestle with the “why” questions such as: Why did this death happen? Why did it

happen to me and my family? Only through living these questions, can the journey toward transformation begin.

Studies in grief therapy point to the power of ritual, community connections, and the use of metaphor and storytelling to help reconstruct meaning and purpose and to help ‘make sense’ of conflicting feelings after a loss (Neimeyer 2000, 2001; Neimeyer & Sands, 2011).

This struggle for meaning can be understood as a deeply spiritual process. Prechtel (2015) argues that grief is a “sacred art”. Moreover, grief is the expression of love. Engaging in the expression of grief individually and mourning in community is a kind of lost art that must be rekindled. Pretchel (2015) argues that “Grief is praise of those we have lost...If we do not praise whom we miss, we are ourselves in some way dead...Grief has a sound, a sound that embarrasses the repressed and offends the oppressive. Grief is the sound of being alive” (p. 5).

In terms of engaging with metaphor, the natural cycle of the seasons can help us to view grief in non-linear terms, and to understand that it is normal for grief to ebb and flow like the tide (Miller, 1995). This is to normalize and validate the process, so griever's aren't shocked when they experience a ‘spring time’ of the soul only to descend into fall and winter's darkness once again. This is to know that spring will return after a long, hard winter and that the sun will return after weary seasons of rain. This points to the therapeutic power of nature not only in terms of metaphor but also in experiencing these truths being ‘mirrored’ in the natural environment.

### **My Grief Experience: In the Months after Jane's Death**

“The death of a beloved is an amputation.”

— C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*

Lewis' (1994) line, “The death of a beloved is an amputation”, not only resonated with me but broke me open...He spoke to the state of my soul in agony beyond belief, beyond anything I had ever experienced before. He says the death of a beloved “is” an amputation and not “is like” an amputation. The pain is real...throbbing, searing and ongoing. It may dim at times but it is always there. In my case, it was not my limb that was cut off but my heart, wrenched out by the death of my sister and not amputated cleanly but split off into pieces, never again to be re-assembled. Something in me died the day I learned of her death by suicide; I don't know if it was the childlike part of me, the one who believed in miracles, answers to prayer, and that things would always, eventually turn out alright. I refused, I didn't want to believe it was true...that I could live in a world where a tragedy like this could happen...I didn't want to live in a world where she wasn't with me, her crooked smile, impish laugh, intensity with equal bouts of silliness. That connection we shared, it felt like she understood how my brain worked...she actually talked about emotions and expressed them; she felt life deeply and drank it up moment by moment.

How could she be so suddenly gone and never to return? What kind of cruel God would allow that to happen? I was shattered and broken...it was like a bomb had gone off, not only in my world but in my family's world and there was no way to pick up the pieces. I was dismembered as the mythic figure Orpheus and like him went down into the underworld to try and get her back. Bargaining with God, I pleaded, “I will do anything...anything...to get her back.” Silence. I saw her everywhere. On the street, in the café, coming round the corner, in the garden, in the

kitchen, in the used clothing shop, at our favourite gelato place, on the steps of her old apartment.

I didn't know how to act around people. I was used to being the "cheerful" one with an easy laugh and a quick smile. What now? I was a ghost of my former self. I could cry and cry and felt that the tears would never stop gushing out of me. I was at a loss with how to deal with grief, how to survive and get through the day. How could the world around me possibly be going on as though nothing had happened? Everything was different. Everything had changed. The more I tried to 'make things right' and return to the 'old' me (pre-loss), the more I failed. The more I tried to avoid the pain or diminish it, the worse it became. In fact, trying hard to *do* something with the grief, made it worse.

I often felt that it would be easier to have an amputated or broken leg than this internal pain and anguish called Grief. Our society knows how to respond to physical pain and illnesses like cancer. Be supportive, bring flowers, sit around the person's hospital bed...However, when it is an internal sorrow, grief or pain that is not outwardly visible, people don't know what to do or say and so often end up doing nothing and try to avoid it. Our modern Western society no longer has certain rituals, wearing black, periods of mourning, wailing, public weeping. There are no outward signs that others are grieving. In ancient cultures, they tore their clothes and sat in ashes. How I wished I had a space to grieve and lived in a culture where those spaces and times were accepted and taken for granted. Grieving takes courage but what do we do when we live in a culture that tries to deny, numb or avoid pain and suffering at all costs? We have all the modern conveniences to save us from every 'negative' emotion.

### **The Secrets of the Nurse Log**

So in the absence of cultural supports, I turned to Nature as a space to be quiet, away from others who seemed awkward and uncomfortable around me, not knowing what to say or how to “fix” things. I was invited to a silent retreat for four days on Bowen Island and wondered whether some time away in a beautiful environment might be helpful. I was fearful because the idea of being alone in my grief seemed overwhelming; however there would be others there in silence as well so I thought I would give it a try. It was in a state of deadness and despair that I went for a walk in the forest and began to identify and connect with the dead stumps and logs all around the forest floor. I stopped and gazed at one stump, seemingly cut off (amputated) from life, forsaken, and without hope. It was then that I noticed green shoots sprouting from it. I wrote in my journal:

Nature easily co-exists, a dead stump...growth...maple leaves mingling with pine trees-it's not a mess...it's beautiful! This unique, new green growth flourishes out of the stump. And you thought that stump was cut off, down and out, done..left to die...no way-it surrendered to its state and allowed new shoots, green shoots to spring forth and make something of beauty that has never been seen before. New birth, new life, new joy, new growth...out of death and surrender...(Hoshino, Personal Journal, 2014)

Something in me shifted that day...perhaps a sprout of hope began to bloom inside my soul...I had a longing to embrace joy and dance to the natural rhythms of life. When I shared my experience with a friend after the retreat, she said it reminded her of the Biblical passage of Isaiah 11:1-3, “a shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots...” These natural metaphors were used as signs of hope from the Old Testament that exile would not last forever and that eventually the Messiah would come and save his people. When I explained to another friend about my experience with the stump and its shoots, she exclaimed, “Oh, you mean a nurse log or nurse stump!” When I did some research, I found that the nurse stump or log is central to the health of the forest and is in a sense a kind of ecosystem

unto itself. Parks Daloz (2004) explains, “For a nurse log, the line between life and death is very thin indeed. It is virtually impossible to tell where one begins and the other ends. Life moves through it like wind through the forest or light through a mountain stream...” (p. 31) He describes how ants and beetles eat into the dead wood breaking it down for moss, bacteria, and microbes to further the decomposition. On the surface of the wood, there are multiple varieties of moss, lichen, and mold so seeds can be planted. I was amazed to learn that “there is more life in this log now, in far more forms, than ever before in its history. The soil it will leave behind when rotted...will be three times richer than before in nitrogen and phosphorous” (Parks Daloz, 2004, p. 32).

These themes of life in the midst of death, producing something new and even richer than before, gave me hope that perhaps I could be transformed by this grief journey...that I could in a sense ‘come back to life.’ However, it’s not that I would go back to who I was before Jane’s death, but that in surrendering to or facing my grief, I could eventually come out on the other side, perhaps more whole and richer than before. Parks Daloz (2004) points to the narrative of the nurse log as a “perfect dance, a transformative community – a place of rebirth over and over again.

Surrounded by this living green miracle, how can we help but be reminded again and again that all Creation is an interdependent dance?” (p. 32). Recently I have been reading Peter Wohlleben’s (2016) book *The Hidden Life of Trees* which explains from the perspective of a forester how trees live in community and rely on each other not only to survive, but to flourish. They send electric currents to each other through their roots and send signals to communicate through scent to ward off predatory insects. Trees that are weaker receive support through their roots from ‘parent’ trees. A tree that is cut down and then replanted in another location will not flourish because it will be cut off from its community. Nature has a way of mirroring that we



need community, that we are relational beings and are connected to each other and that we lose an important mirror or reflection of ourselves when we are cut off from Her. Nature has much to teach us about timing, rhythms, interconnectivity, and communication. Barton (2009) echoes Parks Daloz (2004) in her invitation “to surrender to the rhythms of the seasons and flowering and dormancies.. to savor the secret of life itself...it is a reminder of how things really are, the rhythmic dance to which we unavoidably belong...” (p. 26).

Joining with the rhythms of the seasons invite us to slow down just as we cannot decipher the secrets or messages of the forest unless we stop and listen attentively. My kinship and messages of hope from the forest propelled me to seek out more of what Nature had to offer in terms of healing, and being still.

### **The Wildness of the Ocean**

The kinship I felt with the Ocean from my early days and knowing Jane’s love of the Ocean, helped me to connect with her and also provided a space to express my grief. In the days after the tragedy, after I arrived home from Japan, I had a fleeting moment where I sensed her presence in an almost tangible way, so strong, and at the same time heard in my mind the song by Sarah Harmer called ‘Open Window’ that we both loved: “Our love is a sacred thing, like the mysteries of the night. And our love is an infinite thing like the sun’s first rays on the sea..and the moon rising...” I have never felt her presence so strong and close since then but hold that attachment to Nature and the Ocean.

We had a ceremony of scattering her ashes into the Pacific Ocean in Vancouver (where she lived the last five years of her life) and the Atlantic Ocean in Nova Scotia. When I returned to Japan after a month at home, I would often go down to the ocean, knowing that I could talk to her and grieve there. Knowing that it was the same Pacific Ocean gave me comfort. There was

something about the expansiveness of the ocean and both the rhythmic nature of the ebb and flow of the tide and its unpredictability that appealed to me. Some days it could be calm and other days waves could be crashing and foaming while the wind almost knocked me over in its force.

The wildness and unpredictability of the Ocean is like Grief, “something wild and off the grid” (Prechtel, 2015, p. 48) that we cannot tame, though we may try. Somehow next to the Ocean, my tears don’t feel like they will last forever and with the spray from the wind and the waves, who knows who is grieving: is it me or the Ocean herself? Are we grieving together? Prechtel (2015) argues that, “the water of the ocean is salty because it is made of the tears of all the grief of all the world’s losses since forever” (p. 47). Romanyshyn (1999) echoes Prechtel’s sentiment and speaks of “being touched by a still deeper grief, a grief older than mine, a sadness at the very heart of things, where the ocean itself seemed like the tears of the world, mingling with my own, forging a bond of kinship rooted in sorrow” (p. 9). He highlights this sense of connectedness with the ocean, not only his individual grief over the death of his wife but the grief of the whole world. Perhaps what we are all searching for is that sense of connection and belonging with something greater than ourselves. Prechtel (2015) further talks about the “Tribe of the Sea” and how “For modern people needing to grieve but having no culture in which to really do it, this older community of the wide beautiful fish-filled ocean is the water of all grief and will be as close as a tribe that listens as they’re probably going to get” (p. 48). I began to realise that this feeling of groundlessness and not having a space in society where it felt legitimate to express my grief and pain was no a fault of my own. I do not live in a vacuum and my experience of loss reflects the Western culture in which I grew up, thus I need to re-learn what it means to be human and how to express myself in this world. I was mourning not only my sister but a place, a

space to confront my pain, express my sorrow, and to feel connection, belonging, and legitimacy. I began to be more aware of the culture around me and how it affects not only my expression and unique journey of grief but everyone's journey and sense of what is acceptable, normal, and appropriate when navigating the floodwaters of grief. I began to interact with other voices outside my own "plurality" of selves and my own family and loved ones (Watkins, 2000), voices from the literature.

