

Running Head: WHAT CAN DEATH AND DYING TEACH?

What Can Death and Dying Teach? An Autoethnography of the Retrospective Transformative

Properties of Grief

by

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Abstract

This research explores the lived experience of meaningful incidences of post traumatic growth following the death of a loved one. Using an autoethnographic approach the study explores two siblings' experiences of living through post traumatic growth following the death of their brother. Before their brother's cancer diagnosis and subsequent death, they did not have much of a relationship with death, save for a fear of it and anything associated with it. The experience of walking with him throughout his illness and especially during the last months and weeks of his life forced them to re-evaluate much of what they knew about dying. While the process of caring for him was both heartbreaking and tragic, it was also precious in some ways. Autoethnography allows the researcher to explore, analyze, and convey meaningful experiences of posttraumatic growth related to her and her sister's, grieving process, in particular, the fundamental changes that occurred for them. The paper follows the two sisters through discussion, shared stories and reflections over a weekend retreat where they explore the concept of post traumatic growth in their own lives, in relation to their brother's death. This answers the researcher's questions which include: What has the process of death taught us about living and dying? Have we changed the way we have looked at the world, our lives, or our sense of purpose? How do we mitigate any feelings of guilt we may have around the growth we have experienced? The discussion includes the many ways they have indeed grown and been transformed throughout their brother's illness and death, and also how that growth honours his life, and allows him to hold a strong presence in their lives. By providing an insiders view of the growth that can occur when an adult sibling dies, this research may serve to open up new understanding of the grieving experience, in particular the post traumatic growth that can occur, allowing counsellors to better support the bereaved.

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Dedication

To my brother Ivor. I wish we all could have grown old together, and spent many evenings stargazing and reminiscing about our lives and our many adventures. Thank you for taking care of us so well in our childhood, being a great friend and confidant in our adulthood, and even in your death, continuing to help us find inspiration and optimism for the future.

Chapter 1: Friday Evening-Autoethnography as a Research Method

As I pull up to the oceanside retreat where my sister and I had agreed to spend the weekend, I feel trepidation creeping into my belly. Do I really know what I am doing? Am I actually going to get a thesis written out of this? I remember reading about how, in using personal experience in their work, autoethnographers not only implicate themselves but also close, intimate others (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). It is one thing to plan to talk about the posttraumatic growth and suffering induced transformational experiences that my sister and I may have experienced in the last ten years, but it is another thing to write about it.

I think of my brother, Ivor, who died from an aggressive form of colon cancer ten years ago when he was only forty-eight years old. He was diagnosed around nine years earlier, and the cancer was so close to his rectum that he had to be fitted with a colostomy bag. This was understandably devastating for him—he was a physical, rugged man who built log cabins for a living and hung with a “masculine” group of guys. He lived in a world that may not have seemed as progressive to us—his “worldly” and “educated” sisters—but we knew who he was. He was our big brother who protected us through a childhood that was unpredictable and scary, and he was much more insightful than his tough guy exterior let on. He was always ready with a joke and a smile, his eyes twinkling just a little when he teased us. He was fierce in his protection and loyalty, and in that way, he was more than a big brother. He offered one of the only consistently dependable relationships I experienced in my life. He was my first example of what a man should be, of what a man could be, and he seemed to take on this responsibility easily and joyfully, never expecting anything in return, of course. He had his faults: a temper that was frightening to behold and a steady marijuana habit, although he would argue the latter was not a

fault. Even when he lost his temper, it passed quickly, and he seemed to feel ashamed about it afterwards. I would guess it reminded him of our father, who had a horrible, violent temper, and Ivor attempted to be as unlike our father as possible. In some of my saddest memories, my mother would tell my brother that he was just like his father, who she often described as one of the vilest men on the planet. As a mother of two boys now, my heart breaks at what that must have done to my brother's sense of himself. Still, he tried his best to please our mother, as we all did, despite her harsh criticism. I only wish I could tell him now how much of an impact he had on my definition of what a good man should be and how much he factors into the way I raise my sons.

I remember how difficult having a colostomy bag was for Ivor, and honestly, I do not know if he ever got used to it. I think he felt ashamed of it, and worried about the smells and sounds emanating from it. I think he especially worried how it would affect his masculinity and the intimacy in his life. It was hard for him to adjust to essentially having his rectum emptying into a bag attached to his abdomen just under his rib cage, and I think he had a hard time keeping his bitterness and disappointment at bay. I felt the same bitterness and disappointment. It seemed incomprehensible that this was his future, that he was never going to be able to walk through life the same way again. Could the proud, confident man he was survive this assault to his dignity, and live a happy and fulfilled life in this new form? I hoped so, but knew that given our collective history as siblings, we were much better at caring for and protecting others than we were at caring for and protecting ourselves. Unfortunately, Ivor did not have the opportunity to see what a happy and fulfilled life his new form could offer, as the nine years that followed until his death were a nightmare of tests, surgeries, conflicting medical opinions, strict diets, difficult choices, and horrible, chronic, physical and emotional pain.

This brings my thoughts to my sister, Saskia, who is my rock and the most wonderfully supportive person I know. She has gone through a lot in the processing of our brother's death and I do not know if I want to dredge up all those feelings and emotions for her again. She would do this for me even if she did not want to, so I remind myself to continually check in with her and pay close attention to her non-verbal signals over the weekend. I remind myself that autoethnographers have to consider "relational concerns" as a crucial dimension of inquiry that must be kept uppermost in their minds throughout the research and writing process (Ellis et al., 2010). Even though this weekend may be an emotional rollercoaster for me, I must remember to try and keep my sister's experience at the forefront. My desire to get to the heart of our story should not result in me losing sight of my sister's experience of reliving the past. I must remember to remind her how she can approve or reject everything I write, or even think about writing, and allow her the room to discuss how she feels and what it might be bringing up for her (Ellis et al., 2010).

On the heels of these thoughts are more of the same—I better keep my brother's best interest in mind, too. There is a need to be concerned about the ethics of representing those who are unable to either represent themselves in writing or offer meaningful consent to their representation by someone else, especially someone with whom they are involved in a trust-based relationship (Wall, 2008, p. 49). Suddenly, I am overwhelmed by all the responsibility. Will I represent my brother honourably in this? How can I speak to all the regrets I feel for him without exposing things he may not want written about himself? I am responsible for telling a truthful version of my story, one that is lifelike, so it can resonate with readers. This is part of life after all, and why should it be excluded? Shouldn't our society discuss details of grieving, death, and dying openly? I decide that as long as the potential good from my story outweighs the bad—

that if I can imagine my brother would not be devastated if he read it, or that it would not destroy our relationship—I should represent our experiences as authentically as possible, no matter how real and raw (Ellis, 2004, p. 147). With these thoughts, I am reassured that my approach will be ethical.

I get out of the car and survey the view before me. My sister always chooses the nicest spots, and this one reminds me of our brother. He loved the ocean and being out in the woods, and this spot has both. The vast expanse of water spreads out in front of rustic cabins with all the amenities, even a hot tub on the deck, and behind them, the rainforest spreads as far as the eye can see. Since this weekend was specifically planned to discuss my brother's death and the impact it has had on our lives in the ten years since, I cannot help but remember the last trip we took with him—to Tofino and the beach he loved. He was in so much pain already then, and my memories are tinged with an anguish I cannot help but feel when I think of him that way. I want to remember how nice it was, and that we said the things we wanted to say, and that everyone felt a sense of peace. But truthfully, it was painful. Throughout our stay, we could hear his groans of pain when he would go and lie down in his room because sitting up with us was too much. The drive up had been excruciating for him. I remember thinking that perhaps he felt an obligation to come sit with us or spend time with us, that the trip was really for us and not for him. Maybe it was. Maybe we needed this illusion of everything being the same, that we were simply a family on holiday. I feel a rush of guilt at the truth of this thought, and the reminder once again that Ivor was always more concerned about our well-being than about his own. I take a deep breath of fresh ocean air to combat the closing of my throat and the tears welling up. They still accompany thoughts like these, ten years later. I cannot stand on a long expanse of beach or

look up at the moon at night without thinking of my brother and how much I mourn both him and the parts of his life he never got to live.

I hear the gravel crunch in the driveway of our cabin and turn to see my sister's SUV pull up. My sister Saskia, the antidote to everything sad in my life, every problem I encounter, every doubt I face. I know I put her on a pedestal, but she has been my inspiration, my protector, and my closest confidante for as long as I can remember. It is such a salve to my soul to see her now as she flashes her beautiful smile and gets out of her truck. She is the second youngest in our family, while I am the youngest, and our brother was just a bit older than her. She is a veterinarian who put herself through school while raising her son on her own, and I have always, always looked up to her. People often ask if we are twins, even though we are six and a half years apart in age, because we are so similar in our looks and mannerisms. This similarity extends into our emotional and spiritual selves, and we know each other almost as well as we know ourselves.

“Sorry I'm late!” she yells as she steps down, gathering all her packages and bags.

“Oh please!” I yell back, and we both know that means she is being overly nice, and she is only a couple minutes late, while I am habitually very late. We say a lot of things using few, if any words at all, and I am again thankful for having someone in my life who knows me so well.

We bring our luggage and supplies into our cabin, making idle chit-chat and unloading our complaints about the ordinary, little problems we have experienced in the few days since we last spoke. We rarely go three days without a lengthy phone conversation, or a month without seeing each other, even though we live three hundred kilometres apart. We know the intricacies of each other's lives inside and out, and we continually pick up and drop threads of each other's conversation interchangeably. I feel a sort of apprehension hanging over our chatter this time

however, and I am guessing it has something to do with the reason for our get-together this weekend. My sister has graciously agreed to hole herself up with me for two days and two nights to delve deeply into the ten years that have passed since our brother's death.

This is not just an informal agreement. She is officially part of my master's thesis, an autoethnography exploring the concepts of posttraumatic growth (PTG) and suffering-induced transformative experiences (SITEs). Posttraumatic growth typically features a shift in perception, knowledge, and skill, bringing about positive changes in relationships, self-perception, and attitude to life, including philosophical and spiritual changes (Fosse, 2005). PTG can be seen as a qualitative change in functioning across domains and can bring a new sense of competency and confidence, together with a perception of possibility, appreciation for life, and spiritual development (Taylor, 2012, p. 33). Suffering-induced transformative experiences are a type of psychological shift that can occur after intense periods of trauma and turmoil, and they frequently bring about a permanent transformation of identity, crystallizing a new psychological state that is equivalent to self-actualization, or even enlightenment (Taylor, 2012, p. 49).

I knew that these were going to be tough topics for us to delve into, because coupled with the idea of anything positive coming out of such a sad and devastating loss, is a wave of guilt that washes over me when I try to really think about these things. My mind does not want to go to a place that even hints that I might have benefitted in some way from my brother's death. However, I can imagine my brother telling me that suffering is inevitable in the human condition, and yet, with it, comes the opportunity for growth. Why do I feel guilt about something that will help me grow and give greater meaning to the impact he's had on my life? In our society, is it unacceptable to acknowledge the positive aspects of a terrible experience? Should it be? This line of thinking brings me to another perspective. It is not as if I am saying it

is good that he died. I just think that when something like the death of a loved one happens, it cannot help but nudge your life and your perception of it in a different direction.

I wonder if my tendency to think of the ways that my brother's death has made me a deeper, more insightful person, stems from the feeling I cannot shake that *he felt* that his life did not have much of an impact on the world. One of the few deep conversations we had in the weeks before his death, when he rarely even acknowledged that he was dying at all, was around the fact he did not have any children, and that he would not live on in anyone. I discussed with him the ways he lived on in his nieces and nephews. In fact, I see him in them every day. I tried to express to him how the ideas and values he taught Saskia and I are passed down to our children, and in that way, his knowledge and life philosophies stay alive—not to mention that his nieces and nephews physically resemble him, too. I explained how his unwavering protectiveness and dependability taught me how to be that way for my children and model that for them. I told him how he helped me raise my sons because he shaped my ideas around what a man could be I recounted how his sense of fun and adventure was ever present when I was parenting my children and in all aspects of my life, and I traced that directly back to him. None of this seemed to placate him however, and there was a palpable sense of defeat around him at that moment. He was close to tears, and his eyes looked at me as if searching for something I hadn't yet given him. I so desperately wanted to say what he needed to hear, but now, looking back, maybe it would have been impossible. What he was searching for I did not have the ability to give. He was looking for a life full of the experiences that he had missed, experiences for which he now yearned. As he felt death closing in, I think all his regrets and the injustices in his life started to engulf him. This conversation haunts me, and I struggle to make the meaning from his life that I think he was trying to find. I can be aware of, and mourn, in a sense, all the things

my brother did not get to accomplish or experience, and all the ways his life did not turn out as he hoped, but I can also try and see the positive impact his life and death had on us. These thoughts brought to mind a quotation from Hardy (1979), that I have loved since I first read it: “It has been long suspected that depression and despair is the most common trigger of spiritual experiences”. As I think of that quotation, I wonder if I have grown and transformed in a positive way or had a spiritual experience of my own on the heels of such sadness and regret.

These thoughts are swirling around in my head while we are putting everything away, and as we sit down to enjoy a cup of Earl Grey tea, I decide to dive right in.

“So, you know why we booked this weekend and what I want to talk about—are you having any second thoughts or feeling any jitters?” I ask my sister.

“No, not at all,” she replies. “Actually, I have been looking forward to it. It will be nice to have a whole weekend devoted to talking about Ivor. He enters my thoughts so often, and I have these little musings about what this or that all means, but I never get the luxury of following them through to their conclusion, to try and make sense of the feelings they bring up. So, I am looking forward to this.”

I smile at her because, of course, she has a way of making *her* doing *me* a favour look like something she wanted to do all along. She is always thinking about others.

