

EXPLORING A GRIEVING PROCESS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

by

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## Abstract

Grief is often regarded as a pathological emotion or a set of prescriptive phases, but I believe exploring grief as an adaptive, complex process unique to individuals may create more meaningful and diverse understandings of human experience, thus fostering empathy and connection. In this thesis, I use the autoethnographic method to explore, analyze, and convey meaningful experiences related to my grieving process as a result of my mother's terminal cancer and death through sharing stories and reflections in an embodied first-person narrative. My research questions included: What was my experience of my grieving process? How did I engage in my grieving process and what have I learned about this process? I discovered that my grieving process was deeply connected to the influence that my mother and family have had on me. Our familial culture valued open communication, emotional processing, and the sacredness and spiritual aspects of life and death, which enabled me to make meaning about my grief. Also, my continuing bond with my mother and the way that I expressed it by writing to her helped me to engage in my grieving process and grow from it. I hope this thesis provides some understanding into how grieving can be a source of meaning, connection, positive identity development, and lasting love. Finally, I believe that exploring grieving and the meanings we make of this process may foster self-awareness, empathy, and witnessing in our lives and make us more understanding and accepting of others.

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### Dedication

For my mother, M., who showed me how to love unconditionally, how to have compassion for myself and others, and how to find inspiration and wonder in the world around me. Mom, I carry you and your love with me. Thank you for sharing joy with us.

## Chapter I: Introduction

We don't choose grief, it chooses us. But we do have a choice in how we deal with it. We have the choice to let it be, not to rush it, to honor it in the way that we are called to (Greenspan, 2003, p. 94).

My mother helped to prepare me for facing the reality of her death and the inevitable grief that accompanied my loss. She was an intuitive and loving woman who nurtured a close connection with her children. Perhaps that deep sense of intuition and connection was what guided her to bring me along with her to her oncologist appointment. It was January, 2006; a new year in which we were still clinging to the hope that the colon cancer, which is often curable, had in fact been cured. It had been almost 2 years of bad news, surgery, hope, and then more bad news. The colon cancer had metastasized to my mother's liver, but after liver surgery, we were hopeful that it was gone for good. After surgeries, chemotherapy, and dashed hopes, I still believed that my mother would be okay, like a naïve princess in the fairy tales of my youth.

We arrived at the hospital in Victoria, just the two of us. I don't remember why I was the only one with her; maybe my Dad was working, or maybe my mom knew that I would need to hear the prognosis directly from the doctor. We knew this appointment was important; it would tell us whether the cancer had been successfully beaten back, or not. I don't remember the waiting really, just the smell of disinfected floors, as I tried to keep my breathing measured, calm. I walked beside my Mom, sensing the tension in her body, as if she was about to find out if she had passed some ultimate test of survival. I do remember the oncologist's office: lit with fluorescent bulbs and starkly white, right down to the white board perched precariously in front of us. The oncologist was a woman with

a kind face, and my Mom had spoken highly of her, so I did not busy myself with analyzing or judging her demeanor, perhaps because I wanted to ignore the meaning behind her sober yet compassionate expression, her tentative greeting.

“So, we did some thorough diagnostics to see how things were doing... I’m afraid it does not look good. The cancer has metastasized.” Immediately I am thinking about what she will say next, what treatment, what surgery, what options. But she continues in another direction. She picks up a dry-erase marker and touches it to the white board, drawing a generic outline of a woman’s body. She draws some circles in the lung area, and some near the abdomen.

“There is cancer in your lungs,” she says, slowly pointing to what look like internalized wings on the white board, “and also in your ovaries. There are also cancer cells in your lymph system, and the pain in your back might be from a tumor pressing on a spinal nerve. It metastasized very quickly,” she says, pausing to look at my mother, the marker limp in her hand.

The contrast between black and white on the board mimics the stark contrast of everything before this moment, and everything after. This was an earth-shattering moment, in a quiet, tidy office, in an ordinary hospital. That white board is imprinted in my mind, like an x-ray that reveals something invisible to the naked eye, the difference between life and death: it juxtaposes the reality of the temporary nearness of my mother’s body (who is beside me in this moment and whose hand would be warm if I reached out to hold it) with the prophecy of an inevitable erasure of that warm body from the plane of this world. She will be gone, the board wiped clean, new bodies drawn and riddled with black circles, here in this office. The crude drawing is blurring as I look at it through my

tears and the foggy haze of stunned disbelief. How does my mother, who I love completely and absolutely, feel? That is her body and her life up on that board, and I don't know what to do.

“Oh,” my Mom breathes. “Does that mean its terminal?” She looks at the board and back at the doctor, who is nodding.

“Yes. We will focus on palliative treatments, to keep you comfortable, and we may be able to slow the process down. But we are no longer looking at cure here... I'm so sorry,” she whispers, her eyes welling up with tears. The silence hangs there like an empty page.

After this terminal diagnosis, and this shattering news, I would begin a grieving process that would affect my identity, my relationships, and the meaning that I ascribe to life and death. As Neimeyer suggests (1999; 2001; 2010), losing a loved one shatters our understandings about ourselves, our lives, and our futures, and grieving is a process that allows us to move forward as we reconstruct the meaning of our lives and ourselves. We are relational beings and when we are faced with losing our loved ones, this can challenge our sense of identity and continuity “because we find affirmation for our self-narratives in the responses of significant others” (Neimeyer, 2001, p. 266). Neimeyer's (2001) metaphor for losing a significant other is fitting: “Like a novel that loses a central character in the middle chapters, the life story disrupted by loss must be reorganized, rewritten, to find a new strand of continuity that bridges the past with the future” (p. 263). My expectations and assumptions about my life and my future were shattered when I found out my mother was dying, and I had to find a way to fill the empty pages.

I do not think there is one correct way to grieve, but rather that we are influenced by our culture, social context, relationships, philosophical and theoretical worldview, life experiences, and a multitude of other factors. I see grief as an adaptive and intuitive process that is influenced by our own choices and inherent gifts as well as by forces outside of ourselves (Attig, 2004; Winokuer & Harris, 2012). I believe my view of grieving as adaptive and intuitive has helped me engage in a grieving process that has been transformative, meaningful, spiritual, and honoring of my mother's legacy (Attig, 2004; Hedtke, 2014; Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, Burke, Mackay, & van Dyke Stringer, 2010). Because of my mother's intuitive and wise preparations, and the gifts that she gave to her family, I was able to begin my grieving process before my mom died and also to draw on the meanings that we made as a family about loss, death, grief, and spirituality since losing my mom. Her influence and my family culture of open communication, unconditional love, spirituality, and the valuing of emotion allows me to look forward to my future, in which I hope to pass on my mother's legacy of love in my personal and professional life. I believe that an intuitive grieving process may be more helpful, transformative and inclusive of diversity than grief theories that propose phases, stages, and tasks, which can be pathologizing for people who do not fit into specific models of grieving (Konigsberg, 2011; Neimeyer, 2010).

## **Background**

My mother gave me Greenspan's (2003) *Healing through the Dark Emotions* in the months before she died in June, 2006; I believe she knew that it would be helpful for me to have a wise and compassionate guide who describes the 'dark' emotions as rich soil in which we can learn, grow, and expand, finding gratitude and spiritual connection

in the process of grieving. Greenspan (2003) also highlights how our culture denies death and views grief as something to be hidden or fixed:

In a culture in which death is desacralized and treated as the enemy at the gates, to be warded off at any cost, grief itself is suspect as a ‘tainted’ emotion, and the grieving process is seen in a pathological light. (p. 102)

Greenspan goes on to critique psychiatry and the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) for treating grief like a pathology, instead of as a normal part of life, which it is. In questioning how grief has become pathologized and how we, as a discipline, have labelled it as a disease, a pathology, or a problem to be fixed (Granek, 2010) or understood by phases, stages, and prescriptive interventions (Klass, 2006; Konigsberg, 2011), it is important to consider the historical and theoretical influences that the psychoanalytic, psychiatric, and psychological disciplines have had on grief and grieving. Granek (2010) discusses the historical and psychological origins of grief as pathology, beginning with Freud’s suggestion that everyday human issues such as grief could be included within the study of human behavior, on a “continuum” (p. 51) of normal and abnormal, healthy and pathological. Granek (2010) suggests that these ideas set the stage for psychiatry and modern scientific methods to research concepts such as grief in order to categorize, diagnose, and treat them as disorders in the *DSM*. The historical circumstances and scientific perspectives of knowledge and research affected psychological concepts such as grief:

The development and use of the DSM and the focus on the scientific status of psychology both contributed to the shift of thinking about grief as a

psychoanalytic concept on a continuum to a more distinct diagnostic pathology to be treated by mental health professionals. (Granek, 2010, p. 57)

This dominance of the medical model and quantitative research in psychology may have contributed to us trying to quantify grief through phases, stages, and symptoms, but as a culture, we also have a tendency to shrink away from death and grief (Cait, 2010; Dennis & Kunkel, 2012; Granek, 2010; Klass, 2006; Konigsberg, 2011). Cait (2010) calls attention to our societal fear of death and our culture of ‘death-denial’ and suggests that we try to control grief by medicalizing it and limiting the amount of time that people should grieve.

The importance of Greenspan’s (2003) book is that it reminds us that grief is not a pathology, but rather a deeply human experience that is both universal, and at the same time, unique to each individual. Greenspan (2003) encouraged me to grieve in my own way, and to disregard society’s expectations for me to keep my grief ‘under control’ and within the parameters of time-limited phases and stages, which gave me a sense of validation during the most difficult time in my life. Greenspan (2003) also helped me to consider grieving as a healing and transformative process, using the metaphor of alchemy to describe how grief can lead to gratitude and spiritual expansion:

The gift that grief offers us is the capacity to see deeply into the way things are. Life is limited. We are here for a short time. Grief asks us to know this, not only in a disembodied, cerebral way, but in the marrow of our bones – to look into the reality of death and loss without our usual egoic blinders on. The alchemical gift of gratitude comes from looking into the face of death, not from turning away. (p. 103)

Nevertheless, not all people have been acquainted with a more positive and adaptive view of grief, and the remnants of our culture's aversion to mortality, death and grief may contribute to people feeling stigmatized and pathologized when they are grieving (Dennis and Kunkel, 2012; Greenspan, 2003; Yalom, 2002).

Many theories have been proposed to explain grief and to suggest the appropriate way to deal with, heal from, or cope with it. Theories or models of grief that involve stages and phases may be useful for some individuals who are experiencing grief, but I believe that it could be harmful for counsellors to suggest to clients that grief happens in a certain way and within an acceptable amount of time (Cait, 2004; Winokuer & Harris, 2012). When grief is medicalized, pathologized or seen as a prescriptive, time-limited set of stages (Attig, 2004; Cait, 2012; Winokuer & Harris, 2012), individuals' unique experiences of grieving may be invalidated. I want to move away from harmful ideas about grief in our culture, such as that grief is a pathology that needs to be treated (Granek, 2010) or, as Konigsberg (2011) suggests, that grief is "debilitating" and one can only overcome it by working through "a series of stages, steps, tasks, phases, passages, or needs" (p. 40). If we continue to propagate the notions that grief is a disease, pathology, or defined set of stages or phases, anyone who is grieving could feel pathologized if they do not fit into the idea of what 'normal' grief should be (Greenspan, 2003; Konigsberg, 2011). I agree with Konigsberg (2011) that having set stages, phases, or manualized therapeutic interventions is not necessarily helpful for the majority of people who are grieving. Instead, I believe that the psychology and counselling disciplines, as well as our culture as a whole, need to regard grieving as a unique process, varying in length of time, challenges, and opportunities for growth and transformation for each individual.

Furthermore, we may help to depathologize grief through more qualitative, subjective research, and the vulnerable sharing of stories which help us to make meaning about our lives and connect to others (Berzoff, 2011; Bochner, 2012; Greenspan, 2003; Hedtke, 2014; Neimeyer, Botella, Herrero, Pacheco, Figueras, & Werner-Wilder, 2002).

Fortunately, as Neimeyer et al. (2002) describe, a new grief theory based on constructivist and narrative ideas is emerging in which there is a shift away from stage models and toward qualitative research and narrative, nonpathologizing models of grief. In this new understanding of grieving, meaning making and meaning reconstruction are central, including the transformative and beneficial aspects of grief (Neimeyer et al., 2002). Also, continuing bonds with the deceased, which were once seen as negative and abnormal, are now regarded as normal and perhaps adaptive for many people (Dennis & Kunkel, 2012; Klass, 2006; Neimeyer et al., 2002). As Dennis and Kunkel (2012) suggest, a new paradigm of grief that includes continuing bonds recognizes the possibility that “actual relationships may be maintained, even interactively, despite lacking the material presence of one relational partner” (p. 201). A new grief paradigm that highlights the importance of reconstructing meaning and continuing bonds after the death of a loved one may allow those who are grieving to better understand their identity, their connection to their lost loved ones, and their existence and purpose as they continue to live (Attig, 2004; Hedtke, 2014; Neimeyer et al., 2002; Neimeyer, et al., 2010).

These new understandings of grief and grieving resonate with me because they touch on the human tendency and existential need to make meaning about both our lives and our eventual deaths, including the loss of the people that we hold most dear (Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer et al., 2010; Yalom, 2002). Perhaps my own grieving

process and my tendency to make meaning about my mother's death through such narrative approaches as writing to my mother is what aligns me with constructivist and narrative approaches, which Neimeyer et al. (2002) explain are important for understanding personal grief narratives as a way for people to make meaning about their lives and losses. Through my autoethnography, I hope to explore my process of grieving, not as a blueprint for anyone else's process, but rather to show that grieving can be adaptive, unique, and transformative without specific stages or interventions by a grief expert in most cases (Currier, Neimeyer, & Berman, 2008). Instead, as Neimeyer et al., (2002) suggest, perhaps we as counsellors can be guided by "our faith and celebration of the human capacity to find significance in the experience of suffering, and transformation in the midst of tragedy" (p. 44) and realize that our clients can intuitively find their way through their grieving process. This narrative and constructivist approach to grief theory and research have shaped my worldview and theoretical framework, the lens through which I have conducted my research.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My theoretical framework reflects my postmodern, constructivist worldview, which recognizes that meaning is constructed in social contexts and multiple perspectives should be valued (Creswell, 2012; Hare-Mustin, 2004; Ponterotto, 2005). I am most influenced by constructivism, and the theories that have come out of this paradigm, specifically narrative approaches and theories that recognize "we are always in the process of becoming" (Hedtke, 2014, p. 5) and creating or reconstructing meaning (Neimeyer, 1999, 2000; Neimeyer et al., 2002; Neimeyer et al., 2010). I intuitively used narrative approaches when I was grieving, engaging in therapeutic writing, poetry,

journaling, and holding onto artifacts from my mother in order to make meaning about my loss and to connect with my lost loved one (Neimeyer 1999, 2000). I have also been influenced by Attig's (2001, 2004) descriptions of grieving as an active process that involves freedom and agency as we make and find meaning and consider mysteries of life and death. My grieving process was intuitive and influenced by my mother, my family, my culture, and my inherent personality and intuitive choices, not necessarily by theory; however, my grieving process reflects how my theoretical framework is similar to constructivist and narrative ideas related to making meaning, discovering and shaping my identity, and creating a continuing bond with my mother by remembering her, visualizing being with her, talking to her, and writing to her and about her (Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer et al., 2010). I will further explore my grieving process through a lens of constructivist and narrative theory (Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer et al., 2002). I am also influenced by existential philosophy, which honors the encounter between beings and the issues that affect us all including death, meaning, freedom, choice, isolation, and connection (Yalom, 2002).

An important component of my worldview is postmodern feminist theory and discourse theory, which helps me to consider historical and cultural influences, to challenge dominant ideas, and, as Hare-Mustin (2004) describes, to ask vital questions, of both myself and our psychological discipline as a whole: "What ideas on the margins are co-opted so they lose their transformative potential? How are problems that are complex and challenging too easily dismissed?" (p. 15). These questions become glaringly necessary when considering a complex human experience such as grief. Furthermore, my worldview reflects how feminist theory and postmodern philosophy have made me

acutely aware of the need to make space for alternative perspectives that transcend the status quo and are necessary for understanding diverse human experiences (Bochner, 2012; Denshire, 2014; Hare-Mustin, 2004), which has also influenced my choice to do qualitative, autoethnographic research. We have begun to legitimize qualitative, subjective research that reflects personal processes and lived experiences, but I believe we need to continue to create new ways of representing this research so that we do not fall back on our historical origins of rational, objective, dominant discourses that do not reflect the diversity of human lives (Hare-Mustin, 2004). As Neimeyer et al. (2002) suggest, qualitative research and a new appreciation for constructivist and narrative approaches to understanding grief may help us to value “human complexity” (p. 35) and understand how we as human beings make meaning about “self, family, community, and broader culture” (p. 36) when we are grieving.

The sociocultural aspects of grief that have influenced my grieving process and my research, as well as my choice to use the autoethnographic method of writing will also be considered throughout my autoethnography. As Dennis and Kunkel (2012) explain, grief is situated in a cultural context and is experienced differently across cultures, which is why each experience is unique, including my own. My mother herself helped to create a familial culture around grief, one in which we spoke openly about her death, discussed death as a sacred part of life, processed emotions, and valued spirituality as a way to have an enduring connection with her. She prepared us to see her as continuing to live on in a spiritual way, which we could know intuitively. My mother’s influence and the family culture that she created have guided both my grieving process and my view of the world, and have informed my exploration and analysis of my

grieving process. My story and my grieving process are unique because of who I lost, what my mother meant to me, and how we created a relationship both in life and death that has given me a unique perspective and identity.

My constructivist, feminist, postmodern and narrative worldview, as well as the sociocultural influence of my family, has led me to use autoethnography as a way to explore my grieving process. I wanted to share stories about my grieving process and reflect on how I made and found meaning about my life so that those who read this thesis can further reflect on the universal experience of grieving, which allows us to make meaning about our relationships, ourselves, and the contexts in which we live (Neimeyer, 2010). Furthermore, I chose autoethnography because it moves away from the objective distancing of traditional research, and embraces subjective and embodied writing that makes space for empathy, compassion, and caring (Bochner, 2012; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This moving away from conventional research also means that autoethnography does not require a literature review or discussion section; thus the focus remains on the stories as primary, and the incorporation of theory and literature into my reflections and analysis was a way for me to make meaning about my experience and relate it to the experience of others (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

My subjective experience as well as my worldview has led me to believe that grieving can be defined as an adaptive process (Winokuer & Harris, 2012) that is an active response to loss (Attig, 2004). Grieving also reveals the complexity of being human in that we “respond organically, in all dimensions of our being at once” (Attig, 2001, p. 41), spiritually, physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially. It is also a unique and individual process of meaning making that cannot be dictated by someone

else (Greenspan, 2003; Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, et al., 2002; Neimeyer et al., 2010). Next, I will discuss the purpose for my research and my hope that my autoethnography will validate the grieving processes of others, depathologizing grief and empowering others to recognize its value (Granek, 2010; Greenspan, 2003). I hope that sharing my stories of my grieving process will show that our responses to loss and grief are adaptive, intuitive, and unique to our individual experiences, beliefs, contexts, and ways of being.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative autoethnography is to explore my grieving process with the use of my research questions: What was my experience of my grieving process as a consequence of the death of my mother when I was 21? In particular, how did I engage in the grieving process after the death of my mother? What have I learned about this process? How have I made meaning about my mother's death? What actions and choices helped me to process my grief? And how has my mother's influence affected my grieving process? I explored my research questions through the use of the autoethnographic method, sharing vulnerable stories and reflecting on their meaning. I hope to depathologize grieving by showing that it can be an adaptive, intuitive, and complex process (Attig, 2004; Greenspan, 2003; Martin & Doka, 2012; Neimeyer, 2010). I also hope that sharing stories of loss and grief will help to foster empathy, witnessing, awareness and reflection in myself and others (Berzoff, 2012; Bochner, 2012; Hayes et al., 2007; Neimeyer, 2000; Neimeyer, Roisin, 2015). Finally, I want share my research and my stories in order to honor my mother's legacy and my continuing bond with her (Hedtke, 2014; Neimeyer, 1999).

### **Significance of the Study**

I believe this research is important for counsellors, educators, students, and anyone who works with people who are grieving or who have lost someone because it represents an embodied account of how the grieving process is experienced and how I made meaning of my loss, which may help others to understand the grieving process as a subjective and individual process and to make meaning of their own experiences of loss and grief (Ellis, 1998). I also think it is an important undertaking because Bochner (2012) suggests that traditional research may add to “distancing readers from the actions and feelings of particular human beings engaged in the joint action of evolving relationships” (p. 159), and I believe more research is needed that connects readers to human experience, allows them to reflect on how others live and make meaning, and then make their own meaning, thus creating new knowledge (Denshire, 2014; Bochner, 2012; Ellis, 1998). I hope to contribute something to my profession by taking inspiration from Bochner (2012) who suggests that storytelling in social science “could be usefully conceived as a material intervention into people’s lives, one that not only represents but also creates experience, putting meanings into motion” (p. 157), hopefully encouraging the counselling profession to legitimize autoethnography as an important research forum for diverse voices (Neimeyer et al., 2002). Neimeyer et al. (2002) suggest that personal narratives including autoethnography are important contributions for counsellors to understand loss and grief and constructivist and narrative approaches that foster empathy, diversity, and further research (Bochner, 2012; Denshire, 2014; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Neimeyer et al., 2002). I also feel that grief as a process is best reflected in the process of autoethnography, as both represent the ongoing and unfolding nature of making meaning through communicating with others and contributing to a dialogue in which “self-

narratives represent not only resources for self-reflection ... but also responses to other potential discourses on the experience” (Neimeyer et al., 2002, p. 34) of grief. In this way, I hope to contribute to the dialogue by exploring a grieving process, linking the past to the present, and relating my research to the future of both my personal life and the professional field of counselling.