### **Dialogues with Voices from the Literature Part I: Dominant Theories**

In this section, I explore dominant theories and understanding of grief and loss and how these individualistic-oriented approaches can end up marginalising and silencing the bereaved in our Western society. Moreover I explore ways of deconstructing these societal messages where grief is policed and medicalised. With discursive and relational acts of resistance, we can take a stand against these ways of being in society. I look to other cultures and nations for guidance in this endeavor.

In Western society, grief is still largely seen as an individual emotional or mental process largely influenced from the work of Freud (Bonanno, 2004, Ord, 2009). For example, within dominant discourse, one of the needs or tasks of mourners is to develop a new self-identity apart from the loved one who has died (Wolfelt, 2004; Worden, 2008; Neimeyer, 2000, 2001). In fact, the “failure” to do so is viewed as maladaptive or unhealthy (Field, 2006). I take issue with the use of the word “failure” in the literature as if the bereaved must pass some kind of test to prove that they have adjusted to the loss in a healthy way. Who gets to decide what is healthy and what is unhealthy?

#### **Individual Meaning Reconstruction**

Moreover, this individualistic perspective has never sat well with me as it seems to place the onus on the individual to rebuild some kind of personal identity apart from the deceased and to find meaning in the aftermath of the loss. This perspective demonstrates that the death (loss) of a loved one shatters the bereaved person’s belief or meaning system and their understanding of their individual life narrative. Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies (2006) outline this view as the “meaning reconstruction perspective” (p. 718). Therefore, the ability of the individual to find meaning in the loss and reconstruct their identity in a world where their loved one is no longer

physically present is seen as a healthy sign of growth and healing (Neimeyer, 2000, 2001; Neimeyer, Baldwin, & Gillies, 2006; Field, 2006).

In an attempt to incorporate a more social and cultural/contextual approach to making sense of loss, Neimeyer (2001) explores the literature around constructivism and meaning making. He defines a “constructivist approach” as an emphasis on “the personal and collective processes by which people construct and reconstruct the meaning of significant life experiences” (p. 171).

The emphasis is on the connection between the self and the surrounding environment, in other words, the need to “relearn” one’s sense of self and place in the world post loss. The idea is that this process is not merely a cognitive effort to “reframe” the event in positive ways but to build a “new orientation” in the aftermath of loss (Neimeyer, 2001). He draws from studies that focus on the experience of bereaved parents who have lost a child. There are not many studies that address the experience of bereaved siblings, and these studies focus on bereaved children and adolescents, not on adults (Brent, Moritz, Bridge, Perper, & Canobbio, 1996; Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2005).

Neimeyer (2001) incorporates narrative “trends” into his explanation of the constructivist approach as he sees these perspectives as compatible and complimentary. He defines narrative approaches as “telling the story of one’s loss” and “seeking an audience for a new self-narrative” (p. 173). The framing of the loss is set in terms of a “narrative disruption” (Ibid, 2001) where one’s life narrative has been ‘disrupted’ and needs to be “reorganised.” He then presents principles that align with this approach and some techniques that therapists can use with clients. I am not opposed to principles per say but am hesitant to adopt a “prescriptive” approach to a constructivist, narrative approach which is in itself based on the idea of flexibility and multiple realities and opposed to binary, black/white or right/wrong notions. For example, Neimeyer

(2001) proposes an activity called ‘loss characterization’ where the bereaved is asked to write a character sketch of themselves in light of their loss. They are encouraged to write in third person and can write their past/future self a letter. He suggests, write a letter to person you once were at the time of loss, expressing support and care for them. My understanding of the “heart” of narrative therapy is using questions as therapeutic interventions and seeing it as a conversation instead of a technique or strategy. The idea is to co-research the issue together with the client and find out their context and their understanding of their loss and the nature of the relationship they had with the deceased and how they can maintain and develop that relationship (Hedtke, 2007; White, 2007)

### **Continuing Bonds**

Neimeyer, Baldwin & Gillies (2006) recognize that an “ongoing attachment to the deceased” or “continuing bonds” can be seen as normal and not pathological as was once thought. However, Neimeyer et al., (2006) would add that this continued attachment can only be considered healthy when the individual is able to “make sense” of the loss or find meaning or purpose in the loss. A healthy ongoing bond with the deceased is viewed as one where the individual is able to “internalize” the deceased and hold them in their memory as a type of role model or as a way to continue their legacy or life goals (Neimeyer et al., 2006). Failure for the individual to do so means that their attachment to their loved one is considered “maladaptive.” My question here is who gets to decide what is adaptive or maladaptive (in other words what is normal or abnormal?). Why do we feel the need to “police” peoples’ grief? We can see remnants of Freud’s influence in that grief and subsequent attachment to the deceased is individualised and internalized. It is all about the assessment of the individual’s psychological processing of

emotions and beliefs. It is the search for deficiencies within the individual and then the building (creation) of interventions to “fix” these perceived deficiencies.

### **Understanding the Impact of Dominant Discourse on My Own Process**

As I kept researching and reading, my painful experience of not being able to accept this renewed wave of grief and the intensity of emotion and dismemberment that I felt started to make sense. I had internalized the socio-cultural messages of grief and focused on my “perceived” individual deficiencies or inadequacies in adjusting to or accepting my loss. Since it was four years after Jane’s death and I thought had already done my “grief work”, I began to lose patience with myself and cry out in frustration at my predicament. I was constantly questioning and doubting myself and wondered what was wrong with me. The inner critic was loud, strong, dominating and oppressive. *What is your problem? Why do you keep crying and falling apart? Get a grip and be grateful for what you have. Others will not understand. Keep it to yourself and behind closed doors.* I had been “colonized from within” by these dominant discourses which had “shaped my subjectivity” (Foote & Frank, 1999). It was no longer a “recent loss” so I thought I was not “allowed” to re-grieve. I had such a struggle to give myself permission to feel and face my grief. This led to sleeping problems, stomach pain, and anxiety as my body cried out louder the more I tried to just keep going and “push through.”

### **Pain: The Language of the Soul**

Malindoma Patrice Some (1993), highly respected author, teacher, and medicine man from the West African Dagara culture who has spent many years living abroad in the West, explains about the relationship between pain and the body. He argues that the pain and grief we feel in our modern culture “should be taken as a language spoken to himself or herself by the body” (p. 21). Pain is a signal to us that we are in opposition to a change coming in our lives. In our modern

culture that values efficiency and productivity over all else, it is our souls that suffer. We tend to overwork in an effort to achieve and try to “get by” at all costs. Sometimes the only way we will slow down and listen is if our bodies cry out to us repeatedly until we can no longer ignore them.

Some (1993) explains:

Pain is the resistance to something new – something towards which an old dispensation is at odds....A new experience that does not have a space to sit in within us will have to kick an old one out. The old one that does not want to leave will resist the new one, and the result registered is pain. Pain, therefore is our body complaining about an intruder-Body complaint is understood as our soul’s language relayed to us (p. 21-22).

Some’s words resonated deeply with me. This struggle was exhausting and painful but once I realised what was going on and took the time to stop and figure out what was happening to me, I started to feel some relief. However, my first inclination was not to stop and “be with” what was happening but to just run! It seemed to me that the best way to survive my suffering was to run away from my grief and my pain, to quit my counselling program including this thesis and my practicum as it was all too much, too overwhelming. Anything to avoid this searing pain, fear, and debilitating anxiety.

Some (1993) rightly points out that, “we do not always allow ourselves to work through pain...we think pain is a signal that we must stop, rather than find its source...a body in pain is a soul in longing...” (p. 22). *Wow! That hit me hard...a body in pain is a soul in longing...* Our Western culture does not encourage us to find the root of our pain, to listen to our souls through the language of the body. Instead we are taught to push it away and distract ourselves with the latest new technology or fashion or to drown or numb our sorrows through the use of substances or other types of addictive behaviours. We are expected to show some emotion but not too much nor too little lest we be branded as unstable or abnormal.



## **Questioning Dominant Models of Grief**

Ord (2010) encourages us to question and deconstruct dominant discourses surrounding death and grief, to resist those practices of “pathologizing, othering and essentializing those living with loss” (p. 202).

In the same vein, too little outward displays of grief can be viewed as abnormal. Bonanno (2009) points to the natural resilience that humans possess and questions the idea that everyone grieves the same way and that an absence of outward signs of grief is evidence of some emotional deficiency or underlying pathology. He argues that the data has been skewed in terms of the prevalence of the trauma response and the capacity resilience has been underestimated because most of the research around trauma, grief, and resilience has been done with clients who are struggling (Bonanno, 2004, 2009; Bonanno, Wortman & Nesse, 2004). Bonanno (2004) posits that:

In the loss and trauma literature, researchers have tended to assume a unidimensional response with little variability in possible outcome trajectory among adults exposed to potentially traumatic events. Bereavement theorists have tended to assume that coping with the death of a close friend or relative is necessarily an active process that can and in most cases should be facilitated by clinical intervention (p. 21).

He notes that a large number of people who experience adverse events are able to continue to function relatively well socially and at work without the need for professional intervention.

Furthermore, he questions the idea that researchers and practitioners call “grief work.” The idea of grief as “work” began with Freud who proposed that the bereaved needed to work through each of their distressing memories and feelings in order to recover or heal. Research has shown that grief therapy interventions that centers around “grief work” may be only effective for those who are struggling with acute grief reactions and may even be harmful for other types of clients – especially those who display no outward grief expressions/responses. In these cases, clinical or

professional intervention may actually interfere or impede the natural resiliency of individuals (Bonanno, 2004; Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Death has become medicalized and grief is often seen as an illness to be “treated” or “managed”. If not an illness, then “normal” grief is perceived to be expressed in a linear, time-limited manner, and both too much or too few displays of emotion are seen to be unhealthy. If our grief falls outside these parameters then it can be diagnosed/labelled as “abnormal” or “complicated” by the medical profession and thus by society (Breen & O’Connor, 2007).

### **Grief and the DSM 5**

Bandini (2015) explains that the removal of Bereavement Exclusion (BE) from DSM 5 has caused much debate/controversy around “what is considered a socially appropriate length of time for bereaved individuals to grieve” (p. 347). It illustrates the “changing nature of what our society deems as normal and abnormal behavior” (p. 347). Skeptics are concerned about the “overdiagnosis and overtreatment” of major depression for the bereaved. The exclusion of BE means that the DSM 5 excluded the “2-month ‘normal’ grieving period” (p. 351) when diagnosing the bereaved with major depression. This means a bereaved person only needs to show symptoms of depression for 2 weeks to be diagnosed with major depression even if they are grieving a loved one. I believe this is potentially detrimental as people going through the “normal” grieving process may be diagnosed as ill and given treatment which could interfere with this natural process and actually do harm.