“OK, well, good, I hope you still feel that way at the end of the weekend.” We smile at each other.

“I’m sure I will,” she says in a way that lets me know that is enough politeness for now—let’s get on with it. I am comfortable to oblige her, as I know that she looked long and hard at the consent form and we have already discussed every possibility for her assured comfort and safety.

“Well, I’ve told you a bit about the methodology I am using for my thesis—autoethnography—right?” I ask her.

“A bit I think, but I can’t really remember—we talked about it for the consent piece before, so I know enough about what is going to happen but maybe not that much about the philosophy behind it,” she says with a slight smile.

We share a bit of an inside joke around our roles, as I am six years younger, and, being the little sister, it is funny when I try to educate her.

“Well,” I say, with a smile of my own, “autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 2010).

My sister’s brow furrows a bit, and I realize I am just quoting from the literature and not really explaining it properly.

“Well, an article I read in the *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* was really helpful to my understanding, and although the author goes into it in much more detail, the gist of what he says is to look at it as the telling of a story that is entertaining and easy to read, but also educational and beneficial to the field which it represents. It is a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding” (Wall, 2008, p. 39).

Saskia seems receptive so I continue. “He goes on to explain that in autoethnography, the writer tells a story that allows readers to enter and feel part of the story that includes emotions and intimate detail, and examines the meaning of human experience. It is a form of writing that should allow readers to feel the dilemmas, think with a story rather than about it, join actively with the author’s decision points, and become co-participants who engage with the story line morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually” (Wall, 2008, p. 44).

“That sounds really interesting,” my sister replies, “and certainly a research paper I would be more likely to not only read but read all the way through. Much better than the usual dry articles I am used to reading—but does this method have any credibility in the world of academia? It seems kind of ‘airy-fairy.’ Don’t get me wrong—I think it’s great—and a perfect way to discuss your topic—but how accepted is it in the research realm?”

“Great question, and one I asked myself when I first looked into this method,” I begin. “Autoethnography emerges from postmodern philosophy, in which the dominance of traditional science and research is questioned, and many ways of knowing and inquiring are legitimated” (Wall, 2008, p. 39).

She sips her tea, and I continue. “In other words, autoethnography, as method, attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art, and autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, analytical, *and* emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena. Autoethnographers also value the need to write and represent research in evocative, aesthetic ways, and they view research and writing as acts of social justice. Rather than a preoccupation with accuracy, the goal is to produce analytical, accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005).

“Wow, well, that does make total sense when you explain it like that—it almost looks as if all research should be written in this way. It seems to me that we as readers or even as researchers cannot separate emotion from our experience of learning, and I think it shapes what we retain,” my sister says thoughtfully.

“Yes, I think so too,” I reply. “As witnesses, autoethnographers not only work with others to validate the meaning of their experiences, but also allow participants and readers to feel

validated and/or better able to cope with or want to change their circumstances” (Ellis et al., 2010).

She nods, and I suppress a smile. My attempt to educate my big sister is working, so I continue, “An autoethnography can also be judged in terms of whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves, or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers or even just the author’s own life” (Ellis, 2004, p.124).

I pause to sip my tea then add, “It is also interesting to consider that autoethnographers recognize how what we understand and refer to as truth changes as the genre of writing or representing experience changes, you know, like whether it’s fiction or nonfiction, memoir, history, or science. Moreover, autoethnographers acknowledge that memory is fallible, that it is impossible to recall or report on events in language that exactly represents how those events were lived and felt; and they recognize that people who have experienced the same event often tell different stories about what happened” (Tullis Owen, McRae, Adams, & Vitale, 2009).

Briefly I wonder what I will discover this weekend about the different stories my sister and I have about the impact of our brother’s death. Then I add, “Consequently, when terms such as reliability, validity, and generalizability are applied to autoethnography, the context, meaning, and utility of these terms are altered” (Ellis et al., 2010).

My sister still seems interested. Her eyes have not glazed over yet, so I continue. “For an autoethnographer, questions of reliability refer to the narrator’s credibility—could the narrator have had the experiences described, given available factual evidence? Does the narrator believe that this is actually what happened to her or him?” (Ellis et al., 2010).

I think about all I’ve read about credibility and this unique research method and explain, “In autoethnography, validity means that a work seeks plausibility; it should evoke in readers a

feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible—a feeling that what has been represented could be true. The story is coherent, and it connects readers to writers and provides continuity in their lives” (Ellis et al., 2010).

I look at my sister to see if my explanation satisfies her curiosity.

“That sounds so interesting, and really appealing actually!” she says, almost incredulously. “You have certainly convinced me—I will be looking for autoethnographies in the veterinary medical journals I read from now on!” We both have a good laugh and pour another cup of tea.

“But seriously, I think I get it,” she says. “Autoethnographers value narrative truth based on what a story of experience does—how it is used, understood, and responded to, for and by us and others as writers, participants, audiences, and humans, right?” (Ellis et al., 2010).

“Exactly!” I exclaim, “And what better way to honour our beloved brother than to explore what, through the experience of his death, we have learned, and how we have grown alongside our grief?”

“Yes,” she says, her eyes glistening.

I take her response, together with our empty teacups, as a signal that we have explored my thesis enough for this evening, and we can resume again in the morning.

Chapter 2: Saturday Morning-Posttraumatic Growth

We wake to a beautifully crisp and sunny fall morning, and after our breakfast we head out on a walk. We both love long hikes, preferably with a couple of dogs running ahead. Today we only have one, my sister's dog Augey, but he is more than enough. With his adolescent puppy energy, his stocky frame, and his body slamming method of expressing his love, we have to be cognizant of his whereabouts at all times. We start our walk along the huge expanse of beach, thinking that we will burn off the most urgent bit of Augey's energy here, and then we can begin our trail hike farther down the beach when he is a little calmer. The beach seems to go on forever, the wild trees and rocks so representative of the west coast on one side, and the never-ending grey-blue waters of the Pacific Ocean on the other. The waves washing up onto the sand and the seagulls crying up above are music to my ears, and I take a deep breath in.

"So," my sister says, possibly misinterpreting my appreciative breath in as an impatient sigh, "how is this going to work? Do we just start talking about him?"

"Well, basically we will have conversations over this weekend, as we often do, around Ivor and his death and what our lives have been like since. I'm interested in exploring whether or not we see the world differently since his death," I explain.

"Like, whether our attitudes in our lives have changed at all?" Saskia asks.

"Yes," I reply. "Things like our life goals. And, if we do notice changes, how does that noticing intermingle with the grief we feel? Do we feel guilt if the changes were positive, if we feel more enlightened—like we have possibly benefitted from the experience? And how acceptable do we feel it is to express the positive aspects of the grieving process?"

“Sounds like a big topic—but good!” she says, nodding her head.

“My research question, at this point,” I say “is, in general, what is the experience of posttraumatic growth and transformation following the death of a loved one?”

“You mean, in looking back, we may have changed the way we look at the world or our lives, or our sense of purpose?” she asks.

“Yes, or if we have at all,” I respond. “As well as, how do these changes sit within us, especially if they are positive. Do we feel guilt or shame around experiencing this seemingly positive outcome of Ivor’s suffering and death? How do we feel about any feelings of injustice around benefitting, in a way, from the experience of his death?”

I wait for a response. She is looking at the beach ahead as we walk, then nods for me to go on, so I do.

“We all know that grief is an all encompassing, devastating, and heartbreaking experience. However, I hope grief can also have positive aspects. An alternative definition of grief from a strengths perspective is that it involves reconstructing the world and its meaning in light of the challenge of death,” (Gordon, 2013, p. 29) I explain.

“I like that,” Saskia replies. “The idea that the witnessing and grieving process around death can tear your world, as you know it, down. If you can eventually build it back up, it will be different than it was before, but that is not necessarily a bad thing.”

“Yes, exactly. The idea that grieving may not be just a negative process but also a time for posttraumatic growth, reassessment of the meaning of life, and an opportunity to evaluate the important elements of life, like human relationships, well-being, and spirituality, is not a new idea. But research in this area is still lacking (Gordon, 2013, p. 29). I want to add to the research by exploring the possibility of transformation by being closely engaged with the process of grief,

and death and dying. Our story will hopefully reveal this process. I think it would only benefit society as a whole if we were better at giving ourselves, and others, permission to ponder mortality and grief in all their complexity instead of attempting to contain and simplify them” (Jurecic, 2015, p. 848).

“Yes, wouldn’t it?” Saskia replies. “It is a hard topic to discuss though. It feels almost blasphemous talking about the benefits to ourselves of Ivor going through all that loss—of his dignity and self-respect, of all the things he will never be able to experience—oh, but we gained a better understanding of ourselves!” Her voice lifted sarcastically.

“I know,” I reply sadly. “But does it have to be ‘but’? Can it be an ‘and’ situation instead? Like, can we have been gutted and devastated *and* still see the growth we experienced through the process of being gutted and devastated? I think maybe Ivor would appreciate the idea that we were able to have gained some wisdom from the experience.”

We walk in silence for a moment, the crunch of our rubber boots on the wet sand a comforting sound.

“Of course,” I continue, “I am not suggesting that we look upon our brother’s death as a happy event, or one from which we benefitted. That feels terrible and wrong and not at all what posttraumatic growth or suffering induced transformative experiences are about. Even though we may feel growth after a traumatic event, the event is still always remembered as an unhappy one. People are not necessarily expected to report that they are a happy person, even if they have experienced posttraumatic growth. It is unlikely we would find many people who would look to experience trauma so they can experience growth and feel happy about it.”

We have a bit of a chuckle over the ridiculousness of that last statement.

“People experience posttraumatic growth without necessarily becoming happier or feeling better,” I continue. “They can recognize benefits from the adversity they have experienced but could still be sad in the long term” (Tedeschi, Shakespeare-Finch, Taku, & Calhoun, 2018, p. 73). I look at my sister, hoping this explanation alleviates any possible guilty feelings she may have around talking about the positive aspects of our brother’s death.

“Of course not!” she replies. “And we have talked about this type of stuff before. I am actually looking forwards to really delving into it without any other distractions and allowing ourselves to follow our musings to their conclusions, and exploring them further than we have before.”

“Yes! Me too,” I say. “That is exactly what I was hoping for as well. I am glad we are on the same page, but obviously, I want to make sure you continually check in with yourself and that you are okay, that it is not more painful than you want to deal with in the moment.”

“Yes, for sure,” she replies, “but I think it would be naïve to think there will be no pain at all, or that we should stop exploring when we feel pain.”

“I agree,” I say, “but let’s just be aware for ourselves and each other.”

“For sure,” Saskia replies, matter-of-factly.

“My hope is that by exploring this topic through the autoethnographic format it will be beneficial to us personally, and it might help others too,” I explain. “Studies have shown that posttraumatic growth is less likely to occur when individuals have avoided thinking or talking about their problem (Taylor, 2012, p. 48). However, those who did confront and accept their predicament underwent significant personal growth, describing themselves as more serene and at ease with themselves, and feeling as though there was more meaning and purpose in their lives” (Taylor, 2012, p. 48).

“Well, through the years, I certainly think we have tried to confront and accept our predicament, but let’s see if we can do more. How do we begin?” my sister asks.

“Well, I guess we just start by talking, like we often do,” I say, “about Ivor and what he meant to us. What it was like for us hearing he was diagnosed with colon cancer and the years of treatments and surgeries that followed. What sense did we make of it all, if any?”

Saskia scoffs, “It was hard to make sense of, that’s for sure.”

“Exactly! It is that hard bit we should dig into—what was hard, how was it hard, why was it hard, that sort of thing,” I state in agreement. “What things are we grateful for and not so grateful for throughout the experience? Do things look the same to us now, ten years later, as they did immediately following his death?”

“Sounds great! Really fun and upbeat topic,” she says sarcastically.” But, seriously, I am optimistic about what we will learn.”

“Funny that *you* should feel optimistic even in the midst of such a dark topic,” I reply with a chuckle. Our Pollyanna outlook on life has always been a bit of a joke between us—but also a source of pride, I think. “The research shows that generally, though, optimism is linked to posttraumatic growth and is considered a positive and beneficial personality trait because optimistic people tend to hold a positive outcome expectancy” (Ogińska-Bulik, 2014, p. 359)

“Oh good!” she says gleefully. “I expect to discover that I have experienced a tonne of posttraumatic growth by the end of this then.”

“Hopefully!” I laugh. “Overall though, it is important to look at personality traits in combination when considering posttraumatic growth, rather than separating out the traits. In some situations, a pessimistic tendency seems more beneficial—people who are concerned with safety and security, may also turn out to be more realistic. This may be more indicative of

personal growth for some people who have experienced life crises and have now prioritized safety—this feels like growth to them” (Ogińska-Bulik, 2014, p. 359) .

“Well you should score high on that one,” Saskia interrupts me to point out sarcastically. She loves to tease me about my “paranoid personality”, as she calls it. It has some merit though: within seconds of being presented with a novel situation, I can figure out how I or my children might perish in that very situation. I take the ribbing like a trooper, as I have resigned myself to it for so long, that it now feels like a form of endearment instead of teasing.

“Yes, my pessimistic side might just beat out my optimistic side, or they might double up to give me ‘super’ posttraumatic growth,” I joke back. “But seriously, the content and the experience of personal growth depend on individual context, developmental stages, and cultural backgrounds—it is going to be similar in some ways and different in other ways for everyone. Like, for instance, it would be wrong to assume that deepening of faith is the only spiritual way to experience posttraumatic growth, because a lessening of faith can also be experienced as growth by some—depending on the nature of the person’s faith and its strength and rigidity prior to the trauma” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 79).