## **Conclusion**

I have briefly described the historical and theoretical background of grieving, from it being seen as a pathology, to the current state of grief theory which views grief as a universal human process, which resonates with me. I have also outlined my theoretical framework and the cultural contexts that influence my worldview. Finally, I have discussed the purpose for sharing my autoethnographic exploration of a grieving process, which I hope will allow readers, including counsellors, students, and all people who have lost a loved one, to engage with subjective and evocative stories and reflections on grieving as an intuitive, adaptive and complex process. Perhaps more qualitative and subjective research on grief will encourage a movement away from ideas that pathologize grief and are inappropriate in addressing the diverse personal and interpersonal processes of grieving (Neimeyer, 2010). As Konigsberg (2011) suggests, there does not have to be one right way to experience, describe, or view the grieving process: “we have something to learn from the cultural relativity of loss. Different beliefs about grief and alternative modes of healing have value because they remind us that no one particular approach is more effective, or healthier, than another” (p. 195-196). As I will discuss in my next chapter on methodology, I believe that autoethnography is a poignant and appropriate form in which to convey my experience of grief and engage with readers. Through my

autoethnography, I hope to facilitate readers to engage in a process of witnessing and creating meaning and dialogue that fosters their own ability to be reflective, aware, and empathic when they witness others who are grieving or when they encounter their own experiences of grief (Bochner, 2012; Ellis, 1998; Neimeyer, 2000; Neimeyer et al., 2002).

## Chapter II: Methodology

### Introduction

In order to address my research questions related to exploring my grieving process, I used a qualitative method, in particular, autoethnography. I chose a qualitative method because I wanted to do research that reflects the complexities and context-specific experiences of life as it is lived (Creswell, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005). I was drawn to qualitative research because I wanted to convey my experience with accessible language and a first-person voice so that readers can more readily engage with my work (Bochner, 2012; Ponterotto, 2005). I was most influenced by the constructivist paradigm because I value multiple perspectives and interpretations of lived experience and believe that my socially constructed values will be reflected in my research (Ponterotto, 2005). Also, a constructivist approach to qualitative research allowed me to immerse myself in the research with “methodological flexibility” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 134), so that I could conduct my research with more creative license than other forms of research allow.

Specifically, I chose to use the method of autoethnography, which is a combination of autobiography and ethnography in which “the person retrospectively and selectively writes about meaningful experiences ... that are made possible by being part of a culture and from possessing a particular cultural identity” (Adams & Ellis, 2012, p. 199). Adams and Ellis (2012) explain that autoethnography emerged as an alternative to other forms of research which have been associated with oppression and a depreciation of humanity; thus it is a form of research that is aligned with my values of equality and dignity for all human lives and my philosophy that dominant discourses should be challenged in order to make space for multiple perspectives, silenced voices, and

knowledge that may have been disqualified in the past (Hare-Mustin, 2004; Sanders, 2007). Traditional research is written in a way that often creates separation between reader and writer (Bochner, 2012) and re-enforces dominant psychological discourses that privilege expert, established knowledge over subjective, lived experience (Adams & Ellis, 2012; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Hare-Mustin, 2004). On the other hand, subjective writing engages readers and connects them to the writer, encouraging reflection, understanding and empathy (Bochner, 2012), which is why I chose an autoethnographic method. Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe how evocative personal narratives can help to move us away from dominant and conventional forms of research so that we can connect:

The accessibility and readability of the text repositions the reader as a coparticipant in dialogue and thus rejects the orthodox view of the reader as a passive receiver of knowledge; the disclosure of hidden details of private life highlights the emotional experience and thus challenges the rational actor model of social performance; the narrative text refuses the impulse to abstract and explain, stressing the journey over the destination, and thus eclipses the scientific illusion of control and mastery; and the episodic portrayal of the ebb and flow of relationship experience dramatizes the motion of connected lives across the curve of time, and thus resists... portraying social life and relationships as a snapshot.

(p. 744)

Nevertheless, the literature on autoethnography stresses that it is difficult to break from convention (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 1998; Denshire, 2014; Wall, 2006) and the criticisms that suggest autoethnography is an illegitimate form of research. Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that the “conventions militate against personal and passionate

writing” (p. 734), but stories by writers who care about their subject matter and evoke emotion and understanding from the reader are often the most impactful. Perhaps if more researchers engage in autoethnography, we will begin to sensitize people to the lived experiences of human beings who encounter loss, death and grief (Adams & Ellis, 2012; Denshire, 2014; Ellis, 2007; Hare-Mustin, 2004).

Multiple works by Adams, Bochner, and Ellis (Adams & Ellis 2012; Bochner, 2012; Bochner, Adams, & Ellis, 2011; Ellis 1998; Ellis, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) inspired me to realize the contribution I could make to the counselling field by sharing my autoethnography of my grieving process – which may be therapeutic for myself and my readers. Autoethnography and personal narratives may also benefit the fields of counselling and psychology by encouraging professionals to consider universal experiences of loss and grief, as well as their own experiences, in order to become more aware, reflective, and empathic when considering the diversity of human experiences (Adams & Ellis, 2012; Neimeyer, 2010; Roisin, 2015; Winokuer & Harris, 2012). As Adams and Ellis (2012) suggest, autoethnographic research has the therapeutic possibility to change the lives of those who engage with it, writers and readers alike.

Autoethnography can facilitate witnessing and the ability to share stories that may involve stigma, pain, or difficult emotions such as grief (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). In this way, autoethnography allows readers to witness another’s experience, create meaning, and expand their awareness.

### **Design: Autoethnography**

I chose to use an autoethnographic method because I wanted to explore my grieving process, reflect on it, and write about it in a way that may help to validate the

experiences of others (Bochner, 2012). I wanted to engage in research that reflects not only my personal experience, but also my professional perspective, which can be interwoven in autoethnography in order to facilitate self-reflection and an ability to critique the taken-for-granted perspectives in counselling and psychology (Denshire, 2014). I wanted to explore my grieving process from an embodied, subjective, and creative stance, allowing myself the openness and curiosity to see how it would unfold (Ellis, 1998; Wall, 2006) instead of adhering to conventional methods of research, which represent an objective stance that is closed off from an embodied voice (Denshire, 2014; Wall, 2006). Autoethnography can also be seen as an ongoing learning experience (Chatham-Carpenter, 2010) and a process of making meaning (Adams & Ellis, 2012), which are descriptions that I believe also describe my grieving process; therefore, I believe autoethnography is a most suitable form for exploring grieving as an ongoing process of meaning reconstruction and transformation that will affect me throughout my life (Greenspan, 2003; Neimeyer, 1999; 2000; Neimeyer et al., 2010).

More specifically, I chose a personal narrative form of autoethnography because I wanted to share my exploration of my grieving process with readers from a first-person perspective that uses the elements of plot, dialogue, emotion, sensation, and evocative description to invite the reader to enter my experience with me and “use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). I also wanted, perhaps selfishly, to learn more about my own grieving process and “understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). Bochner (2012) expresses that “personal, emotional, and embodied narratives” (p. 157) are important in social science for connecting our lives to our

research so that our work is meaningful and others can engage with our work and learn from it. My experience of losing my mother has been one of the most transformative of my life which may be why I feel compelled to share my stories and reflections; I hope they will be meaningful and “make a difference” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742) to those who read them.

I have been inspired by other people’s stories of loss and I have always had an affinity for language and writing that makes me feel, which helped me to choose to write personal narrative autoethnography. However, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) highlight, autoethnography of all forms are not necessarily distinct and have even become “blurred genres” (p. 742) along with other forms of literature such as memoir and even fiction. In other words, I do not feel that I have adhered to strict notions of what personal narrative autoethnography is, rather I have included aspects of poetry and literary autoethnography, and even allowed myself to write some parts that are fictional in order to protect people’s identities and to fill in memory gaps while keeping the essence of my story (Ellis, 1998; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In other words, I have attempted to write literature that I would want to read myself. Ellis (1998) captures the higher purpose of writing an autoethnography on loss:

[M]y colleagues and I seek to tell stories that show our experiences as lived intimately and deeply; that represent the uniqueness of our losses, yet connect them to the losses of others so that they might be used as points of comparison or lessons in living; that may offer guidance in figuring out how to live; that encourage tellers and readers to re-story their experience and themselves as survivors while acknowledging the pain of loss; and that help all of us – writers,

readers, and participants in the studies – to understand and cope with our own losses, heal wounds, create meaning, and move ahead with our lives (p. 50).

This description reminds me of first-person narratives that have allowed me to feel along with the writer and connect to an awareness that there is a global community of people who have lost loved ones and who are grieving. Before she died, my mother gave me Greenspan's (2003) book *Healing through the Dark Emotions*, in which the author shares her grief over the death of her child as well as the experiences of the many clients she has seen who have also struggled with difficult emotions. My mother also shared other books which described poignant stories of loss, illness, death and grief, which I found to be particularly comforting. Even though these works were not classified as autoethnography, the authors reflected the spirit of the genre in that they used the self as subject and expressed both personal experiences and discussions about the therapeutic, medical, and psychiatric fields in which they work (Denshire, 2014; Ellis, 1998; Wall, 2006). I have drawn inspiration from these texts which are healing reminders of how my mother continues to care for me, on a spiritual level, which I will explore further in chapters 3 and 4.

### **Participants and Procedure**

I have explored my own grieving process, with myself as subject. I have described my relationships with my mother, who is deceased, and my family, who are part of my social and cultural context (Wall, 2008). I have protected the identity of my family members by not using their names, and I have also obtained their informed consent to write about our family in my research (see appendices A and B). I will further discuss the ethical implications of doing autoethnography below, in ethical considerations

(Ellis, 1998; 2007). I used my journals, artifacts and gifts from my mother (such as cards, letters, journals, jewellery, collages, and photo albums), family photos and home videos, artwork, poetry, my memories, and literature as sources of data, all of which are relevant to the exploration of my grieving process and my relationship with my mother, family, and culture. I also relied on my memory of ‘epiphanies’ that captured the essence of my grieving process (Adams & Ellis, 2012).

Wall (2006) argues that we should choose and perform our methodology thoughtfully when doing autoethnography. This is why I have chosen to use the methods described by autoethnographic researchers such as Ellis (1998), Bochner (2012), Ellis and Bochner (2000), and Muncey (2005). Even though autoethnography does not have a straightforward method (Wall, 2006) and allows for some creative license, there must be some limitations and direction for autoethnography. For instance, Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest using emotional recall and systematic introspection, which allowed me to remember my “physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions” (p. 737) in relation to my lived experience, and write about these details of my life in a way that is not necessarily chronologically accurate, but is true to the emotion and meaning of my experience (Ellis, 1998). Muncey (2005) suggests using snapshots, artifacts, metaphors, and journeys as sources of data; I primarily used my journal, in which I had described my thoughts and emotions after my mother’s death, and my family’s home videos, in which we had gathered much footage of our family conversations and events in the months leading up to my mother’s death, as well as before that. I also relied heavily on my vivid memories of my experience which are rooted in my very being because of their emotional poignancy and the meaning they have come to represent in my life. The metaphor of a

tree reminds me that I am connected to my mother and grounded in my familial culture, as I have grown through my grieving process, and I further explore this image as a metaphor for grief and transformation, identity, and connection throughout my thesis. Adams and Ellis (2012) suggest that autoethnography uses these sources of data to discover “patterns of experience” (p. 201) to “produce an artful and evocative thick description of personal and interpersonal experience” (p. 201). According to Ellis and Bochner (2000), autoethnography also emphasizes the “moment-to-moment” (p. 737) experiences and details of life which require the author to be introspective and observant enough to question themselves and honestly explore their emotions, memories, contradictions, and connections, which I hope I have done.

I believe the strength of autoethnography is that it breaks from convention and allows more creativity and uncertainty. I have learned about my grieving process through the process of doing autoethnography, and reflecting on what it was like to live through the experience of witnessing the death of my mother and grieving that loss. I am drawn to a more fluid approach to writing, and I have included poetry, excerpts from my journal, and aspects of story such as plot, dialogue, and descriptions of the context in which my narrative exists (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 1998; Wall, 2006). I have also used layered writing, or changes in voice, such as from speaking about my mother to speaking directly to her, which I hope will reflect different levels of consciousness, from the wider cultural view as well as the visceral and embodied experience of my grief (Adams & Ellis, 2012; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I have also included aspects of my mother’s voice to reflect our continuing bond and her primary role in my autoethnographic narrative, as her influence is what drives me to tell my story and share her legacy of love with my readers. All in all,

I have attempted to create an evocative autoethnography that resonates with readers and that feels true to life (Adams & Ellis, 2012; Ellis, 1998; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

### **Analysis**

I have drawn my analysis from multiple works by Adams, Bochner, and Ellis (Adams and Ellis, 2012; Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011; Ellis, 1998) which describe autoethnography as a combination of autobiography and ethnography; from this stance, I have written about ‘epiphanies’ that arose from my experience of being part of a culture and analyzed my experiences through self-reflection, comparison with relevant literature, and the theoretical lens of narrative, constructivist, and meaning reconstruction theories related to grief (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer, 2010; Neimeyer et al, 2002; Neimeyer et al., 2010). Some methods of analysis that I used were researching the topic of grief and studying artifacts related to my own grieving process, as well as other items that represent other people’s experiences (such as books, literature, and movies; Adams & Ellis, 2012) and comparing my experience and process to the existing literature and artifacts related to grief (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). I analyzed my narrative by relating my grieving process to theory and existing knowledge, but I did not do this at the expense of the narrative; rather, I only did this when I felt it was appropriate and necessary, such as when I recognized themes and patterns of experience (Ellis, 1998). Ellis (1998) suggests looking for themes that stand out, in order to try to make sense of them if possible, which I have done, including themes such as accepting the reality of the loss, death as a sacred part of life, a challenged sense of identity, processing difficult emotions, seeing grief as a unique process of transformation, and acknowledging the spiritual side of grief. Philaretou and Allen (2006) suggest

reading the material several times and highlighting relevant themes that have sociocultural and psychological significance in relation to grief, which I have done with both my journal and home videos. While reading the material I had written – my personal accounts of the stories depicted in family home videos, my journal, and my memory – I would take notes in the margins, identifying themes and sub-themes (Philaretou & Allen, 2006) that I believe reflect the meaning and significance of my stories, in relation to grieving and experiencing the loss of a loved one.

Because autoethnography is not a conventional form of research, it does not need to be guided by traditional forms of analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), and I used different methods at different points of my writing. For instance, sometimes it was useful for me to get distance from a chapter or journal entry about which I had written, and then to go back and look for themes and patterns in order to make meaning of my process after I reflected on it; at other times, I would review literature that inspired me to look at my experience from a wider point of view; and still at other times, I asked others if they could help me to see my own experiences in a new way, such as my partner, my family, and my thesis advisor. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) suggest that writing about cultural patterns through evocative storytelling may allow the research to be more accessible to diverse readers, providing opportunities for transformation. With this in mind, I connected my autoethnography with ideas about grief from my sociocultural context and existing literature and cultural interpretations of grief. However, my narrative truth, including the themes I have identified in relation to my grieving process, are the focus of my story.

Bochner (2012) suggests that autoethnography, as first-person narrative scholarship, “aspires to truth, but these truths are not literal truths; they’re emotional, dialogic, and collaborative truths” (p. 161) that can exist between reader and writer; therefore part of my analysis is presented as a discussion of themes that are true to my process and that came out of reflecting on my stories and making sense and meaning of my grieving process. However, I have attempted to leave space for readers to see themselves in my writing, by drawing attention to contextual, social, or cultural issues without over-emphasizing analysis (Adams & Ellis, 2012; Ellis, 1998). As Ellis and Bochner (2000) highlight, evocative narratives and their “authors privilege stories over analysis, allowing and encouraging alternative readings and multiple interpretations” so that readers can “feel the truth” (p. 745) of an autoethnography and also create their own meanings and truths. From my constructivist worldview, I am also aware that my story will always be in a process of change and reconstruction because I am narrating from the present, with my current knowledge, identity, and state of being allowing me to interpret my past from a different perspective than the one in which I experienced my grieving process (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Hedtke, 2014; Neimeyer, et al., 2002); in other words, my autoethnography represents a kind of personal narrative ‘truth,’ but not a true representation of ‘reality’ because, as Hedtke (2014) suggests, I am a person who is ‘becoming’ and I “do not have only one true story” (p. 5).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The most important ethical considerations in autoethnography are informed consent, confidentiality, and the need to protect the identities of research participants and minimize the risk of harm to all the people involved in my research, including myself

(Denshire, 2014; Tolich, 2010). I have written about the death of my mother and my grieving process, so this work could affect my family, and I needed to be aware of the risks involved. I did not ask my family members to actively participate in my research, but they are identifiable due to our relationship, so I sent each family member a letter outlining my research topic and methods, informing them of the potential risks of participating in the study, such as being identifiable, and the fact that they can withdraw consent at any time with no negative consequences (see Appendix A). They all signed consent forms (see Appendix B). To ensure that I regarded informed consent as an ongoing process (Denshire, 2014; Ellis, 2007), my family members were able to review a copy of my autoethnography before I submitted it, in order to see if they were comfortable with what I had written about them. If they had chosen to revoke their consent to be mentioned in my research, I would have removed any mention of them, and allowed them to review an edited version, to ensure that the changes were acceptable to them. If my family members did not want to sign a consent form, I would not have included them in my autoethnography, and I may have had to use creative methods such as symbolic equivalents, composite characters, and fictional elements (Denshire, 2014). Or, I may have had to leave my family out of my writing all together, and only written about my own experience and personal memories of my mother, her death, and my grieving process. I am grateful that my family gave me consent to do this research.

Another ethical issue of autoethnography is relational ethics because I have written about my grieving process and my personal experiences, which are impossible to remove from my family because I am tied to my social context (Adams & Ellis, 2012; Ellis, 2007; Wall, 2008). Relational ethics refer to the inevitable connections and

responsibilities that researchers have to the people in their personal narratives and research, and their need to uphold the values of respect, dignity, and ethical action (Adams & Ellis, 2012; Ellis, 2007) because these people have rights (Tolich, 2010). Therefore, I prioritized my consideration of relational ethics in order to minimize risk to my family and those who know myself, my family, or my mother, and who may be affected by my autoethnography (Wall, 2008). As Tolich (2010) suggests, it is important to consult with both the IRB as well as to be self-reflective and minimize harm by not including information that I do not want my family to read. Nevertheless, even though the IRB approved my research, I continually revisited ethical issues, such as leaving out details that may be hurtful for members of my family or myself. I still revealed personal information about my life, and the people with whom I have shared both love and loss, but I was careful to reflect and carefully consider these details before including them (Ellis, 2007; Wall, 2008). As a final thought on relational ethics, I have also had to resolve my ethical concerns about writing about my mother, who is deceased, and thus cannot give her consent (Ellis, 2007). I know that the spirit of my autoethnography is to honor my mother's memory and the positive impact that she had on my life, and I feel that she would support me in writing a heartfelt and thoughtful account of my grieving process, which illustrates my deep connection to her.

I have considered all of these critical ethical concerns throughout my research and writing process. In order to address these ethical concerns, I used only the initials of my family members, and I did not provide data that I believed would harm the reputation of my mother, my family members or anyone who knows us, and I did not include information that would make other people in my story identifiable (Adams & Ellis, 2012;

Denshire, 2014). The people who will be the most affected by my autoethnography, my family, were given the opportunity to read it before I submitted the final draft. Ellis (2007) encourages autoethnographers to continue to question themselves and to talk to others in order to keep reflecting ethically and getting consent throughout the research and writing process. As Wall (2006) suggests, the “inextricable link between the personal and the cultural” makes autoethnography a rich, powerful form of “co-constructed meaning” (p. 9), and it was helpful for me to share some of this process with my family.

Finally, I am my own research subject which brings up the issues of self-harm, self-care, and the need for me to only share what I feel is ethical and safe for me to make public knowledge (Denshire, 2014; Ellis, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Tolich, 2010). One consideration of being my own research subject is that I need to take responsibility for what I write, since anyone could one day read what I put out into the world (Ellis, 2007). Wall (2008) also helped me to question my ability to determine the ethical issues of my research, because, as my own research subject, I am subjectively and emotionally tied to my own experience. Another concern of using autoethnography is the risk of stirring up difficult emotions such as shame or unresolved grief while researching my grieving process (Denshire, 2014). Ellis and Bochner (2000) emphasize that doing autoethnography can be painful, vulnerable work, especially because I cannot control how my work will be interpreted or judged. It has been a challenging and difficult journey at times, but it is one that I am grateful to have travelled with self-care and a support network of caring and helpful people such as my fiancé, family, friends, colleagues, my thesis advisor, and my counsellor.

## **Conclusion**

I have briefly discussed my decision to use qualitative research, from a constructivist perspective, in order to explore my grieving process. I have also provided an overview of autoethnography, including its purpose, benefits and ethical considerations, as well as my reasons for choosing personal narrative autoethnography as a way to learn more about myself, connect my experience to larger sociocultural and psychological ideas, and share my exploration with readers in a way that is engaging and meaningful. In chapters 3 and 4 I will explore my grieving process with the use of “action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739) so that I can convey how I made meaning about losing my mother and experiencing my grieving process, which affected my identity, personal growth, relationships, spirituality, and ultimately, my continuing bond with my mother.

### **Chapter III: A Grieving Process Begins with the Guidance of my Mother**

*My grieving process began with the shattering news from the oncologist that my mother was terminally ill, but even then I could hardly grasp how her death would unfold, who I would be without her, or how I would deal with the loss of the most important person in my life. Facing loss was like the breakdown of my current reality (Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer, Burke, Mackay, & Stringer, 2010; Winokuer and Harris, 2012), which created a sense of disbelief and a primal fear that somehow I could not survive without my mother. In a sense, this shattering of my assumptions about life – that my mother would live to be an old lady who I would have around until I was at least middle-aged – broke me open, and my grieving process became a way for me to make sense of the new reality I had to face (Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer et al., 2010; Neimeyer, Botella, Herrero, Pacheco, Figueras, & Werner-Wilder, 2002), one in which my mother would no longer be alive. Reflecting back now, I see grieving as a process of creating new meanings about loss, death, life, myself, and relationships so that I could survive my loss, exist in a new world, and face the uncertain future (Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer, et al., 2010; Neimeyer et al., 2002). I now realize that, as Neimeyer (2010) suggests, making meaning of a highly disruptive life experience allowed me to create “a system of beliefs” (p. 67) that help me to move forward with my life and my self-narrative (Neimeyer, 2001).*

*The context in which I would begin to grieve and create my new belief system was the familial culture that my mother created: it was a culture of open communication, the safety to process emotions, unconditional love, and spirituality. I intuitively drew on these elements of my context while engaging in my grieving process. It was my mother’s*

*influence and intuitive ability to guide my family that allowed me to begin to grieve and find ways to cope and make meaning about such a profound loss. I will share the stories and themes that have shaped my understanding of what it means to lose someone you love and to experience grieving as an ongoing, adaptive, and transformative process.*

*The most important aspects of my first stories of grieving reflect themes related to my engagement in my grieving process with the wisdom and influence of my mother, while she was still alive. For instance, the familial culture that my mother created of emotional vulnerability and safety, open communication, unconditional love, and spirituality enabled us to have meaning-making discussions that would help to shape my grieving process; through the influence of my familial culture I was able to connect with my family, recognize my potential for growth, find new spiritual meanings about life and death, and relate my past identity with “the one that has survived the unbidden transition” (Neimeyer et al., 2002, p. 34). As a family, we helped one another to consider how spirituality and the mystery of the soul can allow us to transcend even death, and to connect with our lost loved ones in new ways. My mother’s encouragement for us to grieve in our own way and see death and loss as a sacred part of life helped me to engage in a grieving process that has ultimately led to me telling my story almost 9 years after losing my mother. The inevitability of death and loss, as experiences that all human beings face during their existence (Neimeyer, 2010), is what led to my grieving process in the first place, so my story begins there.*

### **Stories of Facing the Reality of Loss**

#### **“I don’t want to lose you”: A story of the visit to the oncologist**

After getting the news from the oncologist that my mother is going to die, I am in disbelief. I feel numb and stunned. I am not ready to have my hope obliterated by a stopwatch counting down the days of the only person that truly knows me. The prognosis tumbles around my dumbfounded mind: 6 months to a year, but it could be shorter or longer...