Another part of DSM 5 debate concerning grief was whether to include “prolonged” grief as a disorder; ultimately they chose to leave it out (Hall, 2014). This ‘disorder’ was first named ‘complicated grief’ (CG) in the late 1990s and recently renamed ‘prolonged grief disorder’ (PGD). There is much debate and controversy among researchers and practitioners whether this

disorder actually exists. Supporters of adding this disorder to the DSM 5 claim that symptoms associated with PGD have been:

shown to be different from other symptoms and disorders, such as normal grief reactions, mood disorders, and anxiety disorders including posttraumatic stress disorder. PGD is associated with several mental and physical health problems, such as sleep deprivation, substance abuse, depression, compromised immune function, hypertension, cardiac problems, cancer, suicide, and work and social impairment (Hall, 2014, p. 11).

Opponents warn of the overreach of the medical profession and pharmaceutical industries into people's personal lives. The medicalization of grief leads to "the way a condition or behavior is defined, what is medically and subsequently socially 'appropriate,' and what treatments are available...the psychiatric profession has come to define what is considered (ab)normal" (Bandini, 2015, p. 351). What is worse is that many of the supporters who argue for the validity of this disorder and key decision makers for whether to include this disorder in the DSM -5 have financial ties to the pharmaceutical industry. Bandini (2015) cites Cosgrive & Krinsky's (2012) research to show that "according to a 2012 study, 69% of DSM-5 committee members reported financial ties to pharmaceutical companies, which was a 21% increase from the proportion of DSM-4 task force committee members" (p. 350).

The medical system has a lot of authority and in this sense often controls or at least influences social norms and dominant discourse around grief, death, and bereavement. In this case, the medical profession shapes how we conceptualize grief and its parameters around acceptable and unacceptable social behavior and public as well as private expressions of grief. Grief is at the heart of what it means to be human and these changes will affect how grief is perceived and how people console themselves and seek out support. The loss of traditional and cultural/spiritual ways of mourning may mean that grief will be placed firmly in the realm of psychiatry, with the bereaved looking to doctors and psychiatrists for support instead of traditional healers, spiritual

guides, counsellors, family and/or community (Bandini, 2015). Moreover, this medicalization of grief can create rifts between, individuals, families, and communities who are grieving and generate further feelings of stigmatization and isolation as they are shaped by this dominant discourse.

### **Internalising Dominant Discourses of Grief**

Wortman & Silver (2001) warn that accepting and internalizing these dominant discourses can have harmful effects for the bereaved and for their families and communities. I fully agree with this as my “pathologizing” of my experience led to further distress, anxiety, and frustration on top of the pain of grief that I was already feeling. I would often feel disconnected from my husband and family, and felt that I was the only emotional one; it was a lonely and alienating time. To top it off, they did not know how to support me and walk with me through this time. Ord (2009) further argues that “constructions of grief are institutionalized in state-controlled grieving practices such as the length of time one allots to grief and the type of mourning that can be displayed in public” (p.196). Harris (2009) uses critical theory in order to uncover social norms and expectations surrounding the expression of grief in Western society to expose instances of “power, control, and oppression” (p. 243). He argues that

dissecting out social and cultural expectations of how bereaved individuals are expected to respond to loss from the actual reality of their loss experience provides an ability to normalize the human response to loss without the oppressive factor of shame and the inhibition caused by external social constraints which may have the potential to suppress adaptive, but socially uncomfortable or stigmatized responses (Harris, 2009, p. 243).

Furthermore, Harris (2009) posits that it is not only that bereaved individuals are marginalized because they represent the fact that we are all mortal, but also the bereaved may come against the Western capitalistic values of productivity, competition, and consumerism. Brookfield (2005) argues that capitalistic societies tend to define human worth in “economic terms by the elevation

of materialistic values over the human values of compassion, skill, or creativity” (as cited in Harris, 2009). The bereaved do not tend to be ‘good consumers’ and may not be able to contribute to the work force for a period of time which disrupts productivity and the potential for economic gain. This is a “threat to the basic foundation of capitalism” (Harris, 2009) and thus can result in social exclusion and pressure to return prematurely to the workforce. This in turn forces grieverers to ‘mask’ their grief and hide it from the public sphere. It seems that our society cannot tolerate vulnerability which is viewed as a sign of weakness. Harris (2009) explains that “in a social system that is based on competition and acquisition, weakness is not tolerable, and so grief goes underground” (p. 247). This ‘hibernation of grief’ comes at a high cost to individuals, families, and communities. For if grief cannot be expressed, it stays in the body and can manifest itself in a number of ailments and illness (Some, 1993), not to mention cause feelings of isolation and division within families and communities where grieverers do not believe they have ‘permission’ to be themselves. This further compounds the sadness and yearning for relationship that they are already experiencing.

In the West, grief has been constructed as an individual problem which gets in the way of consumerism and productivity. Furthermore, when Grief therapy focuses on deficiencies within the individual, it can reinforce this assumption (Valentine, 2006; Walter, 2000). Ord (2010) posits that we need to “re-imagine the way in which grief as a whole is constructed” (p.196). Foot and Frank (1999) call for the “reconstruction and reclamation of grief work as a form of resistance” (p. 159).

### **Discursive Resistance**

Discursive resistance appeals to me as it reflects an aspect of my sister’s character, and the “shit disturber” role she loved to play. She was always questioning dominant discourses around issues

of human rights, the environment, health policy, poverty, and homelessness. It sometimes got her into trouble with her professors or employers but she always felt that the struggle was worth it. This led me re-imagine this dissertation: what if I reframe it as “telling my story” as an act of resistance against Western dominant norms and discourses of grief? What if it is a way for me to re-connect with Jane and channel my “inner shit-disturber”, and for us to co-create a new grief narrative? Could this be a way of honouring her life and our relationship?

Walter (2000) argues that:

the strong desire of mourners to tell their own story, unedited and un-policed by others, is in part driven by resistance to the semi-psychiatric terminology of ‘resolution’, ‘stages’ and ‘denial’ that pervades a significant proportion of the professional and volunteer help on offer...But it is equally clear that the urge ‘to tell my story’ is driven by resistance to a range of other policing activities. Family dynamics, the experience of other bereaved people, and a general culture of containment can all be experienced as invalidating and/or silencing my own story (p. 110).

As my instructor, Chris Kinman says, “Words are like hands” (C. Kinman, Personal Communication, 2015). They have the power to touch us deeply and profoundly.

Walter (2000) argues that around the world, certain conventions and rituals govern what is socially and culturally appropriate in terms of the bereaved expressing emotions and speaking about the deceased. Because of this, he views grief as being “policed.” This need for mourners to speak out is usually in the face of such restrictions and policing. This “policing” can be subtle and may even relate more to the “perceived” policing by the mourner of what is appropriate or inappropriate. This relates to a kind of self-policing or “self-disenfranchisement” (Kauffman, 2002). Kauffman (2002) defines self-disenfranchisement as what happens when the mourner is unable to give themselves permission to grieve or express themselves due to the real or perceived reactions of others.

I can relate with this idea of “self-disenfranchisement.” Though I have not received direct requests by others not talk about Jane, friends are sometimes afraid to bring up her name as they do not want to upset me. I try to assure them that I *want* to talk about her, that I think about her all the time and love to talk about her. Moreover, I am usually the one to bring up her name when talking with my family. We talk about her on anniversaries or birthdays but not often in everyday life. I remember going to a church where the minister told us not to “speak to the dead” in public as it is against the church’s teachings. I was very surprised and hurt by this. Fortunately I have been able to find other spaces and places where I can talk about her, including with my own faith community here in Squamish.

### **Social and Cultural Context of Continuing Bonds**

My own experience and review of the literature point to the social and cultural aspects (or contexts) of maintaining ties with the deceased or continuing bonds. It also points to our society’s “policing” of grief and resistance to alternative ways of coping and adjusting to loss. Klass (2006) posits that some bereavement researchers and practitioners have erred in promoting continuing bonds as *the* way to healthy adjustment instead of one of many ways. He argues that “some clinicians and lay authors have mistaken a description (that survivors do maintain bonds) for a prescription (that it is helpful for survivors to do so)” (Klass, 2006, p. 844). He sees continuing bonds with the deceased as complex and multi-layered and suggests that a more helpful perspective would be to study the “positive and negative multiple roles continuing bonds can play, and the way bonds change over time” (Klass, 2006, p. 845-846). This is an alternative to attempting to assess what conditions make an ongoing attachment to the deceased “adaptive” or “maladaptive”, “healthy” or “unhealthy” (Ibid., 2006). In other words, Klass (2006) offers

another way researching continuing bonds instead of searching for deficiencies within the individual.

Klass (2006) argues that in the bereavement literature surrounding continuing bonds, researchers have focused on the individual at the expense of exploring the social and cultural contexts of identity and ongoing attachment to the deceased. Klass (2006) cites Francis, Kellaheer, & Neophytou's (2005) social and anthropological research concerning historical and present day practices at numerous cemeteries around London, England. They both observed and spoke to people visiting graves and found that these times of visitation were very important in maintaining ties with the deceased, especially right after the death. Furthermore, they found that this bond is not just an internalized process but is integrated into the whole family system. People rarely visit cemeteries by themselves and even when they do, they are often bringing the memory or presence of loved ones with them. It is often a family or community affair to remember the dead and maintain ties.

In this way, survivors are constructing a new *social* identity (Francis, Kellaheer, & Neophytou, 2005 as cited in Klass, 2006). Klass (2006) posits that "When a person dies, his or her social identity will not perish so long as it can be reconstructed through the memories and actions of the living" (p. 850). This is the notion that continuing bonds are "collectively held" (Ibid., p. 851). In other words, death may not only shatter an individual's meaning or belief system, but the meaning system of the family or entire community. Klass (2006) argues that continuing bonds can be "better understood as a function of the relationships between the individual and his or her family or social network. That is problems arise more from a disconnect between inner and social reality than from dissociation or mislocation within the individual psyche" (p. 851). I have found this to be true in my own life as I navigate the discrepancies between my ways of



expressing grief and the meaning I have constructed around the loss of my sister and those of my family and extended family. We in the West have a lot to learn from other cultures who do not hide from grief but journey with others and change and grow together. In this way, I propose that we need to engage with the social and cultural narratives of other cultures to better understand not only how to maintain ties with our loved ones who have died but to better understand death and grief and in doing so better understand what it means to live.

### **Re-learning How to Grieve from Other Cultures**

#### *Indigenous Peoples*

Indigenous peoples have a diversity of views and beliefs around death and dying. One commonality is the relational, holistic worldview, also called the cyclical or circular worldview which is often illustrated by the Medicine or Wellness Wheel (Sharp, Beckstein, Limb & Bullock, 2015). This view is “intuitive, non-time-oriented, and sees life as harmonious where health and wellness are achieved by maintaining balance between the spiritual, mental, and physical aspects in one’s circle of life” (Sharp et al., p. 229). Death is seen as sacred and life does not end with death but a transition into the next life as we see in the natural world with the cyclical nature of the seasons. There is a focus on community and the interconnectedness between people and their environment. This contrasts with the Western linear, more individualized view of life and death.