I decide to offer her an example. “Maybe a person’s strict guidelines around homosexuality cause them to struggle with the possibility of cutting ties with a child that comes out as gay. This could be perceived as a traumatic event for them in their lives. A lessening of the strength and rigidity of their faith may be seen as posttraumatic growth in that situation, as it improves their relationship with their child and inclusion in their life, as well as an overall increase in their acceptance and understanding of a whole segment of society they previously scorned. Am I making sense?”

“Yes, surprisingly you are,” she smiles at me. “It sounds very interesting, and your example was a great one. I look forward to learning more about it, and it kind of takes the pressure off to have experienced it in a certain way, or to measure what we have experienced against some imaginary bar.”

“For sure,” I reply. “Intuitively it makes sense that it would be a completely unique experience for each individual.”

“Yes, I agree,” she says.

I am trying to be cognizant of not overwhelming us both, with emotions as well as information, so I fall silent, allowing us both to mull over these thoughts in our minds for a while as we walk along the beach. The waves are crashing on the shore and the fresh ocean air is swirling around us, and it feels as if our brother is walking alongside us, smiling his impish grin, almost as if he is curiously anticipating what growth or transformation we will come up with.

Chapter 3: Saturday Afternoon-How the Past Influences Posttraumatic Growth

We walk in silence for a time, and I can sense my sister thinking. I do not want her to feel pressure to come up with some wonderful insight or new idea. We finish the stretch along the beach and turn up into the dense forest path just as the rain starts. Within a few minutes it is really coming down, and we laugh about our luck. The rain, or maybe the laughter, seems to relax us a bit, and my sister starts talking.

“I have given a lot of thought to the reasons why our brother’s death affected, or hit me so hard, and why the grief has lasted so long,” she begins.

“Well, there is not a prescription or a time limit to how we grieve, is there?” I ask.

“Sure, but it felt different to me, different from everyone else in our family, and I wondered why,” she continues. “I think the foundation of my relationship with Ivor was established in those years when we were kids. We often had to go visit Dad and his new wife, and things were not always the greatest. Ivor stuck up and protected me, he was always there for me to make me feel safe.”

“I can hardly remember that time. I was so young, and Mom didn’t let me go with you guys on your visits with Dad. What was it like?” I ask.

“It was tough, but also wonderful, if that makes any sense. It was mainly between the years when I was eight to twelve and Ivor was twelve to sixteen—somewhere around there anyway. We were together constantly for those years—you were too little and stayed with Mom, like you said, so it was just the two of us a lot,” she explains. “He was so solid and dependable—probably the only person in my life that was at that time—and I feel this overwhelming sense of sadness and injustice when I wonder if he ever had that same feeling of safety—but I don’t think

he ever had anyone he could count on—no matter what.” She chokes back tears as she says the last few words.

“Well, he had us, in the later years, when we got a little older,” I point out. As I say it though I know that he probably never really thought of us in that way. In his mind, he was the big brother and it was his responsibility to take care of us. “I would like to think he could count on us a bit. Don’t you think he could?” I ask.

“Yes, I hope so,” my sister replies, but from her tone I can tell she does not really believe it. “I just struggled with the fact that he had been such a support and rock to me throughout my childhood, and I saw caring for him in his death as something I could do to repay him. Because there was some discontent and struggle near the end of his life, I guess I wondered if I was able to do that,” she says contemplatively.

“Do you really think he expected payback? Or, even thought about our lives in that context?” I ask.

She goes on, ignoring my last question. “What was interesting to me, as I thought about all this in the weeks leading up to this weekend, is that this dependence on him was really just in my childhood. As soon as I grew old enough, I moved on. I did not depend on him as much.”

“You became very successful, and you worked so hard to get there. Perhaps that work ethic and ability to persevere stemmed from the support you received from him in your childhood?”

“Yes, I guess so. I never really thought about that before you asked me to talk about the growth aspect of our experience. It has really made me go back over my memories and pick apart what was happening for me. My life is great in that I can support myself and my family, both financially and emotionally, and I have not needed him the way I did as a child for a very long

time. I think there was some guilt there for me in that. Maybe I *am* as happy and successful as I am today because of the unconditional love and protection he gave me back when we were kids, but he never benefitted from that himself.” Saskia looks pained by this admission.

“Isn’t the definition of unconditional, though, ‘without conditions?’” I ask. “I wonder if Ivor expected it to be an equal exchange, or if it was similar to how a parent looks at the relationship with their child. Maybe that was the payoff for him—to see you independent and successful.”

“I guess,” she says, not sounding convinced. “Is that really the way sibling relationships work though? To me, there is always that sense of equality between us, that we would each get to end up free from our dysfunctional childhood and live a successful life. I do not feel like he achieved that.”

“I know,” I say, a heavy sadness settling in my gut. “It was something I felt too, that he was cheated in the end, that he did not get to benefit from being a good person—like, where was his payback?”

“I wonder now if that may be one of the reasons I was so affected by his death. I was still so in touch with that child I was and that relationship we had as kids, at the time of his diagnosis, even though I had been removed from it for so long. In some ways his death felt like the death of a parental figure—after all those years of not needing him to be a parental figure anymore, the time that he was one in my life still defined my relationship with him. It is fascinating to me,” she says sadly.

“That reminds me of something I learned in the grief counselling course I had to take for my master’s,” I explain. “Something about the process of readdressing the relationship with the deceased in order to facilitate healthy adaptation to loss—and how that restructuring of those

bonds can be related not only to the attachment style of the bereaved individual, but also the attachment relationship that existed between the bereaved individual and the deceased”

(Neimeyer & Harris, 2011).

“I like that idea,” Saskia says, “the idea that you can restructure the bond after death. It implies the bond is not severed, just experienced in a different way.”

“Yes, that bond is still there, as strong as ever,” I reply.

As we walk in silence for awhile, I think of Saskia and Ivor’s relationship all those years ago. Saskia and I have had endless conversations about Ivor and all our experiences, but I feel like this is the first time I really understand the intensity of the bond they shared before I was around.

“It’s funny,” I begin, after five minutes of comfortable silence passes. “Just the two of you is a novel way for me to look at your relationship with Ivor. In my mind, it has always been the three of us. In my memories, I saw us as a separate unit from the rest of the family—the three youngest—but I realize now as I am listening to you that there was a whole chunk of time spent as just the two of you before I joined up.”

“I know what you mean,” she replies. “I have had moments like that too, when the ideas I held around an experience were based just on my perspective, and then I hear the same experience from another perspective, and it shifts the whole thing.”

“I am just thinking about the idea that your experience of grief within the context of Ivor’s death could be different from mine,” I say, somewhat excitedly. “I mean, it is a strange and obvious idea at the same time—I think because we are similar in so many ways, I just expect our grief to be the same too, but of course it is not. In fact, it is probably quite different. I am actually floored I did not see this simple concept before.”

Saskia laughs. “Well, I wouldn’t be too hard on yourself. I think we, as a society in general, get sort of stuck on these paths we think we are supposed to follow in situations like ours. Because we are so close and so similar, we expect all our experiences to be the same, and then we do not really take the time to look at them closely.”

“Yes, I agree. I think society, and by extension, we as individuals, have a funny concept of grief. It is so common to have reasonable and normal grief responses pathologized, and/or to be expected to grieve within a certain time frame.”

“Or to grieve in the same way as other members of your immediate family or close friends,” Saskia says with a smile.

“Yes,” I smile back. “I was reading about Kübler-Ross’s five stages of grief model, and when it was first introduced, there was such a great need for it that it became very popular, but it was interpreted as five absolute stages that were linear in occurrence, which is not how it was intended” (Breese Biagioni, 2014, p.71).

“Is that the one with denial, anger, bargaining, and, obviously, two other ones?” Saskia asks.

“Exactly,” I reply. “The other two are depression and acceptance. They were thought to have to occur in that specific order, too. If that was not what a person’s experience was like, if they jumped around the stages or missed one, they were thought to be doing the work wrong and had to start over.”

“Sounds ridiculous,” Saskia says dryly.

“Yes, it does,” I agree. “And that was not what Kübler-Ross intended. Before her death in 2004, she described her book as a discussion of some key emotional reactions to grief, and not a

roadmap. The stages were meant to be a set of categories that could overlap, occur together, or be missed all together” (Breese Biagioni, 2014, p. 72).

“Well, thankfully things have changed a bit now?” my sister asks.

“Yes, I think so,” I reply. “There are many different models around grief and loss, but I think the common thread weaving through them all is that there is no specific way to grieve, and no time frame for grief. The grieving process is as unique to each individual as they are unique to each other. There are similarities too, obviously, and that is where we can feel a connection with one another and feel safe to share the differences.”

“And I think the relationship you have with the person makes it unique as well,” Saskia says. “Like we just discovered, even though Ivor was a beloved brother to both of us, we experienced his loss differently.”

“Yes, just as no person experiences loss the same, an individual experiences different losses differently, if that make sense?” I look at Saskia.

“Yes, and then you throw societal expectations in, and it becomes even more complicated,” she replies. “I remember feeling like I had to almost hide how devastated I was after Ivor died. I guess because we weren’t kids anymore, and we didn’t see each other more than a few times a year? I’m not sure why I had that feeling but I am just realizing I did.” She looks for my response.

“Well, that makes sense, from what I have read,” I say. “Because the sibling bond runs so deep, the loss of a brother or sister is one of the most difficult types of losses to bear.

Nonetheless, in adulthood, the adult sibling bond is not generally recognized as significant, which can leave the bereft sibling feeling isolated and misunderstood” (Wright, 2016, p. 44).

I pause, then add cautiously, “Which kind of sounds like how you were feeling.”

“It does, exactly,” she replies.

“That makes me think of something my supervisor, Janelle, once told me. When describing her grief around her brother’s sudden death, she explained her experience: ‘In my thinking, I was only his sister. He had a wife, three children, and a mother—all of whom, I felt, deserved more attention and support than I did’” (Breese Biagioni, 2014, p. 31).

I took a deep breath. “That really stuck with me because I remember feeling that way too—I asked myself if I was justified in feeling this much of a loss around him. Like you said, we didn’t see him every weekend or anything.”

“I know, but we talked on the phone all the time, and we were all still extremely close. And in those years between his diagnosis and death, we were super involved with his treatment and care, and saw him much more,” Saskia replies. “I hate this, feeling like I have to give evidence of how close we were. I think even if I had not seen him for years before he died, I would have been just as devastated,” she says forcibly.

“I know, and why do we feel like we do? Why do we feel like we have to prove how close we were to him in order to validate our level of grief?” I ask. “Maybe that is a form of posttraumatic growth, owning your own grief and grief response, and not feeling like you have to explain it to anyone. There is a freedom in that, and perhaps that freedom spreads into other parts of our lives.”

“Yes, maybe.” Saskia does not sound convinced. “I remember reading about the death of a sibling right after Ivor’s death, when I was trying to make sense of my intense reaction, or what I thought was intense at the time. I read about how we should not only consider the individualistic implications of the loss, but also the impact of the loss on the family system” (Zampitella, 2011, p. 344).

She ventures, “It made me think about the role Ivor played in our family system, and how that would be individual to each one of us” (Zampitella, 2011, p. 344).

“Like you mean, in addition to being a brother to all of us, what else he represented is different for us all?” I ask.

“Yes. You and I really put him in that father role, I think, maybe because we were younger than him. We have touched on how that may have made our experience a little different than our other siblings,” she replies.

“And the two of you spending all that time alone at Dad’s with his new, young, dysfunctional wife terrorizing you.” We laugh, although the reality of those memories is not very funny. Our family deals with a lot of our pain through humour, I find myself thinking. “He took on the father role, or at least the adult in the situation, for you then, for sure.”

“That makes me sad too,” Saskia goes on. “All those memories we shared together are now only mine, and his version and connection to those memories and events are now inaccessible to me. I have lost my confidant and companion from those times.”

“I feel that sadness, too. I try to flip it over though, and I wonder if that is another example of growth. When I feel that thick blanket of sorrow coming on, around all the loss and experiences that will never be again, I try to think of how lucky I was to have had them at all. Ivor was there for you at that time—that was the crucial bit. Maybe now that your memories of that time are the only ones left is a small price to pay for having had his love and support when you needed it?” I look at Saskia.

“Yes, you’re right,” she says. “I guess we will have to make do with our combined memories to keep him alive for us from now on.” She smiles sadly.

We walk on, talking about our brother's last weeks and months of life, and how he and his partner moved into Saskia's house, while Saskia moved in with her partner.

"I took the job of looking after Ivor and giving him the kind of death he wanted very seriously. I felt it was my duty, out of my love and appreciation for all he had done for me, I think," Saskia says.

"Do you think you were trying to care for him the way he cared for you all those years ago?" I ask.

"Yes, definitely that was part of it," she replies. "It's funny, I don't remember making a conscious decision to take on that role. It was just a given for me. I probably would have bristled if anyone had challenged me on it." She smiles at the memory of her fierce commitment to his care.

"That is definitely in your character—you're the peacekeeper and the easy-going one, until someone challenges you on something you feel strongly about. I love that about you, how these two parts of you exist so harmoniously," I say.

"Hey, that's probably another aspect of posttraumatic growth," she exclaims. "I notice myself doing that more and more when I feel strongly about something. Maybe my capacity during Ivor's illness and death helped me to see that about myself—how strong I can be when something really matters to me."

"Totally," I agree. "There are examples of growth everywhere."