We leave the hospital and sit in the car for a few surreal minutes. I feel like there is a stone in my throat, a panic welling up from my belly, and an overwhelming desperation of limitless fears and emotions churning down from my head, meeting in my throat.

"I can't believe it," I choke out. My Mom takes my hand and rubs it between hers, her silver bracelets jingling, reminding me that she is here with me, for now.

"I think I knew this was coming," she finally says. I look at her face, which is tear-stained, but calm.

"I sure didn't," I say. "I really thought you were going to be okay. After your liver surgery, didn't they use the word 'cure'?" I ask desperately, trying to order my thoughts so I can find that memory, or was it just my own mind creating a story of false hope? "How could they let us think that everything was going to be alright? What am I going to do without you?" I feel angry and cheated but also guilty that I am adding to my Mom's burden. And beneath that nasty mixture of emotions is the disorienting fear of unimaginable loss. How can this be happening?

I break down, giving up the fight against my tears, letting the tide wash over me. The panic in my throat is still there, and it's spreading to my chest, choking out my sobs

and making my thoughts race: fears that life will be meaningless without her; that I will not survive; that life will be empty. But if I feel this messed up, what must she be feeling? It's her life that was on that white board, I think to myself.

"I'm sorry Mom... are you okay?" I manage to say through my tears.

"I will be. I guess I expected this somehow. It's hard to explain... I just had a feeling," she says.

"I just ... don't want to lose you," I say as a fresh storm of tears surges down my face. Perhaps my Mom knows the fears that are overwhelming me because she has always been intuitive and able to tell when something is on my mind. Perhaps she even knows that these fears will not come to pass; that I will have a meaningful, transformative grieving process that allows me to continue to love her and remain connected to her, even after she dies.

But in that moment she says, "I know this is hard for you, sweetheart. I know..." she kisses my hand and puts it on her own wet face. "This dying thing is a part of my journey, and you losing me will be a part of yours... I love you and I know you'll be okay."

*My mother would have to reassure me many more times that I would be okay. I did not accept that my mother was going to die after the shattering news, it would take many more months of grieving, seeing my mom get sicker and sicker, and making meaning about death, loss and grief before I would come to some level of acceptance that she was really going to die. I clung to the idea of the 6 months to a year, hoping that it could somehow be wrong, or at least a gross underestimate of the actual time she would*

*live. Unfortunately, these hopes were unrealistic, and may have caused me even more pain than necessary.*

### **Facing death, and the losses before it: A story about moving home**

*The visit to the oncologist was in January, and by April, our mother was very changed. I met my parents in Victoria to move home after leaving nursing school in Vancouver. When it became apparent that the cancer was aggressively killing her, I wished that I had moved home sooner. I had harboured the hope that she would get better for so long, and I believe there was still a naïve part of me that did not think she would decline as rapidly as she did.*

I plan to travel home with my parents, who are in Victoria for one of Mom's radiation treatments, to help shrink the tumor that is causing her the most pain, pressing on a nerve. When I meet them at the hotel, I am shocked to see how much she has changed in the months that I have been away. My mom is half dressed in her favorite white night shirt, worn and partially transparent. The skin on her legs is sagging because she has lost so much weight so quickly, and it is strange to see her so unnaturally slender as she has always been a curvaceous, pear-shaped woman. She is also jaundiced due to another tumor blocking her bile duct.

I hug her and hold her, happy to be with her but feeling how small she is in my arms. I try to push away my shock, but the physical changes have dashed any naïve hopes I had that she might have some sort of miraculous recovery. I had clung to the doctor's 6 months to a year prediction, hoping for the latter, but less than 3 months have gone by, and she no longer looks healthy. She is medicated and exhausted. I know she is happy to

see me, but it is not the same joyful, teasing, energetic reunion that I have always received from her in the past. I want to blame the radiation, and pretend that she is still okay, but I know we are beginning to lose her. A wave of grief washes over me. I do not know how long she has to live, and that makes me feel panicky, as if I am losing control, sliding down a slippery embankment, grabbing and reaching for anything that I can hold onto.

I watch how gentle and attentive my father is with her, sensing a new dynamic, a need for Mom to be supported by us. I can no longer rely on her to comfort me or reassure me that I will be okay because she needs me now. I can no longer rely on her to hold me up. I tell myself to ‘be strong for her,’ but behind that mantra is the fear that I am too weak to rise to the occasion. A nauseating concoction of fear, shame, anxiety, and regret mixes with my grief. I wish I could go back in time and be a better daughter, less selfish and more giving.

After the long drive home, we settle my mom into her bed at home. My father and I are sitting in their bedroom with her, chatting quietly, as she gets comfortable, propped up on pillows. She has her black journal in her hand, and is trying to describe something she wants for her celebration of life, the service after she dies. But we cannot understand what she is trying to communicate. It seems like she has some sort of grand plan, something to do with pictures and music, something that I desperately want to grasp. She continues to try to explain, but she is not getting any more detailed or coherent... The morphine seems to be dulling not just the pain, but her ability to string her thoughts into meaningful sentences: “you know, Mur... the pictures...with the, um... and that song... you know ...ummm... oh, that one lady... um... she’s got the purple thing... you

know...” I ask her to hum it, but she ends up looking down at her journal, pondering an empty page. We encourage her to write out the idea, or draw it for us in her journal, hoping to understand what she wants to tell us. She wrinkles her face in concentration, and starts to put pen to paper. Painstaking minutes go by, and I try to keep my hope at bay, because it has gotten me into trouble before. Such as the last Christmas – just before we went to the oncologist – when the words I gushed into the video camera by the light of our Christmas tree were: “And thank goodness Mom is cancer-free!” Less than a month later, we would get the news that she was not cancer-free, that, in fact, she was full of cancer, and dying.

A few long minutes later, my Mom looks up and raises her eyebrows, her eyes half closed, exhausted by the effort. She hands the journal to me, which I take from her with great anticipation, anxious to understand. I look down at the page, but I see nothing but black squiggles. I give myself a moment to scan the page, flip it over, but there is nothing more. I look back at the loops and lines, trying to decipher some hidden code, imagining for a moment that I must be able to read this. I have never felt misunderstood by my mother and she has always been a wise and thoughtful communicator, so to not understand her is surreal. The writing still doesn't make any sense to me. I fight back tears, feeling like a failure, and feeling overwhelmed with disappointment and grief as I hand the journal to my father.

“That was a long trip, Mom. You must be tired... Maybe we can figure it out tomorrow. I'll make some tea,” I say, finding a lame excuse to go to the kitchen and sort through feelings that are so disorienting and hard to wrap my head around. I realize that I can no longer communicate with my mom in the way that I am used to, or understand

what she is trying to tell me. I feel the beginning of a void opening up. I am losing her as small physical and mental changes add up to monumental losses in this overwhelming moment. *Why didn't I come home sooner?* I ask myself, as I am being pulled into blackness, the loss becoming a vacuum that threatens to suck up the meaning and connection in my world.

### **Facing the reality of the loss: Shattered identity, meaning, and beliefs**

*She was my mother, but she was also my best friend and the person who I identified with the most. It was hard for me to wrap my head around losing the person that I loved most and who loved me more than seemed humanly possible. Her death felt like a threat to my own life because how could I survive without the person who made me feel like a worthy human being, accepted me completely just as I was, and loved me with a love so deep that it felt like the source of my life? It was nearly impossible to imagine. When I first found out that my mother was dying, I did not know if I could survive it. The person from whom I sought advice, connection, unconditional love, and safety was going to die. Facing the loss of my mother also meant facing the “loss of support, nurturing, protection, and security” (Dietrich, McWilliam, Ralyea, & Schweitzer, 1999, p. 83) that she provided, so it is not surprising that this threatened my identity.*

*The fear of my identity being compromised or my life becoming meaningless due to losing my essential role model and primary attachment figure (Bowlby 1969, 1973, as cited in Winokuer & Harris, 2012; Dietrich, et al., 1999) may be what drove my grieving process to begin. News of her death was like the shattering of my assumptions about the world and my place in it, including my safe and meaningful identity as my mother's beloved daughter (Winokuer & Harris, 2012; Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, et al., 2010).*

*As Neimeyer (1999) suggests, from a meaning reconstruction perspective, we make meaning about who we are and what our experiences mean “in specific negotiations with intimate others” (p. 67), and I was faced with losing my most significant relationship. This disrupted my sense of identity and became a threat not only to my understanding of myself, but the overall meaning that I attributed to my life and beliefs, as Neimeyer, et al. (2010) describe:*

*The loss of a primary figure who provides this critical “mirroring” risks eroding the selfhood of the survivor. In sum, for a myriad of reasons, losses can challenge the fundamental conditions that sustain one’s actual lived experience, undercutting one’s broad sense of meaning and coherence. (p. 74)*

*Looking back, I realize that my mother’s inevitable death was not in line with my picture of how my life would unfold, and it was very difficult for me to fathom. It may sound strange, but I think on some level I felt that I existed and was worthy to exist because she loved me. I was the daughter she had always wanted, the apple of her eye, and I did not want to find out who I would be without her there to reflect back to me that I was lovable. Would I even matter? Would her death obliterate my worthiness? These fears were subconscious at the beginning of my grieving process, but now I understand that they were very much a part of what was driving not only my grief over losing my Mom, but my inability to conceive of who I would be without her. As Attig (2004) describes, “our personal integrity and identity are shaken by loss. Bereavement penetrates to the core of our being” (p. 348).*

*In a sense, facing the reality of the death of my mother was the shattering which would necessitate my need to engage in grieving as a process of meaning reconstruction*

*(Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, et al., 2010), so that I could make sense of my world again. It is only now, looking back into my past, that I see how much I needed to ponder questions of identity and meaning in the years of grieving after my mother died. However difficult, it was necessary for me to face the inevitability of death and the fears and unsettling questions that accompanied this new awareness so that I could begin grieving and creating meaning about my identity, relationships, and beliefs about life and death (Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer et al., 2010). What I realize now is how complex, unique, and multifaceted grieving is; the shattering occurred even as pieces of my identity were being picked up: I was the daughter who had left home to start my own life, and yet, I was also the daughter returning home to be with my dying mother; I was both losing myself, and finding myself; not knowing what to do, but knowing that I needed to be with my family; feeling so much grief, but also feeling so much love. Like the prism of light refracted through a shard of glass, the deep purple of grief existed alongside other emotions, such as gratitude and joy, hope and connection (Greenspan, 2014; Hedtke, 2014). As Attig (2004) says, “grieving is about rising above our suffering, reaching through the agonies of our loss ... to reaffirm meaning in life” (p. 355).*

### **A Story of Transformative Gifts: A Visit to the Bookstore**

*I believe that my mother knew my grief over losing her would be both a daunting journey and an expansive area for growth, and she helped me to gain some measure of direction and grounding in order to help me on my path. She spoke of her death; she allowed me to grieve and cry while she was still alive to hold me and tell me I would be alright; and she chose some helpful guides for my journey, in the form of authors who had written books that resonated with her and that would help me to feel less alone. One*

*book that impacted me the most was Greenspan's (2003) Healing through the Dark Emotions, which allowed me to see grief as not only a difficult emotion, but also as a journey to transformation and expansion.*

*I can still recall that intuitive and future-forming visit to the book store with my mother. It was as if she knew my grieving process would be a rich area for self-discovery and exploration, as well as a difficult journey that would often feel directionless and disorienting; requiring reminders that there was hope and new meanings to be found about life and death.*

“I think you’ll like this book, Mur. I’ve heard it’s good. Helpful for people who are grieving,” she says as she looks up the book on a computer in the bookstore.

“Okay, thanks mom,” I say, in a bit of a daze, not fully comprehending the point of ordering it now, since I am not ready for her to die.

“It’s not in right now, but I can order it and have it mailed to you. Does that work?” she asks, gently touching my arm, bringing my attention back to her.

“That’s fine,” I say, hoping to avoid any further ‘death discussions’ for the moment. I don’t feel like talking about her dying, or my grieving, or anything to do with losing her right now. I just want to enjoy being together. It’s too hard to imagine her being gone right now, or to imagine me being motherless.

“Let’s just finish ordering it, and then I’ll buy you a coffee.” She senses that I have had enough talk about death and grief today. She has always been able to switch from heart-to-heart, soul-baring conversation to the welcome distraction of lighter chit-chat. I am grateful for her ability to attune to my emotional limits and needs; she has also

taught this to me by osmosis, and I can tell that her buying this book for me is really important to her. It will be one of her final gifts to me, and it will shape how I engage in my grieving process and ultimately who I become. It is more than a book, it is her way of ensuring that she is there to support me, even after she is gone. It will help me to write my new story, to figure out where I am going and who I will be.

I look at her face, her velvety and wrinkled cheek a perfectly complexioned olive that sets off her deep brown eyes and silver grey hair. She looks over at me with her beautifully crooked smile and says, “All done!” And all I can think is how lucky I am to have her as my Mom.

Her bracelets jingle as she takes my hand in her warm strong grasp and leads me away from the computer and my hesitance to talk about a book that will help me deal with her death. Nevertheless, she is gently preparing the soil and planting the seeds so that my grief can grow, and transform me into the person that I am becoming and will become after she is gone. I squeeze her hand as we walk out the glass doors, and into a cool gust of wind, and a few wayward drops of rain, a sure sign that a storm is coming and that the earth will soon be soaked in a quenching downpour.

### **Grief as a process of becoming**

*I feel grateful that I had some time to explore death, loss and grief while my mother was still alive to gently guide and support me. I am able to look back now at my memories of our time together as stories of my mother preparing me for life without her, and preparing me to become the person that I am today. As Hedtke (2014) suggests, “we are always in the process of becoming – that is, who we are is always being constructed*

*in the context of relationships and that these relationships are formed against the cultural backdrops of stories” (p. 5). Part of my process of grieving would be to come to a more spiritual understanding of life and death, which would unfold slowly with the help of my family and my own reflection and personal growth during my grieving process.*

*Greenspan (2003) helped me to see that grief could expand my identity, carrying the potential for “transformation: a wholly new awareness of reality, self, beloved, and world” (p. 93) if I was willing to go through my grieving process. Both my mother, and Greenspan’s (2003) writing, allowed me to regard grieving as a way to connect us to ourselves, to one another, and also to something larger, a spiritual realm that may become more accessible when we lose someone that we love.*

### **Grief as a unique and intuitive process**

*I would return to Greenspan’s (2003) writing again and again over the years, not only because it was a link to my mother, but also because the author inspired me to see grieving as a unique process in which I could let my intuition guide me to find my own way. Greenspan (2003) argues that we should not listen to experts who tell us that grief should occur for a certain length of time or in a specific way, but rather to recognize that grief “ebbs and flows like the tide – but without the predictability” (p. 104). My mother also encouraged us to grieve in our own way and to consider death and grief as life-changing experiences, difficult as well as sacred. From the gifts that my mother gave me, especially Greenspan’s (2003) book, I learned that I could grieve using my own intuition, doing what felt right for me, making meaning of my experience, and processing the emotions that were a part of my grieving process. I also was able to simply ‘be with’ my grief as a witness and participant in my mother’s dying process, learning through this*

*sacred journey that “grieving is a landscape that is so varied and so vast that it can be discovered only through one’s own most intimate experience” (Park & Halifax, 2011, p. 361).*

## **Stories of Grief and Emotional Processing**

### **Grief as a relational emotion: A story of a mother’s heartbeat**

*I have a memory from when I was a teenager that foreshadowed the loss of my mother. I don’t remember the circumstances that led to the fear of losing her, perhaps I had a bad dream or maybe I was just pondering mortality, but I can vividly remember how my mother helped me process my emotions in the moment as well as help me to see the beauty of sharing emotions and processing emotions in relationship with a loved one.*

I am sitting on my bed, wrapped in the duvet with pink flowers and green leaves that my mother bought for me. She is sitting beside me, comforting me. I feel a mixture of emotion: fear, sadness, and a sense of grief for the losses that I will face in my life. Tears that I do not want to cry are welling up in my eyes. The realization that life does not last forever is devastating. The awareness that we lose the people we love is like reaching a high point on a hike, anticipating a view of the beautiful landscape that you have grown to love, and looking down only to see that the trees have been clear cut, and the forest has been decimated.

I look into her tender and concerned brown eyes as she asks me, “What’s on your heart, love?” as she always does when something is bothering one of her children. She wants to unburden us, to ease our worries and wrap us in her loving arms. For as long as I can remember, she has been there to let me speak what is on my heart. The tears slip

from my eyes; I don't want to let the fear escape by speaking it, but I also do not want to carry it alone. She has always been there to carry any hurt, any fear, any difficult emotion or troubling thought.

"I don't want you to die," I say, my voice quivering, my eyes squeezing shut as I try to contain the feeling, to somehow lessen it. "I don't want to lose you," I sob.

"Oh sweetie, what makes you say that?" she asks, gently rubbing my back. "Did you have a dream that I would die?"

I am shaking with tears and wiping my eyes, the flow is strong, like a waterfall eroding my ability to control my tears. "I don't know..." I cry, my voice small, afraid. "I don't know... I just have this weird feeling. I don't ever want you to leave me..."

She pulls me into her warm strong arms, arms made to hold her children, gently rocking me side to side, saying "I'm right here. It's okay... it's okay. Let it out." And I have full permission to feel these difficult feelings brought on by my awareness that loss is inevitable, even the loss of the people that we love with every cell in our body, every fibre of our being.

"Loss and death are a part of life," my mother says. And we have recently experienced this, since her father, my grandfather, died. She misses her father tremendously. She also lost her own grandfather when she was very young, a man she adored, so my mother is no stranger to grief and loss. She understands what it is like to grieve the loss of a loved one, and to not understand why they have to leave us. She is fully with me in this moment. Not giving me false hope, or taking the pain away with lies, but letting me grieve and cry for losses that I will have to face in my life.

“But so are love, joy, and relationships... And we have such a special bond, Mur. I am so grateful to be your Mom, and to share this life with you. I know it’s hard to think about these things. But I could get hit by a bus tomorrow, or I could live to be old and grey. We just don’t know... That’s why we need to live in the moment. To love each other now,” she says, still rocking me.

“Thanks, Mumma... I love you,” I say, the tears beginning to ebb, but my breathing still ragged.

“I love you more,” she says quickly, in her deep, humorous voice that makes me smile. And then she just holds me, rocking me as my head is pressed against her chest. I am listening to her heart beat, a sound that has probably calmed and comforted me since before I was born.

*That memory was years before my mother was ever diagnosed with cancer, but it is burned in my mind. I remember exactly how she made me feel that day, and whenever I was with her: safe, loved, nurtured, accepted, and never ever alone. She was home for me. She allowed me to feel difficult emotions without feeling ashamed for feeling them. She encouraged me to express what was ‘on my heart’ in the moment, which helped me in my grief because it allowed me to recognize that there is wisdom and value in feeling ‘dark emotions’ (Greenspan, 2003), processing them, and learning from them. My mother was an intuitive and loving person, who encouraged emotional expression and loved her children just as they were. In this way, my mother’s very essence, her way of being in the world and mothering her children was her way of preparing us for life, and the inevitable loss of her. As her daughter, I learned that we could engage in grieving*

*with support from people who love you and accept you just as you are, which allowed me to care for her when she was dying and grieving her own losses.*

### **A story of the emotions that exist alongside grief: A daughter's heart aches**

I crawl into bed with you and let the worn feather duvet settle back on top of you, ensuring that I am gentle. I know you are feeling sick and weak and I want to be there with you. The room is dark, and I draw myself up against your back, as you let out a small sob, quietly, like the mewling of a kitten for its mother. I cradle you and can feel your body is tense with emotion. I know I am welcome when you hold my hand with your warm hand. I can feel my own tears welling up as you cry. I have always taken our cuddles and hugs for granted. It's hard to imagine not being able to physically hold you...

It feels strange to hold you in this way, comforting you as you have so often comforted me. I have my arm around your waist gingerly, afraid that I will irritate the tumor in your back. I hate the invader inside of you, the cancer that is making you feel pain and that will eventually take you away from me. I hold onto you, as you cry into your pillow, being with you in your grief, feeling it with you as I try to contain my own grief. And it is so hard to ache for you, to know that you are struggling with death, with your own process. Is this the pain that you have felt when your own children's hearts have been hurting? You have ached for us countless times, and I can barely tolerate holding on to the immense pain that exists in this moment. How have you been so strong? The only thing that saves me, that allows me to hold it together, is the infinite love that exists alongside the grief.