Identity is seen as relational and when a loved one dies, there may be a loss of belonging. Diverse rituals can help with this process as the community comes together to mourn, often openly with crying and wailing, perform ritual cleansing or bathing, and facilitate a change in diet which may involve fasting, and there may be the cutting of hair. Because of the long history of the oral tradition of storytelling, there may be opportunities to share stories of the deceased

together. Moreover, humor is often integrated into speeches and stories at funerals or memorials. (Sharp et al., 2015). These practices help to strengthen the bonds of the community members as they mourn together and share stories with one another.

### *Mexico*

Mexicans also emphasize humour and community bonds in the way they relate to death and the honouring of ancestors and loved ones. We can see this lightheartedness in the way they celebrate one of their key festivals, the Day of the Dead.

The festival is a combination of European (Catholicism) and Indigenous (Shamanism) practices to honour the deceased and connect with the spiritual realm. The celebration fuses the Catholic “All Saints Day” with the ancient Celtic “All Souls Day” to create a festive space to re-unite once a year with loved ones who have died (Marchi, 2009). The Celts believe that November 1<sup>st</sup> is the beginning of the New Year which was viewed as a liminal (in-between) time when the veil that separates the living and the dead is lifted. The Roman Catholic rituals involve participating in church services and prayer times of intercession for the dead and for the living with the use of rosary beads. Indigenous beliefs involve the importance of maintaining harmony with the spirit world to ensure the wellbeing of oneself and one’s family and community (Marchi, 2009).

Pre-Christian Celtic customs incorporated the creating of shrines, the offering of food and precious objects to the deceased, the upkeep and beautification of grave sites, night time vigils for the deceased, the use of incense and flame to connect with the spirits, and ritual drinking and partying (Marchi, 2006). Death was not considered the end of life but rather the “continuum of life, necessary for regeneration and rebirth” (Marchi, 2006, p. 13).

Mexicans believe that their dead visit them once a year in an atmosphere of playfulness and celebration (Bonnano, 2009). Bonnano (2009) cites the Mexican poet, Octavio Paz, in

explaining that “The Mexican is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love” (p. 161). Mexicans are ease with images of death, as such, skulls and skeletons in colourful motifs are commonly used as decorations in shop windows. This atmosphere of amusement and playfulness is thought to comfort the bereaved.

For the indigenous peoples of Mexico, this is not viewed as a somber time but instead a “happy family reunion where reciprocal relationships with ancestors are reaffirmed, social ties with community are ritually maintained...asking saints and dead relatives to intercede on their behalf in worldly affairs” (Marchi, 2009, p.19).

Day of the Dead practices vary between countries and even within different regions of the same country. For example, Mexican immigrants to the United States or Europe might celebrate differently than in Mexico. One example is a common custom for Mexican immigrants to organise kite-flying celebrations where kites are flown in cemeteries to “help traveling spirits find their way back to earth” (Marchi, 2009, p. 16). It is thought that there may be more of a need to connect with loved ones back home when one is living in another country. The bereaved often attach personalized notes to the kites to communicate with the deceased. This is all done in an atmosphere of festivity with stalls that families can visit where vendors are selling food, flowers, and candles. There are often colourful parades, boisterous games, and carnival rides (Marchi, 2009).

### *Africa*

Nwoye (2005) argues that Africans also perceive the grieving process in a holistic and community-oriented manner. There is an emphasis on the “spiritual/systemic/interactional nature of healing in grieving and the resources which the community makes available” (Nwoye,

2005, p. 147). Nwoye (2005) quotes Sisodia (1997) who explains that “it is a healing system grounded in ecologically sound rituals and ceremonies that facilitate experiential healing” (Sisodia, 1997 as cited in Nwoye, 2005, p. 148). Some (1993) brings the wisdom of the Dagara peoples of Western Africa to the West. He argues that “we enter into ritual in order to respond to the call of the soul...the part of us that picks up on situations well ahead of our conscious awareness of them” (Some, 1993, p. 25).

To the Dagara peoples, death is not seen as an ending but an opportunity for a person to “take off these ragged clothes we call a body, and walk naked” (Some, 1993, p. 74). The community provides the context or safe space for grief to be validated and expressed freely. Some (1993) argues that “tears carry the dead home” (p. 75). They use ritual to create a sacred space to allow suffering, confusion, and anger to be played out. People are free to “get angry, shout out loud to God, speak absurd comments, dance their emotions, run around or weep their guts out” (Ibid., p. 78). This process is supported and contained by ritual/ceremony and by those community members who are not as deeply affected by the loss. The bereaved often re-enact the life of their deceased loved ones and give speeches to share memories and integrate humour and music into the mix.

Dagara elders teach that nothing, not even death itself, can sever an authentic relationship (Some, 1993). When a loved one passes, those left behind are expected to reconnect the “plugs” from the dead person to the living. This is done in collaboration with the village community through ritual. These grieving practices and rituals arise from within the local communities. For example, there are set ideas about breaking the news of the loss. The timing and place where this is done is seen as significant; thus where possible, it is done in the bereaved person’s own home. Early morning or evening is seen as a ‘good’ times to break the news as these are the ‘liminal’ or

transitional periods of the day and neighbours and community members are more likely to be home (Nwoye, 2005). This importance of ‘witnessing communities’ is key because they are able to

cry with the bereaved in joint protest against the loss... Their supportive crying at this period carries an enormous power [as] it validates for the bereaved the relevance of tears. This signifies that his/her crying is not a sign of immaturity or weakness but the appropriate response in the face of loss (Nwoye, 2005, p. 150).

This definitely resonates with me as once I found out about my sister’s death, it was extra difficult because I was in Japan when I received the news. My friends immediately came over to my house to support and care for me. What was powerful and helpful was that my Japanese church community prayed for me with tears and lament to God. This helped me feel that my loss, anguish, and tears were real and valid. Their tears and prayers sustained me at that time. In traditional African culture, there is an emphasis on how the bereaved interprets the loss and the meaning they make from what happened. To help the bereaved explore different perspectives and meanings and to remember multiple aspects of the deceased, during memorial services, members of the community deliver emotional speeches. These speeches explore these multiple possibilities or descriptions through sharing stories and parables (Nwoye, 2005). This has similarities with narrative therapy in inviting the client to explore ‘alternative’ stories or explanations to ‘thicken the narrative’ and well as the focus on providing or finding a ‘witnessing community’ or an audience with which to share stories of the deceased (White, 1997). These opportunities to talk about the deceased are crucial (Walter, 1996) as they can help the deceased gain a more well-rounded view or understanding of the deceased through the medium of story. There can be a tendency to focus on how the person died and the time immediately preceding the death as opposed to reflecting over the full life of the deceased. Furthermore this “conversational remembering” can be healing and help the bereaved transition

from a relationship of “actual physical interactions to one based on internal representations” (Nwoye, 2005; Riches & Dawson, 2000).

### *China*

Throughout their long history, the Chinese have believed in the possibility of connecting with their deceased ancestors through ritual and ceremony (Bonnano, 2009). They emphasize the proper enactment and repetition of ritual above any belief or experience one might have.

Bonnano (2009) cites James Watson, an expert on Chinese burial practices, in explaining that

there is a correct way to perform rites associated with the life cycle...performance took precedence over belief...however, ritual is about transformation...Rituals are repeated because they are expected to have transformative powers. Rituals change people and things” (p.174).

Bonnano (2009) himself travelled to China and engaged in ancestral rites to honour his father and found it a transformative experience because of the communal sense of belonging he felt. He experienced being welcomed into the ceremony by the Chinese and found a peace in the midst of fellow travellers honouring those who had gone before them. However, upon returning to the States, he did not continue the ritual as he felt out of place without the proper cultural context. Bonnano (2009) argues that “continuing bonds are more adaptive in a context where they are understood and culturally supported” (p.180). It was not the same transformative experience for him to continue the offering and rites in an American context that did not recognize this communal connection. Bonnano (2009) further explains that “Nothing in the Chinese bereavement ceremony is about individual grief. The ancestral rites are about honoring loved ones, and above all, they are about family and connection” (p. 190). Even in the preparation for the ritual, the experience is one which is meant to strengthen family and community bonds.

### *Japan*

Japanese death rituals also focus on the strengthening of community and include the idea of honoring the “community dead” of the one’s village or hometown (Stefansson, 1995, p. 84). We can see this collectivity and connection in the way they celebrate the “Festival of the Dead,” known as O-bon Festival. The Japanese have special categories for the deceased depending on age, profession and the manner in which they died. They have memorial tablets at the Buddhist temple for

Buddhist priests who have served in the past and died in the temple; tablets for the war-dead, war heroes...those who died young; for those who died in accidents; for the mizuko, i.e., aborted or miscarried fetuses; and finally all the temporary tablets for all those who have died during the year in the hamlet (Stefansson, 1995, p. 95).

There are offerings placed around the tablets, these are mostly agricultural products such as rice and fruit with the scent of incense flowing up to the spirits and echoes of the priests’ mantras (Stefansson, 1995). What struck me in the above quote was not the tablets for the war dead and war heroes (there is a lot of controversy and political tension surrounding this, especially from the Chinese and Korean peoples), but the memorial tablets for those who died young, in accidents, and aborted or miscarried fetuses. I appreciate how these “unnatural” and “untimely” deaths are recognized in the public arena. There is usually no warning in these types of deaths and no time to prepare. This recognition in the temple seems to allow this special kind of anguish and grief to be validated by the community. Furthermore, aborted or miscarried fetuses are recognized which in our society is unheard of and stigmatized. There is a communal space where people from the community can come and remember and there is no time limit to how long the tablets will remain.

In terms of festivities, there is outdoor dancing, known as bon odori, in which the whole community takes part with the accompaniment of drums, gongs, and flutes. In the past, the

dance had the intent of “pacifying the spirits of the dead” (Stefansson, 1995, p. 98), however, many people today would argue that it is simply a reason for the community to come together. Stefansson (1995) argues that through his observations and research, that people do ‘welcome’ the dead, but that sentiment is only for ‘their’ dead. There is still an overall fear of death, which is viewed as an intruder over the affairs of the living and there seems to persist a tendency to associate evil, suffering, and hardship to the spirits of the dead. Stefansson (1995) argues that the

mid-summer bon festival is the moment when the accumulative process [of death] is interrupted through the ritual intervention of the collectivity...by joining in rituals...[they] domesticate and expel [death] momentarily beyond the boundaries of their finite world... Death is seen as a burden that accumulates through time calling for a collective effort at throwing it off...” (p. 103).