Saskia suddenly realizes Augey isn't running through and around our legs as often as he usually is, and she stops to call him, loudly and repeatedly. I cannot compete with her vocal prowess, and I know the dog will be back momentarily, panting and exhausted from whatever chase he was on, no doubt, so, my mind turns to Ivor's last week of life. All our siblings and our

mother gathered at Saskia's house, where he had been living for six months or so with his partner, and we cared for him as a family. It was probably the most harmonious time for us, in a bizarre way. We were united by a common goal, and any bickering or resentments were forgotten or set aside. We even all got along with Mom, which was a rare occurrence indeed. I am reminded of a quotation by Dr. Ira Byock, from his book *Dying Well*, where he says, "In the very shadow of death one's living experience can yet give rise to accomplishment, within one's own and one's family system of values" (p. 32). It felt like that for me. In the face of death, our family carved out a transformative experience. It was a powerful and intense time, and one that I will never forget. I believe that no matter what happens to our relationships going forward—families are complicated—we can all look back at that period as a sacred one. I ask my sister how she remembers that time, since Augey is now safely back in the fold.

"How do I remember that time?" she asks herself out loud. "Exhausting? Draining? A blur?" She looks over at me with her eyebrows raised questioningly.

"Yes," I agree, "it was all those things for sure. But I can't help but have a warm feeling come up when I think of it. Like, do you remember all of us sitting around the dinner table, the candles glowing, having a wonderful meal and laughing together?"

"Yes, I do," a smile creeps onto Saskia's face. "That was a nice part. I remember wondering if it was okay to be enjoying ourselves when Ivor was dying ten feet away."

"I remember questioning that too," I reply. "From my chair I had a direct view of his face lying in his bed. At this point he had been unresponsive for days, but I remember hoping he could hear us, hoping he could follow the conversation. I think he would have liked it—he would have been laughing inside. It felt like he was part of the family gathering."

“It did feel right for me too...” Saskia agrees. “I think the fact we had his door open, and he was so close to us, made it feel respectful.”

“Like I imagine it was done in the old days,” I added. “While families held vigils for their loved ones to die, they did not stop living themselves, they lived around them. It felt good that he was a part of that with us.”

“Remember all the conversations we had in his room, at his bedside?” Saskia asks with a laugh. “I remember thinking Ivor was getting all the good gossip because that was the room where Mom couldn’t hear us, or there would often only be one or two of us in there at a time.”

“Yes,” I reply, laughing myself. “That was also pretty cool. The room he lay dying in, was also the room where the action was, so to speak. If you ever wanted someone to talk to, you knew you could always find someone in there. That seems like it would have been a comfort to him.”

“I think so, and I hope so,” Saskia says. “I never could figure out how that whole experience was for Mom. I remember thinking about how hard that must have been for her, watching her child die.”

“Me too. I remember watching her with almost a morbid type of curiosity—to gain a window into what it must be like,” I say.

“She didn’t give us much,” Saskia remembers. “She seemed to keep a pretty good cap on her emotions—except when she was not happy with how she was being treated, of course.”

“Remember when she wanted to take a shift with Ivor?” I say, laughing. “We all felt so bad for her, that we gave her a shift, even though I think we all knew how it would end up.”

Saskia is laughing, too. “Of course, we are all mothers, we understood she would want to care for her son in his death. So, we gave her instructions on his pain management and how to administer it, and all went off for a few hours of much needed sleep.”

“And then I think it was me that woke up to Ivor’s moaning, since I was in the room across the hall,” I remember. “I rushed in there to see Mom passed out in the chair in a deep sleep, completely oblivious to Ivor’s pain.”

“I don’t know why we all found it so funny. It is pretty sad really. It is almost a metaphor for our life with her—she wanted on some level to care for us, but her needs always came first,” Saskia observes, still chuckling a bit.

“We did not laugh right away, but after we got his pain back under control, we all had a great laugh about it,” I remind her. “It was a wonderful release.”

“Except for Mom,” Saskia says.

“Yes, of course, that would be cruel. I think she was out for a walk or something,” I reply.

“And then there was the port out on the deck!” Saskia squeals with delight at the memory. “Remember we had had enough of everyone in the house that night, and we snuck a bottle of port out onto the deck?”

“How could I forget?” I reply, the memory ensconcing me like a warm blanket. “That was the first time I had had port, and it was pitch dark outside, but such a beautiful night.”

“And the bats—remember they were flying all around us, so close to our heads?” Saskia remembers.

“Yes, we weren’t scared though. It was another magical experience,” I reply. “Every time I have port now, I think of that night—although I still mainly only have port with you, so...”

“And we always toast to Ivor when we do, right?” she reminds me. “I think that is an example of keeping him with us, keeping our bond strong, while remembering the grief and sorrow we were feeling that first night on the deck.”

“Yes, the sorrow we felt that night is still there, but it has been molded into a different shape, one we can live with, without having to live in the dark part of the sorrow all the time,” I consider thoughtfully.

“I wonder if experiences like that show the beginnings of posttraumatic growth,” Saskia muses. “Experiencing the messiness of life, the contradictions, the losses, the sorrow, but also the humour and celebrations.”

“I think so,” I reply. “Gaining the wisdom that all those things can be present at the same time, emanating from the same experience.”

“It does feel like a type of wisdom,” Saskia says. “I remember after Ivor died, I walked around looking at people carrying on as if nothing had happened, which of course it hadn’t—to them—and I felt like I now belonged to some special club—a club where the members had experienced loss and grief and had this knowledge of what it was like on the other side of that—these different glasses through which I now looked at the world.”

“I had that exact thought, too,” I say. “Like we were party to another level of knowledge, of experience.”

She pauses a minute before saying, “How about sleeping in the house the night he died, with his dead body still in his bed? That was a revelation for me. When the coroners told us it was too late at night and they would have to come in the morning, I thought it might be difficult to sleep in the house with a dead body, even if it was Ivor’s.”

“Me too,” I agree.

“Then, it wasn’t. In fact, it was the opposite. It was comforting, peaceful even,” she continues. “I felt comforted by the fact we slept all together in the same house the night he died, just like when we were kids.”

“A final farewell, in a way, right?” I ask, not expecting an answer. “I felt that same comfort, like it was the last sign of respect we were showing him.”

“Yes,” Saskia agrees. “There were some funny and special times during that time we cared for Ivor, but my overwhelming memories are still ones of chaos—it was so hectic for me,” she remembers. “There were times when I felt something close to panic. I was wholly concerned with shielding Ivor from any form of drama or discontent, and I felt I had to take care of absolutely everything, so he did not have to stress about anything at all.”

“Except dying,” I point out glumly.

“Yes, except dying,” she agrees quietly. “I know when the rest of the siblings arrived, I felt a sense of relief knowing I could have that support and you guys could take over some of the responsibility from me. Having a nurse in the family was also super helpful, especially on the medical side of things, since up until that time it had all fallen to me. All those things took some of that panicky feeling away,” she continues, “but I definitely was stressed about how this experience was going for him, and it was just so very important to me that I do a good job, that I do right by him.”

“And do you feel you accomplished that?” I ask.

She is quiet for a moment. “Yes, actually. I feel very, very proud of what I, and all of us, were able to accomplish for him. I think we gave him a very honourable and dignified death, in a place he wanted. I remember him being so adamant that he did not want to go to hospice, and so

relieved when we came up with the idea of moving him and his partner to my house, so I could be accessible for caregiving. It was also a spot he found beautiful and calming,” she remembers.

It seems almost as if she is realizing this for the first time.

“Actually, I have no regrets about how it went—it is actually something I can really feel good about. I know that I exhausted every option I had available to give him a good death, and I did—we did—and I am completely at peace with my role in that,” she says and looks at me almost jubilantly. “Just by talking about this with you today and thinking about it in the weeks leading up to this weekend, I think I have realized that I am at peace around the type of death we were able to give him,” she continues. “So, I guess, in answer to the question, ‘What transformative experience have we experienced as a result of our grief?’ I might venture to say one unexpected result would be a sort of feeling of empowerment.” She looks over to see my reaction.

“Yes,” I say, “I can see that. That time was so powerful for all of us, and I think that was part of it—in the face of our fear and helplessness, we accomplished something beautiful.”

Her enthusiasm and almost wonderment at her discovery reminds me of some reading I had recently done around narrative reconstruction and posttraumatic growth. Jirek (2017) explains how people internalize an objective external reality, but they also subjectively draw meaning from the raw material of their experiences. All these sense-making apparatuses are shaped by the interplay of innumerable biological, physiological, developmental, interpersonal, cultural, societal, and experiential variables (p. 167). Humans create meaning from their lives by creating credible, coherent accounts of the key events they encounter. Jirek (2017) goes on to explain that individuals continuously encounter new events and situations that may potentially reshape their story, and which either confirm or challenge the existing narrative. I see this

happening in this moment with my sister. She had held a certain narrative around caring for my brother, but in retelling the story, it became clearer to her what that story meant—as exhausting and deeply sad as the experience was, it also left her feeling empowered.

“Because I feel proud of the way things went, that translates into a sense of empowerment. I have faced such a huge fear of mine—obviously some need that goes back to my childhood—and lived through it and done it well,” she continues. “Even in the midst of my grief and fear, I was able to give him what he told me he needed and wanted. I was finally able to show my appreciation for all his love and protection when we were kids.”

“I agree. The result seems to be reaching a more Zen-like state, doesn’t it?” I asked. “As if, after having gone through such profound pain, and making it out the other side, we faced those fears we may have carried previously. We are more settled, more secure in who we are and of what we are capable.”

“Yes,” she replies, “and I think as an offshoot of that, it narrows our focus a bit. What do we want out of life, what do we want to do with the time remaining to us? Going even further, who are the types of people with whom we want to spend our time?”

“Exactly,” I agree. “I know that personally I have much less time in my life for people that I like to call ‘energy suckers.’ People who are small-minded, unkind, or shallow, among other things. Not that I have ever really had time for them in my life, but I guess the difference is, now, after having gone through the losses around Ivor’s death, I do not judge them as harshly as I used to. However, I am very confident and comfortable in my knowledge that they are not people I want to hang out with.”

“There is that Zen thing again,” my sister says. “I feel it too, like this acceptance that people are going to live their own lives, and I am not here to judge, but it is also like living in a

state of knowing—like I know that certain behaviour is not meaningful to me in the end, and I do not want to waste my time with it, but it is a funny sense of judge-y non-judgement.”

“That’s true,” I laugh. “I like that term—judge-y non-judgement. Suffering makes you feel more human, too. I guess it seems to increase our sense of humanity or something?” I ask.

“Yes, less judgement overall, realizing that people can have many different meanings behind their behaviours, but at the same time, more picky about who makes up my inner circle—more certain of the types of qualities I want to surround myself with,” she replies in agreement.

“Like after having faced the death of someone dear, which previously was a scary unknown, now, though the prospect of going through it again is still scary, somehow it is less scary because it is known?” I suggest.

“Yes, that whole cliché that life goes on, right? It is actually true, and it is impossible to know unless you walk through it,” my sister replies.

“I wonder if it makes us face the inevitability of our own death sooner than we might have otherwise. Ivor was our peer, and he is gone, dead at forty-eight years old. It might make death so much more of a reality for us?” I wonder aloud.

I am thinking about what I have read recently around the death of an adult sibling, and in particular the idea that there can be an increased sense of personal vulnerability as this type of death symbolizes the loss of a source of support and protection (Wright, 2016, p. 38). I wonder if that is partly what it is about for Saskia. In my research, I read that unresolved or delayed grief may well be a feature of adult sibling loss.

“For sure, I think that may be part of it.” Saskia answers. “But not so much around my death, as around the inevitability of everyone’s death. I am more worried about the death of those

I love, than my own death. We felt like survivors to me, the three of us, and the fact that one of us did not survive to enjoy some freedom...” She lets her words trail off.

“Does your grief for Ivor feel unresolved in any way?” I ask.

“What do you mean by unresolved?” she asks.

“Well, in a recent study of young adults who lost a sibling to cancer, more than half felt that they had not adapted to their grief even two to nine years after the loss. In the case of adult sibling bereavement, continuing bonds and unresolved or delayed grief may coexist” (Sveen, Eilgaard, Steineck, & Kreicbergs, 2014).

I see her listening closely, so I continue. “What’s more, grief after the loss of a sibling that is prolonged or delayed may give way to complicated grief reactions” (Wright, 2016, p. 38).

I add, “I guess I’m just thinking out loud here, but what if our unresolved grief is a way to continue to feel close to Ivor—to maintain the strong bond we shared?” I look over at Saskia to gauge her reaction—this thought has just occurred to me and I am curious to see what she thinks of it.

“I am hesitant to label what you or I have gone through or are going through as complicated grief or delayed grief. It sounds like something is wrong with our grieving process if I use those labels. What do they even mean?” Saskia asks.

“I think the official definition is something like ‘prolonged acute grief symptoms; situations in which the bereaved is unable to rebuild a meaningful life without the deceased person,’” I answer (Harris & Winokuer, 2016).

“Well, it seems to me this would depend on many variables and be difficult to diagnose. Some emotional losses pose deeper and more complex challenges to normal emotional healing

than others and would take longer to resolve. But, does slower processing imply pathology?"

Saskia asks, and I can see her agitation rising.

"I don't necessarily agree with labels like that either, Saskia," I reply, "but I guess if there was evidence of some kind of dysfunction causing the slower healing..."

"But what if it is simply slower for normal reasons, if there even is such a thing around grief? What if some people are simply dealing with greater challenges than most?" Saskia interrupts (Wakefield, 2012).

"I agree with you. I don't want to get into a debate when we are both of the same mind. These labels seemed a bit extreme for anything we have gone through and are still going through to some extent. However, it seems like we are still searching for an explanation for some of our responses to Ivor's death," I explain.

"I guess," she replies. "I think grief is such a personal and unique experience that I hate to hear it pathologized, you know?"

"Yes, I feel the same," I say.

"And I don't know if I am searching anymore for answers to my response to Ivor's death—I think maybe throughout our process I have come to realize how normal it is—if there is even such a thing as a normal response to loss." She smiles.

"Good," I reply. "This process has been great for me, too—just the freedom to explore all these thoughts and feelings without guilt."