*I am grateful that I was able to comfort my mother and be with her in her grief; in these moments, I began to see my own strength, the strength that she had told me I had. There is a power in connection and holding the pain of another person. Bearing witness to someone else's emotional journey has helped me to have more compassion not only for others, but also for myself throughout my grieving process.*

*We supported one another; she supported me in the beginning, and then my family and I supported my mother near the end of her life. There were many times that I sat with my mother and just cried, and simply told her how much I loved her and how much I would miss her. She was so patient, and she let me grieve openly. However, there were also times when I felt that I needed to cry alone and process my emotions without her support because she was dealing with her own grieving process, facing the uncharted territory of death and leaving behind a whole life that she thought was ahead of her. Witnessing not only her process, but also that of my siblings and father, I have begun to realize that grieving is an ongoing and unique process, different for each person (Greenspan, 2003; Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, 2010), and also influenced by those around us.*

*My mother and family also helped me to see that death is a part of life and that the grief that accompanies loss is just one emotion of many that allows us to be connected to one another. Just as love, joy, and gratitude are emotions that arise and shape my experience of my relationships, grief has also affected the way that I see the world and connect with others, even leading me to be grateful for the limited time that I do have – and have had – with those that I love (Greenspan, 2003; Park & Halifax, 2011). In the last months of my mother's life, I did not take our time together for granted,*

*instead I savored the moments we had, and, over time, I learned to appreciate more and more the gifts that my mom gave to me. For instance, Greenspan's (2003) book helped me in a multitude of ways after my mother was gone, such as by allowing me to see grief as an emotion that can enrich my life and afford me a more expansive view of the world and people, connected as we are by our losses, grief, and suffering as well as by our relationships, love, and joy.*

### **A story of grieving together: A memory boat for Mom's last Mother's Day**

On the last Mother's Day that we will celebrate with our Mom before she dies, we write down our memories of her on yellow squares of construction paper. We put them in a pale blue ceramic memory boat that reminds me how delicate life is and how precious our memories are of life with the people we love. My brother L. sees the memory boat as a metaphor for our mother's journey and our journey with her. We have embarked on this voyage together, but we know that Mom will be going on ahead of us, leading the way with courage, grace, and wisdom. We read some of these memories out loud to her with tears and laughter. Unfolding each one to share it, and then returning it to the boat, like a pile of precious yellow stars in a periwinkle canoe.

I am sitting beside my mom on the couch, she is in a thin cotton robe with purple flowers, a strange compliment to her yellow complexion which has become jaundiced due to a tumor blocking her bile duct. She is so gaunt now, her collarbones and sternum protrude from the top of her robe. Her eyes look so tired, and they appear half-closed most of the time. Her voice is weak and small, but I know she is listening to us and to our humble and grateful gift of our memories of a life with the person who has loved us fiercely and unconditionally.

We see the past through new eyes that appreciate how capricious life is. Memories come rushing back, as if blown in on the wind like leaves from a tree. Fragments of images and stories that were full of joy, fear, and laughter are shared. We remember the moments that were emotionally charged, that struck us like lightning, including the accidents and illnesses that threatened life. Perhaps those memories tend to stay with us because they carry the worry that we could lose someone we love; the inevitable threat of death looming like storm clouds on the horizon during the course of our lives. And here we are revisiting these memories with our mom, who is visibly on a path to death; the storm is closing in, both awe-inspiring and terrifying in its power. I am filled with conflicted feelings: a strange juxtaposition of gratitude for the life we have had and fear of facing the death of the person that I love most.

I unfold the sturdy yellow construction paper on which my memory is written, and struggle to get the words out through tears. “Mom, I remember you always being there to take care of me when I was sick... You would rub my tummy and bring me toast with honey and let me sleep in your bed. I am so grateful that I now get to be home to take care of you.”

Tears are streaming down my face, and I gently lean into my Mom’s chest. She quietly mutters a ‘thank you.’ She is here, but she is fading so quickly. She is frail and we cannot communicate in the same way that we used to, which makes me feel lost and broken. But I can still hear her heart beating in her chest, the sound with which I resonate most in the world. I do not want to let go of her. I hold on to her for several deep heartbeats, hoping to pass my love for her through this embrace, so that she knows that my love is just as unconditional, and deep, and high as hers is for me. I know the secret

that E.E. Cummings (1952) conveys in the last stanza of the unparalleled poem [i carry your heart with me(i carry it in)]:

here is the deepest secret nobody knows

(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud

and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows

higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)

and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

I think to myself: I want you to know the infinite depth of my love. You always did know the secret of how to love unconditionally Mama, and you loved me with your actions and your words, from the time I was born, to this moment when I am here with you, facing death. And I have learned the secret of unconditional love from you, and I will carry it with me always.

*My father took a picture of this moment, when I am crying into my mother's chest, and it holds the essence of a daughter's breaking heart, one snapshot in my long process of grieving. I still find it difficult to look back at those pictures and home videos of my Mom's last few weeks of life because she is so changed. She looks like someone who is wasting away. My mom was eating less and less as the weeks went by, her cheeks are sunken and she looks so much older than her age of 52. But these artifacts from when she was sick are also moving because they portray connection, through the time spent caring for our loved one during her transition from life to death. They also portray grief, and*

*how, even in the midst of loss and suffering, we can care for the people we love who are dying and find some comfort in being together. These captured moments reflect that grieving can be an actively emotional and behavioral process in which we still have choice and agency (Attig, 2004). We have choice in how we want to engage in our grieving process, such as my family choosing to create a special Mother's Day that honored both grief and gratitude, loss and connection (Greenspan, 2003; Hedtke, 2014).*

### **Grief and gratitude: An emotional legacy of love**

*It was meaningful to share our memories as a family – from my father's memories of navigating the ups and downs of life with his significant other including the joy, worry, and humor of having 5 kids, to my siblings' memories of special moments with our mom – all of which convey the unconditional love and compassion that she had for her family, and how we experienced that love in tangible ways. Sharing those memories with her was a way for us to say 'thank you, we won't forget you, and loving you has meant so much to us.' This process was a way for us to honor our mother's legacy of love while she was still alive; it also prepared us for honoring her legacy after her death, in our own unique ways (Attig, 2004). Attig (2004) describes the power of memories and lasting love:*

*Those we grieve have given us their legacies to have and to hold after they have died. Their legacies include not only physical property and genetic heritage but also memories and influences on our practical lives, souls, and spirits. We can experience their continuing love for us as we acknowledge these gifts. We in turn give their legacies places in our hearts, in the vital centers of our lives. (p. 356)*

*This resonates deeply with me, like my mother's heartbeat, because sharing my stories about my grieving process has been a way for me to honor my mother's legacy and carry her love with me.*

### **A story of fragments of my mother's last weeks of life: Peace and anguish**

In the last weeks and days of my mother's life, we continued to grieve together, and support each other. When Mom felt up to it, we would go get ice cream and drive along the ocean in Campbell River, so that she could see the expansive horizon and breathe fresh air. Other times we sat around our living room, my brothers and dad playing their guitars and leading us in songs, many about God and heaven that we knew from growing up in church. My mom would sing along with us as best she could, remembering the poetry of the psalms and the familiar melodies that brought a sense of peace. We found comfort in music, a soothing balm that filled the house, so we often listened to our favorites, from new age Enya to classical music, from opera to gospel, and from Coldplay to our beloved Bob Dylan. There were also moments of quiet, as a sense of peace and sacredness settled on our home, especially near the end. One or more of us would gather in our parent's room, sitting beside our Mom or lying in the old double bed, just to be near her. She was usually propped up on pillows amid my old purple paisley quilt, and often half asleep, as if between two worlds. In her room, we took turns holding her hand, reading to her, singing to her, or resting near her as she slept. Many moments near the end of my mother's life were peaceful and full of love, and also full of grief and anguish.

My memories of your last few days are mostly fragments; some forgotten, some dulled with the passage of time, smooth as sea-glass, and others like broken shards, still so sharp that I have to regard them with awareness and agility, unwrapping them from

their shrouded place carefully, intentionally, and sometimes only partially, just to feel their poignancy, to consider what they mean, what they say about me, about us. What are the most difficult memories? What was the hardest part for you, Mom?

Not being able to communicate anymore... *What I wouldn't give to hear you say "tell me all the details" one more time.*

The fear of the pain, the fear of suffering. The fear of death. *The suffering... your suffering...* I am so thankful you were well cared for. The hospice nurses... so kind, so compassionate. The doctor... so available, so thoughtful. Dad... so strong. *We were lucky.*

But still... *the pain, the fatigue, the confusion... the uncertainty.*

You, eating just one bite, then nothing. Not eating. Not drinking. That was so hard. Wetting your mouth with sponges – your tongue white with thrush... *Not drinking means death.*

Your body becoming bones... sagging skin and bones. Your face yellow, gaunt. Your eyes half closed and far away. *Mom, are you okay? Tell me if you're comfortable, Mumma. Are you in pain? Can you hear me?*

Near the end, you stay in your hospital-style bed, facing the window, and we join you there. Sometimes you see things that we cannot: "Look at that baby over there... all those people in the trees..." These visions bring me some peace and comfort; I feel like you are seeing something that is meaningful to you – perhaps you can see into the spiritual realm of lost loved ones that you are moving closer to, as the veil of this mysterious world is lifted. I may never know, but I hope that near my own death, I can

see you perched in the trees, waving to me, winking, and smiling your beautiful crooked smile.

The last time we brought you out into the living room, you fell into such a deep sleep on the couch. I couldn't wake you, you couldn't hear me. I was terrified that I couldn't reach you. I was afraid that you would never wake up again. I wanted to shake you, hard, to bring you back to us. *Mom. Wake up. Mom!*

You had been sleeping for hours on the lumpy couch and we wanted to get you back to bed. Dad and the boys helped to wake you, finally. But you were confused and crying. Moaning. We just wanted to get you up from the couch to your walker, to roll you back to bed. You feel so fragile, like you could break in our arms. During the lifting and shuffling, you bite your lip. And seeing the blood on your mouth and hearing you cry makes me feel so helpless and overwhelmed. *Are you okay, Mom? Does it hurt?* But you don't answer, you just cry. Inconsolable. It is so hard to not be able to communicate and ensure that you are okay. I don't know if you are in pain, sad, or confused. You are still here, but I miss you so much already.

I let Dad and T. put you back to bed, as I stand in the hallway, fighting back tears and the panic rising in my chest like fire. Feeling useless. Feeling weak and ashamed for being so anxious, not hiding my distress and perhaps adding to yours.

This moment would stay with me and whenever I flashed back to it in the next few months, I felt a sense of helplessness and despair, of wishing I could have done more and feeling like somehow I fell short. Those were the hardest moments, the most frightening feelings, and the sharpest fragments.

**Death as a sacred part of life: Peace and anguish**

*Sharing these stories reminds me that witnessing my mother dying was sacred and peaceful, just as much as it was anguishing and shattering. There was a sense of being near something mysterious and beautiful that I could not quite name or understand. In reflection, I believe it was a glimpse of the essence of what it means to be a spiritual being, with a soul that transcends the physical body (Callanan & Kelley, 1997; Greenspan, 2003). As Callanan & Kelley (1997) describe in their book Final Gifts – another book that my mother encouraged me to read – dying people often reveal new vistas of awareness, “drifting back and forth from a consciousness of this existence to an awareness of the next” (p. 30) which can help those of us who are witnessing their dying process to realize that they are more than a physical body. One example of the peace and comfort that I felt through sensing my mother’s new awareness as she was dying was when she would share her visions of other beings or souls that seemed meaningful for her: the baby on her windowsill or people in the trees outside her window. I could explain them away as morphine induced hallucinations, but even if they were, I did not regard them as such; in fact, they brought tremendous comfort to me because I sensed that my mother was okay, that she would be well cared for as her soul journeyed out of our physical plane. I still feel that these visions of spiritual beings were lost loved ones that my mother hoped to be reunited with, people that had gone on before her, just as she was going on ahead of me to a spiritual and mysterious place that I could not quite envision, but that I could at least appreciate.*

*Being with my mother during her dying process and navigating all of those aspects of being human – the suffering and the fear of pain and loss, the sense of spiritual*

*awareness and peace, the deep and overwhelming grief, and the questions about mortality and life after death – were so powerful and sacred; witnessing that process helped me to not fear death in the same way that I had as a teenager, when I was anticipating the future loss of my mother. I came to a place of acceptance that I did not have all the answers, becoming comfortable with embracing the mystery of both death and the nature of the soul after death. Witnessing my mother dying and grieving that loss brought what matters into focus for me, appreciating life for what it is, even the hard parts, and accepting that death, as a part of life, could teach me about living, loving, and grieving more than any other experience. Park and Halifax (2011) describe how spiritual transformation may occur in those who are dying and those who witness dying:*

*An old woman once told a caregiver that wisdom and compassion are not given to us; they can only be discovered. The experience of discovery means letting go of what one knows. When an individual moves through the transformation of the elements of loss and grief, he or she may discover the truth of the impermanence of everything in life and, of course, of this very life itself. This is one of the most profound discoveries to be made. In this way, grief and sorrow may teach gratitude for what one has been given, even the gift of suffering. (p. 361)*

*There was comfort and peace in sharing this journey with my family, the joy and the sorrow, and the poignancy of ushering my mother into the next life, just as she had wanted. It was a privilege to be with her and bear witness to her final earthly transition, a journey that gave us pause, that slowed us down so that we could exist in the moment to honor a life lived, to share our love of a woman who taught us how to love unconditionally, and to support and hold a human being that was leaving her worldly*

*body. However, as Callanan and Kelley (1997) suggest, as much as there is love and peace in witnessing the dying process of a family member, there can also be unparalleled pain, suffering, and distress because death is often seen as a “fearsome and unwelcome visitor” (p. 31), imposing on us questions about mortality, suffering, and difficult emotions such as grief and anguish.*

### **Difficult memories and emotions: Finding a way through**

*Telling these stories of life, death and grief is also a way for me to process the more difficult memories, and to honor that they are still difficult for me to process. There is still pain there. Some aspects of my mother dying are still hard for me to recall and ‘stay with’ (Neimeyer, et al., 2010, p. 76), but those parts are also full of the experiences and emotions of what it means to be human and to share this impermanent life with those that we love. As I have told these stories, I also realize that grieving is ongoing and in a constant state of change; my grief has changed over time, just as I have been transformed through it. The flashbacks that I used to have of my mother suffering or becoming more and more sick, are not as painful as they once were, perhaps because I have found ways of coping with and processing my emotions (Neimeyer et al., 2010). As Greenspan (2003) taught me, grieving is a process through pain, not the avoidance of pain; and I continue to find my way through grief by processing emotions in intuitive ways, such as allowing myself to cry and grieve, to reach out for support, and even to distract myself if I need a break from the pain (Greenspan, 2003).*

*Grieving is also a process of making meaning of difficult emotions, which have the potential to teach us about ourselves and the world when we are “connected to a process of inquiring deeply into the suffering that is part of everyone’s life and spiritual*

*journey” (Greenspan, 2003, p. 7). Neimeyer et al. (2010) suggest that exploring “the hardest parts of the experience and ‘staying with’ them until the associated images and meanings can be held with less anguish” (p. 76) can be helpful for making us aware of what aspects of our loss are most challenging for us. For instance, revisiting some of my more difficult emotions and memories has helped me to consider what meaning I can give to these memories (Neimeyer et al., 2010); for example, grief was a “wake-up call” (Greenspan, 2003, p. 6) to the reality of death as a part of life. Looking back now, I realize how much I have grown and how much my view of the world has changed. Grieving allows us to experience an expansion in our perspective, as Greenspan (2003) suggests, so that we can see and understand (perhaps for the first time) that we are not alone in our suffering: “When the heart breaks open, the ego starts its journey out of isolation – ironically, just when it is most bereft” (p. 97). I believe this broader perspective can make us more compassionate toward others who are suffering, because we have lived it, felt it, and experienced the anguish and the loss that connects us to the whole of humanity (Greenspan, 2003; Neff, 2003). This view can also help us to be more compassionate with ourselves; for example, I have come to realize that I did the best that I could while my mother was still alive. She did suffer pain, confusion, and grief, and I was not able to take it away, nor was I meant to. I did what I could with what I knew then; looking back on my younger grieving self, I try not to dwell on how I could have been a better daughter or sister. However, it took me years to come to making this meaning out of the most difficult aspects of losing my mother and seeing her suffer, and there are memories that I still struggle to ‘stay with’ (Neimeyer et al., 2010). I do not want to gloss over the pain. It bears repeating: the pain is still there, and it still hurts,*

*and I still miss her so much; however, much of the time I am able to “attend to, befriend, and mindfully surrender” (Greenspan, 2003, p. 13) to my difficult emotions and memories so that I can learn from them and find meaning in them; at other times, I remember that the difficult emotions and memories are part of what connects me to others who are suffering.*

### **A Story of Making Meaning of Death and Grief as a Family: Our Trip to Tofino**

*My mom had helped to prepare our family to make meaning about death and grief so that we could come to new understandings about ourselves, our connection to one another, and our ongoing connection to her after her death. The gift that allowed us to engage in facing the reality of losing her, processing emotions, and grieving together, was a trip to Tofino. This story reflects many of the key themes of my grieving process, including those I have tried to highlight in all the stories that have come before it. I have drawn on this story about Tofino for inspiration in exploring my grieving process, after stumbling across one of our home videos. I believe it conveys not only the beginning of my grieving process, but also the ways that we began to explore death, loss and grief, and to make meaning as a family. For me personally, it allowed me to hear how my loved ones, especially my mother, were feeling and thinking about everything, which would help me on my own unique journey of grieving after my mother’s death.*

*This trip was one of the ways that my mother helped to reinforce the values of our familial culture which had honored love and connection as the foundation of our family; death as a sacred part of life; emotional vulnerability and emotional processing as valuable; honest, open communication and humor as welcome; and spirituality as an integral part of who we are that allows us to connect with something beyond the physical,*

*such as the souls of our lost loved ones. These values of our family culture helped to shape my grieving process and also to prepare me for what was to come.*

### **Facing the reality of the loss**

My mother planned the trip to Tofino after our visit to the oncologist. She knew she was dying, and she wanted us to all be together one more time while she was still feeling like herself. Of her 5 children, only my youngest sister was still living at home, but we all made it there, though the journey was hardest for my Mom. A tumor near her spinal nerve caused my mother so much pain that she had to come a day late, after being hospitalized and given morphine.

I arrived with my oldest brother T., my second oldest brother, L., my younger brother F., and the youngest of us, my sister M.. Our parents arrived the next day. Our Mom was feeling better, and we found ourselves all together, in a condo overlooking the wild winter ocean in Tofino: the perfect backdrop for discussions about death, which can feel like a winter storm. We brought along our video camera and were able to record much of what was said and shared on that weekend in February, 2006. We began by walking on the beach, and enjoying the abundant and wild beauty of Tofino. When we settle back in to the living room in the condo, my mother begins a conversation with her family that has become a part of her legacy of love and the north star for my process of grieving.

My creative and soulful brother, L., is filming my mother. She is perched on the biggest leather chair by the window, her legs tucked under her. Her grey hair is cropped short, and she is wearing her velvet, indigo blue top. We are sitting around her on various

couches and chairs, her 5 children, and her husband, who we all refer to as Dad, even my Mom. We know she wants to talk to us, and she has our full attention. We are not usually such a quiet bunch, but today is different. She looks at the camera to make sure the green light is on, and begins.

“So I’m dying... and I wanted to film this conversation so that in the future you could look back and remember what we talked about, and also have a good laugh about this,” my Mom says, smiling at us. “Everyone’s kind of been told the goods about my health, and just before this weekend, the pain escalated a bit, which was not totally unexpected...”

“So I just wanted to say a few words,” she continues. “The prognosis isn’t good. I am getting sicker, faster. Which means it might be a surprisingly short journey out, like a few months, but it could be another year or two because mysterious, strange things happen. Sometimes doctors say ‘I don’t know why, but it just seems to be holding back.’ I just wanted to have a weekend where we could all be together and I could tell you that I’m okay. I’m feeling well supported. Dad is supporting me as my primary caregiver, and you all have different roles,” she makes a point of looking at each of us. “What I ask of you guys is to support each other. You all need each other.” She nods toward my father, “Dad, you wanted to say something.”

“Hi everybody. That was a great introduction...” my dad begins, looking slightly stiff in front of the camera, as if he is about to give a sermon. He is holding a book about dying that has helped him to prepare to be Mom’s support person, called *Final Gifts*.

“Well thank you, I’ve been preparing all week,” my Mom laughs as my dad smiles and looks toward the camera. I’m sitting beside him, ready to soak up everything my parents want to tell us, hoping to absorb some wisdom about facing one of the most profound losses in our lives.

“Mom was diagnosed with cancer about a year and a half ago, and we’ve been dealing with that knowledge, and surgeries and chemotherapy since then,” my Dad continues. “There’s been some really good times in there, where Mom has been healthy... and there have been some really difficult times of suffering and struggle. Last week we went from regular medical care to palliative care, which means the person is dying and they are no longer trying to cure. So now we are just trying to keep Mom comfortable...”

I can feel his quiet strength and his need to convey a message of hope with us, and with his wife, our mom. I am aware of my oldest brother beside me, who is holding back his emotion with a furrowed brow. I can hear my sister crying softly across the room, and my heart aches for her. I have barely come to terms with the fact that Mom is dying, and I was in the oncologist’s office to hear the earth-shattering news first-hand. I cannot imagine how hard this is for my little sister, who should not have to face the death of a loved one when she is so young. I am overwhelmed with my grief over mom dying and also worried about my sister: *I live far away, what if I cannot support her the way Mom wants me to? I thought Mom would be here to help us through the difficult times in life. What am I going to do without her guidance and her wisdom? How will we even begin to compensate for her absence?* I bring myself back to the moment, trying to calm my mind and listen despite these conflicting thoughts and emotions.

**Grieving as a unique and intuitive process: Love and gratitude**

My dad finishes reading the excerpt he wanted to share from his book and looks up at us, saying “Mom is very strong and she’s done a great job of including us in her journey. I think we can all learn a lot from ...” he fumbles to find the words, perhaps because death is not something that enters every day conversations, “... something that happens to everyone that is born into this world. And it will bind us together more as a family and make our lives richer... We all have a part to play.” He goes on to read more from *Final Gifts*, about how every person responds differently to news about death.

“And I want to interject here,” my Mom says, “Particularly for the youngest of you... you’ll feel that things were not said and you’ll think things were not expressed. ‘Oh I didn’t do this for her, or I didn’t say that to her’...” my mom explains, finger painting her words in the air in front of her. “But the thing is, I’m really intuitive, and I know who you all are, and I know that you all really love me. And even if you all haven’t come and taken me to Italy, or bought me a present, or given me a hug, or told me you loved me...” she says, smiling into the camera, “... it’s okay because I know that all of you here *do* love me... and love me tremendously, and I am so, so blessed by that and I’m so... *honored* to have been given that kind of love because, you know, not all Moms get that kind of love...”

“And I *have* made huge mistakes, but I also know that I’ve been a good mom. And I’m thankful that I’ve had the grace to be a good mom, and also to admit that I haven’t been a perfect Mom,” she grimaces jokingly, and scratches her wrist with her silver bracelets that she always wears, sending them tinkling (one of my favorite sounds,

aside from her heartbeat and her laugh) “and I’ve been through grief about that, and now I’m out the other side.