### *Korea*

Historically, ritual and ceremony have provided a space for Koreans to publically grieve and honour their dead and assist them on their journey to the afterlife. Korean death rituals combine aspects of Confucianism, Buddhism, and shamanism. Shamanism was present in Korea before the influence of the foreign religions or philosophies of Buddhism and Confucianism (Cho & Sung, 2015). Shamanism is referred to as a “popular folk belief centered on shamans, who have the power to talk to spirits and cure illnesses” (p. 82). These beliefs remain deeply rooted in Korean family culture. Thus, many Koreans believe that humans are made up of body and spirit and after death, the spirit lives on and is reincarnated as a new being who can travel between space and time. Furthermore they believe that the relationship between the deceased and the living lives on after death. In this way, it is seen as very important to honour or pay tribute to the deceased and help them on their journey to the afterlife.



Korean death rites are numerous and communal (they involve the whole village in rural societies) and cover “before and after the death, a ritual for the corpse, ritual for the bereaved, a funeral ritual, and a ritual after the funeral” (Cho & Sung, 2005, p. 87).

The process of these ceremonies models the European ethnographer, Arnold van Gennep’s (1960) work on rites of passage which follow a three stage process of separation, transition, and reincorporation. Cho & Sung (2015) further explain that the three-year-long mourning process follows the

separation between the deceased and the living, the period of transition where the feeling of solidarity lingers between the living and the dead, and finally the process whereby the dead wholly reconsolidate with the afterlife, and the living with the reality of life (p. 87).

The purpose of the death rites are meant to assist the deceased and the bereaved; to assist the spirit of the deceased to detach from the world of the living and make the journey to the afterlife, and to provide comfort for the bereaved and help them adjust to the new post loss reality. They provide a communal container through ritual to publicly express their sorrow, regret, and guilt. It is considered acceptable for both men and women to mourn by wailing and crying loudly.

Rituals encourage the continuation of ties between the living and the dead. For example, they “prepare a dining table for messengers of the spirit...offer a wedding ceremony for ghosts of unmarried dead children...[and] host and care for the spirit of the dead for two years” (Cho & Sung, 2015, p. 90).

Koreans believe that the spirit of the deceased remains with the family for two years (transitional period) before completing their journey to the afterlife. They emphasize the importance of honouring the deceased on the anniversary of the death and other important holidays. They hold funeral services to pay tribute to deceased family members up to the fourth ancestral generation. In return, they believe that their ancestors will protect and watch over them (Cho & Sung, 2015).

*Jewish culture*

In Jewish culture, there is a practice called Shiva (Lamm, 2004), where it is assumed that mourners will talk about and immerse themselves in memories and artifacts of the deceased, where “mourners collide with cluster’s of the deceased life: clothes, favourite pictures, furniture, hobbies, the accumulated stuff of life” (p. 47). Moreover, they reconstruct the life story of the deceased by talking with relatives and loved ones who also knew them. They discuss not only the strengths but also the weaknesses of the deceased to try and get a fuller picture of who they were from a variety of different angles. Lamm (2004) explains that mourners are in transition after a loss and refers to Victor Turner’s concept of “liminality” which means “threshold” or this space between life and death – unable to return to the past and unable to imagine the future. Ritual can be a useful way to mark this transitional time and thus when mourners practice shiva, it is common for them to “tear the fabric of [their] clothing...not shave, [they] allow hair and nails to grow...unconcerned with the niceties of etiquette—to not say hello or goodbye but to grunt instead” (p. 55). Mourners are allowed to stay in this “no man’s land” and literally be passive and “sit shiva.”

Of course, this lasts only a week and occurs right after mourning; however, the practices resonate with me as they provide a concreteness to being in that ‘liminal’ space. It is space for the soul to be silent or to cry out with passion and emotion, to lament. I appreciate how Lamm (2004) starts his chapter on “shiva” with the words from the poet Fumia: “Mourning is like re-entering the womb. We find a dark place where we can weep unheeded and become whole in our own time. Emptiness turns to hope in this safe refuge, this comforting cavern echoing endings and beginnings...” (p. 43). The importance of a safe space to mourn, and the permission to grieve, to feel sorrow, regret, anger, and all of the complex emotions that the death of a loved one entails

cannot be underestimated. This space needs to be supported and validated by community and the surrounding culture in order for the bereaved to begin to heal.

### **Summary of Cross-Cultural Lessons on Grief and Loss**

Examining other cultures (Indigenous, Mexican, African, Asian and Jewish) points to the notion that we do not have to ‘let go’ of our loved ones and be afraid of our grief. Rituals and ceremonies are ways in which we can transition through the journey of grief and loss with the support of community. We can put aside time to remember our loved ones and go through photographs and even eat their favourite foods and enjoy their favourite pastimes. We can celebrate our relationship with our loved ones who have died and continue to develop that relationship with them. Researchers and practitioners such as Lorraine Hedtke (2007, 2010), Michael White (2007), and Barbara Myerhoff (2007) can provide for those of us in the West who are separated from Indigenous and non-Western cultures some ideas and structures for creating our own rituals and ceremonies. In this way, we can learn to affirm our relational identities and connection to our communities and the deceased. We will explore these theories and practices in the next section, *Dialogues with Voices from the Literature Part II: Remembering Practices*.

## **Dialogues with Voices from the Literature Part II: Remembering Practices**

### **“Reclaiming” Storytelling Rights around Grief and Loss**

In this section, I will outline Lorraine Hedtke’s (2007) ‘Remembering Conversations’ and how this type of narrative inquiry can help facilitate privileging the voice of the deceased in the context of bereavement groups, and with individual clients. Moreover, I will explore Hedtke’s mentors, David White (2007) and Barbara Myerhoff (2007), to further understand other remembering practices, such as definitional ceremonies, to show the value of storytelling and meaning-making in the context of one’s ‘chosen’ community. As previously mentioned, my thoughts and reflections are seen in *italics*.

A turning point came for me in my navigation through my most recent wave of grief when I started to read and interact with Lorraine Hedtke (2010) and Robyn Ord’s (2009) work around using the post-modern, post-structuralist lens of narrative therapy to resist and “re-story” Western dominant discourses of death and bereavement. Something that I thought was dead came alive in me when Hedtke (2010) spoke about how our Western individualism and structuralism have deeply influenced the way we understand and interact with death and grief.

### **Loss Overshadows Relationship**

Hedtke (2010) argues that within dominant discourse, we focus on the individual’s loss but we do not focus on what remains,. We encourage griever to “let go” and “move on.” We do not focus on the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased and what it might mean to continue those connections in the present and future and not focus solely on the past. *Yes!*

*Something inside of me cried out. I could feel my soul starting to sing a hopeful song as tears streamed down my face. All is not lost? I really can keep her with me and continue those connections that give me life? What might this look like in my life? How am I already doing this?*

*Thoughts started to come a mile a minute and that beautiful feeling of pure excitement and possibility began to bubble up in me once again.*

Hedtke (2010) explores narrative (storytelling) practices that resist Western dominant culture (which tells us to avoid grief and forget our loved ones and our pain) by actively developing connections with our deceased loved ones through “remembering conversations” which “seek to keep those who have died alive in the stories that continue to be told of them long after they have died” (p. 5). *I started to get really excited as I read and digested Hedtke’s work in hospice and bereavement. What excited me was the idea that I could continue to have a dynamic and creative relationship with my sister, to remember her through conversations with others, to draw on what she taught me and what she stood for as a resource and strength in everyday life as well as in adversity.*

Hedtke (2010) and Hedtke & Winslade (2004) explain the concept of “remembering conversations” which allow the bereaved a safe space and the *permission* to speak about not only what was lost but what remains. “They affirm the life of the deceased rather than his or her absence...the life of the deceased can continue on in a storied form” (Hedtke, 2010, p. 21). *I also love the idea that “remembering conversations” don’t have to involve real people but can include imaginary friends, metaphors or even a particular place* (Denborough, 2015; White, 2004) *So that means these conversations or dialogues could include the ocean, the forest or even a nurse log!* These storytelling practices are flexible and the focus is on “finding a way to unearth these connections and histories” (Russell & Carey, 2002). For example, these practices could include conversations with the powerful metaphor of the nurse log, such as: What would it say or might it say to me about my grief journey or my identification with the stump, cut off from the rest of the world? In her thesis, Hedtke (2010) wanted to discover if these types of

conversations helped to develop “storied connections” between the deceased and the bereaved. If so then how might this practice affect the creation and recreation of the identity of the bereaved person?

### **Assumptions Behind Remembering Conversations**

Hedtke (2010) argues that through memory we can connect with the deceased so therefore there is no unnecessary pressure to complete all “unfinished business” before the loved one dies. *This resonates with me and brings some relief that especially in the case of an unexpected death, we don’t have to worry that we didn’t get to express everything we wanted to our loved ones. I have found that writing letters to my sister has been so helpful to keep that connection alive and express what I need to say.* Hedtke (2010) posits that “The stories, remembrance of good times, relationship rituals, favourite sayings, cherished songs, shared connections with others, and accounts of how life challenges have been met all remain in memory” (p. 146). In her research and work with the bereaved, she has found that people tend to prefer “remembering over forgetting” and that this narrative approach “invites hope...stories transcend death just as love transcends death” (p. 147).

This approach invites alternate stories to be shared and heard, hope-filled narratives as well as tragedy and loss. Again this allows for the both/and, of both joy and sorrow to co-exist.

Furthermore, Hedtke (2010) argues that narrative practices allow linguistic freedom in how we speak about the deceased. “Modern language assigns indicative verbs to the deceased, banishing them to the past tense” (p. 149). In using the subjunctive mood/tense, such as might/could/would, we can reflect upon what the deceased *might* have said or done if she/he were present. *This strongly resonates with me as I have a background in language teaching and linguistics. Our*

*language creates reality and the idea that we can continue our connections with our deceased loved ones through the type of speech that we use is an awesome thought!*

### **Benefits of Remembering Conversations**

Hedtke (2010) discusses benefits for bereaved to participate in remembering conversations in a group setting. She found that through her research with groups that:

- 1) Members enjoyed the opportunity to speak about their deceased loved one(s).
- 2) They found this type of sharing more comforting than focusing only on emotions around their loss and loneliness in being separated from their loved one.
- 3) They could make shifts in their relationship with their loved ones (ongoing relationship after death).
- 4) They often found unexpected resources in dealing with everyday life and challenges in rediscovering the “voice” of their loved one.

*My experience also echoes Hedtke’s findings as even as I have been reading her work, I have found myself sharing more stories about my sister to my friends and faith community. It has been wonderful to reconnect with Jane, with her wit as well as her ‘rabble-rouser’ self. My husband even commented to me that I sound more hopeful when I speak of her these days and that he is learning new things about her that he didn’t know before.*

### **Therapeutic Value of Remembering Conversations**

Hedtke (2010) points to the therapeutic value of these conversations for the bereaved through:

- 1) Inviting an enhanced sense of agency in their grief process and in their life in general.
- 2) Supporting ongoing identity development after their loved one’s death

- 3) Encouraging a revitalization of their relationship with deceased and with others who are still living.
- 4) Helping them discover new places for the deceased in their life.
- 5) Increased discernment around dominant discourses of grief and how to resist these influences.
- 6) A focus on the importance of audience for the “preferred stories” of the deceased.