"Ahh, guilt," Saskia says. "Can't we do without it? Aren't we past all that?" she laughs.

"Laugh if you will," I say, smiling, "but from my research, I have learned that the emotional and often physical separation that occurs between siblings as they age may be the root cause of feelings of guilt and regret after a sibling dies, and I can see some of that in what we

have been talking about. Do you think you feel some residual guilt around Ivor's lot in life?" (Eaves, McQuinston, & Miles, 2005).

"Yes," she replies. "I had been feeling guilt around achieving a happy and successful life when it seemed like he had not, especially because my achievements may have been rooted in the unconditional love, support, and protection he provided for me when we were children. I am not sure I still feel that guilt, though."

"As my supervisor Janelle tells me—it is common to feel guilty for being the one left here to live. We don't get to choose who will die, how old they will be when they die, how they die, or where we are at in the journey of life with them when they die. We can only choose to forgive ourselves for being the ones left to live and to survive to the best of our abilities. Her words have often helped me when I am feeling overwhelmed with the responsibility I feel as a result of being happy, healthy and alive, when he is not."

"Those are helpful words," Saskia says. "I will have to keep reminding myself of them when I am feeling low. It's funny how that knowledge, and that responsibility of surviving, as you put it, can actually help us live a more productive life than we would have otherwise—it serves as motivation when we feel unmotivated."

"Posttraumatic growth!" We both shout in unison as we come to the realization at the same time, and we have a good laugh.

Once we finish with our laughing fit, I shift the conversation back to a more reflective place. "I have also learned that siblings can find ways to reformulate their lives, once feelings of guilt have been worked through, and then move on toward healing and growth" (Pretorius, Halstead-Cleak, & Morgan, 2010).

I add, “Other positive outcomes have also been cited, such as a greater sense of meaning in life, newly found personal strength, and recognition of new possibilities” (Taku, Tedeschi, & Cann, 2014). “Do you find evidence of any of that in what we have been talking about?”

“Yes, I think I do,” she replies. “I feel all those things, but something else you mentioned a while ago really stuck with me—perhaps all the unconditional love, support, and protection our brother provided us growing up was not something he felt he missed out on receiving himself, but something he was proud to have been able to do. Maybe he appreciated having that role.”

I feel tears well up in my eyes. “Yes,” I say softly, “maybe an aspect of posttraumatic growth we have not yet experienced is looking back at his life through a different lens—not deficit-based, but in all the ways it may have been successful for him. Trauma can equip an individual with a deep understanding of pain and loss, and this awareness of one’s vulnerability has the potential to promote understanding toward others’ suffering as well” (Kampman, Hefferon, Wilson, & Beale, 2015, p. 290).

I let my tears flow, and say, “Ivor was rich in humanity—altruism, kindness, and acts of love. Maybe he understood more deeply what it is to be a human—and the shared knowledge of the universality of suffering. Maybe he reveled in what he was able to give us, and was content in that.”

My sister has tears running down her face now too. We look at each other. It feels like we are having a revelation. We finish our walk in a comfortable silence.

Chapter 4: Saturday Evening- Strength, Appreciation, and Other Expressions of Posttraumatic Growth

Later that night, after dinner, we are sitting in our little rented cabin by the fire, dry and warmed up after our wet hike earlier. My sister seems quiet and I feel like we are skirting around something.

“Everything okay?” I ask her.

“Yes, of course,” she replies. “I guess I am just feeling tired. Talking about all this stuff is exhausting.”

“I know. Why don’t we stop for the day? I don’t want you to feel overwhelmed or pressured to go on,” I suggest.

“No, I don’t think it’s that,” she replies. “I’ve really been enjoying thinking about it in this different way, actually, and it was interesting to realize that empowering piece earlier. I was wondering if you would mind telling me more about posttraumatic growth—like, does it have to be this mind-altering existential change, or can it be more simple and subtle like what we were talking about on the walk?”

“I don’t mind at all,” I say. “While PTG is still a relatively new area of research, the most recent work discusses what is meant by a traumatic, stressful, or challenging event. Often people experience life-changing circumstances that are not easily described in terms of a single event. They may occur over a period of time and include many events” (Tedeschi et al., 2018).

I explain, “The terminal illness of a loved one is used as an example, as it may extend over days or months, and include many interactions with that person and with others. I think that applies to our situation. What do you think?”

“For sure, that makes a lot of sense,” she replies. “When I look back, some changes happened to me while Ivor was sick, and some happened long after his death, like my realization earlier—it is definitely a process. I just wonder if my changes are really transformative, you know?”

“I do know, and I wonder the same thing myself,” I reply. “From my understanding, posttraumatic growth involves positive changes in our cognitive and emotional life that are likely to have behavioural implications, and these changes can be profound and be truly transformative. I think if you see positive changes in any domain—cognitive, emotional, or behavioural—that is a start, but it must be differentiated from normal personal development. This differentiation is seen in how these changes occur—posttraumatic growth occurs as a result of a struggle with the aftermath of a major life crisis, and that struggle is not usually at first a struggle to grow or change, but rather to survive or cope. The growth tends to be unplanned and unexpected” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 4).

“I see,” she says. “I guess we have to ask ourselves—would we have come to this place without this experience?”

“Exactly,” I say. “Posttraumatic growth can be experienced as an increase in personal strength, as you realized just today, as an increased sense of self-reliance, as a sense of strength and confidence, or as a perception of self as a survivor or victor rather than victim. The idea of having survived the traumatic event may perhaps lead to the sense that there is nothing a person can’t do. This in turn can lead to behavioural changes, such as newfound engagement in the challenges of learning something new. Also, just like we were talking about today, the way we relate to others can be considered posttraumatic growth. One’s attitude or behaviours may be

changed in a positive way, over time with loved ones, or in decisions to move away from relationships no longer seen as positive or beneficial” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 27).

“All these changes are connected then, right?” Saskia asks. “They can be seen as connected to personal strength.”

“Exactly,” I reply. “Another aspect of posttraumatic growth is simply a greater appreciation for all things life has to offer, which I think we certainly have discussed experiencing. Noticing things that for most people are simply incidental to daily existence—a sunset, a clear blue sky, a beautiful flower, or other things about a person’s landscape that they simply had not taken the time to appreciate before” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 27).

“I notice things like that much more than I used to, that’s for sure. I find myself marvelling at the beauty in the rings of a tree stump, or something like that, and when I catch myself, I am almost a bit embarrassed for a sec—like I am being a bit airy-fairy,” Saskia says “But from now on, I am just going to enjoy it and know that I am experiencing posttraumatic growth!”

“Yes,” I laugh. “I know every time I see the moon now I stop and appreciate it for a moment and think of Ivor. I share that with my children, and we all have a newfound appreciation for the moon. But it is not just an appreciation for the moon, in my opinion. It is the ability to pause, to appreciate everything we do get to experience—the vastness of it all. That ability to step outside of yourself and see the bigger picture—I think is a gift. Every time something is difficult or stressful, I think ‘well, at least I get to experience this—if Ivor had the choice, I think he would be here experiencing this instead of not here.’ It has the effect of minimizing your stressors in a way, realizing those are not the important things that matter in the end.”

“For sure,” Saskia replies. “The moon reminds me of him, too. Do you think it is because he loved astronomy and the stars?”

“I think that is a part of it,” I reply. “Also, I have a very strong memory of sitting in those ratty lawn chairs of his, at night, surrounded by all his farm equipment and who knows what, and us just leaning back and looking up at the stars together. He was pretty sick then, and it seemed like one of the few things he still enjoyed doing. Looking back, it seems symbolic, the ability to look past all the chaos around us and escape into the vast beauty of the night sky. We all shared a real connection on those nights I think—you were there often, too.”

“I remember those nights. You and I were usually so exhausted from chopping wood or whatever farm-type work we were trying to do to help him on those visits, we just sank back into those chairs,” my sister says, with a far away look in her eyes.

“Yes, but it was a good type of exhaustion, wasn’t it? At least we were able to do something tangible for him.” I smile at the nice picture this conversation brings up in my mind of the three of us laying back on lawn chairs in the moonlight, in the midst of all the machinery and piles of rusty metal, with our faces turned up to the sky.

“Yes, it was. And that’s a great description of what it was like. Part of posttraumatic growth must be the ability to remember and recognize these moments as special—the ability to separate out the sadness and see the hope in the memories,” Saskia ponders aloud. “As I have said, I have a much greater appreciation for simply being alive and for all I get to experience, and so, when things irritate me a bit, it is much easier to let them go. Watching someone die, especially when they are still young and have so much left they still want to do—watching someone die that is not at all ready to die, it is a profound thing. It makes almost all the other things in our life that trouble us seem trivial.”

“Yes, it does,” I reply. “His death was difficult in so many ways, obviously. One of the hardest memories for me was that he did not want to talk about his death or really anything around it until it was so close to his time, and I only had one real conversation with him about it. I have thought about that conversation many times over the last ten years, and I wonder if it was more for myself than for him. Did he really need to talk about his impending death, or was I just needing to know what that experience must be like? Was I unknowingly feeding my curiosity and fear around death by thinking that was a necessary requirement before you die—to talk about the meaning in it all?”

“I think we were all just winging it, trying to do what we thought he needed or wanted. He was not that vocal about how he wanted it to be—or around the fact he was dying at all. But looking back, I think we did okay. I think there was not one right way to do anything, and winging it was okay. It was enough—we did not have to be experts—we just had to love him and do our best.” My sister looks over at me.

“Yes, I think you are right,” I say. “I realize too, maybe even from our discussion this weekend, that we did a good job for him. There was such a sense of peace when he died. Sadness, too, of course, but such a sense of a completed purpose, almost. We had carried out our responsibility and helped his transition from this life to be a smooth one. Remember the moment he died, when your old dog Gus, who had been asleep for hours already in the living room, was suddenly up and in the bedroom, barking at the window. The fact he was such a big, black beast added to the mysticism of the moment. It felt almost medieval or something.”

“Yes, I will never forget that. I don’t think anyone that was in the room will. Even the most scientific and skeptical among us could not deny that was a spiritual moment. I think it broke through that intense grief and anguish around Ivor taking those last raspy breaths and

switched the focus to his spirit leaving his body, and all his pain, behind. It was so fitting that he died at night, and when we all turned to look at the open window that Gus was barking at, we saw a sky filled with stars.” Saskia is crying.

“Thank you, Gus.” I say, knowing how special that dog was to Saskia, and how hard his death was for her, less than a year after Ivor died.

“Yes, thank you, Gus. I hope you are taking good care of Ivor still.” Saskia manages a smile.

“Who knows what was happening at that moment, but it was definitely something—we all felt it.” I continue, “That is another thing I think I have gained from this experience. I do not need to know as much as I did before, if that makes any sense. I am much more comfortable in the idea that much goes on in the world that I do not understand. If I cannot comprehend a person’s motivation for something, I am okay with that. If it differs from mine, that is fine. I do not have this need to understand, or perhaps underlying need to convince them that my approach is better. I guess that falls into the ‘live and let live’ aspect of posttraumatic growth.”

“Yes, I totally agree,” she says. “Okay, I see now that we have experienced some aspects of posttraumatic growth. My mind is swimming with all this information and things to consider. Let’s call it a night though. I am so tired, and there’s a lot to think about.”

“Of course,” I reply. “This stuff is exhausting.”

“But in a good way,” she replies, smiling. “Honestly, talking about all this has made me feel lighter. There is something comforting in talking about the things we have gained, the ways we have improved as people, as a result of his death. It is a nice switch from all the sadness and regret we often discuss when we talk about it.”

“Yes, it is a nice switch, isn’t it?” I say.

Chapter 5: Saturday Night: The Five Domains of Posttraumatic Growth

In bed that night, I cannot sleep. I lie awake thinking about the day's conversation as I listen to my sister's even breathing beside me. Our Airbnb only has one queen-sized bed, and we have to share. This is not a big deal, but it never fails to bring me right back to being little kids, sharing our thoughts before we fell asleep. There can be such safety and familiarity in that sibling relationship, in that person who knows you so well.

My thoughts go back to my brother. I remember learning about attachment theory in university, first conceptualized by Bowlby (1973), and how adult attachment patterns are created in early childhood relationships, usually with the mother, and are incorporated as working models that organize emotions, cognitions, and behaviours (Cohen & Katz, 2015, p. 159). I wonder, in our case, if we may have formed stronger attachments with each other as siblings because we could not count on the parental relationships in our lives.

I think about our father and mother separating when I was ten months old, and how that was after a very short reconciliation. I had been told the story many times; how, two years before I was born, my mother had left my father, taking all their children but the eldest one, back with her to the Netherlands. She obviously decided to give the marriage one more try, carting everyone back to Canada again, and I was the product of that very short reconciliation.

Early in my life, I learned my first lesson about who I could rely on, as my father was not present from the beginning. He played a larger part in my siblings' lives, as they were allowed to go and stay with him occasionally, and I think I took that as a personal rejection. I think now that my mother stopping me from going on those visits to see my dad was actually a gift she gave me,

because, from what I heard from my siblings, those visits could be terrible. My home life was not ideal either. I remember my mother's mood swings and sharp tongue. Nothing I did was ever good enough, and most things seemed to be my fault, but that did not stop me from trying my best. At least she treated us all the same, and she did not pick favourites.

I think, because of the unpredictability of our childhoods, we may have formed what is referred to as an anxious attachment. Whether I fully support the attachment theory, it makes sense that something we did not get from our parents, we looked for elsewhere—and that my brother may have stepped into that role—giving us a taste of secure attachment. There are findings that secure siblings show relatively high levels of posttraumatic growth and low levels of grief reactions. This can be due to people with secure attachment having positive beliefs about the world and the self, and being less prone to interpreting events as threatening (Cohen & Katz, 2015, p. 161). I suppose my sister and I had experienced a fair amount of posttraumatic growth and we obviously did not have a secure attachment with our parents. So, maybe we did have that attachment with Ivor?