“So there’s nothing that you haven’t said or that you haven’t done that needs to be said or done. I just want that to be known,” my mom continues, emphasizing her message with her strong hands, “And when you’re older, you’ll get a sense of what I mean by that. It’s *all* been said and done,” she reassures us, her voice resonant. “The love is...” she brings her hands in front of her, as if she is drawing our love toward her as she searches for the words to express a lifetime of connection. “I can tangibly feel love coming from each of you... It comes at me. It just comes at me... in the weirdest of ways. Like watching *Grey’s Anatomy* with M.... We love it, and it’s a blast to do that together,” Mom says, looking at her youngest daughter. She is still holding her palms open, vessels holding the love in the room. “And you all show me love in completely different ways. Everybody’s different and that’s what makes life rich.”

My mom continues to joke about other ways that we show our love as my brother L. pans the camera around the room, showing the different expressions on our faces. Some of us have smiles on tear-stained faces, some are actively crying, and some look serious and contemplative. We are all handling this moment in our own way; each of us is dealing with death and grief differently.

### **Intuition and spirituality: Connecting to lost loved ones and processing difficult emotions**

From behind the camera, L. says, “Intuition is huge... I don’t want to interrupt you, but uh, I was talking to this girl on the internet...” he begins, as we all burst out

laughing. My mother knows that my brother is not trying to be funny, so she waves her hands at us to be quiet, inviting the story that my brother wants to share.

“No, not like that,” he continues through his chuckle. “I was trying to get a hold of this girl, and I emailed the wrong person, across the world in New Zealand of all places, but anyway she wrote me back...” he continues as my Dad takes the camera from him. L. goes on to explain that this misdirected email was answered by the stranger, and as they exchanged emails back and forth he realized that her father had died of cancer, and they connected through the experience of mutual loss. It was like finding a kindred spirit. They began talking more intimately by email, and she shared her experience of losing her father, and her own intuitive experiences of her family connecting with their father through dreams and music.

“It was just an automatic connection because she had been through it and it had been really hard, because she didn’t know if she had said everything she wanted to say, but then the intuitive awareness came along...” my brother continues, explaining the power of knowing something intuitively, without physical proof. “She is a religious person. But her sister had dreams about the dad that made them feel connected to him. It was very real, it wasn’t all hippie-trippy, weird stuff...”

“That’s wonderful,” my mom says.

“But just being in tune with that...” my brother continues, his chin trembling as he speaks. “Just knowing that intuitive connection is possible is comforting. He was still there spiritually, just like you’ll probably still be here...” he gestures with his finger to indicate all around us. “I mean, I believe you will... you’ll still be here spiritually...”

“Yes, that’s right,” my mom agrees. “I do feel that way. I mean, I really sensed that when Grandpa died. It was a sense of his presence in the room, departed from the body. The body was on the bed and Grandpa was still with us in the room, but it was definitely spiritual,” my Mom recalls, remembering her own loss of a parent. “And that’s brought me a lot of comfort, knowing that I’m dying... that sense that I will go and be with my dad ... and his Dad, my own Grandpa, who I was very close to... in some way. I don’t know exactly how. But the intuitive knowing that I will go and be with them after all this time, and spend forever with them brings me tremendous comfort. And you can go into these kinds of places when you’re scared in my situation, or in pain, and they can bring you a sense of safety, you know?” she communicates this safe space as a tunnel with her hands. “It’s awesome.”

“Mmmhmm,” my brother L. is right there with her, resonating with her metaphor. “Yeah, because the physical body is so real to us as human beings, but to understand that there is something more than that... whether its heaven or just a spiritual world... um, I don’t know...” L.’s voice is thick with emotion, tears welling up in his eyes as he looks down. Those of us who are listening are attuning to the grief that is rising in the room, responding to the fullness of emotion and meaning in this moment.

“To me it’s just important...” He begins as his voice breaks, the emotion fully crashing into the room, like the waves crashing onto the sand outside our window. “It’s the pain,” he cries in a strangled voice, “that you’re gonna go through... That’s the only thing that hurts me, you know –”

“I know –” my mom says, holding his pain with her gentle presence. Tears are slipping down my face as I listen to my brother articulate something that all of us feel.

“I don’t mind, if you go through...” he gestures as if towards another dimension, “... if you go on to the next world... I mean, that’s good for me, you know. I’m stoked on that. It’s just the fact of the pain that you’re gonna suffer, that I don’t want you to suffer,” his vocal chords struggle to communicate through the grief, and the room erupts with the sobs of my eldest brother, T., and the muffled cries from all of us around the room, like surf hitting the rocks. The room is vibrating with different sounds of grief. There are snorts and sobs, moans and cries, it is an unbridled moment of resonance with one another’s grief and fear of someone we love suffering.

“I know...” my mom is the only one in the room who is not crying, as steady as a rock amid the waves, even as they are crashing up against her, bathing her in a salty spray of love, grief, and fear; a storm of emotions churning in the room.

“But I have talked to my doctor about that. And they’ve reassured me that they will be able to keep me comfortable... A few visits ago my doctor asked me if I was afraid of the pain, and I said ‘not really because I’m hoping you will be able to keep me comfortable’ and she reassured me that they will.... But managing my pain means that I may not be ‘with it’ all of the time. And what I mean is that you children and Dad will lose me as a family member before I’m dead, because of the management of my pain. Just like I lost Grandpa to the morphine before he died, you will lose a part of me so that I can stay comfortable. And I want that, and I know you want that for me.

“So if the next time you see me I’m a little out of it, that’s okay. That’s why I wanted us to have this weekend now. You can tell I’m not out of it at all yet... I love you, you love me. I’m proud of you, you’re proud of me. We’ve all made mistakes, and that’s how life should be. Life isn’t perfect, it’s just life.”

My mom looks around the room at us, and suggests that we take a break, sensing the heaviness of the emotion in the room, and the need for us to have a few moments to breathe so that we can continue this conversation. As always, she uses her intuition and wisdom to know what her family needs. I get up to check on my sister, who has left the room during the storm of emotion, which was surprisingly loud and demonstrative.

### **Honoring the emotions that exist alongside grief: Humor, hope, love, and gratitude**

A few moments later, laughter is filling the room as we joke about who was sobbing the loudest and who had the best snort. We agree that the honor goes to my eldest brother, T., who is laughing hard at the noises he made, joking that he was only at an 8 out of 10, and he could have gotten a louder snort if he had more snot in his nose. Around the room we are all wiping our eyes, blowing our noses, and it feels so good to find some humor in the hard moments. That is another way that my family deals with difficult emotions such as grief. We have always teased one another, and it provides some relief from the tide of emotion that is pulling at each of us.

My Dad reads from his book *Final Gifts* again, explaining to us that dying people may share special gifts and messages with us, even if they do not make logical sense.

“Dying people are tangibly moving from one world to another. So you will be communicating with us. And we can pray for receptivity to those messages,” my dad says to my mom. “We can be part of it and stay with you longer.”

“Yeah its much like birthing, Death is a sacred event...” my mom agrees. “It can seem like it’s all just sad, but it’s a very, very sacred event.”

“Yeah, that’s what I felt with Grandpa, being in that hospital room when he died,” My oldest brother T. says. “Because it was one of those summer nights where it was really warm and still... You know those summer nights in Comox Valley.... And right when he died there was just a total peacefulness. It was like you could just feel the peace.”

We vocalize our agreement around the room, remembering that evening together.

“For sure. And it wasn’t all sad... when Grandpa died,” I say, bringing myself back to that moment, “You know what I mean? There was definitely the loss and grief... But there were other emotions too –”

“– It was profound –” my dad suggests.

“Almost like it wasn’t such a bad thing for him to die,” I continue.

“Yeah, I think it’s harder for the people that are left behind,” T. says.

“We can be instrumental in letting Mom go too, when it’s time for Mom to leave her body,” my dad says as my mom nods her head in agreement. “We can help her go, by not holding on emotionally... not grieving... but being joyful, you know?!” My dad is animated. Lifting his hands up with this idea of allowing mom to go amidst a joyful celebration.

“Well, no... I don’t think you can discourage grief –” I interrupt, smiling at my dad.

“– No, no, no, I don’t mean –” my dad says laughing.

“– Not grieving would be like...” I start clapping my hands and dancing in my seat, pretending to celebrate, trying to show that I think it would be a bit ridiculous.

“ Amen!!” my dad sings, jokingly, clapping his hands along with me, understanding that I interpreted his words as discounting the rightful place that grief should have in mom’s passing.

“Giving her permission to go, for sure,” I continue, my laughter subsiding, “But it’s totally normal to feel like we don’t *want* her to go... I think...” I say, smiling a bit sheepishly at expressing my feelings about the need to grieve the loss, but also proud that I did. I feel like my mother has given me permission to grieve, and I want to honor that and share it with my family.

“Yeah, the loss is still gonna be there,” L. chimes in. And now that our attention is on him, he begins to speak in complete gibberish, imitating us all talking over each other and using his genius sense of humor to lighten the mood. We all have a moment of laughter.

My Mom beams at him and says, “I’m so thankful for you all.” She closes her eyes and begins to gesture with her hands, as if she is scooping us all up in her palms. “And I’m amazed at the gift that this is... to be dying with people that have this kind of knowledge... holding this sacredness. Because I want you all to keep talking to me. Because I *am* in that body until I do go. And then I am outside that body, with God and maybe lingering... and whatever... I don’t fully understand how it works. But the beauty of being spoken to... and held ... and you being with me... You’re ushering me into the next life,” she smiles gently at us, an expression of peace on her face.

“Well you’re allowing us to... We’re sharing it with you,” my dad suggests, “and that’s a beautiful thing. And we have hope that something is beyond this life. We have hope of seeing Mom again –”

“– which is a joyful thing,” says mom.

“Exactly, it’s joyful. Like you’re waiting for us there on the other side,” my dad says, “and it’ll happen before we know it because life does not last that long. It’s like a breath.”

“The blink of an eye,” says T.

“The grass grows up, and then withers away,” my dad continues.

“The bee pollinates the flower, and then drops dead as soon as it stings you! Zzz!” L. jokes, using his playful mood to get us all laughing again. His delightful humor brings us back into the moment, back down to the earth. “Well, let’s go get some whiskey and get wasted!”

“I’ll pass out the morphine, you pass out the whiskey!” my Mom says. We chuckle and then sit with a moment of quiet as the conversation winds down. Our mother has given us so much, but I am not quite ready to end this nourishing family discussion which has touched on the themes of death as a sacred part of life, spirituality, and the emotions that accompany grief such as love, joy, and gratitude. It is feeding me, and I want to say something to nourish my mother as well.

“Can I just say one more thing?” I ask, feeling self-conscious but compelled to give something back to my Mom.

“Of course,” Mom says.

“I don’t even know how to say it...” I say sheepishly. I hesitate to change the jovial mood because I can tell I am getting emotional as my throat tightens.

“Go ahead,” my dad encourages.

“Well I... we’re just so lucky to have a mom like you...” I manage to get out, as I break into a laugh-cry combination, something I get from my mother.

“Thanks, Mur,” my mom says quietly.

“Thank you for being who you are,” I say, my voice high with tears, my vocal chords wound up with a mixture of gratitude and grief. “There’s not that many people that can say they have a mom like you, you know? So that’s pretty great...” The emotion is flowing from my belly, up to my chest and throat, and tears slip down my cheeks unbidden, a cleansing release. And I am not riding the wave alone. Like the surfers in the bay beyond our window, my family is with me in the swells. I can feel the ocean of familial grief around me and the connection with my loved ones as we cry and navigate the same waves and whitecaps around us.

“I’m so thankful to have had the experience of mothering that I’ve had. And I feel like I’ve made huge mistakes, but I also know I’m forgiven ... and I am loved. And that’s huge... I wouldn’t like to be going to my death *not* feeling that way. So thank you very much for saying that,” my mom says, bathing me in her glow of motherly love. “Now you’ve got us all crying again,” she smiles at me.

“Sorry guys...” I say, as we all sniffle and wipe our faces, “I’m just thankful for what we have.”

“Me too,” L. echoes the gratitude, “I’m stoked on the brothers and sisters that I have and everybody’s been supportive towards me in their own way... we all have special relationships... and I’ve been a bit of a weird dude in the past...” L. says, and a cacophony of ‘no’s’ and ‘never’s’ follow, “I mean I’ve been whatever I’ve been...”

And then in true motherly form, my mom reassures him, “You are who you are, and we love you and wouldn’t want you any different than you are.”

“We’re all unique in our own ways, for sure. And we all have struggles and strengths. But when I first heard that you were gonna die...” L. says emphatically, “I was like ‘Oh shit, she’s not gonna be around for stuff that I might succeed at in life or that my brothers and sisters might succeed at’... but now I know that you will be there.”

“I will,” my mom agrees. “And I feel like you’ve succeeded in life anyways... Because success isn’t what the world says it is... it’s what the heart is,” my mom assures him. There are nods around the room as our mom radiates her light of unconditional love and acceptance upon each of us.

“And for dad too...” I begin – looking up at my father who is standing in front of the fireplace, tears streaming down his rugged face – not wanting to leave out the man who has been by our mother’s side from the first day of her journey with cancer, and who has been a beacon for emotional expression and hope. “You have been a great father and you have been a great husband to mom, and I can’t imagine what she’d do without you

right now. It's just so good to know that she has that support, because we can only do so much –”

“Yeah, I was worried this was going to be hard for Dad, but now, this weekend, I've seen your peace...” says L., “and that's important for me. I knew you were always strong with your beliefs, but I just see your faith and peace so clearly now. You have been such a support for mom.”

“I know...” my mom says, “Dad's been amazing.” She can truly lean on him.

“Thank you,” my dad says. He is visibly moved by this, since his Christian faith has been a cornerstone in his life since before I was born. All of his children have moved away from the church, and even our mom's faith has grown into a more open spirituality. But my father's Christian values have been instilled in us, and his relationship with God has helped him to be a foundational support to our mother through her journey with cancer.

A quiet sits in the room for a moment, the fullness of holding one another up in this hard time is palpable. There is so much love here.

“And cut!” I joke, as I wipe my nose, and we all laugh again, my brother T. pretending that it was all a movie set, and jokingly yelling directions at invisible actors. We find ourselves in stitches again, enjoying the humor and the joy of being together during this sacred and difficult time. We have just had a deep emotional connection with one another, finding meaning, gratitude, peace, and love amidst the grief over losing our beloved mom. And we would have many more moments of connection over the weekend, sharing stories, music, food, and laughter.

*As a family, we have touched on themes that were woven throughout the beginning of my grieving process such as facing the reality of our loss, what the loss of this vital member of our family would mean for each of us, and how we could make meaning about this loss. These questions and meaning making conversations about life, death, love, grief, and spirituality would help to shape my own grieving process and the meaning that I would give to my loss. In our trip to Tofino, my mother had reinforced and reminded us of the values that had defined our family culture, such as unconditional love, open communication, spirituality, humor, and the vulnerability to process emotions. She had also shared many gifts with us that would allow us to make meaning of her death while she was still with us, and after she died. Some of the more prevalent themes were facing the reality of loss, seeing death as a sacred part of life, processing emotions, connecting with lost loved ones through spirituality, and regarding grieving as a unique process of feeling the depth of not only grief, but also of the emotions that exist alongside it such as gratitude, joy, hope, and love. Alongside each story of loss is also a story of the love and connection that makes our loss so poignant, which in the narrative tradition may be referred to as the 'absent but implicit' in a story (White, 2000, as cited in Hedtke, 2014); however, because of my mother's influence, our story of love and connection was not absent, rather it was at the forefront. Our mother celebrated the whole of life and death, even regarding the story of death and loss as an integral part of the whole of what it means to be human.*

*I believe it is impossible to describe the impact that my mother had on me and my family, just as it is futile to capture the essence of a soul with words; however, I will try to honor my mother's way of preparing her loved ones for losing her by telling one last*

*story of Tofino. The theme that we continued to come back to throughout our conversations in Tofino was spirituality and our connection to our mother after she dies. This was very important for us, to imagine not only that we might be re-united with our mother's soul after our own death, but also to know intuitively that we could remain connected to her during our ongoing lives. My mother's gift to us honored that belief that we could remain connected and became a symbol to me of the indescribable love and connection she shared with her family. This gift would allow me to remain connected to my mother long after she died so that I could reflect on my process of loss and grief, process the ups and downs of life while communicating with my mother, and look to my future with hope, remembering that legacies of love last, and that I can continue to honor my mother's legacy by sharing her love with others (Attig, 2004; Hedtke, 2014).*

### **A story of our mother's final gifts: Our trip to Tofino**

We are sitting around the living room, tears dried, noses blown, and laughter subsided. I feel a sense of anticipation, because I know my Mom has been working on a gift for each of us. There is a multicolored stack of journals beside her chair, different sizes precariously perched one on top of the other. But gravity is no threat to the integrity of what each one of these carefully bound collections of paper and glue represents – and neither is death – because each journal symbolizes a connection with our mother.

“So what I have for each of you is a journal. It's not a very exciting gift, but I did take a long time choosing the right ones. It's something for you to write in... or if you don't like journaling, you can draw in it... You can put anything you want in it. It's not for anybody else, just you. Now, I did intend to have a lot more done, like a letter and an assortment of photographs for each of you, which I haven't finished yet. But I did finish

the personalized collages inside each of your journals... I wanted to do a collage for each one of you that is just intuitively about you, from me... and I don't even really get it. It was just intuitively what came together..."

My mother reaches down beside her chair, and slowly hands out the journals she has made for us, one at a time. She gives each person several moments to touch, open, and look at their precious gift. Each one has been lovingly put together: the beautifully illustrated covers chosen with us in mind, and the inside flap decorated with a collage of images and words that remind her of her individual loved ones.

I am brimming with anticipation when my mother says, "Here's yours, Mur," and hands me a small black journal with a vibrant imprint of a bird on the front. My mom's bracelets jingle as she hands it to me, and I smile and whisper a thank-you as I receive her gift. The moment feels sacred. There is a hushed appreciation and reverence in the room, as if time has slowed, and we have entered the moment with a clarity that is rare and precious, as if watching some celestial event and regarding our place in the cosmos. I touch the cover of my journal carefully, feeling its smooth cover, and the tactile ridges of an engraved peacock perched in a golden tree.

"I had so much fun doing them... it was so nice to not have to think about anything...except just connecting with each of you," my mom says.

We take time considering our own collages, seeing ourselves through our mother's creative eyes as we experience the images and words she has chosen for us, microcosmic masterpieces that represent a mother's connection to her children. We pass them around, taking a few minutes to quietly look at each other's precious gifts. Then my

brother touches on the higher purpose behind these gifts, the spiritual connection that we can have with our mother.

“I wanted to say something that might sound a little hippie-trippy,” says L.. “But when mom is physically gone from us... every little thing that you feel drawn towards... like some kind of intensity drawing you in... it might be a piece of her. Whether it’s a wave, or a dream. A part of nature, or not... whatever it may be... it’s probably gonna be Mom visiting you.”

“I love that,” says Mom, looking up at her son, who is filming from up high, using his creative energy while filming these interactions.

This resonates with me as well, so I chime in, “Yeah, what’s that poem that we had on the fridge after Grandpa died? Something similar to what you’re saying, bro... The last line is something like ‘don’t stand at my grave and cry... I am not there, I did not die’ ... or something about becoming a part of nature. That might be over the top for some people, but it’s a beautiful picture... the idea that we return to nature –”

“Yeah, the physical body isn’t everything,” L. continues. “It’s what we know and it’s what we can see and empathize with on a daily basis. But there’s more to us than just a body.”

“Totally,” I agree, thinking about the concept of having a soul that is not bound by the physical body and that continues on after death. Mom goes on to tell us of experiences in which her relatives have felt the presence of lost loved ones in different ways such as visions or phone calls. There is a sense of spiritual hope as my mom

reminds us of those that we have lost and how our memories of them are still with us.

Our mother looks around the room at us, and gives us one more gift of wisdom.

“When I was crying and grieving the loss of events that I will miss – and I won’t name those events because I don’t want to get everyone crying again...” she says, “... but events that I want to be there for... a friend told me that in some ways I will be there. And I want to inspire my children... you... to understand that I will be present at those events. Just like how I sensed my Dad’s presence after he left his body. So, when you are at those special events, if you go to a place where you feel like ‘*She should have been here...*’ or ‘*I wish Mom was here with me...*’ then you can also go ‘*Aaahhh, but she is here....*’” The moment holds a warmth and a brightness, as if the sun is perfectly aligned, shedding some light on the chaos of our recent universe. “So if you have events in your lives that you wish I would be there for, remember that I am there.”

We end our day by dancing around together, with Bob Dylan’s song *Tight connection to my heart* blasting in the background: “Has anybody seen my love? I don’t know... Has anybody seen my love?” Dylan croons along with the sweet voices of his background singers. My dad takes a turn leading my mom in a few steps and whirls, one of the last dances they will share. I dance beside them, and then take my mom’s hand as my Dad goes to turn the music up louder. I dance with her, moving to the music I grew up listening to, and singing along to the lyrics that mean so much to me: “honey’s got a... tight connection to my heart.... Baby’s got a ... tight connection to my heart.”