*Once again, my own life experience echoes Hedtke’s findings in that I too have found an increased sense of personal agency in how I understand and develop my relationship with my sister. I get to decide what stories I want to share and how I will remember her. Also I get to hear from others how they are moved and affected by my sharing. In terms of how I see myself, I feel I have more confidence that I have overcome so many challenges and will continue to do so with the help of my sister and who she is and what she taught me as well as with the support of my mentors, friends, and family. I am very aware of the dominant discourses around grief and how I have been affected by them, however, I am not merely a passive recipient but I can actively work towards resisting these influences by teaming up with others who are like-minded. This community can include not only people that I know personally but as well the authors, researchers and poets that I am immersed in reading.*

**Distinction between Conventional and Narrative/Constructionist Orientation to Grief Counselling.** (Hedtke, 2010, p. 26-28)

- 1) Focus on relational vs individual orientation to grief (Poststructuralist ideas).
- 2) Focus on present and future of relationship rather than only on past (With the help of the subjunctive mood).
- 3) Maintaining connection with deceased rather than letting go (“Storied connections”).



- 4) Ongoing introduction of the deceased to others rather than forgetting (Definitional Ceremonies).
- 5) Giving of “Voice” to deceased rather than silencing them (How might they respond to different events or situations?).
- 6) Emphasis on multiplicity and possibility rather than on singularity of story (There are many ways to remember).

### **Reflecting on Hedtke’s Mentors: Lineages**

I am reflecting on the importance of lineages (C. Kinman, Personal Communication, 2015) in order to better comprehend the ideas and influences behind Hedtke’s work. We can trace lineages like a family tree. For example, initially I was moved by the work of Lorraine Hedtke who was heavily influenced by Michael White (Narrative Therapy), who was in turn influenced by anthropologist, Barbara Myerhoff. To really grasp what I was reading, I thought that I needed to go back and immerse myself in their writings.

I found that immersing myself in the writing of Michael White and David Denborough (Narrative Therapy) and Barbara Myerhoff (anthropologist working with elderly survivors of the holocausts and helping to preserve their stories) was transformational in how I have come to understand grief, loss, death, and bereavement and the storytelling practices of remembering conversations and definitional ceremonies.

Barbara Myerhoff (2007) contends that through suffering, a survivor grows a soul but the beauty of sharing one’s story is that the listener is also transformed. The beauty is also in the cyclical and layered nature as well as the depth of the complexity of the stories shared. The listener is invited to “sit” in this complexity and be transformed. Myerhoff (2007) shares her favourite quotation from the Traveling Jewish Theater:

Stories. Listen. Listen. Stories go round in circles, they don't go in straight lines, so it helps if you listen in circles. Because there are stories inside stories, stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. And when you get lost, you really start to look around, and listen (Myerhoff, 2007, p.17).

Myerhoff (2007) then connects this storytelling to the great historic myths where the hero must go to the underworld. This comes back to my former reflections on the myth of Orpheus who went down to the underworld to try and recover his lost love. His journey can be understood as the prototype of the storyteller, the need to make the journey, to search, to remember, and to try and "bring the dead to life" (Myerhoff, p. 19). In other words, the storyteller teaches us to resist a society, a culture which encourages us to avoid death, to forget and move on and to risk losing our very soul in the process. Myerhoff (2007) argues that "the soul that the storyteller has seen on its journey is oneself; one finds that this soul of oneself is the story of the world, which is a story of the great cosmic round. It is the message of continuity, the message of connectedness of each life with the whole of life." (p. 19).

*I am struck once again that we have come back to the powerful metaphor of the nurse log – this symbol of the interconnectedness of all of life – that we can see ourselves in the movements, in the growth, in the creation of the natural world. Death is not the end but perhaps it is just the beginning. As the poet David Whyte so eloquently states in his poem "The Journey", "...you are not leaving, you are arriving." We learn that we are not so separate after all when nature seems to act as a "mirror" to our sufferings, our feelings, our experiences...to bring some purpose and meaning after all. When we interact with nature, with the trees and the forests, we connect with the soul of the world, with the suffering and the joys.*

We learn that, as Myerhoff (2007) explains, "life matters: that it has come from someplace and it goes to someplace. And thereby a mending, a kind of fundamental healing takes place when a

story is told and heard” (p. 20). Myerhoff (2007) posits that this need for an audience, this need to be heard is an important part of the healing. She talks about this “hunger to reach out for that which otherwise would have been lost” (p. 20). This is powerful and this longing stays with us as we seek to let our soul speak in a world that wants us to forget.

*I agree that somehow it feels more true, more powerful, more real if there are witnesses. We feel the urge not just to tell ourselves but to share (to impart what we have learned, seen, experienced) our stories with others...it's an urge, almost a desperate need to connect. But who will be there to listen? If no family or neighbours, what about the animals, the forest, the trees, the ocean, the wind? Perhaps this is why we may feel drawn to empty our grief, our sufferings into the ocean, to find some release, to connect with the tears and suffering of the world. In our present day society, we often lose these close connections, we often do not know our neighbours – let alone our very selves and our souls become strangers to us. With the need to share stories of our loved ones, what about with those who never knew them? Could they really understand? And yet, I believe it is possible for those who have “grown a soul” through their own suffering and pain to at least partially understand.*

Myerhoff (2007) would argue that it is possible and this sharing can be a thing of beauty and a distinct, creative act because “that whole invisible world somehow has to be remade, presented, made tangible, performed, enacted. The others have to be invited in, the listener has to agree to see it” (p. 21). In other words, it has to be intentional, a deliberate act of inviting others into the story of the deceased – perhaps some kind of formal ceremony or ritual is necessary.

## **Definitional Ceremonies**

Myerhoff (2007) would argue that a type of cultural performance is necessary for these introductions to be made, to enact a type of ceremony or ritual to present the deceased to our chosen community. Myerhoff (2007) explains that, “Cultural performances are reflective in the sense of showing ourselves to ourselves... When cultures are fragmented, appropriate audiences may be hard to find. We may need to invent occasions for this to happen” (p. 32). She calls these performances “definitional ceremonies – collective self-definitions specifically intended to proclaim an interpretation to an audience not otherwise available” (Ibid, p. 32). Socially marginalized people, ignored groups or individuals often long for this. *I was thinking that the ‘bereaved’ could be a socially marginalized group of people, especially if you add suicide survivors and sibling bereavement that is often stigmatized and ignored.* The reason to share is rarely only seen as a way to advocate for change to happen but to “forge a link with the listener, to retain one’s past, to find evidence of sense; above all, it is an assertion of an unextinguished presence...I am, I live and I too have survived an ordeal of great magnitude” (Myerhoff, 2007, p. 33).

Myerhoff (2007) further contends that the “growing of a soul”, that process of the soul being enlarged through suffering and sharing, is a partnership between the speaker and listener. If we really believe that we are all connected, one human family and are intricately connected to the natural world, then the sharing of stories assist us to “retrieve a part of oneself, a retrieval of one’s past...which makes for the possibility of the awareness of one’s self, without which there is no such thing as a soul. A soul is not just living, it is knowing one is alive, it is choosing to pay attention to one’s life” (Ibid., p. 24). Perhaps the next question is ‘What do our stories reveal to us about who we are?’ Furthermore, ‘How do we reincorporate these stories, these relationships,

these happenings to help us understand who we are? It will involve pain...there is no getting around it...It involves going back to the underworld, facing our pain and emerging from there, through to the other side. However, the question begs to be asked, “How does one go through...and return from the dead, return from the edge of utter chaos...and pain?” (Myerhoff, 2007, p. 26).

Myerhoff (2007) gives an example of how to survive, how to thrive in an interview with an elderly man who had survived the Holocaust. He explains, “I’ll tell you how to survive but you won’t like it...Pain is the avenue to getting a soul, getting a quality from yourself...[Pain] comes back to you when you’re not looking. Whoosh! It jumps out from behind the stove and grabs you...So when the pain comes I am patient...I stand before it, I call the pain out. After you do this, you discover you got choices. You become whole...I want to live this kind of life, so I can be alive every minute” (p. 27).

*Well certainly, from my experience, we do not return as the same person...we are utterly transformed (hopefully for the good!). I feel that I have literally come back from the dead in my experience of embracing grief (going to the dark places) and emerging somehow with an enlarged soul and a new sense of joy in the midst of suffering. I do feel more like a ‘whole’ person, more ‘alive.’*

### **Re-membering: Life as a club or team**

Narrative therapist Michael White (2004, 2007) was heavily influenced by Myerhoff’s work concerning the therapeutic importance of creating a chosen audience for our stories. He came to conceptualize and apply the idea of “membership clubs”, “re-membering conversations”, and Myerhoff’s “definitional ceremonies” in his practice with clients. Lorraine Hedtke was then able to tailor these concepts and apply them to her hospice and bereavement work.

White (2004) found a useful metaphor in viewing life as a club, membership or team. He would ask his colleagues and his clients, “Who are the members of your club of life?” In other words, in contemporary language, ‘Who are your peeps or your people?’ They can be alive, deceased, or even non-human (i.e pets, plants, bicycles, nature, characters from a book, inspirational authors, imaginary friends, stuffed animals and so on).

White (2004) argues that “Making deliberate decisions as to whom we wish to include in our “team of life” involves a special sort of recollection called “re-membering”...first described by anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff.

White (2007) developed this term in narrative therapy, the idea of creating a community of ‘chosen’ family and friends. The theoretical basis behind this is that our identities are shaped by others; their perceptions, their words influence how we see and come to understand ourselves (Russell & Carey, 2002). This practice invites a renewed sense of agency that we can “revise or re-organise the ‘membership’ of [our] ‘club of life” (Russell & Carey, 2002, p. 24). The intentional use of the hyphen in *re-membering* “draws our attention to this notion of membership rather than a simple recalling of history” (Ibid, p. 24). We are empowered to “downgrade the membership rights” of some members and “elevate the status” of others. The main idea is that anyone can “stand with significant others in this preferred territory of their identity, and these connections provide a great deal of support for the preferred actions they wish to take” (Ibid, p. 24). This practice brings the focus or emphasis on connections that we wish to pursue and how these connections can provide the support for us to move toward change or move toward becoming and acting like our “preferred selves” or “preferred identity” (White, 2007).

This postmodern, post-structuralist idea is that our identities relational and consist of “many voices” which differs markedly from the structuralist idea of the “single-voiced self” (Russell &

Carey, 2002; Denborough, 2014). The working assumption is that there exists no individual “self” but rather an interconnected ‘web of relationships’ (Denborough, 2014).