However, it has also been clearly demonstrated that higher attachment anxiety is associated with a stronger relationship between grief and posttraumatic growth (Xu, Fu, He, Schoebi, & Wang, 2015, p. 113). When individuals with high attachment anxiety are faced with the loss of a loved one, they adapt to the situation. This is painful and involves suffering, and individuals particularly high in attachment anxiety may be deeply distressed by the separation. However, at the same time, these individuals seem to benefit and gain from the process of adapting to the loss. The painfulness and importance of the loss may push individuals to take action, changing the distressful situation (Xu et al., 2015, p. 113). Perhaps if the loss is so painful, as it would be in an anxious attachment situation, the motivation to grow and relieve

some of that pain is also more intense. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) suggest that posttraumatic growth is the outcome of the psychological struggle—stress-induced cognitive rumination transforms into constructive processes, which in turn initiate the development of posttraumatic growth, and this fits with the findings on anxious attachment (Cohen & Katz, 2015, p. 162).

Overall, there are inconsistent findings regarding attachment style and posttraumatic growth, and more studies are needed. I do think the father role my brother filled, especially for my sister, by being a solid, dependable, and safe presence in our lives, impacted the depth of her grief and therefore the posttraumatic growth she experienced. It makes sense that the more pain and distress people feel, the more they engage in actions to overcome their pain, thus leading to greater posttraumatic growth (Xu et al., 2015, p. 109).

My thoughts go back to my brother. I remember what it was like to watch him die. When he entered that last stage of dying, lying there, wasting away and unresponsive, except for the occasional moan of pain, it was difficult at first to stay in his room for long. I felt so guilty about fleeing the discomfort of merely being witness to the experience that he was actually living, but I think that he would have understood—he had not wanted to be a burden but rather had protected us from pain. I wish I could have told him how much of a gift being able to care for him was. As time went on, I remember it became more comfortable, and I spent longer periods of time talking to him, with my one-year-old daughter on my lap. I think having her there helped normalize the experience, and I remember sensing a shift in my perceptions. I developed a natural comfort in the presence of his dying, and I came to believe that the act of sitting with him through this honoured him in some way. I was not scared of it anymore, and I felt I was modeling for my daughter a reverence for the passing of a life. At first, I wondered if it would feel weird to have such exuberant life energy, at its beginning, in the form of my daughter, all fat and rosy and full

of promise, beside death so fully present in the room—my brother lying there, skin and bones, his face gaunt, with his skin tight over his skull. He did not resemble his living self at all—yet he was still living. I could not put words to it at the time. However, it felt right to have those two extreme stages of life together there in that room. It somehow represented the circle—he was once that chubby baby, and, the fact is, we will all die one day. I talk to my daughter about how she was in the room with me and her Aunties and Nana, at the moment that Ivor died—just a chubby one-year-old on my hip. I try to relate that experience to her and talk about that week she spent with us in the house caring for him before his death as an honour and privilege. I remember feeling validated when I read a quotation from Kübler-Ross (1997), years later, regarding how we as a society care for our dying:

Children who have been exposed to these kinds of experiences—in a safe, secure, and loving environment—will then raise another generation of children who will, most likely, not even comprehend that we had to write books on death and dying and had to start special institutions for the dying patients; they will not understand why there was this overwhelming fear of death, which, for so long covered up the fear of living.

As Eaves, McQuiston, and Miles (2015) point out, individuals construct narratives in order to make sense of some personal experiences and to connect with others, not merely to “tell a story” (p. 144). I think about how we do this with death and the grief process—we need to make sense of what is happening. I have always been afraid of death, as my mother was before me, and her mother before her, no doubt. Once I had children of my own, that intensified for awhile. I am sure I have passed that fear down to them in different ways. But I hope I have also

passed on some peace, an understanding of death, and truce with my fear that I gained from my brother's death.

Nursing him through his death, while having the beautiful beginning of life so fully represented, was a transformative experience. Something about the inevitability of it struck home, the forward motion of it with or without my consent. This realization somehow took away some of the power that fear had held over me all those years. I witnessed my lack of control over both processes so clearly that it somehow freed me of the worry. I can only control what I can control, so I enjoy what I can, and do the best I can with what I have—a cliché for sure. Nonetheless, to be in the room as he died, to feel his spirit leave the room, to see he was finally free of his pain and his struggles—this was truly an honour to bear witness to, and I hope I passed that feeling on to my daughter.

I think about the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996)—and I ask myself the question Saskia had asked me earlier—“Have we actually experienced posttraumatic growth?” The model includes the kinds of positive posttrauma outcomes that are broadly representative of the construct, and I decide to go through them and see what fit (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 26). The first domain is *personal strength*, and it can be experienced by an increased sense of self-reliance, a sense of strength and confidence, and a perception of self as a survivor or victor rather than victim (p. 27). I can definitely see this in my sister when she talked about how proud she was of the way we were able to look after my brother during his illness and subsequent death. There were times when it seemed intolerable to watch him go through the agony, or simply bear witness to the pain and sorrow. We had to gather ourselves up and push through it. We could attend to our pain and suffering another time, because his pain and suffering was the priority. He was dying. I think that process of gathering

ourselves up is what contributed to an increase in personal strength, so we could move through something we may have felt was impossible in order to come out the other side.

The second posttraumatic growth domain is *relating to others* (p. 27). I recognise this in my conversation with my sister earlier this day. Not only does this reflect positive changes in relationships, feeling a greater connection with others, and recognizing the importance of spending more time and energy on loved ones; it is also evident in decisions to move on from relationships no longer seen as positive or beneficial. I see this in my own life. I do not hold judgement, but I also do not hold any obligation to keep people in my life. The decisions that once agonized me now seem easy and clear. I knew my sister felt this way, too, when she was talking earlier today about this Zen-like state she feels she has reached. She is not sitting in judgement of others, but, at the same time, she is very particular about who she lets into her life now.

The third posttraumatic growth domain is *new possibilities* which can be seen in the individual's identification of new opportunities for one's life or of the possibility of taking a new and different path in life (p. 27). In this domain, the event acts as a trigger to develop new interests, activities, or habits, or changes in health behaviour or travel—a general sense that we are called to address the kinds of circumstances our loved ones have gone through by making changes to our personal and work lives so that we can be of service. This one is hard for me. I am not sure whether I would have done the things I have done with, or without, my brother's death. I certainly think of the consequences of my choices much more thoroughly, and I consider the impact they will have on others and on my community. Moreover, I consider whether I am giving back. I will ask Saskia about her thoughts on this domain tomorrow.

The fourth domain is *appreciation of life* (p. 28). This domain encompasses experiencing a greater appreciation for all things that life has to offer, whether small and previously taken for granted, or a greater appreciation for the things that people still have in their lives. In this domain, people notice things that many would consider simply incidental—a sunset, a clear blue sky, or anything that a person takes the time to deeply appreciate. Saskia says she has experienced this. I know I am reminded of my brother multiple times a day when I see something beautiful or awe-inspiring. I take the time to look at it because he cannot. I do it not only for him, but for all those who cannot. I feel it is almost my duty to appreciate these things. It is not only “stopping to smell the flowers,” so to speak. It has changed my behaviours as well. I remember my daughter asking me to play tennis on a beautiful sunny afternoon—a rare one when it was just the two of us home. I remember first saying how busy I was, and that I had a deadline to meet—and she was very understanding. I also remember how on the heels of my words came thoughts like—“how many times are you going to have this opportunity with her, she is eighteen now, almost out of the house,” and “this is important to her because we are very rarely alone to do these types of things together, often the other kids are around, too.” I remember being so happy that I had those thoughts, and I consequently went to play tennis with my daughter that afternoon, creating memories we will both cherish. This is a gift from my brother’s death—to take such moments when I can get them. I hope I have imparted that to my children, too. I want them to internalize this quality without having to experience the loss. I can even appreciate things like a hard workout or a good run; whenever I feel sorry for myself about having to get up early to work out, I immediately think with appreciation that I am *able* to work out at all, that I have my health and the physical ability to do so. I am now aware of how quickly that can be taken away.

The last domain in the posttraumatic growth inventory is *spiritual and existential change* (p. 28). This domain concerns engagement with matters related to religious beliefs, spiritual matters, and existential/philosophical questions—reflections on interconnections with others, harmony, and mortality. I have experienced this as well, especially since my brother was only forty-eight years old when he died, and he had not experienced so much of what he wanted from life. He did not accept the inevitability of his death even at the end. I think about how his death was not like it is depicted in the movies, where the dying person is at peace and says the things they want to say to the people they love, and ties up the loose ends. I had one conversation with my brother about his death, and what that felt like or meant to him. So yes, his death seemed senseless and unfair. He fought his illness for eight years, living in extreme pain, all the while with a colostomy bag. This was a different life from the one he had previously led. I think he had a hard time adjusting to that, and perhaps he never did. This caused me to question the point of any of it—to try to make sense of life and death as so many before me have done. So perhaps, through that process of questioning, I grew in this last domain. My notions of the world being a fair place, ideas about the extent to which a person has control over what happens to them, my understanding of personal motivations, relationships, capabilities, and expectations of the future were all challenged, as well as my sense of my own worth, and my place in it all (p. 47).

I am satisfied that my sister and I had indeed experienced posttraumatic growth since I relate to each domain. I finally turned my exhausted mind off and drifted off to sleep, thinking of my brother and how, in all the growth we have experienced since he died, I see evidence that he was still looking after us, even in death.

Chapter 6: Sunday Morning-Variables that Influence Posttraumatic Growth

We wake the next morning to the sound of rain pounding on our roof, which we are lying very close to because the bed is in a loft in the rented cabin. It is well constructed, however, and we do not mind the rusticity of it all, as it brings us back into a childhood kind of space to talk about our brother. In a sense, I feel like we are sleeping overnight in a fort that we have built. After coffee and breakfast and getting the wood stove going—it is freezing inside without it—we decide we will go for another hike—despite the weather.

“Shall we stick to forest trails today, instead of the beach, to avoid as much of the rain as possible?” I ask my sister as we are packing our backpacks and getting Augey organized for the hike.

“Yes, I think that is a great idea,” Saskia replies. “I am sure most people would think we are nuts to go out in this weather at all.”

“I know,” I laugh. “It’s not a complete day for us without a hike though, right? And we do our best thinking and talking while we walk.”

“For sure,” she replies. “Remember when we were kids and Mom forced us to walk everywhere? How we hated it! You even hid that time in Holland and had the whole place looking for you—just to avoid a walk. How times have changed!”

“No kidding!” I laugh at the memory. I was only about five or six years old, and I hid behind an armchair in my aunt’s house to avoid a walk through Amsterdam. The idea seems ridiculous to me now as I would love a long walk through Amsterdam. “And now we look at hiking as a necessity to our daily lives. Funny how life works out,” I say.

“I would say that is another example of posttraumatic growth—except around our childhood instead of Ivor’s death,” my sister exclaims. We have a good laugh about that, even though we both realize she is probably right.

As we get out of the car in the parking lot at the base of the trail we have picked for the day, it is raining miserably, and the sound of the rain pelting our jackets is loud in our ears. The weather does not diminish the beauty of the forest, however. We both stand for a moment just looking at the scene before us, the massive trees covered in moss, the low-lying ferns carpeting the ground, and the dirt trail twisting through them and disappearing ahead, beckoning us to discover where it leads. The rain falling creates a mistiness around the trees that just adds to the magical effect, and we are both eager to get started on the hike.

“I can just hear Ivor’s voice, laughing at us and shaking his head at our insistence on going for a walk, no matter what the weather,” I say to Saskia as we start on the trail.

“Yes,” she laughs. “He certainly did not experience posttraumatic growth around that part of our childhood.”

“No, he certainly did not,” I chuckle. “Or maybe he did, but for him it was the knowledge that he should avoid walking if at all possible.” Our brother was not one for walking everywhere like we were. He would prefer to drive a truck, or even better, a dirt bike, any day. Today, though, I think to myself, for some reason, it feels like he is walking along with us.

Once we have our pace established, Saskia is the one to bring our conversation back to posttraumatic growth.

“I was thinking last night how funny it seemed that I had that realization on our walk—like it was something I already knew but did not. You know, it was just under the surface,” she begins.

I nod for her to go on.

“It made me think how many other realizations are just under the surface—how much more growth I have waiting,” she says with a laugh.

I laugh too. “Well, I don’t think there is a time limit on growth, is there? Don’t we want to keep on changing throughout our lives? Everything we experience allows us to look back on our past and perhaps see it in a different light, or to see a different aspect of it.”

“Yes, you’re right,” she says. “I guess with every experience I have in life, my response to it is shaped both by what I have been through and my core beliefs and values. So, of course, if I am open to new ideas, my perceptions will be ever so slightly changed with each new experience. Ivor’s death was a jarring experience for me. I guess it stands to reason, then, that the aftershocks, so to speak, can be expected to be felt for a long time.”

“Or, never stop,” I say. “From what I’ve read, posttraumatic growth results from new and novel ways of viewing your experience, such as changes in your perception of self and the world. This can involve a deeper understanding of your experience and making sense out of what happened.”

“So, are you saying that an experience of loss, through the suffering, is being absorbed into our sense of self, in a way?” she asks.

“Yes, I think so,” I reply, as I try to navigate a muddy puddle in the middle of the trail. “This deepened understanding of the self and the surrounding reality allows us to deal with adversities more effectively in the future. I guess what some of the research is saying is that posttraumatic growth is not the actual effect of an experienced trauma, but rather the effect of undertaking coping strategies” (Ogińska-Bulik, 2014, p. 358).