**Looking to the Future: Gifts of Spirituality, Meaning, Metaphor, and Connection**

*Tofino was one of the last times when my mother was able to be fully present with us, which is why it was so integral to my grieving process. We were able to hear what our mother wanted us to know about her death and her love for us, and we were able to create meaning as a family in our discussions about death, grieving and spirituality (Koenig, Kellas, & Trees, 2006). From a familial culture perspective, it also allowed us to engage with one another in spiritual and existential conversations, allowing meaning to be given to loss, death, grief, and matters of the soul. I believe these conversations and the openness and respect with which we discussed them allowed us to enter into my mother's experience of dying with her and also to share our socially connected and individually felt experiences of grieving. Ultimately, the trip to Tofino shows how my family helped me to begin to make meaning about loss, death, and grief.*

*As a family, we discovered spiritual ideas that would allow me to face the death of my mother and to continue to have a connection with her after her death. As Burke (2006) describes: "Spirituality is primarily concerned with the personal search for meaning and a felt sense of connection with some ultimate or transcendent reality" (p. 192). For myself, who was raised in a religious Christian home, spirituality was a key element of my identity. Even though I left the church and religion, defined as "organized beliefs as expressed through the rituals and traditions of an institution" (Burke, 2006, p. 192), I still had an awareness that I was a spiritual being, that there was more to me than just a physical body and a brain; I still had the hope that we have a soul that continues on after the physical death of the body. In our discussions as a family in Tofino, I think we are expressing that hope that our soul continues on and can somehow, in a mysterious and beautiful way, be reunited with our lost loved ones. My parents believed this*

*strongly, and the fact that my mother found comfort in this idea made me want to hold on to spiritual ideas and beliefs as a source of meaning making for me during this difficult and disorienting time of facing the profound loss of my primary attachment relationship. As Burke (2006) suggests, spirituality and searching for meaning can help those who are struggling with traumatic experiences to get in touch with not only something that transcends the physical, but also something that becomes a source of hope and resilience. In our meaning-making conversations about death, life, and grief, I believe that we kept coming back to ideas of the soul and the spirit because we viewed both life and death as sacred and as connections to spirituality, and for some of us, to God, or our understanding of a higher power. These ideas can be both incredibly comforting when faced with pain, suffering, and grief, and incredibly full of meaning, which is what we search for in times of loss and grief (Neimeyer, 1999; 2001; 2010). In this sense, spirituality allowed me to come to the meaning that even though my mother was dying, she did not have to be reduced to nothing; rather, I could think of her as transcending the physical world and becoming a part of something more mysterious and spiritual, something that I too could become a part of one day.*

*Nature has also played an important role in my understandings of spirituality, and as Burke (2006) suggests, this may be because my loss and my grief allowed me to see that I am connected to everything, to all of humanity, to the suffering of the world, and also to nature, of which I am a part (Greenspan, 2003). Burke (2006) discusses how traumatic experiences may lead us to share “personal meaning in the context of story, metaphor, and the imagination” (p. 192), such as finding inspiration in nature, as I did. Metaphors about nature helped me to further understand grief and engage in an intuitive,*

*transformative and spiritual process of grieving. For instance, after reflecting on my grieving process, and with the inspiration of Greenspan's (2003) discussion of grief as being like a rich soil in which to grow, a natural metaphor came to me that enabled me to see my loss and grief in a new way, as difficult aspects of life that have enriched me spiritually and connected me to something larger than myself:*

My grief is a tree, it roots me to the ground and makes me grateful for my life and my connection to the earth. The soil in which it grows is the familial culture that my mother created. The roots are my connection to my family and my origins. The rings within its wood are my memories of my mother, and the values and love she instilled in the family that she created. The sap is my energy and emotion and my intuitive ability to continue to grow. This tree also transcends the earth, my day-to-day reality, reaching to heaven and connecting me to the spiritual realm. The leaves spread toward the sun and the love of my mother and they open to the mystery of what is beyond this life so that I will be ready to embrace my unknown future.

*As Neimeyer (1999) suggests, metaphor can lead us to "surprising insights" (p. 78) about our grief. The metaphor of the tree helps me to remember that my grief is grounded in the rich soil and nourishment of my family and in the knowledge of my mother's love. Drawing on the natural world for this imagery also connects me to the nature of life and death, which are cyclical rhythms that come and go like the seasons. My grieving process is influenced by my environment, such as my family and my culture, as well as by my nature and identity, such as my emotions, intuition, memories, experiences, and beliefs, which is reflected in this natural metaphor. Using metaphor*

*also allows my identity to be expansive and open to the mysteries of existence as I continue on my journey of growth and transformation (Greenspan, 2003; Neimeyer et al., 2002).*

*The gifts of grief remind me that from my loss, as devastating and painful as it was, and from my family culture, I have drawn the nourishment necessary for my grieving process to lead to gratitude for what I do have, including the gifts of spirituality, meaning, and a connection with my family and my mother (Greenspan, 2003). I have learned to embrace grief as a gift that helps me to appreciate my life, my relationships, and the spiritual mysteries that connect my soul to that of my mother's, as I carry her into my future (Hedtke, 2014).*

## **Conclusion**

*When we lose someone that we love with our soul, the deepest part of us, it “disrupts the life patterns within which we have found meaning, it confronts us with an unexpected future, and it challenges us to find the courage, hope, and faith we need to stretch into the inevitably new” (Attig, 2004, p. 350). Losing someone that I love – and I use the present tense purposefully here, because I will always love my mother – was terrifying. I would be lying if I said I didn't wish she was here in this physical world, organizing Christmas holidays, calling me up in the middle of the day to ask what I'm up to, or mailing me postcards with ridiculous doodles and wise words; however, I also believe that grieving the profound loss of my mother has allowed me to find new meanings about what it means to live, to love, to be grateful for life, which is uncertain at the best of times (Attig, 2004), and to die. I appreciate that I had a mother who taught me so much and led me toward a grieving process that has helped me to become the person*

*that I am today (Greenspan, 2003; Hedtke, 2014). I would also be oversimplifying my mother's influence in my life if I didn't share that she is still with me in so many ways, guiding me with her words, her gifts, and her wishes for us to carry her into our futures.*

*In this chapter, I have tried to give the reader a glimpse into some of the many ways that my mother and my family influenced my grieving process, preparing me to go through the most difficult transition in my life. With their support, I was able to face the reality of the loss, view grieving as a unique and intuitive process, explore the difficult emotions of grief as well as recognize that joy and love are also present, and make meaning about the spiritual and relational aspects of losing a loved one. My mother's guidance was instrumental in my grieving process while she was still alive, and she would also be an active force encouraging me to move toward the future after she died. It was daunting and terrifying to face the reality of my mother's death, to process difficult emotions of grief, and to figure out who I would be after my loss, but I felt empowered by my mother's encouragement and hope; hope that I would be okay because her love would still be with us; hope that I could find my way through this profound loss and my grieving process; hope that I could use my intuition to grow through my grief, and somehow pick up the pieces and find myself; and most importantly, hope that I could remain connected to my Mom after she died. This hope would waver, especially as my mother's life inched closer to death, but it would remain accessible in the unmarked pages of my mother's final gift to me, and in my own heart.*

*In the next chapter, I will explore how my grieving process unfolded after the death of my mother, and how she would remain with me through the gift of the journal. This journal would help me to engage in a continuing bond with my mother, as I began to*

*fill its pages and tell her the unfolding story of my future. As Neimeyer (2001) suggests “the audience for our emerging self-narrative often includes the very person... we have lost, as our bond with them is transformed” (p. 266), from physical to symbolic, embodied to spiritual. In this way, I would remain connected to my mother as I grieved, and I hope to convey how having a continuing bond with my mother helped me to make meaning of my loss, grief, spirituality, identity, and my mother’s legacy.*

## Chapter IV: Continuing Bonds

### A story of my mother's death: A life ends, a bond continues

It is the last day of my mother's life on earth. I am lying in my parent's bed, beside my mother in her own small hospital bed. It is early in the morning and my dad has gone out for his morning bike ride. He had woken me so that I could come upstairs to my parent's bed to be near my mother, in case she wakes up confused, our morning ritual. I had stumbled out of bed, half asleep, and crawled into their bed. I am in and out of sleep until she begins to stir. I open my eyes, and realize she is trying to get the blankets off of her. She is muttering something to herself. I feel my heart kick into high gear as I hop out of bed and go to her, listening closely, trying to make out her words.

"I have to go... I have to go..." she says quietly.

"You're home Mama, you're already home. You don't have to go anywhere, it's okay," I say, trying to soothe her, knowing that she cannot get out of bed safely. She continues to try to swing her legs over to the edge of the bed, but I know I can't hold her up by myself if she falls, so I gently coax her back into bed. I feel my anxiety rising, worrying to myself, *is something wrong?* She seems so agitated, and continues to repeat herself.

"I have to go... I have to go," she says slowly. I know from the books I had read that dying people often talk about going somewhere or packing their bags for a trip, metaphors for leaving this world I suppose, but in the moment I just feel overwhelmed that she seems confused and upset. I can't think of what to do in the moment, except to keep her safely in bed.

“Mom, you are home, in bed... It’s okay, you don’t have to go anywhere,” I say, trying to reassure her with gentle touch but feeling like I am not able to keep the worry out of my voice. She is not able to communicate anything more to me, except that she has to go somewhere.

I feel alone, I cannot turn to my mother for reassurance. She is so far away, somewhere else, and I feel that I cannot reach her. I cannot seem to comfort her, which makes me feel helpless and panicked and afraid, my hands clammy, and my head swimming. I’m losing her... I can’t save her... she’s dying.... I think to myself as my heart thumps and I find myself chanting, without even thinking, “It’s okay Mom. I’m right here. You’re safe. It’s okay, Mom,” like I am soothing a child, but I do not feel like everything is okay at all.

My mother is still moaning and muttering when I hear the front door open. I feel a mixture of both relief and urgency as I call out to my father, “Dad, can you come in here?” I hear the strained worry in my own voice. I do not want to deal with this alone.

I can hear the front door closing, and shoes being kicked off, and my dad calls, “Be right there, Mooms.” Within seconds he is in the room, his bright red biking jacket with reflectors still on, mirroring my anxiety. “What’s going on?” he asks.

“Mom’s trying to get out of bed, and she keeps saying she has to go. I’m worried that she’s not comfortable,” I say, physically relaxing knowing that I am no longer alone to care for my Mom, that we can work this out together.

My father takes my place beside the bed and gently caresses my mother’s hand. “What’s going on, Lillitoots?” he asks, using his pet name for her. She continues to moan

as if crying, but she is not able to tell us if she is in pain. My father prays with her, calling on a God that I have struggled to believe in for many years, but I welcome my father's faithful presence as he prays, "Father in heaven, please bring your peace into this room..." and I find myself praying alongside him. But she continues to moan and appear distressed.

We both think we have given her the right amount of pain medication, and we do not think we can do anything else on our own to ensure our mother's comfort aside from adjusting pillows and sitting with her. We call my brothers and my grandmother so that they can be with her. Finally, my Dad calls the family doctor, who is able to come to our home and check on Mom. Knowing the end is near, she decides, with our blessing, to give mom a sedative so that if she is in any discomfort, it will hopefully be lessened. Looking back I realize that the sedative may have been more for our own peace of mind than our mother's. But she does seem to calm a little. Her distress may be her way of grieving her own death, the loss of life on earth with her family. It may also be her way of yearning for a new life, for freedom from her body.

As her breathing becomes shallow, I ask my Dad if I can hold her hand, so we switch places. Perhaps that was my way of giving her permission to go, of letting her know that I was okay. I am holding her hand when she breathes her last breath. After several moments of crying and continuing to hold my mother's hand, I realize that she will not breathe again. I say, "We love you and we will miss you, Mama." There is a fullness of emotion and overwhelming grief in the room, such love and sorrow all at once.

**Continuing Bonds: Physical Loss, Spiritual Connection, and Making Meaning**

My mother died just after 2 p.m. on June 7, 2006, surrounded by several members of her family, including myself, my father, and my older brothers. I do not know what my mother was experiencing that day, but I am grateful that she was surrounded by people who loved her. Perhaps she sensed that her loved ones were there to usher her from this world to the next because she looked peaceful at the end. But my mother's soul was no longer animating her physical being, and a new phase of my grieving process began after her death.

I expressed what I felt on this day on the first blank page of the journal that my mother gave to me, after we had cried and grieved together as a family for several hours. My journal is decorated with a brilliantly gold and red peacock that looks as if it is sitting on the boughs of a heavenly tree, burgeoning with life and the blooming of intricate blossoms and leaves. This image illustrates Greenspan's (2003) assertion that "in the seed of grief, there is the promise of a blossoming" (p. 94) and the potential for finding meaning and growth. Inside the cover of the journal, my mother has created a collage depicting open hands, hands caressing feet, the faces of people of different ethnicities, and hands climbing up rock, as if to convey the challenge and struggle that lies ahead. The central image is a maple tree with vibrant red leaves growing beneath the words 'sharing joy' which she has placed in the centre of the collage, a final message to me that our relationship as mother and daughter was one of immeasurable happiness and delighting in one another's company. Her unconditional love was the closest feeling to bliss that I had experienced on this earth: a spiritual, other-worldly love.

*June, 7, 2006*

*It was so strange to see Mom's body without her spirit in it, without life. I'm glad she's free from that body that was failing. Yet I can't believe she's gone. I miss her, but I feel that she's now at peace, which comforts me. I feel somewhat numb, cried out, but I know the emotion will come in overwhelming waves.... She was too young, but we were so blessed to have her at all. The love she radiated will live on and on.*

*I love you forever Mama. Peace be with you.*

My grief permeates all aspects of my life in these first days after her death; I am not always consciously thinking of my mother, but she is such a part of me that every moment I am without her, I sense the heaviness of her absence. The slow dawning on me that her voice will not speak again, that I cannot pick up the phone to ask her a question, that I cannot seek her out for a hug is devastating. But as I wrote in my first entry to my mother on the day of her death, I also have a sense of her love continuing on, as a tangible legacy that will shape my life, grieving process, and relationships.

The initial numbness that I feel after her death is thawing, and it's replaced by a throbbing emptiness in my chest; an aching fear that I will forget her: the feel of her soft cheek against mine, her strong hands, how she could make me feel that everything was okay with one hug. What if I forget what it is like to put my head on her chest and hear the steady thumping of her heart? This loss, this unimaginable absence, has forced me to accept that death is a part of my life.

Night time is when I feel the overwhelming darkness of grief. I experience moments of profound sadness, the deepest yearning and aching that I have ever felt, as if the chord connecting me to my mother has been severed, leaving a gaping hole throbbing

in my chest. I feel the yearning and body-wrenching pain when I am alone in the dark. Sometimes my throat and head physically hurt from crying at night, sobbing into my pillow, wringing the tears out of the gaping hole inside me. When no more tears come, I cry without tears, my mouth open in a silent sob, like a black hole engulfing the pain and longing in a vacuum of grief. When I am too exhausted to cry any more, I sleep. Sometimes I plead with God to please bring her back, to take the pain away, to make it all a dream...

Sometimes I dream that she is not really dead, and it makes so much sense in my dreams that she is still alive. But then I wake up, coming back to the realization that she is dead and the loss is fresh again. I let myself weep because intuitively I feel that I need to cry for the loss of my mother and my deep longing for the one person who has been my primary source of comfort my whole life. Looking back, I cannot help but compare this to the cries of a baby for her mother and primary attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969, 1973 as cited in Winokuer & Harris, 2012).

Perhaps this longing and deep emotional grieving is what led me to intuitively find new ways to make meaning about my loss (Neimeyer, 1999, 2000, 2010) by connecting with my family and sharing memories and stories about life, death, and grief (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006), and by connecting to my mother through writing to her in my journal, which would be the primary source of my continuing bond with her (Dennis & Kunkel, 2012; Klass, 2006).

From an attachment theory perspective, seeking to maintain a continuing bond with a lost loved one makes sense because in my mother's absence, I was seeking to be

close to her (Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005), such as when I would cry for her in the night, silently begging her to come back and to not leave me alone; when I would watch videos of her or look at photographs of her; when I would think of her and hold artifacts that belonged to her; and finally, when I would write to her in my journal, and cultivate my continuing bond with her. In this way, I may have been seeking to have “psychological proximity” (Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005, p. 286) to my mother – since I could no longer have physical proximity – and to internalize a bond with her as I moved forward in life.

Epstein, Kalus, & Berger (2006) studied different types of continuing bonds in order to provide some clarity in definition and see how these different aspects of continuing bonds relate to adjustment. Some different aspects of continuing bonds that Epstein, Kalus & Berger (2006) identify include sensing the deceased’s presence, communicating with them, reliving the relationship, and dreaming or yearning for them. I experienced all these elements of continuing bonds, and I also believed that my mother wanted us to remain connected to her. I engaged in activities that helped me to remember my mother and our relationship, such as reliving memories in my mind and through looking at pictures and home videos. These activities made me miss my mother and yearn for her presence, but they also helped me to sense our bond.

I drew on the wisdom of my family and my mother, and what I knew she wished for me and all of us. Through our family discussion in Tofino, we had placed meaning and value on intuitive grieving and the recognition that we all experience loss and grief differently. I needed to be with my family at times, to feel connected and comforted by their presence, other people who missed her as much as I did. Sometimes we would watch the home videos that allowed us to hear Mom’s voice and remember times that

were full of laughter and humor and love. There were times of connection and comfort, as well as times that were full of sorrow and longing. Sometimes I needed to be alone, grieving for my loss and writing about coming to terms with my mother's death. I struggled to make sense of my new world, the changes in my family and the irreplaceable loss of my Mom. I continued to write in my journal, as an outlet for my grief and as a way of coping with emotions that were new to me, hugely overwhelming, and often impossible to put into words. It was writing in my journal that allowed me to feel my mother's ongoing presence in my life and to foster this continuing bond with her. I found that I could still be connected to her even though she was physically absent. I communicated with her in my journal, expressing the longing and pain of missing her as well as sharing memories of our relationship, and even sensing her presence by sharing some of the most difficult as well as the most joyful times in my life with her.

*June 13, 2006*

*T. [my eldest brother] had the bright idea of using this journal to write to you, and I want to do the same because that way I can talk to you and tell you about my life even though you're not here physically. Truthfully I don't know where you are or if you can hear me, but I'd like to think you can. I miss you so much so sometimes, or maybe most of the time, I avoid actually feeling my sadness/grief. I've been keeping busy, and actually feeling quite well. Happy to be hanging out with the family... I was just watching the end of Stepmom [the movie], crying. I will take you with me like that movie says and I'll talk to you. You feel so close to me, but I can't be with you and chat with you and that's really hard...*

*June 16, 2006*

*Missing you so much Mama, I think your death, or the loss of you is starting to sink in more each day. At first it was just so surreal, like I had accepted it but could hardly grasp it. I have flashbacks of your last days, especially that last one, and it's hard to think of you as being frightened or uncomfortable then. But you weren't alone and you'll never be, and I'm not either, though I do at times feel lonely. Loving hanging out with the family though...*

*Dad and I had a slight argument about the pictures for the memorial, but more me just struggling to share such personal stuff with everyone and with angry feelings about not having you here to ask what your wishes are. I didn't want so many sick pictures of you, near the end of your life, but they are moving and meaningful, and dad wants to share them. So be it. He really is putting his heart into remembering you. Grieving openly. We had a little cry together tonight, looking at the slideshows, 'discussing' our thoughts about the pictures, and sharing our feelings over missing you and coming to terms with or realizing and grieving the loss...*

*But it's just not the same without you. Of course it isn't. It's completely different. The hugest, brightest, strongest, most loving piece of our family is not here. At least physically. But of course you're here Mummy. All the love you've given us we have and will hold with us. I just want you back so much. I want to hug you and hold onto you. I love you...*

Being able to share even these difficult experiences of choosing how to remember my mother and struggling with public rituals to commemorate my mother's death helped to ease the pain of them and allow me to make sense of the conflicted emotions I was experiencing. I was certainly struggling with holding on and letting go, aspects of

grieving the loss of one's mother (Chodorow, 1978 as cited in Dietrich, McWilliam, Ralyea, and Schweitzer, 1999). I could face the reality that my mother had died to some extent, but I could not face the idea of saying goodbye in an absolute way. To say goodbye or release my bond with my mother would have made me feel that I was not honoring her inextricable tie to my life and my identity. She is the primary figure of my life who influenced me, nurtured me, and loved me when I felt unlovable. To let her go, and to pretend that I am not still deeply connected to her would deny her legacy, our relationship, and the beautiful and important life that she led. Therefore, it is not only helpful for me to have a continuing bond with my mother, it is also my way of honoring her legacy and acknowledging the imprint that she left on me and on this life. I had not heard of 'continuing bonds' or been taught about narrative approaches to grieving when my mother died, but my intuition and the influence of my mother and my family helped me to find ways to create a lasting connection with my mother and to discover meaning and spirituality even in the darkest moments of my grieving process.

*June 20, 2006*

*We had a committal for you on Monday morning. It was nice... the cemetery is beautiful. I remember you wanted to go see it, but you were too weak to go. I know those last few weeks were hard for you Mama. You were weak and your body was failing you and I just hope we took alright care of you...*

The rituals such as the celebration of life or going to the cemetery to commit my mother's ashes to the ground, were a part of how our family used rituals to deal with death. Rituals can provide an outlet for grief, comfort in remembering a lost loved one, and establishing a bond with the deceased (Vale-Taylor, 2009). However, these more

traditional rituals would not have lasting importance for my grieving process; instead, I intuitively turned to more personally meaningful and intuitive grieving rituals that allowed me to grieve and connect with my mother in a new way, such as writing to her in my journal, visualizing being with her, cherishing artifacts and objects that reminded me of her, and spending time in nature thinking of her. I had a sense of needing to remain connected to my mother, not just in memories, but in active ways. As Dietrich, et al. (1999) point out in their study of mother-loss, women are not only losing a primary attachment relationship, but also a model for identity development which may make them feel like they are losing part of themselves, thus leading them to want to maintain a sense of connection with their mother:

The formation of their mother as an ongoing presence in their lives constituted the full work of mourning as the women rebuilt their inner worlds and continued on with their own development as women. (p. 93)

This rings true for me since by writing to my mother, I was not only allowing myself to grieve and process my emotions, I was also sharing my ongoing life and growth with my mother, considering what she would think about who I was becoming, and seeking advice from her in a symbolic way by using my journal to share my deepest and most difficult moments of transition and suffering, as well as my most joyful and fulfilling areas of growth. In their book *Continuing bonds: New understandings of grief*, Klass, Silverman & Nickman (1996) suggest that when we lose a vital person and role model, such as a parent, there is a need to maintain some representation of the person we have lost, to help us to understand and represent ourselves. This need for identity and “the continuation and renewal of connection to the deceased are especially salient when considering the tasks,

both individual and family-related, facing the late adolescent college student” (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996, p. 127), which may be why I felt such a need to continue to write to my mother, to share my sense of self with her, and to search for meaning in my grieving process.