### **The Influence of Post-Structuralism on Storytelling and Identity**

To understand more deeply the theoretical foundations behind re-membering and re-membering conversations, it is useful to distinguish structuralism from post-structuralism. Therapists who work from a structuralist viewpoint believe that there are “underlying internal ‘structures’ of people, families, societies, culture, language...seeing people as separate discrete units, unrelated to others” (Thomas, 2002, p. 85-86). This led to the idea that if we want to discover “‘the truth’ about a person we had to peel away ‘the layers’ of the self...deep down, somewhere, we could find the ‘inner self’ and therefore ‘the truth’ of a person’s identity” (Ibid., p.86). This led to a belief that if behavior appeared to be unhealthy or destructive then it must be due to some kind of underlying “disorder, deficit or distortion in their inner self...” (Ibid., p. 86). What followed was the “objective” medical process of diagnosing people and idea that professionals can know the ‘truth’ about a person’s inner nature. For example, grief is sometimes seen as a disorder (complicated grief) – if a person grieves for ‘too long’ or cannot ‘let go’ of the deceased there behavior can be interpreted as disordered (Thomas, 2002).

However, seen from a narrative, post-structuralist lens, problems such as depression, anorexia, anxiety, and grief reactions are not seen as underlying parts of the person’s personality or identity but separate from them, and part of the dominant discourse of society (White, 2004). In other words, “human problems are viewed as arising from and being maintained by oppressive stories which dominate the person’s life” (Carr, 1998, p. 486). Therapists working from a narrative frame can collaborate with clients in “opening space for the authoring of alternative stories” (Ibid., p. 486). The idea is that clients are dealing with oppression on multiple fronts,

they are “experiencing oppression at a personal level from their problems, and at a political level from a mental health discourse and a set of practices which permeate Western culture” (Ibid., p. 487). Therapists can assist clients in resisting these problems, discourses and practices which have been enslaving them (Carr, 1998).

### **Post-Structuralist Ideas in Practice**

So how can therapists collaborate with clients around these narrative-focused, poststructuralist ideas? They can support clients in “deconstructing the sense they make of their lives, the language practices they use, and the power relationships in which they find themselves” (Carr, 1998, p. 489). This begins with questioning the assumption that our identities are fixed and shaped by our problems. A post-structuralist way of viewing our identities is that they are always changing, always in the process of being created, the “creation and recreation of identities” (Thomas, 2002, p. 88). Our identities are created and shaped in relationship with others – they are not individual. This foundational idea is behind the therapeutic concept of creating an audience to “witness” the changes a person is making in their life. Our identities are socially constructed; they are shaped by history, culture, gender, sexuality, class, and other factors. Therapists can help clients notice or become cognizant of how their views of themselves have been influenced by these societal factors and how they have pushed back against these pressures and expectations. Denborough (2014) argues that “All too often, the stories we believe about ourselves have been written by others” (p. 8). Therapists can help clients explore the history of their resistance to societal norms or dominant discourses and what it means to them (Thomas, 2002). I like this idea that we can “reclaim storytelling rights” (Denborough, 2014, p. 8) around grief and loss. Hedtke (2010) contends that: “A narrative perspective can open up



unlimited ways in which a story is told... [it] is a product of interaction and no story is owned by a single person... We can speak about how stories transcend physical death.. (p.20-21).

### **Remembering Conversations: Sharing Stories of the Deceased**

Walter (1996) sees the “purpose of grief [as] the construction of a durable biography that enables the living to integrate the memory of the dead into their ongoing lives” (p. 7). However, he only touches on conversing with others who knew the deceased and not the idea of introducing the deceased to new people. Walter cites the research of Marwit & Klass (1995) where they asked students aged 18-54 to write about a loved one who has died and the role the deceased *currently* played in their life. In their findings, they pointed to four key themes: the deceased as a role model, as giving guidance in specific situations, as clarifying the values of the bereaved, and as a valued part of the bereaved’s biography (p. 11). Walter (1996) also describes his own experience and posits that what helped him the most as a bereaved person was the coming together with community to share stories of the deceased’s life. It was not “internalized dialogues with a deceased person but external dialogues with others who knew [them]” (p. 13) that helped him process his loss. Walter (1996) argues that in the present day where we are no longer connected to the traditions of our past, it is not the use of ritual and ceremony that helps in the grieving process but dialogue. “Ritual is replaced by discourse...working out who the deceased really was, what she was like, how I related to her, how she died, and checking this against others’ accounts...” (p. 15). *I agree with Walter that external dialogue with others is helpful and comforting to the bereaved. I noticed especially a year after Jane’s death, I had a longing to meet with her friends in Vancouver and Halifax to exchange stories. I wanted to discover an expanded view of who she was through her interactions with her different communities. I was not searching for a “true” account of who she was (there is no such thing) but a broadened*

*perspective on her life through the multiple, layered stories of those she loved and engaged with. However, I do not agree that discourse needs to replace ritual in this “post-modern age.” We have not “outgrown” our need for ritual to ground us and help us concretize what we are going through, to fill the gap in times of transition .*

### **Permission to “Say Hello” Instead of “Goodbye” to the Deceased**

Walter (1996) further contends that “Grief is part of the never-ending and reflexive conversation with self and others through which the late-modern person makes sense of their existence” (p. 20). The idea is that we need “permission to retain the dead person” and *not* permission to move on (Ibid, p.23). White (2007) and Hedtke (2007, 2010) argue along a similar vein with the idea that instead of cutting ties with our deceased loved one, we can move forward by “saying hello again” (Denborough, 2014, p. 207). White has collaborated with diverse colleagues to create a list of questions which help provide some structure to therapeutic conversations in working with bereaved clients (Ibid., 2014). Here are some examples of questions that could be asked or reflected upon:

If you were seeing yourself through [the deceased]’s eyes right now, what would you be noticing about yourself that you could appreciate? What difference would it make if you were appreciating this in yourself right now? What do you know about yourself that you are awakened to when you bring alive the enjoyable things that [the deceased] knew about you? What else do you think you might find out about yourself that could be important for you to know? (Denborough 2014, p. 208).

*I love these questions as they are provoking and as I reflected upon them, I thought of Jane’s speech at my wedding at Pier 21 in Halifax nine years ago. She talked about how I am a “wonder”, just as Pier 21 is one of the seven wonders of Canada. It brings tears to my eyes now,*

*and it did at my wedding that she would use that word to describe me...I remember that she even looked up the definition of a “wonder” in the dictionary – “a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable”. I hadn’t thought about that for a long time and it brings a twinge of sadness along with admiration and love for her that she would unabashedly say that out loud about me. She reminded me that I taught my dad how to hug and that I sought out my own path through my church and dance and travelling. It is comforting and overwhelming that I can still feel her pride in me and love for me....*

This profound idea of giving ourselves permission to continue to develop our relationship with the deceased is supported by work of Myerhoff (2007). She argued for the importance of “..restor[ing] what has been lost, maintaining it through incorporation into the present. Full recollection and retention may be ...vital to recovery and wellbeing” (p. 111). *This has been both powerful and life-changing for me that I can continue to remember Jane, share stories, and to bring back her “voice” into my life to remind me who I am.*

### **An Expanded Audience for our Stories**

Walter’s (1996) emphasis on the need for external dialogue to process grief is similar to Myerhoff, White, and Hedtke’s focus on the therapeutic value of audience; however, White and Hedtke expand upon this idea even further with the introduction of Myerhoff’s (2007) “definitional ceremonies” with the participation of “outsider witnesses”. White (2004) uses the term “outsider witnesses” when he intentionally brings together an audience to engage in therapeutic conversations. He invites these members to listen to his therapeutic conversation with the client and then invites them to respond. White normally facilitates this therapeutic process with clients who have experienced trauma and feel disempowered and disconnected from their

sense of self. Hedtke (2010) extended these practices to include bereaved clients (which of course can overlap as many bereaved clients have also experienced trauma). To better comprehend Hedtke's use of 'definitional ceremonies' and 'outsider witnesses' with bereaved clients, we will delve into White's work with clients who have experienced trauma. White (2004) has done extended research on the incorporation of "outsider witnesses" practices, a term first used in Myerhoff's anthropological work with survivors of the Holocaust. White is insistent that these witnesses should be prepared beforehand and that they have a clear understanding of what is expected of them. White is looking for what resonates with them, not empathy, advice, opinion, judgement, praise or problem-solving.

#### **Four Patterns of Inquiry for 'Outsider Witnesses'**

According to White (2004), structured interviews of these witnesses should follow four categories of inquiry: "particularities of expression", "images of identity", "embodying their interest" and "acknowledging catharsis" (Ibid., p. 49-50). First, "particularities of expression" refer to what the witnesses heard that really struck them or caught their attention. During the interview, the client gets to "listen in" to the conversation between the therapist and "outsider witnesses" without the pressure to participate. White (2004) argues that the "power of 'outsider-witness' response is much greater when the person concerned [client] is not in the conversation itself" (p. 49). We listen differently when we are not expected to respond right away and have time to simply absorb and receive what is said. Second, "images of identity" refer to what was heard from the client's story that influenced the picture or image they had of who she was. Furthermore, when the witnesses share these images, White would ask them what these pictures revealed about the client's beliefs, values, hopes or purposes. During this process, the witnesses would speak and look only at the therapist and not the client. In this way, what is shared is not

so easily discounted by the client. Third, “embodying their interest” refers to how the client’s story affected the witnesses’ own personal stories/history. In other words, by sharing how they might reinterpret or reflect differently upon their own personal experiences and history in light of the client’s story, the members’ interest became “embodied interest, not disembodied interest...[this] is powerfully authenticating...” (p. 50). Finally, “acknowledging catharsis” points to how the witnesses might act differently or reprioritize certain relationships based on how they were touched by the client’s story. This practice can be highly restorative and validating to the client’s experience and sense of self due to the recognition that one’s story has the power to make a “significant difference in the lives of others” (p. 51). This idea that the suffering and pain that we experience could have meaning outside of ourselves and be used for good in the lives of others is very empowering and enhances our sense of personal agency. As Viktor Frankl (2006) famously stated, “those who have a ‘why’ to live can deal with almost any ‘how’”. Once the interview with the outsider witnesses is completed, then the therapist interviews the client along the same lines based on what they heard.

### **The Structure of ‘Definitional Ceremonies’**

The four lines of inquiry laid out above describe the process of “definitional ceremonies” – the “redefinition of people’s identity” (White, 2004, p. 52). These ceremonies consist of at least three sections: “the telling”, “the re-telling of the telling”, the “re-telling of the re-telling”. First, the ‘telling’ is the original therapeutic conversation between the client and therapist, witnessed by the selected audience (outsider witnesses). Second, the “the re-telling of the telling” refers to the interview of the outsider witness along the four lines of inquiry based on what resonated for them from the client’s story. Finally, the “re-telling of the re-telling” refers to the conversation between the therapist and client based on what the client heard from the invited audience.