“How we cope with our loss and trauma determines how much posttraumatic growth we experience?” Saskia asks.

“That’s kind of how I understand it,” I reply. “The trauma and loss can force individuals to contemplate the meaning and purpose of their lives; question the very basis of their existence and challenge them to the core—disturbing one’s identity—what you see as defining your life. This can lead to a new found appreciation of life and the challenge of accepting the changes in it. Individuals come to a realization that life can be taken away or that it can vanish at any point.”

“Ivor’s death certainly hammered that one home,” Saskia observes grimly.

“Yes, that’s for sure,” I agree. “And apparently this contemplation of the purpose and meaning of life can often lead to prioritizing life, re-evaluating relationships, and changing values” (Kampman et al., 2015, p. 287). I add, “Of course, posttraumatic growth progress is assumed to be influenced by the characteristics of events as well as pre-trauma individual differences. The posttraumatic growth model indicates that the way one experiences a traumatic event is critical.”

“What do you mean the way a person experiences a traumatic event?” my sister interjects.

“Well, this involves a variety of things,” I reply. “Things like whether the event is challenging or seismic enough to challenge schemas, or how relevant or central the event might be to the person’s core beliefs.”

“How about how emotional distress is managed immediately after the trauma or what kind of characteristics people or the triggering event itself contain?” Saskia asks.

“Exactly,” I say, “and how ruminative thinking occurred and how the characteristics of rumination changed over time, or how self-disclosure through writing or talking was activated.

Also, which sociocultural contexts affect this whole process and how life narratives have been developed. All these things, and there are an infinite number of variations within them, affect posttraumatic growth” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 29).

“No kidding. It seems to me, then, the path to posttraumatic growth can be as individual and unique as the person experiencing it,” Saskia observes.

“For sure, many pathways can exist,” I reply. “Just like the infinite number of patterns and shapes in the nature around us now, people with different personality dispositions may respond to traumatic events in ways that lead to different effects on core beliefs. Persons with different sets of core beliefs may be more or less likely to have such beliefs challenged, decimated, reconstructed, modified, or strengthened” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 29). I look at my sister to see if she is following.

“Well, that seems fairly obvious, but how could you even study that? There are so many variables and contexts of a person’s life that could determine how much posttraumatic growth an individual has achieved—it seems like there could be so many influences...” She trails off for a moment, but I sense she has more to say, so I remain silent. Then she continues, “Like how about whether a person is introverted or extroverted; whether the damage is caused intentionally or not; whether or not the person engages in disclosures about the events to other people; and, the kinds of responses others give to such disclosures? There are so many variables. And what about experiencing too much distress—like, is there a point where a person is so distressed it is not possible for posttraumatic growth to occur?” she asks.

“Well, you bring up an interesting topic—the relationship between posttraumatic growth and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Are they even related? Or opposite occurrences?” I reply. “On its own, that topic is a whole other thesis, but what I do know is that research is

limited and results are mixed—it is unclear whether PTG and PTSD are essentially part of the same construct, overlap, or are distinct and independent of each other” (Dekel, Mandl, & Solomon, 2011, p. 243).

“That’s interesting, I hadn’t even connected the two until now, but of course there must be a relationship, don’t you think?” she asks.

“Well, the posttraumatic growth model suggests that some measure of significant distress may be necessary for growth to occur, although too much distress may impair the bereaved and render them unable to engage in the growth process” (Butler et al., 2005).

I continue, “One article I read concludes that exposure and responses during the trauma, namely, active coping and loss of control, predicted both PTG and PTSD. However, PTG is predicted by unique factors that are not associated with PTSD and vice versa”(Dekel, Mandl, & Solomon, 2011, p. 245)

“Like what kind of unique factors?” my sister asks.

“Factors like the ability to control your own emotions, which predicted PTG above and beyond PTSD, while factors like things that happened before the trauma and personality variables were predictive only of PTSD. Overall, the findings suggest that PTG and PTSD possibly share a psychological engine that sets them in motion, but different factors around the traumas explained a significant portion of the variance of both outcomes. That is only one study though, and I don’t think you can realistically narrow it down to one specific factor that predicts either PTG or PTSD” (Dekel, Mandl, & Solomon, 2011, p. 245). I add, “But, that is beyond the scope of our discussion around posttraumatic growth as it applies to us, I think. Don’t you?”

“Yes, totally,” she replies. “I can see how it can get so complicated and involved. It is exhausting, all the possibilities!”

“Yes, I see what you’re saying, but certain generalizations can be made, I think,” I reply. “Like challenging core beliefs—events that challenge core beliefs, no matter how traumatic these events may seem to observers, are traumatic to the person struggling to understand what to believe about the world and their place in the aftermath of these events. While growth is not an inevitable outcome of this cognitive work, it is quite common under conditions that encourage growth” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 47).

I wonder about Saskia’s experience, and how she felt so rocked by the loss. Was it that our brother had been her constant, her protector, at a time in her life when she was in a difficult and unsafe place? It is hard to accept how unjust it seems that not only did Ivor have that tough beginning in his life, too, but then also experienced difficulties throughout the years, only to die young. I decide to ask her carefully, as I know there is something deep here in her feelings around this.

“Do you think Ivor’s death, touched, or perhaps altered any of your core beliefs?” I ask.

“I have been thinking about that,” she replies. “I do think so. At first it was hard to put my finger on it, because I want to be pragmatic and realistic, and strong—we know those qualities have helped us survive so far, right?” She looks at me.

“Yes, for sure. The belief that you can never show it if you’re faltering in some way. In childhood, we learned to always act like we knew what we are doing. Otherwise someone else might come into your life and try to take over—so you better maintain control at all times!” We laugh at my description, but as much as I am joking, there is some truth to it, of course. Our childhood was chaotic and unpredictable in many ways, so this “fake it till you make it” attitude was our adaptation to maintain control of our lives that we carried with us once we became adults. We try not to rely on too many airy fairy beliefs, as our mother was very much that way.

She was not practical or pragmatic at all, and we wanted to be the opposite of that as adults. As I think about it now, however, since my mother's death, I have begun to embrace some of her more unconventional teachings, or at least be thankful that I had experienced them in my developmental years.

"Do you think that had to do with how out of touch with the real world mom seemed to us?" I ask her.

"Yes, I do, very much," she replies. "Mom seemed like such a victim to me, always at the mercy of the decisions of others. She seemed to have such little control of her own life and what happened in it—I remember at a very young age clearly making a decision that my life would not be like that."

"Me too," I agree. "Has that changed for you since she died? It has been five years now since we all went through her battle with cancer and death."

"Yes, I guess we have been through a lot of loss in the last ten years, hey?" my sister says sadly. I think she is avoiding the question, but then she continues. "Mom is a complicated one for me, and her death was just as confusing to me as her life. How many times did she say she did not want to live in an old folks' home? We all thought she was just preparing us for her living with one of us, but I wouldn't be surprised if she actually willed it or something."

"What do you mean?" I ask. This does not sound like the scientific and logical Saskia I know.

"Maybe she had more control over the way she lived her life than we thought," she replies. "Maybe her aversion to doctors and any kind of idea around the logical progression of events was her roundabout way of reaching a quick and relatively painless death."

“You mean the fact that she wasn’t diagnosed with cancer until the doctor literally palpated a mass the size of a cantaloupe in her abdomen, and then died within three months, was a conscious decision on her part?” I ask, interested where this was going.

“Well, she did not have to go into an old folks’ home.” Saskia looks at me with a smile before continuing. “I guess what I am saying is that as much as I criticized Mom and her decisions in her life, I realized after she died that in some ways her beliefs worked for her, and who was I to say they were not the right ones?”

“You were directly affected by many of her choices, often in a negative way,” I remind her.

“Of course, as a child, it was different. Her parenting style, though, is a separate issue. I’m just looking at the way I judged how she lived her life. Now I find I look at it differently, and maybe her doing things her own way, even if they constantly seemed to put her in a vulnerable position, was a form of power for her.” She looks over at me kind of sheepishly.

“I think you might be right,” I reply slowly. “Once Mom died, I was able to look back at her life and our lives with her through a different lens. I think part of that is that we did not have to be reminded of the not so great parts of her in our day-to-day interactions, so we could focus more on the positive things she gave us.”

“Yes, and it is easier to see that people are usually doing the best they can with what they are given when you are not being hurt constantly by those same people,” she says.

“That is posttraumatic growth, too,” I say. “Perhaps we bring that realization, or that new lens we have into our new or existing relationships, and we approach them or the people within them in a different way—perhaps with a little more compassion and understanding.”

“Yes, I think we do,” she replies. “That brings me back to what started this conversation—whether Ivor’s death touched or altered any of my core beliefs.”

“Yes. Thanks for getting us back on track,” I smile at her.

“I guess I never really wanted to admit it,” my sister continues, “because it reminded me of Mom, but I held a core belief that life evens out in a way, and that it would end up fairly. I know there is much evidence to the contrary in the world, but somewhere in my mind I think I believed that Ivor’s life would get better for him, and that he would be compensated, in a way, for his early sacrifices and struggles. I think this was similar to the blind faith Mom had in everything working out—she didn’t have to plan or figure anything out—it drove me nuts! Anyway, I think I held a similar view that Ivor would be okay, and that his life would be good as a reward for all he did when we were kids. Then he wasn’t okay. He was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer. He lived in shame and unbearable pain for the next nine years. Then he died. It was not fair, even slightly. Of course, I know life is not fair, but I think I held this childlike belief and hope that it would be for him.” I can see the sadness and fatigue in her.

I reflect on how our beliefs about the determination of the course of our lives—whether they are largely a result of chance or our control of outcomes—are probably mostly unconscious for many people. We are not even in a position to consider them until something like this shakes them. My sister was possibly forced to challenge such schemas and to re-examine what she believed.

“So how is it for you now with that core belief challenged? Do you still hold it, or has it changed?” I ask her gently.

“It has changed, or I guess come up to the surface maybe? I think I always knew life was unfair, but because we had survived together, maybe I never believed we would not all get

through it and get to rest, get to experience happiness and success? I guess because I experienced that in my life, I kept waiting for him to get to experience it, and then when he didn't, I don't know, I felt guilt around it maybe? There's that guilt again." She looks over at me as we walk, but I just nod for her to go on, feeling like she is at the cusp of discovery.

"I think I felt guilty because he enabled me, in a sense, to have the life I have today. He could have applied that energy and attention to his own life, and perhaps had a different outcome. Did he take care of my needs at the expense of his own happiness?" I hear the last words catch in her throat.

"I know what you're saying," I say carefully. "As I have mentioned, I feel guilt around the life he led, too. But I am wondering if we are still looking at it the same way we looked at Mom's life? How do we know, really, how satisfied he was with how he lived his life? Sure, he talked about things he would have liked to have done, and regrets he had, but maybe he was fundamentally content and happy until his diagnosis? And maybe, he was happy with the life he was able to lead in the end, even though it was cut short. I feel strongly that he would not have changed anything about how he responded to the childhood experiences the two of you shared. I think he was especially proud of that part of his life, and he did it without even thinking—that was who he was."

"I hope you're right, and intuitively, I know you are, but the guilt still rises up a bit every now and then. Or maybe it's more the injustice of it all," she replies thoughtfully.

"Yes, I know," I say. "I think what is important to our personal growth, and our time remaining in this world, is what we do with that guilt. Do we live the best life we can live, because he cannot, and because he has had such a big part in where we are today?"

“Yes, that feels right, and totally the way I think he would look at things,” she replies. “Maybe it is as simple as growing up and maturing. I feel like I no longer have to fake it till I make it as much around being pragmatic, confident, practical, comfortable, and sure in my own decisions. I feel like his death shook that last bit of airy fairy belief system out of me. Do you know what I mean?”

I nod. I really do. What she is saying resonates with me, too.

“I know exactly what you mean,” I reply. “It’s not like I still don’t see the magic in the world or believe in fate or karma. I like the little quirky beliefs I hold, but I just don’t rely on them any more. They are not part of my core belief system.”

“Exactly!” my sister says, excitedly. “It’s like we can still hold a little bit of Mom’s naivety in our hearts. We can be playful and fun and airy fairy sometimes, but the core of us knows what’s what in the real world—we can shift between those two states, but still live in the real world—not the world of our childhood.”

“Yet another gift our brother gave us,” I say with a sad smile. “The shedding of the last vestiges of the baggage we needed to rid ourselves of from our childhoods.”

Chapter 7: Sunday Afternoon-New Possibilities

We continue our walk in silence for awhile. The steep climb, up a rocky portion of the trail, makes talking difficult. The rain has miraculously stopped, and the sun is shining brightly, giving us a little warmth on this brisk day. Surveying the view from the top of the rocky ridge we have just climbed, I am again struck by how lucky we are to live where we do and to be able to go on hikes like this together. It is not lost on us that we are both older now than our brother was when he died. We have outlived him. It is hard to imagine not being in this world anymore, and again, I feel this urgency to make my time worthwhile, to make sure I am living a meaningful life. This reminds me of my thoughts the night before and another question I have for my sister.

“I think I told you about the domains of the posttraumatic growth inventory, right?” I ask.

“Yes, I think I remember something like that,” she turns, smiling, with a mischievous look.

I smile back. She needn't worry—I am not going to explain them all in detail again—I just want to touch on one. “Well, I was thinking about them last night before I fell asleep and I was trying to think of examples in our lives to see if we had touched on all the domains.”

“And...had we?” she asks.

“Mostly,” I reply, as we start walking along the path again. “I just wanted to ask you about the one that touches on new possibilities—and I wonder if you've felt anything like that since Ivor's death. Have you noticed a shift in your ideas around new possibilities for your life, or the possibility of taking a different path in life?”