### **Continuing bonds: Spirituality, meaning and nature**

*June 20, 2006*

*I miss you so much. I want you back so bad. I can't believe it is two weeks since you died. I can't believe you're dead, I hate the sound of it. But there's that poem on the fridge that says you're still all around... part of nature maybe or in some kind of paradise. I love what you wrote to Dad in his anniversary card... "mingled with the souls of all the ones we love." But it's still so hard because I don't know where you are or what I believe, and I want you here with me, with us. I'm crying for me and my loss, but I hope and I think that wherever you are, you're okay or at rest or however it is. I think the hardest part for me is thinking that you're nowhere, that you're really gone... but you didn't believe that, you thought we would meet again, in some way, and I want to believe that too. It's just so hard to accept that you're gone from us physically and I can't hear you or feel you right now. I feel like I'm just talking to you, not communicating like we used to. I really miss your wisdom and advice, and your kisses and hugs and smiles and everything. Thank you for loving me so much. I'll never love anything as much as you.*

Klass (2006) suggests that our identity may be influenced by both our continuing bond with our lost loved one and by our social and cultural context, and I felt that my spiritual identity was transformed through these relationships. For instance, in my own

family, the idea that our mother had become a part of nature was something that allowed us to speak about her as a part of our new reality and our world without her. Klass (2006) mentions that some people maintain continuing bonds with social and cultural norms of visiting the cemetery, which allows for closeness to the lost loved one. For my family, on the other hand, even though we eventually brought her ashes to a cemetery with a beautiful tombstone that my father designed, this was not the place where I felt most connected with her. I would create more individualized and meaningful ways of being connected to my mother and creating a new way of relating to her, forming a continuing bond with her that was created partially because of our familial beliefs about spirituality and the soul continuing on after death. In Tofino, we had attributed meaning and value to connecting with lost loved ones through recognizing their ongoing presence in the natural and spiritual world, and this helped me over the years to find meaning and connection with my mother and my family as I recognized that she was still with us in many ways. I saw my mother as continuing on and being a part of nature, as is expressed in the poem *Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep* by Mary Elizabeth Frye (1932) that my mother had put on our fridge after her own father died of cancer:

Do not stand at my grave and weep

I am not there. I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.

I am the diamond glints on snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened grain.

I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you awaken in the morning's hush

I am the swift uplifting rush

Of quiet birds in circled flight.

I am the soft stars that shine at night.

Do not stand at my grave and cry;

I am not there. I did not die.

This poem informed my way of seeing death and experiencing grieving. I was comforted by the idea that although my mother was physically gone, she was not absent in spirit. I have many memories of feeling that she was in the brilliant orange and pink sunsets that occurred for several days after her death, in the birds and butterflies that curiously hung out near our family in the year after her death, and in the love that seemed to permeate all of the art, gifts, notes, and home videos that she left for us, including the poem on the fridge and the gift of the journals that she had bestowed on each of us.

In the physical plane she was gone, but on the level of the soul, I could still sense her love. And in a way she was still influencing our ways of grieving as a family because we did not often go out to the cemetery where her ashes were, instead we went out to the beach in our hometown, and into the forest to smell the trees, and up to the lake to swim and connect with her and with nature in a way that was spiritual. I also believe that this understanding of spirituality as a part of our familial culture allowed us to continue to talk about our Mom in a way that brought her into the present moment. These beliefs informed my ideas about death and spirituality and helped me to feel that she was never

completely absent, that in fact she was a part of the luscious orange and pink sunset and the wind that painted whitecaps on the ocean. On one of our first family trips following my mother's death, to Manning Park, where my parents met, a large Monarch butterfly landed on my brother's head and rested there, gently opening and closing its wings, as if anointing him. We joked together that the butterfly was Mom, just popping by to be part of the fun. Those moments stay with me, and they brought not only laughter but also a sense that our connection with our mother was a shared bond, a bond that helped to identify us as family, trees from the same soil.

The belief that my mother is a part of nature as well as a spiritual being is still with me despite the death of her physical body, and it has nurtured my spiritual connection with my mother and our continuing bond. It was partly through that poem on the fridge that I have continued to look for traces of my mother in the natural world, fostering my love of trees and flowers, and allowing me to explore the spiritual side of death. For instance, last fall I had a moment of pure connection with my mother, 8 years after her death, in which Frye's (1932) poem came back to resonate with me and my experience. I was out for a bike ride, as I often am when the weather is nice, and I decided to stop at one of my favorite places near my home. It is a small creek that runs through the forest and underneath the road in a quiet neighbourhood. I can look down at the creek from both sides of the road and it is lush and green, surrounded by cedar trees and a majestic maple tree on the banks above, as well as a vibrant medley of ferns, nettles, and brambles twining on the ground. The sun filters through the trees in an otherworldly way, and makes me feel like I am transported, even if momentarily, to a simpler world, a sort of nostalgic paradise that reminds me of the small island where I grew up.

On this particular day on a fall afternoon, I stopped beneath the majestic orange, red, and brown canopy of the maple tree, to breathe in the crisp air and the earthy smell of fall. I looked up at the trees and I reached out to my mother to say, “Hi Mom, I love you, and I miss you,” in my mind. And just as I thought these words a maple leaf floated down from the tree toward me, like a message on the wind, and I opened my hands to it and caught it, just as if I knew it was meant for me. I sat there straddling my bike for a moment, grateful and bewildered. I muttered a thank you, and smiled at the connection I felt with my mother and the gesture that I had so long ago asked for in my journal, that my mom could “touch me or contact me somehow.” There had been inklings of my mother touching me in spiritual ways, such as the day I meditated and was inspired to write a poem to her, or the dreams I had of being with her. But this was such a physical event, a gesture that illustrated not only my mother’s presence, but also her connection to nature. I know many people would say it was just a leaf that coincidentally fell into my hands, and perhaps it was. But for me it does not matter whether it proves anything, what matters is that in that moment I felt connected to my mother and I felt her love wash over me, and it was pure joy. As Greenspan (2003) suggests, we can be transformed spiritually by grief: “While the physical connection is broken, the spiritual connection with the beloved attains a greater force precisely because it extends beyond the physical” (p. 97).

### **Continuing bonds: Connection, remembering, and therapeutic writing**

*July 4, 2006*

*Wish you were here sweetest Mumma. Just thinking of the times when you would wake me up in the mornings and hold my hand or play with my hair. You’d hug me when I’d cry. I feel like I don’t know what I want and I’m scared. But I’ll be okay.*

I am almost reassuring myself in this excerpt, and as Lewis and Hoy (2011) suggest, I am seeking out the aspects of my mother that I longed for, such as comfort and reassurance, and in a sense discovering my own resilience through my continuing bond with my mother. By remembering her love and hopes for me, I am able to keep the hope of remembering her alive. As Hedtke (2014) describes, the process of remembering enables us to know that we still hold the essence of our relationships with our lost loved ones, such as lessons we learned and love that we shared, and that we can hold the power of these relationships with us. Dietrich et al. (1999) describe this process as recalling the significance of the “first relationship of caring” (p. 83) and thus acknowledging the depth of the loss. I agree that this is part of the power of remembering. However, I also feel that for myself, part of remembering was allowing myself to be grateful for the brief but profoundly joyful and meaningful time that we had together as mother and daughter, which I described in my journal:

*September 26, 2008*

*I read a bit of that book by Greenspan that you gave me, and it was inspiring. I want my loss of you and my grief to expand my consciousness and myself and help me grow. I want to write about you and to you and cherish the sacred time we did have together.*

Over the years, through writing to my mother, I am also able to continue to share my difficult feelings with her, as I always have, and to find some relief in sharing my grief and my pain as I move through new challenges and losses, as relationships come and go, and as people hurt me and I hurt others. The endless tide of change and loss, and the flow of grief is something that I can write to my mother about, finding a sense of both

comfort and connection as well as an ability to process the emotional and spiritual pain that I sometimes feel as I grow into adulthood.

*July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

*Wish I knew if I'll see you again. Can't imagine never being with you.... I need to enjoy this life and find its meaning.*

*Feel like the hole/space you left is almost getting bigger. Not that I'm really more emotional, but more aware of you not being here. Scared to forget anything, so afraid to lose bits of you, memories.... I'm trying to find some happiness but without you things seem a little more grey because I can't share them with you in the same way. You used to say, "Tell me every detail." I loved that you cared so much and took such an interest in me and my life. I'll never be so loved by another human and I'll never love anyone like I loved you. I know you know/knew all this and I'm so glad I had the time to tell you. I wish you could touch me or contact me somehow.*

*Always, your little girl*

*December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

*Big cry tonight. The anticipation of another Christmas without you, how much better and more amazing it would be with you, especially the laughter but also the tears, the hugging and your hands on my face, always soft, hardworking mother hands. I have been recently thinking about how you'd say "Stop it" in that deep hilarious voice if I was playing with something on the coffee table with my feet (usually your coffee mug!). Still cracks me up. So anyway, I was sobbing in bed, feeling sorry for myself, missing the family.... We all miss you. Sometimes I feel so fine, and sometimes the loneliness and the*

*ache for you is so strong I feel like I'm being crushed or suffocated. The lack of you is a space I just can't fill, even with family. But I'm still so looking forward to going home...*

*October 2, 2008*

*Mom, I feel some negativity and depression seeping back into my life. I feel unmotivated and a little lost. More like a lot lost. Confused about why I'm here and why I can't get my shit together.... Overwhelmed and depressed by my shortcomings... stress, and a lack of confidence. And not having you to share my hurts with. "The silence is deafening" comes to mind. Not just silence, but what often feels like a gaping hole, like all your light got sucked out. Not all, of course, but the physical presence of you in the world. Some days are just really hard. But the sun comes up in the morning and hopefully I'll feel that tomorrow. I want some of the wisdom in Greenspan's (2003) book to touch me, change me, like the quote from Psalm 30:6 in her book: "One may lie down weeping at nightfall, but at dawn there are shouts of joy" (p. 99).*

*But I sometimes feel I don't have time to read these inspiring things, to work on myself, my grief, my spirituality. There's school to do, exercise to keep me from getting fat, TV to watch... at the expense of my growth, my learning, maybe even my success...*

*I don't know why I'm being so negative and I feel bad because it's transient, temporary, and not worth really feeling sorry for myself over. There's nothing really worth complaining about. I have it good. I just feel down. Lonely, lost, purposeless, pathetic and strange. Like I don't even fit in in my own life.... Maybe I need a huge change, a life-altering experience... One thing for sure, something needs to change, even if it's just my attitude or outlook.... I want to talk to you! What's it all about? I*

*wonder what you'd be doing if you were still alive.... I don't know, but I hope, I can only hope, that you truly are somewhere better. Somewhere where I can't burden you and where you can fully realize you're amazing potential. How did I get so lucky to have you as my Mom? I know I feel cheated that you're gone, but it doesn't take away from what a blessing you were when you were here.*

*Sometimes I wish I was you, and that sounds so strange, but I kind of feel like a part of you... it would be amazing to be in a kind of paradise with you. I miss you so much. Hope "never land" is everything you hoped. I hope to join you there someday, when the time is right I guess. Wish I could reach you... or you me... fill me in on the adventures of the afterlife. I hope I dream of you soon... It's high time I dealt with your loss... Everyone dies and everyone experiences loss. I will also die one day.*

*You're always in my heart. Feeling more hopeful already.*

Being able to share my existential and spiritual struggles with my mom as well as emotional difficulties definitely helped me to gain some perspective and keep hope alive in my life. Even though there were moments of overwhelming grief, despair, and loneliness, I was able to share it with her in a new way. Looking back, I also realize that I was identifying with my mother in some way, imagining where she might be, or how we might be reunited one day. It was a recognition of the universal human journey from birth to death, and it helped me to feel less alone and more grateful for the precious and capricious nature of life. My continuing bond with my mother symbolized her spiritual presence in my life as an ongoing source of support and love.

**Identifying with lost loved ones: Linking objects, life imprint, and legacy**

Another element of how I used my continuing bond with my mother to identify with her is what Neimeyer (1999) refers to as ‘linking objects’ (p. 77), or items that belonged to our lost loved one that we bring into our lives. These have also been referred to as legacy gifts. The bracelets that my mother gave me have become such a part of who I am and how I feel connected to her. I need only look down at my wrist or listen for the silvery sound to know that I am my mother’s daughter, and that I am eternally connected to her and the gifts that she gave me. Lewis and Brown (2008) studied the use of maternal objects in women who had experienced the deaths of their mothers and found that these grieving daughters were able to use objects from their mothers to self-soothe and to internalize aspects of their own mothers such as “comfort, protection, warmth or care that the daughter could then access for herself in the face of her grief” (p. 139). I certainly felt comforted knowing that I could wear something of my mother’s that she had worn my whole life. It also helped me to feel that I was close to my mother and in a way similar to her which may have been an important part of me identifying with my mother and recognizing that we shared commonalities.

This sense of identifying with a lost loved one is described in much of the literature, and may in fact reflect my need to continue to use my mother as a role model for my development process (Dietrich et al., 1999; Lewis & Hoy, 2011). One small component of recognizing what Neimeyer (1999) refers to as the “life imprint” that my mother left on me was my glee and joy at recognizing that sometimes my writing looks like my mother’s writing in my journal. This was especially poignant for me because I was writing to her, so to see her writing emerge from my own hand helped me feel that she was a part of me.

Another aspect of recognizing how I had incorporated aspects of my mother into myself can be expressed in what I wrote to her in my journal over a year after she died:

*December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007*

*It feels so good to talk to you, even if it is only this way... Thanks for all your love, Mother, I feel like it is stored up inside of me and I just want to share it!*

Ultimately this legacy of love (Attig, 2004) would lead me to want to work in a helping profession, and eventually to become a counsellor, so that I could have meaningful work that would somehow honor my mother and the lessons that I learned from her about acceptance, warmth, love, and respect. Through therapeutic writing I was able to remain in tune with my mother's hopes for me and share with her my "ongoing quest for significance" (Neimeyer et al., 2010, p. 78) as well as to honor my mother's legacy through my own life.

Also important for identifying with my mother was my recognition of my need to internalize aspects of my mother's hopes for me into my life and my identity. I have been able to see how my identity has been shaped by intuitively connecting with my mother through my grieving process; for instance, I can remember her wishes and hopes for me and carry the messages of love that my mother gave to me into my future (Hedtke, 2014). As Hedtke (2014) suggests, I can hold onto the lessons from my mother and what I have learned from my grieving process to find a "connection with what is *not* lost" (p. 12). One card from my mom reminded me to hope, with words from Emily Dickinson (1891) inscribed on the front: "Hope is the thing with feathers/that perches in the soul/ and sings the tune/ without the words/ and never stops at all." Inside this one of many gifts that my

mother gave to me, she has written “Just a little note to say how much I love you and quietly miss you. I hope for you self-love, love for others and other’s love for you.”

Messages like this helped me to stay hopeful that I could hold parts of my mother with me as my life moved forward. The books and cards from my mother became gifts that symbolized her legacy of love (Attig, 2004), and they have continued to guide not only my process of grieving, but also my process of creating the future that I know my mother would want me to have (Hedtke, 2014).

### **Continuing bond and internalizing my mother’s essence: Poetry and visualization**

The hopes that my mother impressed upon me were written in cards and books that she gave to me, and over the years I have internalized these hopes and wishes as a part of myself (Lewis & Brown, 2008). Most importantly my mom wished for me to love myself. Perhaps the most poignant epiphany of my grieving process came several years after my mother’s death, when I sat down to meditate and reflect on my mother and, like nothing I experienced before, I had the sense that she was communicating with me, not with any bells and whistles, but from a place within me. The message that I felt more than heard, was to love myself and be more compassionate with myself. That night I wrote a poem expressing to my mother what I had learned about unconditional love:

*I haven’t mastered loving myself unconditionally*

*I guess because you did that for me*

*A mother’s love, limitless, undeniable, even if you deny yourself acceptance*

*Every flaw celebrated, or at least down-played, made into an endearing idiosyncrasy*

*I miss you mumma*

*Your love, your soft face and strong hands, the jingle of your bracelets, now on my wrists*

*Never forgotten, never misplaced, but what if*

*My mind doesn't let me remember, it's already happened*

*Little moments of "oh I wish I could ask mom, she'd know, she'd remember"*

*You can't be gone, it just seems wrong,*

*How can the only person you truly feel you are a part of just leave?*

*Tell me you're not gone, send me a sign, show me you still want to hear*

*Every detail*

*Let's have a heart to heart, in my dreams*

*Meet me by the lake, take my hand, interlace your fingers in mine once more*

*Let's walk together for awhile*

*Let's chat,*

*Let's just be together for awhile*

*I miss your shoulder laugh, that silent hilarity*

*And your unruly hair, electrified in the morning*

*And your sayings...*

*"Oh brother"*

*Oh mother*

*You're still here,*

*it's not enough, but it'll have to do*

*You're inside me, and I'm learning to love me*

*just like you*

*I love you more!*

*and I you*

*Always*

Writing this poem allowed me to express some essence of what I had learned from my mother and what she had given to me (Neimeyer, 1999). As Neimeyer (1999) suggests, poetry that allows us to express how we feel about a loss may “help crystallize a moment, validate an emotion, or convey a felt sense in a way that straightforward writing cannot” (p. 81). The epiphany about loving myself began a journey in which I searched for and began to practice love for myself, self-compassion (Neff, 2003), and more acceptance of both myself and others. Neff’s (2003) work on self-compassion helped me to recognize the connection that I share with all other human beings who have loved and lost, and to live mindfully in the moment while being kind to myself and others (Neff, 2003). This journey is intertwined with my grieving process, and it is one in which I can feel my mother’s support as she still guides me in subtle ways.

There are other creative ways that have allowed me to access the feeling of being connected to my mother and having her wisdom inside me. One way that I have realized that my mother is part of me is using the metaphor of a forest grove to describe my family. I am like a tree growing among other trees and plants, I have grown up from the soil and the nutrients in it, such as my grief and the love of my family, and the many emotions and experiences that we have been through. My mother’s death, like the death of a tree in this forest, is a great loss. But it is more than an ending and the grief that was left in the wake of her death has allowed for new growth to emerge. Like a tree that falls in the forest, whether blown down by a storm when it is old, or felled in its youth, it remains a part of the forest. I grew up surrounded by nature on Cortez Island, living on acres of wild forest. And without fail, on the trees that had fallen, new life grew: honey suckle sprouted from stumps, huckleberries took root in old trees that had fallen and

turned into soil, and wildflowers such as bleeding hearts grew nearby, thriving in the nourishing grove. My mother is still a part of the forest grove in which I live. She is still a part of me, inside my roots, grounding me to earth, and reaching as far up as the highest leaves. She is no longer bound by a physical body; her spirit is free and the mystery of where she is gives me hope and teaches me to appreciate the forest while I grow here. Grieving has become a part of who I am, just as my mother is a part of who I am. We are still bonded together, and I created a continuing bond with her in many ways, from recognizing my spiritual connection with her through nature, to allowing myself to remember her and carry her with me as I continued to live my life after her death (Hedtke, 2014).

One last creative way that I remember that my mother is a part of me is through visualization, and this is something that I have done since my mother died, anywhere from imagining walking through a forest with my mom, to meeting her in a meadow. I recently did a visualization from Greenspan's (2003) book to help me feel connected to my mom. I imagined drifting through a lake in a canoe, breathing into the moment, and coming ashore into a grassy meadow, a place in which I had visualized being with my mother many times, a place of comfort and peace. I imagined being under a large tree and sensing the presence of my mother, and feeling like I could ask for her wisdom and guidance. I felt connected to my mother and the gifts that I know she hoped I could have such as self-compassion. I put a question out to her, to the universe, and to myself: "Am I moving in the right direction, and living the way that you hoped for me?" And the quiet but resounding answer was "Yes, and you have lots of life left to live, so enjoy the moment and be present in it." This visualization was such a gift, because I could feel the

internalized presence of my mother and the encouragement to continue to live with a sense of gratitude and mindful presence in the moment. I understood that it was I who was creating the words and ascribing meaning to this experience, but it was as if my mother was guiding me from within.

There are still profoundly difficult moments when I miss my mom so much, especially when I experience the losses, challenges, and inevitable suffering of being human and loving others with vulnerability. In the moments where all I want to do is to feel the arms of my mother around me, to listen to her heartbeat, and to tell her what is on my heavy heart, I try to remember that she is with me. Even in the hard moments, when I want to tell her: “I’m not okay, I want you here. I feel like a mess and I don’t know how to do this without you. I’m not the same without you in my life. Our family is not the same without you.” But then her voice comes up from within me, and I have a reassuring sense of what she would say, and I can speak to myself as my internalized mother, finding strength, comfort, and compassion from within:

*Of course it’s not the same, but nothing ever is, is it? We are always changing, and so are the people that we love. It’s not about staying the same, darling, it’s about letting yourself live a life full of growth and connection, love and acceptance.*

*Remember what I told you: ‘breathe everywhere’ ... the moment is where you live a full life, a joyful life, a life of being present and grateful for each breath. Love is within you and around you, and life is a sacred journey that is about sharing that love, in moments of grief and in moments of joy.*

## Conclusion

I hope that my story and the meaning that I have made about maintaining a continuing bond with my mother will help to depathologize grief as we challenge outdated ideas that we need to let go of our lost loved ones in order to be healthy. Klass (2006) asserts that the work of Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) was about normalizing grieving and continuing bonds, and challenging the notion that grieving and having a bond with lost loved ones was pathological. As Klass (2006, p. 846) suggests, continuing bonds do not guarantee healthy adjustment – but it was something that I intuitively did and it helped me to feel less alone and more connected to my mom. Klass (2006) goes on to suggest that “the question of how humans both hold on and let go of those who have died” (Klass, 2006, p. 857) is worthy of consideration, especially for those of us who work with people who are grieving. I agree and emphasize that continuing bonds should not be seen as a necessary intervention for counsellors, but rather as a normal part of the grieving process for some people, myself included. I believe that grieving is a unique journey to discovering our own process and the meaning that we make about our losses, ourselves, and our relationships with our lost loved ones. As I move forward in my life, I am grateful that I have had the opportunity to honor my mother’s legacy through my academic work and to share the hope, love, and connection that she shared with me at a time of profound loss and grief.