## Summary

The question is: Will we allow tragedy/pain/suffering to enlarge (grow) our souls? Our lives are defined not by grief, loss and/or trauma, but how we respond to what happens to us and what that demonstrates about who we are and what we value (Sittser, 2009). White (2004) emphasizes the importance of helping clients figure out what they value. He argues that, “ongoing day to day distress as an outcome of trauma [loss] can be understood as a tribute to the maintenance of an ongoing relationship with what a person holds precious, and as a refusal to surrender to this” (p. 60). Supporting clients to give voice to what they value helps to create an expansiveness, an opening where other stories can be heard beside the story of trauma and loss (White, 2004). In working with bereaved clients, this is where we can hold space for stories of the deceased and interviewing the client about what remains instead of only what was lost (Hedtke, 2010), what gives them hope, and what strengths would or has the deceased identified in them. For example, I was able to reclaim the memory of my sister’s speech at my wedding and her musings on how I am a ‘wonder’ and my determination to forge my own path apart from what others in my family were doing. Furthermore, we can go one step further and invite others to witness these discoveries and recollections, to witness the re-incorporation or re-integration of the deceased’s voice in our lives. White (2004) suggests the following question which ties to the earlier section on retaining the voice of the deceased and the invitation of an audience for this preferred story of identity: How could you let others know that you have reclaimed some of the discoveries about yourself that were clearly visible to [the deceased], and that you personally find attractive? (Denborough 2014, p. 208).

*This deeply resonates for me as I have begun to informally share some of the recollections and memories I have of my sister and what this says about who I am and what I value. As my*

*audience members communicate with me what they hear and how they are touched by my musings, my sense of self and sense of personal agency is strengthened. I feel more confidence in talking about my sister and in seeing and living out the strengths and resources she sees/saw in me.*

### **Discussion and Response: Dissertation as Definitional Ceremony**

“Definitional ceremonies provide people with the option of telling or performing the stories of their lives before an audience of carefully chosen outsider witnesses” (White, 2007, p. 165).

In this final section, I will explore how this paper can be seen as a type of definitional ceremony. It can be seen as transformational to building the agency and relational identity of the teller (myself), and the gathering of ‘outsider witnesses’ (from my life and research) to share and ‘co-author’ my life stories. This process also includes addressing You, the Reader as Audience to this performance. I finish by guiding the Reader through the four patterns of inquiry to complete the ceremony: “particularities of expression”, “images of identity”, “embodying interest” and “acknowledging catharsis” (White, 2004, p. 49-50).

For me as the author, griever, researcher, and fellow traveler on the road of life, sharing or “performing” my story (ies) has helped me to understand myself more deeply, to make sense of who I am and what I value. Moreover, I have been able to rekindle a new kind of relationship with my sister, whose spirit and personality is more alive to me now than ever before. I understand her impact on my life as soul friend and fellow activist (shit disturber). She taught me to question society’s dominant messages and to respond with acts of resistance to give a voice to those who are marginalised and oppressed. In the case of this thesis, I am talking about the bereaved in society and our right to express our emotions without being labelled abnormal or being stigmatised.

As the teller or enactor of my own “preferred story” (White, 2004, 2007), I came to understand how my story is “co-authored” (Ibid) with the important people in my “club of life.” I have a renewed sense of agency that I can call to mind those members of “my club of life” to author my own “preferred story”. These members are the loved ones in my life now, but also those who



have gone before me. These members of my club of life also include the authors and researchers that I have met on the journey of creating this thesis. I can carry their support and transformational ideas with me as I live my life as a wife, daughter, friend, community member, researcher, and practitioner (therapist). I do not have to allow society and its dominant discourse to dictate how I view myself as a suicide survivor or griever. I do not have to live in silence or in shame but can express myself publicly. I know I am not alone on this journey and can band together with fellow travellers on the road of grief and the road of life.

This is an act of resistance against isolation which is so common in contemporary Western society. Having an audience for my story gives it purpose and meaning, now what was invisible and private becomes visible and public. I have a voice and have taken steps to be heard. The sense of aliveness and wonder that I felt was lost in the heaviness of my grief has returned and my playful self can stand up and shine. As White (2004, 2007) argues, the ‘thin’ conclusions about my preferred way of living have been ‘thickened.’

### **Reader as Audience for My Performance**

My grief stories have been ‘thickened’ not only by the telling but by the presence of You the Reader as Audience. White (2007) posits that:

The prominence given to “collective self-definitions,” top the importance of “appearing before others,” to “garnering witness to one’s worth, vitality, and being,” and to “proclaim an interpretation to an audience not otherwise available” emphasizes the central significance of the contribution of the audience in these definitional ceremonies (p. 183).

As a member of my audience you get to participate and be changed by what you read and digest from my work. Furthermore, I see the researchers, poets, and practitioners with whom I have engaged in the literature also as ‘outsider witnesses.’ As I read and interacted with their sequence of ideas, my own thinking and images of my life were changed. For example, I shared

my experience of interacting with the nurse log and then after researching the symbolism and significance of this living microorganism, I grew to understand more deeply how my story is connected to the story of creation, of the environment. I could view my own process and realisations mirrored in the seasons, growth, and resurrection that we can see in Nature.

Moreover, I came to see my own grief connected and reflected in the tears of the Ocean. This interdependence and interconnectivity helped me to see that we humans are not alone in the universe, that we are connected to all living things. We do indeed have a tribe that we can belong to, the tribe of Nature, whose healing power and resources have much to offer those who grieve.

So now for You, the Reader it is your turn to ‘retell’ your story in light of what you heard. Your role is to acknowledge what you heard, engage in your own retelling by responding personally to what you heard, and to refrain from giving opinions or judgments (White, 2004, 2007). Let’s go through the four patterns of inquiry for the participation in a definitional ceremony:

1) **Particularities of Expression:** What caught your attention from what you read and heard from this dissertation? What have you learned about what I value? Was it my renewed connection with my deceased sister? Was it the ways in which we can carry our deceased loved ones with us and stand upon what they taught us and how they supported us? Was it our interconnectivity with Nature, with all living things?

2) **Images of Identity:** What images come to mind for you based on what you have read? Was it the nurse log? The wildness of the Ocean? The image of my sister as the ‘shit disturber’? Was it the aggregation of members of my ‘club of life’ standing alongside me as I told my story?

3) **Embodying Interest:** What might these images reveal about who I am and how does that relate to your own history? Are you grieving someone and do you need to renew and rediscover

their voice in your life? Are you feeling alone in the universe and need to connect with the tribe of Nature?

4) **Acknowledging Catharsis:** How have you been moved by witnessing my life stories? What are the implications for your life? If you are a health care practitioner, how can what you heard transform the way in which you view and interact with your grieving clients and their families and communities?

These are just some of the many ways, You the Reader can respond to what you heard. I hope these questions will be helpful to you as you reflect on your life journey and the transformational effect your life narrative can have on the world. Thank you for listening, acknowledging, validating, and transforming my life narratives.

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## **Appendix A: Consent Letter for Research Participants**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

As you know, I am currently working on my thesis as part of my Master of Counselling degree at City University. My intention is to write on the topic of "Re-interpreting Grief and Loss through Nature's Metaphors".

In order to expand and reflect upon this topic, I will be engaging in an autoethnographical study which involves integrating my personal experiences and emotions around the death of my sister, Jane who died by suicide in 2012 with the relevant academic literature. As I explore my grief journey and how connections with nature have brought forth growth and healing, I may reference you. I will not reference you by name, but there is a chance that you may be implicitly identified due to the circumstances or the relationships I describe in the study. For example, I may mention "my mother" or "my husband", etc. Since this thesis may be available online after completion, it may be possible that you could be identified because of our relationship.

I would like to know if you are comfortable with potentially being identified in the study. If you are not, please do not hesitate to inform me and I will not mention you or our relationship in any form.

When I have completed my research, I will provide you with a copy for you to review in order to ensure that you are comfortable with what I have written about you. There is a risk that you could be emotionally triggered in your grief around Jane's death by reading my work. If this happens, I will provide you with counselling resources to process any difficult grief reactions. If for any reason you would like to revoke your consent to participate, you can do so without question. I will then remove any mention of you from the study.

If you decide to participate in the study, all electronic documents concerning this study (rough drafts, notes, the finished study) will be kept in my home, and on my password protected laptop computer for a period of five years. I will be keeping my journal entries, artwork, and photographs in my home and not destroying them.

Best,

Karen Hoshino

## **Appendix B: CityU Research Participant Informed Consent**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the following research project to be conducted by \_\_\_\_\_, faculty member or student, in the \_\_\_\_\_ Program. I understand this research study has been approved by the City University of Seattle Institutional Review Board.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form, signed by all persons involved. I further acknowledge that I have been provided an overview of the research protocol as well as a detailed explanation of the informed consent process.

### **Title of Project:**

### **Name and Title of Researcher(s):**

#### ***For Faculty Researcher(s):***

Department:

Telephone:

Email:

Immediate Supervisor:

#### ***For Student Researcher(s):***

Faculty Supervisor:

Department:

Telephone:

E-mail:

### **Program Coordinator (or Program Director):**

### **Sponsor, if any:**

### **Purpose of Study:**

### **Research Participation:**

I understand I am being asked to participate in this study in one or more of the following ways (the checked options below apply):

Respond to in-person and/or telephone Interview questions;

Answer written questionnaire(s);

Participate in other data gathering activities, specifically, \_\_\_\_\_ ;

Other, specifically, \_\_\_\_\_ .

I further understand that my involvement is voluntary and I may refuse to participate or withdraw my participation at any time without negative consequences. I have been advised that I may request a copy of the final research study report. Should I request a copy, I understand I may be asked to pay the costs of photocopying and mailing.

### **Confidentiality**

I understand that participation is confidential to the limits of applicable privacy laws. No one except the faculty researcher or student researcher, his/her supervisor and Program Coordinator (or Program Director) will be allowed to view any information or data collected whether by questionnaire, interview and/or other means. If the student researcher's cooperating classroom teacher will also have access to raw data, the following box will be checked. All data (the questionnaires, audio/video tapes, typed records of the interview, interview notes, informed consent forms, computer discs, any backup of computer discs and any other storage devices) are kept locked and password protected by the researcher. The research data will be stored for years (5 years or more if required by local regulations). At the end of that time all data of whatever nature will be permanently destroyed. The published results of the study will contain data from which no individual participant can be identified.

### **Signatures**

**I have carefully reviewed and understand this consent form. I understand the description of the research protocol and consent process provided to me by the researcher. My signature on this form indicates that I understand to my satisfaction the information provided to me about my participation in this research project. My signature also indicates that I have been apprised of the potential risks involved in my participation. Lastly, my signature indicates that I agree to participate as a research subject.**

My consent to participate does not waive my legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, and/or City University of Seattle from their legal and professional responsibilities with respect to this research. I understand I am free to withdraw from this research project at any time. I further understand that I may ask for clarification or new information throughout my participation at any time during this research.

Participant's Name:            Please Print

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name:            Please Print

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If I have any questions about this research, I have been advised to contact the researcher and/or his/her supervisor, as listed on page one of this consent form.

Should I have any concerns about the way I have been treated as a research participant, I may contact the following individual(s):

    , Program Coordinator (and/or Program Director), City University of Seattle, at  
    (address, direct phone line and City U email address).