“Hmmm,” she says. “I don't think I have really thought about that. Remember when I took six months off work to trek through Peru and do the Machu Picchu trail, shortly after he

died? I remember thinking at the time that it was such an unusual thing for me to do—but I was so exhausted, mentally and physically, that it felt like the only option at the time.”

I know what my sister means when she says it was an unusual thing for her to do. She had always worked hard, raising her son alone while simultaneously putting herself through veterinary school. She did not stop to take a breath once she graduated, working around the province, and finally settling on Vancouver Island. She now owns her own practice and is beginning to reap the benefits of all her hard work and sacrifice. So yes, it was a surprise to many of us when she announced she was taking six months off to hike around South America.

“So, what do you think that was about—do you think it was symbolic of you taking a new path in life—like, literally taking a new path?” I laugh at my own joke.

“I guess so,” she laughs in response. “At first it was just a coping mechanism, but as I learned earlier this weekend,” she looks at me with a sly grin, “coping mechanisms can be the first step along the path to posttraumatic growth.”

“Yes!” I giggle. “And I am loving all these walking and embarking on a new path metaphors.”

We have a good chuckle before she continues. “It started, like I said, as something I had to do. I felt too exhausted to keep working or to just go on with my life as it was. Of course, you cannot help but have a spiritual experience in a place like that, or at least do a lot of reflection. I thought about Ivor all the time, and about the last nine years of our lives with him. I felt rejuvenated by the end, and I remember thinking after I returned to work that I never would have considered doing something like that before. I would have never thought I could leave my practice—my baby—in someone else’s hands for six months and not be a nervous wreck the whole time. I actually hardly thought about the practice while I was gone.”

“So, would you say that experience helped facilitate a shift in you valuing your own health and wellness a little more?” I ask her.

“Yeah, I guess I would,” she replies. “Before that I would not have believed you if you had told me how much it would help me, how much better I would feel by the end. Up until then, I always plowed forward, just kept my head down and kept working towards my next goal. I was the only one providing for my little family, and I felt I could not stop. Wow! I never actually realized it before—that’s so interesting. To think that something I literally felt forced to do by my self-perceived weakness—going on that trek because I felt I couldn’t keep going as I was—could have such a positive ripple effect throughout my life. What I thought was a weakness was actually a strength.”

“Yes, it’s cool really,” I reply. “And I wonder if you would have ever come to that place if not for what you went through in caring for Ivor throughout his illness and through his death. Navigating both his medical care and his hopes. I wonder if that experience was a triggering event for that growth within you.”

“Yes,” my sister says. “I believe it was.”

I think about all we have discussed this weekend as we continue to hike along the narrow forest path.

“What I think I have learned is...” I glance over at Saskia.

“Please, do share,” she says with a smile.

“I think that just as there is no answer for what constitutes right beliefs, there is probably no answer for what constitutes positive change that is applicable to all. Posttraumatic growth is not meant to be a Pollyanna view of the world. It does not deny extreme pain and distress or the difficulty of recovery, let alone the work involved in truly transformative change. In developing

a system of core beliefs that is robust to future challenges, people who experience posttraumatic growth may have simply become more comfortable with more than one way of thinking that allows them to hold apparently opposing viewpoints simultaneously—and this may now feel like a more accurate view of people, the life course, and the world.”

“This resonates with me. As we have talked about this weekend, I have realized my opinion is just that—my opinion—and I am interested in other points of view now, instead of being stuck in my own narrow world,” Saskia replies.

“I don’t think you were ever stuck in your narrow world. I remember you have always been pretty wise,” I remind her. “To me anyway,” I add.

Saskia rolls her eyes at my compliment.

“Well, that may be true,” she continues, smiling. “But regardless, we can only live in the here and now, and yet we constantly change—change and the stress that can accompany it are inevitable in the human condition, and yet with change there is the opportunity for growth” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 198). She thinks for a moment, then adds, “This flexibility enables realization of the possibility of a more complicated experience that helps people to adjust to life after a loss, perhaps alongside a positive change in self-growth.”

“Flexibility does seem to be key,” I reply. “Flexibility leads to enhancing or suppressing emotional expression in accordance with situational demands. People can then seek help actively, or take part in distracting activities at times, but they can also be alone and in touch with the pain, thus facilitating growth and a sense of self-efficacy” (Cohen & Katz, 2015, p. 162).

“Yes!” Saskia exclaims. “Back to the old idea that there is no one right way, or one specific way to achieve posttraumatic growth.”

“And,” I reply, “taking it a bit further, questioning whether experiencing posttraumatic growth even leads to a greater understanding of how to live life well.”

“Wait a second,” Saskia interrupts. “Now you are saying experiencing posttraumatic growth does not lead to a greater understanding of how to live life well. That seems to contradict what we have been talking about all weekend, doesn’t it?”

“I see what you’re saying,” I reply. “Let me clarify what I mean. Experiencing posttraumatic growth helps create a meaningful experience out of the misery of trauma. Creating a meaningful way to live through trauma brings a degree of comfort. But there are many cultural differences in how we think about the ultimate goal of life, so we need to be careful in making decisions about measuring quality of life in relation to posttraumatic growth in various cultures and populations” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 198).

“I see. Now that makes more sense. We do not want to impose our Western ideas of what living a meaningful life might mean to us on others who may not have the same views,” Saskia says.

“Exactly,” I reply. “For example, I think there is a variation between individualistic and collectivistic cultures and the contents and the levels of posttraumatic growth within them. Some aspects of posttraumatic growth, such as developing new interests, having a greater feeling of self-reliance, or establishing a new path in life, could be consider intra-individual. In a traditionally collectivist culture, whether or not a single individual experiences growth may be less salient than whether a group of people or community experience growth as a whole” (Tedeschi et. al., 2018).

“I see what you mean,” Saskia replies. “It seems there are more and more layers to this business of posttraumatic growth, aren’t there?”

“Yes, that’s for sure,” I respond. “It is super interesting though, and I find it very hopeful—like searching for a diamond in a pile of coal dust.”

Saskia smiles at my attempt at a vivid description. “It is hopeful. I know I feel lighter and more optimistic since this weekend began. Dare I say I might even be looking at my grief and loss experience with Ivor through a slightly different lens?” There is a pause before she continues. “So how do you think this research and knowledge you have gained around posttraumatic growth will help you in your new therapy practice?”

“Well,” I reply, “at this point, I can see many implications for focusing on posttraumatic growth in clinical work. Seeing posttraumatic growth as a possible and common process for trauma survivors could mean that, as a therapist, I will be more focused on the definition of the trauma from the point of view of the individual’s core beliefs or assumptive world, and to the degree to which these have been challenged.”

“If you focus on the definition of the trauma from the point of view of the individual’s core beliefs, isn’t there a danger then you could be missing key events in the trauma, or memories that the survivor might not be willing to disclose?” my sister asks.

“Well, of course there is always the chance there is something that an individual does not disclose, but I think if I am more willing to be a knowledgeable companion rather than to assume expertise about another’s experiences that will go a long way to alleviating that person’s reservations around trust. If I am more aware of the domains of posttraumatic growth that may be emerging in the people I work with, and I bring these changes out into the open and focus on them, I hope that may empower them to feel a little stronger in their lives.”

“That sounds obvious but yet I had not looked at it that way, you know what I mean?” my sister asks.

“Yes,” I laugh. “I have felt that same way many times throughout my education—like—a ‘how could I not have seen that before?!’ kind of moment.”

“Yes, exactly,” she replies. “It makes so much sense to approach someone, especially someone who has experienced some sort of trauma, from alongside, trying to understand things from their perspective, rather than telling them how they should be feeling.”

“I agree,” I reply. “I think it is also helpful to focus on the aftermath of trauma, rather than the trauma itself, and to try to integrate my awareness around posttraumatic growth into other standard trauma treatments” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 199).

“I bet you will be surprised about how common trauma experiences are in people’s lives, and maybe these experiences can be mined for ways to enhance the meanings and purposes people use to guide their life choices and everyday behaviour,” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 199) Saskia suggests.

“Totally,” I reply, enthusiastically. “I find that if we are open to seeing them, examples abound of people overcoming diversity and difficult experiences, and finding growth on the other side, even though they may not label it as such.”

“Me, too,” Saskia says. “This all reminds me of a passage that always stuck with me in that book you lent me—*Life Losses: Healing for a Broken Heart* by Janelle Breese Biagioni (2014). After suffering multiple losses in a short period of time, she is faced with yet another loss, the death of her husband, leaving her a widow with two small children. She writes, ‘At 34 years old, and as a mother of two young children, I realized that I had to make a choice: I could give up, or I could somehow find hope to reconnect spiritually and bring meaning back to my life. I chose to fight. In doing so, I discovered a powerful inner strength and wisdom. Moreover, I healed my broken heart and I survived’” (p. 292).

“Yes, that part stuck with me too,” I reply. “In that period of coping, of simply putting one foot in front of the other and surviving for her children’s sake, she found the inner strength and wisdom she hadn’t realized were there, and she goes on to live a full, successful, and accomplished life.”

“I wonder how common this story is in some variation or another?” Saskia asks.

“I think more common than was previously thought. I am inspired to bring this new lens to my therapy practice and to possibly walk with others as they discover strength and wisdom they didn’t know they had as they salvage something positive from their suffering and despair,” I answer.

“Well,” Saskia says. “That sounds great, and hopefully, on a societal level, an increased understanding of posttraumatic growth will produce a greater respect for people who have endured traumatic events. They should be appreciated as people who have been on the hero’s journey and have something to offer the rest of us who only dimly perceive what they clearly see” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 199).

“Yes, perhaps one day posttraumatic growth research will be recognized as empirically based, and people will come to see the importance of a close connection to and respect for people seeking help that is clearly found in humanistic, existential, narrative, and constructivist approaches to therapy. We need to get back to learning from the individuals that have actual experience of what we are treating and studying,” (Tedeschi et al., 2018, p. 199) I reply.

My sister and I do not discuss posttraumatic growth for the rest of our walk, or on our drive back to the cabin, or as we pack up and get ready to leave. I feel we have exhausted the topic and we both feel comfortable leaving it where it is and mulling things over privately. If I have learned one thing about posttraumatic growth it is that it never stops. We are always

growing and learning—provided we remain open to it and come from a place of curiosity. I think my sister and I will both leave the weekend with a new appreciation for all we have gone through and have learned throughout our brother's illness and death, and, in the years to come, will probably still find new and different ways in which we have grown and learned. While I did not think it was possible, my sister and I have become even closer this weekend. In discussing our shared experience, as well as our individual ones, we have both discovered new things about ourselves and each other, which remind us both how lucky we are to have each other in our lives, and to have the connection that we do. As I hug her tightly before we drive in opposite directions toward our regular lives, I can feel my brother's presence strongly there with us, and believe that this weekend, and the subsequent strengthening of our already iron-clad bond, is just one more gift he has given us. I offer up a silent thank you for his continued presence in our lives.

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Appendix A

Dear _____,

You are aware that I am currently working towards my Master of Counselling degree and that writing a thesis is a requirement to graduate from this program. I intend to write on the topic of “What can death and dying teach? An autoethnography of the retrospective transformative properties of grief.” In order to explore this topic, I will be engaging in autoethnographic research which will involve exploring my personal experience of grieving (and, if you agree, your experience), reflecting on the process, and relating it to scholarly literature. I am going to be studying the experience of post traumatic growth and suffering induced transformative experiences. I would like to invite you to participate in this research as it may provide a richer understanding of any shifts in your life around perception, knowledge, and skill since our brother’s death. I would like to explore whether his death inadvertently brought about positive changes in our relationships, self-perception, and attitudes to life, including philosophical and spiritual changes. You may personally benefit by participating in this research as you may find that it provides insight, along with a possible sense of satisfaction in contributing to knowledge that may contribute to the well-being of the bereaved. If you did participate it would involve informal conversation about our shared experience of these topics, which I would record and report in the form of a story. The purpose of the study is to create thick descriptions of lived experience through studying retrospectively, my own and your experience of caring for our brother in his illness and his subsequent death, and then the transformations that may have occurred in our perceptions in the ten years since, in order to help others.

If you agreed to participate we would spend a weekend immersed in these discussions, and I will write mostly about what comes out of those discussions. There are some risks involved in participating. You may find these conversations to be tiring. If you ever feel even slightly tired or uncomfortable, please do not hesitate to tell me and we will take a break – I will check in with you from time to time as well. You may be uncomfortable with particular topics or conversations. You can end a conversation at any time – and a reason does not need to be given, I will accept your decisions unequivocally. If we find ourselves in disagreements regarding how something unfolded, or memories, or there is something uncomfortable, or sore subjects from the past, we can try and find a way to represent that particular issue that we are both happy with, if we cannot it will not be included in the paper. We will always agree on the locations of our discussions to ensure comfort and privacy and nothing you tell me will be judged or criticized. My thesis can be written without your participation, and if you ever feel any discomfort or that it may alter our relationship for the worse, know that you can drop out at any time with no effect on my academic achievement whatsoever, or the status of our relationship.

If you are not comfortable being part of my research, please do not hesitate to let me know. If so, I will not mention you or my relationship with you in any form. I will leave you out of my research by avoiding all mention of my relationship with you and speaking only of my own experiences. If you do consent, when I have completed my thesis, 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. You will see the drafts before approval from my supervisor, so no one else will see the raw data until you approve it. If for any reason you would like to revoke your consent to be mentioned in my study, you can do so without question. I will then remove any mention of you from the study and I will only leave in information regarding my personal experience. I will also provide you with a revised copy of my thesis before publication, so that you can ensure that I have removed any mention of you to your satisfaction. I can not guarantee confidentiality. I can use a pseudonym at your request but given that you are my sister it would not be difficult for a reader to realize your identity. All data that I collect will be on my password protected computer.

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 CityU email address).