In this chapter, I have explored how grieving my loss has shown me the power of my continuing bond with my mother, a bond that continues to shape me as I remember the legacy of love that my mother bestowed on me, carry that legacy into the future, and make meaning about the inherent suffering, loss, and spiritual mysteries of life and death

that I have yet to encounter (Attig, 2004; Neimeyer, 1999; Hedtke, 2014). The ways in which I engaged in my process of grieving after my mother's death were influenced by my familial culture, my mother, and my own intuition and spiritual beliefs which led me to create a continuing bond with my mother. In the next chapter I will briefly summarize my research background, purpose, and significance. I will explore some implications for my research such as emphasizing the need for counsellors to recognize clients' intuitive ability to grieve, for all people to recognize that their context, beliefs, relationships, and identity will affect how they grieve, and that reading and doing autoethnographic research may help to foster empathy, witnessing, and self-awareness. I will explore some limitations of autoethnographic research, and finally, I will share some concluding thoughts regarding the challenges of conducting this kind of research as well as the need for this type of vulnerable, personal sharing of stories in order to facilitate human understanding, empathy, and connection (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

## Chapter V: Summary, Implications, Conclusions

### Summary

Grief and grieving have been described and regarded as pathological in the fields of psychiatry, psychology, and the helping professions in the past (Granek, 2010). This has also led to aspects of grief, such as continuing bonds, being described as symptoms or being labelled as unhealthy which may make people feel pathologized or abnormal at a time in their lives when they are already hurting and vulnerable due to losing a loved one. Fortunately, there has been a shift in our understandings of grief as theories of meaning reconstruction, narrative approaches to grief, and the potentially helpful and normal role of continuing bonds have been put forward (Dennis & Kunkel, 2012; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, et al., 2002; Neimeyer, et al., 2010). My research is aligned with this new theory of grief, which makes space for us to depathologize grief, to recognize its value and the active responses we use to make meaning about our losses and our lives, thus honoring our humanity and our agency, as beings that have freedom and choice even in the midst of events which may feel devastating and purposeless (Attig, 2001; Attig, 2004; Greenspan, 2003; Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, et al, 2002; Neimeyer, et al., 2010).

The significance of this study is that it is an embodied account with stories and reflection on my grieving process, which I hope will help readers to reflect on what grieving means to them and to those with whom they work, so that they can create their own meaning and understand the meanings that other people make about loss and grief (Bochner, 2012; Denshire, 2014). I believe that when we are exposed to other people's ways of experiencing the world, we may experience an expansion of our understanding

and beliefs about ourselves and others, possibly leading us to be more open, curious, empathic, and accepting. I chose to do narrative autoethnography, so that I could do and share research that would be meaningful, personal, and help my readers to become connected to human experiences of grief, rather than distanced from them, in order to foster openness, empathy, witnessing, and dialogue, as well as perhaps promoting further qualitative research (Bochner, 2012; Denshire, 2014; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Neimeyer et al., 2002).

My purpose in writing this narrative autoethnography was to explore my grieving process with the use of my research questions: What was my experience of my grieving process as a consequence of the death of my mother when I was 21? In particular, how did I engage in the grieving process after the death of my mother? What have I learned about this process? How have I made meaning about my mother's death? What actions and choices helped me to process my grief? And how has my mother's influence affected my grieving process? Through exploring these questions I also set out to depathologize grief and show that it can be an adaptive process, to foster a sense of empathy and awareness in both myself and my readers, and to highlight the role of continuing bonds in grief, thus honoring my mother's legacy and my ongoing connection to her in a more spiritual and symbolic way. This exploration of my research questions through the lens of the autoethnographic method has provided me with a new view of my experience and my deep connection with my family and my ongoing connection with my mother. Through sharing vulnerable stories and reflecting on their meaning, I hope I have helped to depathologize grieving by showing that it can be both an adaptive, intuitive process as well as a complex one (Attig, 2004; Greenspan, 2003; Martin & Doka, 2011; Neimeyer,

2010). I also hope that I have given my readers a glimpse into the process of grieving, in order to foster empathy, witnessing, awareness and reflection in them (Berzoff, 2011; Bochner, 2012; Hayes et al., 2007; Neimeyer, 2000; Neimeyer, et al., 2002; Roisin, 2015). Finally, I believe I have honored my mother's legacy and my continuing bond with her by sharing my stories of grief and reflecting on the meaning that I attributed to my loss and grief (Hedtke, 2014; Klass, et al., 1996; Neimeyer, 1999).

### **Implications**

Through my autoethnography, I hope I have shown that grief can be both adaptive and intuitive as well as complex, as a process arising from the nature and identity of the grieving person as well as the surrounding sociocultural web of relationships and understandings about grief, loss, and death (Attig, 2004; Neimeyer et al., 2002). My grieving process was intuitive, and I use that word to indicate that it was my inherent character, values, and instincts as well as the influences around me that led to my spontaneous use of narrative approaches such as writing in my journal and connecting to my mother by using artifacts and books from her as well as talking to her to help me to create a continuing bond and relationship with her, in a new way. My process of grieving has been one that has helped me to understand myself better, to appreciate my life and my relationships, to be open to new relationships and possibilities for growth, and to live a life that is a celebration of what has been passed on to me from my mother. My intuitive approaches to grieving share similarities with narrative and constructivist approaches such as making meaning about loss and grief through therapeutic writing, poetry, linking objects, and visualization (Neimeyer, 1999), whereas for others, different approaches may work better. I believe that grieving is shaped by who we are, who we

love, and who we choose to become (Attig, 2004; Hedtke, 2014). I made meaning about my mother's death, coming to new understandings about death, emotional processing, spirituality, and the influence of familial culture. I also reflected on the healing and comforting power of maintaining a continuing bond with my mother, not because I had been told that that was the healthy way to grieve, or because I had read about these theories, but because it was what intuitively made sense and felt right to me. These grieving choices and activities were ways in which I processed my grief emotionally, spiritually and intellectually, and they allowed me to remain connected to my mother's love and my love for her, discovering what Attig (2004) describes as "lasting love" (p. 356), in which a person who is grieving can stay connected to the legacy of their lost loved one as well as to the gifts, memories, and connection that remain. Perhaps this concept of continuing bonds and remembering our loved one's legacies will help others to feel less alone in their grief.

I believe that my intuitive grieving process does not portray anything exceptional or out of the ordinary, rather I think it reflects the research, that most people seem to be able to navigate their grieving process without intervention, and will feel better over time (Königsberg, 2011; Neimeyer, 2000; Currier, Neimeyer, and Berman, 2008). My autoethnography portrays an experience of grieving in which professional help was not required; I have been grieving in my own way for over 9 years, and I believe I will be grieving in some form or another for possibly the rest of my life. Intuition, family support, and self-help led me to a grieving process that facilitated transformation, connection, and the ability to make meaning. I did not feel that I needed to see a

counsellor because I was able engage in an adaptive grieving process with the help of my mother and my family.

I believe that my autoethnography on my grieving process may help counsellors to consider the diversity and unique intuitive potential in people who are grieving, including clients who navigate their grieving journey with only self-help, and in fact may do better without therapeutic intervention (Neimeyer, 2000; Currier et al., 2008). As Konigsberg (2011) summarizes from the literature, there is research to show that most people who are grieving will recover on their own and will not need counselling. One controversial idea that is supported by research is that grief counselling may not be particularly helpful for the majority of people and may even be harmful in some cases (Neimeyer, 2000). Neimeyer (2000) suggests that grief therapy could be harmful for people who are capable of helping themselves, and suggests that we as counsellors are able to recognize when all that is needed is “respectful witnessing” (p. 555). The meta-analysis of Currier, et al., (2008) reviewed 61 studies and concluded that the majority of people who are grieving improve on their own, indicating that intervention is unnecessary most of the time. At the very least, counsellors should look at the research and consider when seeing clients whether they can be helpful in empowering their clients to grieve in their own way, instead of choosing interventions that are not suited to client’s meaning systems, identities, and unique processes of grieving (Neimeyer, 2000).

Nevertheless, in issues of prolonged or complicated grief, as some researchers have called it, counsellors need to be aware when clients are in need of counselling or psychiatric support, especially in clients who are experiencing prolonged or complicated grief, which Konigsberg (2011) suggests is about 10-15 percent of people who are

grieving. My own experience of grief did not require therapeutic, psychological or psychiatric intervention, but it was not complicated, and some people may benefit from therapeutic intervention. As Neimeyer (2000) suggests, grief therapy may be helpful for clients “whose grief is traumatic or prolonged” (p. 555), or, I would argue, for people who do not feel they can function after losing a loved one (Konigsberg, 2011). However, for the majority of grievers, as Currier et al.’s (2008) meta-analysis suggests, most people feel better over time. For myself, time certainly helped to ease the intensity of my grief, but I also found that intuitively engaging in certain activities, such as spending time with family, fostering a continuing bond with my mother, meaning-making about my loss, and processing emotions, was helpful. By reflecting on my own process, I hope I have shown that many clients can discover their own intuitive ability to grieve in a way that is meaningful and helpful through their own agency and choice, and in some cases with the collaborative help of a counsellor who can join with them and witness their process (Attig, 2004; Neimeyer, 2000).

Another implication for my research is that counsellors who take the time to reflect on how their own losses and grieving processes have impacted them may be more effective in helping others. Hayes, Yeh, and Eisenberg (2007) studied grief in counsellors working with clients, and they discovered that clients perceived counsellors as less empathic if the counsellor missed a deceased loved one and had unresolved grief. On the other hand, if counsellors had lost a loved one, and had resolved grief, Hayes et al. (2007) found that clients felt the counsellor was more empathic, which suggests that processing one’s grief can be helpful for both counsellors and clients:

In the realm of bereavement therapy, therapists can function as wounded healers in that losing a loved one and working through the emotional pain of missing that person can serve as a basis for enhanced empathy with clients who are also dealing with the death of a loved one. (p. 351)

This study shows that counsellors can benefit from engaging in the grieving process, in a way that works for them, so that they can become more able to reflect on their own grieving process, make meaning of their loss and grief so that it is not a debilitating wound, and then be more empathic and present with their clients. I believe that engaging with research and stories may be one way that counsellors and others in the helping professions may be able to become wounded healers, or people who have been hurt but have taken the time to care for themselves, so that their wounds do not impede their work with clients, but rather enhance it (Hayes, et al., 2007; Winokuer & Harris, 2012).

The concept of the wounded healer is one that warrants further exploration for counsellors, especially those who have experienced loss, suffering, and grief. Loss is a universal experience, and is “perhaps the only psychosocial/existential challenge that will be faced by every client we consult, and of course by every therapist as well” (Neimeyer, 2010, p. 65). Winokuer and Harris (2012) suggest that being a wounded healer means a counsellor has the self-awareness to examine their own wounds, and heal enough that they can then experience heightened empathy as they work with others who are going through a healing process. Nevertheless, this requires that counsellors are self-aware enough to recognize when their own wounds still need attention, otherwise clients may sense that their counsellor is not empathic or able to attend to their needs (Hayes, et al., 2007; Winokuer & Harris, 2012). Furthermore, as Hayes et al. (2007) suggest, even if a

counsellor believes they are a wounded healer that is self-aware and empathically attuned to clients, they still need to ensure that they are able to identify their own feelings, biases, and blind spots, and not impose them onto clients.

An important aspect of recognizing when our wounds or our biases, assumptions, or worldviews are getting in the way of our work with clients is practicing self-awareness and reflection. Roisin (2015) stresses the importance of reflective practice for counsellors, so that they can become aware of their ‘personal lenses’ (p. 89) and the experiences that affect how they perceive the world and interact with others, including their clients. This may also include the ‘shadow’ side of us, or the aspects of ourselves that we have not examined or are not consciously aware of (Roisin, 2015). As Yalom (2002) stresses, we need to look at “all our own dark, ignoble parts” (p. 216) because not only will it help us be more self-aware, it may also allow us to normalize the shadow side for our clients, especially those that may be grappling with difficult feelings due to a loss. Whether counsellors refer to their shadow side, blind spots, unresolved issues, or triggers, the fact of the matter is that self-awareness and self-reflection may help counsellors recognize when they should attend to their own needs and wounds so that they can become wounded healers (for more information on the shadow side, self-awareness, and ethical issues, see Roisin, 2015 and Winokuer & Harris, 2012, p. 179). I believe that reading research that explores the concepts of self-awareness, reflective practice, and the issues that are closest to us is a great place to start. For myself, reading about grief and grieving and the autoethnographic method allowed me to explore my wounds and personal experiences in an embodied and conscious way; I believe that I am now more aware of the perceptive and theoretical lenses through which I view the world, the beliefs

that I have about myself and others, and the areas of myself which are still tender and wounded. Having this awareness will hopefully allow me to move forward with the knowledge that I am always in a state of learning, becoming, changing, and expanding (Greenspan, 2003; Hedtke, 2014), so that I can recognize when to look at someone or something from a different angle, and to set aside my assumptions in order to gain a broader and more empathic perspective.

Engaging in an autoethnographic exploration of my grieving process in chapters 3 and 4 has helped me to become more self-aware of my own biases and blind spots, more reflective of the sociocultural and theoretical influences that affect my worldview, and more prepared to witness and empathize with others' experiences of grief. I believe that reflecting on my own grieving process and the meaning that I ascribed to my loss and grief has facilitated self-awareness which will allow me to be a more reflective, open, and empathic counsellor. I can move forward in my counselling career with a greater appreciation for human struggles and the diversity and resilience with which we respond to losses and suffering.

I hope that sharing my difficult and rewarding journey of grieving through autoethnography will help others to see the benefits of engaging in this type of research, both for ourselves and for others. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest, a movement away from traditional research to emotional and intuitive narratives is beneficial for counsellors who need to hear stories, bear witness, and respond with empathy and compassion. Ethical research that facilitates caring is important, and "the goal is to encourage compassion and promote dialogue" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 748). I believe that counsellors and people in the helping professions may discover much about

themselves and their clients by reading and doing autoethnographic research in order to foster empathy and witnessing, and further the psychotherapeutic aim of “intersubjective understanding” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 760). I hope that exploring my grieving process through autoethnography will help to foster empathy, witnessing, and an ability to reflect on experiences of loss and grief. Our ability to connect with others, with ourselves, and with our lost loved ones can be facilitated by the sharing of grief narratives and may help us to make meaning about our lives (Neimeyer, 1999; 2010; Winokuer & Harris, 2012).

For people who are further interested in grief research related to continuing bonds, Root and Exline (2014) suggest considering what the continuing bond means to the bereaved individual, what their relationship with the deceased was like, and what their beliefs are about death and spirituality, in order to clarify how it is experienced and whether it is adaptive for individuals. For myself, I saw a continuing bond with my mother as a positive and helpful relationship, partly because we had a loving and close relationship and I had spiritual beliefs that helped me to imagine that her soul would continue on; therefore this may be why I perceived my “ongoing, inner relationship” (Root & Exline, 2014, p. 4) with my mother as positive. However, other research has suggested that continuing bonds may not be adaptive for some people (Root & Exline, 2014; Stroebe, Abakoumkin, Stroebe, & Schut, 2012).

### **Limitations**

Some of the limitations of my research are related to the limitations of autoethnography, including a lack of generalizability and the fact that I chose what resonated with me, so that my research is biased and subjective and not verifiable;

therefore it cannot be determined as valid or reliable necessarily (Philaretou and Allen, 2006). As Philaretou and Allen (2006) point out, as researcher/subject, I choose what to write about and what was significant to myself, so the research could be construed as being self-indulgent or so limited that it is not helpful to others. Ellis (1998) also discusses that autoethnography is “limited by what is possible to know and admit to oneself about oneself” (p. 54). To me, this means that it is difficult to see some of our own struggles and flaws, or to admit to them, thus potentially limiting the research. I am also limited by my memory and the fact that I cannot possibly include all my experiences of grief into my research; therefore, my research may not be considered to be complete or it may be overly simplified, thus missing some of the complicated nuances, conflicting emotions, and unresolved struggles of what it means to lose one’s mother and to grieve. On the other hand, an incomplete account of my experience may leave more room for others to see themselves in this research so that they are able to examine their own ideas about grief and grieving and to make their own meanings (Bochner, 2012; Ellis, 1998; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). As Ellis (1998) suggests, leaving space for the reader to put themselves into the story and “fill in or compare their experiences and provide their own sensitivities about what was going on” (p. 55) may facilitate their own understanding of themselves as well as allowing them to empathize with the suffering, joy, and grief of others, thus connecting both reader and writer to a shared humanity and existence (Ellis, 1998; Konigsberg, 2011; Neff, 2003; Yalom, 2002).

Doing autoethnographic research also presents ethical concerns, which I outlined in my 2nd chapter, including the fact that writing about our own lives can be harmful to those who are close to us because we are revealing information about their identities and

their personal experiences as well. Autoethnographic exploration can also open us up to self-harm, because once we share our stories, we cannot control how they are received (Ellis, 1998; Ellis, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Doing this work did bring up some difficult emotions related to my mom's death and to aspects of myself that are difficult for me to accept or reveal (Philaretou & Allen, 2006). As difficult as that was, I also believe it is helpful to share these struggles in order to help others recognize that we all have parts of ourselves and our lives which are conflicted, troubled, or wounded, and that in sharing this type of research, despite its limitations, we may become more understanding of what it means to be human, for ourselves and for others (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

I knew that my experience of losing my mother on the cusp of adulthood had a profound effect on my identity, my understandings about the world, and my relationships, but I felt that I needed to further explore my grieving process so that I could share what I had learned with others. Ultimately, I have discovered that I am still in a process of growing and changing, and that even in the midst of reflecting on my grieving process, I have faced new challenges and losses which have made me realize that I still feel grief and longing for my mother. I have felt desperately alone at times, as if my mother is truly gone, but I have also had moments when I have remembered her love and her hopes for me to love others, to love myself, to live in the moment, and to search inside myself for my mother's love, wisdom, and strength. Through writing this autoethnography, I have come to understand that the loss of the most important person in my life – my role model, mother, and best friend – was the beginning of me coming to know myself better, being

grateful for the love and joy that I have had in my life as well as the difficult experiences that teach me to have empathy for others, compassion for myself, and awe at the mystery of what it means to live and die. Also, this research directed my attention back to my mother's light, which shines through a prism and sends vibrant color throughout my life, and always will. I remember her and carry her with me, loving others and myself on my journey, everything that she hoped for me as a mother who loved unconditionally and wholeheartedly.

In remembering my mother's wishes for me, and in reading her notes and cards, she guides me to find comfort and inspiration in the stories of others who have loved, grieved, and continued to live. Remen's (1996) book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, which my mother gave to me when she was dying, has been one such source of comfort. My mother wrote to me at the front of this book that she hoped I would find peace and encouragement through reading other's stories, as she had, and I have. In the forward, Ornish (as cited in Remen, 1996) says that we share stories as a way to connect and to heal. Greenspan (2003) also shares the impact that stories can have on us in her book *Healing through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair*, emphasizing our need to befriend difficult emotions and learn from our experiences of loss, grief, and human suffering. I know for myself, these books were helpful guides that my mother had the intuitive wisdom to give to me. I have been helped immensely by reading other's stories of loss, grief and struggle. In doing so, I am reminded that I am not alone, and that the very fact that I have loved, lost, and grieved is what connects me to other human beings who have also suffered (Greenspan, 2003; Remen, 1996; Neff, 2003; Neimeyer, et al., 2002).

The difficulties that I have faced in writing this autoethnography and being vulnerable enough to share the hurting parts of myself cannot be understated. This has not been an easy process as “honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts – and emotional pain” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 738). Autoethnography is not an easy form of research, it is deeply personal and emotional and it made me feel uncomfortably vulnerable at times, especially when I felt uncertain of how much to share or how to describe something that seems beyond words. Also, during my research, I faced other personal challenges that brought up new feelings of grief and a longing for my mother’s wisdom and presence. Ellis and Bochner (2000) were not exaggerating when they described the vulnerable challenges of doing this work: “There’s the vulnerability of revealing yourself, not being able to take back what you’ve written or having any control over how readers interpret it. It’s hard not to feel your life is being critiqued as well as your work” (p. 738). Fortunately, I also had moments of sharing my work with others that helped me to feel connected, understood, and validated for the hard work that I had done.

Despite the challenges of autoethnography, I think the power of this research is that it is vulnerable, personal, and embodied, and it allows us to share stories that connect us to one another and to ourselves (Bochner, 2012; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Greenspan, 2003; Remen, 1996; Neimeyer, et al., 2002). Stories open us up to what it means to be human and vulnerable, as Greenspan (2003) describes:

Vulnerability is what we share as human beings: our openness to being affected by one another, for better and for worse, is at the core of our interconnectedness. Because we are vulnerable, we feel pain – not only our own pain, but the pain of

others... Vulnerability is at the heart of our human capacity for empathy; for suffering but also for joy; for hurt but also for compassion; for loneliness but also for connection. (p. 39)

Perhaps literature, personal narratives, autoethnography, and qualitative research that reflect the lived experiences of loss, grief, human suffering, and transcendence, can provide a sense of connection and empathic awareness for others. I have also found comfort and a sense of deeper connection to my mother and myself through engaging in autoethnographic research, sharing my personal stories, and reflecting on my capacity to engage in a meaningful grieving process. It has been a gift and a privilege to share my continuing bond with my mother, as a way to honor her legacy, and to not only survive a profound loss, but also to move toward the future with gratitude for my grieving process which helped to shape my identity and illuminate the joy of sharing love in relationships, even though we can never fully know how long we have to share our lives with those that we love (Brown, 2010; Ellis, 1998; Greenspan, 2003; Hedtke, 2014). I hope that my stories and research can help others to feel less alone, to recognize that loss and grief, however devastating and disorienting, can be pathways to learning, growth, connection, and meaning, and that we have choice in how we ascribe meaning to these experiences.

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

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 “Exploring a Grieving Process: An Autoethnography.”

In order to explore the topic above, I will be engaging in autoethnographic research which will involve exploring my personal experience of grieving, reflecting on my process, and relating it to scholarly literature. I also intend to use my own journal, photographs, home videos, and cards and artifacts that belonged to my mother as part of my research process, but I only plan to include quotes from these sources if they are from myself or my mother and I will not reveal any of my family members names or identities.

As I explore my grief process and the loss of my mother when I was 21, I may mention my family or my relationships with my family members, and that may include you. I will not mention anyone by name, but there is a possibility that you may be able to be identified due to the circumstances or the relationship I describe in my research. For example, I may mention “my father” or “my brother” or I may mention “my family” as a whole, of which you are a part. Therefore, you may be identified because of our relationship. Since this thesis may be available online after completion, it may be possible that you could be identified by those who read it.

I would like to know if you are comfortable with possibly being mentioned in my research. If you are not, please do not hesitate to inform me, and 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 experience and my relationship with my mother. Also, if you wish to withdraw your consent for me to mention “my siblings” or “my family” at any time, you may do so without any negative consequences.

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. 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 and relationship with my mother, in relation to my grieving process after her death. I will also provide you with a revised copy of my thesis, so that you can ensure that I have removed any mention of you to your satisfaction.

If you consent to possibly being mentioned in my study, please know that what I write about you will be protected by me using a name other than your own, and that my thesis will be on my password protected computer.

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



School/Division of \_\_\_\_\_

### **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).